

'Dark Lullaby' proves soothing melody

By Mona Grigg
special writer

JACKIE Troutman won't forget her 60th birthday. She says it might well qualify as the most exciting time of her life. The milestone birthday arrived at the same time as the publication of her first novel, "Dark Lullaby," a romantic suspense set on the Hawaiian island of Kauai.

The Lynx Books paperback is issued under the Plymouth native's maiden name, Jackie Dalton.

At one bookstore, at least, that's a plus. "I don't know where else the book is," Troutman says. "But at Metro News (in Canton) they've reordered the book twice. When I went in the last time, the clerk told me that nearly everyone buying the book says, 'I want to school with her!'"

In fact, it was Troutman's Plymouth High School English teacher, Edna Allen, who gave her a love for words. "Every Friday we had vocabulary drill. She would give us a word, we would give her a definition, and some of them I can still recite," Troutman says. "But she gave us much, much more. She loved literature, especially spoken literature — Shakespeare — and even took us once to see Maurice Evans in a post-war USO road company 'Hamlet.'"

Troutman has lived in Plymouth all her life. She married her husband, Harvey, 14 years ago, and between them they have eight children and 14 grandchildren.

FOR 10 YEARS, Troutman taught home economics in the Plymouth-Canton Schools before becoming a partner in a company making training film strips for school cooks. The strips, marketed nationally, were a success, and Troutman found the part she liked best about running the business was writing the scripts.

When mountains of red tape mirrored the company down, the partnership dissolved. A cousin who dabbled in writing encouraged Troutman to begin writing fiction. Romances were really hot, the cousin said. This was in 1983, and the cousin was right, romantic fiction was hot — but not for Troutman.

"It was my own fault," Troutman says. "I was writing category romances and not bothering to read them. The agents and editors kept telling me that I didn't quite have it. My plots were too convoluted. Then I discovered that I really liked writing suspense."

When Troutman began sending out proposals for romantic suspense

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new novelist

novels, the responses improved, though she still balked at what she calls "the narrow confines of category, the love scenes by page two and all that."

TROUTMAN SAYS WHEN she started writing she promised herself that if she hadn't sold a book in two years she would give up and find something else to do. But, "the two years came and went — several times — and I couldn't quit. Much to my surprise, I am totally addicted to writing. I love the actual sitting down and trying to figure out which word to use, but I also love talking to people while I'm doing the research. All I have to say is, 'I'm a writer and I'm really interested in your field,' and boom, they're off and running."

The interest in other people's stories comes naturally to Troutman, who sees herself as a storyteller rather than a writer. "I hear other writers say, 'I always wanted to be a writer.' Well, I never saw myself as a writer. I'm a talker. Just ask my husband," she says, laughing. "He tells everyone, 'My wife can say anything in 10,000 words or more.'"

The writing came hard for Troutman until two things happened. Her son convinced her to give his castoff "Model-A" Healtkit H89 word processor a try. She did and found it eased the reversal problems that had initially made touch typing difficult.

Then, after accumulating a box full of what she calls "my first drafts, though I didn't know it at the time," Troutman read a book by a storyteller-writer who advised writers to write as though they were telling the story aloud. They were right, two break-throughs," Troutman says.

In March, 1987, Troutman met



Retired home economics teacher Jackie Troutman has discovered a new career at age 60 — writing romantic suspense novels.

DILL BRESLER/staff photographer

agent Joyce Flaherty at a meeting of the Detroit Chapter of Romance Writers of America. Flaherty encouraged Troutman to send her something. But before Troutman had a chance, Flaherty called to ask if Troutman would be interested in writing for the Jeffrey Weiss Group, a book packager looking for people to write to their specifications.

"WHEN DID THEY want a proposal? They wanted it fast," Troutman found. Since she and Harvey had just returned from a one-month stay on Kauai, it was only natural that the book's setting would be Ha-

well. Within five days, she had worked up a proposal — two short chapters and a five-page synopsis — and sent it off. The publishers bought her idea in June, but asked her not to start writing until she had heard from an editor. When she finally got the call, on Labor Day, she was astounded to hear that the book was due on the first of December — less than three months away.

She finished on time, "thanks to a quiet house and time on my hands," and Jeffrey Weiss sold her book to Lynx.

Was it a thrill to find her book in the bookstores? "More an exercise in

fulfillment," Troutman said. "I finally got up enough courage to ask Metro News if they would stock it. So far, that's the only place I've seen it, though my daughter called all excited because they had spotted it at a Meijer's store in Muskegon."

But not to worry, Troutman has contract in hand for her second novel, "Forbidden Treasure," a romantic suspense involving diamond mining in the Upper Peninsula. The hardcover, due out in March, 1989, will be published by Thomas Bourque/Avallon, a "squeaky clean" publisher whose 60 book titles a year are distributed only through libraries

and are geared to both young adults and senior citizens.

Troutman, not at all averse to writing steamy love scenes or allowing her characters to use blue language, said, "they're so squeaky clean, it was challenge to find an explication that fits their guidelines." Bourque/Avallon is not a book packager, so there's an outside chance Troutman may earn some royalties beyond her modest advance. Still, Troutman says, "The fun of this is the excitement of my family and friends. That really is the highlight. I can't imagine a better way to launch a new career at 60."

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