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Children's author wins award for historical fiction

By JOHN PELLEGRINO TAB STAFF WRITER

When Weston resident Sara Hoagland Hunter was in second grade, her grandmother took her to visit the Concord home of Louisa May Alcott, author of "Little Women." Hunter noticed that Alcott had a writing desk that looked out on scenic Walden Pond.

"I knew then that I wanted a writing desk like that," said Hunter. "Now I have a writing desk in my office that faces the Charles River."

Hunter, a native of Dover, has become a celebrated author in just the past few years. Formerly an English teacher at Dover-Sherborn Regional High School and a drama and public-speaking teacher in the Dover elementary schools, Hunter has published six books since 1995.

This summer Hunter received an award from the Western Writers of America for one of her recent books, "The Unbreakable Code." A conversation between a Navajo boy and his grandfather, the novel tells the true story of how the Navajos were used by the U.S. government during World War II to create a secret code that the Japanese were unable to decipher. The story illustrates the Navajo's pride in their language and culture.

"The Unbreakable Code" was listed by Smithsonian as a 1996 Notable Book for Children, and this year it won the Western Writers of America's Spur Award in the children's book category.

Hunter said her interest in the Native American history and culture began at Dartmouth College, where a Native American friend introduced her to the story of the "code talkers." For this book, Hunter got together with another Dartmouth classmate, Julia Miner, an architect, painter and children's book illustrator. They took several trips to Navajo reservations in Arizona to interview former code talkers. Miner's lush oil paintings serve as illustrations for the book.

Historical fiction is a new genre for Hunter, whose other books focus on cartoon characters. For Jim Henson Productions, Hunter wrote "Miss Piggy's Night Out," a whimsical tale that chronicles Miss Piggy's quest to become a star. That book was published in the Viking Easy-to-Read Series, recommended for ages 5-8.

Last year she wrote two books for Warner Brothers, based on Looney Tunes cartoon characters: "Beauty and the Feast," featuring Bugs Bunny and the Tasmanian Devil, and "The Good, The Bad And The Tweety," featuring the lovable bird and the hungry but hapless cat. Hunter also published "Rondo's Stuff," based on the Nickelodeon television show for preschoolers, in 1996. Her latest book, "Chocolate Yak A Lot," was released by Warner Brothers earlier this year.

"My books are from the sublime to the ridiculous," she said cheerfully. "It's a lot of parody writing."

Hunter said that she has never wanted to write books for adults.

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“I never once doubted that I wanted to write for children for a moment,” she said. “My target audience has always been kids because that is where my interests lie. I’m not very much of a grown-up, and I don’t think I would be effective writing books for grown-ups.”

In addition to writing six books in three years, Hunter wrote the lyrics for all 20 songs on a compact disc entitled “Born to Sing.” Hunter’s songs are parodies of Mother Goose rhymes, sung by “Baby Looney Tunes” characters. Titles include “Twinkle, Baby Looney Star” and “Hickory Dickory Duck.” A second volume of “Born to Sing” will soon be released on Rhino Records.

And last year, Hunter used her longstanding interest in video to create a documentary about international adoption. In “Born Journey,” Hunter and a camera crew chronicled a Korean infant’s final week in his Seoul, Korea home and followed him into the waiting arms of his new family at Logan Airport. Released in October 1996, the feature has been aired locally on WSBK-TV and on local and national cable stations. Hunter said that this project was close to her heart because she and her husband adopted a Korean baby 10 years ago.

Hunter says her husband, Andy, and their two children, John and Abigail, are her inspiration and support team. She says she wants her books to be fun and entertaining, but also educational.

“The challenge is to never preach to the children or to be heavy, but just to be fun,” she said. “Whatever text I am writing, I try to make sure I am passing down what’s good and true and rich about life.”