

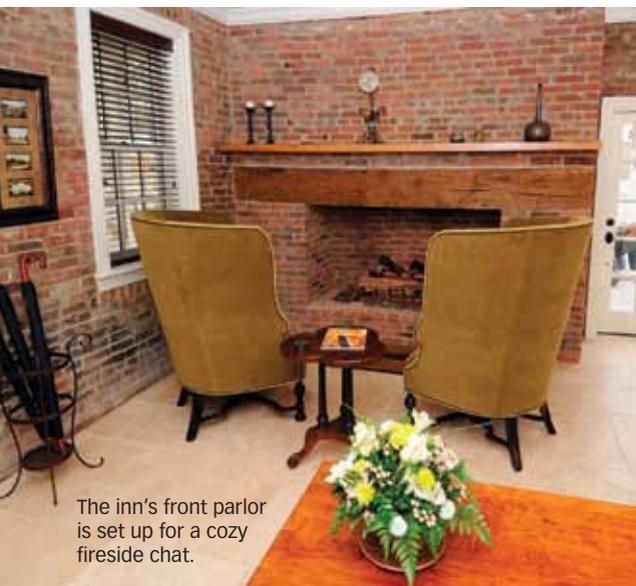
Inn the Mood for Love

Romance writer **Nora Roberts** takes a novel approach at her Maryland B&B

by Christine Koubek



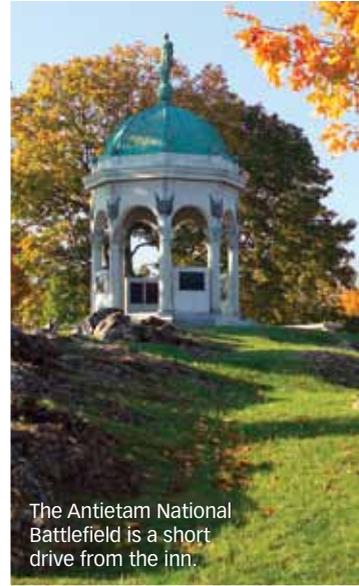
Tatiana and Oberon from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* inspired this romantic room at Nora Roberts' Inn BoonsBoro.



The inn's front parlor is set up for a cozy fireside chat.



The soaking tub in the Tatiana and Oberon room



The Antietam National Battlefield is a short drive from the inn.

After navigating the long, woody drive along U.S. 40/Old National Pike, my husband and I entered Boonsboro, Md., and saw all the trappings of a typical rural town: the colorful but worn-looking, two-story Colonial buildings; the historic clock-tower, once a church and now a wellness center; the handful of shops, such as Crawford's Confectionary, which a small sign explained was part restaurant, part guns-and-ammo store.

It wasn't exactly the picture of romance. Then again, romance is sometimes found in the least likely places.

About four years ago, best-selling novelist and Silver Spring native Nora Roberts opened her romance-themed Inn BoonsBoro here. Just as Disney and J.K. Rowling inspired theme parks and tourable movie sets, Roberts created a physical reality based on fictional characters and settings. Located on Main Street, near the town's few shops and restaurants, the inn celebrates literary lovers from classic novels. It's a case of life imitating art, but Roberts has turned even that theme on its head. The bed-and-breakfast has inspired a trilogy of romance novels by Roberts herself, with the inn as the setting.

I hadn't read a Nora Roberts romance

novel in nearly two decades—roughly the same amount of time I'd been married. But I figured the ingredients for romance were similar to those for the genre: a sense of mystery, excitement and escape from everyday life.

The reality of managing work schedules, kids, a house and a dog had taken a toll on the mystery and excitement in our lives (unless the possibility of the Redskins making it to the playoffs counts as a mystery). But for this one weekend, my husband, Tim, and I would escape from our everyday lives, and Roberts' remote, beautifully restored inn would help us to do so.

I pressed the inn's back doorbell, and Missi Williams, one of the property's four innkeepers, welcomed us into a brick-walled reception area. She handed us two room keys labeled "Eve and Roarke" (the guest room based on lovers from Roberts' mystery series written under the pen name J.D. Robb) and took us on a tour of the inn's common areas.

Though the exterior stone front and shapely porch pickets looked Americana, the interior felt more akin to a European villa, with its wide, arched brick doorway, centuries-old stone

walls, stained-glass chandeliers and slipper chairs upholstered in flaxen fabric.

The western Maryland town of Boonsboro was founded in 1792 by brothers George and William Boone, cousins of Daniel Boone. The inn's original structure was one of the earliest buildings in town and served as a hotel through the early 1900s, then housed various businesses before sitting empty for many years.

A longtime resident of nearby Keedysville, Nora Roberts looked out at the deteriorating building whenever she attended book signings across the street at Turn the Page Bookstore, which is owned by her husband, Bruce Wilder. (Like many of her characters, Roberts found romance in an unlikely setting. Wilder was hired to build custom bookshelves for her home, and the two have now been married for more than 25 years.)

The couple decided to save the historic old hotel and bought the property in 2007. They planned to preserve the character of the structure and create a boutique hotel with six guest rooms inspired by literary lovers, all with elaborate bathrooms and high-end amenities. But several months into the project, a liquid propane tank ignited in the early



The rear courtyard of the inn offers porches and patio tables for lounging. Below: The front of the inn

morning and the inn erupted in flames. By the time fire companies from Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia had put out the fire, only the masonry remained.

Within a month, workers began restoring the remaining brick and stone, and construction started anew. An amended building plan included two more guest rooms on the third floor. And in February 2009, the inn welcomed its first guests.

BoonsBoro and the bookstore aren't the only Roberts family enterprises in town. She and her husband also own a gift shop and fitness center. As we paused in the lobby near a cake pedestal holding chewy oatmeal raisin cookies, Williams noted two places for dinner—Dan's Restaurant & TapHouse next door and Vesta, a family-style pizzeria across the street that delivers to the inn. It turns out both are owned by Daniel Aufdem-Brinke, one of Roberts' two sons from a previous marriage.

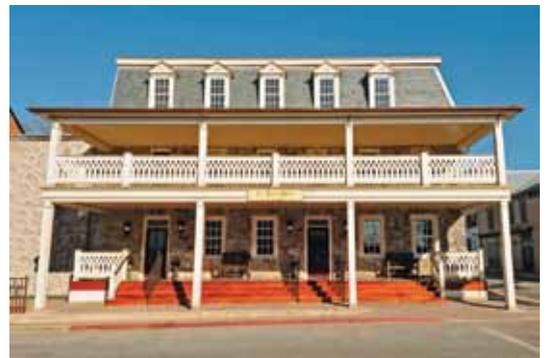
The mayor of Boonsboro actually refers to the town as Noraville, according to a *Washington Post* story that ran in November. All told, the family busi-

nesses employ some 100 people in a town of just 3,400.

As we continued our tour, we passed the inn's only first-floor guest room, dedicated to the aristocratic Marguerite and Percy and done up in 18th-century French décor inspired by Baroness Emmuska Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. We later learned that the room is handicap-accessible and is popular with women traveling together because of its two full-size beds (or perhaps it's a nod to a time when men and women slept in separate beds).

Upstairs, we passed more rooms identified by literary couples whose names were etched on oil-rubbed bronze signs: Titania and Oberon from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Jane and Rochester from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Elizabeth and Darcy from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; Nick and Nora from Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man*; and Eve and Roarke from Roberts' futuristic "In Death" series.

After the fire, a royal-themed room



based on William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* (dedicated to Westley and Buttercup) was added to the third floor. Williams explained that the eighth room is a luxurious but themeless penthouse suite with an ornately carved, four-poster, king-size bed, crystal sconces and a "floating wall" that separates the tub from the shower.

As we entered Eve and Roarke's room, we noted the scent of lavender patchouli from an oil diffuser atop the dresser. The fragrance carried through to custom-made shampoo, bath crystals and lotion. Details paying homage to



"Eve and Roarke's" room, where the writer and her husband stayed



Antietam National Battlefield

the "In Death" books were everywhere: Homicide detective Eve's preference for simple stylings was reflected in the king platform bed with illuminated headboard; billionaire Roarke's ornate tastes were represented by an orange antique dresser, elaborate wall sconces and a pair of Lucite Louis XV chairs. An "In Death" book was on the nightstand, and a fabric pillow with a bicolor-eyed cat sat in for protective Galahad, the feline Eve adopts in the series' first book.

Based on remarks written in the room's guest journal, I learned that there was a gray suit button tucked away in the room, a button that symbolized when Roarke first fell for Eve. We searched the room until we found it (though its location will have to remain our little secret).

As for the bathroom, all the accoutrements an overworked detective could need were there: towel-warming rack, oversize shower with a rain showerhead and wall jets pointing in every direction, a half-egg-shaped soaking tub, heated tile floors and—the best part—a toilet with a lid that rises and seat that warms as you approach.

"Make sure you try out all the buttons," Williams said as she left, her voice carrying the hint of a Southern drawl.

As we unpacked, Tim and I agreed that everything had been provided for a relaxing weekend.

Before heading next door for dinner at Dan's, we joined fellow guests sipping a red wine labeled "Jealous Mistress" in

the lounge. The room's narrow, rectangular shape, with the wine located at one end, made it impossible not to join in the chatter, so I took a seat on the buttery leather sofa. A flat-screen TV and chess set with Civil War soldiers went unused as we all compared notes on our rooms and on the various authors and their books, including Roberts, of course. Each guest seemed intrigued by the inn's history.

Linda and Adriana (friends, thanks to the marriage of their respective son and daughter) passed around an album they'd found on a side table. It held pictures of the inn at each stage of construction—from before and after the fire to its opening, with Roberts and Wilder standing on the glossy porch floor.

Another guest, Phyllis, visiting with her husband, Mickey, filled us in on Roberts' Inn BoonsBoro trilogy; the third book, *The Perfect Hope*, came out in November. She told us that Vesta frequently shows up as a setting in the first book. In fact, she added, the series is set against the backdrop of the inn's construction—a fact Williams confirmed when she popped in to check on the wine.

The next morning, we poured ourselves coffee from the dining room's copper urn and filled our plates with fruit, homemade muffins, and spinach and sausage quiche from the complimentary buffet breakfast, part of which was set out on an antique breakfront. The room

had a handful of tables with cane-back chairs, many of them occupied by the folks we'd met the night before.

Originally we worried there wouldn't be enough to do in tiny Boonsboro. We were thankful to learn that there were enough options for a good outing, but not so many that we'd be missing something when we chose to relax. Within a short drive we could explore Crystal Grottoes, (caverns with pure white stalactites and stalagmites), Antietam National Battlefield (one of the country's best preserved battlefields) and Harpers Ferry (a Civil War-era village and entry point for great hiking in West Virginia). And if it rained, there were always the Hagerstown outlets.

We opted for the 20-minute drive to Harpers Ferry, and spent a good portion of the day climbing the Maryland Heights Trail. At the top, we came to a rocky overlook where a number of people silently contemplated the view, including one meditating man with long gray hair. We rested on our own boulder and gazed out at the spectacular view of Harpers Ferry village and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

I had forgotten what it was like to let a day unfold this way. As we hiked, we reminisced about the New England mountains we'd climbed and the things we'd once dreamed about—careers, kids, building a house, family travels, all of which had long since become realities. We asked someone to take our photo near the edge as the wind whipped

across the overlook.

When we got back down to the town, we shared a Sam Adams and a sandwich on an outdoor patio that fronted the train station and, instead of talking about the next week's responsibilities, we imagined future hikes with our boys and indulged in other dreams of the future.

Later that night, after pizza at Vesta, we relaxed in the library for a bit. Tim savored a glass of Jameson (Roberts' favorite, we were told) and I made cocoa in the Keurig. I thumbed through the books on the shelves—popular fiction, romance novels and classics, some of which had Roberts' full given name, Eleanor Robertson, written in cursive inside.

I took *The Great Gatsby* off the shelf and settled next to Tim. He put an arm around me and, sweeping his other arm out, said, "You can tell this is a passion of theirs, a labor of love, much more than just building a business to make money."

I looked at the collection of books, the

Irish whiskey, the beautiful woodwork surrounding the fireplace and the custom-made bookshelves and saw what he meant. Roberts hadn't created a romantic setting by tucking away suites far from the other guests; rather, she had created a setting, a mood, in which a couple could dream.

Before checking out the next day, I ran into Phyllis in the hall with her luggage and asked if I could see her room (promising to return the favor). Occupancy at the inn runs high year-round, so opportunities to peek inside the other rooms are scant. Phyllis had been across the hall in Nick and Nora. "Wait till you see the bathroom," she said. It was tiled in blue glass, and the bedroom featured a chocolate-brown ceiling. Green tea and ginger scent permeated the room, and a DVD of *The Thin Man* sat on the bedside table. "Maybe next time Tim and I will stay here," I said.

Afterward, Tim and I stopped in the bookstore and browsed the front room,

which is devoted to current best-sellers and book club favorites. The back room features every Roberts and J.D. Robb book in print, numbering well over 100. I bought Roberts' *The Next Always*, the first in the Inn Boons-Boro trilogy, in order to see how she traveled from fact back to fiction.

"Reality leaves a lot to the imagination," John Lennon once said, and Inn BoonsBoro embodies that quote with its own kind of imagined reality. There is no room for Romeo and Juliet or Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky or Gatsby and Daisy. Each guest room is based on what Roberts sees as a good romance: Namely, all the literary lovers get their happy ending. ■

Christine Koubek lives in Gaithersburg and recently completed her master's degree in creative writing at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesda.com.

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The advertisement features a large image of a snowy mountain resort at night with illuminated buildings and ski lifts. Below this are three smaller images: a person skiing, a person petting a horse, and a person snowboarding. At the bottom, there is a logo for Garrett County Maryland, the phone number 888.387.5237, the website visitdeepcreek.com, and a QR code.

driving range

If You Go

GETTING THERE

Inn BoonsBoro is just over an hour from Bethesda. Take I-270 toward northern Frederick, merge onto I-70 west toward Hagerstown, then take Exit 49 onto U.S. 40 Alt toward Braddock Heights/Middleton. Stay left at U.S. 40 Alt W/Old National Pike into town. The inn is on the right.

STAYING THERE

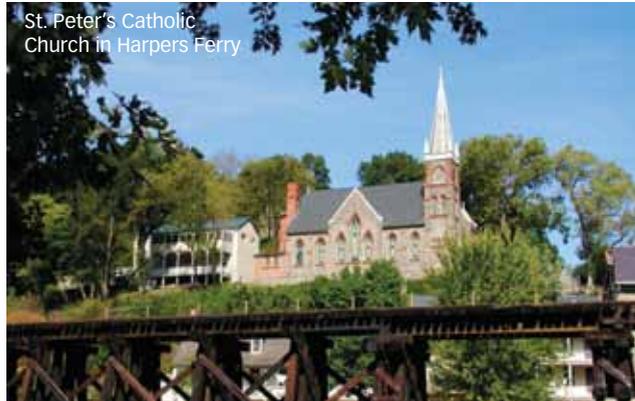
Inn BoonsBoro (1 N. Main St., Boonsboro, 301-432-1188, www.innboonsboro.com) has seven of eight rooms with literary couples as their themes. Rooms located in the front of the inn have doors that open onto the porch overlooking Main Street; rooms in the back have a porch that overlooks the courtyard and parking lot beyond. Rates, from \$225 to \$305, include a full breakfast from 8 to 9:30 a.m., access to the dining room fridge, which is stocked with water and soda, evening wine and cheese, and passes to Fit In Boonsboro, a fitness center owned by Roberts and her husband on the opposite side of the parking lot. Occupancy runs high year-round. The schedule for Nora Roberts' book signings at Turn the Page Bookstore typically comes out after the first of the year. Once it's released, those weekends at the inn typically sell out well in advance.

EATING THERE

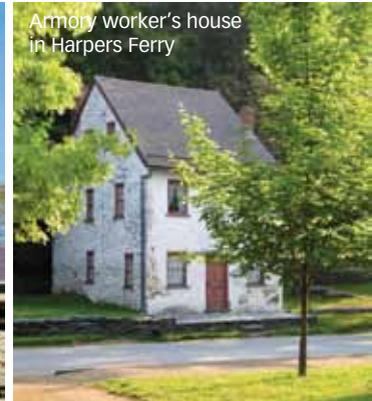
Roberts' son Daniel Aufdem-Brinke owns these two places a book's throw from the inn. Vesta delivers.

Vesta (2 S. Main St., Boonsboro, 301-432-6166, www.vestapizza.com) is an über-casual, family-style restaurant with an open kitchen and wood booths (as depicted in Roberts' *The Next Always*). New York-style pizza is its specialty, along with salads, wings, calzones, cold and hot subs and wraps. Prices range from \$1.99 for a pizza slice to \$11.95 for chicken Parmesan. Open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Dan's Restaurant & TapHouse (3 S. Main St., Boonsboro, 301-432-5224, www.dansrestaurantandtaphouse.com) opened in June and is a classic pub-style restaurant with a craft beer bar. The menu includes delicious Boonsburgers, chicken, steaks and other American cuisine at affordable prices (entrées are \$10-\$20). Live music on weekends. Open noon to midnight Sunday,



St. Peter's Catholic Church in Harpers Ferry



Amory worker's house in Harpers Ferry

11 a.m. to midnight Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday.

WORTH A VISIT

Turn the Page Bookstore (18 N. Main St., Boonsboro, 301-432-4588, www.ttpbooks.com) features an excellent collection of Civil War-related books, the latest *New York Times* best-sellers, book club favorites, and a room devoted to all the Roberts and J.D. Robb books in print. Several book-signing events are held each year, with Roberts (aka, J.D. Robb) and other nationally known writers. Check the schedule online.

Gifts Inn BoonsBoro (16 N. Main St., Boonsboro, 301-432-0090, www.giftsinnboonsboro.com), also family-owned and adjacent to Turn the Page Bookstore, sells the scented items that correspond with each room at the inn, as well as note cards featuring a quote from many of the novels and even tea matched to each story (chamomile for Jane and Rochester).

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (Harpers Ferry, W.Va., 304-535-6029, www.nps.gov/hafe) is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; closed Thanksgiving, Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Learn about the first successful American railroad, John Brown's attack on slavery, and the largest surrender of Federal troops during the Civil War. Cross the bridge to reach the Maryland Heights Trail Entrance. Two trail options take you past Civil War forts and to scenic views of Harpers Ferry village and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. Visit www.historicharpersferry.com for information about the town's shops and restaurants, special events and history-related visitors centers.

Antietam National Battlefield (visitors center at 5831 Dunker Church Road,

Sharpsburg Md., 301-432-5124, www.nps.gov/ancm/index.htm) is open year-round, from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Labor Day to Memorial Day, and from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Memorial Day to Labor Day. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. Stop by the visitors center for an introductory film, join a park ranger for a battlefield talk or drive the self-guided, 8½-mile tour of the site to learn about the Civil War's bloodiest one-day conflict. Prices for a vehicle pass (good for three days): \$4 per individual 16 and older, \$6 per family.

Hagerstown Premium Outlets (495 Premium Outlets Blvd., Hagerstown, Md., 301-790-0300, www.premiumoutlets.com/hagerstown) is open from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday. Spend a cold or rainy day darting among 100 outlet stores, including Calvin Klein, J.Crew, Brooks Brothers, Kate Spade and Under Armour. Warm up with a French press coffee from Andrea Carmona French Macaron at the indoor food court. Sign up for the VIP lounge online and receive coupons.

Check www.marylandmemories.org and www.fredericktourism.com for more information on the surrounding areas.

MORE ROMANTIC INNS

Inn BoonsBoro isn't the only B&B within driving distance of Bethesda to focus on romance. Here are some others that aim to put you "inn" the mood for love.

The Inn at White Oak (1 White Oak Trail, Gettysburg, Pa., 866-500-7072, www.innatwhiteoak.com) is nestled on 30 acres with gardens, ponds and pastures not far from

The Inn at Bowman's Hill



Gettysburg's downtown. This grand estate oozes romantic hideaway—especially if you opt for the “Secret Service package” with breakfast in bed. Each of the inn’s six spacious suites (referred to as “Guest Quarters”) features a fireplace, luxury linens and a flat-screen television with DVD player. Common areas include a spa, billiard room, library, theater with recliners, and an indoor heated swimming pool flanked by oversize stone fireplaces. The inn opened in February 2011 and shot to the No. 1 spot on TripAdvisor’s list of Gettysburg inns. Rates: \$179-\$289; includes hot breakfast, snacks and beverages.

The Hope and Glory Inn (65 Tavern Road, Irvington, Va., 800-497-8228, www.hopeandglory.com), a former schoolhouse near the Chesapeake Bay’s western shore, was turned into a playfully elegant inn by Peggy and Dudley Patteson. It features a spa called “Recess” and a bar dubbed “Detention.” The property includes six guest rooms, six quaint guest cottages situated amid the gardens, and seven vineyard “tents,” which are three-bedroom, three-bath cottages, each with a fireplace and each decorated in jaunty chic. Don’t miss the outdoor garden bathroom, available

to any guest. It has it all—tub, separate shower, mirror, sink, potted plants and the sky for a ceiling. Rates: \$205-\$355; includes hot breakfast.

The Inn at Bowman's Hill (518 Lurgan Road, New Hope, Pa., 215-862-8090, www.theinnatbowmanshill.com), a six-time AAA four-diamond award winner, sits on a gorgeously manicured 5 acres next to a wildflower preserve. Four rooms and two suites each have a king-size featherbed, fireplace and an opulent bathroom with a two-person tub. You can enjoy a gourmet breakfast by the fire, swim in the outdoor heated pool or book an in-suite couple’s massage. Off property, you can visit several piano bars (Bowman’s Tavern is a half mile down the hill from the inn) or take the Bucks County wine trail. Ten of Pennsylvania’s 90 wineries are within a few miles of the inn. Rates: \$385-\$595; includes gourmet breakfast. ■

—Christine Koubek