

# BREAKING IN

Debut authors: How they did it, what they learned, and why you can do it, too.

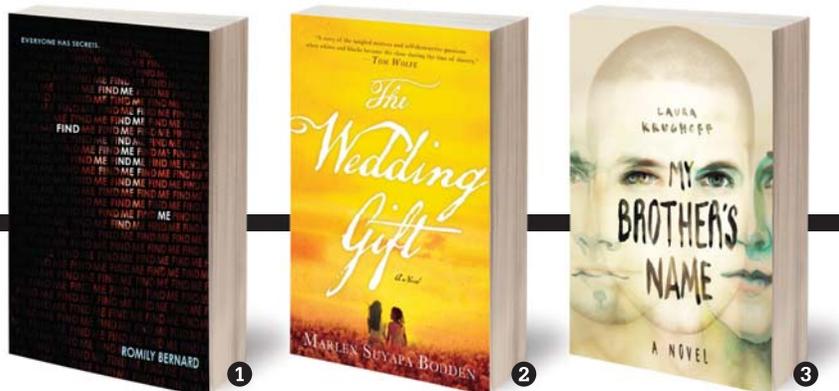
BY CHUCK SAMBUCHINO

## Romily Bernard



1 **Find Me** (young adult thriller, HarperTeen, September) "A teenage hacker trying to get out of the game gets blackmailed into finding a class-mate's rapist."

**WRITES FROM:** Atlanta. **BEFORE FIND ME:** I'd written women's fiction, chick lit and historical romance. Almost every agent I submitted to said, "Wow, like your voice, but, um, the heroine is kind of ... grouchy." Then, in 2010, I decided to try writing YA. Suddenly, my heroines weren't grouchy. They were spunky. **TIME FRAME:** I wrote *Find Me* in about nine months. After I was agented, we spent another four months rewriting it. **ENTER THE AGENT:** I'm repped by the amazing Sarah Davies of Greenhouse Literary. I found her online [and] then cross-referenced her information with *Publishers Weekly* deals, and supplemented that by researching her current authors. **WHAT I LEARNED:** For an industry that trades in dreams, publishing is still about product. That sounds heartless, but it's not. It means we have to make hard decisions about what's right for the book, but also what's right for the market. **IF I COULD DO IT AGAIN:** I would have found YA sooner. But I think, for me, going through all those failed novels was part of the process. At [BookExpo



America] this year, someone told me I was an overnight success. I told her 246 agent rejections over four years begged to differ. **PLATFORM:** I blog with the DoomsDaives [doomsdaisies.com]. **BEST ADVICE:** Learn to separate constructive criticism from negative criticism. There are going to be people who are never going to like your writing. Ignore those people. **WEBSITE:** romilybernard.com. **NEXT UP:** The sequel [to *Find Me*], *Remember Me*, is due out fall 2014.

## Marlen Suyapa Bodden



2 **The Wedding Gift** (historical fiction, St. Martin's, September) "When plantation owner Cornelius Allen marries off his daughter, he presents her with a wedding gift: his other daughter, a young slave named Sarah."

**WRITES FROM:** Stamford, Conn. **BEFORE GIFT:** I majored in history in college and loved to read nonfiction about history. ... In 1999, I was reading a book on runaway slaves and came across, in a footnote, a summary of a court case in Alabama, in the 1840s, where a slave owner sued his wife for divorce because he claimed

the child she gave birth to was not his. The court granted him all the property his wife brought into the marriage, including a young slave woman. I thought that would make for an interesting novel. **ENTER THE AGENT:** My book was first self-published (2009) because I could not find an agent. It sold 140,000 e-books and made *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller list. When that happened, a friend of mine introduced me to my agent, Victoria Sanders of Victoria Sanders & Associates [who sold the book to St. Martin's]. **BIGGEST SURPRISE:** I was told that a book about slavery would not sell, and I'm glad I ignored that. **WHAT I DID RIGHT:** The single most important thing I did in the beginning was to invest in editing. ... I knew that the stigma against self-published books mainly has to do with poor or no editing. **PLATFORM:** [Originally] I made a list of everyone who could help me spread the word. I asked everyone who was in a book club to recommend my book. ... [Now I have] a PR and publicity firm to help. There also is my focused social networking campaign, including book clubs and Goodreads, and email campaigns to women's fiction readers. **WEBSITE:** marlenbodden.