

# A Story to Tell

Author Bryn Greenwood's unconventional life inspires gritty novels

BY KAT BRAZ

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRYN GREENWOOD '92, '95



Bryn Greenwood '92, '95 is a *New York Times* bestselling author who discovered her storytelling mechanic at K-State.

Bryn Greenwood authored her first story before she learned to write. *The New York Times* bestselling author vaguely recalls the thinly veiled autobiography of an alien family with a character that bore a striking resemblance to the Great Gazoo from the *Flintstones*. Because Greenwood '92, '95 was too young to write, she dictated the tale to her older sister, Liberty '90.

"I can honestly say that from the first moment I understood what books were and that there were people out there who got paid to write books, I knew that was what I wanted to do," Greenwood said. "If you can imagine your average 4-year-old having the confidence to say 'Yes, this is what I want to do with my life.'"

She grew up in rural Hugoton, Kansas, in the southwest corner of the state, where she dropped out of high school to follow her older sister to Kansas State University. The acceleration into college was fueled partly by Greenwood's frustration with an unchallenging high school curriculum and partly by a need to escape her drug dealing father's very public trial for tax evasion.

It was at K-State in her first creative writing class taught by Ben Nyberg, professor emeritus, where Greenwood discovered a storytelling mechanic that would become a hallmark of her novels. After asking students to write a story about something personal they experienced, Nyberg then instructed his class to flip the perspective and rewrite the same story with the antagonist as the protagonist.

"It's a challenging thing to recast this person, whom you may still have grudging thoughts toward, and suddenly make them the hero of your story," Greenwood said. "It's a great exercise because that's the way of the world. It's not ever just one person's story."

Greenwood's breakout novel, *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things*, published in 2016 by St. Martin's Press, employs more than a dozen different first-person perspectives. Though not autobiographical, some of the novel's themes mirror Greenwood's own life experiences — a father who's a drug dealer, a dysfunctional home life, mental illness, an adolescent involved with an older man. Though the book landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list, its reception was not without controversy.

"I get a lot of hate mail from people who wish I would disappear off the face of the earth because my book made them uneasy," Greenwood said. "But I literally experienced a lot of these things. And when people tell me that reading about these things made them uncomfortable and they'd rather not have to think about them, it's a dismissal. It's saying, 'I don't want to know you exist.' But not telling these stories doesn't magically make my experiences go away."

Her most recent book, *The Reckless Oath We Made*, published in 2019 and also

set in Kansas, is described as a contemporary fairy tale. In it, Greenwood deftly juggles nine distinct narrators to tell the unconventional love story between Zee, a nearly six-foot-tall waitress with a bad hip who occasionally engages in sex work to get by, and Gentry, an autistic man who speaks in Middle English and believes himself to be a knight — and Zee's protector.

Again, the book borrows from Greenwood's own life. She's written about taking similar desperate measures to make ends meet, she also suffers from chronic pain due to an injury and like Zee, Greenwood's mother is a hoarder.

"Within certain circles of our culture that are not struggling on a day-to-day basis, there's this titillation of horror and amusement watching something like Hoarders on TV," Greenwood said. "But I come from a family of hoarders. I have relatives whose hoarding got so bad that there were dead animals in the house. I don't want to think that there's a whole segment of society that exists only to be fodder for amusement for people who are better off financially. That's what I hope readers get out of my writing."

Though she's a bestselling author, Greenwood stays firmly grounded in the realities of the present. After earning her master's, she chose to remain working class rather than pursuing a career in academia. She took a position at the University of Kansas as a department secretary so that she could spend her off hours focusing on her writing. She worked as a secretary for 13 years until the success of *All the*

*Ugly and Wonderful Things* enabled her to quit. The fickle nature of the publishing industry places a lot of pressure on a best-selling author's follow-up book. It's pressure Greenwood keenly felt while working on *Reckless Oath*, which she completed in 14 months.

For now, Greenwood works mostly from her couch in her Lawrence home with her two rescue pups nearby. She camped out in her gutted home as she renovated it. The house itself was formerly a drug house, which made it an "incredibly cheap" purchase according to Greenwood and certainly seems fitting given her family history. She's currently at work on a few different projects.

"I hold my breath all the time," she says. "Publishing is really unsteady. Sometimes you sell a book and you get a nice big chunk of money and you think, 'I've got a couple years there.' But what if the next book doesn't sell? I'll get to a point where I'll think, 'If I haven't sold a book in the next year, I guess I'll have to look for another secretarial job.'"

