

Creepy thriller a squirm-inducing read

Northern California author Jody Gehrman spent some of her young adulthood in Bellingham earning a masters degree in English from Western Washington University before returning down coast to establish her writing career. She's created short movies, developed plays and written enough novels to count on both hands.

Today Gehrman is a communications professor at Mendocino College, which probably informs her latest work, "Watch Me."

This creepy psychological thriller is an exploration of ambition, obsession and morality. Gehrman sets her

story on a small college campus. Her protagonist, creative writing professor Kate Youngblood, is grappling with the onset of middle age as her ex-husband marries a younger woman, her best friend gives birth to a baby, her latest writing project stalls out and fall semester presents yet another class of run-of-the-mill students.

Except for one. The work of 22-year-old Sam Grist is provocative and raw and shows great promise. Kate is shaken out of her doldrums with a visceral desire to nurture this young man's talent.

But it turns out that Sam

has more than writing on his mind. Since his teens, when he was dazzled by one of Kate's books, he has become fixated on getting to know her. He has learned everything he can about her, worked his way across the country to be near her, and tried and failed and tried again to get accepted into the college where she teaches.

And now that he's on campus and registered for her class, he stalks her to learn more about her patterns and moods.

Kate, unaware of the depth of Sam's obsession, is intrigued by his preternatural intensity and

flattered by his attention. He tells her that her writing is luminous. She even feels a spark of illicit physical attraction.

Flustered, Kate doesn't catch on to Sam's aberrant mentality at first — doesn't understand his propensity for violence, doesn't know that he considers her his ultimate prize and regards any human obstacles to that goal as "defective attempts at human life ... (m)alformed lumps of tissue, hair, and skin."

But as readers, we are privy to this, because Gehrman alternates chapters between Kate and Sam as first-person narrators. This

gives us intimate views into how their perceptions are being distorted by ego, desire and fear, which is particularly disturbing because don't most people entertain fantasies about how they'd like to move through the world and the kind of people they'd like to attract?

It's unsettling, also, to read this twisted tale in the era of #MeToo, as people who felt they were victimized long ago are only coming forward now.

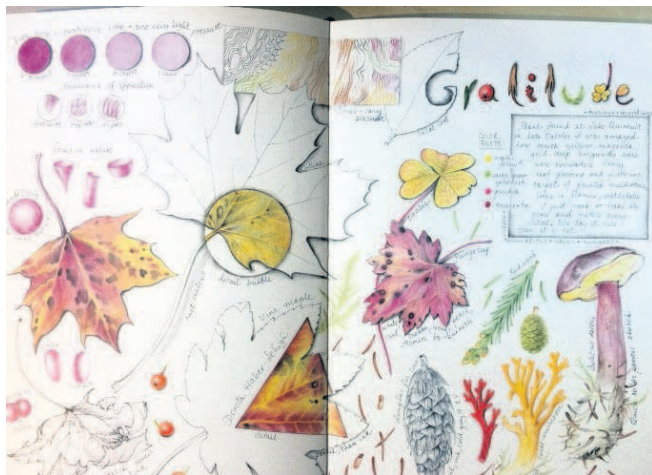
"Watch Me" might provide some insight as to why those folks didn't make waves sooner. When Kate, belatedly, realizes

"Watch Me"
By Jody Gehrman
St. Martin's Press
320 pp
\$15.99

that Sam may be a danger, her petitions for help are met with skepticism, even hostility — for mightn't she have been complicit to a degree?

Probing the gray area in human interactions and where to draw the line, "Watch Me" is a squirm-inducing read.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY DOROTA HABER-LEHIGH

A botanical sketch with art by Dorota Haber-Lehigh

Botanical drawing classes plant seeds of inspiration

MANZANITA — The Hoffman Center for the Arts in Manzanita will offer five botanical drawing classes throughout 2018, starting 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 10.

Led by Dorota Haber-Lehigh, the series of workshops will focus on drawing from nature while being inspired by changing seasons. The workshops can be taken independently or as a series.

Each workshop will have a different seasonal focus while emphasizing sketching from observation. Students will experiment with new techniques, study botanical accuracy and learn the importance of self-expression. The series is designed for students 18 and up. All skill levels are welcome.

This first workshop will focus on keeping a botanical sketchbook. Students will engage in creative, meditative and structured exercises to dive into this practice.

In this foundational class, students will learn sketch-

ing, measuring, tonal/shading, application, color blending and layering, and composition ideas. Using pen, graphite and color pencils for sketching and adding text will give students the tools to embrace their personal style and use a sketchbook to record their botanical journey.

By the end of the first class, students will complete several entries in their sketchbooks and will walk away with ideas on how to continue throughout the year.

Tuition is \$45 per session, or \$150 for all five (\$30 per session).

Later classes will be held noon to 4 p.m. April 28, Aug. 25, Oct. 20 and Dec. 1. Additional information can be found at hoffmanblog.org/register-for-workshops.

Haber-Lehigh's art and teaching explore the beauty of nature, magic of native plants and human connection with plants. She has authored two ethnobotanical coloring books. Her workshops are engaging, inclusive and fun, and designed for all skill levels.



Botanical drawing by Dorota Haber-Lehigh

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