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Wedding season

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Books to enlarge the spirit

By Paul Erland

When writer Pat Ballard and publisher Peggy Elam met and formed a working relationship, they found what every heroine in every romance novel longs to find: a match made in heaven.

Elam is founder and president of Pearlsong Press, an independent publishing company devoted to enlarging readers' perspectives; Ballard is an author with a wide perspective, so to speak, and large and lovely heroines. Pearlsong has published seven of Ballard's books of romance fiction featuring females at peace with their pulchritude. There is an eighth book under contract, a work of nonfiction.

Ballard was the first author Elam published. The ladies met after Elam, a licensed psychologist and a writer herself, wrote to Ballard to commend her for a letter to the editor she'd written about the bashing of fat people. Elam was starting a Health at Every Size support group in Nashville; she invited Ballard, who came, and the two were able to talk – a lot, as only one other person ever came to the meetings.

Ballard, who grew up in Mississippi, was a plump and happy child until the age of 11, when she picked up a women's magazine that informed her that she was far from the feminine ideal. She embarked on the long and torturous road of dieting accompanied by eating disorders. At the age of 33, having weathered anorexia and bulimia – "I had the will power to starve myself to death," she says – she finally found the strength, with the help of her husband



Star author Pat Ballard and publisher Peggy Elam hold some of the pearls available from Pearlsong Press

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Books to enlarge the spirit

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and son, to love the body God gave her.

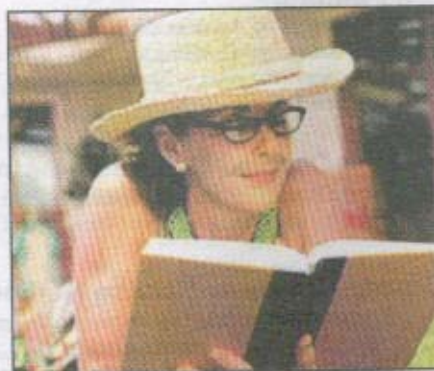
As the scales fell from her eyes, she gained confidence, and she saw that others looked at her differently. She gained perspective. When she sat down to write — something she'd always loved to do — she brought that perspective to the romance genre, hardly a hotbed of hefty heroines.

"I wanted to write books to inspire people," she says. She wrote four, self-publishing them all, with Big Beautiful Heroines as protagonists — heroines who would never go on a diet just to get a man but would get the man nonetheless. She met Elam, who wanted to get into publishing, to promote the philosophy of Health at Every Size, and the rest, as they say, is herstory.

Elam, with a bachelor's degree in journalism and English and an M. S. and PhD from Vandy, envisioned Pearlsong Press as the culmination and crowning touch of everything she'd done. In her multifaceted career she'd been a journalist and a poet, appeared on TV and spoken on radio, worked with people with eating disorders, and set out to be a healer and psychotherapist. "Pearlsong" is a name that came to her in a meditation, and it nicely brought into harmony a number of themes: The Pearl River runs through the part of Mississippi where she was born; the pearl is her birthstone; Pearl is a nickname for Peggy; and the pearl is a lustrous gemstone created out of strife. As the oyster heals itself, a pearl is formed — something to sing about.

Pearlsong republished Ballard's four existing novels, all in 2004, as well as a collection of unpublished short stories, *Dangerous Curves Ahead*. The novel *Wanted: One Groom* (set in Nashville) was followed by *Nobody's Perfect*, *His Brother's Child*, *A Worthy Heir*, *Abigail's Revenge* (a romantic suspense novel), and *The Best Man*. All the books are available through online booksellers, through various bookstores and through Pearlsong Press. Elam handles editing, layout and design, formatting and the thousand-and-one other details involved in getting manuscripts ready for print, as well as post-publication promotions. The books are produced by Lightning Source, a print-on-demand service.

"We're environmentally friendly," Elam says. Her company is also diversity-friendly, publishing works and offering products that celebrate the beautiful array of body types and sizes — that encompass the whole of human-



ity. Pearlsong Press has published seven authors (and has two more under contract), including Pattie Thomas (*Taking Up Space*, "a road map through the minefield of the 'war on obesity'"), Jack Adler (*Splendid Seniors*), Judy Bagshaw, who also writes about plus-sized heroines, and the diminutive (4 foot, 8 1/2 inches) Ellen Frankel (*Beyond Measure*, a memoir of climbing Mt. Everest and discovering something about herself).

Ballard, a member of the Romance Writers of America, has become known as the "Queen of Rubenesque Romances." She does trade shows and speaking engagements to promote her books, which have sold steadily since 2000, and her message, which is that a woman can be large and sexy. Her next book will be called *10 Steps to Loving Your Body*. Commandment number 9 on that maxi-manifesto is "Stop apologizing for your size."

Working in the realm of romance may be the best way to spread the word; about 50 percent of all fiction sales in the U. S. are romance novels. College-educated women make up the largest percentage of readers. And by letting her readers know that they've got nothing to be ashamed about in regard to their bodies, Ballard is simply following a time-honored maxim — the one that says literature can be very broadening.

The books of Pat Ballard are available at online booksellers such as www.amazon.com, www.borders.com and www.powells.com, as well as at www.pearlsong.com -- order from the latter and you'll receive an autographed copy. They are in stock at Borders in Brentwood. For more information about Pearlsong Press, visit www.pearlsong.com.