

MURDER

she wrote

the writer

With dozens of books to her name, author Denise Swanson could be forgiven for easing up on the publishing pedal a bit. After all, her cozy mystery and romance novels have sold tens of thousands of copies worldwide, and her audience on Facebook and other social media has crossed the 10,000 followers mark.

But resting on her laurels isn't in Denise's nature. For one thing, she has more stories to tell. In September, Denise published ***A Call to Charms***, the first book in a new romance series, Forever Charmed Mysteries. On New Year's Eve she released ***Come Homicide or High Water***, the third book in the Welcome Back to Scumble River series (her most successful). A third book, ***Winner Take All*** from her Chef-to-Go romance series, is set for a September 2020 release.

That's a lot of publishing in just one short year.

For another thing, she's having too much fun. Changes in the publishing industry have brought new opportunities, as e-readers, digital and self-publishing, and social media attract new readers and a wider audience for Denise's writing. That audience, with which she interacts daily online, trusts her to write stories they like to read. And that trust is something authors, including Denise, covet. It's also earned, and something Denise never takes for granted.

A lifelong resident of a small, rural town, Denise finds inspiration in the people and goings-on around town. And until that natural curiosity goes away, Denise has no plans to slow down any time soon.

The Kankakee River in Wilmington, Ill.



Author Denise Swanson

Let's Get Cozy

Denise Swanson writes what's known in the publishing industry as cozy mysteries, or cozies for short.

A subgenre of the mystery and crime category in fiction — a \$725 million market that's second only to the romance category, which earns \$1.4 billion (yes, that's with a B) — cozies are typically set in a small, tight-knit community. They feature a clever crime; a brilliant, engaging and plucky (typically female) amateur sleuth; and a sense of justice.

Patterned after the whodunits of the early 20th century (think Agatha Christie and P. D. James), cozies shy away from the graphic sex and violence typical of traditional murder mysteries, true crime novels and courtroom dramas, which is exactly what true fans love about them.

After all, what's not to like in a world where justice always prevails?

"There's enough bad out in the world; my readers want an author they trust to make it right," Denise says. "They want to read something where good will prevail, bad will be punished, and the cat's not going to die. They're looking for an idyllic little world where bad things happen but there's always a consequence."

Seldom standalone books, cozies are typically written as a series set in the same small town with the same clever crime-solver and characters that recur from book to book. This lends familiarity for the reader, which cozy audiences love.

"True cozy readers get to know the people in the books, and that's what keeps them coming back," Denise says.

"They're not gorgeous, they're not rich, but they remind them of themselves and the people they know in real life. They're able to put themselves in their shoes."

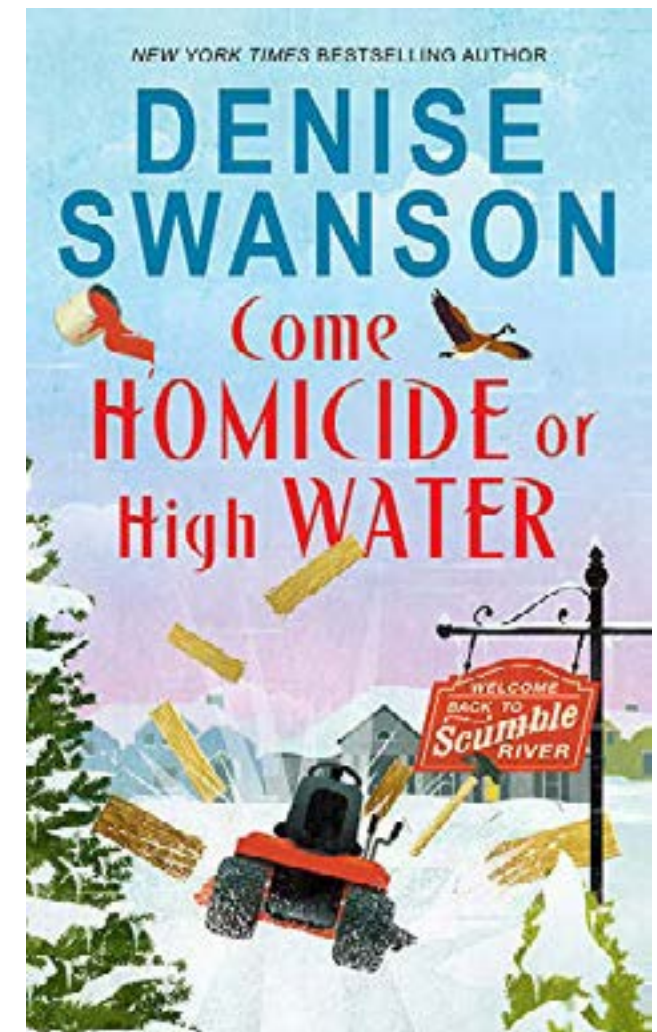
Her readers agree.

"I like the suspense with humor and a little romance while getting to know the characters' families and towns," says one Facebook reader. "Each book in the series is a continuation of a bigger story of the characters' lives."

The Scumble River Series

Denise hit on the cozy formula with her debut series, The Scumble River mysteries. Of the 22 Scumble River books to date, five have landed on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

The series features Skye Denison, a school psychologist who returns to her childhood hometown and finds herself solving all sorts of crimes. The first Scumble River mystery, ***Murder of a Small Town Honey***, was published in 2000; ***Come Homicide or High Water***, the latest installment, was released in December.



Swanson's latest book, released in December.

Denise's second cozy series, Devereaux's Dime Store Mysteries, stars Devereaux "Dev" Sinclair, owner of a five-and-dime shop in a small Missouri town. Her third series, the Chef-to-Go mysteries, about personal chef and caterer Dani Sloan, is her most recent.



Hometown Inspiration

Coal City, Ill., where Denise Swanson was born and raised, looks like a lot of small midwestern towns. Named for the coal mines that dominated local industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Coal City is marked by Broadway Street, which runs four blocks through the historic downtown business area, and acres of cornfields that stretch beyond the city limits. A few miles away, the Kankakee River bisects the town of Wilmington, famous as a stop on US Route 66.

Denise's family, both her mother's and father's sides, has lived in the area for more than a century; her mother, Marie, still lives in the rural country house that Denise's father built for them in 1965.

Denise met her husband, classical music composer David Stybr, in second grade, and together they returned after college, marriage, and three years in Maryland, where Denise worked as a school psychologist in Prince George's County. Back at home, she continued her work in the Will County, Ill., school system, one of just a handful of trained school psychologists nationwide as the field was being established. After 22 years, she left to write full-time.

The infamous Scumble River goose.

Her experience as a school psychologist lies at the heart of her storytelling.

"I draw on all of this for my books," Denise says. "I started writing seriously in my 30s,

when I kept a notebook of anecdotes of funny things from work, and I use all of Coal City's controversies. There's a section in the *Coal City Courant* [the local newspaper] called Sound Off, which is where I get a lot of my ideas. It's just the stuff going on around town."

She frequently references people and places she's known her whole life to develop new plots and characters.

"Skye's hairstylist brother is based on my cousin, who still cuts my mom's hair," she says. "***Dead in the Water*** is based on a tornado that came through Coal City a few years ago, and ***Die Me a River*** centers on an explosion at the bowling alley in Wilmington."

Even the ceramic goose in front of her mother's house makes an appearance, as Skye's mother has one too. Skye uses it to gauge her mother's mood, depending on how the goose is dressed when she pulls into her driveway. While Denise's mother Marie's goose sports a similar wardrobe, Denise insists she doesn't view it as the same emotional indicator.



The Gemini Giant is a local landmark in Wilmington Ill., the place on which Swanson bases her fictional town of Scumble River.



Denise Swanson and her mother, Marie.

Denise grew up an only child, a voracious reader since she taught herself to read at the age of three. Her father farmed the family's land during the day and worked the 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm shift at the clay pit in Coal City, mining clay for firebrick and foundries after the coal mines closed.

Her mother stayed home with her until Denise left for college. Marie then joined the police department as an emergency dispatcher, eventually working her way to sergeant. Denise's father passed away in 2000, just a few months before her first book was published. Marie joined her on her first book tour.

Marie doesn't read her daughter's books until they are complete, but she is understandably her No. 1 fan.

"What I like about her writing is that I can get into her books right away," Marie says. "They're very good stories."

After each book is published, Marie adds it to a bookshelf in her spare bedroom where she keeps a clean copy of every book Denise has written, each one signed "To Mom" by the author.

"I'm very proud of her," Marie says.

The Deadly Divas

When her first book was published in 2000, the internet and Amazon and all the ways people buy books now didn't exist, so Denise decided to hit the road.

Enter the Deadly Divas.

"We were a group of four mystery writers who traveled around, talking about our books at libraries, bookstores and women's clubs," Denise says. "We wore boas and tiaras, and gave out Diva beads, bookmarks, chocolate — all kinds of stuff — to people who came to our readings.

"Back then, independent bookstores were big and when we were able to get one bookstore to stock our books, we would build around it. Word of mouth from that bookstore would sell more books, and that's how I was able to build my readership."

The Divas traveled to Texas, New England, California, Alabama and throughout the Midwest. In 2000 alone, Denise made 78 appearances.

"That first year was really important," she says.

“I'm more than happy to promote other authors when they're willing to share what they know, because authors did that for me when I was starting out.”

Denise Swanson

Today, Denise maintains an active, engaged audience on Facebook, each day reaching close to 8,000 readers and authors through two separate

groups. For her reader's group, she posts information about new books, events and her writing process, along with a question of the day and Tuesday treats — recipes that connect to characters and stories in her books. Her second page is where she promotes other cozy mystery authors with giveaways and links to free Kindle books she thinks her readers would enjoy.

Denise often invites new authors to her book signings and Facebook groups in order to introduce her readers to writers she likes. She's also an active participant in writer's groups and professional organizations such as Mystery Writers of America, Romance Writers of America, and Sisters in Crime.

Building community among writers and fans is something Denise believes in strongly.

"I'm more than happy to promote other authors, especially when they're willing to share what they know, because authors did that for me when I was starting out," she says.

“ I had to put that one down for a while, before I could return to reading it.”

Marie Swanson

Industry Changes

Denise published her first book with Penguin Publishing Group. At the time, the only path to publication was to be agent-represented and she spent three years — and 270 rejections — writing and querying agents.

“I was getting discouraged,” Denise says.

She attended a writing conference in Georgia, where she submitted 50 pages plus a synopsis of her novel for judging. To her delight, the book finished in the Top 10, earning her a meeting with a publisher’s rep who, while she didn’t sign on to represent her, allowed Denise to share her critique: “Cozy mystery writing at its very best.” Using the editor’s quote in three more queries, Denise signed with a St. Louis agent, who sold a three-book deal to Penguin.

“I was ready to give up, but I didn’t,” Denise says.

Denise wrote 25 books and two series for Penguin before moving to Sourcebooks, a boutique publishing house based in Naperville, Ill., in 2015. At the time, Penguin was closing down its mass market paperback division and wanted Denise to publish her new books in hardcover, which she refused.

“My readers had been loyal to me for 19 books, and I felt it wasn’t fair to ask them to pay more for a hardcover,” Denise says.

Hers was an industry-wide problem. The growing popularity of e-readers meant the mass paperback market was shifting away from print to digital publishing, and Denise’s books were no exception. She was able to move the backlist of the original Scumble



Two of Swanson's romance novels.

River series to Sourcebooks, which made them available as e-books. They then rebranded her post-Penguin Scumble River books as a new series, Return to Scumble River, and Denise set to work writing more Skye Denison mysteries.

She appreciates the close partnership that a smaller publishing house offers its authors.

“It’s been a really good fit,” she says.

Today, traditional publishing is just one segment of Denise’s publishing platform. A fan of romance as well as cozies, Denise entered the contemporary romance market in 2015 with the Forever Charmed series, which follows four sorority sisters looking to spice up their lives. A year later she debuted a second romance series, Delicious Love — each book a standalone story that, shall we say, sizzles.

“Take one smoking-hot top chef who thinks food should be a sensual adventure, add a venture capitalist who has struggled with her weight since she was a teenager, and mix well. Is this a recipe that sizzles, or is he just another craving she must resist?” reads the blurb for ***Sinfully Delicious***, the debut novel.

“I had to put that one down for awhile, before I could return to reading it,” Marie, Denise’s mother, says.

In September Denise entered the fantasy and paranormal market with ***A Call to Charms***, the first book in the Forever Charmed series about witchcraft and magic.

She also contributes regularly to Mystery Lovers’ Kitchen, a blog where mystery authors talk about their books and post



Marie Swanson's collection of signed first editions.


recipes. (Marie's pumpkin cake was the treat for November.)

Each move Denise makes in publishing has two considerations: her readers and her business. Denise credits e-readers with making self-publishing possible, and self-publishing with making more of her books available, which has helped to grow her audience. Since authors earn a higher percentage of sales from e-books than they do with traditional publishing, the shift to electronic publishing hasn't hurt the bottom line, either.

Today, Denise writes full-time and manages her active Facebook groups, while her husband David handles business

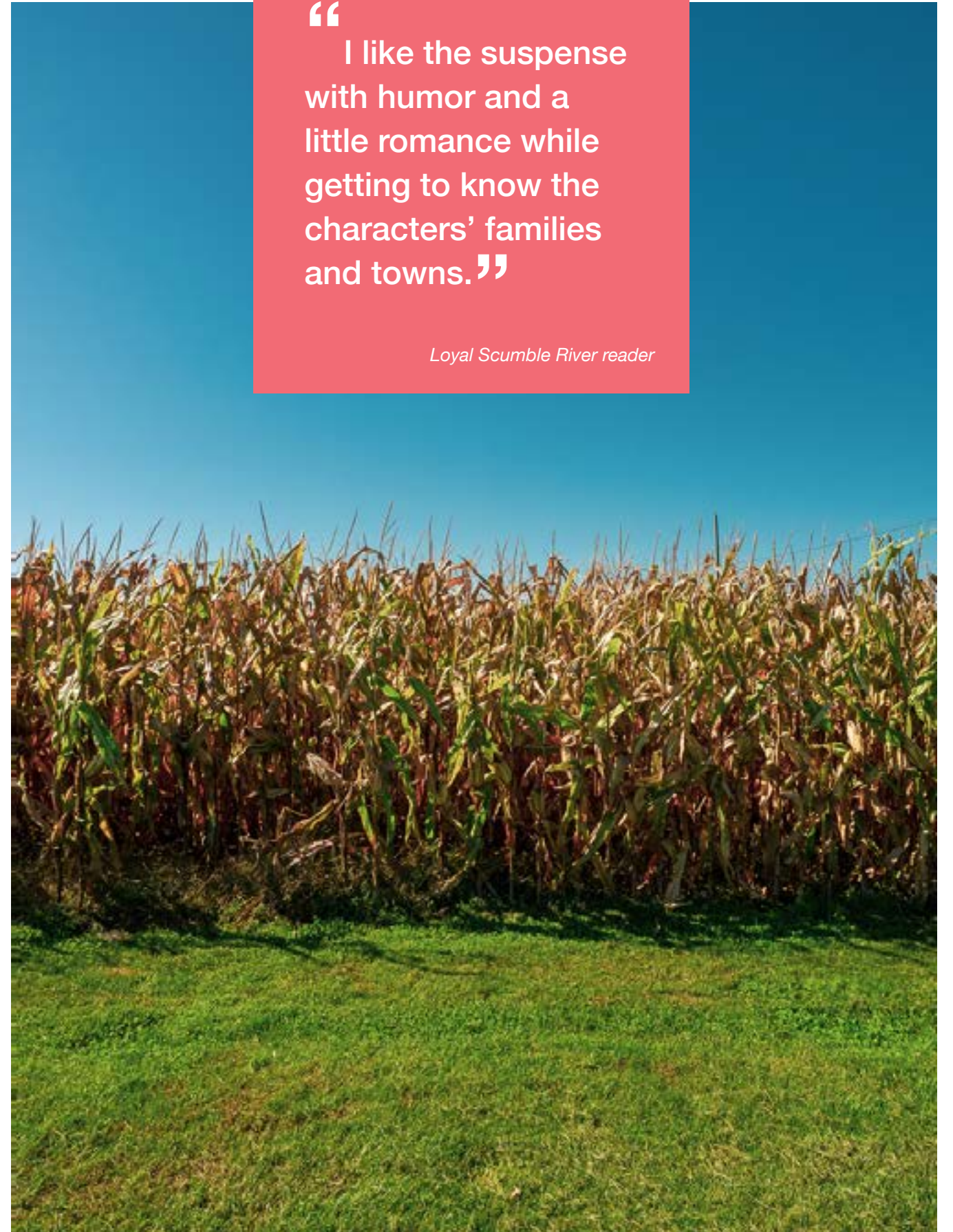
operations and web development. Her current writing schedule doesn't allow as much time for book tours and events as when she first started writing, but Denise never forgets her roots when a new book comes out.

One of her favorite local events is to hold a book signing at the Coal City Pharmacy, a downtown landmark located on Broadway Street. Denise usually draws a crowd, signing books and catching up on the news.

It's the kind of small-town touch that her readers enjoy most about her books. As one reader said, "She makes you feel a part of their world." 

“ I like the suspense with humor and a little romance while getting to know the characters' families and towns.”

Loyal Scumble River reader



Denise Swanson finds inspiration everywhere, even in the cornfield outside her childhood home.