

Jean M. Auel (1936-)

By Eric A. Kimmel

No contemporary Oregon 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 worldwide 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. The success of *Clan of the Cave Bear* was not exceeded until 1997, with the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States) by J.K. Rowling.

Clan of the Cave Bear was conceived as the first of the six books of the 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 and how to tan hides, and she 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 lifeways class taught by anthropologist Jim Riggs in central Oregon.

Auel's own journey began in Chicago, where she was born Jean Marie Untinen to Finnish immigrants on February 18, 1936. She married Ray Bernard Auel in 1954, and the couple moved to Portland, where they raised five children. Jean Auel worked as a clerk, circuit board designer, technical writer, and credit manager at Tektronix. She earned an MBA from the University of Portland in 1976. Always interested in writing, she left her last job in 1977 to begin the research that would result in *Clan of the Cave Bear*.

Auel 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 she was named an Officer of the Order of Arts & Letters by the French Minister of Culture and Communication in 2008.

A friend and supporter of aspiring writers, Auel gives this advice in an interview on her Web page: "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."

Sources

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