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Criminal mind games

CHICAGO LIT | Author concocts quite a caper out of thinking 'What if?'

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The great thing about being a novelist is that when you have criminal thoughts, you can turn them into fiction instead of jail time.

Before her death five years ago, the mother of author D.C. Brod stayed in an assisted living home. Brod's mother had a finite amount of savings, and the home was expensive. Brod remembers thinking, "just intellectually," if she could steal the money to keep her mother in the home and somehow get away with it.

Of course, Brod didn't do the crime. "I'm basically an honest person," said Brod, 59, of St. Charles. But the idea of an ordinary woman trying something desperate to help her mother stuck with her and became the heart of her new novel, *Getting Sassy*.

"That's the kind of thing writers like to do — ask 'What if?'" said Brod.

Getting Sassy (Tykus, \$24.95), a comic novel set in Chicago's suburbs, involves a humble, adventure-phobic free-lance writer named Robyn, who gets together with her slightly shady accountant to plot a kidnapping. They want to nab a goat named Sassy, who is a companion animal to a racehorse. The horse won't race if his goat is missing, so Robyn knows the owner will be desperate to get the goat back. (The idea of a horse that won't race without its goat is purportedly the origin of the expression "he got my goat.") The owner, Bull Severn, once scammed Robyn's mother out of a chunk of her life savings — so the goatnapping seems less a crime than a way to get revenge.

Brod, the author of the five-novel Quint McCauley mystery series, said she has a fondness for caper stories, like "The Italian Job," "The Thomas Crown Affair," and Donald Westlake's Dortmund novels. *Getting Sassy* is this kind of story, where the challenge is to pull off something complicated. The people trying to perpetrate the crime are the good guys. "Getting Sassy" is the first in Brod's planned "Getting Even" series — the next book is titled *Getting Lucky*. "Somebody's been wronged, but the system is so hard to beat, sometimes you need help," Brod explained.

Deborah Cobban Brod has always enjoyed reading and writing fiction but spent her early adulthood doing technical and marketing writing. After finishing her thesis for a master's degree in journalism, she decided to try writing a book.

"I thought, if I could spend 120 pages on the repression of the radical press, I bet I can write a novel," she said.

Brod joined a writer's group at Elgin Community College, and unlike a lot of people in writers' groups, actually did the work, bringing in a chapter at a time.

"I thought, I'm going to learn how to write a book by writing it," Brod said. "And I was lucky enough to sell it."

Besides the McCauley novels, Brod also wrote a contemporary Arthurian thriller called *Heartstone*. She said a key to her success is discipline — "just sticking your butt in a chair and doing it." She gets support and feedback from her husband, retired Northern Illinois University journalism department chair Donald Brod, and from regular meetings with writing friends.

One reason Brod likes her Robyn character is that she's not overly confident and she's mostly just winging it. When she's trying to escape a bad guy and get into her car, she can't find her keys, and she hears her mother's voice in her head, "Robyn, if you had a compartment for your car keys you wouldn't have been bludgeoned to death." It's hard to imagine James Bond or Angelina Jolie's Evelyn Salt having this kind of internal monologue.

"I like characters who are not terribly sure of themselves," Brod said. "It made her more real to me, and more fun to write."

Despite the presence of some guns and mayhem in her novels, Brod avoids gratuitous violence, which will make her stop reading a book. A friend pointed out that Brod loved the *Lord of the Rings* movies, which are filled with slashings and hackings.

"But that's comic violence," Brod protests. "It's a little different. And they're orcs."

Like Robyn, Brod admits she's made some dumb choices in her life — with men and crummy jobs — but they've gotten her to a place where she's happy now.

"You learn from your mistakes, and sometimes you don't learn the first time you do it," said Brod. "It takes a few times."

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