

The Time Traveler's Wife's Author

As the movie adaptation of her first book comes to the screen, Audrey Niffenegger gets ready to plug her second, writes her third, and mounts an art show.



The Night Bookmobile seemed larger from the inside—much larger. The lighting was subdued and pleasant. The whole place smelled of old dry paper, with a little whiff of wet dog, which I like. I looked back at the librarian. He was reading his newspaper.

Audrey Niffenegger; detail from "The Night Bookmobile"



By Ed M. Koziarski

Audrey Niffenegger is really into cemeteries—particularly London's Highgate Cemetery, resting place of Karl Marx and Douglas Adams and stomping grounds of the fabled Highgate Vampire. Niffenegger—whose best-selling first novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, is now a movie, opening nationwide August 14—worked as a guide at the cemetery in 2004 as research for her new book, *Her Fearful Symmetry*.

Due out September 29 from Scribner, which according to the *New York Times* advanced her \$5 million for it, *Her Fearful Symmetry* tells the story of two mirror-image twins (the kind that seem to be exact reflections of each other) who inherit an apartment near Highgate. Their super-intimate relationship is disrupted when one of them falls in love with a morbid cemetery guide.

Between stints at two artists' colonies this summer (Oxbow in Saugatuck, Michigan, and Yaddo in upstate New York) Niffenegger, 46, found time to make her regular pilgrimage to London, where she likes to "hang out" at Highgate and still gives tours of the cemetery. "I have a little fantasy about living in London part-time," Niffenegger says. "But since I travel so much it would be silly to have two homes to be away from." The city on the Thames, she says, is "quirky, literary, old, and full of strange things that make sense only to Brits." London is also the setting for "The Night Bookmobile," published last year by the *Guardian* newspaper as the first installment of her serial comic *The Library*. Work from "The Night Bookmobile" is on display through August 22 at Printworks, 311 W. Superior.

For the half of the year that she isn't on the

road promoting her work, Niffenegger remains on the north side with her cats, Claudine and Whimsy. She offers backhanded praise for the relative obscurity in which Chicago artists work. "Chicago is great if you want freedom to do your thing without anyone interfering or noticing," she says. "The worst thing is the blank look I get when I'm out in the world and people ask me where I live. 'Chicago?' they say, and I can see that they have never given Chicago or its art a moment's thought."

Niffenegger was an unfamous visual artist and maker of art books when she wrote *The Time Traveler's Wife*, which has sold about 2.5 million copies since 2003. The film version, starring Rachel McAdams and Eric Bana, was developed by Brad Pitt's company, Plan B Entertainment, as a vehicle for Pitt and Jennifer Aniston before their divorce; Plan B has stayed on to coproduce it with New Line Cinema and Industry Entertainment. The Chicago-set movie shot here for a few days in 2007, but was filmed mostly in Manitoba. Bana plays a librarian at the Newberry who slips in and out of time, first meeting McAdams as a young girl on one of his temporal forays. Their eventual marriage is tested, but also kept fresh, by his tendency to disappear into the ether. (Some of the most dramatic responses to the book have come from readers in the armed services, Niffenegger says. "Military personnel are far from home and their partners, and my first novel often resonates with them because of that separation.")

Niffenegger declines to talk about the film, except to say that she wasn't involved in the adaptation. "I haven't seen it," she says, "and I prefer to let people form their own opinions about it." She also won't discuss money. Regarding the

reported advance for *Her Fearful Symmetry* she says, "That was a private thing that happened to be made public. I don't talk about deals."

Success has afforded her the luxury to write and make art full-time, but it's also changed how she works. "When I was writing my first novel I was alone with it," she says. "For my second novel I had the benefit of other people's expertise"—an agent and editors—"but it can make the work go slower because I . . . question myself more as I go along. I know I will be hearing from readers if I get it wrong."

She still teaches one course a year at Columbia College's Book and Paper Arts MFA program and continues to work with T3, a writing group for visual and literary artists, which she cofounded five years ago with former students from the Columbia class. T3 published the first issue of its zine, *Little Bang*, in October.

"Writing is a rather isolated activity," Niffenegger says. "It's fun to sit in a classroom and thrash out someone else's problems." Does her notoriety affect the dynamic with her students? "It sometimes makes them shy at first," she replies. "But we all manage to get over it."

Niffenegger says she's rarely recognized in public, and in the visual art realm she toils largely free from the attention showered on her as an author. "Very few people see my visual art. I have always had the luxury of working for a small but loyal and curious audience." The illustrated books she's been making since the 1980s, and even her two recent graphic novels, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* (2005) and *The Adventuress* (2006), have made much smaller splashes than her straight prose.

Niffenegger is now illustrating chapter two of *The Library*, and she's 20 pages into writing

her third novel, *The Chinchilla Girl in Exile*.

"I'm in the happy stage of making up the rules," she says, "naming the characters, making a family tree, reading piles of books that might somehow be relevant, and generally loafing around waiting for things to click." Extrapolated from an unpublished short story, *The Chinchilla Girl in Exile* centers on a nine-year-old girl with hypertrichosis, a genetic condition that causes her face and body to be covered with hair.

"I am interested in how our bodies shape our experience," Niffenegger says. "Because fiction is entirely abstract—I put some symbols on paper, you decode them and construct the story in your mind—it's a great medium for considering people whose appearance might be too exciting to let us get to know them. In fiction a different-looking person can speak without their body getting in the way of communication." **B**

The Night Bookmobile

Through 8/22: Tue-Sat 11 AM-5 PM, Printworks, 311 W. Superior #105, 312-664-9407, printworkschicago.com.

The Time Traveler's Wife

Opens 8/14, multiple venues, thetimetravelerswifemovie.com.

Audrey Niffenegger reads from Her Fearful Symmetry

Tue 9/29, 6 PM, Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton, 312-255-3700, newberry.org. **free**

Wed 9/30, 7:30 PM, Swedish American Museum, 5211 N. Clark, 773-769-9299, womenandchildrenfirst.com, free with the advance order of a book.

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