Bloomington’s Own Fairy-tale Princess

It’s a classic Cinderella story: Lonely, small-town girl transforms into wildly successful international sensation. But there was no fairy godmother to wave her wand over Bloomington native Meggin Cabot. Although today she’s easily recognizable as the celebrated author of more than 50 novels, including The Princess Diaries, the Queen of Babble series, and the Heather Wells mysteries, Cabot, a self-proclaimed “outsider,” so feared rejection that she stockpiled nearly 20 years’ worth of writing before she dared submit a manuscript. Once she worked up her courage, however—and endured the obligatory string of rejection letters—she quickly became one of today’s most prolific sources of popular fiction for children, teens, and adults.
CABOT: Well, growing up in Bloomington back then, we didn't have cable. We only had three TV channels. We didn't have computers—I mean we didn't have a lot of the stuff kids have today. My friends would go on vacation during the summer or they would go to summer camp and I would be the only kid left in my neighborhood. My dad wasn't making a lot of money so we never went on vacation. I was stuck in my house with my Barbies. I actually value that upbringing because it forced me to use my imagination to make up my own games and a lot of the time I'd end up writing my own stories.

BLOOM: Your latest series, Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls, is about a nine-year-old. Does it draw from your grade school days in Bloomington?

CABOT: Yeah, it does. Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls is really about me and when I went on your grade school days in Bloomington? Your latest series, Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls, is about a nine-year-old. Does it draw from your grade school days in Bloomington?

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BLOOM: So many of the protagonists in your young adult novels are misfits in some way—outsiders who feel they don’t fit in. Do you think that’s true of you as a teenager?

CABOT: Yeah, I was. Totally. And I think that’s true of all my books—really the theme that runs through them all is that as a teenager most people feel like freaks. I just take it to another level in my books where the girls actually are freaks. For instance, in Princess Diaries she really is a freak because she’s a princess. And in the Mediator books where the girl can speak to ghosts, and then in 1-800-WHERE-ARE-YOU where she has psychic powers, they really are freaks.

BLOOM: Did you always plan on being a writer?

CABOT: I wanted to be a veterinarian for a very long time. But it turns out you have to know math to be a veterinarian and when I found out that, that really ruined that dream because I was never very good at math. So then I decided I would be an actress. Actually, all through high school I was going to be an actress, but I was still writing all the time, just for fun. Then I walked one day when I was on stage that when you’re acting, you’re saving stuff that somebody else wrote. And I really wanted to say stuff that I wrote. So then I thought, “Maybe I’ll be a writer.”

BLOOM: But when you went to IU, you chose to study writing or literature.

CABOT: Yeah, I actually met this guy at a party who was a creative writing and English major and I was talking to him about majoring in creative writing, and he was like, “Don’t do it. It’s horrible, all the professors will suck the life out of you.” And that really freaked me out so badly that I thought, “Well, I’m not going to do that because I love writing and I don’t want that to happen.” So I just took all sorts of classes. And the one that I really ended up loving was an illustration drawing class. So I started taking tons of classes at the art school, and I thought, “Well, I’ll be an illustrator.” So when I graduated, I went to New York to become an illustrator. But of course nobody was hiring at all. I got like two jobs.

BLOOM: The guy from the party, Benjamin D. Egnerate, reappeared, didn’t he?

CABOT: He was a friend of a friend and I ended up meeting him again when I got to New York, but I hated him. I thought he was a big jerk. His dad was a doctor, so he had this red BMW and he had these Ray-Bans and I just thought he was some dumb frat guy. But he just really nice to me. He met me his first job in New York. He worked in an investment bank and they had an opening for a receptionist position. So I saw him every day and he would buy me lunch. He turned out to be really funny and nice and sweet. And that’s when we get together and now we’re married. End of story.

BLOOM: You wound up working at a dorm at NYU, which was the basis for your Heather Wells murder mystery series. What was that like?

CABOT: I was assistant dorm manager and it was a great job. I loved it. I worked there for ten years. It was great because in the mornings nothing ever happened because the kids were asleep, so I would work on my books. There were actually never any murders when I worked in the dorm. Sadly, there were some suicides and unfortunately that’s a killing cause of death of kids that age.

BLOOM: So all that time you kept on writing for your own enjoyment. What finally convinced you to try to get your work published?

CABOT: My husband was actually like, “You’re always writing these books. Why don’t you try and send them out?” And I was like, “No, because if they get rejected, I’ll feel bad.” Writing was really my hobby, and if somebody rejected your hobby then what have you got left?

But then my dad died, and I realized you don’t really have a lot of time in life. And if there’s something you want to do, you shouldn’t put it off or be afraid to try. Because really that’s the worst thing that can happen, that somebody you love dies. I realized that being rejected...
School South. Bloomington High graduating from Class of ’85, “I’m getting published!” And everybody in the "Well, I just happen to have a Victorian that I’ve written in my spare time.” And I sent it in. I would get really encouraging rejections. I couldn’t ever be as bad as that. So the day I got accepted? The day I got accepted was the day I burst out, looking for a Victorian romance, and I had actually already written a Victorian. I said, “Well, I just happen to have a Victorian that I’ve written in my spare time.” And I sent it in and they said, “Perfect!” and bingo! It was fantastic! I ran out onto my balcony and I burst out, “I’m getting published!” And everybody in the "Well, I just happen to have a Victorian that I’ve written in my spare time.” And I sent it in and they said, “Perfect!” and bingo! It was fantastic! I ran out onto my balcony and I burst out, “I’m getting published!” And everybody in the complex was like, “Go away! We’re all published! Who cares?” It was really funny!

BLOOM: Why did you chose to use a pen name, Patricia Cabot, on that first book?
CABOT: I didn’t want to use my real name because it was such a creepy book and I didn’t want the kids from the dorm or, like, my grand- mother to find out about it. But of they all did. And the kids from the dorm actually invented a drinking game based on my books. It was funny. It ended up being fine.

BLOOM: What inspired you to write The Princess Diaries?
CABOT: I felt like when I was a teenager I couldn’t find books that were funny and that I could identify with that didn’t have “issues.” We call them “issue” books in the young-adult field because there’s always an issue like teen pregnancy or doing drugs or having an uncle molest you or, you know, the dog dies, all these horrible things. That was the problem, they all were “problem” books where the girls either ended up getting pregnant or they would end up on drugs and they’d learn this big lesson. I didn’t really want to read books like that. I wanted to read “escape” books that were fun. So when I started writing I decided to write the kind of books that I could never find.

BLOOM: Did you know immediately that The Princess Diaries would be a hit?
CABOT: I knew it was good, like I knew it was different than anything else I’d seen. But it got rejected over and over again by a bunch of different publishers. My agent just kept sending it out. Actually, she was the one who sent it to Hollywood because she thought it would be a really good movie, but no one agreed with her. And then finally Whitney Houston, who had her own production company at that time, was the one who optioned the book and the rights.

BLOOM: How long did it take to get an acceptance?
CABOT: For about three years I got rejec- tions every day. It was really depressing but I kept thinking, “I’ve got nothing to lose,” so I kept writing no matter what. And sometimes I would get really encouraging rejections. They’d be like, “This isn’t really what we’re looking for, but you’re obviously a good writer so keep us posted if you write something that’s not about a high-school basketball coach or not about a medieval romance or something set in a different time period.”

So finally someone who rejected me—they didn’t want something medieval but they were looking for a Victorian romance, and I had actually already written a Victorian. I said, “Well, I just happen to have a Victorian that I’ve written in my spare time.” And I sent it in and they said, “Perfect!” And bingo!

BLOOM: What was the reaction of your family to the book that you invented a drinking game based on your books.

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BLOOM: What did you think of the movie?
CABOT: I thought it was a big joke until they finally started calling and said Garry Marshall [Pretty Woman, Beaches] is going to direct and Julie Andrews is going to star, and then I started thinking, “Wow, maybe this is real!” But they don’t call the check until the filming actually starts, so it was quite some time before they actually sent the check and that’s when I thought, “Yeah, I guess this is real.”

BLOOM: How long did the process take from start to finish?
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“We really want to live in the Indiana Memorial Union.”

BLOOM: It seems like all your hard work has paid off in terms of your success in what was really your dream job. Do you have any gripes about the writing life?

CABOT: Yeah, I have two! I hate revising, so I really like writing that first draft, and then when you turn it in and your editor sends it back with tons of notes—I hate that. Although, usually, unfortunately, they're right. And I don't like deadlines. I wish you could just turn it in whenever, and unfortunately that's a big part of it. And I hate that, unfortunately, the way it works is that you call your editor and say, “I have this great idea for a book. What do you think about it?” And she says, “Great! I'll put it in by such-and-such a day,” and then suddenly I hate the idea.

But really, how can I have gripes, because it's so great? I know there are so many people who've never gotten published. And I was one of those people for so long. I got rejected for so many years.

BLOOM: Back then, writing was what you did for fun. So now that you are writing for a living, what do you do to blow off steam?

CABOT: It's weird because when I have time off, I think, “Oh, I'd love to write a book about this funny thing I thought about the other day.” and I'll start writing it and then I realize, “Oh, my God, this is supposed to be my time off. What am I doing?”

So now I'm trying to be more laidback and enjoy other people's books and watch movies and go on bike rides and I've taken up snorkeling a little bit. And I come here and spend time with friends and stuff.

BLOOM: How much of your time do you spend in Ellettsville and Bloomington?

CABOT: We're here at least about six weeks of the year. My husband tries to go to all the IU basketball games because he's a huge Hoosier fan. I have a lot of friends here because a lot of the people I grew up with are still here. I love how the students are so energizing and there's always a lot of stuff going on, a lot of cultural events that you can attend. My husband is a chef so his favorite thing is to go to Bloomington food and the Farmers' Market. He's really into the Slow Food movement and organic stuff and buying fresh foods and meats and stuff from Fischer Farms.

BLOOM: Do you think there's a particular Homer influence on your writing?

CABOT: Oh, yeah, I think everybody when they're reviewing my books thinks Seme and Sensibility with the characters. I can't get away from it. All of my characters are always so decent and so kind. And I think, “God damn it! But it's true. I can't get them to stop being so decent. I think that there really is a kind of wholesomeness, even when they live in New York. I think that has to do with having grown up here. Everyone in Bloomington just kind of looks out for each other and they're very concerned about the environment and concerned about one another and I don't want to say it's “Obama-esque,” which is kind of a new term, but it really is. It really kind of epitomizes what I think he's going for so far as, “We all have to help each other out.” I think that's what Bloomington is about.

BLOOM: Do you think you'll always maintain a presence here?

CABOT: Yeah, it's so funny, my friends were like, “So you're going to retire here, right?” We were talking about what we really want to do: We really want to live in the Indiana Memorial Union. “How can we get condos in the Commons? It would be just awesome to live there. Go bowling, as old people. We'd have to do a little bit of work on the rooms. We need a Jacuzzi tub in the room.

BLOOM: Will you know you're done when you've written something in every literary genre? Already you've covered most of them: adult fiction, chick lit, romance, detective mysteries, graphic novels, children's fiction, paranormal. What else are you planning to do?

CABOT: Maybe a memoir someday, but I think the danger is that once you've told your whole story there's nothing left to put in your books for fiction. Because each one of the books has a little grain of something that really did happen to me. So I don't think I'll ever do that. Maybe when I'm really old and retired and living in the Union. :)}