

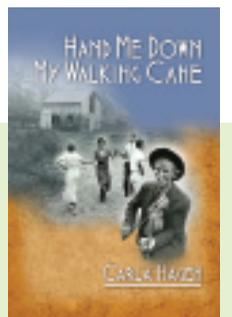
# First novel won't be her last, Hennepin Co. attorney says



Carla Hagen signs books after a presentation at Magers and Quinn Booksellers in Minneapolis.

## Hand Me Down My Walking Cane

by Carla Hagen  
(North Star Press, \$14.95)



**C**arla Hagen has been a public defender, a prosecutor, and a senior attorney for Hennepin County. But that experience is important for her *next* novel.

Her new novel – Hagen’s first – is a different kind of crime story. It’s a look at the controversial resettlement of “rural slums” during the 1930s. The novel, “Hand Me Down My Walking Cane,” tells the story through the relationships (professional and personal) of four fictional characters in a village that existed near Baudette, where Hagen grew up.

The longtime member of Local 2938 started the novel more than 10 years ago. She’s always been a writer, she says, and has rows of journals to prove it. While living in Mexico in her 20s, then in Texas, she wrote poetry, did freelance reporting, and wrote speeches, grant proposals and “anything I could think of.”

“I always wanted to earn a living as a writer. But, after I finally moved back here, I thought, I’m from a poor family. I don’t think I have the courage to be a full-time writer.”

So she got her law degree and started a career in criminal law. That choice worked well, she says. But ... “I got to a point when I was a public defender, I was so burned out. I’d be up at dawn getting ready for my trials, be

in court all day, jail after work, then in my office.” She felt she had to take her writing seriously again. “I started taking classes at The Loft, because I just wanted to get back that part of myself.”

One step led to the next. She jumped to the county attorney’s office, working part-time while taking classes at Hamline University to earn a master’s degree in fine arts. “It felt like I needed an apprenticeship,” she says. She started the novel at Hamline. “I graduated in 2002 and I had just finished the first draft, a very rough draft. I don’t think it was really done until 2008.”

Having a union job actually made it possible for Hagen to get this far as an author, she says. “One thing I find that really, really helps me: I’ve been able to go off for a month every year, to a writing colony or someplace else, where I can just be alone and write. And this is all due to having a really good employer, frankly.”

### Capturing a forgotten episode

Hagen grounds “Hand Me Down My Walking Cane” in historical reality: stories she heard growing up, conversations with her parents and others who went through the relocation, and basic research about the era and area. Instead of straight history, she calls the novel “a fictional

biography of a certain time and place.”

Her village – Faunce Ridge – is a hard-scrabble place of proud, independent people who know how to get by. There is no mayor or police force. Even though people got fair prices to sell their property and move on, most of them were not happy about being separated and scattered, she says. A few held out for years.

“Unlike places in the Dust Bowl that were truly devastated, this was a place that was viable,” she says. “What you couldn’t grow, you could shoot. People were really proud of themselves. They really liked being left alone.”

### Next novel is closer to home

Hagen already is well into her next novel – a modern-day murder mystery, she says, that takes place in the same remote, border country, but relies much more on her work experience in the criminal justice system. “I have all this experience, all these stories, but I’m still ambivalent about it. I’m not sure I’m sneaky enough to write a crime novel.”

The main character is a prosecutor, “but she’s a lot younger than I am. I think I still have to divorce myself from her a bit. I’m not sure how that’s going to work yet.” If it all works, she says, the novel will become the first in a series.