

Fowler wins national honor

Authors 2000
 ✓ PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction goes to novelist

By Wallace Baine

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SANTA CRUZ » Santa Cruz novelist Karen Joy Fowler has won the 2014 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for her novel "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves," it was announced Wednesday.

The PEN/Faulkner is the largest peer juried prize for fiction in the United States. Fowler will receive a \$15,000

cash award, and will join the list of past winners that includes such monumental names as John Updike, Sherman Alexie, Philip Roth and Ann Patchett.

Reached via e-mail at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport on her way to a lecture in Erie, Pa., Fowler said, "I am in a state of happy disbelief. Wish I were in Santa Cruz, celebrating with my nearest and dearest."

Fowler was previously a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner in 2002 for her novel "Sister Noon." Other finalists for the 2014 award include Valerie Trueblood for "Search Party: Stories of Rescue," Joan Silber for "Fools," Percival Everett

for "Percival Everett by Virgil Russell" and San Francisco's Daniel Alarcon for "At Night We Walk in Circles."

"We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves" is set in the 1970s with a Midwestern family in which both parents are scientists. The story is told from the point of view of one of the children, Rosemary, who describes about how the loss of her sister Fern fractured the family.

There is a twist to the story that Fowler doesn't reveal until about a third of the way in (Spoiler alert): Fern is a chimpanzee.

The novel was inspired by a real-life

FOWLER » PAGE 3



Karen Joy Fowler won an award for her novel "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves."

BRETT HALL-JONES
 — CONTRIBUTED

Fowler

FROM PAGE 1

developmental experiment in the 1930s of a married couple of scientists rearing a chimp alongside their own infant son.

The experiment ended after nine months when the human child began to mimic the chimp's behavior.

In a 2013 interview, Fowler said that the reveal presented a problem in marketing the book and in her talking about at book signings.

The book is meant, she

said, as a kind of meditation on the emotional and spiritual bonds that can occur between creatures of different species.

Waiting until well into the story to reveal Fern's true identity underscores the cross-species empathy, which is at the heart of the

novel.

"I wanted the reader to think of Fern as her sister first, just as you would think of any other sibling. And I felt that if you met her first as a chimpanzee then I could never make that point as clearly."

The story resonated

especially for her as the daughter of an animal scientists.

"My father worked with rats, never chimps or monkeys. But he was always clear at the dinner table conversation that we were animals as well. So I grew up being told that I was an

animal among other animals."

Fowler and the runners-up to the PEN/Faulkner Award will all be honored on May 10 at a ceremony at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

For more information, visit www.penfaulkner.org.