

She followed whispers of the heart into a new practice

It wasn't that, as a practicing psychologist in Toronto, Julie Brickman wasn't paying attention to her patients; she was probably paying too much attention.

"I was seeing things in psychology that I couldn't express in the language of psychology," she said. "Fiction allowed way more latitude. So I went back to school, took classes, wrote short pieces – and discovered that's where my heart was."

Brickman continued her psychology practice as she worked to transform herself into a writer, but "I knew I'd never get really good if I didn't do it full time." So she gave her patients six months' notice, got an MFA, snagged the first grant she ever applied for (a Canada Council grant, an exploration program for new artists in all areas) – and soon published a novel, "What Birds Can Only Whisper," with Turnstone Press of Winnipeg.

Born in Montreal, Brickman grew up in New Jersey and now lives in Carlsbad. "I just didn't want any more lingering gray winters," she explained. "And I wanted to come home. Being out of the country made the whole country home – you lose your regionalism. I couldn't think of a more beautiful place."

In addition to writing occasional book reviews for this section, she's currently working on two projects. The first is a novel called "Empty Quarter," set in the United Arab Emirates, which she visited after she started writing the book. ("I kind of felt obligated," she allowed.) The second ... well, she spent three months as writer-in-residence in Dawson City, way up in the Yukon, to work on "Empty Quarter." Problem is, she became so fascinated with the Yukon that



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"I figure that with the first few novels, you're learning," says Julie Brickman. "There's a lot of apprenticeship in writing."

she has put the novel on hold in order to write a memoir about her time there.

Not that she perceives it as a problem: "I feel incredibly lucky that I'm doing this. ... I love all steps of writing, from the first draft to the big revisions to the small polishings. My confidence waxes and wanes, but I do love it."

Brickman plans never to return to psychology. "Ever," she added; italics rippled through the phone.

Her new career certainly got off to an auspicious start. "I closed my practice on Friday," she said, "and on Monday my novel got accepted. So I guess I made the right decision."

- Arthur Salm