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Rural teen readers connect with D.J.'s world

By Mary-Liz Shaw

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Catherine Gilbert Murdock didn't set out to write a trilogy, but D.J. Schwenk had other ideas.

D.J. is the likable, self-deprecating heroine of Murdock's 2006 debut novel "Dairy Queen." A sophomore who makes the cut for the football team at her tiny Wisconsin high school, D.J. wouldn't sit demurely on the literary sidelines.

The story about a teenager trying to keep her family's run-down dairy farm afloat as she navigates a secret love affair with the quarterback from the rival school proved a surprise hit with readers of all ages. Although "Dairy Queen" is classified as young adult, Murdock gets fan mail from middle-school readers, college seniors, mothers and grandmothers.

Murdock did sell "Dairy Queen" to her publisher with the understanding that she would write a sequel. That was tough enough, she says, "because you're basically being told, 'Oh, you're so brilliant, you did such a great job. Now go do it again.'"

Despite the pressure, Murdock wrote the sequel, "The Off Season" (2007), to great reviews. When she was finished with it, Murdock believed that she was finished with D.J., too. But readers weren't ready to break up with the athletically talented, socially awkward D.J.

"There was just this drumbeat. And it was not so much a demand for more of a book as it was a demand for more D.J."

Murdock's third and final novel in the D.J. books, "Front and Center," comes out in October. She will read from and sign copies of "Front and Center" at two Milwaukee-area bookstores this week.

'Wanted to just keep reading'

"Dairy Queen" and "The Off Season" touched a nerve among their core readership of 12- to 15-year-olds, particularly in rural Wisconsin, where young readers are not used to seeing their lives reflected in fiction.

Marissa Hageness, a high school junior in Fall River, a town that "my family practically founded" about 20 minutes outside Eau Claire, read "Dairy Queen" after her older sister checked it out from the library. She devoured the sequel with relish.

"After the first chapter was done, I was hooked. I wanted to just keep reading. First of all, who writes about Wisconsin?"

Fall River is very close in size and geography to D.J.'s fictional town of Red Bend. And, though Murdock's first two novels are not football stories per se, they are structured around the game in the same way that much of Fall River's social world is built around football.

"Football is life," Hageness says. "Where I'm from everyone lives and breathes football."

D.J.'s wry voice, sense of humor and good-natured point of view drive the stories and are a large part of their appeal. But Murdock knows that books do not live by voice alone. She creates intricate plots for her characters, piling on the struggles both exterior and interior, until readers are as emotionally invested as the characters in the outcome.

In "Dairy Queen," it isn't enough that D.J. has to keep the farm running after her father injures his hip, which occurs when he's fixing the manure spreader. She also is caught in the middle of a family feud between her father and older brothers, who play college football. She is flunking school, her best friend has just come out and she is trying to hide her budding affection for Brian Nelson, the haughty rich kid from the hated rival.

"This is what Romeo and Juliet's life would be like if they actually had a life," says Jennifer Parker, a junior at Waterford Union High School, north of Burlington.

Parker was hooked on the story when D.J. tries out for football to escape being "a cow," a docile follower of orders.

As the only girl on her school's wrestling team, Parker can appreciate D.J.'s struggle for respect, but D.J.'s fictional plight lacked the severity of Parker's reality.

"I can remember six guys going up to the coach and pointing at me and saying something heated, but they never said one word to me," she says. "What (D.J.) went through on that football team is so much better than what I went through on wrestling. I think compared to what she went through, I went through hell."

Parker stuck it out "because I like being strong. I didn't do it because I needed to get out of a rut."

The sequel is darker, with D.J.'s brother Win suffering a spinal injury during a game and her relationship with Brian teetering.

Murdock felt the two books had ferried her character through a period of significant emotional growth, ending at the logical conclusion of a phase in D.J.'s life.

"I really liked the message of the second book.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp. I really liked that message of 'Don't be a doormat&ensp.&ensp.&ensp. you deserve someone who values you.' "

A search for self-worth

Finding a new phase for D.J. proved a challenge, until Murdock learned about the high-stakes world of college sports recruiting.

"Front and Center" has D.J. returning to her first sports love, basketball, where her talent draws attention from top women's programs, including the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota.

The third story is the most serious exploration of D.J.'s search for self-worth.

"I wanted the conflict, but I didn't want, 'will she get the scholarship or won't she?' No. She gets the scholarship, but she doesn't want it," Murdock says. "I didn't want 'will she get the boy or won't she,' which is so clichéd. Let's turn that upside down: She gets two boys and she's forced to decide."

And the unusual focus on women's sports should satisfy the few readers, like Parker, who take issue with a few aspects of D.J.'s character.

"I just thought that making her kind of slow and a farm girl was pretty stereotypical," Parker says. "But, getting confused over love? Yes, definitely.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp.  can relate to the fact that she was kind of taken off guard by liking someone."

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