



Orinda author turns fascination into novel

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ORINDA -- Robert S. Murillo is unabashedly candid about his fascination with a certain silent film star.

"I fell in love with Louise Brooks the moment I spotted her in one of those clunky coffee table books," Murillo said. "There was just one picture of her taken in 1927 -- not much bigger than a postage stamp. We stared at each other for a few seconds before I realized she was seducing me and like so many others -- I fell. Hard."

Murillo takes a real-life situation in Brooks' life and concocts twists and turns in his recently-published first novel, "The Vanity," so titled from Brooks' plan to retrieve risqué photos which she taped to a drawer of a vanity in a house she once shared with her estranged husband. He had planned to leak those photos to the press.

"The Vanity" is the story of Brooks' mission to stop her husband from ruining her career and life as she connects with Mike Lundy, a fictional character from 2011 who may have a hand in Brooks' fate.

The Orinda author, who was once a high school English teacher in West Contra Costa County before working as a stockbroker for more than 30 years, poured his interest in Brooks and the Roaring Twenties into his first novel, which took him four years to write.

Longtime friend Linda Rossi had the privilege of reading Murillo's manuscript in its early stages.

"Having known Bob for over 20 years, it has always been entertaining and educational to watch old movies and/or discuss the art-deco period with him," Rossi said. "He and his wife Suzanne have a wonderful grasp of that era gone by and made every effort to experience the setting of the novel by visiting sites in Hollywood and Beverly Hills."

"I always thought I was creative, but I never thought I'd retire to become a writer," said Murillo, who was raised in Oakland.

Nevertheless, he thought he'd try his hand at writing, starting with limericks then venturing into short stories.

"The Vanity" started out as a short story before Murillo's wife saw potential in it as a novel.

"She said, 'This is a great story. You need to develop this,' " Murillo said. "This book wouldn't have been possible if it hadn't been for her encouragement. She saw much more in it."

Murillo said his story isn't "time travel," and instead describes it as a "cross-time" novel in which two stories intersect within a continuum. He blends facts that he researched about Brooks' life and places them in creative scenarios of what would happen if a man from the future were to make a decision that would alter the past.

The author said that what helped in writing the cross-time story was that the calendar dates in 1927 were the same as those in 2011.

"This connection of time provides a gateway that allows the characters to cross," Murillo said. "That's my portal."

While Murillo said he's a fan of writer Jack Finney and various time travel stories, he aimed to make his story stand out.

"That's why I wanted to make mine different than what the authors did," he said.

He devoted a lot of time getting to know his character by reading books and watching Brooks' films.

"Louise Brooks had so many stories about her," he said. "She was so dynamic, so feisty. She spoke her mind. There were so many facets of her life that there was somewhere to go with her character."

Murillo's knowledge of Brooks is thorough and his writing transports the reader to surroundings, places, and people that are very descriptive and real, Rossi said.

"While I was privileged to help with the editing of 'The Vanity,' and thus read it many times through, it gave me a greater sense and belief in time travel/communications, and I think these ideas and feelings will stimulate thought and remain with readers as well."

Despite other books written about the 20s film star, Murillo said that no other book has been written about Brooks in this genre. "The Vanity" is an intimate look at the woman beyond the public persona, he said.

While researching Brooks' life, Murillo was amazed to find she still maintains a global cult following. He invited journalist Thomas Gladysz, founder and director of the Louise Brooks Society, to talk about Brooks' legacy at the March 1 book event.

"This is the only book that takes Louise Brooks as a protagonist," he said. "Some of the scenes with her in it go beyond the facts we know about her. I hope that readers will become familiar with Louise Brooks. I've become close to her. It's important to know who she was."

- WHEN: 1 p.m. March 1
- WHERE: Orinda Books, 276 Village Square, Orinda
- INFORMATION: www.robertsmurillo.com