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Author of rural tales eases into upstate life

By **STACEY MORRIS**
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Greenwich--The novelist Gail Fraser looks through the window of her office, out at the moss-colored pond in her front yard, hoping to catch another glimpse of the deer that wander onto her property for a drink.

Fraser notes with a smile that one of the perks of being her own boss means the freedom to spontaneously take a little breather.

She grabs a yellow walkie-talkie on her desk, and gives it a squeeze in order to indulge in another irresistible diversion. "Hi, honey, how's it going?"

Fraser's husband, Art Poulin, a retired architect turned folk-art illustrator, is a few hundred yards away in a red clapboard studio, painting folk-art scenes for a 2009 Graphique de France calendar.

"It's so much fun," she said of the walkie-talkie, with a giggle. "It's a great way to stay in contact and keep working."

And Fraser has been working a lot lately. She's the author of the Lumby series, folksy tales akin to Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon books. Her three novels are set in the fictitious rural town of Lumby, U.S.A., that chronicle the adventures of Mark and Pam Walker and an eclectic bunch of town folk. She's currently working on the series' fourth installment. The books were first published by the small publisher Yorkville Press beginning in 2005. Now the series has been picked up by the Penguin Group N.A.L., which has begun to reissue the books.

"The Lumby Lines" came out in May, and earlier this month, "Stealing Lumby" hit bookstore shelves; "Lumby's Bounty" is due out in January.

"Yorkville knew their distribution channels were limited, and because sales were so promising, they wanted to give Lumby the chance they felt it deserved, so my editor suggested we go to auction," Fraser said, explaining her switch to a new publisher.

"Suddenly, I had Random House and Simon and Schuster bidding against one another for 'The Lumby Lines.' I felt like a racehorse ... but at the end of the day, Penguin agreed to buy all three."



GAIL FRASER created an idyllic world of country living in her "Lumby" books. She and husband, Art Poulin, traded in high-powered careers to imitate that life when they moved to a Washington Country farm.

The last two years have been more than just a whirlwind of change for Fraser. She's living a whole new life, because just eight years ago, she was a globe-trotting senior executive strategic consultant.

It was a job that meant a never-ending rotation of business trips to every conceivable time zone. One week she'd be in Hong Kong, advising a client on revamping product introduction; the next week she was implementing a plan for fraud management in Sydney, Australia.

The dizzying lifestyle was made somewhat easier by the fact that her never-ending odysseys were taken first class.

But when architect Art Poulin was summoned to design plans for her Reston, Va., house, Fraser's life changed.

"I knew right away he was one of the most honest and kind men I'd ever met," she said. The two were married two weeks after the completion of the house.

Suddenly, Fraser's traveling routine was cast in a different light.

"During our first two years of marriage, I traveled for most of it," Fraser said. "We realized it was time to re-examine our priorities."

Since Fraser is a former English major who'd been nurturing a longtime dream of being a writer, she decided to take six months off and give novel writing a shot.

Enter Lumby, U.S.A., an idyllic but quirky "one-moose town" that's home to the country's oldest apple tree, a cadre of wise and helpful monks, and the town's newspaper, whose name was accidentally changed from The Lumby Times to The Lumby Lines because of a miscommunication with the pressman.

Fraser spent those initial six months at her computer keyboard, weaving the tale of an East Coast couple who move to Lumby to restore a crumbling monastery into a historic inn.

As it turns out, Lumby is not all that unlike the rural hillside town in which she and Poulin ended up living. Fraser may have spent nearly half her life in places like Singapore and Milan, but she's no stranger to upstate New York.

A 1976 graduate of Skidmore College, she also drew much of the inspiration for her book's setting from regular visits to the New Skete Monastery in Cambridge, where 20 years ago she bought a German Shepherd puppy from the monks.

"I became close friends with the monks over the years," Fraser explained. "When I finished 'The Lumby Lines,' I showed them my manuscript and said, 'If you're offended, let me know.'"

But the brothers loved the story so much they passed it to Yorkville, the publisher they work with for their books on raising dogs. Suddenly, she found herself with a book contract.

Fraser's plan was always to make her first novel the start of a series.

Her second novel, "Stealing Lumby," centers on the disappearance of a world-famous painting of a picturesque Lumby barn.

In "Lumby's Bounty," the residents are faced with the task of assembling from scratch a hot air balloon in time for the annual balloon festival.

"I think the idea of a place like Lumby really taps into something for people," said Fraser, who realizes she unconsciously produced the relationship-based storylines as a knee-jerk response to 9/11. "Lumby is a state of mind, not just a fictitious town. It's a story of hope and faith ... and of integrity always winning out.

"We live in a complex world that is so divided politically, racially, sexually," she said.

"Lumby is the opposite of that. It's forgiving and not complex."

Kind of like Lazy Goose, the secluded Washington County spread where she and Poulin have put down permanent stakes.

When she and Poulin have down time, they stargaze through their telescope at night (Jupiter and the Space Shuttle have been recent sightings); tend their heirloom tomatoes; or hop on Huey, a farm utility RTV, and ride to the summit of their mountain for views of the Adirondacks, Catskills and Taconic Mountain Range.

For the couple, Lazy Goose is a welcome case of life imitating art, since they didn't move to the area until after the second book was written.

"There are certainly some parallels to Lumby and Washington County," said Fraser. "The people here are incredibly friendly, the scenery is gorgeous, and we love the artistic subculture."

And does she miss the world of hot towels in first class and dining on Birds' Nest Soup in Malaysia?

Not a bit.

"The anchor has dropped. This is where Art and I want to grow old," she said. "And I've got a great job ... I get to go to Lumby every day at 9 a.m."

Stacey Morris is a freelance writer living in Queensbury.