



Photo for the Tribune by Chris Ocken

Leigh Buchanan Bienen has turned a huge, unused space on the top floor of Northwestern University's presidential mansion into a place to spread her many hats.

'Wives do things!'

She's the spouse
of a university president,
but Leigh Buchanan Bienen
is also a lawyer, professor
and prize-winning
short story writer

By Nara Schoenberg
Tribune staff reporter

The first two stories of the six-bedroom brick mansion are what you'd expect from the president of a major university: dark woodwork, Oriental carpets, tasteful modern art.

The third floor is different.

A back staircase leads up to a spacious former ballroom, empty except for a series of book-covered, paper-strewn tables and benches positioned at various intervals on the polished wood floor.

"I really wanted the third floor to be my place, where I could do my things," says Leigh Buchanan Bienen.

Bienen, whose first book of fiction, a short story collection called "The Left-Handed Marriage," will

be published this month, is best known as the wife of Northwestern University President Henry Bienen. But her official duties haven't stopped her from pursuing at least two careers of her own. A lawyer, she teaches at the university and has published two non-fiction books. As a short story writer, she delves into issues as diverse as capital punishment, animal rights and infidelity.

"I'm very aware that when people look at me, they see Northwestern," says Bienen, 63.

"I'm very glad to publish a piece of fiction as the wife of the president of Northwestern ... people should know that wives do things."

A lively figure with short, steel-gray hair, pin-striped slacks and a silver ear cuff, Bienen combines

PLEASE SEE BIENEN, PAGE 7

Photo for the Tribune by Chris O'Leary

BIEMEN:
Lawyer,
teacher,
writer

It takes a funny set of circumstances to make a writer, says Leigh Buchanan Biemen. Her gritty, real-life quanderies take the subtleties of academia. Her gut instinct, she says, was that the law would provide her with material as a writer.

Continued from page 1

formality and frankness in roughly equal parts. She'll describe her role as the president of the law school as "a wonderland," and then cheerfully add that her duties often amount to "standing around while other people do things."

Her own career has followed a labyrinthine path through economics classes at Babson, a Ph.D. in business at the University of Iowa, through Nigerian courts and New Jersey suburbs. She worked for Saul Bellow as a secretary assistant in the 1960s and ghostwrote a book about a Man Man leader while her husband was teaching in Kenya.

Writing 'my first calling'

The common thread may be invisible to the naked eye, but it's clear to Biemen. Surrounded by piles of unread books and unripped papers, she says of writing, "I always felt that was very much my first career and my first calling and the thing that was most important to me."

Her first collection of short stories weaves together the various paths her life has taken. In "Thebanian," Biemen, a former public defender who has published scholarly articles on capital punishment, shows how a young man with few skills is lured into acceptance of his job as a state executioner.

In the title story, a wealthy lawyer who is increasingly bored by his home life agrees to his lawyer-son's plan to enlarge their family with a young, second wife.

The trip last winter the African expression had been a distraction, but a temporary one. Biemen writes of the lawyer, Jackson, who is married to a woman named Marjory. "It only made him hungrier for a real change. Perhaps that was why Marjory's proposal appealed to him, Jackson's extramarital, his profession, his education, his looks, his expensive clothes and neatly backcombed hairline suggested a dedication to convention, or at least the status quo, but Jackson adhered to no such allegiance."

Don't read between lines

The story reflects Biemen's African travels and a residency in suburban Princeton, N.J., but she's quick to say that, in this case, the parallel between her personal life and her fiction will go so far. The story is not about her husband or her marriage, Biemen says.

The daughter of Norman Buchanan, a Berkeley economist professor, and his wife Janet, who designed leather products, Biemen grew up in a home where reading was important. Her parents parted when she was about 12 in what she describes as a bitter divorce, and her mother went on to work in real estate.

As a student at Cornell University, Biemen studied economics but gravitated toward English courses. Among her college influences was novelist Vladimir Nabokov, who taught literature at Cornell.

"When something is happening here that is very special," she thought when she first walked into one of his classes. "It made me want to be a writer like him, which is like trying to be like Shakespeare, right?"

After college, she did graduate work in economics at MIT. But she missed the literary life, and eventually left MIT to study writing at the University of Iowa.

Married in 1961, she continued to write short stories and do some journalistic writing, but she encountered the usual discouraging small paychecks and rejection letters.

"After a while, it became clear that had to find some other way to contribute to the family income," she says.

An advanced degree in economics or literature might have been an obvious next step, given her educational background, but Biemen was drawn more to

gritty, real-life quanderies than the subtleties of academia. Her gut instinct, she says, was that the law would provide her with material as a writer.

"The thing about criminal justice that continues to engage me -- and will continue to engage me -- is that it raises all the fundamental questions, all the fundamental moral questions, all the fundamental human questions," she says.

"You know? Who gets arrested? Who gets put in jail? For what kind of thing? Who are we punishing? Who are we punishing? What's right? What's wrong? What is a society?"

A long journey

Biemen began law school when her husband was a professor of politics at Princeton University. She commuted three hours a day by foot, bike and train from her home in Princeton to Rutgers (Princeton doesn't have a law school in Newark, N.J.). With three children -- ages 10, 8 and 4 -- she agreed to study sessions on the train.

Still, she says, there were advantages to going to Rutgers. She was intrigued by her daily walks through deceiving Newark neighborhoods. No one knew her husband at Rutgers, she says, "I could be there and be my own self."

After her first year of law school, her husband got a teaching job in Nigeria. She embarked on a study of homicide and capital punishment in Nigeria, and came back with a passion for criminal law. In another school, she took a job at a rape research project. She later worked as a public defender, arguing cases and researching the application of the death penalty.

She was still living in Princeton when she got her big break as a fiction writer. In the story "My Little Man," she submitted "My Little Man" to *Ontario Review*, a literary journal edited by Raymond Smith and his wife, author Joyce Carol Oates. The story, a chilling mixture of the exotic and everyday, is

told from the point of view of a once-proud bird now confined to a cage by a couple who have nothing but disdain for her. It is as difficult for me to remember the jungle, the sun in Africa, or my days in the dark pet shop owned by the blind, blind, blind Indian," she parroted, and told the author, "It was so disturbing to me, I was waiting in line (with real ID) and I had to go all day."

Oates, who didn't know Biemen at the time although they would later become friends and who coincidentally teaches at Princeton -- read "My Little Man" and told the author, "It was so disturbing to me, I was waiting in line (with real ID) and I had to go all day."

Oates later published the story, which went on to win an O. Henry Award, one of the most prestigious honors in short fiction.

Steady contributor

Over the years, Biemen has written 10 short stories, about 15 of which have been published, "some in very obscure places," she says. She also has written an unpublished novel.

Oates and Smith, who runs the small literary publisher Ontario Review Press, had talked with Biemen about the possibility of a short story collection. Biemen wasn't sure, but a couple of years ago her husband pushed her to pursue the option.

Now Ontario Review Press is publishing "The Left-Handed Marriage."

"I think her African stories are very unusual and her legal knowledge and experience comes in handy too," Smith says. "All of her expertise in these different matters gives a definite authenticity to her work."

The road to publication has been long and winding, but Biemen saves the twists and turns shared in her bright attic room, the oak-covered railing just beyond the window, she smiles mischievously when she contemplates her work.

"It takes a funny set of circumstances to make a writer, and that should never be forgotten."

WISCONSIN
Stay just a little bit longer.
traveltowisconsin.com

MILWAUKEE
The Genuine American City
For events and hotel availability, call 1-800-554-1448 or visit www.officialmilwaukee.com

Zoo
makes anything else seem tame!
Visit year round for wild animals, events and fun!
Located 10 minutes west of downtown Milwaukee.
Open all year.
Call 414-254-5410 or 414-771-3040 for information on rates, new exhibits and events.

With over 25 festivals, including Summerfest and Food with the Bands, August 16-19 at the Milwaukee County Zoo, Milwaukee's the perfect place for a great summer getaway.
Book online and receive the Genuine American Experience booklet with a value of \$200 in attractions and cultural offerings.
Call 1-800-554-1448 or visit us at www.officialmilwaukee.com