

# Worth the Wait

A master of suspense novels, author Jennifer McMahon endured years of anticipation before her work finally came to fruition in four published books, with a fifth on the way. BY ELEANOR KOHLSAAT ('HAS 07)

**A**t a funky little college in a small town in Central Vermont, four art students band together to form a group called the Compassionate Dismantlers.

Led by a charismatic frontwoman whose conviction is that the true essence of things can be revealed only through disassembly, the group lives together in a backwoods cabin and perpetrates acts of meaningful vandalism. But then one of the Dismantlers' pranks goes abruptly wrong, resulting in the accidental death of their leader.

Cut to a decade later. Two of the group's former members are struggling in a rocky marriage, the tragedy covered up and (they believe) safely laid to rest. But now along comes their inquisitive 9-year-old daughter and her troublemaking friend to stir up old ghosts.

The idea for the suspense novel *Dismantled* came to author and Goddard alumna Jennifer McMahon (GV '91) in a dream. In the dream, she says, an old Goddard friend paid her a visit.

"She confessed that she was a longtime member of an outlaw art group called 'the Compassionate Dismantlers,' who believed that true art was about taking things apart, rather than putting them together," she says.

"It was one of those long, epic dreams with shifting perspectives...incredibly vivid and detailed," Jennifer continues. "When I woke up, I knew immediately that the Compassionate Dismantlers belonged in a book, and the obvious backdrop was a fictional version of Goddard."

Certainly, from the first page, it's apparent that the book's Sexton College, with its eclectic buildings and creative oddball students, owes Goddard a sizable debt. No one in the book is based on a single individual, Jennifer says, but "I take bits and pieces of people, and they show up in my characters."

Jennifer says she never planned on becoming a novelist. At Goddard, she studied poetry and creative writing and dabbled in drawing, painting, sculpture and photography.

"I liked the idea of being an artist, of doing all kinds of messy things," she says. "I'm jealous of visual artists. They get to finish projects. When you're writing, it never seems as if you're done."

After graduation, she enrolled in Vermont College in Montpelier with the intention of earning a master of fine arts in poetry. But her poems grew longer, stretched into short stories, then into a novel-length manuscript.

"I was completely hooked on fiction," she says. She took a semester off to

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**SPINE-TINGLER** The author of several hair-raising tales, Jennifer McMahon says, "I love hearing that I've scared the bejesus out of people."



figure things out, and she never went back.

Jennifer's path to literary success was by no means a straight shot. After landing an agent, she – rather optimistically, she admits – quit her job so she could write full time. She and her partner, Drea Thew, whom she'd met at Goddard, were in the midst of building a small house in the woods. Drea supported them by waiting tables.

A year went by. Rejections from publishers were piling up, but Jennifer kept plugging away, finishing a second book and sending it to her agent. The agent set aside book number one and started marketing book number two, and Jennifer began working on book number three.

Another year went by. More rejections. Jennifer realized her third book was “a complete mess, and I didn't know how to fix it. I was too ashamed to show it to my agent, so I put it in a drawer.”

She made up her mind to write one more book. It would be her last chance, she decided: if this one didn't sell, she'd go out and get herself another job. That last-ditch effort turned out to be a combination ghost story/whodunit set in a small Vermont town. The plot revolved around the murder of a teenage girl, a murder

found a new agent who was enthusiastic about her work and was able to sell her manuscript, *Promise Not to Tell*, to a major publisher. After the success of that book came *My Tiki Girl*, a young adult novel, and then *Island of Lost Girls*, a suspense novel about a young girl's abduction.

Jennifer is currently at work on her fifth book. Like her other novels, it's set in Vermont. She reveals that the subject is a 12-year-old girl who wanders into the woods behind her house, crosses over into the fairy world and disappears. Years later, an adult woman shows up, claiming to be the missing girl.

“I write a lot about young girls, 9 to 12 years old,” Jennifer notes. “It's a voice that comes very naturally to me. Maybe some part of me is still stuck in that time frame.”

She remembers her own childhood as both troubled and magical. Her parents were divorced and her mother struggled with mental illness and alcoholism. Jennifer grew up in her grandmother's house.

But despite her unstable family situation, she also has fond memories of staging plays in her grandmother's backyard, hanging out in a tree house, swimming in the lake. She fell in love with

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that bears a chilling similarity to one that occurred more than 30 years before.

“I knew it was good,” Jennifer says. “Better than my other books.” So she sent the book to her agent and waited. And waited. The phone didn't ring. “Eventually I got a letter from her – a letter! – saying she didn't think she could sell the book, and it was time for us to part company.”

Naturally, Jennifer was devastated.

“I felt very sorry for myself,” she says, “drank way too much tequila, and thought about quitting.”

But after stewing in her own juices for a while, she came to the realization that no matter what happened, she would never stop writing. She couldn't. Writing was part of who she was.

“So I dusted myself off,” she says, “and started sending the book out again.”

The tale has a happy ending. Jennifer

books and reading at an early age.

“A book that had a huge impact on me, that I reread every year, the book that made me want to be a writer, was *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” she says. “I still get something new out of it every time I read it.”

“Plotting is something I've really had to work at,” she adds. “I started out writing poetry, so that's the thing I've had to teach myself and work hard on – making interesting things happen. I'm learning as I go along.”

Currently Jennifer and Drea, now a nurse at Fletcher Allen Healthcare in Burlington, Vt., live in Barre, Vt., with their daughter, Zella, 5, in a rambling Victorian house filled with toys and art supplies. Jennifer says she's “incredibly fortunate” to have made it as a fiction writer, but it's clear perseverance has played a major role in her success.

## BOOKS BY JENNIFER MCMAHON (GV '91)



She says she knows a lot of talented people from her Goddard days whose youthful idealism bumped up against reality after graduation.

“It makes me sad, in a way, that we have to put those dreams on the back burner,” she says. “It's something a lot of creative people struggle with.”

In *Dismantled*, the husband-and-wife protagonists have essentially given up their creative dreams. The husband is a house painter, the wife a commercial artist who produces tame horticultural still lifes.

Jennifer's advice to artists and writers, and anyone with big aspirations, is simple.

“Just don't give up,” she says. “Find the thing you're most passionate about and stick with it. That's the most important thing Goddard taught me.” CW