Jean M. Auel (1936-)

No Oregon contemporary writer has achieved the superstar celebrity status of Jean Auel. And she did it with one book, *Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980). Most books on best-seller lists appear for a few weeks at most, but *Clan of the Cave Bear* held its place for eight months, selling millions of copies world-wide and putting Auel in the company of Stephen King and Anne Rice, two of the most popular writers of the 1980s. The book was made into a feature film in 1986.

Clan of the Cave Bear is the first of the projected six books of Auel's Earth's Children series. Set 25,000 years ago, it begins the story of Ayla, an orphaned Cro-Magnon child adopted by a Neanderthal clan. Auel portrays Ayla's adoptive family, the clan of the Cave Bear, as an alternative—not a lesser—human species.

Neanderthals possess emotions in the novel but not speech. They express themselves through a highly developed body language of movement and symbol. They also possess group memory that extends back thousands of generations. Reliance on memory is at once a strength and a fatal weakness as, locked into ancient traditions, they are not able to adapt to new circumstances. The "Others," the Cro-Magnon, will eventually make them extinct. Subsequent books in the series continue Ayla's story: *The Valley of Horses* (1982); *The Mammoth Hunters* (1985); *The Plains of Passage* (1990); *The Shelters of Stone* (2002); and *The Land of Painted Caves* (2011).

Jean Auel's books are anchored in meticulous, hands-on research. She learned how to make tools out of flint, tanned hides, and visited caves and prehistoric sites in Europe. "I have learned a great deal," she said, "from asking questions, taking classes, and traveling." In writing *Clan of the Cave Bear*, which began as a short story, Auel did extensive research, including enrolling in an aboriginal life skills class taught by anthropologist Jim Riggs in central Oregon.

Auel's own journey took her from Chicago—where she was born Jean Marie Untinen to Finnish immigrants on February 18, 1936—to Portland. She earned her MBA from the University of Portland in 1976. At the same time, together with her husband Ray Bernard Auel, she raised five children while working as a clerk, circuit board designer, technical writer, and credit manager at Tektronix. Always interested in writing**,** she left her last job in 1977 to begin the extensive research that would result in *Clan of the Cave Bear*.

She has won several awards, including a nomination for the American Book Award in 1981 and the Scandinavian Kaleidoscope of Art & Life Award in 1982. The University of Portland gave her an Outstanding Alumnus Award in 2006, and in 2008 she was named an Officer of the Order of Arts & Letters by the French Minister of Culture and Communication.

Auel remains a friend and supporter of aspiring writers. In an interview on her Web page, she gives this advice: "You learn to write by writing, and by reading and thinking about how writers have created their characters and invented their stories.…If you want to write, sit down and do it.…Inspiration happens when you're working at it."

Written by Eric A. Kimmel

Further Reading:

"Video Interview." Jean M. Auel. http://www.randomhouse.com/features/auel/webroot/video.html

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