

Local author relishes the success after struggles

By Lou Fancher
The Concordian

"Writers are solitary little owls," declares Concord resident Verna McKinnon, sounding nothing like an owl – or a person who prefers to be alone.

Her voice bubbles and swings along, bringing to mind a feisty Irish tune or a jolly folk singer weaving her tale of wisdom and woe. A list of reclusive authors' names trips off her tongue, rising from the deep reservoir of her research and making plain her impressive knowledge of literary history.

As the author of "Gate of Souls," the first in a series of four fantasy novels, she is clearly immersed, embedded, thick-as-thieves, head-over-heels in love with the craft of writing.

"The hardest thing is the first chapter," she states. There's an Irish saying to match: "Making the beginning is one-third of the work."

Her Celtic roots are at play, driven by today's high-speed readers whom she describes as "impatient." Somehow, the word sounds descriptive, not critical, as she completes her thought – speaking with gratitude for brevity making her work "tight."

McKinnon generously outlines her writing process, which doesn't include an outline at all. Instead, the entire book is in her head; she keeps only



Photo courtesy of Verna McKinnon

ENJOYING HER RECENT SUCCESSES, VERNA MCKINNON draws upon her Celtic heritage to provide inspiration

what she refers to as "a bible" – an extensive list of facts about each novel's setting, character, language and history.

The nitty gritty of writing is done directly on a computer in a six-draft process. It all sounds tucked and tidy and so easy one wonders, "Where's the strife? The starving artist in the attic?"

It was actually during a depressed, doubting period when McKinnon

found the publisher for her novels. Writing short stories for a Webzine, tightening her already tight prose, she found herself at the end of the proverbial rainbow: HD-Image was her pot of gold. Or cup, very small cup of gold. OK, so it was just a coin. But it was a gold coin and, joining the ranks of "writers with day jobs to pay the bills," McKinnon is proud and fortunate.

Her good fortune lies in realizing a childhood dream. Now a few years past the half century mark, McKinnon looks and sounds reminiscent of the twentysomething college grad she once was, brimming with enthusiasm and confidence. She's a fan of classic heroic fantasy, with a special fondness for female characters who are "thousands of years old, funny, wild, burdened by life's struggles and champions of their domains."

She nearly sparkles when there's mention of Mrs. Peel, the part-time scientist, spy and Kung Fu-capable character from the British television show "The Avengers."

"Mrs. Peel was great!" she exclaims. Instantly, she reels off a string of characters longer than a 10-year-old's Christmas list, expanding the scope of influences on her work beyond literature to television and film.

With drafts for a dozen more novels barreling around in that head of hers, she seem to have no limits on

her energy. With any luck, McKinnon may some day need her own shelf at the local bookstore or library.

Just don't put her in a tight corner labeled "Young Adult Genre." Her joy and pride is in the way fantasy fiction allows her characters, readers and even her own voice to span the generations, conquer any foe and live out an ageless existence.

Visit www.vernamckinnon.com for more information.

Willows Cabaret hitches up to new musical set in trailer park

By Gary Carr
Special to The Concordian

"The Great American Trailer Park Musical," the latest offering at the Willows Cabaret in Martinez, is superbly trashy, tacky and full of laughs. It celebrates all those guilty pleasures you look for on late-night cable TV.

The comic musical by Betsy Kelso, with music and lyrics by David Nehls, plays April 6 through May 3. The show sports a script and a score that's been wowing audiences since its premiere at the New York Musical Theatre Festival in 2004. One critic describes it as "South Park" meets "Desperate Housewives."

The Willows production is directed by Larry Tobias and stars Chris Blisset and Amanda Ryan Paige – the same trio who scored a hit in last year's "Pump Boys and Dinettes" in Martinez.

The story of "The Great American Trailer Park Musical" is ripped right from the tabloids at the Safeway checkout. When Pippi, a stripper on the run, moves into Armadillo Acres (Florida's most exclusive trailer park), things take a turn for the zany. Jeannie, a Dr. Phil-loving ago-

raphobic, and her toll-booth collecting husband find themselves pulled apart by Pippi's appearance, and the fun begins.

It's a musical romp through the mysteries of kleptomania, hysterical pregnancy, a broken electric chair, '80s nostalgia, road kill and spray cheese.

Featured songs include "This Side of the Tracks," "Flushed Down the Pipes," "Road Kill" and "That's Why I Love My Man." The cast also features Erin Hoffman, Janine Burgener, Jessica Payne, Jenny Angell and Michael Scott Wells.

The Campbell Theatre is a cabaret setting with tableside service at 636 Ward St., Martinez. For tickets and show times, call 798-1300 or visit www.willowstheatre.org.



Photo courtesy Willows Theatre Company

JANINE BURGNER (LIN), JESSICA PAYNE (BETTY), AND JENNY ANGELL (PICKLES) in "The Great American Trailer Park Musical" at the Willows Cabaret in Martinez.

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