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Luanne Rice coming to Savoy; new book takes on mental health issues

By Nancy Burns-Fusaro

New Britain native Luanne Rice may divide her days between Manhattan and Old Lyme, but it's Westerly that holds the softest spot in her heart.

"Watch Hill and Westerly were always magnets for us growing up," said Rice, a New York Times bestselling author of 32 novels whose next book, "The Beautiful Lost," hit bookshelves last week.

"When we were young, our parents took us to the carousel in Watch Hill; when we were teenagers, we had to go to the Knick to hear Roomful of Blues," said Rice on a recent rainy morning as she sipped coffee inside Savoy Bookshop and Café, where she will return Tuesday evening at 6 for a book-signing.

"The Ocean House is in my first book, 'Angels All Over Town,'" said Rice, the oldest of three daughters, whose books often center on themes of love, family, nature and the sea. "Well, my dream of the Ocean House ... my fictionalized dream of the Ocean House."

"One of the sisters in the book is the innkeeper," said Rice, whose first novel for young adults, "The Secret Language of Sisters," tells the story of two teenage sisters, Tilly and Roo. "And one of my favorite places in the world is the Olympia Tea Room."

In a wide-ranging, nearly two-hour interview, Rice, who is thoughtful, warm and compelling, talked about books and families, writers and depression; being Irish, travels to Nantucket, Newport, Providence, Woods Hole; music, sailing, sisters, her mentor, the late Brendan Gill, and issues surrounding mental health and depression. But the interview always returned to families.

"The mysteries under your own roof are often the most dangerous and the most tender," said the author, who is a fierce advocate for mental health.

Rice, who dropped out of Connecticut College to work through depression, spent time at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, Mass., a well-known, highly-regarded Harvard-affiliated facility specializing in psychiatric care.

Last year, said Rice, she participated in a project called "Deconstructing Stigma: A Change in Thought Can Change a Life," which included an exhibit that was displayed at Boston's Logan International Airport in a 235-foot gallery located between Terminals B and C.

The exhibit — a series of larger-than-life photographs and interviews with people from across the United States who have been affected by mental illness — was part of the hospital's overarching [Deconstructing Stigma](#) mental health awareness

and anti-stigma campaign, according to the McLean website, and is expected to reach several million people.

“I’m very proud of it,” said Rice, whose contribution features a stunning portrait along with the comment, “Secret-keeping eats you up and that leads to self-hatred and then suicide. Share what you’re feeling. Talk about it. Write about it. It’s serious, but there is help.”

“The Beautiful Lost,” tells the story of a young woman with a secret, Rice said.

Maia, who has been struggling with depression ever since she was abandoned by her mother, is in love with Billy, the handsome brooding boy who lives in the local group home.

The two take off on a road trip to find Maia’s mom.

“It’s about two kids who both have secrets and both have troubles,” said Rice. “So, they go on a road trip to Canada and they hide out and they eat lobster rolls and they talk and they talk.”

The Billy character is actually based on a true story, said Rice, with an interesting Westerly connection.

In 1992, Rice wrote a story for Glamour magazine about a sensational Connecticut murder case that involved her family. Her editor at Glamour was a woman named Laura Mathews, who has a summer house in Westerly.

Ever since writing the story, she said, she’s been interested in the psyches and personalities of children whose parents have committed murder. The Billy character arose from her interest.

“Maia is based on a lot of my own experiences,” said Rice, explaining that her main character struggles with issues surrounding depression medications. “I really want to let kids know they’re not alone. In spite of the advances that have been made, mental health issues are still a source of shame for many people.”

Rice was awarded an honorary degree from Connecticut College in 2002, and her papers are located in the college’s Special Collections Library. She has also received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from St. Joseph College in West Hartford.

In June 2014, she received the 2014 Connecticut Governor’s Arts Award in the Literary Arts category for excellence and lifetime achievement as a literary artist.

Several of her novels have been adapted for television, including “Crazy in Love” for TNT, “Blue Moon” for CBS, “Follow the Stars Home” and “Silver Bells” for the Hallmark Hall of Fame, and “Beach Girls” for a mini-series on Lifetime.

Rice also contributed a monologue to “Motherhood Out Loud,” a play that premiered at Hartford Stage Company and was performed Off-Broadway and at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles.

Rice said she hopes readers of all ages will come to the Savoy Tuesday.

“I might read a little and I might talk,” she said with a smile. “But I’ll definitely be taking questions.”