ROMANCE

Local romance writers are passionate about love

BY KELLY WYGONIK
STAFF WRITER

Steamy covers and passionate love scenes – you can't judge a book by it's cover, and there are many misconceptions about romance novels.

"Romance novels are all about family values and commitment," said Ruth Ryan Langan of Farmington Hills author of 45 romance novels, and one of the keynote speaker at "Tap the Source of Romance," the sixth biennial conference, sponsored by the Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America. "They're just wonderful stories about falling in love."

The conference 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, May 3, at the Livonia Holiday Inn Conference Center (Six Mile Road exit at I-275) offers a resource for writers of all genres. Admission is $60 per person, call (810) 627-1722, (810) 471-5908 or (810) 469-0569. Walk-ins are welcome.

According to statistics compiled by Romance Writers of America, romance readers range in age from 18 to 82. The average is 39 years old. Forty-five percent of them are college educated, and 50 percent work outside the home. Romance sells – 48.6 percent of all mass market book sales are romance novels.

Reading romance novels started out as a hobby, and became Patti Shenberger's career. "The more I read, the more I learn," said Shenberger of Clarkston is membership chairwoman of the Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America, and a published author. "Romance novels are what I like to read, and what I like to write. People are so busy, there's still romance, but sometimes it gets shoved to the back burner."

Shenberger writes short romantic stories, two were published by "Star," and a non-fiction article she wrote was in "Romance Forever."

Writers and aspiring authors from the U.S. and Canada will meet at the conference to attend workshops, have their work critiqued, and meet with other authors. There will be an all day book fair and book signing by Elizabeth Atkins Bowman, Marian Edwards, Kelly Ferjutz, Elizabeth Manz, Maris Soule, and Shelly Thacker.

Anne Stuart, a published author for over 20 years, is the other keynote speaker.

Also speaking are editor, Karen Taylor Richmond; Literary Agents Damaris Rowland and Deborah Herman; Reviewer, Pam Cohen; and Private Investigator, Michael C. Shipman.

Shelly Thacker of Redford will be signing copies of her latest book, "His Forbidden Touch."

"We are not housewives," said Thacker. "We are serious professionals, well-educated, articulate woman. Romance is moving into hardcover. Romance is the most optimistic fiction, it's about love, commitment, lasting relationships, real values."

Marion Edwards of Livonia author of three romance novels, started writing romances after someone gave her one to read.

"I fell in love with them," she said. "They're so uplifting. In these books the women always win. After reading one you feel, 'Yes! I can conquer the world.'"

Romance writers put a lot of heart, and hard work into perfecting their craft. "There's still an element of sexism about romance novels," said Langan. "We're considered housewives turned writers. But I work nine to five seven days a week. The books have to be well-written and plotted to be read."

Forever romantic, romance writers "love the whole concept of falling in love."

"Romance novels are pure entertainment," said Langan. "They're for anyone who loves a good, quick read. I have so many stories to write, I'll have to live to be a 150 to write them all.

The Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America, a non-profit organization, offers manuscript critiques, market information, educational speakers, an opportunity to network with others in the industry, and serves as a support group for writers trying to launch or maintain a successful career in this very competitive market.

For more information about the organization, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Patti Shenberger, 6019 Mary Sue, Clarkston, MI 48346, or call (810) 623-9162.

Also of note:

■ Three multi-novel Michigan authors – Nancy Gideon a.k.a. Dana Ransom and Rosalyn West, DeAnna Pyle a.k.a. DeAnna Talcott, and Maris Soule, will be at a book signing "Romance in the Afternoon," 1-3 p.m. Friday, May 2, at Books-Connection, 19043 Middlebelt, (at Seven Mile Road across from Livonia Mall). Call (810) 471-4742 for more information.

Romance novel: *"Falcon on the Wind" was Shelly Thacker's first published romance novel.*

STREET SCENE

R&B singer finds maturity to pursue a musical career

CHRISTINA FUOCO

Growing up in Milwaukee, rhythm and blues singer Eric Benet was enraptured by music.

"I was raised in a really musical, singing environment. I sang in the gospel church choir. I've been singing for about as long as I can remember. I had always hoped and prayed to make a career of singing," explained Benet, 27.

"It took awhile before I reached a level where I was mature enough to know that it was possible and so I could be brave enough to say, 'OK. I'm going to puruse this as my livelihood to support myself and my family."

Benet's parents had other aspirations for their child.

"Coming from a conservative city and conservative parents, their design for me would have been to not drop out of college and continue the route of graduating and getting a nine-to-five job or getting my master's degree. I guess that's what every parent wishes for their child. But I wasn't feeling that. The music was a little bit too strong to deny inside of me."

Benet recently celebrated the release of his debut solo album "True to Myself" (Warner Bros.) and will sing songs from the record on Sunday, May 4, when he opens for Erykah Badu at St. Andrew's Hall.

Performing Sunday: *R&B singer Eric Benet will perform songs off his debut album "True To Myself" (Warner Bros.).*

Written and co-produced by Benet with the team of George Nash Jr., Demonte Posey, Roger Troutman, and Christian Warren, "True to Myself" opens with the self-titled track he describes as an "anthem to my daughter." In the slow grooving, backbeat-laden song, Benet sings "Some people live their whole life/And they'll never see/The only way to find true happiness/Is to thine own self be."

"It's like a song that I wrote as if I were to die tomorrow and I had to give my daughter some advice and put it in a song," Benet explained. "We're all on our own little journeys. I had to deal with a lot of growing up in the last couple years. It's the way I want to live the rest of life after going through all the (stuff) I had to go through."

In 1992 Benet, his sister Lisa, and his cousin Nash released an album on EMI as the group Benet. Shortly after its release Benet's girlfriend, with whom he had a daughter, India, died in a car accident. (He and India, now 5, recently appeared in a public service announcement for Fox television promoting social awareness.) The emotional pain of his girlfriend's death inspired many of the songs on "True to Myself."

"For me, it's best to write from pain. That's usually where the songs come from. That was a hard song to record let alone to perform."

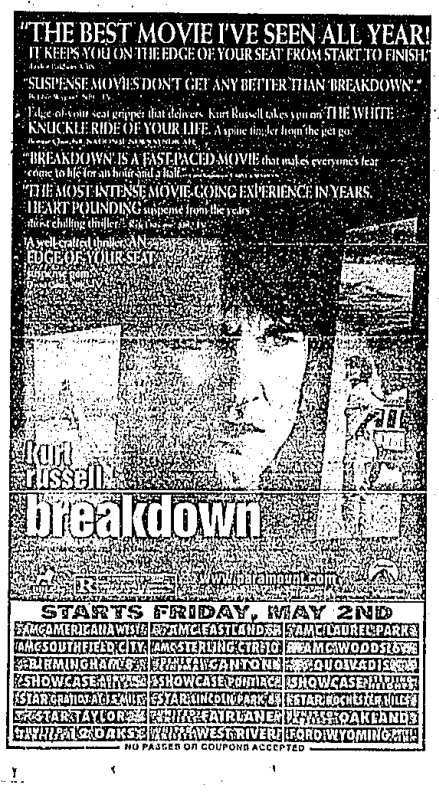
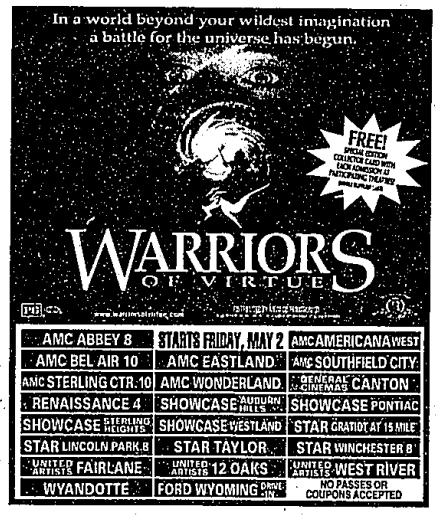
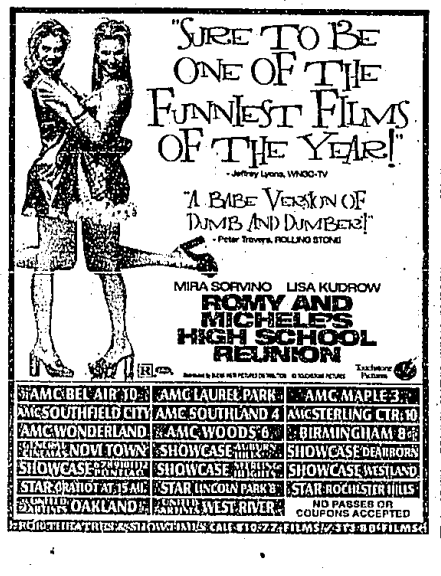
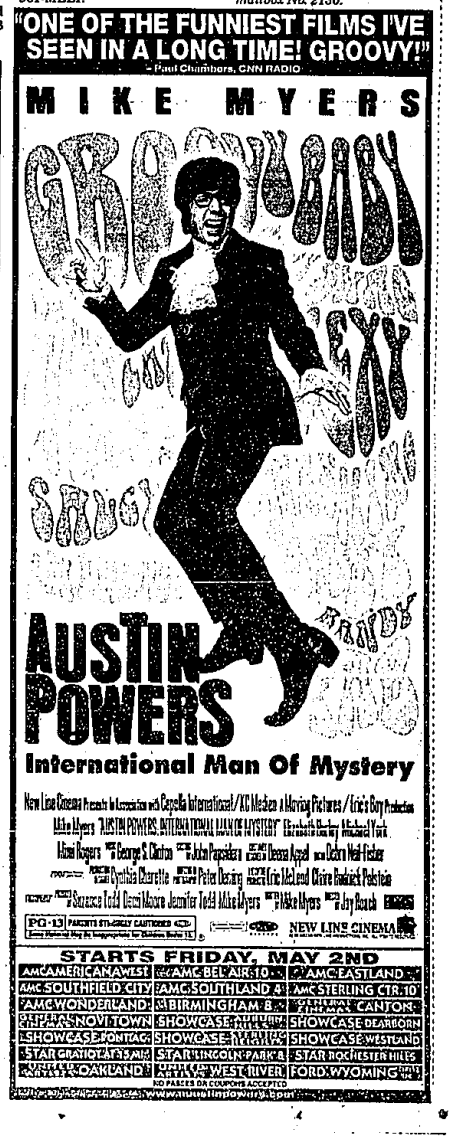
He doesn't perform the song live anymore but not because it unleashes a flood of emotion.

"I can't do it the way I want to with my singers and the arrangements – the way it should be. To put a long story short, I can't really afford it right now," he said with a laugh.

The album "True to Myself" varies in style from jazz-tinged songs ("I'll Be There") to R&B ballads ("Feminity" "Let's Stay Together") to funk ("Just Friends" and "Spiritual Thang"). To add color to the album, Benet experimented with a B-3 organ, strings and conga on songs like "Chains," which offers a portrait of life in the real world.

"It's about being in situtations we all have the power to change but are afraid to. Things like sexual abuse and drug abuse," he was quoted as saying.

Eric Benet opens for Erykah Badu at 8 p.m. Sunday, May 4, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are $20 in advance for the all-ages show. For more information, call (313) 961-MELT.

• Local alternative rockers the Vudu Hippies are hosting a benefit for the FRIENDS Alliance Network, the only human service agency organized and managed by people with HIV/AIDS, Sunday, May 4, at the Magic Bag, 22920 Woodward Ave., Ferndale. Tickets are $7 in advance at Ticketmaster outlets for the all-ages show. Doors open at 6 p.m. For more information, call (810) 645-6666 or (810) 544-3030.

Write Christina Fuoco at The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, or you can leave her a message at (313) 953-2047, mailbox No. 2130.