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Scratch Pad: Keeper of a brother's literary legacy

Arnie Hummasti seeks to honor the talent of his younger sibling, Neil Hummasti.

By Erick Bengel, Coast Weekend
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Arnie Hummasti poses for a photo with two of his brother Neil Hummasti's books after a presentation at Fort George
Colin Murphey

Arnie Hummasti had two brothers.

They were both diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on the same day. George, the oldest, died in 2010, followed by Arnie's younger brother, Neil, in 2011.

Neil, an Astorian who taught in local schools, wrote on the side — novels, short stories, essays, theological tracts. Though he received compliments from publishers over the years, he never found commercial success. His struggle is a case study in how a driven writer can, for any number of reasons, fail to break into that other dimension reserved for so-called marketable authors.

Now Arnie, a retired teacher of drama, journalism and language arts, is seeking to showcase his brother's voluminous writings.

Last year, he self-published two of Neil's novels and brought them to the attention of Coast Weekend (see Pages 8-9). He even sent copies to the Bookmonger (see Page 19).

Is Arnie hoping Neil's posthumous paperbacks will make the leap from Arnie's own publishing company, Svensen Pioneer Press, to one of the top-tier publishers his brother aimed at?

"That would be nice, but I don't expect that," Arnie said. "That would be the ultimate goal, but nowadays it's almost impossible to get anything published through a major company."

As Neil put it in his letter to a potential publisher when he was shopping around his comic novel, "I See London, I See France...":

"I would like to have access to the larger publishing houses, and I am painfully aware of the fact that most of the major firms will consider new manuscripts only if they are (1) submitted by reputable agents or (2) written by people who have disgraced themselves publicly."

I wondered if there was a sense of sadness for Arnie, to be evangelizing Neil's work and serving as the keeper of his brother's legacy.

Arnie said enough time has passed since his brother's death that he felt comfortable doing it. His operative emotion is, simply, enthusiasm for Neil's hidden gifts. "Right now I'm just trying to honor what I think is his talent," he said.