

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Curtis Sittenfeld

The Book: “Prep” (Random House, 2005)

After spending an “amazing and incredible” day with enthusiastic creative writing students at the Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities, visiting writer Curtis Sittenfeld, author of the bestselling novel, “Prep,” joked “the students here know me better than my parents.”

Sittenfeld, 30, capped off her visit at the school on January 27 with a public reading and book signing. Her novel, optioned for film by Paramount, was recently selected by the New York Times as one of the Ten Best Books of 2005.

“Prep” is narrated by a teen character named Lee Fiora, who surprises her middle-class, South Bend, Ind. family (her father is a mattress salesman) by applying to an exclusive Massachusetts boarding school called “Ault.” Lee arrives at the prep school on scholarship and finds herself surrounded by an elite group: the students at Ault are the sons and daughters from some of the country’s most powerful and wealthy families.

Ault is a cloistered world where money is never discussed but underpins everything from a laundry service that Lee can’t afford, to spring break vacations in Europe, to Ivy League college applications. Lee is marginalized, intimidated, but nevertheless fascinated by the mores of her privileged, often inscrutable classmates. It is Lee’s awkward attempts to fit in, her intense self-scrutiny, and her shrewd observations about the daily life of such an exclusive place that gives “Prep” its universal appeal. Don’t be fooled by the embossed pink-and-green ribbon belt worn across its cover: This novel provides male and female readers of all ages with an engrossing, penetrating look at class, race and gender.

Sittenfeld, a graduate of Groton, an exclusive prep school outside Boston, attended Vassar, then transferred to Stanford. She got her MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

She is often asked how much of the novel is autobiographical. “The short answer,” she said, “is not particularly. I wasn’t a scholarship student at Groton. I don’t feel like I am Lee. Of course, because I wrote it, my personality is on the page. But in a way, I’m all the characters. I imagined them all.” She said former classmates of hers look for themselves among the cast of characters in the novel. “Lots of people love to see themselves in fiction, even if it’s unflattering.”

Besides attending a prep school, Sittenfeld’s “research” included her stint as writer-in-residence at St. Albans, a private boy’s school in Washington, DC. “I would just lean out my apartment door and watch (the students) or ask them a question. That way, I would know, yes, I’m on target with my characters.”

Sittenfeld said “Prep” began as a short story. “I wrote the 25 pages of the last chapter.” It took her nearly four years to complete a draft. “I was a better writer by the time I finished.” Her “episodic” style means she often knows each chapter’s event—a conflict with a teacher, for example-- “but I still have the experience of surprise. I can’t overplot. It becomes tedious and there’s no discovery.”

Turned down by 14 out of 15 publishers, “Prep” nevertheless sold within two weeks to Random House. Editors who rejected the novel commented they wouldn’t know how to market it. Was it young adult or adult? It was too cerebral and dark for “chick lit.”

The first change Sittenfeld’s editor made was changing the title from “Cypher” to “Prep.” Next, the 600-page manuscript had to be shortened 100 pages, which Sittenfeld said she agonized over. “My editor sent a 20 page letter with suggested cuts.” Instead of eliminating whole chapters or characters, Sittenfeld elected to take a “nip and tuck” approach, cutting 2 to 3 pages every other page or so. Sittenfeld said she now realizes the edits made “Prep” a better novel.

“Another writer told me a lot of editors function as an agent within the publishing house these days—focusing on marketing. It’s rare to have line edits—macro comments are more typical. My editor is incredibly smart. She was the midwife for ‘Prep’. She packaged it into a book she could market.” And how. “Prep” had a first printing of 15,000 copies, but hitting the New York Times bestseller list pushed a second printing up to nearly 100,000 copies.

Not one—but *four* publicists in the publisher’s office asked to promote “Prep”. They designed press materials to look like a yearbook, using pages from the author’s own high school yearbook from Grodin. “There were places where this (approach) was mocked,” Sittenfeld said, “but it was creative, not expensive, and it worked.”

Sittenfeld, who now lives in Philadelphia, won the *Seventeen* magazine fiction writing contest in 1992, at age sixteen. She tells writing students such as those at the Governor’s school “to write about subjects that really interest you, because your first audience is yourself.” And you have to love writing. “You can’t control if you’re published and how well you’re published so you have to love it.” In addition, “workshops” and exchanging writing with other students is crucial, she said, in order to develop an inner critic. “My father edited my papers as a child,” she said. “He was tough. Eventually, I internalized that ability and I try to be a harsh editor of my own work.”

Sittenfeld is on a multi-city tour for the recently released paperback edition of “Prep” But she won’t have much time to recover from her travels: Her second novel, “The Man of my Dreams,” will be out in May.

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel “The Garden Angel” (St. Martin’s Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.