

Orion Township pharmacist pens historical fiction

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By DUSTIN BLITCHOK

Special to The Oakland Press

Robert Lytle has been writing prescriptions for customers at his pharmacy in downtown Rochester since 1976, but he is known to young adult readers for writing something entirely different: historical fiction novels.

His latest, "Mr. Blair's Labyrinth," illustrated by Gayle Vandercook, was recently published by EDCO Publishing, Inc., of Auburn Hills, and is Lytle's eighth book. Lytle's home in Orion Township, which he purchased in 2004, plays a large role in the book's plot. The estate was built as a summer home 1929 by Frank Blair, whose Guardian Trust bank was housed in the Guardian Building in downtown Detroit. Blair "lost everything (during) the Depression," says Lytle. The property originally included what is now Indianwood Golf Club and other surrounding land that was later parceled out.

Lytle's first book project came about when he helped his father write his memoirs, and Lytle also wrote a self-help book on pharmacy. The rule of thumb, says Lytle, "is to write what you know about."

He drew on his experience working on Mackinac Island for four summers for his first young adult novel, "Mackinac Passage: A Summer Adventure," the first in a series of five adventure stories.

"One thing I feel about today's children," says Lytle, is that "they seem to be so repressed by their parents' fear of danger. I felt totally carefree when I was growing up ... I could go anywhere."

Lytle went fishing and even sailed to Mackinac Island as a young adult without parental supervision. Lytle's family had a summer cottage on La Salle Island, in the Les Cheneaux Islands in Lake Huron.

Lytle met his wife Candy on Mackinac Island in the mid-1960's; they have four sons. The Lytles had always liked the labyrinth garden at The Grand Hotel, and installed a labyrinth on their own property with a cherubic fountain at its center. Lytle describes a labyrinth as a "walking garden, like a maze; a meditating garden."

Lytle began writing his latest book in 2007, when “it (the economy) was starting to get a little scary.” In “Labyrinth,” two teenage boys walk the labyrinth in Lytle’s garden at midnight on Midsummer’s Eve, under a full moon, and are transported in time back to 1935 and the Great Depression. The story is a timely trip from today’s economic malaise to the true hardship of 1930’s. “My parents and older sisters lived through the Depression. So many people lived through it, and it’s just the way things were.” Lytle says that families who lived through the Depression had “a very close-knit affection for each other, and more camaraderie.”

Lytle’s current publisher is Edna Stephens of EDCO Publishing in Auburn Hills. Stephens is a former teacher in the Lake Orion school district who publishes educational books. She says that “Labyrinth” is “a great classroom tool for teaching kids about the history of their community and the state,” and adds, “It provides a ‘real world way’ to compare the economics of yesterday and today, and is a wonderful piece of literature that can be used to enhance reading comprehension and reflective writing skills.”

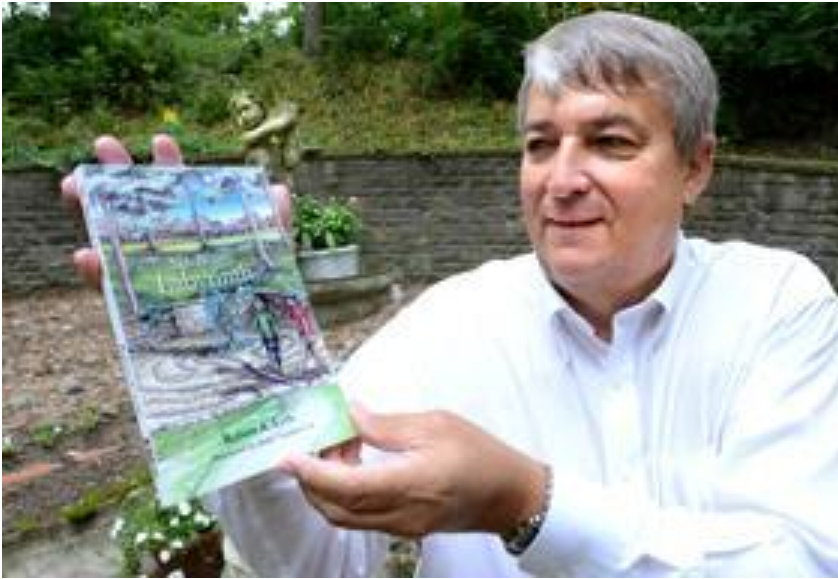
Lytle has already finished his ninth book, which he began to write six years ago. He says that he is on his 50th revision of the book, which will deal with a child orphaned by the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 in New York City, and goes to live with an uncle in London who has ties to the Irish Republican Army. The book, which will have a target audience of middle school and high school students, will deal with “terrorism at all of its levels,” says Lytle, and explore the Anglo-Irish conflict. Lytle is drawing on his time in Ireland for the book’s setting; he spent his fourth year of pharmacy school at Queens University in Belfast, just before the “Irish Troubles” started.

Although Lytle has had strong enough sales to have had multiple printings of all of his fiction novels, he says that “the margins are so small in publishing; (e-readers) and other forces are pushing down the profit margins on books.” Lytle notes that publishers “are bottom-line people; editors are more willing to take risks on new authors.”

Lytle explains the reward of writing novels by saying with a smile, “people never write me letters to tell me how great a prescription I filled for them was.”

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Bob Lytle of Orion Township, with his new fiction book, "Mr. Blair's Labyrinth." This is Lytle's eight book. Tuesday September 6, 2011. The Oakland Press/TIM THOMPSON