



Photo: Elizabeth Clements, Fermilab

Meet Mickey

Could a romance heroine cut it as an astrophysicist? That was the question I had to answer two years ago when I started working on my romance novel, *It Should Happen To You*. I try to write characters that fascinate me, and when I needed a brainy heroine for my romance novel based in Chicago, physics was the natural conclusion. And thus, Mickey Coleman was born.

Why physics? Because physics has always fascinated and defeated me. To me, the study of matter and energy was the key to

extreme intelligence and to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. Alas, I had to repeat physics in college—to be fair, it was engineering physics, not the basket-weaving version—and I could only gaze in seething jealousy as my classmates broke the curve each and every time.

Eventually, I married a physics major, maybe because I wanted to absorb understanding through osmosis, but most likely because I was secretly in awe of the brain of a physicist. He knew the secrets that had always escaped me. Being a very good teacher, he tried to explain to me the theory of relativity and Kepler's Laws. But my brain was determined to reject them all. It was a constant irritant to me that I couldn't grasp something so elementary. My talents were understanding people; my curiosities weren't about atoms, but motivations and characters. My left brain took to computers, my right brain took to man. An odd combination, yes, but we play with the cards we're dealt. Eventually I wrote computer programming books, and then finally, romance novels.

I had vaguely heard of Fermilab, mainly through *Jeopardy* questions, and my husband supplied me with enough information to realize that this was the place where Mickey had to work. (Eventually Harlequin lawyers changed Fermilab to Astrophysical Sciences Research Center, but to be fair to all who work there, it's Fermilab.) This was the pinnacle of physics knowledge in

the United States; the Carnegie Hall for the intelligentsia.

When I contacted Fermilab, I was introduced to astrophysicist Jennifer Adelman. I talked to her about the research that was going on at the lab, and astrophysics seemed the way to go. A woman searching for understanding of the forces on Earth? Oh, no, that's too mundane. No, Mickey was a woman using science to unlock the mysteries of the cosmos. A romantic bottled up inside an interstellar bluestocking. It was perfect.

Mickey Cushing Coleman was the only child of a noted heart-surgeon, and spent her life living up to his ideals (and IQ, as well). Her brain was her weapon of choice, her manner a little brusque and uncomfortable, and dealing with Black-Eye galaxies and neutrinos was preferable to dealing with men. When she hires Chicago wiseguy, Dominic Corlucci, to get her out of a career-ending jam, she ends up falling in love with a man who is totally wrong for her... Or is he?

I didn't have the luxury of visiting Fermilab before I wrote the book. I had to rely on Jennifer, my husband, and the Internet for help on the research, but it was fun, and challenging. For once, I could be the physicist I had always dreamed of being. I couldn't spout off a hypothesis about gravitational lensing, but Mickey could.

I read books and scoured the Web for names and terminology. I was a computer geek (whereas atoms eluded me, bytes were my friend), and I gave her the hacker basics in computer erudition. I knew which TV shows she would watch (*Red Dwarf*), and which books she would read (very little fiction, mainly journals, and *Long History of Neutrinos*).

Physics will always fascinate and elude me. To the marvelously talented folks at Fermilab, my hat is off; keep exploring the building blocks of the world. I'm going to write another physicist someday, but next time, I think he'll be the hero.

Kathleen O'Reilly

Kathleen O'Reilly has been published in fiction for five years. Her book It Should Happen To You, published by Harlequin, is about a female astrophysicist living in Chicago. After the book came out in March 2004, O'Reilly visited Fermilab and met astrophysicist Jennifer Adelman-McCarthy (photo, left), who had provided her with information on life and research at the lab. O'Reilly lives in Valley Cottage, NY, with her husband and two children who outwit her daily.