

After the agency broke apart, McGlashan took Russell's manuscript with her to her new agency, where it was well-received but a continuing subject of debate: Was it science fiction or a love story? An adventure or a religious novel? It took the father of the new agent, a retired president of Bantam Books, to wake up his daughter.

"If you don't take this, you're a fool," the retired publisher said.

In August 1995, "The Sparrow" was offered for auction to five major publishing houses. Villard Books, a division of Random House, won the bidding, paying Russell a \$75,000 advance for a first printing of 50,000 copies. The deal included paperback rights and translations into French, Spanish and Korean, plus a sequel titled "Children of God." Russell could earn up to \$250,000 plus royalties.

But the roller-coaster adventure into Russell's new career as a star novelist hardly ends there. To expect her to sell her 1988 Ford subcompact, move to Geauga County and enroll her son in a private school would be too simplistic and totally out of character for Russell.

It helps to know a little more about her background. In 1989, Russell read a story in the newspaper about St. Adalbert, a struggling elementary school doing marvelous work on E. 83rd St. in Cleveland. About 85 percent of the students are non-Catholic. Most live in poverty. All are determined to receive a good education and graduate to high school.

But the tuition at St. Adalbert is \$550 a year. Even with financial aid, many prospective students cannot afford to attend.

Russell was touched by the story. She wrote a letter to the principal, Lydia Harris, offering to pay a year's tuition for a needy student. The letter arrived on the day that the mother of a bright fourth-grader tearfully announced that she would have to pull her boy out of school for lack of funds.

"Lydia thinks Jesus sent me," Russell says. In response, Russell quotes an alternative source of inspiration: the Talmud. "To save a single life is to save the whole world in time."

The Russells continued their benevolence annually until 1994, a "nightmarish" year for Mary Russell that was spent fretting over the fate of her novel. Under the excuse of "burning off nervous energy," Russell visited St. Adalbert School to see if she could volunteer her time. Lydia Harris informed her that the school needed to expand, and would she mind leading a fund-raising effort to collect \$330,000 to pay for the job?

Russell raised the money required to build two classrooms, which provided space for 60 more students. "You can rock yourself to sleep with that," she says with satisfaction. "Who cares if the book flops? I can always say I'm a successful fund raiser."

St. Adalbert's pastor, the Rev. Jerome Steinbrunner, is grateful. "'Can't do' is not part of her vocabulary," he says.

Russell wasn't finished yet. After paying half of her book advance to the Internal Revenue Service, and making a generous donation to a Jesuit school in Porcupine, S.D., she presented half of all that remained to St. Adalbert to convert a garage into a library.


By the way, the Russells' matching Fords are still in the driveway. Dial phones are still in the house. Son Daniel still attends public school. And she still loves her little home in an integrated middle-class neighborhood, with no aspirations to leave after 14 years for a chalet in a country suburban setting.

"Living here provides a sort of sacredness and moral weight to everyday life," she says.

In the glow of her success, Russell has found time to take an accounting of her life. She revels in the novel's aftermath, not so much for the acclaim it has brought her, but for the worthy causes the book money has paid for.

The portrayals of Jesuits in the book have been so well received that Bucko expects it will inspire more men to join the religious order. "If I get five, Ray says he'll give me a toaster," Russell says and chuckles.

Judging from the divergent paths of her career so far, it would be wise not to pigeonhole Russell into one profession for too long — a suggestion that Russell mischievously endorses.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit if I ended up in rabbinical school. I'd be the oldest broad in the place." 



Russell helped raise \$330,000 to build two classrooms at St. Adalbert school in Cleveland. "Who cares if the book flops?" she says. "I can always say I'm a successful fund raiser."