Kathleen Founds

Kathleen Founds is the author of “When Mystical Creatures Attack” and teaches English at Cabrillo College in Aptos.

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KATHLEEN FOUNDS: “WHEN MYSTICAL CREATURES ATTACK” IS ITSELF A BIT OF A MYSTICAL CREATURE.

It’s a novel told through short stories, a witty mix of voice and form that agents didn’t know what to do with, written by a first-time author and published by a small university press — and here it is, making The New York Times’ list of 100 best books of 2014.

For Founds, 32, a Marina resident and Cabrillo College English instructor, the honor came as a surprise — and a relief.

“It was a huge, exciting achievement for it to actually get published,” she said of the book, which came out in October. “But then once I knew it was going to get published, I was kind of afraid that it would just come out and disappear and people wouldn’t actually read it. Like it was on The New York Times list, I felt relaxed. It was like, ‘OK. Some people are going to read it now.’

Like many a mythical creature, the book is an amalgamation of parts.

It started about 10 years ago with a binder full of short stories for her graduate thesis at Syracuse University. As she waited in a coffee shop for her advisor, award-winning short story writer George Saunders, she flipped through the binder and started to notice a theme.

“I realized that half of my stories were about angsty, red-headed teenage girls, and the other half were about angry, red-headed women in their 20s,” she said. What if, she thought, she could make connections between them?

With cautious encouragement from Saunders, Founds got to work turning the stories into a novel. She knew all of the teenage girls name and the 20-something women in other name. Then she wrote the book’s final chapter — “I knew that was the book I wanted to get to” — and started filling in the rest, in some cases repurposing old stories. (Or, as Founds put it, cannibalizing her “former failed work.”)

The result is a narrative arc that follows the mental breakdown of an idealistic high school teacher named Laura Freedman, who corresponds from an insane asylum with two of her students: the rebellions and brooding Janice, and the hopeless romantic Cody, an aspiring writer.

Stories take the form of high school writing assignments, emails, letters, a cookbook, a diary and bits journaling entries for Ms. Freedman’s capitalistic, middle class family, and receive a response.

They’re written in first, second and then a partial person, lifted by sarcastic humor, poet and high and vengeful, weighted by moments of sweetness, longings and despair.

“I couldn’t do a (traditional) novel,” Founds said. “I always wanted to write a novel, but I found it really challenging to just stay in one voice and one tone consistently over a long course.”

“When Mystical Creatures Attack!” was published by the University of Iowa Press as a prize for winning 2013’s John Simons Short Fiction Award. Founds entered her book in the competition after finding little success with literary agents, who deemed the genre-defying format “difficult to place.”

That was the euphemism for “we can’t sell this,” she said.

The idea of a mystical creature, illustrated by Founds, may not be fully representative of the work as a whole. But they do point to a particular brand of humor found in her online-only children’s books and comics.

Her children’s books aren’t really for children, even if she did write them for one of her brothers, who is 17 years younger, when she went off to college. “Soledad the Squid and the Relentless Search” is a chirpily depressing account of the desire for companionship “Thanatophobia and the Socially Awkward Possum (A Love Story) gets a little more traditional, as Pedro the possum must find the courage to woo a multi-colored bird. It also introduces a debatably cute animal called a squash.”

The comics are mostly about motherhood (Founds has a 2-year-old daughter), but they also feature a goat named Brian and an icicle with an original corner in a high-poverty area.

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Then it was on to Syracuse to earn her master of fine arts in creative writing, and later to Ohio, where she taught writing at a technical school specializing in truck-driving certificants.

Some of these experiences work their way onto the pages under a familiar philosophy.

“I think of writing as kind of like quilting,” she said. “The women in my family who died before I was born were made these beautiful quilts with these elaborate patterns. But what’s interesting to me is that rather than going to a fabric store or something, it would be stuff they wore around. They made their clothes out of fabric, and which used to come in a pretty material. They’d wear the clothes and they’d become little scraps, and then they’d sew them into these quilts.”

“So the quilt ends up being part of their life or representing them in some way. And it’s all sliced up and reconfigured into a different way. I would consider that a metaphor for how my life goes into my writing.”

“When Mystical Creatures Attack!” is available online and at Crossroads Books in Watsonville and Live Oak Santa Cruz. She will do a book-signing at Crossroads Books from 1 to 3 p.m. Jan. 31.

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Kathleen Founds also designs the labels for the Founds Family Brewery. Her favorite beer: The Nereid Popsicle Imperial IPA.