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“When I’m writing, I always try
to find a location I already know.”

Bart Van Lierde, best-selling Belgian author



Photos by TONY PITTS, Times Herald

FOREIGN SETTING: Best-selling Belgian author Bart Van Lierde has been in the area researching his newest novel, set in Port Huron.

Mystery guest

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Belgian author returns to visit host family, research next novel

By **BILL CHAPIN**
Times Herald

Fran Warsalla didn't recognize the young man she found talking to her husband in their Port Huron home Wednesday.

"I looked and I looked," she said. "Then he spoke and the accent gave him away."

The Warsallas had hosted Bart Van Lierde as a teenager traveling in the United States. Now an author in his native Belgium, Van Lierde had returned to Port Huron to do research for a novel. He remembered where the Warsallas lived and stopped by to say hello.

Van Lierde, 30, first came to Port Huron as a 16-year-old cellist in the Belgian Youth Symphony, which performed at St. Clair County Community College during a U.S. tour. He returned a few years later during a cross-country trip.

By Belgian standards, Van Lierde is a best-selling author, he said. But Belgium is a small country with two languages.

"When they have a book that sells well, they talk about 10,000 books," said Van Lierde, who writes in Dutch.

Those numbers rarely attract the attention of English publishers, so Van Lierde's work probably will never be translated.

"It's quite impossible to live from selling books, so the state

gives you money," he said. "They really subsidize you and help you to survive."

When he set out to write his fourth novel, a thriller, the setting was a problem.

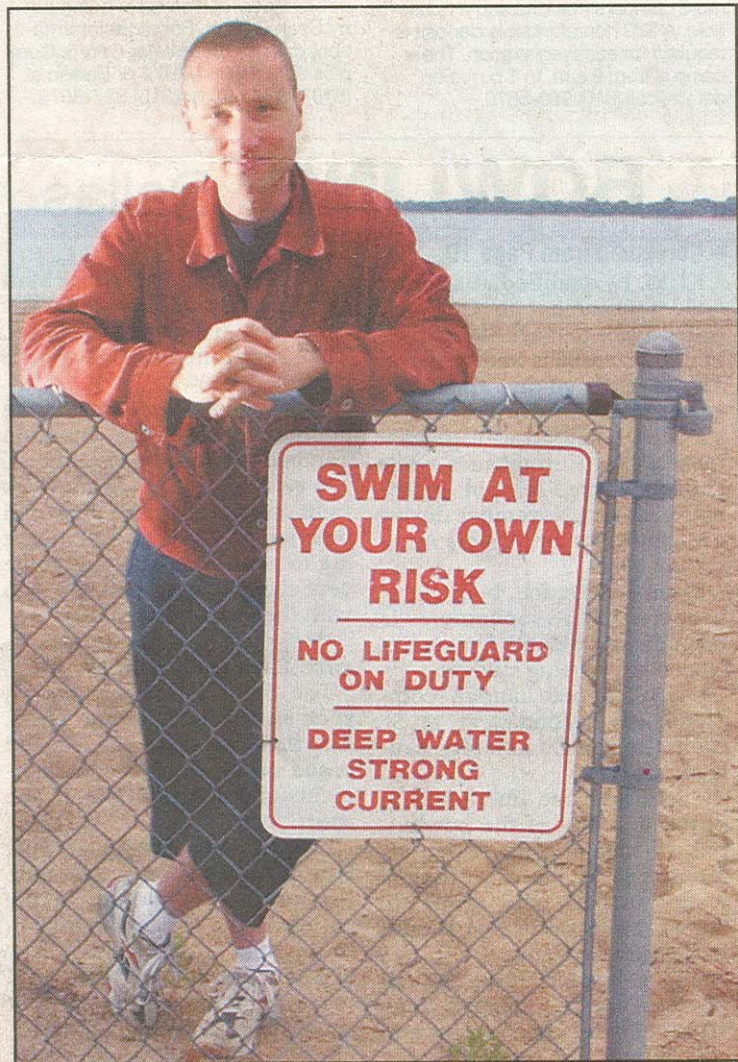
"It's fairly rare that people die in a violent way in Belgium," said Van Lierde, who lives in Antwerp. "If you write that five people get killed, people will not believe it."

It's easier for readers to accept a murder mystery in the United States, which has a homicide rate more than three times that of Belgium. He decided to set it in Port Huron because "when I'm writing, I always try to find a location I already know," he said, and being on the border gave the city a certain symbolism.

Van Lierde wrote a first draft, then planned the trip to check facts and gather detail. On Thursday he visited Lighthouse Beach to see if it would work as the starting point for the climactic boat chase. Then he was off to search for a neighborhood where a character could crash a car into a tree.

He plans to change at least one major character. In his country, he said, all hospitals are affiliated with the local college. He created a single administrator who oversees both SC4 and Port Huron Hospital, then discovered there is no such person.

Despite all the mayhem happening in Van Lierde's fictional



THRILLING LOCATION: Bart Van Lierde has been in town doing research for his latest thriller. The novel will take place in Port Huron but most local readers will be kept in suspense because like his other best-selling novels, the book will only be available in Dutch.

Port Huron, he said he is amazed by the hospitality of Americans, such as the Warsallas, who insisted he come over for dinner Thursday.

"Most people don't know that

about the States," he said. "I tell my friends: 'Go there. It's totally different than you imagine.'"

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