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Iowan Rachel Aukes: Renaissance woman

She weaves sci-fi fantasy romance tales about strong, adventurous women. But another passion finds her taking to the skies in her fleet of vintage biplanes.

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Written by ERIN RANDOLPH Special to the Register

Rachel Aukes is a lot like the heroines she creates in her romantic fantasy novels: adventurous, multifaceted and often found piloting an airplane.

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But those heroines live in a world with mythological and supernatural creatures — dark angels and half-angel/half-mortals and hell-hounds. Aukes, 39, lives in an unassuming house on a cul-de-sac in an Ankeny subdivision with her husband and 60-pound lap dog.

By day she's a business consultant. By night and on weekends, she

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writes science fiction fantasy novels under the pseudonym “Berinn Rae” and flies antique airplanes with her husband.

The pilot Aukes takes to the skies weekly, spending entire weekends with friends and family at the couple’s hangar in Ames, most often piloting the Aukes’ Champion 7FC Tri-Traveler (Tri-Champ for short) or formation flying with her husband. She’s also the co-founder of the aviation business Half Fast Flying Adventures.



Rachel Aukes, writer and pilot.: Rachel Aukes, writer and pilot, and her husband Brian run Half Fast Flying Adventures in Ames, Iowa.



Ankeny business consultant/pilot/science fiction romance novelist Rachel Aukes, 39, stands on the wing of her North American SNJ-5 Texan. / Rodney White/Register Photos

Rachel and Brian Aukes’ fleet

MEET THE PLANES:

- **Boeing Stearman PT-17.** Built for the Army Corps, this was used for training American and British pilots during World War II before being converted to a crop duster. Brian Aukes restored it to its original Army configuration and won the 1997 Aerobatics Champion award at the National Stearman Fly-In while piloting this plane.
- **Boeing Stearman PT-27.** Built in 1942, this Stearman was sent to Canada for primary training during World War II. After the war it was converted to a crop duster until it was rebuilt by the Red Baron Squadron, which flew the plane until 2007.
- **North American SNJ-5 Texan.** This plane, nicknamed “Smoke ‘n’ Noise,” was built for the Navy and used as a trainer for U.S. pilots during World War II. Following the war, it was sold to Mexico, where it was used as a trainer and in missions, before heading to

The author Aukes writes what she knows. Each of her lead characters just so happen to be a pilot as well. Aukes describes her heroines as having “kickassitude,” a term she uses to describe the strong female figures at the heart at each of her books.

Aukes grew up an introvert, and though she’s gone from an unsure teen to a published author, female pilot and business owner, she remains self-effacing. Just like her heroines, she seems unaware, or perhaps just modest, about her strengths and accomplishments.

“Because I was an introvert growing up, I always looked up to strong women,” she said. “I don’t think I’m in the minority. I think we need more strong women in our lives. My books always focus on a strong woman.

“She’s got to learn her strength throughout the story. That’s kind of my niche, I think.”

Reading leads to writing

Aukes was raised on a farm in Ryan, Ia., a small town northeast of Cedar Rapids, where she and her siblings collected animals of all walks, including goats and great-horned owls.

“Growing up I loved to read, and that’s eventually how I got into writing,” Aukes said. “I think that’s how people become writers. We love to read as much as we love to get our thoughts out.”



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Colorado for use in flight instruction. The Aukeses purchased it in 2006.

- **Champion 7FC Tri-Traveler (Tri-Champ).** The Aukes' Tri-Champ was built in 1957 and was used as a trainer, club plane and for personal enjoyment in Virginia, South Carolina, Ohio and Indiana. The Aukeses bought it in 2011, and it has since become Rachel Aukes' favorite plane to fly.

- **Stinson 108-2.** The Stinson was built in 1947 and was used as a missionary plane in South Africa for more than 20 years — a tube in the floor of the fuselage was used to drop supplies. The plane is not currently in running condition, and the Aukes hope to restore it so that it will fly again.

THE BUSINESS: Half Fast Flying Adventures,
www.halffastadventures.com.

Rachel Auke's ('Berinn Rae')

books:

"**Knightfall**," released May 2011. Available as eBook and paperback through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

"**Hellbound**," released March 2012. Available as eBook and paperback available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

"**Stealing Fate**," released July 2012, is a novella. Available as eBook through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

"**Collision**," released July 30, 2012. Available as eBook on Amazon.com.

She especially loved science fiction books and comics, once owning an impressive collection of more than 3,000 comic books. After high school she attended the University of Northern Iowa to study business.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do, but knew that I could make good money in business," she said. "I graduated in MIS (management information systems). It was a combination of business with computer science. People told me that I'd be guaranteed to get a job right away."

A job offer from Des Moines came after graduation, and she worked toward a master's degree in project management at Drake while teaching at Upper Iowa University at night.

"I wasn't ready to move on to being a full-time professor, so I kept the day job," she said. "I stayed with the financial services industry. Before you know it, 10 years and then 15 years pass."

Her job was downsized from Wells Fargo in 2010, and that was the push needed to finish her first novel.

Aukes knew writing was one of those jobs few people get to do full-time while still paying the bills. But two months later, she received a publishing offer for her first book, "Knightfall." Writing became the new priority.

An evolving author

It took Aukes almost a year to write "Knightfall."

"You can't just write a book," Aukes said. "You have to figure out the process. I know people think they all have a book in them. But not all of them should probably write a book."

She spends 10 to 20 hours each week writing, setting aside one day each weekend for writing. (The other weekend day is reserved for flying, friends and family.)

Aukes describes her genre as "sci-fi fantasy with a happy-ever-after." Readers are primarily women, in their 20s, 30s and 40s. She never outgrew her childhood obsession with comic books and science fiction, and she combined that with paranormal romance, inspired by Sherrilyn Kenyon's best-selling series "The Dark Hunter."

Aukes has published three novels, including “Collision,” which was released on July 30, and her publisher is awaiting proposals on two more. She’s also released a novella as part of a collaboration of three books on the Greek fates written by three authors.

One of those authors is Aukes’ critique partner, Justen Hisle from Milwaukee, who reads and provides feedback on Aukes’ first drafts — and vice versa. The two met during a writers’ conference in Milwaukee in 2010 and became fast friends. The pair rarely goes a day without speaking, even if virtually.

“Rachel’s depth, voice and imagination are what make her a great author,” said Hisle, whose pseudonym is Elle J. Rossi. “She stays true to herself and her characters. I can sense her personality shining through in each of her stories. Her writing grows stronger with each and every book. I have no doubt she will one day soon be a best-seller.”

Though Aukes has yet to reach that level, she was invited to sit on a panel on paranormal romance at the Romantic Times Booklovers Convention in Kansas City in May, was a 2012 EPIC Award winner for Best Fantasy Romance eBook with her debut offering, “Knightfall,” and was a 2012 Bookie Award nominee for Best Fantasy Romance.

Her real-life romance

Aukes wasn’t looking for romance 10 years ago when she visited the now-defunct Clive bar Drink. But that’s where she met her future husband, Brian, who was wearing the Hawaiian shirt that sparked their conversation.

“What initially attracted me to Rachel is her spirit of adventure and her outlook on life,” Brian Aukes said. “She’s always looking to walk down her own path versus someone else’s.”

The couple has been married eight years, and he introduced her to flying. Brian essentially grew up in an airport — his family owned a small airport in Illinois and his father was a crop duster. He logged his first flight hours at the age of 5. Now he’s a flight instructor, teaching acrobatic and war bird training. When she’s writing, he’s usually in Ames, working on their five biplanes.

Together they own and operate Half Fast Flying Adventures, a play on words but also a business offering fantasy flights on their fleet of planes, three of which were built in the 1940s and were used for training pilots in World War II. They offer free flights to veterans of World War II.

“The airplanes are from the World War II era,” Brian said. “We figure it’s one small way we could repay them for their sacrifice.”

Rachel said she quickly became hooked on flying after meeting Brian.

“In both the physical and emotional sense, flying frees me from the world below,” she said. “There’s something magical about leaving all of life’s stress on the ground and dancing through the clouds or flying over a lake at sunset or skimming over acres of corn.”

Rachel and Brian say they dream of someday expanding their business, and perhaps owning an airport of their own. But for now, Rachel is content splitting her time between writing, flying and a day job as a contractor. She’s content with her real-life romance and her suburban home, and those everyday experiences that provide material for her paranormal stories set in fantastical worlds far from Ankeny.

“A song on the radio, a vivid dream, somebody’s voice, it’s amazing all the fodder for stories out there if you look,” Rachel said. “For me, I daydream. Always have, always will. Granting my mind freedom to wander is always rewarding, not just from the mental recess break, but also because my daydreams start with random ideas and congeal them into stories.

“I think everyone should daydream more. And take naps. We never should’ve outgrown naps.”

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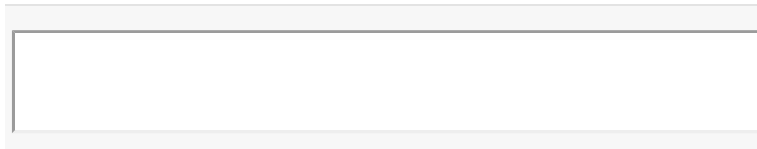
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