

Karen Gettert Shoemaker is Coming to Columbus!

By Elizabeth Millard

Reading Karen Gettert Shoemaker's words makes me feel as if I'm reading Willa Cather; she captures the hearts and souls of her characters in intricate, poetic detail. On February 15th, she will be speaking in Columbus. The Friends of the Columbus Public Library will host this presentation offered through the Nebraska Humanities Council.

The title of this presentation is "Family Stories into Literature: The Role of Gossip and Research in Fiction." She will focus on the ways writers can use family stories and history to write literature. Her presentation will discuss the ways to excavate history, both our own and the world's, as a way of finding the true stories only we can write. Shoemaker pulled a great deal from her family's history to write her latest book, and at one point she had spent so much time researching material that she put a sticky note on her computer that read, "Research is Not Writing!"

The book club I belong to is currently reading her latest novel, The Meaning of Names (selected as the Omaha Reads book selection for 2014), and I have yet to find someone who doesn't think it's an amazing read. For example, I loved how she compared waving wheat fields to "the back of a well-stroked cat."

Karen grew up near O'Neill in Holt County, and it wouldn't be a stretch to say that Nebraska runs through the author's veins. "The beauty of Nebraska is the kind that unfolds slowly," Shoemaker shared. "Nebraska is a kind of ever-changing canvas: our seasons, our people, our landscape even, are never quite the same from one day to the next."

She received her Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1997, and is a writing mentor with the University of Nebraska's MFA in Writing program. She has taught literature and writing at the University of Nebraska, both Lincoln and Omaha campuses, and has conducted writing workshops through Hastings College, Chadron State College and the Nebraska Humanities Council.

She has received numerous awards for her writing and her teaching, including a Nebraska Arts Council Award, the Vreeland Award, the Mari Sandoz/Prairie Schooner Award for fiction, and a Nebraska Press Association Award for nonfiction. Her story, "Playing Horses," was chosen by the editors of Best American Short Stories as one of the 100 Distinguished Stories of 2001.

Shoemaker's first collection of short fiction, Night Sounds and Other Stories, was published in the United States in May 2002 and republished in the United Kingdom in 2006. Her fiction, nonfiction and poetry have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including Prairie Schooner, The London Independent, The Nebraska Review, Fugue, The South Dakota Review, Foliage, Arachne, Kalliope and The West Wind Review.

Plenty is on the horizon for Shoemaker, who has several projects in the works. I am excited that her presentation to Columbus is one of them!

Elizabeth Millard is a member of the Friends of the Public Library Board of Directors.

