

» Q&A | AUTHOR PAMELA CARTER JOERN

# 'We read to develop our compassion'

BY EMILY STICKLER

Pamela Carter Joern, a local playwright and novelist known for her memorable characters, has readings and signings around the metro area promoting her most recent book, "The Plain Sense of Things," a novel about the journey of a Nebraska family over three generations. Joern will be reading at Excelsior Bay Books on Oct. 20 at 7 p.m., Magers & Quinn on Nov. 10 at 7:30 p.m. and at Loft Literary Center on Nov. 18 at 7 p.m. Joern recently spoke with the Journal about her book.

**Southwest Journal: How did you come about writing this book? Did you imagine it would turn out the way it did?**

**Joern:** I started it as a master's thesis, and my original vision was that I would write this book of stories. I love short stories and some of them would be about this family and then there would be other stories about townspeople in which the family would be incidental — you know, like someone walking down the street. So I wrote that book of stories as my master's thesis and it even won a prize, but readers said we don't think this is working as a book. So I spent the next year pulling out the family stories and trying to figure out what else this family could do and, over this, time is when my first novel, "The Floor of the Sky," came about.

**Southwest Journal: Did you originally think to have each of the stories or chapters coming from a different perspective?**

**Joern:** Yes, and I think that's because I'm a playwright. I started out as a playwright and I love the intersection of different characters. That's what interests me, so I think that's why I loved the idea of

telling the story through stories that would feature different family members at different points in time. And these stories gain a lot with the cumulative element and makes the book read a lot more like a novel. But if I would have thought of it as a novel, it would not have been this book. So it's an interesting kind of hybrid form of a novel.

**Southwest Journal: Both "The Plain Sense of Things" and "The Floor of the Sky" are set in Nebraska. Do you plan on writing other books with the same setting?**

**Joern:** A piece of my heart is very there, clearly. I wouldn't say that never ... someday I might publish the other set of stories. I'd love that, and they're all set in the same fictitious town as "The Plain Sense of Things," but now I'm working on a novel set in Minnesota. Who knows? I wouldn't say never, but I may have exhausted my need to be there.

**Southwest Journal: How did spending your childhood in Nebraska affect the perspective from which you wrote "The Plain Sense of Things"?**



Pamela Carter Joern

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**Joern:** This book, more than anything I have ever written and probably more than anything I ever will write, has more autobiographical elements. It's fiction, and people that know me would say, "Boy, there's a lot of lies in that," but it was based on stories I've heard growing up. My mother is a great storyteller and she's very family conscious, and I was the only daughter so I was her depository for all these family stories. But there were things missing. I would

just get the bare outline of something that happened. And so I think as a writer I became intrigued by what sort of people would do that or what would the aftermath be and so that gave rise to these stories.

**Southwest Journal: Is there any overlap in your characters between "The Floor of the Sky" and "The Plain Sense of Things"?**

**Joern:** Not one bit, not at all.

Character traits, yes, the kinds of people, sure, but the families are completely separate. "The Floor of the Sky" is set in the sand hills, and this book more around the town. But [there's] no relationship between the characters except that people of the Western plains, they don't talk about their feelings and opinions, and it's not that they don't have one, it's just [they] don't express it openly. So that's a challenge for a writer, to try to peel back just enough so the reader can see and feel what's in the inner world of someone that wouldn't be talking about it all that much. And not so much that the dignity and privacy is compromised — they had to seem real, like those kind of people. And it's not an easy life, and so there's a sense of dignity and pride of place and a tremendous tenacity to hang on to family. And a reliance on the community and inner strength to get you through. So those kinds of qualities overlap.

**Southwest Journal: What do you hope your readers get out of this book?**

**Joern:** Empathy. I think we read to develop our compassion, so if that happens ... I think this book is a movement from judgment to compassion. There are a number of stories in this book that make that step, so if that could happen, that would be great. And then just a feel for the people and the place — to be able to step into another region or another time or another kind of living.

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