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'Novel' approach to retirement

By Carol Sorgen

Stella Adams had planned to become a history teacher after receiving her undergraduate degree from Morgan State University. Instead, she changed gears and, over the next 30-plus years, Adams went on to earn a master's degree from Towson University and work for the government in a series of analytical, human resources and managerial positions.

Now retired, the 70-year-old Randallstown resident finally has the time to pursue a dream she's had since she was a child — to become a writer.

Adams' first novel, *Heavy is the Rain*, was released in 2013, and is soon to find new life as a theatrical production. Set against the backdrop of Baltimore and South Carolina — and highlighting themes of physical, sexual and emotional trauma — Adams' novel tells the story of Billie Cunningham, a precocious 7-year-old whose mother moves with her to Baltimore in the 1940s to secure a better life.

The story follows Billie's life to adulthood as she learns to navigate the uncertainties of life, overcome its tragedies, and discover the power of love and forgiveness.

Autobiographical overtones

The novel begins with Billie's move from rural South Carolina to Baltimore with her mother, Lilly Ann. (Like Billie, Adams was also born in South Carolina and grew up in Baltimore.)

Their new life, secured through Lilly Ann's marriage to Herbert Brown, a man 12 years her senior, quickly begins to show that it comes at a heavy price.

For Lilly Ann, it means turning a blind eye to her husband's unsavory extramarital activities ("In short, he was a pedophile," said Adams), and, for Billie, it means harboring a dark and shameful secret.

Despite her secret, Billie grows and matures in her new world, and she develops a close bond with Thomas McNeal, Jr., a neighborhood boy struggling to fight his own demons.

"I wrote this book for those who have journeyed from victim to victory," said Adams who, following the age-old advice to writers to "write what you know," acknowledged that there are elements of the

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER MYERS



Stella Adams, 70, published her first book, *Heavy is the Rain*, two years ago, and it is now being adapted for the stage. The book follows a young, abused girl from South Carolina to Baltimore, and has some parallels to Adams' life.

story that reflect her own life.

The coming-of-age story, which is currently on sale as a trade paperback or ebook on Amazon.com and BN.com (Barnes and Noble), also serves as the basis for an upcoming theater production in Baltimore by the same name. Adams herself adapted the script from her novel.

An open casting call for the play will be held on Jan. 23. Dr. Gregory Branch, executive director of Unified Voices, a choir whose members are employees at Johns Hopkins Hospital, will serve as the play's producer/director.

"After reading Adams' novel, I knew right away that it was a great fit for a Unified Voices production," said Branch, who has produced and directed multiple stage

productions and also works for Baltimore County government.

"This play takes place in Baltimore and showcases themes of child sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional trauma — things that I see in my position as director of Health and Human Services of Baltimore County. I hope it will stimulate more conversation about these topics."

While some Unified Voices choir members may perform in the production and there will be a few song selections in *Heavy is the Rain*, it is not a musical.

From workshop to publication

Though Adams had written poetry as a

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Author

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young child, she had never before written anything for publication.

But in 2009, at the age of 64, she attended a writing workshop at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) taught by Lauren Small — a local writer and novelist who has strong interests in social justice and the history of psychiatry. It was Small's encouragement that gave Adams the courage to pursue her dream of becoming a writer.

"Our first assignment was to write 20 pages on any topic we chose," Adams recalled. "I thought if I were going to write at all, I'd make those 20 pages the beginning of my book."

Small also encouraged those who were serious about writing to establish a group outside of class where they could meet and critique each other's work. The group met

every other month for a year and a half, and at the end of that time, Adams was the only one with a completed manuscript.

With manuscript in hand, Adams approached Small, who suggested she send it to 10 people who didn't know her. (Friends and family weren't necessarily going to be the most objective audience, she told Adams.)

The response was favorable, and after only two months, Adams was approached by Delaware-based Plenary Publishing, which specialized in multicultural fiction and nonfiction.

Plenary is no longer in business, so Adams has now taken on the role of marketer (with the assistance of local publicist Cherrie Woods), appearing at book clubs and book fairs such as the Baltimore Book Festival and African American Author's Expo. "And there are always books in the trunk of my car," Adams laughed.

Adams is working — "slowly!" — on a second novel, which will have a different theme and characters. She is encouraged by the reader response to her first book, which has garnered 5-star reviews on Amazon, with such comments as, "I didn't want the story to end," "...artful and entertaining," "...couldn't put it down." And some who grew up in Baltimore mentioned their nostalgia for landmarks that Adams sprinkles throughout the book.

For Adams, her goal is to get her work into the hands of readers and to have a "following" that will look forward to her future projects, relate to her stories, and be "comforted and reaffirmed."

"A lot of people are afraid to start writing," Adams continued, and she offers these tips to allay those fears: Get it down on paper; you can fix the mistakes later! Write what you know. Do your research. Hire a proofreader and editor so that you'll present the best product you can.

"Strive for excellence," she added, "but don't let that keep you from getting started (or finishing)."

If you do that, said Adams, then you may just be able to say — as she does — "Now, I'm a writer."

Words of advice

For those who harbor dreams of becoming a writer themselves, Adams said that it's never too late. Though she does add, "If you're looking to make money, this isn't the thing to do!"

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