

'It is a lot of people's story'

In her debut novel, Northwest author Megan Kruse explores family and queerness from three perspectives

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Megan Kruse came of age as a queer youth in quasi-rural Washington — outside of Tulalip to be exact. And like many youths, she gravitated toward Portland. Between college and grad school, Kruse moved here mainly for the queer community. She worked for three years in domestic violence intervention — an experience that she says became a pivotal part of her life.

Kruse calls Seattle home these days, teaching at the community writing center Hugo House and mentoring and teaching online — a joy and a staple that feeds her passion for writing.

Her creative writing has appeared in a number of literary magazines and journals, including Narrative Magazine, Witness and The Sun.

Kruse's first published novel, "Call Me Home," was published by Hawthorne Books, an independent press in Portland. At its heart, this is a story about family, our choices and how we come to live with them, what it means to be queer in the rural West, and the changing idea of home. Many of the themes in her new book involve domestic violence and came out of the time that she was working in domestic violence intervention, trying to figure out how to make emotional sense out of everything she saw.

Kruse returns to Portland this month to give a reading at Powell's City of Books — a dream, she says.

"It's really exciting — this whole process — I never really want to outgrow of this feeling of gratefulness," she says.

Her reading at Powell's will be at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 10.

Sue Zalokar: What was your takeaway from that time in Portland and the work you did here in domestic violence?

Megan Kruse: I did love that work, but I also know that there are ways those people, who are able to do it for a long time, they make it sustainable for themselves. Either they figure out how to create those necessary boundaries or to balance that with the rest of their life. For a lot of people, if that is your singular passion, (that passion) gives you a lot of longevity.

For me, I loved the work, but I just became overwhelmed with it. I remember driving through the city after having gone home to my regular life and being overly aware of all of these people surrounding me and in crisis. I wasn't able to draw those lines very clearly.

But, I left and I went to grad school and I knew that what I'd always wanted to do was write.

It has always been easier for me to think to myself, I'm going to write about this. And to me, that has always been a way to make sense of things emotionally. It let me let myself off the hook a little bit. And it let me share those things and make them visible, in the way I know how: to write.

S.Z. For readers who may not know your work, what are you all about?

M.K. I want to represent contemporary characters that aren't generally represented. I'm a traditionalist in the sense that I like a story that *contains* you.

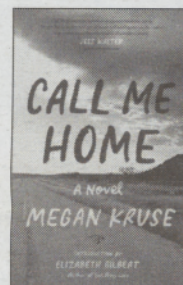
That kind of story-telling has often involved rural places and a lot of description, and it hasn't encompassed many queer characters. There is no narrative for characters who live in places where there is not a queer community or a queer culture. There is no template for them about what it's like to grow up.

That is part of why I want to tell those stories. It is my story; it is a lot of people's story. There is a certain kind of loneliness when you grow up out of the urban area environment because you KNOW you are going to leave home. You know you can't stay there because you don't really exist there.

S.Z. Your novel, "Call Me Home," is told in three voices: Lydia, Jackson and Amy. The sum of their voices seems to be more powerful than one of their voices would be on its own.

M.K. I have always been captivated by the idea of how families function in the world. The story of a family looks one way from the outside, but it is going to look different from each individual person. The sum of that creates a more powerful story than any one person could provide.

"Call Me Home" began as Jackson's story. It was his disenfranchisement and his leaving home and making his way in a new



Call Me Home
by Megan Kruse



Author Megan Kruse will read from her novel, "Call Me Home," on Tuesday, March 10, at Powell's City of Books.

community in Idaho, where he is working on a construction crew. He had left his mother and sister and there was sort of a refrain for them. That was the thing that kept kind of pulling him forward was this desire to find them again.

I started to realize that the story was empty without hearing their side of the story. I didn't have any establishment for whether or not they were missing him too or what had happened to them. It occurred to me that the story was not just his; it was theirs as well.

If I could tell all three voices, then the sum would become more than each of the parts together. I revisited a lot of events from different perspectives. My hope is that it starts to overlap to create this sort of more intense understanding of this family's story.

S.Z. Is Jackson modeled after you in any way? You are a queer woman who once was a queer youth in rural Washington ...

M.K. Maybe in some ways emotionally. He's very introspective and sensitive. His story isn't mine, but in a lot of ways, despite making some mistakes, he is very self-aware. And he is able to take some big, bold risks ... he goes about that very calculatingly.

S.Z. The Center for American Progress reports that 20 percent to 40 percent of homeless youths are LGBTQ.

M.K. Disproportionately, this affects people. Young people leave their homes and come to Portland or San Francisco or Seattle or other metropolitan areas where they can be open and queer.

We tend to think, "OK, once you leave home, you can go out into the world and make this life," and the reality is that people are starting off disenfranchised. We kind of spackle over the issue.

If you leave home without any resources and you leave home because there is no place for you there, the chances that that is

to be queer in the West." I have a friend who pointed out that it is reductive to the story (to declare it as a queer story).

It's like anything else. You have to have visibility before something becomes fully accepted.

It can sound reductive to say, "Oh, Kate Brown, this bisexual woman ..." Well, the point is that she is the governor, and these are the things that she stands for.

It is important to disrupt the sense that straight is normality, and that people in power are not minorities. I think it is important to own those things.

It is important for me to say that my novel is a queer novel. Does that mean that is all it is? No.

We are a ways off from queer stories being just as accessible as (non-queer stories). Until then, until it's not odd, until someone is not going to pick up my book and be like, "Oh, wait," then yes we need to (verbalize and recognize minorities and their accomplishments).

S.Z. I worked in a tribal school in Washington state where the staff was largely non-native, but I always liked that we had a native principal. He was a walking, talking role model in front of a lot of native kids in much the same way that acknowledging Gov. Brown's sexuality, or your novel's sexuality for that matter, sets role models for LGBTQ youths. "Hey! There are gay writers and politicians. I could do that ..."

M.K. I remember being young and a teenager and how voraciously I would eat up any literature or media that had to do with lesbianism or queerness. People say, "Oh, do you need to name something this way?" That's a secondary concern to me. That is a question of rhetoric. When the real question is about getting queer stories out there. That is what is important right now — having somebody pick up a book that looks like it is about them.

S.Z. In introducing your manuscript to Elizabeth Gilbert ("Eat Pray Love"), who wrote the foreword to the book, she says you wrote: "And so I think that in some ways the novel became a love letter and an apology. An acknowledgement that I am inextricably a part of where I came from, and that you can't actually weigh what is precious or ugly; it is itself, and so are we."

What does this mean to you?

M.K. When I was growing up, I had a real, desperate sense of wanting to escape where I was from. I did not value that place. It is this ragged corner of the Northwest where I just remember this constant onslaught of rain and kind of rough places and rough people, and I was sort of "small town girl with big dreams" where I wanted to go out where I thought things were happening. Some of that, in my mind, was related to this feeling that there wasn't going to be a community for

me there.

Writing ("Call Me Home") made me realize that these (same places) are the ones that have made me.

There is no way to quantify how much it's worth to be from somewhere; you have to look at the experiences. The same with thinking about those novels that I wrote before ... I used to think they were so terrible. But then being able to embrace from whence you came and realize that you can't definitively name those things as good and bad and you can't ever leave behind the places that you are from or the things that have shaped you into who you are.

"The struggle to be out is so complicated. We owe it to those stories to recognize that there is still a lot of work left to do."

S.Z. How much of fiction writing is nonfiction?

M.K. Nearly every part of this book came from ... so many small details and moments ... Everything comes from who you are.

There are vistas (of my life) or approximations of people I have met; they live inside the fictional story in "Call Me Home."

Jackson and Lydia's relationship is similar to my and my brother's. Their relationship to the geography. Those pieces all come from me.

It happens in both respects, if you look at nonfiction, there are so many ways that we sort of "tailor" or transmute our nonfiction to have fictional qualities to make it easier to connect to.

Fiction has always countered that fear of smallness.

S.Z. Have you any advice for aspiring writers?

M.K. Something I say to students lately, but generally, is recognizing that writing is not a destination you arrive at.

I can't imagine a world in which I wouldn't also have to work full time. You just have to remind yourself that this is something that you will continue to do and make room for it in your life, because once you let down those ideas of how it's going to be when you "get there," you allow your writing to get better and better.

Just pursuing everything that you are interested in or you find important and keep writing about them, putting those ideas on the page. You will get better over time.



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