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EMERITUS PROFESSOR'S FIRST NOVEL EARNS PRAISE

History professor emeritus Frank Frost has done plenty of writing and publishing before.

What university professor hasn't?

One of his academic efforts -- "Greek Society" (D.C. Heath & Co., 1996), now in its fifth edition -- even has enjoyed best-seller status in its field.

But it was with a special feeling of accomplishment that Frost recently thumbed through the pages of his just-published first novel, "Dead Philadelphians" (Capra Press, 1999).

It was the realization of a lifelong ambition.

"In 1953, I got out of the army with the thought that I would like to be a writer," Frost said.

"What I didn't realize is that to write fiction, you need to know something.

And you need to know people."

What became equally apparent as rejections of his short stories mounted was that he was going to have to take another course if he wanted to support his wife and growing family.

So in 1954 he put his literary ambitions on hold and went back to school to pursue a life in academia.

He earned a Ph.D. in history in 1961, specializing in Greek history, and began a 34-year affiliation with UCSB in 1965, retiring in 1990.

Along the way, he spent a lot of time in Greece doing research, turning the results of his work into papers, articles and books.

He relished the chance to write.

"I enjoyed it," Frost said. "They

say a professor's life is publish or perish.

I would have perished if I hadn't had the opportunity to publish."

With that opportunity gone with his retirement, Frost returned to fiction writing.

He wrote more short stories without success.

And he wrote a political thriller novel he titled, "The Succession," but again, there were no takers.

Undeterred, he tried again.

The result was "Dead Philadelphians," which arose from an observation Frost made on one of his many trips to Greece.

"It struck me one day how easy it would be for a Greek American to hide out in Greece," Frost said.

Thus was born the concept of Frost's "Dead Philadelphians" hero, Danny Castle, a California ex-con hustler of Greek heritage, who loses himself on the isle of Crete to avoid the mafia, the FBI and assorted other bad guys.

Not only did Frost get "Dead Philadelphians" published, he earned high praise in a Los Angeles Times book review.

Reviewer Peter Green called Frost's writing "wonderfully taut, flexible, evocative," and his pace "fast-moving."

But he was most taken with Frost's depictions of rural Greece.

"The details are absolutely authentic," Green writes, using as example Frost's portrayal of a Cretan wedding.

Such authenticity comes from years spent in the very places Frost chose to spin his yarn.

"I've been to that wedding," Frost said.

Though Frost found a publisher for "Dead Philadelphians" and has since signed an option with a film company to have the book spun into a movie, it wasn't an easy sell. After feeling he didn't try hard enough to find a home for his first novel, Frost offered "Dead Philadelphians" to about 180 publishers and literary representatives before landing a New York agent.

Frost was elated.

Unfortunately, the journey from manuscript to publication was just beginning.

After hearing much optimistic talk from the agent, Frost suddenly lost contact with her.

His phone calls went unreturned, his letters unanswered.

After six months of such treatment, he wrote a letter to the woman's firm telling it he was taking his book elsewhere.

As it turned out, there was a perfectly understandable reason Frost's agent had stopped corresponding with him.

She wasn't disinterested, she wasn't irresponsible; she was dead.

But by the time the agency made Frost aware of her sudden demise, he had signed a deal with Capra Press Inc. of Santa Barbara.

Capra associate publisher David Dahl said the book is selling well for a first novel, with most of its initial run of 4,000 copies gone.

A second run in time for Christmas is anticipated.

"It's doing very well," Dahl said. "For him to get that kind of a rave review for a first novel by a new writer, that's great."

Dahl said the book section of the San Francisco Chronicle has asked for a copy and a good review there could boost sales further.

In the meantime, Frost is at work on a third novel.

And he's enjoying the freedom of his new vocation.

"It's kind of a relief, after having done history," Frost said. "If you don't know something, you can just make it up."

About UC Santa Barbara

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