

The Rending and the Nest



By Kaethe Schwehn

Thu, November 14 @ 7pm : Author Visit

SSP Library Book Club

Review: 'The Rending and the Nest,' by Kaethe

FICTION: Northfield writer Kaethe Schwehn vividly portrays a hostile world in which survival depends on stories shared, accepted and believed.

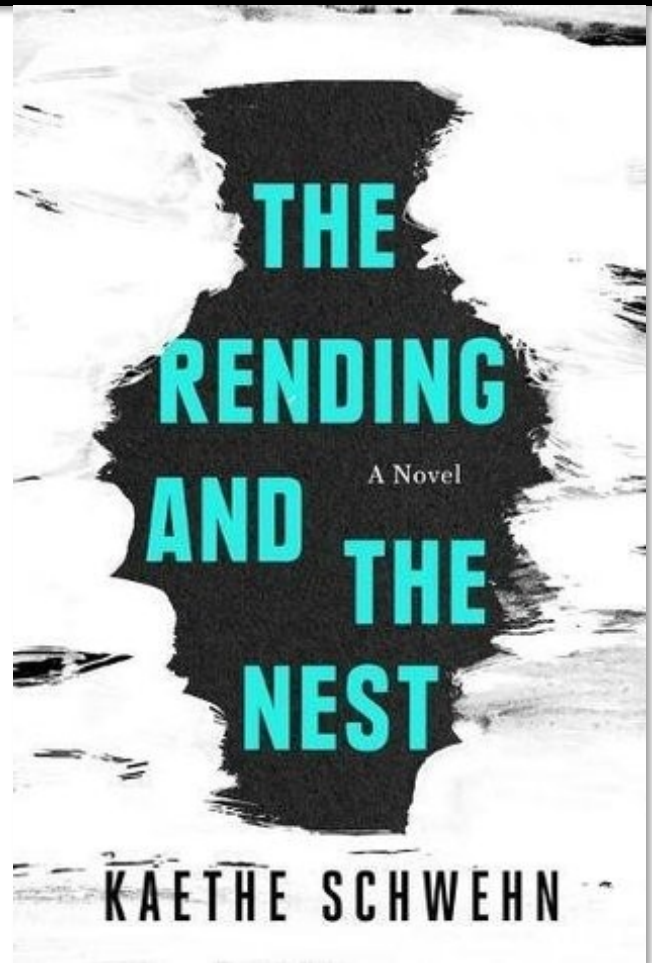
Star Tribune

By Christine Brunkhorst
Posted February 16, 2018

Seconds after leaving her 10-year-old brother in line at Nickelodeon Universe in order to shop, 17-year-old Mira finds herself flat on her back, a sweaty security guard hovering over her. "Come with me," he tells her. Led through a deserted Mall of America by this questionable authority figure, the truth occurs to Mira: The world has changed.

Thus begins Kaethe Schwehn's "The Rending and the Nest," a post-apocalyptic tale of personal acceptance and reinvention that is as compelling as it is unnerving.

One moment Mira is a self-conscious teenager trying to find the right necklace to attract the right boy, and four years later she is a badass survivor in a new world, living with a band of people that her earlier self would not have looked twice at.



Mira is the perfect narrator for this tale of wresting control of our narratives in a hostile world. Like most 17-year-olds, she is filled with doubt, wants to be attractive, wants to fit in. She mimics popular girls, goes to parties she doesn't enjoy, does things she might otherwise not do. Forced into a leadership position in this dystopia, her gradual transformation propels the plot forward: What happened to 75 percent of the world's population? Who has made the cut and why? Why is the world's junk stacked in mountainous piles? What does it all mean?

Mira and the ragtag crew ask these questions

while subsisting in a quadrangle of corrugated shacks near Apple Valley. There is no visible sun and the temperature hovers around 55 degrees. Precipitation doesn't exist, yet the ground is sporadically saturated.

As in any nascent community, the members assume roles. Mira combs the junk piles for repurposeable items; Chester serves as community sage; Ida and Sylvia are pseudo-doctors in a clinic made up of items scavenged from Ikea; Lana becomes yoga instructor and prostitute; and burly, tattooed Rodney assumes the role of Mira's lover.

The survivors establish rules, host visitors from other settlements, trade stories — but only to a point, because each inhabitant nurses a wound he or she would rather keep hidden.

When Lana is the first to become pregnant, normalcy and hope reign. But when she gives birth to a plastic doll, and other women follow suit, bearing similar garage-sale fodder —

Deborah three decorative birds, Paloma a canteen filled with coins, Mira a ceramic vase — chaos ensues. Into this raw wound strides Michael, a nattily dressed visitor bearing a Burley filled with written stories he's gathered from sometimes unwilling subjects. He is mesmerizing and menacing and it will take all of Mira's recategorized selfhood to save her community and move forward.

“Our only truth is narrative truth,” Oliver Sacks writes in “The River of Consciousness.” “The stories we tell each other and ourselves — the stories we continually recategorize and refine.”

Schwehn's novel vividly makes this point through characters who take control of their own lives and learn to lead rather than be led.



About the Author

Kaethe Schwehn

I was born in Chicago but I've lived beside a lake in Minneapolis, on a sleepy street in Indiana, in a rural mountain village in Washington, across from a Mattress Mart in California, upon the side of a volcano in Ecuador, near the coupling of train cars in Montana, and between the dusty walls of a farmhouse in Iowa. Now I live in Northfield, Minnesota where the re-enactment of a bank raid each year is softened with the scent of chocolate breakfast cereal cooking in the Malt O Meal factory down the road.

I studied creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Montana and earned a BA from Gustavus Adolphus College. I currently teach composition and creative writing at St. Olaf College.

I'm the author of *The Rending and the Nest*, *Tailings: A Memoir*, and *Tanka & Me*. I also am the co-editor of *Claiming Our Callings: Toward a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts*. My poems and prose can be found in journals such as *Crazyhorse*, *Pleiades*, *jubilat*, *Witness*, *Minnesota Review* and the anthology *Fiction on a Stick*. I've been the recipient of a Minnesota Book Award for Creative Nonfiction, a Minnesota State Arts Board Grant, a Loft Mentor Series Award, the Donald Justice Poetry Prize, and a Best of the Net Anthology award.

A poem of mine is printed on a sidewalk square in the town where I live. This means that lots of people can read my words or ignore them, decorate them with sidewalk chalk or spill Pinot Grigio into their very crevices. This makes me happy. I think writing belongs in the messy middle of our lives, making us stranger and stronger, word by word.



Coming Up

Thu, December 12 @ 7 pm

News of the World
by Paulette Jiles

