

Finding romance in tough times

■ Alamedan turns job loss into career writing novels

By J.M. Brown
Correspondent

At 65, longtime Alameda resident JoAnn Smith Ainsworth was sort of forced to pursue her dream of becoming a novelist.

The database administrator found herself unemployed

and scared when the law firm where she had worked for 20 years abruptly went out of business. Left only with Social Security checks and a retirement fund, she had to give up her home in Alameda and move in with her son in an investment property they own in San Leandro.

To stave off her sorrow, the divorcee turned her focus to books — not reading them

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Alameda resident JoAnn Smith Ainsworth just published her second romance novel in paperback.

Alameda Journal

FRIDAY, JULY 31, 2009

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as much as writing them.

Last week, Ainsworth, now 70, celebrated the paperback release of her second novel, "Matilda's Song." The medieval romance set in Britain after the Norman Conquest of the British Isles of the 11th century already has been published online.

Ainsworth, who has a master's degree to teach English, began penning the book in 1998, but only pondered the prospect of turning her fun hobby into a serious occupation after what she wryly calls her "early retirement."

"In order to stay sane and have order and something to do, I started reworking the manuscript," she said. "I needed some way to focus so I wouldn't get depressed."

Ainsworth is begrudgingly grateful she lost her job because it pushed her to chase a dream that otherwise may not have been realized.

"I could have worked until I was 70," she said. "This

way, I sold a book at 68, e-published at 69, and was in hard paperback at 70."

The rebellious heroine in "Matilda's Song" is also struggling to forge a new life. She pretends to be her cousin's wife in order to escape marriage to a cruel knight, only to find herself tangled up in another forced affair even as the knight tries to reclaim her.

A Pennsylvania native who came to California in 1969 to finish her undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley, Ainsworth chose to author romance novels because they represent the biggest sector of the paperback industry. Her first novel published in paperback, "Out of the Dark," a romance about a visually impaired woman, also was released first electronically.

Her romance stories are what the industry calls "mild," focused more on character development and less on descriptive romantic interludes.

In its assessment of "Matilda's Song," RT Book Reviews gave the novel four stars out of a possible four-

and-a-half. Reviewer Susan Mobley wrote, "This great story presents the life and morals of this era in a realistic, yet not dry or boring way." Ainsworth has actually written six books, but needs to revamp four of them. She expects it may take five years to develop a strong readership and ample income.

She also has been involved with the Isle City of Alameda Business and Professional Women and Toastmasters International, both of which have helped her develop a stronger sense of self. For two years ending in April, she served as the president of the women's group, helping to organize a museum exhibit for its 50th anniversary. In Toastmasters, she has learned through speech-making how to organize her thoughts and present ideas to others verbally.

Next, Ainsworth hopes to write a paranormal suspense series of three books set on the East Coast during World War II — a challenge that will require her to shift from the character-driven style of romance tales to the plot-driven

concept behind mysteries.

Even though paperback romance conjures images of light summer fare, Ainsworth goes to painstaking lengths to create the stories. As a former database specialist, the first step she takes is to chart out characters and plot points on a computer spreadsheet before writing a rough draft that melds dialogue with narrative.

She has a strict routine when she writes. Every morning, after she wakes up, she does 30 minutes of exercise followed by up to four hours of writing in her PJs. Then she eats some lunch and spends the rest of the afternoon marketing her work.

Ainsworth really cherishes when the story is finished and she can begin revising.

"I feel like a sculptor when I edit," she said.

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