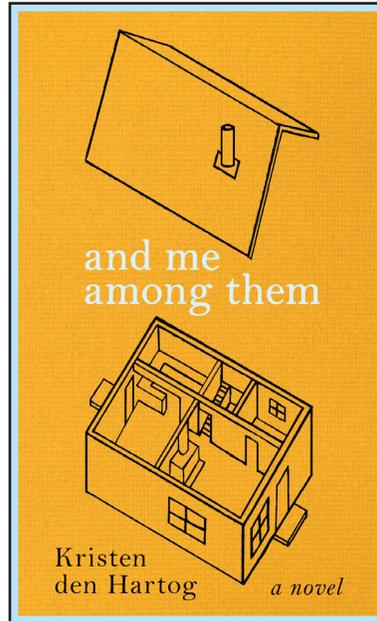




READING GUIDE



And Me Among Them

Kristen den Hartog

About the book:

Ruth grew too fast.

A young girl over seven feet tall, she struggles to conceal the physical and mental symptoms of her rapid growth, to connect with other children, and to appease her parents, Elspeth, an English seamstress who lost her family to the war, and James, a mailman rethinking his devotion to his wife. Not knowing how to help Ruth, Elspeth and James turn inward, away from one another. As their marriage falters, Ruth finds herself increasingly drawn to Suzy, the dangerous girl next door.

Ruth is not precocious, nor a prodigy, but her extraordinary size affords her extraordinary vision: a bird's-eye perspective that allows her not just to remember but to watch her past play out. Possessing an uncanny ability to intuit the emotional secrets of her family's past and present, Ruth gently surfaces Elspeth and James's vulnerabilities, their regrets, and their deepest longings.

"Den Hartog works wonders with both the mundane and the extraordinary -- we've read accounts of storming the beaches of France during the Second World War before, but the author's recounting is vivid and freshly startling. She can move a reader to tears as well as to awe."—Winnipeg Free Press

About the author:

Kristen den Hartog is the author of the novels *Water Wings*, *The Perpetual Ending*, and *Origin of Haloes*. Her most recent book, *The Occupied Garden: A Family Memoir of War-torn Holland*, was written with her sister, Tracy Kasaboski, and explores the life of their father's family during the Second World War. Kristen lives in Toronto with her husband and daughter.



Photo: Jeff Winch

And Up We Went With Her: Kristen den Hartog in conversation with Freehand Books

Robyn Read (editor of *And Me Among Them*): Where did you first see Diane Arbus's "Jewish Giant at Home with his Parents in the Bronx"? Much of Arbus's work was thought to be controversial; do you think this photograph in particular could be considered contentious?

Kristen den Hartog: It's a photo I've known about for a long time. I went looking for it again when my ideas for the novel were first swirling around in my head, and I pasted a copy of it to my notebook. Arbus's work is certainly controversial. Whether she exploits her subjects or not is difficult to say; after all, the subjects consented to be photographed. Arbus herself apparently worried she would become known as a photographer of freaks, and many people do see her that way. I think that's a shallow reading. In this particular photograph you could say that the son is depicted as monstrous and the parents helpless and fearful. But the image says so much more than that. To me the photo is startling, but also beautiful. There's a sense of sorrow about it, and wonderment, and

also inevitability. Families don't choose each other; for better or for worse, they live together in little boxes, growing and changing, or even refusing to grow and change.

RR: Why a girl giant; why a child?

KdH: In the beginning, Ruth was a boy named Benjamin. In that early draft, something felt off, and I knew I had made a wrong turn I needed to correct. Sometimes when I get blocked I need to look for different ways into the story—it might be as simple as changing a name, but this time it was more than that. I realized that being a boy giant would be difficult enough, but being a girl giant, especially in the 1950s, would open up all sorts of questions about body image and femininity. How would it feel for Ruth, looking to her pretty, delicate, and also distant mother Elspeth as a model, and so quickly outgrowing her? And how would it feel for Elspeth?

As to why I chose to tell the story from a child's point of view, that's a perspective I've always loved that feels very natural for me as a writer. Though I've forgotten so much of my own childhood, I remember how it feels to be a child and what things look like through a child's eyes. There's a certain clarity that comes with a child's point of view. Their instincts are sharp and their surroundings are fresh and surprising to them; they seem to notice everything. They sense when things are wrong or dishonest, or when they are truthful. Because there is so much they haven't learned, they aren't afraid to ask questions. And some of the questions are about the simplest things, but they are huge, too, such as when Ruth asks James about the sun and the seasons—"the very basics of life on earth"—and he is floored by how much he doesn't know.

RR: What were your greatest challenges writing historical fiction?

KdH: It can be difficult to create a realistic world in an earlier time, because we're so conditioned by our contemporary environment. But I was comfortable writing about the war years, since my previous book was a family memoir about my grandparents' life in Holland in WW2, and I had already researched that era. The biggest challenge this time was figuring out what would have been possible for Ruth as far as medical treatment. How quickly would her condition have been diagnosed, and what would have been done for her once that time came? Equally challenging, though, was inhabiting Ruth's body—trying to imagine what it would feel like to be her, and then conveying that for the reader. For both these hurdles, I turned to the stories of actual giants (people with gigantism or acromegaly) who lived around the time that Ruth did.

RR: Do you consider there to be a relationship between *The Occupied Garden: A Family Memoir of War-torn Holland*, written with your sister, Tracy Kasaboski, and which explores the life of your father's family during the WW2, and *And Me Among Them*? Did the research for *The Occupied Garden* inspire or incite the setting and era of *And Me Among Them*?

KdH: Yes, I find there's always a relationship between one book and the next. Even if I don't recognize it at the time, I can spot it looking back. *The Occupied Garden* involved years of research, and much of what I'd learned was still with me when I settled in to work on the new novel. I remember making a little scrapbook full of photos and newspaper clippings and notes I'd gathered for the memoir but never used. I made the scrapbook as a way of pushing *The Occupied Garden*

from my mind so that I could move on to this new project. But the residue was still there. It simply felt necessary to write about that time period, and as Ruth's story progressed, I saw the possibilities multiplying, and began to understand why a postwar setting was key: James's ordeal as a soldier and Elspeth's loss of her family—the fact that they each carried a burden they couldn't speak of, and that had come long before Ruth.

RR: Ruth has quite a lot on her mind. She has insight into her mother's dreams, her father's infidelity. In your interview on *Pickle Me This*, Kerry Clare states, "the magical elements of [your] story about a girl who grows to be seven feet tall and is blessed with a strange omniscience [are] perfectly countered with a realism that kept the story's feet on the ground." What interested you about juxtaposing the literal experiences of a girl who grows much too fast with an extended metaphor about her ability to look down on all others?

KdH: As a writer I'm drawn to wild legends, myths, and fairytales, but I'm also most intrigued by the connections between people and the dynamics of a family. I tried to walk the line between those two places and create a story that had a sense of magic about it but was also rooted in reality. I wanted to make Ruth powerful and compassionate rather than victimized, and it occurred to me that I could best achieve that by allowing her to tell her own story—including the parts she couldn't possibly have witnessed. So up she grew, and up we went with her. I wanted the reader to look with Ruth, rather than at Ruth.

Calgary, Alberta. March 29, 2012.

Robyn Read was the editor of And Me Among Them (Calgary: Freehand Books, Spring 2011), and was the Acquiring Editor for Freehand Books from 2009-2011.

