

Writers, readers and best friends forever

By **Laurie Higgins**

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Since most friendships develop between like-minded people, it makes sense that writers would be friends with other writers. But can thorny issues like publication, success and jealousy come between friends trying to survive in the competitive world of publishing?

Not at all, according to authors Elinor Lipman and Mameve Medwed who have been best friends since meeting in 1979 in an Adult Ed writing class at Brandeis University and have many other friends who are writers as well.

"We pick our friends carefully and it doesn't take long to find out who is competitive and who is supportive," Lipman says.

Medwed agrees and even shows her support by slyly plugging Lipman's last novel, "The Pursuit of Alice Thrift" in her own latest novel, "How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life."

"I can't think of anybody who would be happier for any success for me than Elinor and I am always so excited when something good happens to her," Medwed says. "John Cheever once said he didn't understand jealousy between writers because writing is not a competitive sport. And it's true. What I do or what she does or somebody else does, it doesn't take away from somebody else. All our books are individual and different."

The truth is when you read their latest novels it is easy to see why jealousy is not an issue between them. Both of these women are exceptionally talented writers who display not just style, put panache. It is also easy to see how they could be friends.

"We definitely clicked and part of it had to do with appreciating each other's voice. We both wrote things that were kind of polished and kind of funny," Lipman says.

That friendship could have been tested a few years after they met when Lipman got the idea to put their stories together and submit them to agents and see if they could get a two person short story collection. They found an agent and got good responses to the work, but publishers' marketing departments nixed the idea, saying they didn't know how they would package such a book.

Both continued to write and in 1987, Lipman's first book, a collection of short stories titled "Into Love and Out Again," was published. The book included several of the stories that Lipman had hoped would appear in their rejected joint collection.

"I learned that Mameve had the best character in the history of personhood because she was so gracious and so supportive and just fabulous," Lipman says. "There's a quote that could have been written for Mameve: A true friend is someone who sticks by you when things are going great."

While Lipman turned to novels next, Medwed stuck with short stories for several more years, publishing in literary journals. It was on Lipman's advice that she finally took the leap to novels after her story "Mail" was published in the "Missouri Review."

"One day she called me up and said, 'I think you should stop writing these stories. It's ridiculous. You publish two or three a year and you get paid in copies. You need to have a book,'" Medwed recalls.

Lipman loved "Mail" and suggested that Medwed expand the story into a novel. "I always take her advice so I did that and that was my first book. And now that I'm writing novels I haven't gone back to stories at all," she says.

Talking with these two authors makes it instantly apparent how they can craft such well drawn, quirky and likeable characters. Like the fictional people they create, they are warm, funny and very smart. And like a long time married couple, they can predict what the other will say about a variety of subjects, perhaps because they talk on the phone several times a day and email each other about a dozen times in between.

In fact one could easily wonder how these authors who both profess to a love of interruptions and distractions, actually get any work done. The answer is with plenty of dedication and a totally different writing process.

Lipman tries to write 500 words a day. "Whether I feel like it or not I try to get a certain amount done every day because what I've learned over the course of eight novels is that what you write on the days you feel uninspired doesn't end up being less readable and you can always revise," she explains.

She revises each chapter as she goes along, polishing it again and again before moving on to the next chapter. As she finishes each chapter, she sends it to Medwed, who then calls her immediately with feedback.

Medwed writes two pages a day and likes to write the whole first draft in one unedited swoop to get the story down.

"Elinor is my first reader and sometimes my only really important reader. What she does is she sends me her chapters one by one and each chapter is so utterly polished there is barely anything I can say. She gets the raw deal because I send her this huge messy first draft because I don't like to stop," Medwed says, just like Lipman predicted she would.

Modesty aside, there is nothing sloppy about Medwed's new novel, "How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life." Medwed's first person narrator deftly draws the reader into her story by occasionally addressing the reader directly. It has the effect of having your wittiest friend tell you a story that is funny, thought provoking and never predictable.

The novel begins at a low point in Abby Randolph's life. Her mother has recently died in an earthquake, her boyfriend has taken off with "that woman whose goods he appraised a month ago," and the antiques business she started with the recently departed boyfriend has only half the inventory it did when they were together. Desperate to fill her booth at "Objects of Desire," she brings in a few of her mother's less cherished items to fill in the empty spaces.

The fun begins and never stops when a neighboring dealer spots a possible treasure in her booth and encourages her to take it to "Antiques Roadshow," where Abby discovers her lowly chamber pot was once owned by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Lipman's new novel, "My Latest Grievance" showcases an author who just keeps getting better all the time, and her best friend and biggest fan loved it from the minute she started reading it.

"I remember distinctly what Mameve said after she read the first few chapters of "My Latest Grievance." "Alice Thrift" is dedicated to her and she called me and said, 'As you know "Alice Thrift" was always my favorite book, but this one is testing my loyalties,'" Lipman says.

Other fans of Lipman's novels will feel the same way. Sixteen-year-old Frederica Rebecca Hatch is a most compelling character, born and raised on a college campus where her parents are professors and dorm parents. Like any normal teenager she just wants to be able to have a good old fashioned teenage rebellion against parents she describes as "the most annoyingly evenhanded parental team in the history of civilization."

Her chance comes when she discovers that her father was married for a brief time before he married her mother and they deliberately hid this information from her. When the flamboyantly glamorous ex-wife, who is the polar opposite of Frederica's mother in every way, becomes the new dorm mother on campus, Frederica befriends her much to her parents' chagrin and the reader's delight.

If you go:

Elinor Lipman and Mameve Medwed will do a literary brunch at the Wequasset Inn, sponsored by Cabbages and Kings Bookstore, along with good friends and authors Stephen McCauley, author of "Alternatives to Sex" and Sebastian Stuart, co-author of "24-Karat Kids" on Monday (June 26) from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Call Cabbages and Kings at 508-945-1603 to reserve tickets, \$25.

Lipman and Medwed will also do a free reading and discussion at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, sponsored by the Armchair Bookstore, on Monday (June 26) at 7 p.m. Call the Armchair Bookstore at 508-385-0900 to reserve seats.