

Arts and Leisure: Ginsberg sticks to same genre when both reading and writing

by Arthur Salm

Debra Ginsberg describes herself as "a very omnivorous reader." And while it's true that she ricochets from fiction to nonfiction, from serious literature to flat-out fluff, her reading is at the same time constrained by her work.

NEW AUTHOR - Author Debra Ginsberg likes to read in the genre she's writing in. She's just finished her second novel, 'The Grift,' a psychological thriller. CNS Photo by Sean DuFrene. Which is, for the most part, writing: Ginsberg is the author of three memoirs ("Waiting," "Raising Blaze" and "About My Sisters") and, last year, "Blind Submission," her first novel.

"I like to read in the genre I'm writing in," Ginsberg said. "I'm starting a new novel, and I want to read in that genre - stuff like (Laura Lippman's) 'What the Dead Know.' It'll be psychological suspense - not a straight thriller, but a little bit bent."

Ginsberg has just finished her second novel, "The Grift," about a psychic whose phony predictions start to become unnervingly, and dangerously, accurate. It'll be out next year. And yes, the "r" in the title is supposed to be below the line. Think about it ... a little longer ... right. You got it.

Ginsberg's work history, in addition to waitressing (see first memoir, above), includes manuscript reader for literary agencies, and she still does some freelance editing. So you'd think it'd be difficult for her to switch off that part of her brain, and just get old-fashioned lost in a book. And you'd be right.

"But if it's a great book, yeah," she said. Just recently, she said, she was reading a book and came across what she said she instantly knew would be one of her favorite lines of all time. It's in mystery writer James Lee Burke's new book "The Tin Roof Blowdown," and I like it a lot, too - so much that I think it deserves its own paragraph. Makes it easier to clip:

"I sometimes think that every person's experience, if translated into flame, would be enough to melt the flesh from his bones."

As both a reader and a writer, Ginsberg has learned an important lesson. It's so obvious it should be common knowledge and practiced without exception. And yet.

"I've learned you have to really focus on those first couple of pages," she said, "how important it is to engage readers immediately. If the first pages are really amazing, you can get away with a lot, and still hold onto them."

Which isn't, of course, to say that you can just coast from there.

"It used to be that if I started a book I'd finish it," Ginsberg said. "I'm not like that anymore."

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Well, the first few pages of a book are important, but a grabber of a title doesn't hurt. Take this one (I did): "Who Pooped in the Zoo? Exploring the Weirdest, Wackiest, Grossest & Most Surprising Facts About Zoo Poop" (Farcountry Press, 41 pages, \$13), by Caroline Patterson, with illustrations by Robert Rath, and featuring the San Diego Zoo.

There are a lot of odd critters in San Diego's Balboa Park and they have many ... unique ways of dealing with ... matters. Matter. You know. And every way is, in a word, interesting. The only major flaw in the book is the claim that it's aimed at children 8-12. Fact is, they're just going to have to wait their turn.

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