

Local novelist resurrects cross issue for book

By Michael S. Higgins
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What went down years ago — the St. Cloud cross — has now come up again in a novel.

A controversy that arose in 1987 when the American Civil Liberties Union sued the city of St. Cloud over a cross that had looked over the city for more than two decades has provided material for a local author.

The cross had been atop the 135-foot water tower before it was ordered taken down in 1990.

And while the just-released "Tamarind" doesn't describe actual people or St. Cloud itself, author Swanee Ballman said her hometown's constitutional squabble gave her the inspiration for her book.

In "Tamarind," dueling ministers represent good and evil.

Ballman and her family moved from Orlando to the St. Cloud area 12 years ago. She said she didn't attend packed hearings back at the time of the ACLU's lawsuit and didn't get involved in the court battle, which ended in 1990 with the city replacing the cross with an American flag.

But it's clear which sides represented good and evil in Tamarind's sharply drawn morality tale.

Speaking this week and taking time from the next novel she's already

started writing, Ballman said St. Cloud's cross was a landmark that served as "a symbol of love and joy."

The Christian cross represents, after all, "the kind of things I wanted for my family," said Ballman.

The author of two published children's novels with religious themes, Ballman said "a lot of towns had crosses in the community."

The ACLU successfully argued that having a prominent religious symbol on city property would offend non-Christian residents and amounted to government interference with freedom of religion.

In the fictional town Ballman created called Tamarind, Spanish moss and a slow lifestyle are threatened by a plot birthed by the evil Molec and his reptilian devils.

"We're here to obliterate Christianity," said Molec early in the book. An atheist named Tom Murray files the legal action against the city in Ballman's work: the narration describes him as hating his town council, his neighbors and Christians, among oth-



Swanee Ballman

ers. Like her other characters, Ballman said he's not based on any real person, but was formed as a compilation.

"A little bit of this person or that person," said Ballman.

Characters in the 223-page Tamarind will hopefully seem real to people, said Ballman. So should the war between good and evil.

Her Christian thriller sheds a light on the unseen battles that are always being waged between good and evil. People feel this is going on everyday, she said, pointing to how popular the concept of angels is.

For her part, Ballman said she stays very involved in her Cornerstone Baptist Church, located on Canoe Creek Road.

The former English teacher said she actually has never seen a meeting of the St. Cloud City Council, which had to deal with the community's emotions regarding the issue.

She found a publisher after accumulating many rejections, an old story among budding novelists. Ballman remembered her Legacy publisher doubting that a woman could write the sort of other worldly battles the book contains.

"I told him, 'I live in a house with a husband and two boys,'" said Ballman, with a laugh.

She wrote the first drafts of

"Tamarind" in spiral notebooks while waiting for one or the other of the three children during their busy schedule. Later she'd rewrite the scenes on her computer.

"One son was playing Little League. My daughter was going here and there," the mother-turned-author said. "I did nothing else, even get up in the middle of the night and write."

An emotional novel like "Tamarind" can be emotionally tiring, said Ballman. She recalls her daughter being surprised to find her mother crying one time when writing.

"You won't believe what this character just did," Ballman said she told her girl.

Being part of a family that she describes as "project oriented," Ballman said taking time from family interaction to write hasn't bothered her husband or her children.

The publisher and Ballman believe a national distributor will be picking up the new novel. She said it should be available at both regular and Christian bookstores. She acknowledged that writing a religious thriller should have appeal during a time when secular books and music continue to break sales records.

The book is published by Legacy Publishing, Maitland, and listed at \$11.95.