

A Boonsboro Romance

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“Home is where the heart is.” For best-selling author Nora Roberts, home is Boonsboro, Maryland, a small town along the National Road, not far from Hagerstown. Boonsboro serves as a gateway to an impressive list of heritage sites that include Antietam and South Mountain National Battlefields, the C&O Canal Towpath, Washington Monument State Park, Harpers Ferry Historical Park and a portion of the Appalachian Trail. It’s also a destination for Roberts’ devoted fans. The town’s motto sums it up: **“Discover our history. Savor the romance.”**

With more than 200 books – and counting – to her credit and 400 million copies of those books in print around the world, Roberts is a publishing phenomenon. *The New Yorker* has called her “America’s favorite novelist.” She condensed her given name of Eleanor Marie Robertson into Nora Roberts as a pen name for her romance novels and writes mysteries under the J.D. Robb pseudonym. She often writes trilogies. Her impressive output is a result of talent plus her commitment to an eight-hour per day, five-day work week. According to *Fall into the Story*, described by Roberts’ publicist as “the official blog for Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb readers,” her annual earnings run around \$60 million.

It all began in 1979 when a blizzard left Roberts snow-bound for several days at her hilltop home with her two sons, ages 3 and 6. The result was a severe case of cabin fever. To divert herself, she picked up a pencil and notebook, and began writing a story. As it took shape on paper, Roberts had an epiphany: “This is IT. This is the thing I am meant to do.” After several rejections and revisions, that story, *Irish Thoroughbred*, became her first published book in 1981. A few years later, she hired a carpenter named Bruce Wilder to build some bookshelves. They married in 1985. Bruce continued to use his carpentry skills to transform the family home with multiple additions and



Best-selling author, Nora Roberts, at Turn the Page Bookstore’s July 9, 2016 book signing.

renovations, including an office and tower closet. When she’s not following her famous “butt in chair” rule of writing, Roberts tends her gardens and does battle with encroaching deer.

The combination of Roberts’ 30-year commitment to the area and her financial success has proven to be a boon for Boonsboro. In an interview published in a *Washington Post* article, Wilder said, “In our position monetarily, you can invest whatever with your financial adviser, and you really never see it. That’s all good. But we want to see stuff.”

So Roberts and Wilder decided to establish several related businesses that have brought new life to The Square, Boonsboro’s historic district, and given nearby businesses an economic boost. To date, they include a bookstore, historic inn, gift shop, pizzeria, and fitness center. One of Roberts’ sons runs a nearby restaurant and tap house.

It seems appropriate that the first to open was the Turn the Page Bookstore. Located in a pre-Civil War townhouse just off The Square, Wilder opened the store in 1995. The Bookstore’s slogan is “A Great Place for Books and Coffee.”

“You feel like you’re in someone’s home,” says Janeen Solberg, the store manager. “You can tell that one of the rooms was a kitchen by its mantel and woodwork.” TTP, as the store is often called, consists of five rooms. Many visitors make a beeline to the Nora Room, where they’ll find all of the Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb works in print, in all formats, including audios and DVDs — plus a standing cardboard “Nora.” The store also carries a wide selection of general fiction and non-fiction, greeting cards, Roberts and J.D. Robb themed merchandise, locally crafted items, the Nora Roberts *Inspiring Women* jewelry collection, Eve Dallas Roast Coffee (named for a J.D. Robb character), hand-poured soy candles, locally made soaps and body care items, pottery by store manager Janeen, and Wilder’s photography. In a nod to the area, the store carries an extensive collection of books featuring local history, the Appalachian Trail, and books from local authors. Books featuring Civil War history are a specialty, and the store also offers an extensive selection of autographed books. While browsing the store, patrons can enjoy Dublin Roaster Fair Trade coffee from Frederick at the store’s full-service coffee bar.

“More than 60 percent of our books are sold online,” Solberg says. Many Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb titles are sold through a subscription service that allows customers to buy books automatically as soon as they’re released and shipped near each book’s release date. Roberts comes to the store three times per week to sign subscribers’ books at no extra charge.

Patrons can keep up with promotions, updates on books and merchandise, monthly book club meetings, “brush and bubbly” events, and the wildly popular book signings via the Bookstore’s online newsletter and its Facebook page. Roberts’ book signings draw readers from all over the U.S. and overseas. From 200-500 devotees stand in line for hours outside the store to pick up tickets required for admission, usually between the hours of 10 a.m. until the cutoff time of 1 – 2 p.m. Roberts and at least five invited authors remain at the store until all books are signed. It’s a festive event, with authors and their fans enjoying camaraderie and chit-chat as books are signed.



Top: Some patrons wait to meet Nora Roberts and other authors at Turn the Page Bookstore’s recent book signing.
Middle: A relaxing atmosphere and fun day prevail at Turn the Page Bookstore book signings.
Bottom: Turn the Page Bookstore and other businesses on Main Street in downtown Boonsboro, Maryland.
For more information: www.ttpbooks.com or 301.432.4588.



Inn BoonsBoro (top) dating back to the 1790s, has been lavishly restored, continuing a two-hundred year legacy of welcoming guests.

Inset: The private courtyard offers guests a relaxing retreat at the back of the Inn.

For more information see: innboonsboro.com or call 301.432.1188.

“We want it to be a fun day,” says Solberg. “It’s a community of readers.” On July 9, 2016, TTP celebrated its 21st Anniversary Book Signing. Future book signings are scheduled for September 17, October 29 and December 3.

Inn BoonsBoro

Roberts’ fans, tourists and B&B aficionados with a taste for luxury can enjoy unique accommodations at Inn Boonsboro, conveniently located on Main Street across the street from the Bookstore. The Inn features seven themed rooms, each bearing the names of famous literary lovers, plus a penthouse suite. Guests enjoy access to several common rooms, including a cozy library, plus complementary beverages and snacks. “Getaway Packages” offer multiple ways to enjoy personal celebrations and the area’s wealth of historic sites and recreational opportunities.

“The themed rooms were Nora’s idea,” says innkeeper Karen Long, managing innkeeper. “Each room has its own scent.”

The décor of each themed room reflects the historic periods of each couple in high style, with lavish furnishings and spa-like private bathrooms featuring separate bathtubs and showers. The “Elizabeth and Darcy” (*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen) evokes the courtly refinement and charm of England’s Regency Period, with a king-sized bed and a slipper tub. “Jane and Rochester” (*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte) is a suite featuring the rural romance of 19th Century England’s

wind-swept moors, offering an imposing king-sized canopy bed, fainting couch, brick fireplace and copper tub. “Marguerite and Percy” (*The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Baroness Emmuska Orczy), an ADA-compliant suite located on the first floor with two full size beds, reflects the opulence of 18th Century France. “Titania and Oberon” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare) creates an enchanting atmosphere filled with fanciful touches like a queen-sized canopy bed of iron with “twisty tree” headboard and footboard and shimmering organza drapes, plus a copper tub and two copper vessel sinks. “Nick and Nora” (*The Thin Man* by Dashiell Hammett) features a spare but elegant 1930s art deco style, complete with queen-sized bed and crystal lighting in the bathroom. “Eve and Roarke” (*In Death Series* by J.D. Robb) reflects the tastes of each character, combining Roarke’s love of antiques with Eve’s penchant for contemporary, futuristic style displayed by a king-sized platform bed and Louis XV chairs in smoky lucite. “Westley and Buttercup” (*The Princess Bride* by William Goldman) a suite with private entrance off the third-floor porch, is rich with royal amenities like its grand king-sized bed, in-wall fireplace, huge sofa, copper tub with mirrored mosaic exterior and two copper vessel sinks. The Penthouse, also on the third floor, boasts a carved four-poster king-sized bed and bathroom with a floating wall dividing the curved jet-tub from the counter with two porcelain vessel sinks below a custom mirror flanked by crystal sconces.

Inn Boonsboro is a love story in itself. The imposing stone building dates back to the 1790s and operated as a hotel until business declined. Eventually it stood empty on the square. Roberts and Wilder watched the building’s decline and wondered what could be done to save it. They soon stepped up to purchase the building, and committed to using local tradesmen, artisans and products as much as possible. Plans included six guest rooms, kitchen, common rooms, office space and an apartment for the innkeeper. All porches would be rebuilt.

In April 2007, extensive demolition of the interior and restoration of the exterior masonry began, with an anticipated opening date of June 2008. But those plans were derailed in February 2008 when the inn suffered a devastating fire caused by a damaged propane tank. Fortunately, the masonry survived and the structure was deemed salvageable by the county commissioners. Undaunted, Roberts and Wilder started anew, with plans to add two more guest rooms on the third floor. On February 17, 2009, just before the first anniversary of the fire, Inn Boonsboro opened for business. An unexpected bonus from the fire’s destruction was the discovery of an intricate stone wall that now serves as a focal point in the dining room.

“Fans will book a year in advance of book signing dates,” Long says. “Other authors at book signings often stay at the Inn. Most guests are Nora fans. It’s a nice surprise for others. The Inn has brought a lot of commerce to Boonsboro.”

Inn Boonsboro continues a two-hundred year legacy of welcoming overnight guests to Boonsboro. Several Roberts-owned businesses are conveniently located nearby. Inn guests can work out at Fit in Boonsboro gym at no extra charge, find handcrafted items from local artisans at Shop Inn Boonsboro, and enjoy pizza and other Italian specialties at Vesta Pizzeria and Family Restaurant.

A 15-year resident of Boonsboro, Long says, “It’s changed drastically since I moved here, with more businesses, especially during the past three years.”

Solberg agrees. “Nora has helped bring the town back to life. It’s her town, too. She’s lived here for decades. She donates locally. They [Roberts and Wilder] have done a lot.”

Will Roberts retire any time soon? Not likely. Solberg says, “She has no intention of slowing down.”



Rooms at Inn Boonsboro lavishly reflect the historic periods of specific literary couples. Jane and Rochester, left (*Jane Eyre*) and Westley and Buttercup, right (*The Princess Bride*) are two of the seven themed suites.

PHOTOS COURTESY INN BOONSBORO