



'Murder,' she penned

Local author's success is no mystery to legion of fans

By Dane Anderson
Staff Writer

Karen MacInerney spent much of her childhood lost in the soft cushions of a bedroom chair, crunching M&Ms and reading mystery novels. She read everything Nancy Drew and Miss Marple had to offer a keen young detective.

Now all grown up and with two children of her own, MacInerney is a familiar figure to customers in Starbucks at the Westlake Barnes and Noble. Enscorped most mornings in one of the shop's big leather chairs, she isn't armed with chocolates and other people's writings. She's armed with coffee, a laptop computer and a creative talent to die for.

The young Westbank mom and former public relations writer has created two successful lines of mystery novels in the last six years and has just been nominated for the prestigious Agatha Award for best first novel – "Murder on the Rocks," published by Midnight Ink Books in May, which kicked off her Gray Whale Inn mysteries. The second book in the series, "Dead and Berried," sold out before its official release date last month and earned MacInerney the honor of Barnes and Noble Austin Author of the Month for March. "Howling at the Moon," the first book in the new MacInerney series, "Tales of an Urban

Werewolf," is due out next spring.

"I still feel like Cinderella this week," she said. "I'm having a hard time believing it all."

MacInerney's life may seem like a fairy tale, but it was hard work, determination and a willingness to take chances that landed the successful author in her current state of grace. She quit her job in public relations at 3M Corporation to go back to graduate school.

"I was writing promotional pieces for things like the anniversary of electrical tape," she said, eyes rolling at the memory. "Try and find the hook in that. I dare you."

MacInerney became pregnant with her second child while studying for a master's degree in ecology.

"I wanted to spend time with my new son and my three-year old daughter," she said. "I wanted to do something worthwhile and still have time for my family."

Always reading mysteries in her spare time, MacInerney became convinced she could write one herself.

"I would read some of the ones out there and think, 'I can do better than this,'" she said. "Then I told myself, 'Alright, let's see what you can do.'"

At 3 a.m. she e-mailed an advertisement to the Texas Writer's League that started the Austin Mystery Writers' Group.

It was in that group that MacIner-



Westbank's own Karen MacInerney has published two mystery novels and has a new series coming out in spring. The young mother of two thrives in her writing environment, the local Barnes and Noble bookstore.

ney learned she could write powerfully and write fast. Even so, making that beginning leap to starting her first book took guts.

"It is a scary thing to do, to start writing," she said. "I remember sitting on the futon in my office screwing up the courage to write those first few paragraphs. I told myself that I wanted to write the book I wanted to read. I figured, even if it was awful, at least I would have done something I had always wanted to do – written a book."

She got a babysitter in the afternoons and started writing "Murder on the Rocks" while sitting in a Starbucks chair. It only took her five months. The manuscript was a finalist in an Austin Writers League competition. That honor won her a meeting with potential agents. One phoned soon afterward to take her on as a client.

"I took that call locked in my bathroom with my kids banging on the door," MacInerney said.

Not content to rest on her laurels after the success of her first novels, MacInerney has developed a system that helps her get 1,500 words a day on to paper. After dropping her kids off at school, she heads to her chair in the coffee shop and works until its time to pick them up again.

"You just get the words down," she said. "You can fix it up later. I start each day by revising what I wrote the day before. Then I go on."

Juggling her roles as mother, wife and successful author gets tricky, even for someone as disciplined and well-balanced as MacInerney. A good sense of humor helps her keep things in perspective.

"One time, when my son was about three, he got mad at me and said, 'Mommy, you're not a very good writer,'" she said. "I looked down at him and said, 'Well, that would hurt a lot more if you could read.'"

With her computer neatly packed away in a backpack, MacInerney relaxed as she talked about all she has ahead. The fact that she's on the hook for another three books over the next 18 months doesn't worry her. She knows she's good for them. The diminutive author offers sound advice for people who have always wanted to write, but get scared at the thought of picking up a pen.

"Books seem so big," she said. "But it's just a story made up of scenes. You write one scene and then another, and before you know it you have a book."

The Westlake author will be holding a book signing at the Barnes and Noble Round Rock from 2-4 p.m. on March 24. She will also be teaching a class on writing the mystery novel through the University of Texas informal classes program beginning March 26. To learn more about these and other MacInerney events, visit her Web site at www.karenmacinerney.com.