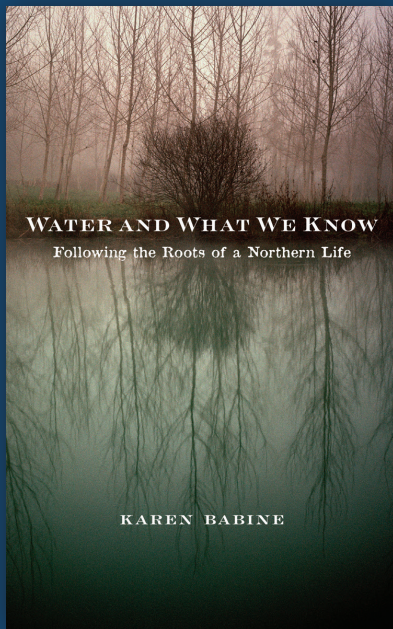




## MEMOIR & CREATIVE NONFICTION WINNER

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### **Water and What We Know: Following the Roots of a Northern Life** by Karen Babine

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS



The Friends, as the Library of Congress-designated Minnesota center for the book, organizes the year-round, statewide activities of the Minnesota book awards.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

In essays that travel from the wildness of Lake Superior to the order of an Ohio apple orchard, Babine traces an ethic of place and explores the link between landscape and identity. From the headwaters of the Mississippi River in Itasca State Park, she considers the desire that drives the idea of the North. The bite of a Honeycrisp apple grown in Ohio returns her to her origin in Minnesota and to pie-making lessons in her Gram's kitchen. In the Deadwood, South Dakota, of her great-great-grandfather, she pursues what the Irish call *dinnseanchas*, or place-lore. And through it all Babine searches out the stories that water has written on human consciousness, revealing again and again what their poignancy tells us about our place and what it means to be here.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Karen Babine** is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*. She was born and raised in the Lakes Country of Hubbard County, Minnesota. She traded lakes and trees for prairie and grass on the Red River Valley of western Minnesota for college, then went west to Spokane to earn her MFA in creative writing from Eastern Washington University. Her PhD in English is from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her interests include place studies and travel writing, contemporary Irish literature, literary heritage, teaching creative writing, and all forms of nonfiction. Her essay "An Island Triptych" was listed as a Notable in the *2014 Best American Essays*. She lives and writes in Minneapolis. Visit [www.karenbabine.com](http://www.karenbabine.com).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stories of Babine's family are woven throughout the pages of this collection. Were there any particular stories that stood out for you? How do you think her family and background served her well in becoming a writer?
2. What does Babine mean when she says, "An ethic of place requires a certain level of discomfort"?
3. How did you respond to Babine's account of the 1997 Red River Flood? Why do disaster narratives form such a foundational part of a community? How does she think one's relationship to a recently flooded place is different than to a place that has seen a wildfire or a tornado?
4. Part of Babine's fascination with the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption comes down to the fact that "something happened to change the physical and mental landscape" and she was alive when it happened. What does she mean by "mental landscape"? Have you experienced events in your lifetime that have changed the physical and mental landscape of a community?
5. Language and etymology appear frequently throughout the collection as Babine examines word origins and how words connect us to the places they represent. Why is it important to understand the connection between language and place?
6. How much do you know of your own ancestry? Did reading "Deadwood" make you wonder about your own background and how it might have shaped who you are today?
7. In "Grain Elevator Skyline" Babine writes: "The existence of the *homeplace* separates the Heartland from other parts of the country." What is "homeplace" and why does she consider it to be an important aspect of the Heartland mythology?
8. Several ethical and environmental questions are raised in the essay "Faults". *How do we control natural disasters - and to what extent should we? Is it a natural disaster if people are not affected, property not destroyed? Are we coming closer to the point where politics and economics finally decide that fossil fuels are not worth the earthquakes and pollution that result from their extraction?* How would you respond to these questions?
9. Babine clearly did a great deal of research in writing these essays. What have you learned from reading the collection and which topics are you interested in exploring further?
10. Is there a particular place where you feel physically and emotionally at home? What does it mean to inhabit that place?

# 28TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

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## A CONVERSATION WITH KAREN BABINE

**What inspired you to write this essay collection? Did you set out with a focus on place and identity, or did the common thread materialize later in the process?**

Like many first collections, this one wasn't designed in one piece. In fact, the earliest pieces in this book I wrote when I was a senior in high school. I wrote the majority of it during my Masters of Fine Arts program, two years that did so much to shape how I envisioned myself in the conversation of environmental writers. In the years since, some essays were removed, some added. Once I had something about the right length and an order that seemed logical, I looked for the thread between all these very different essays on very different landscapes and landscape events, and the idea of water became obvious. I knew early in the process that I was interested in exploring this idea of place, but I didn't fully articulate what I consider an ethic of place until I wrote the introduction (the last thing I wrote).

**Could you describe the research you undertook in writing these essays?**

The best part about being an essayist is the research. It's my idea of fun. Most of the essays start with something I read, something discussed on a podcast, current events, anything. For instance, "Recorded History," about volcanoes, began when I learned that the 1980 Mt. St. Helens eruption was the largest landslide in recorded history. Really? In all of recorded history, that was the largest? So I started researching volcanoes for other "largest" moments, which led me to things like learning that *Frankenstein* was written because of the 1815 Mt. Tambora eruption. Research's purpose is to lead me to those moments of intersection, of *ohhhhhhh*, *I never thought about it that way before*.

**What do you hope your readers will take away from *Water and What We Know*?**

I want readers to be able to find their universal in my specific, to consider how the places they are connected to shape how they think about the world. Often, we don't consider local knowledge a valid form of knowledge, but when we think about what we know, because we are here right now, we know quite a bit.

**How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer? Please share a little bit about your journey in becoming a published author.**

I'm one of those who's been writing since I could hold a crayon, so through high school, college, my MFA, my PhD, it's been about honing my craft, discovering new writers who are writing similar work, becoming a greater part of the literary community. I was able to publish young, through the *High School Writer*, a newspaper-magazine that published high school writing (out of Grand Rapids), to learning in college that literary journals existed. To find the right press for this book, it was a matter of looking at my shelves of my favorite environmental nonfiction and seeing who published them. I'm so grateful my book landed at the University of Minnesota Press: a Minnesota book on a Minnesota press is quite a gift.

**Have you always been drawn to creative nonfiction or did you start out writing in other genres?**

I have dabbled in other genres, but I find nonfiction fits my brain waves best, the ideas and questions and simple joys that can exist in an essay. I always find myself coming back. A writer can learn a thousand things from writing in other genres and at the moment, I find myself in a micro-essay project, which is outside my comfort zone, but it's been fun to play with.

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

When I was a sophomore in college, I took a Minnesota Writers class. It remains the most important literary moment in my life. (Thanks, Joan Kopperud!) But in that class, we read Paul Gruchow's *Boundary Waters*—and I had no idea that he was teaching in our English department at the time. It was the first time I realized that I could write about Minnesota, I could write about rural Minnesota, people would care, it could be published, and, as Gruchow had just won the Minnesota Book Award for *Boundary Waters*, it could win awards. Minnesota is the most vibrant literary community in the country and there is no better place to be a writer.

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

I'm working on a micro-essay collection about my mother's recent cancer diagnosis/treatment, becoming obsessed with cast iron and cooking with it, and being incredibly disturbed by the food metaphors of cancer. Her doctors talk about chemo infusions, of seeds, of her cabbage-sized tumor. And so these very short essays (250, 750, or 1500 words) examine very specific minute aspects of those, from roasting chickens and making chicken stock (as a vegetarian) to making eggs with my favorite cast iron skillet. It's unlike anything I've ever done before (and when it's done, I'm back to place writing), but you go where the writing wants you to go. I wouldn't have chosen to write this on my own, but it's good for me to stretch who I am as a writer.