

Tulane alum Sophie Tanen releases cozy mystery novel, *Fifty Feet Down*

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*The cover of Tanen's Novel, **Fifty Feet Down** (2023)*

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On Sept. 15, Sophie Tanen, a Tulane alum who worked at the Newcomb Institute as an Information and Scientific Visualization Teaching Assistant, released her sapphic mystery novel, *Fifty Feet Down*. The novel is based in the small, charming town of West Rutland, Vt., best known for its fall foliage, green mountains, and marble quarries.

Fifty Feet Down centers around a New York City journalist named Alex, who travels to West Rutland to discover more about her last living family member, her long-lost stepbrother, who is unaware of her existence. At the same time, Alex is tasked with investigating the disappearances of four high school boys.

During her search, Alex meets Luna, a worker at a local sculpture garden. The two delve into a complicated romance, all while Alex searches for answers about the local marble quarries and century-old tragedies that may offer up new clues.

Tanen, who grew up in Rutland, Vt., says the concept of her novel derived from her childhood fear of the marble quarries.

“[The marble quarries] used to terrify me because the thing about the quarries is [that] there's hidden ledges under the water. So, [if] you go swimming into the quarries and get caught under one of those, [it's] over,” Tanen said.



(Photo of Sophie Tanen)

As Tanen developed as a writer, she realized her fear of the quarries could be useful. “I was sort of like, ‘Wow, what a great murder weapon’,” Tanen said.

Tanen got the idea to write the novel at her grandma’s house, who lives in West Rutland.

"I got this idea for a very specific scene of a girl almost drowning, caught underneath one of those marble ledges. I got home from my grandma's and I wrote that scene," Tanen said.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Tanen went back to Vt. and decided to put the story to the side. After the pandemic was over, and Tanen came back to Tulane, she became very homesick.

"That's when I decided to write it, and I built the story around that one scene of the girl almost drowning," Tanen said.

Tanen says that *Fifty Feet Down* is the first mystery novel that she has ever written. After deciding that she didn't want her novel to take too dark of a turn, Tanen determined that she would write a 'cozy mystery'. [Cozy mysteries](#) are a sub-genre of crime fiction in which sex and violence take place off the page, the detective is an amateur sleuth, and the detection takes place in a tight-knit community.

"I wanted to make it so they each had personal ties to what was going on, and I think that makes you a lot more invested in the story and the characters," Tanen said.

Tanen says that her writing process typically revolves around her first drafts.

"My first draft tends to be very quick. I find that if I...have to take a break from a first draft, [then] that means...it's not ready to be written, or I'm not ready to write it. When I write a first draft, I sort of dive headfirst into it and I don't stop writing it until it's done," Tanen said.

Tanen finished the first draft of *Fifty Feet Down* in March 2021.

"Once I write the first draft, which usually takes a month or so, I take a big step away from it and I don't look at it for at least three months so that I can go in with completely fresh eyes," Tanen said.

After Tanen takes time away from her first draft, she picks it right back up a few months later.

"That's when I start [a] second draft, which oftentimes is a complete rewrite. Then I take another break from it and I just keep doing it until I feel like it's done," Tanen said.

Tanen says she wishes she would've known more about the novel editing process before starting *Fifty Feet Down*.

"*Fifty Feet Down* [was] edited by editors at Hanson House, which was great. But I wish that we'd sent it out to beta readers to get more regular reader feedback," Tanen said.

Though *Fifty Feet Down* is a sapphic cozy mystery novel, Tanen says that the focus of the novel should not be on the character's queer identities.

"I think almost nothing would change if they were heterosexual, and that was my goal," Tanen said, "My goal when I'm writing about queer characters, is that it's just very normal. It just exists. There's not homophobia, [and] they don't have big coming out scenes."

Fifty Feet Down, which was released on Sept. 15, is available for purchase online through Amazon and Barnes and Noble, and can also be requested at local libraries.