

Q&A

A Conversation with
Kristin Bair O’Keeffe

author of *Thirsty*

Q: What is *Thirsty* about?

A: At its heart, *Thirsty* is the story of one woman’s journey through an abusive marriage, but it’s about a lot more than that: the steel-making culture that dominated Pittsburgh for over a century and that demanded so much of immigrant families, race relations, the way that women get so much of their power and strength from their friendships with other women, the way significant change can take an absurdly long time to occur, immigration from Eastern Europe during the late 1800s and early 1900s, displacement, loneliness, and the cycle of violence among generations of women.

Q: *Thirsty* is set in Pittsburgh around the turn of the twentieth century at the height of the city’s steel-making days. How did you come to write this particular story in this particular time?

A: I grew up in Pittsburgh before and during the crash of the steel industry. My maternal grandparents lived in Clairton, Pennsylvania, and my grandfather worked in the Clairton Works. As a kid, I spent loads of time at their house and loved it. Despite the pollution and the stress that working in the mills put on families, the towns were tightly knit communities. Over the years, I developed a kind of awe of the mills and all those little towns carved into the steep slopes near the rivers. I was fascinated by how a place and its denizens could be so completely bound to and even defined by a single industry. Pittsburgh was (and in many ways, still is) steel, and vice versa.

Of course, *Thirsty* is a historical novel that takes place long before I was born, or my grandparents,



for that matter. The novel began as a poem about the mills that I published as an undergrad at Indiana University—“Crumbling Steeples.” At the time I wrote the poem, I didn’t know that it was the beginning of a novel. I didn’t start writing *Thirsty* until many years later.

Q: Has the city changed since your childhood?

A: Dramatically. The most obvious change is that since closing, most of the mills have been dismantled and the land on which they stood redeveloped. The first time I drove down East Carson Street after J&L Steel’s Southside Works had been taken down, I cried. The riverbanks that were once lined with mill buildings are now filled with condos, restaurants, and beautiful parks. It’s lovely, but for those of us who grew up when the mills dominated the landscape, the absence of them is strangely sad.

Q: Is the Pittsburgh you wrote about different than the Pittsburgh you know?

A: No and yes. Pittsburgh has a spirit that transcends time and change. Native Pittsburghers know what I’m talking about. We maintain a deep connection to the city and to one another, no matter how far away life takes us. I’ve met more Pittsburghers since moving to Shanghai than I’ve met in a long time. Hear a Pittsburgh accent on an airplane? Introduce yourself. See a Steelers T-shirt on a boy in India? Say hello. Desperate to watch the Steelers play in the Super-bowl? Go to an Irish pub in Shanghai.

That spirit was born and nurtured during Klara's time, when the city's pride and belief in itself swelled because of its prowess as the steel-making center of the world. That will never change.

On the other hand, Pittsburgh is a very different city today. Step by step, it is healing and recovering from the damage that was done by the demise of the steel industry in the 1980s. As the steel-making center of the world, Pittsburgh had a unique voice; it's still searching for a new voice, a new identity. The fact that the G20 Summit is taking place there in September speaks volumes about how it is moving forward.



Q: How much research did you do for the book?

A: A good bit. Since I wrote the first full draft of *Thirsty* as my graduate thesis, I did most of my research at the Chicago Public Library. When I began, I didn't know much at all about the steel-making process, but when I was done, I could have been thrown onto a team at the Clairton Works in 1890 and pulled my weight. (My grandpa would have been proud.)

I also drew upon my own experiences as a native Pittsburgher. I'm familiar with the landscape of Pittsburgh and the way that landscape has shaped communities and their inhabitants. Of course, in the end, I depended most on my imagination. Since I didn't live during Klara's time, I had to imagine her life, her feelings, and her responses to Drago and others. There was a point at which I had to let go of the facts and let the story move into fiction.

Q: Did you visit any steel mills while researching the book?

A: Well, I tried. During a visit home one Christmas, I slipped onto the property of one of the mills without any of the guards seeing me. I wanted to take photos. For a while I roamed about without any trouble, snapping shots of this and that. But then a guard spotted me and got

upset; I'm pretty sure he thought I was an environmental spy. There was a lot of discussion at that time about the pollution the mills were putting out. Within minutes, I was not very kindly escorted from the property.

Q: Is Thirsty a real town?

A: In my head, yes, and hopefully by the time readers turn the last page of *Thirsty*, yes. But in reality, no. It's a mythological town, an amalgamation of all the steel towns I know and all I read about during my research.

Q: The domestic violence in the novel is both powerful and uncomfortable. Was it difficult to write?

A: I had to trust Klara's story while writing. The sections of the book in which Drago is beating Klara or Maxwell is beating Sky came quickly and completely. It's tough stuff, but important. I winced, but kept writing.

Q: Did you worry that Drago and Maxwell might alienate some readers?

A: No, I didn't. One reader once complained that *Thirsty* was too violent and that there aren't any men like Drago or Maxwell in our world, but unfortunately, that's not the case. According to the National Coalition of Domestic Violence, an estimated 1.3 million women in the United States are victims of physical assault each year and one in every four women will experience domestic violence in their lives.* That number doesn't even take into account all the women abused in countries around the world or all of the domestic violence that doesn't get reported. I don't like the fact that we are still combating an issue that women in Klara's time were combating, but we are. No reason to shy from it.

*Statistics quoted by the National Coalition of Domestic Violence. [<http://www.ncadv.org/>]

Q: There's a cycle of violence in *Thirsty*. Klara's father was abusive. Her husband is abusive. And her daughter follows the same pattern by marrying an abusive man. Do you believe this is the way it works?

A: I do. Daughters learn so much from their mothers—from watching as much as from interacting. When a mother becomes a victim of abuse, the daughter often follows the same path. There's a great deal of psychology behind it, but that's the short answer.

Q: Has domestic violence toward women changed since Klara's time?

A: Here's what I know: Way too many women around the world are victims of domestic violence. There were too many during the time when Klara would have lived and there are too many today.

Yes, there are many more resources available to women today—shelters, organizations, help lines, and so on—and many more people working to put an end to such violence, but the crisis is still too big. On top of that, funding is being cut for programs. (California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently cut 100 percent of domestic violence funds.)

Q: How often do you visit Pittsburgh? And when you do, where do you go?

A: My folks and two of my sisters still live in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, so I get to go home and eat hoagies at Danny's Pizza at least once a year. When I'm living in the United States, I try to get there twice a year. One of the things that's hardest for me is that I haven't been home during the summer for a number of years so I haven't made it to Kennywood (the local amusement park) . . . and like most Pittsburghers, I love Kennywood: the Turnpike, the Racer, the Log Jammer, cheddar

"Kristin Bair O'Keeffe's *Thirsty* has all the power of a small miracle. The mysteries of nineteenth century, small town factory life—the sudden appearance of thousands of butterflies, an extraordinary affliction of hiccups, a talking bird—brilliantly transcend the accumulation of everyday cruelties. A remarkably good read."

—Joe Meno, author of *The Great Perhaps* and *Hairstyles of the Damned*

fries at the Potato Patch, Noah's Ark . . . all of it. Now that I have a daughter, I'm making it a point to get home in the summertime. Hopefully, by the time she's five, she'll know Kennywood as well as I do.

Q: What is your writing routine?

A: I used to get up before sunrise, roll out of bed still dreamy and sleepy, then stumble into my office and write for many hours. That was before I became a mom. Now I get up before sunrise, roll out of bed, and stumble into my daughter Tully's room to get her out of her crib and ready for the day. She and I spend our mornings together; I write in the afternoons when I have childcare help (and in the wee hours of the morning and the late hours of the evening when Tully is sleeping).

Q: Who are your favorite writers?

A: I always say that if I could have lunch with any two people in the world, I would have lunch with Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison. I've been inspired by many writers, but those two are my touchstones.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: Besides a magic potion that will stop abusive men from hurting women and instill girls and young women with a sense of self that is impermeable to abuse from such men, I'm also working on a memoir and my second novel. The memoir is the story about finding love, moving to China, and becoming a mom. The subject of the novel is still a secret.



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