

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // BOOKS

Author's new book stars some of San Antonio's favorite landmarks

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Photo: Jerry Lara /Staff photographer

For San Antonio author Kelly Irvin, it's vital that her novels have what she calls a "sense of place," that they are set in the real world, one readers will be familiar with and recognize immediately. The author of more than a dozen successful Amish romance novels, for example, Irvin has traveled the country to soak in the sights and sounds of Amish communities such as West Kootenai, Montana; Bee County, Texas; and Jamespost, Missouri.

In her newest book, "Tell Her No Lies" (\$15.99 HarperCollins/Thomas Nelson) it's the city of San Antonio that takes the spotlight, as Irvin leaves behind the bonnets and buggies for more secular romantic suspense set in her adopted home.

Sense of place remains her lodestar.

"People really like to read books where they recognize the setting," said Irvin, a Kansas native who, before coming to San Antonio, worked for 10 years as a newspaper reporter in El Paso and Laredo. "They like getting the inside jokes about things like traffic being a parking lot on I-10. It's all in the details."

"Tell Her No Lies" is the story of Nina Fischer who is abandoned by her mother and rescued from foster care and adopted by her well-to-do aunt and uncle. Years later in her mid-20s, she is the only one at home when her adopted father, a prominent San Antonio judge, is murdered.

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Now a suspect, she teams up with a TV news photographer friend to find the real killer. Their friendship, of course, eventually blossoms into romance.

The book is set in and around a number of San Antonio landmarks, including King William, Friedrich and Brackenridge parks, the San Antonio Botanical Garden and police headquarters downtown. But the biggest star turn is reserved for Haven for Hope, the shelter for the homeless on the near West Side.

Fischer volunteers at Haven and her world view is tempered by what she experienced as a homeless child. Several scenes in the book, including a dramatic reunion, take place on the facility's campus.

Irvin said she tried, while writing the novel, to help break stereotypes about the homeless. At one point, for example, the detective investigating the murder asks Fischer if one of the Haven residents could have broken into her home and killed him.

“That’s such a common stereotype,” said Irvin, whose husband Tim is a videographer. “If you look at the homeless in San Antonio, so many are working families who don’t make a living wage. So when they lose their jobs, there’s nothing to fall back on. There’s a lack of understanding of the economics that cause people to end up in that situation.”

Although Irvin is today a full-time novelist, that wasn’t her original plan. She wrote most of her books while a public relations manager at the San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, where she worked for 22 years. She retired at 57 in 2016, however, when she was diagnosed with primary lateral sclerosis.

A motor neuron disease that’s rarer than the more familiar amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease), PLS tends to progress more slowly and, in most cases, is not fatal.

“But I had to retire because I couldn’t do a lot of the things that require mobility, like setting up ribbon-cutting ceremonies,” said Irvin, who now walks with a cane.

Then, a month later, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 ovarian cancer. She was treated with chemotherapy, surgery and then more chemo after she had a recurrence. She’s been cancer-free for 11 months now.

“Things were coming at me real fast back in 2016,” she said. “But because I was able to write full time, it gave me time to deal with what I was going through, to wrap my head around it. It’s like there’s this beautiful silver lining.”

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And her medical worries haven’t slowed her writing. She has a new Amish romance novel, “With Winter’s First Frost,” coming out in February.

A surprisingly successful genre, Amish romance isn’t read by members of the traditional Christian communities scattered throughout the country, most notably in eastern Pennsylvania. Instead, Irvin said, the book appeal to readers attracted by the seemingly idyllic, peaceful and faithful lifestyle of those who live in them.

Irvin’s editor lauds her as being able to both stick to the conventions of her chosen genres and to dig deeper to give her readers something more to consider. In an earlier Amish romance, for example, Irvin tackled the subject of illegal immigration when she had two young Mexican boys who came into the U.S. illegally seek sanctuary in an Amish community near the border.

“The Amish there want to abide by the law, but they also want to do what they’re called to do by their faith, tend to the weak,” said Becky Monds. “How they can do both plays a large role in her story, which she captures brilliantly.”

That book will be followed in June by “Over The Line,” a return to romantic suspense. While a lot of genre fiction is totally focused on action, romantic suspense takes the occasional detour to delve deeper into characters’ personalities, their lives, their concerns and, of course, their loves.

“I want to care about the characters,” she said. “That’s what I like to read, and that’s what I want to write.”

“Over the Line” involves gun smuggling across the U.S.-Mexico border and takes place mostly in Laredo — another city with which she’s intimately familiar.

Like all of Irvin’s books, “Over the Line” falls into the category of “Christian fiction,” meaning that, while there’s plenty of romance, there’s no swearing, little violence and scenes fade to black — or in this case the next chapter — before anything truly naughty happens.

“My readers want something they can leave on their coffee table that their kids can pick up and they don’t have to worry about what they’re going to read.”

And if more evidence is needed that Irvin plans to continue her prolific schedule, she said she’s getting ready to sign another three-book contract with her publisher.

Her writing dance card will be filled at least until early 2021.

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