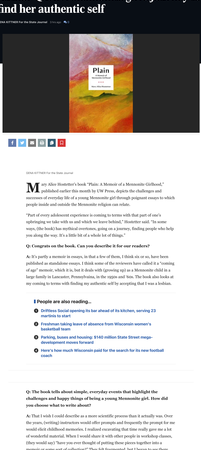
TOPICAL ALERT TOP STORY

AUTHOR Q&A | MARY ALICE KERSETTER

Author Q&A: A Mennonite girl's journey to find her authentic self

GINA ATTWATER For the State Journal 2:15 p.m. 0



GINA ATTWATER For the State Journal

Mary Alice Kersetter's book "Plain: A Memoir of a Mennonite Girlhood," published earlier this month by UW Press, depicts the challenges and successes of everyday life of a young Mennonite girl through poignant essays to which people inside and outside the Mennonite religion can relate.

"Part of every adolescent experience is coming to terms with that part of one's upbringing we take with us and which we leave behind," Kersetter said. "In some ways, this book has mythical overtones, going on a journey, finding people who help you along the way. It's a little bit of a whole lot of things."

Q: Congrats on the book. Can you describe it for our readers?

A: It's partly a memoir in essays, in that a few of them, I think six or so, have been published as standalone essays. I think some of the reviewers have called it a "coming of age" memoir, which it is, but it deals with (growing up) as a Mennonite child in a large family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the organs and bass. The book also looks at my coming to terms with finding my authentic self by accepting that I was a lesbian.

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Q: The book tells about simple, everyday events that highlight the challenges and happy things of being a young Mennonite girl. How did you choose what to write about?

A: That I think I could describe as a more scientific process than it actually was. Over the years, (writing) instructors would offer prompts and frequently the prompt for me would elicit childhood memories. I realized excavating that time really gave me a lot of wonderful material. When I would share it with other people in workshop classes, (they would say) "have you ever thought of putting these pieces together into a memoir or some sort of collection?" They felt fragmented, but I began to see these were filaments, strands that did connect. The family piece, the religion piece, feeling like a misfit piece. If there were a continuer for them, they might make some kind of sense and fit with each other. Working toward that was a really big process.

Q: Was it easy to access all the memories for the material you needed for the book? What did you use for inspiration?

A: My mother when she passed away entrusted me with the years of diaries. I felt I should do something with them. I sifted them down to a book, which I had self-published. These were really valuable source material to trigger memories. Most of (her diary entries) were about work and weather, interspersed with a lady being born or some other important event. It would consist of day-to-day tasks on the farm and who came to visit and what children did at what ages. That really helped the process along for me. When she recorded something of note about me ... it was often for ... not following the rules.

Q: The book opens with you buying produce at a market from a young Mennonite girl and wondering what she was thinking, wanting to talk to her. Did that interaction inspire you to write a book or had you long known you wanted to write "Plain?"

A: That certainly was not a piece I had written before I was in the final stages of the memoir. I put (that essay) in and took it out, and put it back. I wasn't sure of ... starting with the now and then going backward (through the book). After I wrote it, it really worked as a way to enter the book and give a perspective on where the reflective voice was coming from.

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Q: An important tenant for Mennonites is peace and pacifism. What also do the Amish people need to know about Mennonites?

A: I hope it rates through in the book that peace and pacifism are important to Mennonites, and that's a part I take with me. I also admire their beliefs about simple living and a sense of community. The more progressive group of Mennonites, those who are part of Mennonite Church, USA no longer have strict rules about dress and are increasingly tolerant of gay marriage and gay clergy. The more conservative group, the group my parents would be a part of if they were still alive, still rightly adhere to more traditional practices. There are many things about Mennonites that I respect — their efforts to feed the hungry and clothe the poor, to minister in as many ways to the needs of "the least of these." If I was growing up in the current more liberal Mennonite church, I wonder if I'd have any reason to leave or been so intent on escaping.

Q: You've written both fiction and nonfiction. Can you tell us a little more about your writing background?

A: I first declared I wanted to be a writer when I grew up at age 8 or 9. It's certainly not a path that would have seemed to fit the Mennonite beliefs. One needs to do something to be of service. Women in that generation in our community could be a nurse or a teacher or a bookseller. I majored in English and taught English, and all along the way I wrote. I mostly imagined myself writing fiction writer, because I couldn't imagine writing about myself. I would take evening classes. It was something to help me figure out who I was and what I was thinking.

Q: Do you feel more drawn to fiction or nonfiction?

A: I do enjoy both, actually. Right now, I'm working on a novel, so I don't have a good bellwether when this is all over. I love creating characters, but I also really love finding experiences or making sense of things that have happened ... putting them together in a way that's really quite exciting for me.

Q: What are you working on next?

A: I'm working on a few essays that may or may not be appropriate. Something happens and I try to put it together in an essay. I'm juggling a few things at the same time. The thing I would like to commit to ... is getting the linked short stories I finished a few years ago published and getting the novel into a workable state.

Feature

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Around The Week

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An anthropomorphic grilled cheese trying to find her sense of "self" is awesomely Wisconsin.

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The title ("The Art of the Break"), book by Wisconsin author Mary Wimmer and published this fall by UW Press, refers to a specific point ...

Review: 'Not the Camilla We Knew,' by Rachael Hanel

NONFICTION: A combination memoir and biography of Camilla Hall, the Minnesota Vikings's daughter who died in a plane crash, "Not the Camilla We Knew" by Rachael Hanel, Minnesota author and former Star Tribune reporter, is a tribute to a young woman who came together as a small band of self-described misfortunate who, in service to their political agenda, did instead fringe a gem.

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Wisconsin author Hannah Morrissey knows she can type 70 words a minute, but that the average human can talk at a rate of 160 words a minute — ...

Holiday books: Nonfiction

"Happy, Happy: The Stories of Alan Bennett" edited by Nick Tapsir. (Harry Ransom, $35.) Bennett, the British playwright, actor and author, is best known for his plays and movies. Here, his five-hour "Enjoy" and "A Private Function" film dramatizations. It would have been one line: "Bitter as hog's fat. Sweet as honey." Yet fans of the latter and those entries are glorious into the month. If not ...

Review: 'All the Broken Places,' by John Boyne

FICTION: A tactic compelling novel about a woman forced to confront the sins of her past, "All the Broken Places" by John Boyne. (Knopf, $26.95.) Beginning with "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" (translated into nineteen and during the heart of thousands of young readers — and more than a few old ones), as well. The Irish-born author's Holocaust tale of the haunting ...

Holiday books: Fiction

"The Marriage Portrait," by Maggie O'Farrell. (Knopf, $26.) Following her award-winning novel "Hamnet" about the death of Shakespeare's son, O'Farrell's latest novel focuses on the 16th Duchess of Ferrara, who is married off to her young brother, a prince in name only, a country ruled by her husband. Whereas, the ruler of Ferrara, as the ship draws to shore with Mrs. A leaves ice that that he ...

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Review: The Presence of Absence,' by Simon Van Booy

Novelist Simon Van Booy uses a simple story about an author taking a story to explore the anything but simple process of telling a story. "The Presence of Absence" by Simon Van Booy. (Harper Collins, $27.99.) Van Booy, who lives in Wales, has written novels and short stories over the years, but Simon Van Booy is without a doubt prolific — prolific, though, in the positive sense of being marked by ...

Review: 'Strega,' by Juhanne Lykke Holm, translated from the Danish by Sankia Vogel

FICTION: A transfixing new debut young woman growing up in a patriarchal world "Strega" by Juhanne Lykke Holm, translated from the Danish by Sankia Vogel. (Knopf, $26.95.) Lykke Holm's novel, 2020 ——— Johanne Lykke Holm's breathtaking novel "Strega" is Sankia Vogel's virtuoso English translation, is a thought-provoking fairy tale for our flawed patriarchal society. It's haughtily-voice that evoking ...

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