A look back at the underappreciated work of Ervin Krause

We take look back at the work of Ervin D. Krause, a Midwestern author whose work is only now coming into focus, 45 years after his death.

Carson Vaughan

Ervin Krause: An underappreciated writer gets his due, 45 years late

His own brother, a doctor in Wyoming, had proffered the diagnosis: Hodgkin's lymphoma. Like so many of the novels and short stories he'd written since moving to the Aloha State, so many miles and climes removed from the stark plains and soot-caked window sills of his homeland, Ervin Krause's body, not

yet 40, now faced rejection. His white blood cells were mutating in ways no amount of radiation could stop. There was little to do — little anyone could do in 1970 — but wait.

For several days he'd followed it, the tiny green gecko suctioned to the wall of his second-floor study. Three days back he'd seen it drop to the floor, watched as it writhed and circled its own tail. And now, sitting at his desk before the big attic window, the palm trees just outside, he watched as the gecko approached the tip of his cane. The late-afternoon sun mellowed the study, and the silence that weighed so heavily upon them — upon he and his wife, Loretta, upon his family back in Iowa, upon his closest friend, Richard, now in Japan, and his academic colleagues back in the Midwest — the silence settled right there before him, flicking its tongue in reflection.

Krause lifted the gecko, its tiny claws clinging to the palm of his hand, and gently placed it back down on the center of his notepad. He offered it food and sugar water, but the gecko, whose brilliant green had drained away, ignored them both. It took one slow lap before crawling beneath the cup of his hand and laying down. It shook once and fell still.

"Had it come to tell me," he wrote in his last complete work, a poem called "Lizard," "the enormity of the incident connecting us?"

I comfort myself that it did not come to haunt me

(But I am haunted still)

It with its dry fever and sightless eyes

And spastic malfunction

And I with my cane and sweats and cancer

Come together, come to this

And one hundred million years and billion generations

Bridged ... bridged ... to what?

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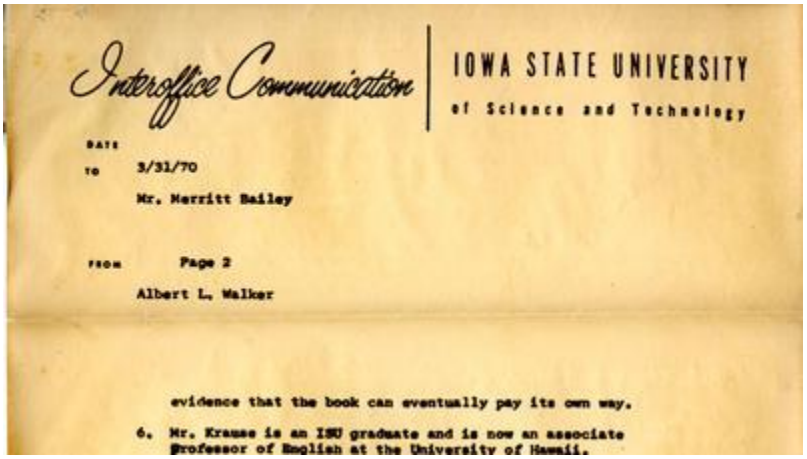
Once all but forgotten, writer Ervin D. Krause, the son of a Midwestern tenant farmer, ranked among the best short story writers in the country in the early 1960s. Championed by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Karl Shapiro, then editor of Prairie Schooner, Krause's work was reprinted in both the O. Henry Prize and Best American Short Stories anthologies, sharing space with luminaries like Flannery O'Connor, John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates. At a time when American literature was still heavily preoccupied with the beatniks — the breathless bebop of Kerouac, Burroughs' cut-ups and more — Krause wrote hopeless stories in gimmick-less prose, stories that open doors only to slam them shut, stories as dusty as a November cornfield and populated with the characters of his childhood.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TO Mr. Merritt Bailey

FROM Albert L. Walker

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evidence that the book can eventually pay its own way.

6. Mr. Krause is an ISU graduate and is now an associate professor of English at the University of Hawaii.

Ervin Krause letters of acceptance, rejection Document

In "The Snake," for example, first published in Prairie Schooner and later reprinted nearly a dozen times in various anthologies and textbooks, a farmer stops his tractor to admire a snake in the furrow, "the colors clear and sharp and perfect." Minutes later, the farmer's nephew, on his way to bring him a jar

of cold water, kills it without hesitation. "There are only moments when one sees beautiful things," the farmer thinks, "and these are soon crushed."

In another, called "The Right Hand" (featured in this week's fiction supplement), a young boy concludes his neighbor, who has an unsightly birthmark contorting his face, must be evil. "He had felt it before," Krause writes, "on cold lightning-fired nights, in the chill of the church on Sunday mornings, on entering an unlighted barn." Rather than push him away, the boy becomes obsessed with the feeling, pursuing it to an end both surprising and, as the old trope goes, inevitable.

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Krause's stories evoke a grim determinism more in line with the naturalists of decades prior, a cold reality mimicked by a "frigid sun" or a farmstead "abandoned and gray."

Thanks to a popular new series from Nebraska's NET Radio called "Lost Writers of the Plains" and the 2014 publication of "You Will Never See Any God," a posthumous collection of his short stories, Krause is slowly crawling back into the spotlight.

Born to a devout Lutheran family near Arlington, Neb., at the outset of the Great Depression, Krause was the fourth of five children — all boys. His parents, both Germans from Russia, met after immigrating independently to

Nebraska at the turn of the 20th century. Each spring, as February rolled into March, Ervin's father, a large and kind man they called "the gentle giant," would pack up and move the family in search of greener pastures, better yields, more rain. Wishful thinking, the boys knew, but they didn't mind — all their neighbors were doing it too, "more a matter of survival, really," says Hank Krause, Ervin's brother. When they landed again, they'd shelter in a cheap farmhouse. In at least one of them, Krause would later tell his wife, the gusts were so strong and the winters so cold tiny drifts of snow would pile up in the cracks of the stairwell.

After the animals had been fed and the fences repaired, his father, a wagon driver in World War I, would sometimes tell Ervin the stories. He'd describe the gunfire in France, the horses under his watch and the cannons they pulled across the battlefield. He didn't spare the gore; he described the blood too, spilling from the horses, slowly coagulating as it snaked its way downhill.

"All of these violent things — Erv was quite taken with that," Loretta says. "There is a fascination with life and death in all of his stories, and I think this was part of it."

When Ervin was 15, just a year after they'd finally settled in Akron, Iowa, his father suffered a paralyzing stroke. Ervin began to read him stories. He kept reading him stories every day until he graduated high school. Not long after, the gentle giant died. All the while, their mother, a short woman whose stubborn and dogmatic tendencies Ervin would later take after, prioritized their education, instilled in them a scholastic drive. With only one car in the family, Ervin and his older brother Arnold would walk three miles into town, check out a stack of books at the library, and have one of them read by the time they returned home.

"They'd be walking and reading at the same time," Hank says.

Arnold became a doctor, and decades later, working his practice in Casper, Wyo., he'd officially diagnose Ervin's cancer, knowing even the best treatments weren't likely to save him. Another brother, Gerald, became a farmer. Waldfmar (they called him "Wally" for short) joined the Navy, became an aeronautical engineer. Hank became a scout for the San Diego Padres.

And Ervin, still blind to his fate, became a writer "with great meditative dignity of address," according to Richard Poirier, series editor of Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards from 1961 to 1966. But first he'd prove himself a polymath. He'd graduate top of his class at Akron High School in 1949, earn a national Bausch & Lomb Honorary Medal for science, deliver the valedictory address and enroll at Iowa State University, studying physics and mathematics. In his spare time, he'd write poetry and short stories for Sketch, the student-run literary journal, and edit Iowa State Scientist, ISU's science department magazine. To top it off, he enlisted with the Reserve Officers Training Corp, and after earning his bachelor's degree, spent 18 months stationed in England with the U.S. Air Force.

He recorded life note by note, storing away every passing conversation, all of his trials and mistrials, the sidelong stares, the meeting of strangers, the cut of their jib, the dry heat of a Midwestern summer — the big and the small, all of it filed away in some mental black box, ready for deployment when he met the empty page.

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"I think he wanted to empty his soul of the stories he had inside him. That's what happens when you're an artist," says Richard Goodman, one of Krause's closest friends and a colleague at the University of Hawaii. "Things bubble up in the back of your brain and they pester you to death until you get them out on paper."

Following a brief stint writing technical manuals for an aerospace manufacturer in St. Louis, Krause enrolled as an English graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The move, according to Timothy Schaffert, editor of "You Will Never See Any God," "would rapidly advance Krause's writing career, but it would also toss him into the center of controversy."

That same year, 1956, another military veteran arrived at the university: Karl Shapiro. He'd been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1945, having written "V-Letter and Other Poems" while stationed in the Pacific, and spent the next two years as U.S. poet laureate. He'd accepted a job as English professor at UNL, and more importantly, as editor of Prairie Schooner, the University's highly regarded literary quarterly.

Shapiro wasted little time reshaping the journal in his own vision, releasing it from the shackles of folklore and exposing it to a modern light. He redesigned the layout, featuring his own name on every cover. He toyed with dropping the "Prairie" from "Prairie Schooner." He courted the Beats, especially Henry Miller, whose major works were banned in the United States until 1961 but whom Shapiro published in the fall issue of 1958. And yet he cleared space for a quiet, sharp-eyed farm boy too, a Midwestern gothic whose lean and austere prose resulted in stories haunted and calculating: a farmer pinned beneath his tractor, futilely awaiting help; a child too innocent to understand the evil in his ways; a man who damns his own father to hell just before he dies.

"None of his characters finds peace, none finds a sanctuary of comfort, all find failure and defeat," Krause wrote in the introduction to his 1957 master's thesis, "The Three Views of John Dos Passos." The same could have been written about Krause's stories themselves, their tone pessimistic, skewing always toward a harsh and unrelenting realism.

Over the next five years, Shapiro would publish six of Krause's stories, a move Schaffert, in his introduction to the collection, calls "a rigorous commitment to

Krause's work." In 1960, Shapiro published "The Quick and the Dead," reprinted in Prize Stories 1961: The O. Henry Awards. And in the summer of 1961, he published three more, promoting Krause on the cover "with the same typographic fanfare he had previously allowed Walt Whitman and Henry Miller." One of them, "The Snake," would win Krause the runner-up spot in the 1963 O. Henry Awards, second only to Flannery O'Connor's classic, "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

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To publish the same author with such frequency was unprecedented, but if Shapiro and Krause had their way, there would have been even more. In 1962, after Krause had married, found "a real New York agent" and accepted a teaching offer at the University of Hawaii, he sent Shapiro a story called "Anniversary."

"There are some fairly stern passages in this story, but they are not designed to titillate — in fact, just the opposite, if anything," he wrote in a letter to Shapiro, as if portending the events to come. "I think only the nervous or the unfair would really be alarmed."

Shapiro liked the story, which centers on a college humanities professor who returns to Lincoln, Neb., where he'd earned his master's degree, to rekindle an affair with a woman named Wanda. Hardly idolizing the professor's morality, Krause portrays a man deeply flawed, misogynistic and insecure. Shapiro slated "Anniversary" for publication. And yet, as if on cue, UNL administration somehow caught wind of the story and pulled it from the layout without notifying the journal. Shapiro resigned in protest. Later interviewed by The New York Times, Shapiro called "Anniversary" a story of "washed out love with a couple of bedroom scenes." The dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, on the other hand, called it "obscene and in poor taste."

Krause later read the entire story aloud on a Lincoln radio station. Deeming it "the most moral story I have ever written," he also wrote a letter to UNL Chancellor Clifford Hardin:

To say that this story is obscene is fantastic; it is a gruesome distortion, a lie both about what the story says and what it intends ...If this story is in poor taste and obscene, then St. Augustine's Confessions is obscene; then most of Dostoevsky is obscene; then all revelations of personal discovery of error and guilt are obscene; then the churchly confession is obscene.

Several American universities offered Krause faculty positions upon completion of his MA, but his wife Loretta — whose father was stationed in the Pacific during WWII and who'd been there before — lobbied for Hawaii. They bought a modest home in the Kaimuki neighborhood of Honolulu, where Loretta still resides. They found lifelong friends in their colleagues at the university, especially fellow professor Richard Goodman. Together, the three of them would picnic on the white sands of Hanauma Bay, commiserate over lousy freshman essays and the older professors in their department. Krause would take his little black notebook with them, jotting notes as the waves rolled in and people walked by.

"What are you using all this for?" Loretta once asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "But here's the emotion, and I don't want to forget it."

But in truth, Loretta says, Krause never seemed especially excited for the move, and his writing may have suffered from it. He kept at it, writing every day after class, polishing more short stories, completing novels, one of them based on his history with censorship at UNL. But the rejections kept coming. The Atlantic, Little, Brown, The Macmillan Company and many more. After praising "Anniversary" as "one of the most honest presentations we have read of the situation with which it deals," Opal Belknap, associate editor of Genesis West, wrote, "In view of this, it is a little puzzling, even to us, just why Gordon

Lish, Ken Kesey and I have come to the same conclusion independently: That the story's impact is not quite strong enough for us to back it up by publication." He tried not to agonize over it, but the rejections hurt, Loretta says. He'd damn the editors, curse at their letters, but he'd return to his desk nonetheless, willing himself to start again.

"I think that's one of the reasons we were probably going to leave Hawaii," Loretta says. "He said no one can write about something they don't know. He said, 'I can't write here. I have to go home to write.'"

Fed up with the rejections for his novels and short stories, he set out to write a book of military history called The Techniques of War, something he hoped publishers would more readily accept. He spent virtually all of 1964 touring the battlefields of Europe with Loretta, research for a book that would never see the light of day. Some publishers told him it was too specific for their general audience; others just the opposite.

"Well," he told Loretta years later, shelving the manuscript whole, "it's here if anyone wants to read it."

Nearing the end of their European tour, Krause began to complain of pain first in his groin, then his back. Still suffering weeks later, Loretta flew him to see his brother Arnold, now a doctor, in Casper, Wyo. Krause rarely spoke of his cancer, not to his friend Richard, not to Loretta, not to his brothers or mother back home in Iowa. But in a short story called, "The Shooters," which appears in "You Will Never See Any God," he writes of a man named Leonard not yet 35, diagnosed with cancer, "a word," he wrote, "that carries its own exclamation point."

(F)rozen and burning all at once, and if he thought of it he could feel them both, he believed, truly feel them crawl in his tissues, in his marrow, that dark cold cancer in him and the glow of the radiation; condemned to death quite surely, and he did not know how or why. Nor did anyone.

Eventually, the doctors at The Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu told Loretta there was nothing left they could do. Krause spent his last week at home, bedridden and slowly hemorrhaging, scribbling incoherently on a notepad Loretta set beneath his hand. He died on Thanksgiving Day, 1970, just 39 years old. None of his novels had found a publisher. What looked like a promising lead on his first and only book of short stories fell through. Even "Anniversary," with all the intrigue and sex appeal of its censorship, gathered dust, rejected by Shapiro's successor at Prairie Schooner. When they came to take his body, Loretta watched, stunned, as he breathed again.

"No ma'am," they told her. "That was his last breath."

"I had no idea that he had air in his lungs, and when they moved him," she says, "of course that air all came out."

They buried Krause five days later, back home in Akron, Iowa. A reverend from the Lutheran church officiated the funeral, way up on a hill in Riverside Cemetery, surrounded by harvested cropland and the Big Sioux River.

Loretta vowed to publish the stockpile of her late husband's work, and in the years proceeding his death, she sent his novels and short stories out far and wide, corresponding with publishers and agents. One of them summed up what Loretta would hear time and again: "Editors are business people primarily," wrote literary agent Ruth Cantor, "and they all seem to feel that unless an author is working, and producing, by that same token, they do not stand to make a profit on future work."

Had it ended there, Krause's biography would have aligned with the rest of his work, a dash of hope — a promising young writer — and a heaping spoonful of the grotesque, dead of cancer before his work found the spotlight.

But it didn't end there. In 2010, Timothy Schaffert, a novelist and creative writing professor at UNL, stumbled upon Krause's work while blogging for

Prairie Schooner. He recognized the name, remembered hearing rumblings of the notorious censorship case as late as the '80s, when he was in grad school at UNL.

"When I read them, I'd not yet located Erv's widow and the infamous 'Anniversary,' but I knew if I could find more of his work, a collection was necessary," says Schaffert, author, most recently, of "The Swan Gondola." "It was dark, haunting, gritty, vital, eerily poetic work. And the censorship case made his work seem even more dangerous."

Schaffert later reached out to Loretta, who'd saved all of her husband's work. In 2014, Bison Books, the trade imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, published "You Will Never See Any God," edited by Schaffert. And this past February, NET aired an eight-part essay series called "Lost Writers of the Plains," Krause, in many ways, the capstone.

"I knew one day this day would happen, that he would be in some way recognized," Loretta says. "And sure enough, it happened. It only took 50 years."

Carson Vaughan is a freelance writer based in Lincoln, Neb. Follow him on Twitter @carsonvaughan.

"You Will Never See Any God"

By Ervin D. Krause, edited by Timothy Schaffert, Bison, 180 pages, $17.95

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