

# Santa Cruz Sentinel.com

## Santa Cruz novelist Clifford Henderson explores life before birth in 'Spanking New'

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Clifford Henderson's new novel, "Spanking New," is told from the perspective of an unborn soul who is searching for a mother and father. The book deals with family drama and love, as well as issues surrounding gender identity, as our main character, Spanky, who is sure he's a boy, struggles with the reality of being born into a female body.

The book launch for "Spanking New" is scheduled for Monday at Bookshop Santa Cruz, and will include readings by Henderson.

This is the second novel for Henderson, who runs the Fun Institute, an improv and acting program in Santa Cruz. The longtime actress and playwright released "The Middle of Somewhere" just last year, although she wrote "Spanking New" first.

In this latest work, Henderson explores the world of "the known," where these parentless souls exist. All memory of this universe is erased at birth, however, when they enter the Earthly world, referred to as "the land of forgetting."

"I'm kind of making up how the universe works," Henderson said.

The storyline developed as Henderson found herself thinking about the cycle of life, and the parallels between coming into this world and leaving it.

"Birth is like death," she said. "It's a huge, terrifying transformation."

In the novel, these souls want so badly to be born that they can make hasty decisions when it comes to selecting parents. "Sometimes their choices are less than perfect," she said.

Her work in improv has been an asset in developing her characters' voices and creating storylines with drama and tension. In theater, sets and time restrictions limit what one can do, while novels have no boundaries.

"I wanted to be able to do setting and jump from place to place," she said.

She enjoys bringing characters to life.

"That's my favorite thing "" writing colorful characters," she said.

When it came to getting this book published, Henderson encountered some birth pains of her own. During a recommended re-working session, she had to remove a character at one point, killing this person she'd come to know and love.

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"This one had a really challenging birthing," she said of the book.

In a recent review of the novel, Anita Kelly, the LGBT Coordinator at Pennsylvania's Muhlenberg College, wrote, "Clifford Henderson has written a masterpiece in Spanking New.' She explores the serious issues of our day such as heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia and pro-choice in a humorous and non-threatening manner."

While the book tackles heavy topics and challenges the traditional Christian ideas of where we all come from, Henderson said the novel is full of humor and fun.

"It will make you laugh," she said.

**if you go**

clifford henderson, author of 'spanking new'  
when: Monday, 7:30 p.m.  
where: Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz  
Cost: Free  
details: [www.cliffordhenderson.net](http://www.cliffordhenderson.net)

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