

A CONVERSATION WITH KAETHE SCHWEHN

What inspired you to write *Tailings*?

I didn't set out to write a memoir. I've never thought my life was very interesting; however, I realized a few years ago that Holden Village, a retreat center in the Cascade Mountains where I spent almost every summer of my youth, is a fascinating place. So I set out to write a book about Holden, not about myself. When I submitted an accretion of pieces of the Holden story to my two Loft mentors (through the Mentor Series Program) both said Holden was interesting, but that my own story had to be the book's through-line. I was not pleased.

Describe the research you undertook in writing your book.

I read a short book about Holden's past as a mining village. I interviewed a geologist and asked questions (via e-mail and Facebook) of past village directors and community members. I listened to teaching sessions from the 1980s and paged through my own journals from that time period. I rifled through photos and other documents in Holden's tiny museum and I took my own photos of the mine tailings.

What did you enjoy most about writing your memoir? Did you encounter any challenges in the process?

In graduate school I studied poetry. I was forever writing persona poems because I hated using myself as a central character—I never wanted to be the "I." The best and worst part of writing the memoir was having to learn to inhabit that "I" as myself, or as a version of myself that was much closer to the "real life" me. That was both terrifying and liberating.

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

I hope readers take what they need from the book; that is, I think we take different things from books based on where we are on our own journeys. No reader will resonate with every aspect of the book but I hope that for each reader there's at least a moment of identification or recognition, a moment where the words somehow make the reader feel less alone.

How does being a Minnesotan and the particular community in which you live inform your writing?

I am incredibly grateful for the way my community supports my writing. This book was written with the help of a Minnesota State Arts Board grant and a Loft Mentor Series award. It was fed the wine and wisdom of two Minnesota writing groups and then first promoted at Content, Northfield's amazing independent bookstore. The MN Book Award nomination then provided other amazing opportunities to engage with the wider Minnesota community. I feel ridiculously grateful and lucky to live in this state.

How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

Right now I teach at St. Olaf College and have two amazingly energetic young kiddos (ages 1 and 5). Writing is currently getting squeezed into the cracks between everything else. I have completely forgotten what I like to do when I'm not teaching, writing, smearing peanut butter onto bananas or playing the "Frozen" matching game.

Could you share a little about your current work or plans for a future project?

I'm currently working on a post-apocalyptic novel involving a community that resembles Holden in many ways (except for the fact that the women are giving birth to inanimate objects).

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Tailings: A Memoir

by Kaethe Schwehn

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A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY
THE FRIENDS OF THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

SUMMARY

In August of 2001, Kaethe Schwehn needed her own, personal Eden. She was a twenty-two-year-old trying to come to terms with a failed romance, the dissolution of her parents' marriage, and her own floundering faith. At first, Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center nestled in the Cascade Mountains, seemed like a utopian locale: communal meals, consensus decision-making, and eco-friendly practices. But as the months wore on, the idyll faded and Kaethe was left with 354 inches of snow, one prowling cougar, sixty-five disgruntled villagers, and a pile of copper mine tailings 150 feet high. *Tailings* is a lyrical memoir of intentional community told from the front lines, a passionate and awkward journey about embracing the "in-between" times of our lives with grace and hope.

Kaethe Schwehn accepts her award at the 27th Annual Minnesota Book Awards Gala on April 18, 2015.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author writes that Holden provides a "liminal space, a way of dwelling deliberately in the unknown." What have been the most meaningful liminal spaces you've inhabited? What did you learn during those times?
2. What aspects of life in Holden did you find appealing? Would you want to be among the sixty-five people who keep the village alive during the winter? What would be some of the benefits and challenges of this experience?
3. Describe the author. Which aspects of her character do you identify with most and least? Do you get the sense that she was fully honest in her portrayal of her twenty-something self? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the book's linear structure and use of language. Was it apparent to you from the beginning that Schwehn is also a poet? Can you find examples of poetic influence in the tone of the book and style of writing?
5. The author discusses several definitions and interpretations of vocation, highlighting one from Frederick Buechner who believed vocation is about finding the place where "your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." What is your



own personal definition of vocation and how do you see it reflected in your work?

6. In the deepest part of winter, the author writes, "February feels like a single day repeating itself endlessly." How did you experience the description of the never-ending winter, with its isolation and the sameness of one day to the next? Were there any images or ideas that will stay with you long after closing the book?
7. Hospitality is an important part of the culture in Holden. What are some practices that demonstrate the community's commitment to hospitality and how does Schwehn react to them? Can you remember a time when you came as a stranger to an existing group and were warmly welcomed?
8. Why do you think the author chose to leave her "Intended" unnamed until the eighth chapter? Did the sudden use of his name change anything for you?
9. At the end Schwehn concludes: "Holden didn't let me escape the world; instead, the village helped me make more room for the world inside myself." What does this mean to you?

ABOUT KAETHE SCHWEHN



Kaethe Schwehn holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is the coeditor of *Claiming Our Callings: Toward a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts* (2014). Schwehn has been the recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board grant and a Loft Mentor Series award. Her fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in numerous journals. She teaches at St. Olaf College and lives in Northfield, Minnesota, with her husband and two children. Visit www.kaetheschwehn.com.

27TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

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