

# HAPPY ENDING

After three decades, writer finally reaches shelves with first novel

*Sunday, December 03, 2006*

**Bill Eichenberger**

*THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH*

When she was 13, Patricia Sargeant read the Joan Aiken book *Black Hearts in Battersea* and decided she, too, would become a writer.

Thirteen years later, in 1991, she "got serious" — and bought a word processor.

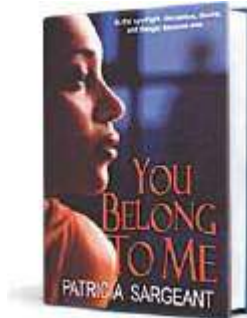
Fifteen years later, her first novel, *You Belong to Me*, has been published. "Some people don't like to admit how long it took them to get published," Sargeant said. "Technically, if you wanted to, you could say I'd been writing 28 years and just now got published. Or you could say I'd been writing for 15 years and pursued a book deal seriously for eight. The thing is, you can't put a clock on it. Getting published takes as long as it takes."

*You Belong to Me*, published by Dafina Books, is part romance, part mystery.

The novel tells of a science fiction writer, Nicole Collins, whose best-seller is optioned to a production company owned by her



**Patricia Sargeant with copies of her book, *You Belong to Me***



ineffectual ex-husband, Malcolm. The plot is propelled by an obsessed fan who doesn't want the characters to be distorted by Hollywood hacks.

Sargeant — who left New York for Columbus to study journalism at Ohio State University — actually completed another novel, *On Fire*, before writing *You Belong to Me*. She shopped it unsuccessfully for several years in the early 1990s.

"As a new author, you're writing your story and learning the craft at the same time," she said. "Until I started writing in earnest, I didn't know you were supposed to tell an entire scene from a single character's point of view." She also needed to figure out how to handle being rejected. "You think you're braced for rejection, and yet it still hurts," she said. "You have this editor you've dreamed of working with, and you send her your baby, and then she writes back: 'It's nice. Good luck finding a home for it.' Your baby — 'nice'? Nice? "

Little did she know at the time that the obligatory "Nice effort, dear" would seem warm and fuzzy compared with some other replies.

"I entered a contest where, if you won, you got a reading from an editor, and the judge wrote to me and told me, 'Your heroine is too stupid to live.' That's not what you want to hear about your heroine."

Instead of becoming bitter, however, Sargeant tried to learn from such comments.

"Yes, writing is an art, but it's also a business. You have to take a professional approach to criticism," she said. "I read every letter twice — once right away and then again after I've cooled down. You have to ask yourself: 'Do I agree? Disagree? Has more than one person told me my heroine is stupid?'"

Sargeant put *On Fire* on the shelf and started other novels, including *You Belong to Me* — on which a publisher finally bit.

"I'll never do that again — have so many projects going at one time," Sargeant said. "But for a time there in the 1990s, I thought maybe I was writing in the wrong genre, that maybe I wasn't any good at romance."

The rejections took their toll.

"To be honest, part of the reason it took me that long: I got kind of depressed, and I needed to take a break," she said.

In 1998 she joined a chapter of the Romance Writers of America and met her critique partner, Marcia James.

"From the start," James said, "Patricia researched both the craft and business of fiction writing, pursuing her goal of becoming a published author as seriously as a graduate student pursues a master's degree."

"We learned the business part of it together," Sargeant said. "Even now I get very tense with the promotional stuff I have to do. It's outside my comfort zone. I don't have to explain to Marcia what I'm going through. She already knows."

Beginning in 1999, Sargeant worked tirelessly in search of a home for *You Belong to Me*.

She won a Harlequin contest but didn't take the offer; she wanted her book published as a "single title," not a "category title" in a series.

Single titles — generally more meaty (90,000 words, say, as opposed to 50,000) — stay on bookstore shelves longer.

"You can do a lot in 90,000 words," Sargeant said. "There's so much more room to murder people."

At the news that New York publisher Kensington Books was launching the Dafina imprint, designed for black readers, she sent a proposal for *You Belong to Me*.

She heard nothing. Months later, she resubmitted materials and waited more months. She was resigned to not seeing her book published.

"On New Year's Eve of 2005, I decided I was going to keep writing whether my stories sold or not," Sargeant said. "I figure writing is the only way to quiet the voices in my head."

Finally, Kensington editor Karen Thomas gave her a two-book deal.

*You Belong to Me* was published in November, and *On Fire* will arrive next year.

"I told my agent I was worried because, after Dafina publishes *On Fire*, I wouldn't have anything to shop. And she told me: 'Patricia, you're a published author now. You don't have to shop a completed book. You can shop a proposal.'

"I thought: 'You've got to be kidding me. I've just hit the jackpot!'"