

KIM DALLESANDRO

REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS

TRAINS

When fourteen year old Kari left her abusive home and connected with a band of disaffected young people in Germany, she never anticipated the ordeal she would live through for the following several years. It was 1968; the Vietnam War was raging and an alienated generation was kicking back, culturally and politically.

The group Kari joined was a part of a network of radical activists connected with the infamous Red Army Faction. Soon she was both using and running drugs, getting embroiled in political activism bordering on terrorism, and trying to survive the sexual, emotional and physical abuse directed at her by her 'handler' and his associates.

An insight into an era born of idealism that shows how it crashed and burned, often becoming worse than the society it had rejected.

What people have said about 'Trains'

"Kim Dallesandro writes with an enviable prowess that cannot be taught. With *Trains*, she's peeled off her skin, ripped out her guts, and thrown it all onto the table, and done so with an eloquence that will hold the reader spellbound. Uncompromising, fearless, and utterly riveting, *Trains* is a ride no one should miss!"

(Díre McCain - author of 'A Scar is Borne')

"Trains is the kind of deeply felt, propulsive, fist-to-the-heart story that leaves a reader drained, staggered and grateful that the author survived to write it. Dallesandro writes with shades of Denis Johnson and Hubert Selby - and a raw, unpolished power all her own. Trains is the kind of work I could not put down - and didn't want to end."

(Jerry Stahl)

"Kim Dallesandro's book Trains is a sprawling movie or miniseries waiting to happen. Based on a true story, the book (set in 1968/70 Germany) is told from the point of view of varying characters, swirling at a time of upheaval clashing with apathy, when sexual and other physical assaults were quietly condoned.

Dallesandro paints a vivid picture with deft detail, also reflecting that era's moral detritus caused by the useless Viet Nam War, while alluding to the fiery civil rights movement that aimed to right societal wrongs. Trains is a terrific literary entry! (And yes, she's married to my hero, Joe Dallesandro.)"

(Michael Musto)

Kim Dallesandro answers some questions about her first novel, 'Trains'.

1. Your first novel has recently seen publication from Oneiros Books. I understand this one has been percolating for a long time. Can you explain why it took so long for you to get around to writing it?

I'm just learning to write, have little formal education, 5th grade. But all my life I've been a reader. And I've read some great books and I've read some not so great books. When

reading memoirs, I have mixed reactions to them mainly because some writers don't know how to step out of the story. I didn't know how to do that either for decades. Every time I'd write this story it was all about me, me, me. I couldn't get out of the way and allow a reader to make their own decisions based on what they are reading. And if you don't leave room for your readers to be in the story, you lose their interest. That's what happens to me when I read anyway. So I had to give life to the other characters in the story and allow them to have their say which demands I write like a reader.

2. Although it deals with events that happened decades ago, the book feels very timely in terms of what is going on in the world at the moment.

How do you regard that?

I think it's important for people to realize how fast a runaway child will be picked up and used for the benefit of others. And just like Michelle explains so clearly you either belong to your parents or you belong to someone like him. Which is the truth. And then the stink that surrounds you becomes you. In TRAINS, Kari changes into exactly what she feared and hated most, and I think that happens, must happen if one is to survive. You have to learn to blend, that is, become what you're around and mirror it back to them and strategize how to exit the situation knowing that in most cases your homelife was just as bad. There is always a moment of wanting everyone to perish that is abusing you and a moment you wish to no longer exist. So when people see runaways standing around on a street corner high or drunk, just know that the laughter you hear is hollow, means nothing. They are all prisoners.

3. What is the story behind the beautiful painting on the book's cover?

John Huke the artist and his wife Randy Smith Huke I met when I was at the adolescent facility in Austin, Texas. Randy was my art teacher and John would come by the facility and pick her up after work. There came a time when they would take me out on pass and let me paint or eat at a restaurant, they never gave up on me. They encouraged me and showed me how I could walk out of this situation and not go to a State hospital. They saved my life. That's how I see it. And then decades later I was in Austin and went to visit 6 years or so ago, and John showed me some art he'd been working on and there it was. That painting, the story of my life. I bought it and have stared at it everyday because to me it's a photograph of me during that time. Of course it had to be the cover, and I'm fortunate that Randy agreed. I'm so happy to see photographs of the book with John's art everywhere, people seeing his art and coming to know him as an artist. I think after people read the book, they'll realize they didn't even have to; that painting tells the whole story.

4. You've written a lot of shorter pieces, including song lyrics. The prose in 'Trains' has a definite rhythm to it. Please tell us about that.

When I was in 3rd or 4th grade we had this class called syncopated typing. There were twenty five IBM typewriters, with the ball, you know model. The keys were all taped so you could not see the letters and there was a large drawn keyboard on the wall in front of the class so we knew where each letter was. It kept us looking forward, not down. After we

successfully learned to type, the teacher added music, and would use a projector and put a paragraph on the wall, have the class type it over and over maybe five times. Then music was added, a beat was determined and all twenty five of us would type to the music. It was incredible. It taught me about the beat of words, and once you understand that, you know immediately when you're out of synch, so to speak. I wrote song lyrics in Austin with some of the most famous musicians around, and able to do that from the class I had taken years before. I apply that same discipline to the short stories and to this book. It has to have a tempo, or you're just standing still. In TRAINS, the first chapter I wanted to be slow almost frustrating, little snap shots of Kari's childhood, other explanations, almost boring. Just like it would be were you to be standing on the platform in a train station waiting for a train that's late. The second chapter you have boarded the train; that is you've started the story and it slowly opens up and begins to pick up speed to the tempo that will take you to the end. Each subsequent chapter just moves a bit faster. I wanted the readers to feel that movement forward. That's what I tried to accomplish and feel good about the end result.

5. Is it correct you're writing another novel? What will this one be about?

I have a huge amount of writing that's gone missing but the good news is I wrote the story so I'm piecing together what I do have and hoping to fill in the holes after I clear my brain from TRAINS. I must say there is residue that lingers after you finish, it's quite amazing all that you feel. The second novel is an accidental triangle – three people- whose lives overlap and results in a surprising redemption for one of them. This is

what I really want to write, this story, MAD DOG TAG. It's almost three stories that have to seamlessly merge into the final couple of chapters. It's working out how to do that keeping my tempo and the forward movement. For me writing is music, poetry and words so it's complicated to get started, map it out, but once I understand where I am and where I'm going, it all just happens.

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MAD DOG TAG

Kathleen is dying of cancer. As she reviews her life and reflects on mortality she decides she needs to perform an act that will confirm her humanity. Jesse is a Vietnam veteran, horrifically damaged psychologically and physically. As their lives become entwined, an inexorable series of events is set into motion.

Mad Dog Tag is a character-driven psychological study, part love story, part horror, with the fascinating beauty of a slow motion trainwreck.

This is the second novel by Kim Dallesandro.

What people have said about 'Mad Dog Tag'

Kim Dallasandro is able to recreate in words, the hell that resides somewhere, in all of us, that we hope to never see. I read with the prayer that I will not have to personally experience anything like this. I am convinced that she embodies the souls of otherwise forgotten individuals who have, for some reason, only known to God, have had to endure these wretched experiences. That said, interspersed with these descriptions that try the imagination, is a sense of humor that has, in all likelihood, kept her sane. Theater of the Absurd comes to mind, but, this writing is totally original.

It is not an easy task for a writer to maintain a level of adrenalin throughout an entire work of literature that keeps a reader on the edge of the proverbial seat, and yet, while Mad Dog Tag comes from a very different viewpoint than her first work, Trains, KD manages to sustain the same sense of anticipation and anxiety one feels while immersed in Trains.

The reader just does not know what to expect, what will come next.

Mad Dog Tags is told from the perspective of different characters but mostly through the recollections of the PTSD-haunted soldier protagonist, Jesse. The character of Jesse Smith comes to life through the reliving of formative time periods in his life, but the times are so well defined by dialogue that the reader is able to experience his “being” seamlessly. KD does not waste words and though the reader does not know what will happen next, there is never a feeling of being strung out.

Reading It takes a generosity of soul to write stories like this; stories that barely differentiate between reality and imagination. You can't make this stuff up.

(Charlotte Herzele MEd, PhD, MED)

“Kim Dallesandro has done it again. Superbly crafted with her signature unvarnished prose, *Mad Dog Tag* is a mesmerizing psychological novella that will swallow the reader whole. Another remarkable achievement by a writer who brings literary conventionality to its knees.”

(Díre McCain – author of ‘A Scar is Borne’)

“Kim allows us into her true life story with a sense of wisdom and honesty. Her writing is daring and feels like a run on sentence of pain that is being released.”

(Christian Madsen)

Dave Mitchell talking with Kim Dallesandro about her new book ‘Mad Dog Tag’,

Dave: Mad Dog Tag has been brewing for a long time. I remember seeing bits of it in Paraphilia Magazine and I think we included a

section in the 'Dream of Stone' anthology. Why was it in limbo for so long?

Kim: The biggest reason it took so long is I wrote the ending first way back in 2005 and the challenge was to thread together a story that fit that ending. Also, Jesse's story is so raw and brutal that it's impossible to digest as a whole, small spoonful's of it fed into the storyline make it more intense but controlled since the intensity of his story quickly overshadows and colours any story I tried to write around his. I also had to find a way for the Kathleen character to at least have the same intensity as Jesse in an entirely different way. It's a story of energies, maybe.

D: It's a character driven novel, obviously, but where did these characters originate?

K: Jesse Smith is based on a relationship I had with a Vietnam Vet, everything I wrote is from conversations we had over the time we were together and my own experience with his unrelenting PTSD and his sometimes crazy ways of coping with it. Stacy Bernstein the doctor treating Jesse is based on his stories about a caseworker at the V.A. Hospital he had and what happened during that relationship. Kathleen is a fictional character I made up but many things she does I did once, so I transfer life events into this story of fiction, it's believable because it really happened in real life.

D: The character of Jesse is hinted at in early chapters, but he doesn't appear until a quite advanced stage in the book. Why was that?

K: Kathleen has to be able to see him, understand him, empathize with him and it takes all those chapters to break her down so she can.

D: It seems to me that you were playing a subtle game with reader expectation, offering plot twists only to pull them again. I confess I really didn't know how it was going to end right up until the last chapter. It made me laugh and start again from the beginning. What was going through your mind there?

K: Since I knew the ending, I could play cat and mouse with the reader, I had the power to bring it home in any number of ways. I like that not one person in my reading group (persons reading chapters as they were written) had any idea what was going to happen. And as in real life, none of characters knew what was about to happen either. So the reader is just as surprised as the characters. Or so I hope.

D: Like Trains, this book has wider ramifications than just to distract the reader for a few moments. There are multiple messages in there. How would you like that to be perceived?

K: Simplest answer is there is only one person in the room, meaning we are all part of something much bigger than ourselves. Most of us forget that the need for individual expression and planting a flag that screams 'look at me I'm different' prevents magical moments from happening under the worst of conditions. I really wanted a magical moment; I wrote this book as an apology to my Mad Dog Tag not having the resources or experience to deal with what he went through and probably making it worse by not understanding what he needed.

D: The cover art is beautiful. You drew that yourself. What's the story behind that?

K: Dots. They fill time, they distract, they quiet a noisy brain. I draw for those reasons, it's a meditation of sorts. That's just what I drew on that day, which was the perfect portrait of Mad Dog Tag.

D: Kim Dallesandro, thank you for answering my questions.

K: Thank you for helping me through both of these books, what a ride it's been!

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DREAM MAKER

On July 15th, 1976, twenty six children and a bus driver from Chowchilla California were kidnapped and buried alive in a rock quarry 106 miles away in Livermore. This is not a story about that. This is a story about the people who lived through that. This is a story about fear, mindful meditation, loss and most importantly, a story about what is a lie and what is the truth; a story about living and a story about dying. A story about letting go and surrender.

What people have said about 'Dream Maker'

"In Dream Maker, Kim Dallesandro, delivers with prowess a work of fiction that had me on the edge of my seat wanting more. I couldn't tell you what the story was even about but the dialogue between the characters set scenes that were intriguing. Kim shows expertise at reeling the reader in and not letting you go until she's had her way with you and you love every delicious minute of it! Dream Maker is a work of captivating art!"

(Lisa Cherry, author of 'The Hard Way')

"This is a book of lyrical and dreamlike prose, with a stunning and heartbreaking end, as four people hope for absolution and with love and compassion struggle for the acceptance of pain and loss and its permanence in a life of impermanence."

(Kathy Doyle)

"Kim weaves a tapestry of Maggie's life. The apprehension builds as Maggie's life unravels."

(Mary Nelson)

Once again, Kim Dallesandro manages to tell a raging story in which the characters are fully developed and completely distinct through the words they speak. Reading *Dream Maker* is like watching a movie. What surprises and delights me the most in all Kim's work is her ability to provide the reader all the information necessary to follow whatever is going on in the story. She provides characters' individual histories through dialogue that streams through and defines each character. I always want to know what each of them will do next and where they will end up. This comment, by Maggie, "She marched through Jenny's life, Maggie did, at what would now be called the eleventh hour, like a Joan of Arc character, she assessed the damage and miraculously a week or so later what was had returned. That's the short version of a much longer, more complicated story," says it all. I want to know more about that complicated story.

(Charlotte Herzele - MEd, PhD, MPH)

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIM DALLESANDRO ABOUT HER NEW BOOK 'DREAM MAKER',

1. You've just had a third novel published. That's three books in the space of just over a year. Some people might see that as quite rapid. What's the story behind that?

When you don't have much time to catch up, you learn to type fast.

2. I gather that the actual process of physically writing this one was very different from the previous two. Can you explain?

"Trains" was a story that was pulled from a much bigger piece of writing "Renunciation" which I could draw from and refer to during the writing process. "Mad Dog Tag" was eleven years of a never ending struggle to write a story to fit an ending I'd thought of in 2006, leaving me with mountains of failed attempts to tell the story I finally was able to articulate. And then along came "Dream Maker" and I did my usual research, notes, plotted and planned, felt really good about this story I'd imagined until Chapter 5 when it suddenly came to me that I was writing a story that had little to do with what I thought I was writing. At the time, I honestly did not believe I could pull it off. People that read the book will let me know if I did.

3. *What is your attitude to drawing on personal experience in your writing?*

Every story, every lyric, every jotted down line of words I write includes some aspect of my life. What else can I draw from that I know anything about? Only what I've done, felt, survived.

4. *Without really giving anything away, most of the action in this book takes place in one confined space. What is the significance of that?*

The characters were lazy. They never went anywhere. They demanded it be written that way, so I complied.

5. *I heard you say that you regard this as your first 'real' book. What do you mean by that?*

This was the first one I experienced a "force" of sorts demanding the story be written for it, not MY story, THEIR story. It was crazy! I felt removed, pushed aside and watched the story unfold, same as if I was the reader not the writer. I believe that is the magic of great writing, getting out of the way and letting the words come from outside yourself.

6. Your ear for dialogue is incredible and the prose has a rhythm to it that becomes more obvious when it's read out loud. Where does this come from?

Lyrical writing. Everything has a beat. Silence has beat, the street has a beat, conversations have a beat, writing must have a beat, a rhythm that moves the words forward toward the ending. Without it the writing falls flat, loses the reader and makes it hard to remember what you already read when you come back to the story.

7. Everyone who's read this so far was blown away by the ending and had to go back and read the book over again. I heard you were surprised by the ending yourself. How did that come about?

I was surprised. But I knew the ending at Chapter 5. What surprised me more is how we got to the ending.

8. Can you describe yourself in one word?

Wallpaper, baby.

Kim Dallesandro, thank you for answering our questions.

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Born at March AFB, Riverside California in 1954 and raised in a military family, Kim Dallesandro spent her youth in Japan, England and Germany with small intervals back on U.S. soil.

At just turned 16 fate threw her feet first across the pond landing in Texas. Writing being a staple of her creative life, she married a musician and began a journey of lyrical writing, working with such artists as Joe Ely, Asleep At The Wheel, Harvey Young, RC Banks, Kimmie Rhodes, Stevie Vaughan, Jimmy Vaughan, Denny Freeman, Keith Ferguson, TJ McFarland, Bevis Griffin and Chris Bailey, learning the craft of songwriting.

Her poetry and lyrical writing led to short stories and her ability to find the discipline to condense words and incite emotions in writing with precision and economy. Selections of her writing were published in Paraphilia Magazine in 2012-2014.

In 2021 she wrote two novels, the first 'TRAINS' based on a true story, and "MAD DOG TAG' a piece she'd worked on for over a decade, both published by Oneiros Books in 2021, reprinted by Incunabula Media in 2022.

Her newest book, 'DREAM MAKER' was published by Incunabula Media in 2022.

There is an excellent interview here where Kim talks about her experiences writing song lyrics and the many people she worked with over the decades.

<https://www.punkglobe.com/kimdallesandrointerview0311.php>