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## Ex-POW's wife defends her man in a novel way

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This is not a book review. I'm not judging the literary merits of a first, self-published novel. Too delicate a mission.

No, this is a rave response to seven years as a prisoner of war and then 20 years of listening, documenting, writing. Twenty years of rejection and revision.

Let's start with the name on the cover – Karen Black. No, not *that* Karen Black. Not the sexy actress in "Five Easy Pieces," the trashy girlfriend who embodied the country song, "Stand By Your Man."

No, our Karen Black is a visibly successful Escondido attorney who got where she is the long, hard way.

On July 4, 1973, she blew into San Diego from Kansas – a divorced Dorothy with four children *in toto* (and no Toto or ruby-red slippers).

Before she enrolled in her first college course at Mesa, she had been a legal secretary and sold Suzuki motorcycles. But she knew what she wanted, this high school valedictorian who married a Navy enlisted man before graduation. In her 40s, she started law school at the University of San Diego.

And she knew she wanted the handsome officer and gentleman she met in a bar in 1974.

The man, Cole Black, a Navy jet pilot, had been a prisoner of war in Vietnam. For almost seven years, he rotted in a hole as black as the one in Calcutta. But after he returned to Miramar and a hero's welcome, his marriage quickly fell apart.

"It was a casualty of war," he shrugged last week.

In the early 1980s – when he and Karen were married and living in Mexico City where Cole was a military attaché – Karen decided it was her mission to write Cole's story.

At reunions, she would listen to other POWs who had endured torture, forced confessions, isolation. She listened to Cole's once-classified debriefing tapes. Just as intently, she listened to what happened after the POWs rushed across the tarmac to their waiting wives, many of whom were dreading the inevitable embrace.

Divorce ran through the ranks of returning POWs like an epidemic. More than one-third were divorced within the first year back, an astronomical number for families of military officers.

The warm memories that sustained the captured pilots turned to dust in a matter of miserable

days. The wives had moved on. The POWs had lost their place at the table. They, too, moved on – to new wives who looked at them without years of regret pooled in their eyes.

By the mid-1980s, Karen had her novel.

The Naval Institute Press said the sex scenes were too "risque" for a conservative military audience, Karen recalled. (Henry Miller it's not. More along the lines of a steamy romance.)

Other editors and literary agents complained that "Code of Conduct" was really two separate books: the prison story and the domestic story.

No question, the alternating plot lines are worlds apart.

The war story is reproduced as faithfully as if it were nonfiction. But the San Diego story, while based on reality, does not directly reflect Cole's own family life. It's fiction, Karen said.

In the book, Bobbie, the wife of "Matt" (Cole's fictional name), has an affair with a Navy officer while her husband is in captivity. After Matt returns, Bobbie tries to hide the truth, but Matt finds out. He leaves his home and hooks up with a woman who resembles Karen herself: independent, forthright and positive she wants to marry Matt.

Bobbie is a composite of POW wives, not a replica of Cole's ex-wife, Karen said. And for those who might suspect revenge against the first mate, Karen said she does not condemn the POW wives who created new lives.

"I frankly have a lot of empathy for those women," she said. "I have no idea what I would have done."

At 70, retired Navy Capt. Cole Black's stomach looks ready for a hundred sit-ups. Every year, he participates in a study in which Vietnam POWs are compared with men of similar backgrounds, except for prison camp. The POWs generally fare well, mentally and physically. Cole shrank to 120 pounds in prison, but he has come back strong.

Although he helped Karen with technical points, Cole has yet to read "Code of Conduct." Maybe later, he smiled, when he's stuck in a rocking chair.

He seems shy of limelight, but he's trusting – and standing by – his wife's mission.

Karen hopes to go on tour to generate buzz about her book (Web site: <http://www.code-of-conduct.com>). Military bases are likely markets.

And, of course, the POW fraternity – some 450 strong – ought to rally behind a fiercely devoted wife who has done her damndest to stand by her man – and the men who stood by him.

