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Comb That Wet Dog, Gina By Jeff Baker

Gina Ochsner's written two books and won more than a dozen awards for her short stories, but she thinks that learning to deal with failure helped prepare her for success.

"I was the worst graduate student they had ever seen (at Iowa State)," Ochsner said, "and they told me this. If anybody had gone around the room in one of my classes and picked out the three people who would end up writing a book, I wouldn't have been one of them. I would have been the one you thought would drop out after two weeks."

Ochsner didn't drop out. Not at Iowa State, not at George Fox College before that or at the University of Oregon afterwards, and not when she was writing stories in the suburbs of Salem and getting so many rejections she could paper the walls of her kitchen with them.

"It's this stupid stubbornness, I guess," she said. "I wouldn't let go, or it wouldn't let go of me. I take longer than most people, I work slower than other writers who have more natural facility with language, but I keep pushing. It's like running a comb through a wet dog's hair. You keep pushing."

Anyone who reads the stories in Ochsner's Oregon Book Award-winning debut, "The Necessary Grace to Fall," or her new collection, "People I Wanted to Be" (Mariner Books, \$12 paperback, 204 pages), would never think she doesn't have a facility for language. Anyone who heard Ochsner use an apt metaphor like "running a comb through a wet dog's hair" or listened to her discuss her love of the magic realism of Julio Cortasar while fixing her daughter a snack would know that she is an intelligent, articulate writer, one who worked for years before enjoying the feeling that comes from seeing her fiction published in The New Yorker.

Ochsner grew up in Salem and went to McKay High School and George Fox College, where she said she "first caught the writing bug" and was inspired by a favorite teacher, Laurel Lee Thaler. "She was so unassuming and egoless, not at all concerned with career or reputation," Ochsner said of Thaler, who died last year. "She taught us that every part of your life is story-worthy. . . . I get all teary just talking about her."

Ochsner can tell funny stories about attending Iowa State (she thought she had been accepted into the famous writing program at the University of Iowa and didn't realize her mistake until she was driving across the country) and about having her first book win the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction from the University of Georgia Press (she thought the editor calling to tell her the great news was a telephone solicitor and hung up on him). She jokes about how many times she's failed courses in Russian 101, despite her fascination with the country and its culture.

Behind the laughter of a busy household is a determined woman who makes the most of her time in front of the computer. Ochsner is a wife and mother to four children and may have only 30

minutes to write in a day. "I'm thinking about it all the time, though," she said. "I write Post-it Notes to myself and write down funny things I hear or that the kids say. I find that a really creative time is right around the dinner hour. Weirdly enough."

7:30 tonight, Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.

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