

The Allure of Decay

In her new graphic memoir, Kristen Radtke explores her preoccupation with human mortality and abandoned spaces

By CLAIRE KIRCH

Kristen Radtke has always been fascinated by abandoned structures that have fallen into decay. But she also feels a compulsion to preserve what is lost by journaling and writing. These seemingly contradictory impulses led Radtke, 29, to work for the past six or seven years on graphic essays that she has compiled into a memoir, *Imagine Wanting Only This* (Pantheon, Apr.).

Radtke says her nonlinear graphic memoir started as a series that she began as a graduate student in the University of Iowa's M.F.A. program for nonfiction writers. After a two-year stint in Louisville, Ky., Radtke, who is the managing editor at Louisville-based publisher Sarabande Books and also the video editor for *TriQuarterly*, Northwestern University's literary magazine, moved to Brooklyn in 2014.

"*Imagine Wanting Only This* started as prose," Radtke explains. "At first I didn't realize that I was writing a book about ruins; I was just writing a lot about ruined places. I didn't recognize that they had anything in common until I'd been working on the book for a couple of years."

The memoir opens with Radtke and her college boyfriend taking a road trip from Chicago to Gary, Ind., when she was 20



to visit the ruins of a cathedral in the city's center. They discover a bag of photographs and take it with them, a spontaneous act with emotional consequences that is referenced repeatedly throughout *Imagine Wanting Only This*. The pictures turn out to have been left by friends as a tribute to a young photographer, Seth, who was killed while photographing an approaching train.

The memoir concludes with Radtke's move to New York City and her imagining the city devastated by terrible floods. In between, Radtke recalls her childhood in Green Bay, Wis., and learning in elementary school about the Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871, the deadliest wildfire in history, which leveled a nearby town the same day as Chicago's more famous fire.

Author Profile

Radtke also describes her visits as an adult to the World War II ruins on the island of Corregidor in the Philippines and to Heimaey, an island off Iceland's coast that was destroyed in 1973 when a volcano erupted and covered the town in lava and ash. The townspeople later returned to Heimaey and rebuilt the town, a fact that impressed Radtke: "I thought [Heimaey] was so striking, the idea that you could love the place you are from enough to move back even after it had been completely destroyed and you would rebuild essentially exactly what you had before."

The title of the book, *Imagine Wanting Only This*, refers to Radtke's response to visiting that reconstructed town. The cover image shows the author from behind, gazing out at the Detroit skyline from inside the Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Recalling a moment during a layover there, she says she realized that the image of a new airport next to a decaying city "encapsulated the ideas of the book." She adds: "Detroit is our American example of ruins more than anywhere else. So many structures there have been abandoned since the automobile industry left."

Human beings have always been fascinated by ruins, Radtke notes, because they are intrigued by what existed before them and what will come next. Some contemporary ruins—the result of industry leaving a place—are particularly evocative, she says, because they demonstrate "how each of our civilizations is vulnerable to the same things," from antiquity to the present.

As a child, Radtke says, she "always drew and always wrote," particularly after her parents—her father is a retired engineer who became a farmer, and her mother a homemaker—moved from a subdivision to the countryside outside

of Green Bay. "It was a really comfortable upbringing, but it was very isolating. It's probably why I was a writer—I just spent so much time in my room alone, drawing, writing."

Radtke's family did not travel. They "really wanted to stay close to home, which was something that I bristled at," she says. This, together with a family history of a genetic heart defect that is resistant to treatment, contributed to the wanderlust she has exhibited since her late teens.

"The reality that we have a finite amount of time can make us all a little frantic," Radtke says. "Or at least it made me a little frantic in those moments where I've recognized it. It makes me anxious to go out and see and do as much as I can. I think it also informs that need to preserve and to take things down."

After leaving home at 18 for Chicago to attend Columbia College's art program, followed by a short stint in Italy, Radtke moved to Iowa City in 2009, where, encouraged by University

of Iowa writing program faculty members Robin Hemley and John D'Agata, she began combining words and images, beginning with comic strips and video essays. "I resisted doing a full book of [text and images] for a long time," she says, explaining that she didn't think at the time that she could sustain the visual narrative and draw the same characters "for 300 pages."

Though Radtke considers herself both a writer and a visual artist, she notes that drawing is often easier for her than writing and says she believes that one can convey in graphic form anything that can be expressed in prose. "But I do think we all use the tools we have to tell stories," she says. Sometimes she draws entire pages before writing any text; at other times she "completely storyboards and maps something out with text and draws later."

Radtke lists among her literary influences Alison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi, who have both written graphic memoirs. She also praises cartoonist Adrian Tomine for his characterizations and dialogue.

With her literary preferences running toward short stories and essays, Radtke notes that she initially enrolled in Iowa's nonfiction writing program to hone her essay-writing skills. "I'm really influenced by the form of the essay," she explains, "That is really how I structured the book, with an argument and then investigating. I read a ton of Didion when I was writing this book. She is the master of essays in general."

Emboldened by the critical reception of *Imagine Wanting Only This*, which is a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers pick for spring, Radtke is working on two new graphic projects: a graphic novel about female friendships, that she calls a "terrible man book," and

a series on urban loneliness that is being published on the *New Yorker's* website. That series, with "big illustrations" and "probably no narrative" was inspired by Radtke's move to New York City after living in such small towns as Green Bay, Iowa City, and Louisville.

New York City, Radtke says, "is such a great place to people watch: we're very publicly in our private spaces, because we spend so much time in transit or crammed all together." She adds, "It's very interesting, watching people fall asleep on the subway or have a screaming phone call in a parking lot in a way that doesn't happen in smaller towns where we can get away from one another."

Focusing for so many years on ruin and decay, Radtke says, made her feel that she needed to move in the opposite direction with her next project. "I wanted to do something next that was highly attuned to people—their faces, their bodies, the way they talk and move through space," she says. ■

