

Broken for You

by Stephanie Kallos

About the Book

National best-seller and *Today Show* Book Club selection *Broken for You* introduces us to a remarkable new storyteller and has garnered comparisons to the works of John Irving, Anne Tyler, and Margaret Atwood. The story of two women in self imposed exile whose lives are transformed when their paths intersect, Stephanie Kallos's debut novel is a work of infinite charm, wit, and heart. It is also a glorious homage to the beauty of broken things.

When we meet septuagenarian Margaret Hughes, she is living alone in a mansion in Seattle with only a massive collection of valuable antiques for company. Enter Wanda Schultz, a young woman with a broken heart who has come west to search for her wayward boyfriend. Both women are guarding dark secrets and have spent many years building up protective armor against the outside world. But as the two begin their tentative dance of friendship, the armor begins to fall away and Margaret opens her house to the younger woman. This launches a series of remarkable and unanticipated events, leading Margaret to discover a way to redeem her cursed past, and Wanda to learn the true purpose of her cross-country journey.

Funny, heartbreaking, and alive with a potpourri of eccentric and irresistible characters, *Broken for You* is a testament to the saving graces of surrogate families and shows how far the tiniest repair jobs can go in righting the world's wrongs.

Praise for the Book

“Theater veteran Kallos debuts with a dazzling mosaic of intersecting lives and fates. . . . Kallos has a rare, deft way with whimsy, dream sequences and hallucinations. Comparisons to John Irving and Tennessee Williams would not be amiss in this show-stopping debut.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Tikkun olam is a Hebrew phrase that means ‘repair the world,’ and this imperative serves as the narrative catalyst of *Broken for You*. . . . This is a novel of redemption.”

—*Susan Coll, Washington Post*

“[A] dreamy, powerful tale of familial warring, secrets and redemption This haunting and memorable debut is reminiscent of early [Margaret] Atwood, peopled by lovably imperfect and eccentric characters.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Courtesy of Grove Atlantic

About the Author

Title: Stephanie Kallos

American Novelist

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2010. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2010 Gale, Cengage Learning

Updated:03/25/2010

Personal Information

Born in Mountainhome, ID; daughter of Greg and Dorie Kallos; married Bill Johns; children: two sons. **Addresses:** Home: Seattle, WA. Agent: Writers House, 21 West 26th St., New York, NY 10010. **E-mail:** stevie@stephaniekallos.com.

Career

Writer. Previously worked as an actor and teacher.

Awards

Pushcart Prize nomination, for short story "The Failure of Therapy"; Raymond Carver Short Story Award finalist, for short story "FSBO"; *The Today Show* book club selection, 2004, Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, 2005, and Washington State Book Award, 2005, all for *Broken for You*.

Works

Writings

- *Broken for You* (fiction), Grove Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Sing Them Home*, Grove Press (New York, NY), 2009.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Iconoclast*, *Chelsea 73*, and *Carve*. *Broken For You* has been translated into ten languages.

“Sidelights”

Stephanie Kallos is an actress-turned-novelist who impressed many critics with her first novel, *Broken for You*. The story centers around two women living with loss. The first, Margaret, has lived in virtual isolation in a Seattle mansion since the death of her son and her divorce from her husband. In her seventies, Margaret discovers she has a brain tumor and decides that she must do something different with her life as the end is apparently near. She opens her mansion to borders, among them Wanda, a maniacally organized stage manager who was abandoned by her parents and is in town looking for a recent boyfriend who did the same. The novel essentially follows Margaret and Wanda as they interact with each other and come to terms with the ghosts of their respective pasts. Bronwyn Miller, in a review for *Bookreporter.com*, noted that as the book is "told in alternating chapters that illuminate the characters as they are now, we also are privy to their back-stories of how they came to be 'broken.' With such insight into these people, *Broken for You* ends up being a life-affirming read rather than a depressing one." Writing for *Booklist*, Jennifer Baker commented: "Well-crafted plotting and crackling wit make this debut novel ... a delight to read and a memory to savor." *Library Journal* contributor Jenn B. Stidham wrote that the author "has given us a compelling, richly layered story," and a *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented: "Though it takes a while to get started, this haunting and memorable debut is ... peopled by lovably imperfect and eccentric characters."

The author's second novel, *Sing Them Home*, tells the story of three siblings who continue to grapple with their grief following their mother's disappearance years earlier when a tornado swept through their small town in 1978. "The initial idea for *Sing Them Home* arose from a photo from the March 1974 *National Geographic*--and from my family's personal connection to that photo," the author noted in an interview for the *Midwest Booksellers Association* Web site.

The author goes on in the interview to explain that at the age of five her family lived in Wymore, Nebraska, and were friends with a family that lived outside of town in a restored nineteenth-century farmhouse. The author and her family moved in 1960 and, in 1974, a freak tornado landed on the old farmhouse. "*The National Geographic* photo was taken a few miles away, near Blue Springs, Nebraska," the author recounted. "It shows a vast, flattened, muddied milo field with a farmer leaning over the remains of [our friend's] baby grand piano. It was the only thing that came down in any kind of recognizable form." Kallos also recalled that her mother asked how everything could just disappear and wondered where the house's contents went. "These questions--and their implications--have haunted me ever since," revealed Kallos.

In *Sing Them Home*, Aneira Hope Jones has disappeared from the tiny fictional town of Emlyn Springs, Nebraska, during a tornado, and her three children, now grown, continue to deal with the loss of their mother. Larken, the oldest child, is a history professor who finds solace in food. Bonnie, the middle child, is an amateur archivist who continues to search for clues to her mother's legacy. Meanwhile, the youngest son, Gaelan, is a television weatherman who is dedicated to predicting the area's largely unpredictable weather. When their distant father, Llewellyn Jones, dies in a strange way, the three children return home and are face-to-face once again with their family's tragic past and their father's longtime lover, Viney Closs, who was their mother's best friend and ended up helping to raise her kids.

A contributor to the *Book Chick* Web site remarked that "I found myself reading with increasing desperation to find out the secrets of Emlyn Springs." Kallos tells the story via various characters' points of view, including Hope's missing diaries. As the story progresses, readers, as well as the three siblings in the novel, learn about the past of Hope and Llewellyn, including the fact that Hope had several miscarriages and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis just before she was taken.

The town of Emlyn Springs and its inhabitants also play a major role in the novel. Each year, the townspeople's Welsh heritage leads them to honor their dead in a strange way featuring a week of silence and song meant to help the newly dead pass on into the afterlife. "With its Welsh heritage especially--reflected and really outlined here in language, rituals and traditions--as well as characters far richer than small town clichés, the town becomes actually not a backdrop at all, but is as much of a character in the story as its residents," noted a contributor to the *Pickle Me This* Web site. The novel fluctuates between the story of Hope and Llewellyn from the past and the yearlong story of three siblings finally coming to resolutions in their own lives of personal pain, all through love and the formation of a new family.

"The author, who has roots in Nebraska, is working in a vast landscape here, both emotional and physical," wrote Shawna Seed in a review for the *Dallas News Online*. "She handles it all with grace, giving each character and plot line a satisfying finish, like chords resolving themselves." Heather Paulson, writing for *Booklist*, commented that the author "stitches together a colorful patchwork of memories and images, creating a rich narrative fabric."

Further Readings

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, August, 2004, Jennifer Baker, review of *Broken for You*, p. 1900; November 1, 2008, Heather Paulson, review of *Sing Them Home*, p. 25.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, January 16, 2009, Karen Valby, review of *Sing Them Home*, p. 69.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2004, review of *Broken for You*, p. 650; October 15, 2008, review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Library Journal*, August, 2004, Jenn B. Stidham, review of *Broken for You*, p. 68; September 1, 2008, Barbara Hoffert, review of *Sing Them Home*, p. 118.
- *Marie Claire*, January, 2009, Lori Fradkin, review of *Sing Them Home*, p. 43.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 12, 2004, review of *Broken for You*, p. 41; September 1, 2008, review of *Sing Them Home*, p. 33.
- *Seattle Times*, January 11, 2009, "A Family's Fate Is in the Wind; Books and Authors," p. 4.
- *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), January 4, 2009, Katherine Bailey, "Implausibility Casts Specter over Melodrama; FICTION: Three Siblings Reunite for the Funeral of Their Welsh Father," p. 12.

Online

- *Book Chick*, <http://book-chic.blogspot.com/> (February 25, 2009), review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (June 25, 2009), Deborah Donovan, review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (May 30, 2005), Bronwyn Miller, review of *Broken for You*; (June 25, 2009) Norah Piehl, review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Dallas News Online*, <http://www.dallasnews.com/> (January 12, 2009), Shawna Sees, "Sing Them Home by Stephanie Kallos: Plot Twister Sets Sprawling Novel in Motion."
- *Ezine Articles*, <http://ezinearticles.com/> (June 25, 2009), Karen Haney, review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Hedgebrook*, <http://www.hedgebrook.org/> (June 25, 2009), short biography and list of books and awards.
- *Midwest Booksellers Association Web site*, <http://www.midwestbooksellers.org/> (June 25, 2009), "Q & A with Stephanie Kallos."
- *Oregonian*, <http://blog.oregonlive.com/> (January 16, 2009), Alexis Nelson, review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Pickle Me This*, <http://picklemethis.blogspot.com/> (February 27, 2009), review of *Sing Them Home*.
- *Seattlepi.com*, <http://blog.seattlepi.com/> (June 25, 2009), "A Conversation with Seattle Author Stephanie Kallos."
- *Stephanie Kallos Home Page*, <http://stephaniekallos.com> (June 25, 2009).

Source Citation

"Stephanie Kallos." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2010. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 July 2010.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1000162832&v=2.1&u=lom_kentdl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000162832

Discussion Questions

1. How is Margaret portrayed in the beginning? Who is this woman who is entombed in a vast, carefully dusted house with her father's collection? An unlikely heroine, she is an old, peculiar recluse. How is her diagnosis an inciting force for change? Talk about her growing appreciation of the uncommonness of common things.
2. In the clamor of the first armload of plate crashing, Wanda "suddenly knew that she had found a home with someone who was as deeply aggrieved and crazy as she was. It was tremendously comforting" (p. 133). How does the Hughes house, truly a sanatorium, provide a haven and structure for these women to pass through madness to sanity? Can you think of other books or plays that explore the same theme?
3. When Wanda reflects on her life in the theater, she says, "You're part of this intense family for a while, and then everyone moves on" (p. 165). How does Troy shift the rules? What is different about the steady accretion of people at the Hughes house?
4. How much is it possible to know another person? What are the limitations imposed on characters in *Broken for You*, both by accidents of history and by their own actions? Even with breakthroughs of knowledge and trust, do any characters keep a part that is private? Which ones? Margaret and Wanda, for instance, as close as they are, each retain core secrets until almost the end. Why? And what are the secrets? Why does M. J. Striker withhold his own secret and recognition so long?
5. What do we learn about Margaret's mother? How does she function in the book? Were you reminded of Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit*? In her visitations, what is her value to Margaret? There is high comedy in her shenanigans. "Oh, Margaret really! You must enjoy this hoopla while you can. Believe me when I tell you it's no fun being part of a scandal after you're dead" (p. 289). Is Margaret working something else out in these spectral appearances? (The visits of Daniel are fewer and very different. How?)
6. Did you find conflicts between traditional values and newer ones? Where? Which characters grow larger or more sympathetic from being challenged by younger people? Does the converse hold?
7. How is the theme of the quest important in the book? Which characters commit themselves to seeking someone lost? What are the results? Who abandons the quest and why? Are there surprising rewards?
8. Parenting is explored in various characters' stories. Discuss Oscar, Margaret, and Michael as parents. Others? How is the idea of surrogate parenting developed? How successful is it?
9. "Once the door is open . . . you can't shut it again, impose limits, set degrees of openness . . ." (p. 126). In what ways do Margaret and Wanda, and later Gus and M.J., irrevocably make themselves available and vulnerable to life?

10. What does it mean to bear witness in this book? “Margaret had been given the privilege of bearing witness to Wanda’s life” (p. 126). What other characters participate in this act? What are the larger ramifications of bearing witness, and why does it matter? For instance, why does it matter to honor the dead and find out their stories and try to fulfill their wishes?
11. Talk about the title. To how many characters and things and ways of life does it pertain? What is meant by a “dissolution of borders” on page 269?
12. How is the star motif expanded in the book? Think about the star imagery from Margaret to 1942 school children in Europe. (See page 282 for some of Margaret’s own thoughts on the subject. And see page 290 for a further amplification of the symbol.)
13. “The Hughes Collection Scandal: Desecration or Deification?” (p. 278). What do you think about the central occupation in the book? Art? Or half-crazed mayhem? What do Wanda’s pieces say about her as an artist? What does the media criticism of her work say about the art? “Consider the artist’s point of view” (p. 293). Do you accept the premise that salvation or restitution may come through destruction and loss—and moving on? Which characters find their own salvation through building up others?
14. How does the Crazy Plate Academy serve as a culmination of the process that has gone on through the book? “Sorting was like beachcombing on a shore where every pebble is precious and time is boundless. And the familiar way everyone chatted—so many hands in constant, purposeful, attentive motion—gave Margaret the feeling of being at a quilting bee, a barn raising, or a wake” (pp. 327–328). What do these activities, certainly disparate, have in common?
15. How does the fact that neither Margaret nor Wanda is Jewish affect their joint efforts vis-à-vis the Holocaust victims and memories? When does expiation for her Nazi-sympathizer father become important for Margaret? Do you agree that “at the center of this controversy is the concept of worth: what we as humans value—and why” (p. 280)? When Margaret is researching Irma’s past in Paris, she realizes, “Bodies had been shattered and things had not” (p. 313). How directly does her involvement in the making of tesserae correct this imbalance? Does the appearance of the Jewish patron Babs Cohen add credibility to the undertaking? Discuss other times Judaism appears in the novel. Think about, for instance, Sam Kosminsky singing in Hebrew at dinner, the background imagery of Kristallnacht (p. 227), the museum in Paris, and Bruce singing the blessing.
16. Irma Kosminsky is the most vocal proponent for doing mitzvahs. What are some of them? How do you explain her life-affirming resilience and sense of humor? How does she explain it? In a conversation with M.J. we hear “Why bother, Mrs. K? . . . We both know you’re going to win” (p. 274). Apart from Scrabble, how else does Irma “win” in the book?
17. Discuss Stephanie Kallos’s definition of a relationship: “a marvel of construction, built up over time and out of fragments of shared experience . . . Maybe we feel such a strong kinship with *pique assiette* because it is the visual metaphor that best describes us; after

all, we spend much of our lives hurling bits of the figurative and literal past into the world's landfill—and then regret it. We build our identities from that detritus of regret. Every relationship worth keeping sustains, at the very least, splintered glazes, hairline fractures, cracks. And aren't these flaws the prerequisites of intimacy?" (p. 295). Do you find this an alarming view of human behavior? Or do you find it oddly comforting?

18. What is the significance of the Sevre chocolate service? How is the mystery resolved? What is the story of the single teacup? "It was like that all through the war, things like that, little things that people did" (p. 321). What ultimately is the fate of the tête-à-tête?
19. How is the poetry of Yeats interwoven in the book? Why in particular should it be Yeats who recurs?
20. What were the funniest parts of the book for you? Think of Irma, with her dry survivor wit as well as her bolder humor. Recall Maurice, whose clumsiness is a boon in the Hughes house. And Margaret's outrageous mother. Talk about other moments of high or low comedy.
21. How are love and sex recurring symbols of healing and joy? Think about specific relationships, those that survive and those that don't. Describe M.J.'s loves, both as Striker and as O'Casey. How do you compare young love to that of older people? Why does Wanda wait so long to accept Troy as her lover? What does the parenthood of Susan and Bruce say about love, sex, and family?
22. The china, both whole and in pieces, generates stories, such as the ice-fishing ninety-two-year-old Alta Fogle. "Maybe this is true. Maybe not. You can never be sure: all objects in the Hughes house have to have meaning, and if their past is not known, stories are invented" (p. 337). In chapter thirty-two, the narrator addresses the reader directly, as if one were M. J. Striker approaching the Hughes house. "Pay attention. Let your mind embrace metaphors. It's your first clue about what goes on here" (p. 337). How do these quotations help us understand multiple levels of the story? Is the making of mosaic art also a metaphor for writing stories, the novel, for instance?
23. Did you find the dream sequences effective in conjuring up the memories and surreal perceptions of the injured Wanda and the dying Margaret? As a reader was it hard for you to suspend disbelief in a kind of free fall? Have you encountered magic realism in other books? In the third dream sequence, Margaret approaches Wanda. "Be happy. . . . We're worth more broken" (p. 348). How is the last line of Margaret's dream, "The balloon arcs up forever, into the night sky, past millions of glittering stars" (p. 350), magically apt?

Courtesy of Grove Atlantic