

Sprawling Dracula novel gives 'Historian' author her first taste of stardom

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By JOHN MARSHALL

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER BOOK CRITIC

There were times when she worried about whether she would ever finish her novel as the research and writing consumed year after year, three years, then six, seven and eight.

There were times when she wondered if any literary agent would want to represent her novel, let alone any publisher publish it. And there were times when she vowed that, if any money ever came from this, she would buy that pair of pajamas she denied herself for so long.

All those concerns are behind Elizabeth Kostova.

Her 642-page novel is the Big Book of Summer 2005, in pages, in heft (2 pounds) and in sales (915,000 copies in print). "The Historian" (Little, Brown, \$25.95) is the first debut novel ever to begin atop the best-seller list of The New York Times; it has held second spot since.

This is no surprise to publishing insiders who watched the buzz generated by Kostova's massive historical look into the legend of Dracula and his inspiration from the 15th century, Vlad the Impaler. The buzz began when a six-day auction of Kostova's novel showered the newcomer with a publisher's advance of \$2 million, an astounding sum, but one that reflected frenzied publishers searching for "the next 'Da Vinci Code.' "

The buzz built even more when editions were sold in 28 languages and when the film rights went for \$1.5 million. It intensified when Little, Brown launched its big publicity campaign, at a cost of \$500,000, spurring stories on "Good Morning America" and in USA Today, Entertainment Weekly, Newsweek.

Kostova was suddenly the next big literary phenom, the next Alice Sebold ("The Lovely Bones"), the next Susanna Clarke ("Jonathan Strange").

The 40-year-old Kostova has purchased those pajamas now, although she only will say they are "very simple" and adds, "I can't go into any detail because I'm too modest and my grandmother would turn over in her grave if I said anything more."

Kostova has much bigger concerns these days. The personable and photogenic writer is adjusting to the dizzying travel and relentless spotlight of a national book tour that has been "an out-of-body experience." She has had to decide how much of her personal and family life to reveal to interviewers. And she has gone from a decade of solitary labors to being "astounded" to meet her readers in distant cities.

This lifelong proponent of thrift has even had to formulate her philosophy of philanthropy, since she suddenly has the means to help others. Her generosity was revealed in Seattle last week when, before a talk at The Elliott Bay Book Co., Kostova appeared at a private reception to support the launch of 826 Seattle, a free writing center and tutoring program for students that will open this fall in Greenwood (www.826seattle.com).

Kostova, who became aware of the program through a friend, presented 826 Seattle with a donation of

\$10,000. She also offered two \$5,000 challenge donations to this program, which is affiliated with a San Francisco program started by publishing wunderkind Dave Eggers. One \$5,000 donation would provide one of the 100 copies of a limited edition of "The Historian" that should become a pricey piece of literary memorabilia. The other would provide a new piece of short fiction by Kostova dedicated to the donor.

Kostova says, "One of the great pleasures of having some payment for my novel, after many years of only being able to buy two new books a year, is being able to help in some small way those causes that anyone with a conscience dreams of helping. ... I'm very excited about helping beginning writers because I had a lot of help myself."

Her greatest help came from her family of librarian and professors who taught her to "revere the patience of people who advance scholarship or knowledge," a reverence that would color many pages of "The Historian," where the primary characters pursue those elusive goals.

It was her father, professor David Johnson, who provided the inspiration for "The Historian" and instilled her longtime love for the beauty, history and culture of Eastern Europe, the setting for most of the novel.

Years later, Kostova was hiking in North Carolina with her Bulgarian-born husband (Georgi Kostov) when, atop Yellow Mountain, she had an intense flashback to her childhood trips in Europe during which her father would entertain her with his Dracula tales, based on the Hollywood films.

Kostova saw an image of herself and her father in that blaze of inspiration but also a creepy added element - what if the father were spinning his Dracula tales to his entranced daughter and Dracula were listening in? What if Dracula were still alive?

Kostova got the chills at that thought and pulled her writer's notebook out of her backpack. She filled it with seven pages of all she could remember from her trips with her father, the places they had visited, the tales he had spun. It became the skeleton for her novel. Kostov, used to his wife's writerly obsessions, snapped a photo of her furiously scribbling, a photo that "accidentally" documents a book's moment of conception.

Two days later, Kostova typed up her notes and started work on the very first chapter.

"The first three chapters came to me," Kostova recalls, "and I was fortunate that I stumbled onto the structure."

"The Historian" is not the usual Dracula fright fest. There is little violence or blood because Kostova abhors gore. She had no interest in a potboiler.

Her models for "The Historian" were the multitiered Victorian novels she had long admired, by such 19th-century writers as Thomas Hardy or Wilkie Collins, that were dense with complex characters, questions, lengthy documents and letters, plus cliffhanger chapter endings.

Kostova's manuscript pages piled up as she crafted a novel with a vast panorama, cutting back and forth across time and continents. It has parallel stories of three generations of historians tracking the murderous ruler, Vlad the Impaler of Walachia, and his lost gravesite where his headless body was said to have set in motion his Dracula roamings. And these three generations of historians (esteemed professor, his star student and his daughter) always confront increasing peril as they pursue their "ghastly trail of scholarship" and close in on a secret unsolved through centuries.

Kostova took many chances with "The Historian" and not just having the daughter go unnamed in the narrative. The pace of her novel is more steady than brisk, and its strangely restrained Dracula does not appear until page 570, which may leave readers frustrated, or even toyed with, as Kostova pursues her

depictions of European history, landscape, architecture, travel and cuisine. "The Historian" ends up being more an intellectual jigsaw puzzle than page-turning thriller.

It is easy to see how the project consumed a decade, especially since Kostova helped support her family with other jobs -- as lawn mower, waitress, housekeeper, proofreader, secretary and writing teacher while the Yale grad pursued her master's at the University of Michigan and honed her novel once she got over her initial embarrassment in revealing its subject to other grad students and professors.

Kostova admits the book became "an obsession" and cites one morning when, fueled by caffeine, she finished an astonishing 43 pages of manuscript. That creative burst left her, as she puts it, "unfit to drive."

Her manuscript for "The Historian" stood at 1,100 pages when she finished it late one night and burst into tears of relief. Kostova did two complete rewrites and cut it down to 900 pages but was convinced it couldn't be cut any further without serious damage.

She steeled herself for rejection when she finally submitted the manuscript to agents. She did the same thing when her agent submitted it to publishers.

"One of my fears was that if somebody did take it, they would ask me to cut it in half and then I would face a major dilemma," Kostova says. "Then what you would get is just the plot and you would have to take out all my ruminations on travel, architecture and food. Yes, I would have had a serious dilemma if someone told me to cut 300 pages.

"For me, this was never a Dracula adventure; it was all those other things. So I am not sure what I would have done if I was told to cut the novel."

Kostova never had to face rejecting an offer from a publisher to preserve the integrity of her manuscript. This is a lax age in editing and publishers seldom make a \$2 million investment and then perform major surgery. The editing of "The Historian" resulted in its reduction by a grand total of four pages. Some readers and critics (including this one) may believe that is at least 100 pages too few, but there has been no resistance to the book's heft in the marketplace.

Kostova's huge payday has allowed her to purchase an Ann Arbor home and leave teaching, although she plans to return. Her husband, whom she describes as "very supportive" throughout her toils, can quit his computer job and enroll in grad school.

Kostova did not escape unscathed in her long march to sudden celebrity. She did all that Dracula research, wrote all those pages with Dracula as the haunting presence, and not once did this "rational and logical person" ever have a Dracula nightmare.

Until her writing was done.

"Right after the book sold," Kostova admits, "I woke up in the midst of a horrible Dracula nightmare. I woke up all sweaty and gasping for air."

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