

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Big romance (for writers) at Anaheim's Grand Hotel

By Barry Koltnow
The Register

Marie Charles was happy just to get out of the house.

"I have two children," she said, "and I'm lucky if they let me go to Alpha Beta."

The Irvine author (Marie Charles is her pen name, her real name is Marie Rydzynski-Ferrarella) didn't get to the supermarket Saturday but she did get a chance to meet some new friends, sign a few autographs and, most importantly, sell a few books.

"It's nice to be able to come here and exchange ideas," she said, "but there's nothing better than meeting terrific people who want to buy your books."

Although Charles has written 11 books, she was but one of several dozen authors who stretched along three walls of the Grand Hotel's premier banquet hall Saturday, separated from anonymity only by the small, hand-printed cardboard name plates placed in front of them. The fact that one particular author in the room received preferential treatment did nothing to diminish the moment.

"She's the mecca that we're all striving for," Charles said, as she gazed longingly at a growing line of autograph seekers in front of Janet Dailey's table.

When you write 80 books in less than a decade, rank fifth on the list of best-selling living authors in the English language and are generally credited with revolutionizing the genre, you get to enjoy the trappings of royalty.

For Dailey, that meant a table of her own at the autograph session and star billing for the three-day romance writers conference in Anaheim that concluded Sunday. Dailey's name on the program (she was keynote speaker) and the opportunity to mingle with, and learn from, book editors, literary agents and other writers drew 300 willing participants to Rom-Con '84, the third annual conference sponsored by Freemont magazine publisher Barbara Keenan. Each paid \$185 to attend the conference yet Keenan said it was not a money-maker.

"This is the first year we're going to break even," the conference organizer said. "This is just a side adventure for us. We just do this to help people."

Keenan, who also owns a book store in addition to running a romance magazine called *Affaire de Coeur*,



The biggest gun in the romance-novel arsenal, Janet Dailey, said Dailey was the "ultimate draw" for any romance writers conference.

"You don't get any bigger than Janet Dailey," she explained.

Dailey, who said she tries to attend at least one of



An Orange County trio of passion prosers, from left, June Casey, Marie Charles and Nancy Carlson.



Al Gamboa/The Register

Dalley, autographs her books at the romance writers conference at Anaheim's Grand Hotel.

the three romance conferences held throughout the country each year, insisted that she gets as much out of them as the would-be writers.

"I enjoy giving back to an industry that's been good to me," she said. "There were no organizations like this when I started out and I know how valuable it would have been. Sometimes you think you're the only one on Earth who's feeling what you're feeling.

"There's a real exchange of information at these conferences," she added. "It always surprises me how much I learn about myself from the questions other writers ask me."

The celebrated author, who is awaiting release of a theatrical film based on her book "Foxfire Light", said she is always touched by the comments of readers at these conferences but is particularly moved by those who tell her that her books inspired them to write their own books.

Santa Ana College student Michele Ziegler is one such reader.

"I didn't even like these kind of books six years ago," she said after securing a prized autograph. "The stories were so bland and the characters were stereotypical.

"But then a friend gave me one of Janet's books and I've read almost 40 of them since then," she added. "Her heroines were the first to be strong, modern women. She puts so much of herself into the writing that it makes the stories believable. Now I want to write a book."

Nancy Carlson of Laguna Hills was another author. ("Hard Drivin' Man") who found the conference worthwhile, albeit for different reasons.

"I find these conferences exhilarating," she said. "Meeting and talking with other writers makes it very easy to go home and write."

A third Orange County writer, June Casey of Santa Ana ("Edge of Illusion") said she too finds her energy level up after a writers conference.

"It's a lonely and energy-draining profession," she said, "and you need reinforcement."

Joan Schulhafer has neither written a romance novel nor aspires to write one, yet she said she wouldn't dream of missing the conference. Her motivation is strictly business; she represents Silhouette, a leading publisher of romance fiction.

"Although most conferences are writer-oriented," she said, "this one is more reader-oriented. A majority of the people here are readers and that provides us with a great opportunity to introduce our new line of contemporary romance novels to them and get their impressions."

The conference was not all pep talks, autograph-seeking and marketing surveys, however. There were two full days of workshops on subjects that ranged from improving writing skills to utilizing tax loopholes once a manuscript is sold. Attending the right workshops, judging from workshop titles, could put a computer in your home and "passion in your prose."

"No matter how much you've learned," Keenan said, "you can always learn more."