

## A & E Live

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### Joern plows her love of the land into her books

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“People who have devoted their lives to the land, even those who have been ruined by it, have a kind of integrity that is not often written about in modern fiction.”

That’s Pamela Carter Joern talking about the characters in her widely praised new book, *The Plain Sense of Things*, made up of interconnected stories that follow three generations of a rural Nebraska family from the 1930s to 1979.

“Some parts of this book are based on my family’s old stories,” says Joern, who grew up in Nebraska. “I had intriguing little bits of history I’ve been told, and because I am a fiction writer, I use these as a starting point, trying to imagine what it was like for these people.”

Joern lives in Minneapolis now, but she admits she wrote her second novel because she’s “a little bit homesick” for her native state. Her first novel, *The Floor of the Sky*, also set in Nebraska, was a 2006 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection.

“I come from farming people, but they’d lost the farm by the time I was born,” she says. “I do have a deep love for the land out there. I think often people who grow up in a place are imprinted with it.”

Joern holds advanced degrees in communications and secondary education from the University of Nebraska and in religious studies from United Theological Seminary, as well as a master of fine arts from Hamline University.

“What can I say,” she says with a laugh. “When I don’t know what to do, I go to school.”

Writing wasn’t even on Joern’s radar when she was an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, where she met her husband, Brad.

“In the world I grew up in, nobody aspired to be a writer,” she says. “That was like wanting to be a movie star. I loved reading and the theater, so I majored in speech and literature, thinking I would be a teacher.”

Joern’s daughters were young when she wandered into a drama workshop at a writer’s conference, after she’d been told her poetry was “terrible.” She decided right away that she’d do better with plays than poetry.

Since then, Joern has written six plays that have been produced in the Twin Cities area. She learned her craft at Role Over Productions’ little theater in Minneapolis, which she founded with a partner in the 1980s.

“The actors were terrific at helping me understand character development, action, all the things that good fictions writers need to know,” she recalls.

Joern was working on her theology degree when she began a 12-year involvement with the sometimes-controversial Re-Imagining movement, made up of lay and clergy women who want to bring a wider perspective to Christianity.

One of her first projects was writing a play about women's roles in the church. "We got sellout crowds in churches and tremendous positive response, but also hate mail," she recalls. "That sparked a change in my career direction and I switched to a master of arts in religious studies. I realized I wanted to be able to write freely and that might not happen in the church. My personal belief is that there is a huge need and place for the arts in the church. Its creativity linked to the spiritual journey."

Somewhere between her theater experiences and her Re-Imagining work, Joern wrote a novel she knew had problems. So when her youngest daughter went away to college, she enrolled in the Hamline MFA program.

Her thesis project was the short stories that would become *The Plain Sense of Things*. The manuscript won the program's outstanding prose thesis award.