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Spreading the word about a beautiful girl

Rachel Simon has become a voice for those with disabilities

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Author Rachel Simon, of Wilmington, has been on a 12-city tour to promote the paperback of “The Story of Beautiful Girl.” Her previous book, “Riding the Bus With My Sister,” was made into a TV movie

starring Andie MacDowell and Rosie O'Donnell. / THE NEWS JOURNAL GINGER WALL

Written by

[GARY SOULSMAN](#)

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IF YOU GO

What: Author Rachel Simon on “The Story of Beautiful Girl” and disabilities and the family.

When: Wednesday at 7p.m.

Where: Theatre N, 1007 N. Orange St., Wilmington.

Admission: Free, but RSVP requested at (302) 657-0650 or info@dhf.org.

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Wilmington author Rachel Simon has officially arrived in the 1 percent. Not the 1 percent of folks riding the crest of American riches, the 1 percent of authors who can land a 12-city book tour.

Having a chance to hand-sell her book over the last several days has been “a hoot and an embarrassment of riches,” Simon said from Austin, Texas, last week. “It’s also a bit lonely. No one else is going through it with you.”

She’ll finish her tour to promote the paperback of “The Story of Beautiful Girl” this coming week, with one of the last stops at Wilmington’s Theatre N. The event, at 7 p.m. Wednesday, is free, but an RSVP is requested by the Delaware Humanities Forum, the sponsor, at (302) 657-0650 or info@dhf.org.

Book publicist Alana Levinson says Simon has done more than 400 keynote addresses and workshops.

Her novel is about the love between Homan, a deaf African-American man, and Linnie, a young woman who's a gifted artist but developmentally disabled. The story spans four decades, beginning in 1968.

For her Wilmington talk, Simon has been asked to speak on disabilities and the American family, a subject at the heart of her novel.

Since the 2002 publication of "Riding the Bus With My Sister," she's been a sought-after spokesperson in the disability community, in part because her non-fiction book is about her mildly disabled sister. The book was made into a TV film, with Rosie O'Donnell playing Beth and Andie MacDowell playing Rachel.

She recently told the PBS Newshour that she was transformed by writing "Riding the Bus" and learning "that during the course of my life and my sister's life, there had been some major civil rights development in the lives of people with disabilities. And the major one is called self-determination — that people with disabilities have the right to choose how to live their own lives."

The stop at Theatre N next week promises to be a relatively relaxed one; there are sure to be friends in the audience, and the energetic 52-year-old is only a few blocks from her townhouse in Midtown Brandywine, where her husband, Hal, will welcome her home.

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It's been a good month for Simon, who's on her sixth book and her first book sales tour. Even before the \$12 paperback edition came out, the hardcover was in the top 300 in Amazon sales, she says.

Her experience also shows what can happen when a major publishing house really backs a novel. For the hardcover launch last May, Grand Central Publishing sent her on an eight-city pre-sale tour that included dinners with independent booksellers to promote the novel.

Simon believes it was effective, in that many bookstores had staff hand-selling the book to customers.

It also helped that reviews for the novel were good.

At year's end, Sandye Voight wrote for the Telegraph Herald in Dubuque, Iowa, that "The Story of Beautiful Girl" was her favorite book of the year.

It's "the kind of novel that hooks you from the beginning, when a widow answers her door on a stormy night and two escapees from a mental institution give her their newborn to hide," she wrote.

Earlier this month, Simon landed an interview with Judy Woodruff on the Newshour, which touched on her wanting to write more about disabilities after "Riding the Bus."

"I met a lot of people who didn't have the experience my sister had [living at home], who had lived in institutions," she told Woodruff. "And I felt like their stories were not being heard."

More recently she's been blogging lightheartedly (rachelsimon.com/blog/) about the rules for surviving a book tour. One is that air accumulates in your clothing, making it harder to pack as the trip goes on.

One solution is to "Box up your clothes" and ship some home, she wrote. "Tell yourself, who needs 4 outfits when 3 will do. So what if your blog photos reveal that you're a fashion minimalist?"

She's also spent plenty of time in airports, one of her favorite places for meeting folks, since she jokingly says that one of her goals is to meet everyone in the world.

She's been pleased to find that there are lots of bookstores in airports. The Denver Airport had four and each had 15 copies of her novel, she said.

"Along the way I've learned that a signed book is a sold book," says Simon, who signed all 60 in Denver.

The idea is that, if a person is debating between books, they'll always pick the signed copy and think, "Hey, it's only \$12."

She’s also been touched that, in some cases, people have boarded planes and driven for several hours to attend one of her reading-signings. The field of disabilities is one that people often feel passionately about, she says.

As Woodruff pointed out, Simon has been one of the few novelists to treat the world of disabled people in a dignified way.

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