

Fictional town's true feel

In Reach by Pamela Carter Joern

REACH, NEBRASKA – a fictional town created by author Pamela Carter Joern – is all too real to anyone who has ever identified themselves as a small-town Nebraskan.

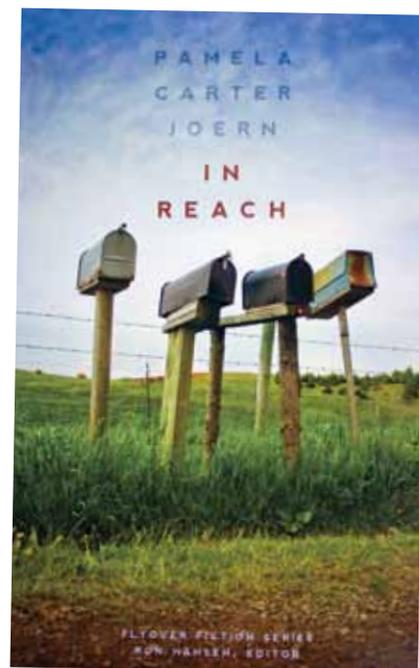
The book, *In Reach*, tells of how the town was named by a British homesteader, who said the undulating prairie grasses evoked the reach of the ocean. This observation is poetic, nostalgic and hauntingly familiar, much like the book itself. This is Joern's third book. She's earned awards for her first two novels, *Floor of the Sky* and *The Plain Sense of Things*. She has also authored six plays.

What makes this collection hit home for readers are the town's imagery, the underlying tension of tangled relationships and the array of distinct individuals presented. It seems that the situations posed in *Reach*

could take place in any Nebraska town and that the characters could be a reader's third-grade teacher or their neighbor.

Joern's anecdotes are at once as familiar as your morning coffee. Together they evoke a tray of coffee cups, each with their own unique flavor. One story is a stark black cup of Joe, a tale of remorse. Another is more of a hazelnut blend with a spoonful of sugar stirred in, lighter and more hopeful in tone. All are strong, somehow familiar, and unforgettable.

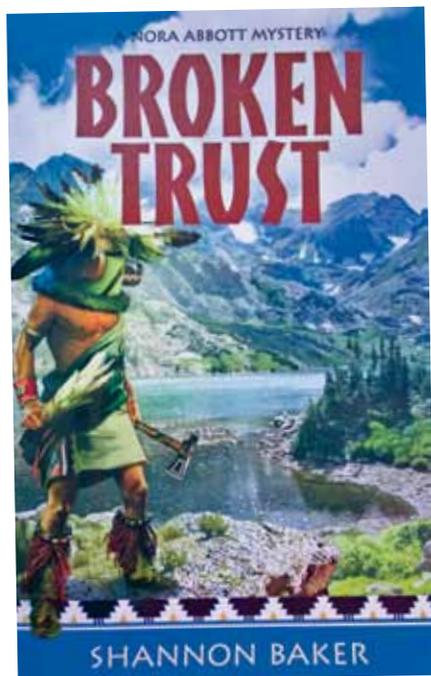
The collection of characters, along with the stories and emotions that accompany them, are illustrative and authentic. There's the old widow with an interesting life tale, sharing it with a middle-aged auctioneer's wife. The difficult but ultimately loving relationship of a college professor and her college-aged daughter studying



abroad. The wife with very valid reasons for killing her husband.

These stories are raw and wrenching. The events that tear Joern's characters apart will do the same to the reader. That's part of this collection's beauty. Her deeply empathetic prose masterfully captures nuanced emotions that linger after her tales conclude.

– Emily Case



Baker's not so straightforward whodunit

Broken Trust by Shannon Baker

SHANNON BAKER'S NEW book, *Broken Trust*, feels like a classic mystery novel but by no means is it a straightforward whodunit. The McCook native's recipe for treachery in this second installment of her Nora Abbott Mystery series includes an eclectic assortment of characters, action, Indian legends and just a pinch of love. All of it against a backdrop of swoon-worthy scenery.

The author is heavily influenced by her surroundings. She's an avid outdoorswoman with interests including backpacking, skiing, kayaking and cycling. As a result, her favorite landscapes of the Nebraska Sandhills and the Rocky Mountains come to life in the pages of her novels.

The most recent book finds protagonist, Nora, recuperating from the previous novel's adventures and losses. She moves away hoping to find healing and a new direction with her life. She seems to find that when a job opportunity presents itself. However, it soon proves to be anything but.

She quickly finds that the previous director was shot to death, and on top of that, \$400,000 has gone missing. Adding to the turmoil is a surprise visit from her overinvolved mother and a love interest from her past. From that point, life escalates from stressful to tense to dangerous.

Baker is particularly effective in presenting a strong and relatable heroine in Nora. She's vulnerable but not weak, and calculating but not callous. Another element that infuses the series with life is its connections to Native American mysticism, adding depth and mystique to the plot.

Like the winding paths the author explores in real life, the story takes many sharp and unexpected turns, reaching a thrilling conclusion. Nora's adventures and troubles may have just begun, but talented small-town Nebraska writer Baker leaves mystery fans with high expectations of what she'll cook up next.

– Emily Case

A fictional community resembling real Nebraska towns, a mystery inspired by our landscape, and a magical telephone that can call into the past are all characters in our Winter Reading selections.