

Midcoast movie makers shoot local author's debut novel

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By Jack M. FoleyReporter: Camden Herald

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So you live in Maine and your first novel becomes your first movie, which begets your first screenplay, which leads to your first job as a Hollywood executive producer — and it all ends up winning at the Cannes Film Festival.

Four out of five ain't bad, as they say, but that dream of boatloads of international movie laurels might still await the Midcoast's breakthrough novelist, Kay Stephens — everything else is a done deal.

Never mind she began the book at age 33 and is now 53, her debut novel, "The Ghost Trap," is being turned into a movie in towns and harbors from Warren to Camden. It is also the movie company's first feature film.

The story and movie makers have attracted some big Hollywood names, too.

The lead, Jamie, will be played by Zak Steiner of TV's "Euphoria" fame. Anja will be actress Greer Grammer, who starred in the 2019 movie "Roe v. Wade" and is the daughter of TV sitcom star Kelsey Grammer from "Frasier" and "Cheers," as well as Sarah Catherine Hook and Steven Ogg.

Other performers are actress and former Miss Utah, Rachel Slawson, and Actor Taylor Takahashi, who was in the 2021 Hollywood production of "Boogie."

Because the book is all about the Maine lobstering culture, 29-year Midcoast resident Stephens and a cohort of friends, a handful of local movie pros and some very serious film folks imported from Hollywood have, for weeks, been shooting at locations that include Rockport, the Rockland breakwater, Samoset Resort, Warren and Pushaw's Trading Post in Hope.

"The Ghost Trap" is a story of love and lobsters found and lost, and a bitter trap war between rival lobstering clans, sort of a watery version of the Hatfields and McCoy's feud of American folklore, Stephens explained during filming at a rustic house in Warren.

The house is the make-believe home of the movie's lobsterman hero, Jamie. At 27, he is entangled in a nasty territorial fight with another lobstering family — and is torn apart emotionally when the love of his life sustains a terrible head injury.

"He goes from being a fiancé to being a caretaker," Stephens said.

The book attempts to depict with authenticity the Maine lobstering culture, and that is what the movie is shooting for, too, she said.

Ghost trap is a lobstering term. It refers to the wood or wire cages that are baited and sunk below the waves to catch the critters, all the while suspended from colorful buoys. When they are abandoned or get loose from the buoy, they are called ghost traps.

It is a metaphor for life and what happens in the book, the overarching theme, "Life doesn't always turn out the way you want it to," Stephens said.

That seems to be what has happened to Stephens and her novel, in a good way — but not at first.



"The Ghost Trap" author Kay Stephens is flanked by movie "lobstermen" Cheri Savage and Ryan Post. The wife and husband team runs the Tall Tails lobster boat out of Spruce Head. Their expertise and assistance has been so vital to the movie production of "The Ghost Trap" movie, they were promoted to co-producers. *Photo by Jack M. Foley.*

“The Ghost Trap” was published in 2009 by Leapfrog Press. Sales did not leap. After it languished on the hardly-selling list for years, the movie opportunity surfaced unexpectedly for the author, artist and journalist for the PenBay Pilot.

“Some people’s novels sell like hotcakes, mine was the opposite,” Stephens said. “It’s a regional small novel not a best seller.”

Indeed, the number of copies sold since publication is under 5000, she said.

That might all change because of one paperback copy’s chance encounter with a movie man headed for a Maine ferry.

Maine-born Peter Couture is a partner with Hollywood movie maker James Khanlarian in a relatively new movie production firm, Khanlarian Entertainment.

Couture, a resident of North Carolina, and Khanlarian, a Los Angeles resident, had been fishing for a book to turn into their first movie; four years ago it happened right in Couture’s old back yard where he still visits his Northport parents with his wife and kids.

Couture was born and raised in Watertown, Mass. He was vacationing in Maine when, just before boarding a ferry, he grabbed a fist full of novels from a “local authors” table in Lincolnville — ironically, it turns out, right across from an Atlantic Highway eatery called The Lobster Pound, he said.

At first, he thought it as a horror story, because of the title. He not only found out differently, he loved the book and immediately saw its potential for the big screen.

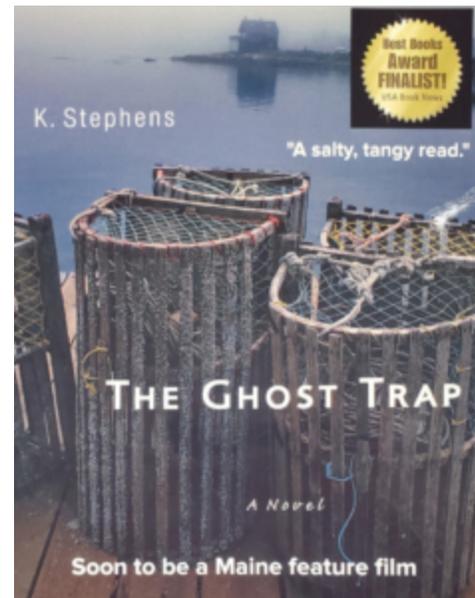
“That was it,” he said. “I thought it’d make a great fit.”

Without reading the novel and based solely on Couture’s enthusiasm, Khanlarian said, he was on board to option the novel’s rights to the unknown author’s book — and get busy movie making.

That was when the whole deal almost did turn into a horror show; Couture emailed Stephens but she thought the offer was not real and did not respond, she recalled.

“I almost threw away my entire career,” she laughed in hindsight.

But the deal was finally made and, by dint of a writer’s strike in Hollywood, Couture and Khanlarian offered Stephens the scriptwriting job.



The cover for the novel “The Ghost Trap.”

The script she produced is “amazing,” Khanlarian said on location in Warren.

And because she quickly became the firm’s go-to link to everything Midcoast and everything about lobstering culture — in this case from traps and boats to lipstick and high heels — Stephens became the film’s executive producer.

“It’s a huge labor of love,” she said, smiling, but adding she does not get much sleep anymore because of the tough shooting schedule.

She credited the expertise and friendliness of Midcoast Mainers for the project’s success so far.

Wife and husband Cheri Savage and Ryan Post are just two examples. Signed on as local lobster experts, they soon were elevated to co-producers, quite a change from their normal line of work.

Lobstermen to the core, the Rockport pair work 800 traps from their vintage 2015, 40-foot boat, *Tall Tails*, out of Spruce Head. Too new to be the movie hero’s lobster boat, the *Tall Tails* has been turned into a camera, crew and gear boat for filming on the water.

“You wouldn’t have a movie without the local support,” Post said.

Like Couture and Khanlarian, Stephens echoed that observation, calling the expertise of locals and communities’ support, much of it volunteer, “absolutely integral” to the movie makers’ ability to do what they do so far from Hollywood, hub of the movie world and home to all so many movie maker professionals.

Post also accompanied Stephens for months as she traveled the state promoting the book, the former vouching for its authenticity.

As far as lobstering goes, the boat captain said, “It’s the story of my life.”

Nor is Savage a stranger to the way of life; she spent time on lobster boats as a kid and for years has co-captained the couple’s boat, she said.

Said Stephens of her gloved, trap-hefting friend, “She’s the only lobsterman with a pink mirror on the boat and in high heels.”



All dressed up in their oilskins, “The Ghost Trap” stars Greer Grammer and Zak Steiner take a refreshment break during filming of the movie version of Midcoast author Kay Stephens’ novel of the same name. *Photo by James Khanlarian.*

The local production work is a rare opportunity for Maine, too, according to Stephens and her movie maker partners. That is because when it comes to making Hollywood films, Maine is pretty much an empty lobster trap, they said.

“There hasn’t been a movie shot here since ‘Island Zero,’” said Stephens, referring to the 2018 film starring Laila Robbins, Adam Wade McLaughlin and Teri Reeves. It is about a Maine island fishing community whose residents begin to go missing after the island is cut off from the outside world.

Yes, there is a Maine Film Board, according to Couture and Khanlarian, but compared to other states, such as Georgia, and countries, such as Canada, Maine does not offer a lot of incentives, such as rebates, to the movie industry to film here.

“So nobody wants to film here,” Khanlarian said, adding for a film like “The Ghost Trap,” Nova Scotia would have offered far more in terms of economic incentives. It is the people of Midcoast Maine who have made all the difference, he said.

Khanlarian, Couture and novelist Stephens hope to finish and get through post product within several months, then head off for a round of film festivals and find a distributor for “The Ghost Trap.”

Among the festivals actually on this list — ayuh, Cannes.

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