

Allure of 'Des Moines' no mystery to author

BY MARY CHALLENGER • REGISTER STAFF WRITER • FEBRUARY 4, 2008

When he began his first mystery novel nearly a decade ago, Alfio Giovannini wasn't quite sure which language he should write in, English or Italian.

But the native of a small town in the Italian Alps had no doubts about the setting - his adopted hometown of Des Moines.

Giovannini even decided to call the book "Des Moines," an unusual tribute to a place he says he landed in mostly by accident.

In the mid-1970s, while attending medical school in Florence, Giovannini dated an art student from Des Moines. When she became pregnant and returned home, he followed her to help raise his son.

The marriage didn't last but Giovannini fell in love with Des Moines, for reasons he can't quite explain.

"It's one of my favorite towns or cities in the world," he said, his English still bearing a heavy accent. "I've gone to other places but I've always come back to Des Moines."

Giovannini worked to learn English - his fourth language after Italian, Latin and ancient Greek - by watching "Sesame Street" with his son and earned a degree in geography from Drake University. Eventually, he landed a job in cancer epidemiology research for the State Health Registry of Iowa.

His days are spent collecting data on Iowans diagnosed with cancer - type of cancer, stage diagnosed, treatment plan, mortality - to send to the National Cancer Institute for analysis. It probably goes without saying that the work can be depressing.

"All day long, we see people who have it bad," he said. "Not just people my age and up but little 2-month-olds diagnosed with cancer. You see the struggles of the kids going through chemotherapy and the struggles of their parents."

Giovannini said he turned to writing as a way to clear his mind of the bad stuff.

The main character in "Des Moines" is a man named Julian Watson, a retiree living in a downtown apartment who is both devoted to and frustrated by his agoraphobic wife, Virginia. Although the book is technically a mystery, it's much gentler than the gory whodunits that tend to top mystery charts today.

The story takes place in 1986, before the Internet or cell phones, back, Giovannini says, when the downtown area was reminiscent of a "Seinfeld" episode in that nothing much was happening there.

"I always had this idea in my mind of a guy sitting minding his own business and someone walks up and asks him for an autograph," he said. "What would he say, what would he do? Would he go home and tell his wife what happened?"

Although the idea for "Des Moines" came easily, writing it was a struggle, Giovannini admitted. It's one thing to come home after work, he said, and muster up the energy to shovel the driveway or mow the yard.

But busting his brain to come up with a few good pages exhausted him.

It's really stressing to write," he admitted.

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MARY CHIND/THE REGISTER
Alfio Giovannini talks about his mystery, "Des Moines," from his home here. He moved from Italy and travels extensively ... "but to me, there's no better place than home."

The Des Moines Register

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"Des Moines" was published by Publish America, a Maryland-based company whose involvement basically is limited to printing the book and making it available through online booksellers around the world such as Amazon.

It's up to Giovannini to create a market, which he is doing through his Web site, www.desmoinesnovel.com, and by setting up signings at local bookstores.

"I think he has a nice style of writing. He's easy to read," said Sharon Carey, a clerk at Beaverdale Books, where Giovannini will appear Saturday. "One thing about it taking place in Des Moines, it helps anyone whose home is here feel like they're part of the story."

Giovannini says not only is "Des Moines" his first book, odds are good it will be his last. He has an outline for a sequel but says he will only write it if people ask for it.

"I think one book is probably enough," he said.

Most authors reveal a bit of themselves even in their fictional works. The 56-year-old Giovannini says he does feel a strong affinity to one of the characters in "Des Moines" but most people would never guess who it is.

"I'm the wife," he admitted. "I'm a homebody. I travel the world, so I don't suffer from agoraphobia or anything, but to me, there's no better place than home."

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MARY CHIND/THE REGISTER

Alfio Giovannini

BOOK SIGNINGS

WHAT: "Des Moines," a mystery novel by Alfio Giovannini

DETAILS:

- Noon to 1 p.m., Friday, the Book Store, 606 Locust St.
- 2 p.m. Saturday, Beaverdale Books, 2629 Beaver Ave.

MORE INFORMATION: Go to www.desmoinesnovel.com.