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Truth in fiction

WordsAndPictures: MWP talks with author Pamela Carter Joern

by Glenda Martin

What a pleasure to talk with Minneapolis playwright, novelist, short-story writer, editor, and teacher of writing, Pamela Carter Joern. I've read and written about each of her novels. Lucky for me.

I've used her first novel "The Floor of the Sky" in book groups and retreats. It's listed as a "greatest of the great" in "The Great Books-Because Women Say So!" published by Minnesota Women's Press, because it was chosen by more than one of our book groups as a great read.

In Aug. 2007 I wrote in the Minnesota Women's Press about "The Floor of the Sky" and in the Aug.-Sept. 2008 issue of BookWomen I wrote about her second novel "The Plain Sense of Things." Each is set in Nebraska and is about farm families who are connected to and shaped by the land. I'm not going to write more here about her two novels. I will just urge you to get them, read them, discuss them. When you do, notice that the novels are published by University of Nebraska Press under the nomenclature Flyover Fiction. I love that term, a tongue-in-cheek comment about the publishing world, and I love that a university press is publishing novels.

Every woman has a story. What about Pamela Carter Joern's? This is a woman who continues to grow and learn. She has an MFA in creative writing, as well as advanced degrees in communications and secondary education, and religious studies. She has written six plays produced in the Twin Cities over the past 25 years, including "Common Place," "Alchemyra's Art," "Simple Gifts" and "Whatever Happened to Alice James," which was performed at Illusion Theater as part of its "Fresh Ink" series featuring staged readings in 2004.

She co-edited (with Nancy Berneking) the stories of women involved in the global ecumenical Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis in 1993. The stories of the women who attended the conference were compiled in "Re-Membering and Re-Imagining," published by The Pilgrim Press in 1995. A stunning collection about, for some, a life-altering event.

Joern explained that the threads in her writing are sexuality, spirituality and creativity through the arts. She is interested in religion and how people find meaning in their lives. "I write to move from judgment to compassion through empathy." She is challenged by trying not to get caught in "the tyranny of the urgent," she said. I'm adopting it as a personal mantra.

She also raised a question about the apparent "disdain of fiction." That hit a hot spot for me. This is something I've faced for years in book groups and find intriguing. I like to keep Jessamyn West's quote always at hand, "Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures." Be sure to bear this in mind when you read Joern's two novels.

Joern's conversation is rich with stories. Here are two growing-up stories she shared:

As a child Pamela grew up in isolated, country, Nebraska. With her two older brothers she went to a one-room country school with 13 students. There was only one other girl, who was older, so Pamela spent a lot of time alone.

She had an active inner world, read everything she could get her hands on, mostly what was written for boys because that was what was available, including the Hardy Boys books, comic books, even Field and Stream.

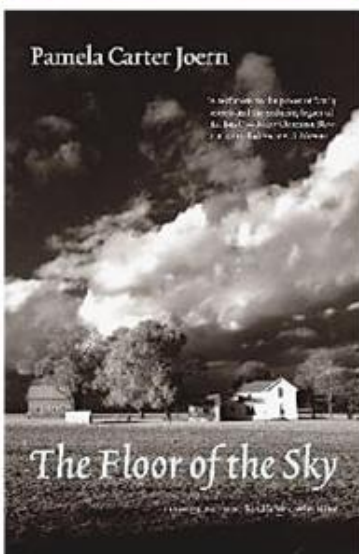
Her family moved to town when she was 10, and her life enlarged. She would stand on a corner outside the school until a classmate came by, so exciting and important it was to be able to walk home with another kid. Thus her social world began.

Pamela's mother always worked and supported the family by selling home products through a party plan. Pamela's role was to go with her mother on long drives to the farms, ranches and homes of the hostesses, and sit quietly in the corner. Her remembrance of the time was that her mom was the "rock star of the '50s" in this "world of women." Her mom made it "fun for everyone," as the women talked together and shared stories.

Recently, as Joern was driving a distance on a winter night in Minnesota to speak to a book club about her work, she remembered those times with her mother, where women gathered. She realized that meeting with the book club was not so different from what happened years ago for women on remote Nebraska land, coming together to share words and stories. Honoring women's experience.

It was a joy to talk with Pamela Carter Joern. Immerse yourself in her novels and discover the truths she writes about.

Glenda Martin is co-founder of Minnesota Women's Press and now facilitates many book groups.



Pamela Joern. Photo by Susan Makepeace.

"I write to move from judgment to compassion through empathy."
-Pamela Carter Joern

