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Monday, December 21, 2009 Tuesday, November 10, 2009

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'Minnesota Cold' chills readers

Author to come to Hibbing this month

by **Kathryn Kohlhase**
 Staff Writer

Published: Sunday, November 8, 2009 6:08 AM CST

HIBBING — Ask Author Cynthia Kraack about her newly released book, "Minnesota Cold," and the first thing she'll note is its unexpected, eerie parallels to parts of the current political landscape.

However, Kraack, who is coming to Hibbing this month, was inspired to write the book before the latest debates on public health care, immigration and "going green."

In the late '90s, Kraack was driving across a Twin Cities bridge when she spied a toddler's pink shoe on the side of the road. "I started thinking about

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a woman riding on a train, seeing a child's shoe and feeling so sad for the family who lost the shoe, because she was living in a time when clothes were supplied by the government," she said.

Around the same time, news coverage of the Serbian conflict caught Kraack's attention. She watched as a woman "who looked like she was ancient" described trying to feed her family by cooking over a camp stove in her home. The woman had just turned 40.

"The people there were just like us," Kraack said. "They had dishwashers

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and color TVs. This was a city that had once hosted part of the Olympics, and now it was like a tomb.

"I started thinking, 'What if tomorrow we had to survive? How would we? Who would?'"

Kraack followed this line of distopian thinking and, over the course of several years, she would write similar scenes set in a post-nuclear Minnesota.

"Minnesota Cold" is the story of Sallie Dodge, a 70-something year-old woman told by a government help agency that it's her time to die, Kraack said.

"What's unique about the book is that it features a senior age female as the protagonist, and the story is set in current time," Kraack said. "It's not Sallie looking back at what it was like to be in her 20s."

A couple years into her writing process, an event happened that would forever shape the American consciousness. However, Kraack said she made a conscious decision not to let the event influence the plot of the story.

"9/11 fueled more of that thinking of, 'what if we were stripped out of our comfort zone,'" she said. "But I didn't want it to change my story. I let it only influence the background of my story."

Hints of this can be found in references to Homeland Security, and especially, Kraack said, in a sense of fear of immigrants and "non-natives."

Though the book is set in a Minnesota much different than the one we know today, its characters struggle with themes that today's readers are familiar with, including government-run health care, immigration and conservation.

Since the book's release this September, Kraack said readers have reacted to the parallels with issues in today's society.

"It's interesting. It seems to hit people where they are at in life," she said.

A group of high school students read part of the book and connected with the conservationist, "going green" elements in the post-nuclear society, while a women's book club resonated with Sallie Dodge's character and her interactions with her family.

"There is a thriller element to the book, plus underlying is the story of a loving family," Kraack said.

Balancing writing a book with work and raising her own family proved difficult sometimes for the longtime Twin Cities resident.

"I would write as much as I could late at night," Kraack said. "And occasionally, I would claim all of Saturday or Sunday just to write."

However, she found help from writing groups. Kraack once edited weekly newspapers and has been creative writing for around 10 years.

"Being a member of a writing group is a valuable part of the writing process, in my opinion," she said. "Workshopping with other writers gives you a reality check — are the characters acting consistent, is the plot moving at a steady pace?"

"Minnesota Cold" is Kraack's first novel, and she said she "wrote to discover the story."

"I just wrote until it was done, and then I went back to decide what could stay and what could go," she said.

Since the book was released, she has begun work on a speculative fiction trilogy. The first book of the trilogy, "Ashwood, Minnesota" is due for release in September 2010 and is set in a post-world depression Minnesota.


"Squandering resources has always bothered me," Kraack said. "Whether it's petroleum, health care, money for schools, water or clean air."

Kraack said "Minnesota Cold" readers have told her the book has kept them up at night, turning pages, and it has also made them think about how they are living.

The book's publisher, Northstar Publishing, has been pleased with the book's success. Kraack said they had planned for the book's first printing to last the end of the year, but that deadline is now under review.

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Kraack will be in Hibbing for a book signing from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 14, at Howard Street Booksellers. She said she is looking forward to coming to the Iron Range. She has visited numerous times, and is originally from a similarly sized area.

"Life just feels a bit more real where people are still connected to their families, neighbors, schools and churches and employers than many of us are in bigger cities," she said.

Kathryn Kohlhase can be reached at kkohlhase@hibbingdailytribune.net. To read this story and comment on it online go to www.hibbingmn.com.

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