

LARRY BLAKELY



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Although Larry Blakely says he was “cut from Little League,” he’s remained a baseball fan. The Clark College English composition teacher had his first book, “Dust & Dreams: Stories of Life, Love & Baseball” published this spring.

DUSTING OFF a dream

Baseball is the
avenue for Clark
teacher
to fulfill desire
of writing fiction

Did you know?

■ New book titles and editions in the United States decreased by an estimated 18,000 to 172,000 in 2005, according to the latest figures available by R.R. Bowker, a New Jersey-based company that releases annual bibliographic reports. Great Britain replaced the United States as the publisher of most new books in English (206,000 in 2005).

■ The New York Yankees boasted the highest Major League attendance average (50,499 people) for home games in 2005, as reported by the online Baseball Almanac.

By **TRICIA JONES**
Columbian staff writer

Susan Sarandon gets a lot of the credit for launching Larry Blakely's writing career.

Not that she'd know about it. But former trial lawyer Blakely, now a Clark College English composition teacher, is willing to forgive her ignorance.

Sarandon's role as a sexy, brainy baseball groupie in "Bull Durham" nudged Blakely closer to fulfilling a longtime desire to write fiction.

After seeing the 1989 film, "I got it in my head that I was going to write a love story with baseball as a backdrop," Blakely said. Further, that a movie would follow, starring — Susan Sarandon.

Hollywood has yet to launch such a project. "But I am a patient man," said Blakely, quoting from "Dust & Dreams: Stories of Life, Love & Baseball" (Bear Creek Press, \$15).

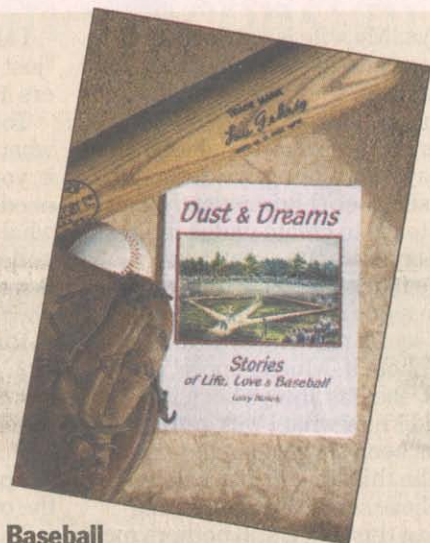
His is no idle boast. Sarandon became Blakely's muse more than

a decade and a half ago. "Dust & Dreams" was published in May.

The book represents years of story-writing wedged in between more pressing demands on Blakely's time. He practiced law for 20 years, mostly in the Portland and Hood River areas. He and his wife reared two daughters now out on their own.

Blakely enjoyed the challenges of civil litigation. But courtroom stress began to erode his energies. He decided to make a radical career change in 1997, enrolling in Baltimore's Goucher College's two-year master's program in creative writing. He began teaching at Columbia Gorge Community College in The Dalles, Ore., before eventually moving to Portland and taking an adjunct faculty job at Clark College.

Blakely, 59, cheerfully admits a writing instructor earns far less than a lawyer. He's grateful for the support of his wife, an elementary school principal. And he thrives on



Baseball is a player in each of the tales in "Dust & Dreams," but the stories all turn on universal themes and credible characters.

WHERE TO BUY

Copies of Larry Blakely's "Dust & Dreams: Stories of Life, Love & Baseball" are or will be available at Vintage Books, Cover to Cover Books (formerly So Many Books ...) and the Clark College Bookstore, all in Vancouver.

Larry Blakely is scheduled to appear from 5 to 7 p.m. Aug. 4 at Cover to Cover Books, 1817 Main St., Vancouver, for a reading and book-signing. Admission is free. Call 360-514-0358.

Baseball:

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interacting with Clark College students. Despite the fact that he's teaching a required comp course — usually not anybody's favorite — Blakely said his three years at Clark have kept him invigorated.

"Due to my previous training, I know how to keep a small crowd's attention," he said.

Blakely isn't bad at engaging readers, either. When he decided to get serious about finding a publisher for the short stories he'd written over the past 15 years, Blakely sent a couple of samples to a small press in Wallowa, Ore.

Publisher Mark Highberger glanced at the cover letter and figured he'd be sending Blakely a polite rejection. Bear Creek Press puts out less than a dozen nonfiction books a year, most focusing on regional history or area landmarks. Short stories aren't part of its catalog. But Highberger said Blakely sounded like a nice guy.

"I read the first story and really liked it, and I read the second story, and I was hooked," Highberger said. "Sometimes, you just do things because it's the right thing to do."

"Dust & Dreams" took shape within just a few months. The 130-page volume presents 13 tales in which people play, watch, write or talk about baseball or its athletes. "But all the stories are about far more than baseball," Highberger said.

Rounding the bases from poignant to wry to pithy, "Dust & Dreams" brings readers home on the strength of its forthright characterizations.

Plump and perky Lula Pierce unwittingly interrupts a suicide by showing up to demonstrate the power of a Kirby vacuum. A preoccupied neighbor offers to take crusty Henry Tibbets' ailing dog to its appointment with a fatal needle. College freshman Annie is about to give up on her empty, bereaved father — until they go see Darryl Strawberry play at Ohio's Cooper Stadium.

"A lot of the book is about lonely people who somehow

find other lonely people ... they're not clinging to each other, but they can help each other. And I think that's the way it works in life," Highberger said.

Blakely's stories are peopled with straight-talkers, cussers, and opportunists, as well as the vulnerable and bewildered. Many are inspired by men, women and children he knew while growing up in Astoria, Ore.

"I come from a small town, blue-collar background, and I still identify with ordinary, working people," Blakely said.

Blakely's boyhood goal was to join the New York Yankees. Reality intervened at about age 12, when Blakely discovered "I couldn't catch the ball, I couldn't hit the ball — it was a random event if the ball wound up in my mitt." Blakely nevertheless retained his passion for the game.

The fact that so many in the country share Blakely's devotion to the sport adds to his book's folksy appeal. As Highberger points out, even nonfans such as himself regard baseball as part of the American landscape.

"There's a tapestry of culture that baseball seems to trigger ... I don't think you could (convey) that with basketball or hockey," Highberger said.

For the chronically overbooked, Blakely said baseball offers a slower-paced activity.

"The weather is usually pretty decent, and there's a relaxed atmosphere that allows people to visit with each other and not miss much," he said.

Whatever its strengths, "Dust & Dreams" is unlikely to reach best-seller status this summer, or even turn a profit, according to Highberger.

"It depends on what Larry wants to do; how hard he's willing to promote his own book," Highberger said. Still, it allows Blakely to approach a bigger press with a publishing credit.

Blakely said he's working on a novel he hopes to complete in a year. He prefers not to reveal details, except to say it's about aging baby boomers "having a blast and living large."

Maybe, just maybe, there's a part in it for the nearly 60-year-old Susan Sarandon.