THE VAN DE WEERDS

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing
Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is a work of fiction exploring the family dynamics of the Weerd family, told from the point of view of three main characters: Katie (age 30) and her parents, Donna and Harold. Donna and Harold are about to divorce and their son, Brett is estranged from the entire family, including the young daughter he’s never known. The novel spans a year’s time, with the final chapter moving forward another year. Estrangement, addiction, death, and the custody of a four-year old niece and granddaughter are part of this story.
I would like to acknowledge the guidance of Jeanette Lynes, the head of the new MFA in Writing Program, the Interdisciplinary Centre For Culture and Creativity, College of Graduate Studies, and the English Department at the University of Saskatchewan. Many thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Hilary Clark, my MFA mentor, Sandra Birdsell, for her patient and capable guidance, my committee members, my classmates in the MFA in Writing Program, and the writing group of which I’ve been a part since 2003. Thanks to Elaine Chapman for her insights on addiction and to Leanne Bellamy for her assistance re. the legalities of custody and access. Finally, but not least – the support of my husband Allen, and our family, for whom I am well-blessed.
ARTIST STATEMENT

I’ve always had an interest in the local. Canadian Art, specifically art of the prairies in my visual arts studies, local characters in my novels. I think magic can be found on the prairie, in our everyday surroundings and the people we know.

In Alison Calder’s article titled Reassessing Prairie Realism she describes regional literature in Canada as being both realistic and referential. Its value resides in its ability to mirror a specific environment, to show what real life is like in a limited and peculiar environment.

As a woman born, raised and living in Saskatchewan, I know about the peculiar environments and circumstances that can lurk under the smooth facade (some would say “dull”) of the prairie landscape. That’s not to say that the stereotypes about my fellow “cow-tippers” (as we’re called in Alberta) necessarily hold true. The finest people I know live on the prairies, but we do have our eccentricities. That’s why my family members, when told the former title of my novel, The Weerd Family, invariably rolled their eyes to the heavens and asked, “Is it about us?” I assured them it was fiction, but where does fiction come from really, if not from our own stories and the stories of those we know?

This novel has been described by one of my fellow-students in the first cohort of the MFA in Writing Program as:

“Fargo, without the nasty wood-chipper.”

I embrace the genre of Prairie Realism, but with sometimes the realism comes with a twist. I’m interested in what happens when the ordinary meets the extraordinary. When men and women who are practical in their habits and their thinking, come to believe in alternate realities, in things fantastical. But even the extraordinary must have a ring of truth.

To quote Alice Munro: “It’s not real but it’s true.”

In the Weerd Family, Ella, the small child who becomes the object of a custody dispute, has an imaginary friend, Leesha, who may or may not be the reincarnation of her Aunt Katie’s childhood imaginary friend, Alicia. Katie’s beliefs in this regard, inform her actions.

As I’m both a visual artist and a writer, the use of visuals and illustrations is understandably near and dear to me. Sometimes these immediately suggest themselves – sometimes the writing comes from drawings. And sometimes, as was the case with this novel, nothing suggests itself for a very long time. The change came when Harold began to create his ever-evolving cabin plans. As part of the process most to my liking, the drawings inform the writing and vice-versa.

Lorelie Gerwing Sarauer
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
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Live like you will die tomorrow. Learn like you will live forever.

- Ghandi