



Faith Harkey will be reading from "Sneak Thief," her new book for young readers, on March 23.
MILA BRIDGER

Young voices speak loudly for writer Faith Harkey

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Seated at her floor desk, author Faith Harkey listens intently. She enjoys feeling grounded with the earth while she creates, likening writing to living inside a dream. She listens, waiting for a character's voice to arise, and prepares for the 12 to 16 hour days ahead when she will become absorbed with telling their story. Then suddenly, it happens.

"I was sitting down to see what was bubbling up in my psyche one day and it turned out to be an 11-year-old character," says Harkey. "A little girl whose voice was so loud, she was placing demands on me that I write her story." Harkey never expected to become a middle-grade school author, targeting an age range from late elementary through middle school. She was surprised by the voice that would become the main character of her first published novel, "Genuine Sweet," and even more intrigued by the commanding presence of Hush Cantrell, the star of her most recent book, "Sneak Thief," which she will be reading from at Midtown Reader on March 23.



Harkey

Both novels take place in the imaginary small town of Sass, Georgia, a mashup of rural Florida, Georgia, and Idaho. Harkey grew up a city kid, but now calls Tallahassee home and the place she can "fill her cup" with the community's literary offerings in between novels. She and her husband often traverse the nooks and crannies of America and the south as well, unearthing rural life's nuances.

"I believe there are a lot of stereotypes about people in rural communities," states Harkey. "In my experience traveling across the country I've met brilliant, highly educated people, artists with insight into the human condition, and people with thick accents that speak slowly but think very quickly. I hope that we can take another look at what it means to be from a small town and learn from each other."

During her time in Idaho, she witnessed several small-town phenomena that appear in her novels. One such instance is stores pulling double duty, like a Radio Shack providing school band instruments. Another day, she glanced out her window to see a herd of kids walking their 4-H project sheep down the road on leashes.

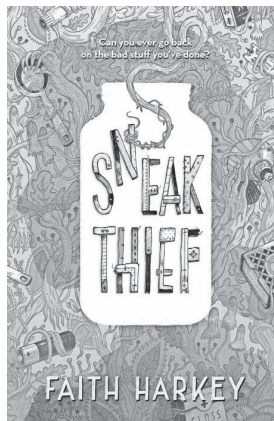
"I think that we see things in small towns that we either tend to forget or overlook in city life," says Harkey. "The respect for the cycles of life, the interconnectedness of people, that sense of responsibility between neighbors and a slower pace of life that leaves room for matters of the heart. There's so much there that's beautiful and magical."

In line with the strokes of magical realism inside her novels, it was a dragon that first ignited Harkey's imagination. The creature resided in a poem shared by her fourth-grade language arts teacher, inspiring Harkey to flex her own creative writing powers. After reading her work, her teacher encouraged her to write every time she felt inspired, and by the time she graduated high school, Harkey had filled over 20 notebooks.

She went on to graduate from Eckerd College's writer's workshop under the mentorship of Sterling Watson. Harkey enjoys using his "make it worse," philosophy which intensifies plots and allows characters to "shine set against a background of struggle." Harkey says her route to becoming published as a professional writer feels similar in its long, and sometimes arduous process.

"Some of (Watson's) best advice was 'Quit, if you can,'" says Harkey. "And the emphasis wasn't really on 'quit,' it was actually on that 'if you can.' It acknowledges that for many writers this work is a calling. There is something within us that draws us onward and to have faith even when the process becomes difficult."

She feels the emotional heartbeat of young adult author Joan Bauer present when she writes, appreciating Bauer's skill in addressing the power chil-



Cover illustration for "Sneak Thief" is by John Hendrix. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

dren possess in the face of hardship. Harkey also senses a connection to Lucy Maud Montgomery, the author of "Anne of Green Gables," and the trimmings of small-town life their novels share. Ultimately, Harkey craves accessibility in her work, seeking to create language that is open and honest so that every reader feels welcome and cared for.

For "Sneak Thief," she traveled up to Georgia and Arkansas to bathe in the lyrical, Southern lilt that mark the main character's voice. She admits to feeling intimidated by Hush at first as the character challenges the rules and deals with inconsistent adults. Harkey says the book asks questions about mothering as Hush struggles to find a mentor, positing how we are mothered and how over time we begin to mother ourselves.

"I feel like these characters become a part of my family, my neighborhood, and my heart," says Harkey. "Seeing them go through these little pieces of their lives and having a moment that feels authentic is really rewarding."

Harkey loves to read reviews of her books written by children to see how they engage with the stories. During one school visit, she read an excerpt from "Genuine Sweet" about a character calling down starlight into a cup and calling it wish juice, and was delighted to hear a tiny whisper echo "wish juice" from the back of the room. Harkey treasures how these young minds still believe in magic effortlessly, and feels it is a privilege and a gift to write for middle-grade readers.

At Midtown Reader, Harkey will talk about the nature of inspiration and looks forward to speaking with young readers and writers alike. In both her books, characters develop powers called a "shine." With "Sneak Thief," she uses this mystique to focus on themes of redemption, with the idea that we all make mistakes now and then.

"Depending on how we handle those mistakes, we can emerge stronger, more empowered, and kinder," says Harkey. "I hope that my readers discover that they can not only be kind to each other but to themselves. That they find a core of their own preciousness, and ask, 'what is my shine?'"

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

If you go

What: Author Event - Faith Harkey with "Sneak Thief"

When: 6-7 p.m, Friday, March 23

Where: Midtown Reader, 1123 Thomasville Road

Cost: Free admission

Contact: For more information, call 850-425-2665 or visit <https://www.midtownreader.com/>.