

'How to Write a Novel' a light-hearted look at weighty topics

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By Gina Webb - For Cox Newspapers

A sly send-up of how-to books on writing might seem an odd bedfellow for a story about a family's lingering grief. But Georgia author Melanie Sumner ("Ghost of Milagro Creek") ingeniously unites the unlikely duo in her fourth novel, which begins when 12-year-old Aristotle "Aris" Thibodeau receives a book from her mother called "Write a Novel in Thirty Days!"

Aris' father died in a car wreck when she was 4. His widow, Diane, moved her children, Aris and 8-year-old Max, back to her hometown in Georgia, under the wing of her narrow-minded but well intentioned parents. Aris isn't crazy about rural Kanuga, a "two Walmart, no-Target town fueled by fast food and tethered to heaven by a church on every corner," and she worries about her family.



Melanie Sumner (photo credit: Michael Lionstar)

Her spacey mother, an attractive 40-something adjunct English teacher at a nearby Christian college, is overwhelmed by work and parenting, and "on bad days" simply stays in bed. Max is in therapy to cure his

habit of hitting himself. Aris needs someone to talk to, too – but money's too scarce.

Though Diane may have thought writing a novel would be therapy for her daughter, Aris has more pragmatic plans. "Luckily it only takes thirty days to write a novel," she says. "I figured I'd knock one out, make



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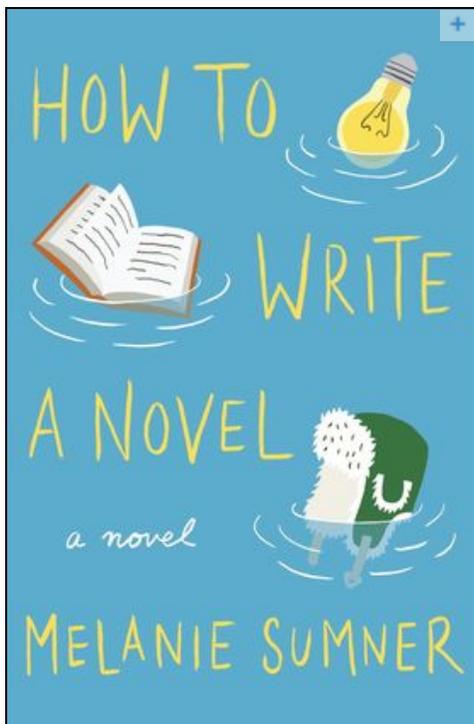
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a wad of cash, and get famous. That would draw some attention to our situation.”

And not just any attention. “Remarriage was on my agenda for getting the family back on its feet,” Aris admits, and her preferred candidate is commitment-phobe Penn, a family friend and handyman Diane met at AA. Diane, in no hurry to remarry, assures Aris their family is “like a three-legged dog that gets around just fine.” Aris replies that “people who get around just fine don’t become writers.”



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Aris' novel, of course, is the wry, comical story of all this, infused with her precocious, peppery humor. How-to advice drives the action as she tackles Exposition, Rising Action, Climax and Falling Action, while attempting to follow instructions such as “nothing happens Nowhere,” “avoid flashbacks,” or “remember the Why.”

Part of the book's charm is how Aris riffs off the rules, improvising on her inexperience. Puzzling

over how to create “something ... that changes the world the characters inhabit,” she remembers from church “that great literature often begins with a flood,” and opens her first chapter with an overflowing bathtub.

Practice makes perfect, not to mention hilarity, as she gropes for the right phrase to describe a kiss: “Snogging, playing tonsil hockey, interfacing passionately with each other, making out, creating a field of physical obsession and focused arousal.”

Reminiscent of the narrators in “Where'd You Go, Bernadette?” or “Harriet the Spy,” Aris mines drama from the quotidian: Diane cleans the house, throwing away Aris' and Max's favorite possessions. Aris reads her mother's hidden diaries. Penn and Diane move toward romance at a snail's pace. One of Diane's students gets arrested for



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speeding; when Diane takes his side, the college threatens to suspend her. The kids' grandparents visit. Max takes part in a talent show.

The plot – well, Aris admits she's making it up as she goes. She seeks advice from the school librarian, whose suggestions again echo the all-too-familiar wisdom of writing programs everywhere. "When is your protagonist going to face a situation she can't handle?" she asks, adding, "Something terrible must happen." And though "nothing happens in Kanuga," Aris' novel hinges on the revelations found in Diane's old journals, especially a dark family secret involving her father.

Could Aris be, as she hints in the prologue, other than she claims? As a narrator, she's unreliable, a 12-year-old who feels called upon to explain what BFF means; who, when asked what her novel's about, reels off a laundry list of MFA-ready themes: "The usual stuff. Chaos versus order, woman versus nature, good versus evil, individual versus society, the evils of racism, the effects of capitalism on the individual, the fallacy of eternal love, loss of innocence, appearance versus reality, the circle of life."

And though it sometimes reads as young-adult fare, "How to Write a Novel" serves up those ambitious topics and more: Diane's university wants her to sign a "faith statement"; Penn debates religion; and skeptical Aris writes "God Is" or "God Isn't" on the toes of her sneakers. One of Diane's writing students, Charles, contends with a racist cop and court system. Revelations of child abuse arise as well as the question of whether the spirit of Aris' father manifests through electricity and sound waves.

Sumner, who has written three other novels and teaches at Kennesaw State University, haunts the book in much the same winking, nodding way Aris' father inhabits the flickering light bulbs in their house. She can often be found in Aris' departures from her literary guidebook: "Writing a novel feels almost like talking. You're not talking to yourself, exactly, but when I'm talking to myself I'm not talking to myself anyway. I'm talking to someone who may or may not be real, someone who really likes me."

Fiction and reality crisscross and collide in Sumner's lighthearted novel, a reminder that life rarely plays by the rules. As Salman Rushdie notes in an epigraph that begins one chapter, "This is not what I had planned; but perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin."

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Melanie Sumner

Vintage Books, \$14.95, 304 pages

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