

'Plain Sense' gets to the heart of living

By PAMELA MILLER, Star Tribune

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"The Plain Sense of Things," Minneapolis resident Pamela Carter Joern's second book, marks her arrival as a significant Midwestern writer.

Joern's particular gift is for chronicling the ways the heart weathers chronic hardship. But she wouldn't put it that way. She'd just tell a story, and let the rest take care of itself.

Like its predecessor, "The Floor of the Sky," this book is a multigenerational family saga that plays out in harsh, beautiful rural Nebraska. "Floor" was a fine debut. But "Plain Sense" is a better book, with more nuanced characters whose tightly told adventures span five decades. It can be read as a novel or as linked tales, and its power of story lifts it above the humble genre of regional fiction.

Several characters' life stories unwind in the tight weave of Joern's prose. Most enduring through the years and pages, as well as in our imagination, is a woman named Alice.

As a radiant, cheeky child she enlivens the grubby farm family she lands in when her father dies, leaving her with her grim stepmother, Mary. She becomes the teenage bride of Mary's brother, Jake, and over the years they raise three children, quarrel and reunite.

Late in the book, Alice struggles to care for the dying Jake. And finally, she adapts to widowhood as her children flood her with advice and emotions.

From childhood to old age, Alice -- lively, beautiful, stubborn, bold -- charms everyone. Yet it is her private engagement with obstacle and opportunity that is most interesting.

Joern has a gift for illuminating a character's inner life without speaking over much of it. She adeptly mixes past and present tense, effectively linking past and present, story and memory. Here, for example, is how she opens the book, in a scene set in 1930s Nebraska:

Gramp went to fetch Billy himself after the telegram arrived announcing that Carlene had died. Grandma took to her bed, turned her face to the rose-patterned wallpaper. Gramp sat at her back, ... tentatively reached his hand out toward his wife but could not think what to offer. He shrugged ... , stood, said well then, and clumped off to the Elmyra train station.

See, he stands on the brick platform with his sheepskin jacket pulled snug against the wind. His shoulders sag. Metal clasps clang against a flagpole, the ground bare with scattered piles of

dirty snow. His breath freezes It's early, the light gray and diffused. His jaw aches, clamped in anger.

You want to read on, don't you? Who are these people, and what just happened to them? And, now what?

Kudos to the University of Nebraska Press' Flyover Fiction series for bringing Joern's work to light. May there be more forthcoming.

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