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Debut novelist mines family background for new angle on women's history

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Szczepanski will read, discuss, and sign copies of *Playing St. Barbara* at Blue Willow Bookshop on Thursday, November 14, at 7 p.m.



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Posted: Friday, October 18, 2013 4:32 pm

By Submitted

"Write what you know" is a common adage for new writers. However, it was what Memorial writer Marian Szczepanski didn't know about her family background that inspired her debut novel *Playing St. Barbara* (High Hill Press). The novel chronicles the secrets, struggles, and self-redemption of a Depression-era coal miner's wife and her three daughters.

Szczepanski will read, discuss, and sign copies of *Playing St. Barbara* at Blue Willow Bookshop on Thursday, Nov. 14, at 7 p.m. A second reading/signing at River Oaks Bookstore takes place on Saturday, Nov. 16, from 4-6 p.m.

"I knew very little about my grandmothers' lives," states Szczepanski, who grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania. "I heard stories throughout my childhood about coal mining, but they focused primarily on the men's activities. I was curious about the women, especially immigrant women, and how they adjusted to life in melting-pot mining towns during a challenging time in history. I started my research and quickly found out there is very little information strictly about women's experiences in that region. I had to read between the lines in history books, miners' oral histories, and archival records to find the story I wanted to tell."

Szczepanski's volunteer work as a Domestic Violence/Information & Referral hotline advocate at the Houston Area Women's Center also informed the novel, particularly its main character. Every week, she listened to women describe the nightmare of living with an abusive spouse or significant other. The callers represented every age, social classes, race, and level of education. "The only constant was their fear and hopelessness about regaining control of their lives," Szczepanski recalls. "I wanted to give these women a voice in my fiction, but it didn't seem right to do so in a contemporary story. I didn't want to commit a breach of confidentiality, even unintentionally." It was only when she visited the University of Pittsburgh labor archives and examined records of coal companies' private police forces that she discovered domestic violence, often fueled by alcoholism, was also rampant in mining

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communities.

Already the novel has drawn national attention. In a review for The Huffington Post, Nina Sankovitch, author of Tolstoy and the Purple Chair, wrote: "Marian Szczepanski made a believer out of me—I believe in the possibility of light and grace, even in the darkest of times, and I am more enthralled than ever by the powerful stories of women, sisters, mothers, daughters, and friends."

"Grace Paley once said, 'You really don't have a story until you have two stories. It's those stories working against each other and in connection with each other that make it happen.' I knew I could both give voice to and protect the privacy of the hotline callers by writing a character who was a composite of their stories, yet lived in a very different time and place. I could research a period of history that informed my family background, as well as highlight a prevailing social evil I feel very strongly about," Szczepanski states.

The granddaughter of immigrant miners, Szczepanski lived as a young child in the Jamison Coal Company house where her mother and aunts were raised. She holds an MFA in fiction from The Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and has won awards for short fiction and magazine feature writing.

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