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Amicus Curious

Life in law firm provides grist for her novel

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Law Bulletin staff writer

Mary Hutchings Reed was heading to lunch at a social club with a law firm colleague and a client when a problem developed.

No one had called ahead for a reservation, but dining room space wasn't the issue. It was Reed's gender.

It was the late 1970s, and the club allowed women only in its private rooms, not the main dining area. And all of those rooms were full.

"And they said, 'Mary, we'll meet you back in the conference room,' " Reed recalls.

"At the time, you sit there going, 'What do you do?' Do you throw a hissy fit right there in the dining room with the chairman of the department? … [Women] were taking it one step at a time. We were taking these little bitty in-roads, and you had to pick and choose your battles," Reed said.

Reed, 56, reveals a fictional version of that frustrating moment in "Courting Kathleen Hannigan," a novel that she wrote to capture the experience of women who joined male-dominated law firms in the late 1970s.

"This is not a book that says 'treat women better in law firms.' It's not like that," Reed said. "I suppose it's helping me make sense of my own experience in some way … it's a creative outlet.

"This book is about a woman growing up in a law firm. It's a coming-of-age story."

After graduating from Yale Law School in 1976, Reed started her career at Sidley, Austin LLP, where she became a partner. In 1989, she joined Winston & Strawn LLP as a partner and helped start the intellectual property practice. She now is counsel to the firm.

A self-described liberal Democrat and feminist (though she said she believes most young women shun the "feminist" label today because it sounds too harsh), Reed said now is an ideal time to publish the book, given that two high-profile women are part of the presidential race.

Sen. Hillary Clinton was three years ahead of Reed at Yale, and the two didn't know each other. But Reed did work with Sen. Barack H. Obama's wife, Michelle, at Sidley.

"And I think it's always important to know where we came from. It's sort of a tribute to women who fought those battles. So I thought it was time to tell that part of the story," Reed said.

The book tracks the rise of the protagonist's legal career, and that story is sandwiched between the plot line that presents the main conflict.

"Kathleen Hannigan" works at the fictional firm of Albright & Gill, which is facing a gender discrimination suit from a highly qualified female associate who didn't make partner. Hannigan is caught in the middle of a case that's loosely modeled after the real-life *Hopkins v. Price Waterhouse* of the late 1980s.

"Kathleen must answer whether the firm discriminated. If she says 'No,' she's violating her own principles," Reed said. "If she says 'Yes,' she's testifying against her own partners."

After the trial is introduced, the reader is guided through Hannigan's experiences at the firm.

The tale is set in Chicago, and the firm is located a block west of the intersection of State and Madison streets. Reed provides a constant reminder of the setting throughout the book with references to downtown basement taverns, shopping at Marshall Field's, burger joints with hanging ferns and fireworks exploding over Lake Michigan in July.

The time setting is stated and reinforced in a sequence that unfolds after a smudge on a page of a brief causes major problems. Today, the page could be reprinted in a matter of seconds.

The scene ends with a colleague, Harry, telling Hannigan to get over the "dog work" that the young lawyers face. He then stares at her blouse before and after he complains about his own grunt work.

Hannigan responds without a word.

"In a parody of male aggression," Reed writes, "she put her feet up on the desk next to Harry's, aware that her skirt was riding up her thigh. She stared at him, daring him to look. It was a pretty good leg, and she hoped it intimidated the hell out of him. Harry chuckled."

Paul McGrath

Mary Hutchings Reed

The novel also provides a glimpse into the coded language of lawyers, such as when Hannigan asks another new associate on her first day where she is "from."

" 'From' among law students meant law school, not home, and law school was an instant indicator of rank," Reed writes.

In another matter, Hannigan sees her colleague's name, but not her own, mentioned in the newspaper regarding a big case that she played a significant role in settling.

"While her folks would have gotten a kick out of seeing her name in the Tribune," Reed writes, "she figured she would be able to make the necessary professional hay out of the case as a speaker at law seminars and such…."

Readers who are past their early 20s will also get a chance to remember life as young professionals who live away from the safety net of school for the first time.

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For example, Hannigan wakes up one morning and throws out spoiled food, which qualifies as "cleaning" her apartment for the day.

That young associate lifestyle in the city is perhaps best portrayed when Reed describes Hannigan's Friday night routines. Since the story is set in the days before an efficient mass e-mail exists, a phone tree starts around 4 p.m.

That leads to drinks in the Loop; followed by either pizza, burgers, Mexican food or Chinese; more drinks and dancing; a cab ride home; and possibly getting "lucky" or eating again after midnight.

But along with the success at work, the office's gender divide is presented in ways that have the subtlety of a rock concert, and they would fuel nightmares for anybody who writes employee handbooks. This is evident when Hannigan finds herself in a cab with a drunk colleague who opens his fly while sitting next to her.

Though it's possible that one could read the book as Reed's tell-all account of her own experience in which names are simply changed, Reed said that isn't the case. Some of the characters' actions are overstated for literary effect.

"I know that there is probably some curiosity where people want to say 'That's so-and-so, and that's so-and-so. And Mary is Kathleen Hannigan.' In the acknowledgments, I say, 'It's all fiction and it's all true.' Because I take different characteristics of different people I know, and I put them all in one character," Reed said.

"I don't worry when I tell the truth. And it is fiction, and I wasn't out to hurt anyone's feelings," Reed said.

And, of course, she knows that "the law gives you a lot of protection for fiction."