

Award-Winning Writer Releases First Book

By Marla Cantrell

One day in February, I made the decision to publish my first collection of short stories. I knew a lot about publishing, having been the managing editor and lead writer for Do South Magazine until 2019. I'd been told by friends and family that I should have done this sooner, but even after winning the Arkansas Arts Council Fellowship Award in Short Fiction, I lacked confidence. But February came, and a switch turned on. It was time.

My first call was to my longtime friend and editor. When my manuscript for *Early Morning in the Land of Dreams* was ready, I turned it over to him, and while I waited to get his markup, I contacted another friend and graphic artist to design my cover.

And then COVID-19 hit. There was something paralyzing about sitting at home with little to do. I'd always had so much to get done, and the shutdown made me wonder if any of my busyness had meant anything at all.

I wish I could say that I kept writing. I did finish a few magazine articles I'd been assigned earlier in the year, but all the personal writing I did was dark and foreboding, much like the world around me. When I got my edited manuscript back, I didn't even open the file.

It wasn't until August that I finally felt ready to continue. I made my edits, had my work proofread, and sent the copy to another friend who formats books. When I saw what she'd done, my heart soared. When I saw my book cover, I wiped away

tears.

Years ago, when I started writing fiction, I knew I wanted to tell the stories of the people I'd known but failed to see in popular literature. None of them had a ton of money or wild ambitions. They were all hard-working, dealing with hardships, and smart in a way that wasn't always recognized by the wider population.

shows up in one, three days after his death, to save a woman from herself. A man named T-Buddy finds his mama's eternal love in a fallow field on an icy day. A woman named Gypsy gets in trouble for giving advice to the people who call her while she's working at a data collection center named *Dream Catchers*, housed in an old Walmart. Because in Arkansas, doesn't everything have

are sleeping, making love, eating breakfast, or signing divorce papers." Author and UAFS professor Tom Wing said, "Marla takes her loom of words and weaves compelling characters with unforgettable narration." And author Gwen Faulkenberry said, "It's with respect for everyday people that Cantrell frames the stories of southern life, not glossing over anything, but bringing the beauty into the light."

I'm glad I finally took the leap. My book is available on Amazon, TelepheePress.com, and Chapters on Main in Van Buren. I have my first book signing at Chapters on October 10, from 11 a.m. until 1 p.m.

I'm glad I didn't give up during a year that has thrown us obstacle after obstacle. It's heartening to know that *Early Morning in the Land of Dreams*, with all its heart and hope, and with its love of the southern voice and spirit, will land in someone's hands. And after reading it, they feel might feel even prouder of Arkansas, and full of compassion. I can't think of anything better than that.

About the author: Marla Cantrell, the former managing editor and lead writer for *Do South Magazine*, is the winner of the Arkansas Arts Council Fellowship Award for Short Fiction. She's had more than 100 short stories published in magazines and several national and international anthologies. Marla's non-fiction writing has appeared in *Woman's World* and *Huffington Post*. She's also an editor, writing instructor, ghostwriter, and director of the Alma Public Library.



My stories have been compared to literary versions of country songs, with the same heart and rhythm. I like that. Each of the 25 stories in this collection is set in the real or imagined Arkansas. (I added a few places that don't exist on the state map, but they're based in fact.) Glen Campbell

a connection to Walmart? My first writing teacher and author, Anita Paddock, said this about *Early Morning in the Land of Dreams*. "Marla Cantrell's stories of the rural South let the reader hear the thunderstorms raging and rain pounding on tin roofs of houses where inhabitants

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Marco's Pizza to Open October 29

Delivery, Take-Out Location Will Serve South Fort Smith

By John Speck

Lifelong Van Buren resident and pizza lover Kyle Putman will open the first Marco's Pizza location in the River Valley at the end of this month barring any unforeseen issues, and the excitement in the 34-year old's voice demonstrates his entrepreneurial spirit.

"Marco's is the only national pizza brand that was actually founded by a native Italian," Putman said. "Pat Giammarco perfected all of the recipes we still will use today, and you can be assured of the freshest and highest quality ingredients on every pizza we produce."

From fresh dough made each day in the store, veggies that are cut fresh daily, and homemade sauce using Roma tomatoes and imported herbs and spices, the difference between Marco's and other pizza brands will be noticeable immediately, according to Putman.

In the Spring of 2019, Putman and a friend were visiting New York, trying every pizzeria they walked past. After sampling several, talk turned to bringing great, authentic Italian pizza to the Fort Smith area. Research into various polls and rating services showed Marco's as America's favorite national pizza brand. Once he tried the product, Putman determined it was a perfect fit for his investment and effort.

The initial Fort Smith location – Putman intends to add two more in the area over the next couple of years – will be at 2505 Market Trace, just off Jenny Lind south of I-540, next to Harp's. It will be a take-out and delivery only location, with no interior seating. Employee delivery will be available within an 8-minute radius of the store, and Uber Eats will deliver outside that radius.

"We want our customers to receive our best, and that means hot, fresh pizza with quality fresh toppings and a natural fluffy, buttery crust with a perfect chew," Putman explained. "That only happens if it is delivered quickly."

Putman is in the process of hiring his crew of 20 full time and 10 part

time employees, which will include shift managers, pizza makers and delivery drivers. Interviews are taking place amidst the clamor of ongoing construction, but he has been impressed by the quality of applicants so far.

"The restaurant industry has been hit hard by the COVID pandemic, and there are a lot of good people out of work right now. We're looking forward to putting some of them back to work at the end of this month," Putman stated.

Petree Construction of Fort Smith is handling the extensive remodeling of the location, which was formerly a martial arts studio. "We had to gut it completely to the studs and basically start from scratch," Putman elaborated. "We went with Petree because they were local and used local subcontractors, and keeping that money local was very important to us."

Putman added that community involvement is in Marco's DNA – including regular discount programs for First Responders, Teachers and Military, both active duty and retired. "We will also participate in non-profit fundraisers and school events. Marco's gives us full local discretion on that front, without any nationally required tie-ins," he said.

In order to introduce the community to their pizza, Putman said the store would be offering a "Free Slice" day on October 30 where anyone can come in and try a slice of their choice of pizza at no charge.

"Even though we don't normally offer pizza by the slice, it has proven to be a good way to have people try our 'Primo' quality without having to buy an entire pizza," Putman explained. "We know that once they try it they will be hooked."

The store will feature a clean, modern, minimalist design with accents of red, white and green – the colors of the Italian flag. It will be open from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, and 11 a.m. to Midnight on Friday and Saturday. The phone number will be 479-755-9100.



Van Buren native and owner Kyle Putman stands in front of the new Marco's Pizza store on Market Trace in South Fort Smith. Photo by John Speck

