

Wallen had a 7-year itch to write a novel

by Arthur Salm

"Ruby leaned down, pinched the rattlesnake behind the jaw, flipped it over and milked its venom sacs. Its rattler buttons ticked like a Timex gone haywire. She reached for the deadbolt on the back door. The snake's tail flopped and the rattler buttons shook. The slick scales felt loose between her fingers, so she tightened her grip, enraging the rattlesnake even more. Once she got the door open, she flung the rattler with all her might, hoping it would land in Oklahoma."

AMY WALLEN - Author Amy Wallen's first novel, 'MoonPies and Movie Stars,' will soon be reissued in paperback. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. Well, that's what you do when a rattler has found its way into the pin-setting room of your bowling alley, Devine Bowl, in Devine, Texas.

At least that's what Ruby, one of the intriguing when not being flat-out hilarious characters in Amy Wallen's debut novel, "MoonPies and Movie Stars," does, anyway. That's before she embarks on a road trip to California to reclaim her long-wayward daughter, taking her game-show-crazed sister and mother-in-law along for the considerably-less-than-Point-A-to-Point-B ride.

Wallen's path to published author was no more direct. By the time she moved to San Diego 20 years ago - in part because she wanted to use her Spanish - she had traveled the world. As a youth, she lived in Peru, Bolivia and Lagos, Nigeria, where she learned Italian: Her father worked for an Italian oil company.

While she's spent time in Texas, she's never actually lived there. But she nailed the dialect in her novel:

"Don't you even think about walking anywhere near my maple lanes in those boots ... And that dress - that the same one married Shep, then Buck, in? Shorter than legal in Devine, don't you reckon?"

"MoonPies and Movie Stars" was published last year by Viking; the paperback edition comes out in June.

Wallen, 44, had long planned to be a writer, even taking jobs in advertising and as an administrator in a law firm to pay the bills while she wrote.

"But mostly it was just writing in a journal," she said. "Then, on Feb. 3, 1998, I started writing in the voice of a woman I saw in an ad. I got good feedback on it, and I never wrote in my journal again."

The novel was seven years in the making. Seven years and 12 drafts.

"At first," she said, "each draft took me about a year. Somebody said, when you start putting stuff back in, you're finished. So, I started sending it out (to agents) in 2005."

A few minutes later, though, she dropped another hint to writers who want to know when their novel is finished:

"Each draft, you think it's going to be the last one. And then your friends get tired of hearing you say it, and you stop."

And then you start again. Assuming her friends get tired of hearing about drafts of her new novel at the same rate they became tired of hearing about drafts of "MoonPies and Movie Stars," she's about a third of the way through. This one, she said, has a Fountain of Youth theme, about a group of Hollywood has-beens and wannabes in a senior-living colony in Burbank, Calif.

And there are more on Wallen's drawing board.

"I wish I didn't have so many stories in my head," she said. "They take so long to write. It's frustrating."

AUTHOR: Amy Wallen

UPCOMING: Paperback edition of "MoonPies and Movie Stars" in June

KEY COMMENT: "I got so tired of 'I-hate-my-boss' journal griping."

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