

Karen Joy Fowler

Life behind the plotline

Local author Karen Joy Fowler wins PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction

By Kirsten Fairchild

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"Unique" is one word to describe Santa Cruz resident Karen Joy Fowler's newest novel, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. "Award-winning" is another.

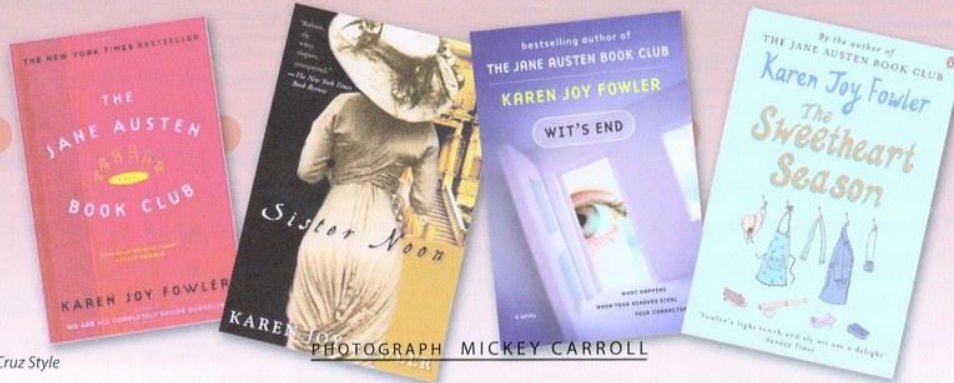
In early April, the book earned 64-year-old Fowler the 34th annual PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, a peer-juried award given for the best work of fiction by a U.S. citizen. Past winners include such stellar authors as John Updike, Philip Roth, E. Annie Proulx, and Sherman Alexie. It wasn't the first time Fowler

was in the running for the prestigious award; she was a finalist for her novel *Sister Noon* in 2002, when Ann Patchett received the award for *Bel Canto*.

The "unique" tag has been repeated by the legion of reviewers who raved about — and too often revealed — the significant plot twist involved in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. No spoilers here, however. All we will reveal is that the novel features a 40-something female protagonist who was

involved in a psychological experiment during the first five years of her life. The book explores the impact of the experiment on her life and her family.

Fowler was born in Bloomington, Indiana, where she lived until she was 11. Similar to her protagonist, Fowler was the daughter of a psychologist who created mathematical models for learning processes. In Fowler's case, her father collected most of his data from training rats to run through mazes.



PHOTOGRAPH MICKEY CARROLL

Her family moved to Palo Alto, where she graduated from Palo Alto High. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science from UC Berkeley and did her graduate work in the subject at UC Davis. Married since 1972, Fowler and her husband Hugh have a son, Ryan, who is an attorney in Southern California, and a daughter, Sharon, who lived in Capitola while pursuing her doctorate at UC Santa Cruz. Visiting their daughter gave the couple a chance to get acquainted with Santa Cruz, and they moved here when Hugh retired six years ago.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is Fowler's sixth novel. She is perhaps best known for her 2004 book, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, which spent 13 weeks on the New York Times Best Sellers List and was made into a feature film. She has also had three short story collections published and has contributed pieces to science fiction magazines and journals such as *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

On a recent morning, Fowler sat down at Chocolate the Restaurant before heading to a Pilates class at Agile Monkey for a conversation over a chai soy latte.

Santa Cruz Style: Congratulations on the PEN/Faulkner Award. What was your reaction when you heard the news?

Karen Joy Fowler: As luck would have it — coincidentally in a very novelistically plotted way — I got the news when I was visiting Ann Patchett. I was doing an event in Nashville and staying at her house. She's the person I lost to the last time I was up for the award. She told me that if I won she would make me pancakes. So, that was my celebration — Ann Patchett made me fantastic pancakes.

How did your own family factor into the writing of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*?

Fowler: The idea for the book came from my daughter Shannon. We had gone back to Bloomington, and I was showing

her her grandfather's lab and his work and telling her about growing up in Bloomington. I mentioned a famous experiment that took place in the 1930s involving an infant, and she suggested that writing about that child would make a good book.

Your previous novel *Wit's End* is set in Santa Cruz. What kind of a setting does Santa Cruz make for in a work of fiction?

Fowler: Santa Cruz makes a fantastic setting. It's a fantastic setting for life as well as a book. It's so varied in terms of geography, botany — I work a lot from setting. It's wonderful to be able to use the beach, the mountains, the woods, downtown — it has a very colorful history, which is probably true of every place.

Looking at your novels and short stories, you don't seem to just write about one thing or stick with just one theme. You tackle a lot of different ideas and that seems to result in very different books. What about that appeals to you?

Fowler: I do return to a lot of the same themes and issues, but certainly in terms of setting and plot, I consciously choose to do my best not to repeat myself. I want to look at something new and try something new. To me, the fun part of being a writer is to solve problems I haven't solved before, to try to learn skills I don't already have.

Arguably, you're best known for *The Jane Austen Book Club*. How many times would you estimate that you've been asked to name your favorite Austen book?

Fowler: Wow. Comfortably, in the hundreds.

Let's add one more to the total. Which is your favorite?

Fowler: It's a rotating answer. It is sometimes *Pride and Prejudice*, it is sometimes

Emma, and it is sometimes *Persuasion*. It is never *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey* or *Mansfield Park*. I have come far enough to believe that *Mansfield Park* is the most interesting, but I can't get to the place where it is my favorite. It's clear to me that the world's smartest people like *Mansfield Park* the best, so I keep trying to get there.

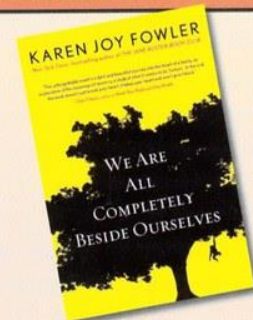
What are some of your favorite places in Santa Cruz County?

Fowler: When it was in town, I loved the Bonny Doon (Vineyard) tasting room and certainly I love Bookshop Santa Cruz. I really like Oswald's and Soif. I love Lighthouse Field State Park, and every morning I can manage it, I walk along West Cliff Drive. The Nickelodeon, the Del Mar, Logos, Agile Monkey — I'm very downtown-centered.

In addition to accepting the PEN/Faulkner Award on May 10 in Washington D.C., what are your future plans?

Fowler: I was just feeling similarly elated and deflated that I'm going to be traveling so much — I will miss most of the summer here. I'm going to several places in the states, to a literary festival in West Cork, Ireland, to Brisbane, and possibly to Sydney and to Singapore. ♣

A cool book for a hot summer



We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves
Karen Joy Fowler

"A novel so readably juicy and surreptitiously smart, it deserves all the attention it can get..."
— *The New York Times*

