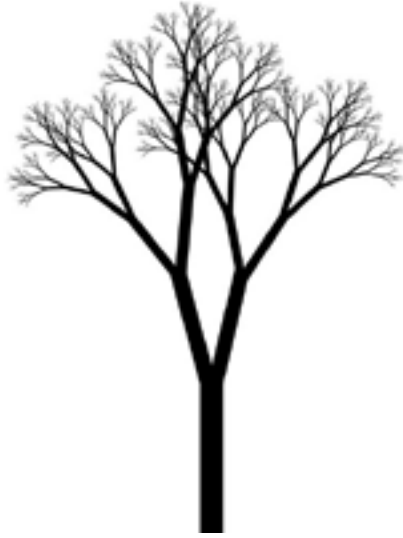


SEARCHING
FOR
SPENSER



A MEMOIR
BY MARGARET KRAMAR

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"THIS BOOK IS A REMINDER THAT LIVING WITH A MOST DIFFICULT AND PAINFUL THING GIVES US CHOICES. MAKING THE RIGHT ONE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE. MARGARET KRAMAR HAS WRITTEN THIS STORY FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS. AND NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF IN THESE PAGES."

~ Maryemma Graham, University of Kansas Distinguished Professor & Founder/Director, Project on the History of Black Writing.

Parenting can be a struggle; especially parenting a disabled child. In this flawlessly written memoir, Kramar describes championing her son, diagnosed with Sotos syndrome, through his short life. *Searching For Spenser: a Mother's Journey Through Grief* examines the experience of loving and losing a child and reminds us that there is a way forward through the pain and suffering. The wounds, although soul deep, do heal allowing a way to live, love, and laugh again.

Kramar's memoir offers guidance, wisdom and inspiration. It not only speaks to those who have children with disabilities and those who have lost a child, but also those who seek an amazing and surprising story of redemption and hope.



CHAPTER 40

Another Christmas

On most ordinary days I can walk past the glass case in the entrance hall of Chippewa containing Spenser's picture. He smiles from the golden frame, frozen at nine years old, watching everything that goes on in the school. But when I enter the gymnasium for the school Christmas assembly, I'm enveloped by Spenser's presence. The classes file onto the risers to sing Christmas carols, the teachers serenade the students, and Santa Claus arrives. He wouldn't miss it for the world.

In Lane's third grade classroom, the children's desks faced a table with wrapped toys and a Christmas tree. Chocolate chip cookies, cheese, crackers and fruit punch were lined up on the window sill on either side of me.

Lane sat staring at me from his desk, his eyes fixed on me with serious concentration. I had no idea what he was looking at, or why his face bore such a stern expression. In the midst of a Christmas party, Lane would usually be running all over and putting his hands on other children. Leaning up against the heat register, I grieved for Spenser.

A girl unwrapped her gift, a toy with connecting magnetic rods. Those little rods would end up all over the floor, disconnected, scattered, lost.

I stopped in Tristan's room before the busses were called. We almost made it out the door before a set of grandparents stepped forward with a huge bag filled with individual treat bags. More candy, more wrappers, more little plastic Santa

Claus heads that only make a sound ten times before they are broken.

Lane and Tristan ran around on the sidewalk before getting into the car, despite a chilly wind. Once in the car, they turned on the inside car lights, played with the locks, and would not get their seat belts on. More bags rustled, more candy came out. Wrappers would be on the floor mats, wedged into the seats, and stashed in little pieces in the side door compartments.

At home in the driveway, Tristan wouldn't go into the house because he was fixated on his pinewood derby kit. He broke the seal so the pieces would be scattered and lost, rendering the car worthless.

I screamed at him to get into the house. He fell to the car floor, yelling, "I won't come into the house." I grabbed for an arm, but he was heavy, and laid out on the car floor. As I unlocked the front door I castigated myself for being a horrible mother, who should have taken the time to handle the scene differently.

The bright overhead dining room light revealed that the house was a mess. There were papers piled on the dining room table, and book bags flung on the couch, crammed with treat bags and little plastic toys that would all have to be sorted. I didn't have the energy to carry the laundry basket to the basement. I would have to clean up all this clutter before Christmas. I was so tired.

In their room, junk was all over the floor. Before I put them to bed, I made a half-hearted effort to sort through the debris, barely making a noticeable difference.

Once in bed, illuminated by a soft night light, Lane and Tristan were quiet, tucked under their quilts. I draped my arms over the guardrail of the bunk bed, and leaned my head against my arms.

"I'm sorry, boys. I haven't been very patient today. I guess I'm sad about Spenser, and it can get overwhelming."

Lane sprang up from his pillow, his head and shoulders outlined in profile against the dim night-light.

"But Spenser was beside you all day today," he said.

"What are you talking about?" I peered more deeply into the darkness, into his wide round eyes.

"In the room, today in the room. When I looked at you, he was right there next to you."

In my snapshot memory of Lane, I pictured that concentrated expression he drilled into me as I leaned up against the heat register.

"If you saw Spenser, why didn't you tell me this before?"

He looked down and fidgeted with his bedclothes, turning the fabric softly in his hands. Lane was, after all, only about nine years old. "I was afraid you would say I was making it up."

"Okay, well then, as for Spenser, what did he look like?"

"Dull."

"Dull?" I watched him more closely, but he seemed to be telling the truth. "What are you calling dull?" This was not a word he would ordinarily use.

"Like you could see through him. Like he was not really there. Like blurry, if you hold your finger up, and make your eyes go back and forth like this." Lane held his index finger straight up before his face, and made quick, darting motions with his eyes.

"Lane, are you lying to me about all of this? Are you making all of this up?"

"No." He hesitated, as though I might punish him. Still he exhibited the rapt expression, the willingness to talk, even though I did not know where the dialogue was leading.

"What was Spenser saying? What was he doing?"

"He was whispering to you."

"What was he saying?"

"I couldn't hear him." His shoulders rose in a little exasperated shrug.

Tristan was softly breathing in the lower bunk. They both smelled sweet and clean after their baths.

"Then why weren't you afraid? Wouldn't seeing Spenser have scared you?"

"It wasn't the first time I saw him."

"When did you see him before?"

"He wanted to go out to play. To play games with us. It was November."

"Just this last November?" I asked. Through the hazy darkness, I saw Lane smile, the smile of a pleasant memory.

"So where was he?"

"Coming down the stairs to go outside. Then he vanished."

"Was he dull and blurry when you saw him that time?"

"Yeah."

"Lane, are you making all this up? Are you telling me this just because you think I want to hear it?"

"No."

I hugged him. It was late. His arms folded around my neck, and he gave me a wet kiss on my cheek. Of course he would say he was not making it up. As to whether he was, there was no earthly way of knowing. But was it Wordsworth, who besides talking about trailing clouds of glory, believed that young children were more in tune with the other world because they are so recently departed from it?

Then there was another time during the past November, a few days after Thanksgiving when Lane volunteered to get the pumpkin pie from the basement refrigerator.

When he came back upstairs, he slumped down in his chair, and fiddled with his silverware, looking puzzled and confused. There was no mistaking that something had happened.

"What's the matter, Lane?"

"When I was downstairs," he began, "and got the pie from the refrigerator, a hand knocked on the glass panel door. I heard the noise and when I looked up it waved. Then it vanished." Lane imitated the wave, a quick, friendly impulsive shake of the hand.

Now he's afraid to go into the basement alone, especially after dark. Further, I know that wave. It's exactly something that Spenser would do.

Half a year later, a summer late afternoon, mercifully devoid of the direct sun, drew me outside of the house. I intended to thin the radishes and carrots, but the weeds in the zinnias waylaid me. I pulled quickly, right hand over left, as

the roots dislodged easily from the black, moist soil.

The tires crunched on the gravel as Tom rolled into the driveway, bringing Lane and Tristan home from day camp. As the afternoon shadows lengthened, I grasped a big weed with both hands and tugged.

Lane and Tristan kicked a soccer ball in the side yard underneath the red maples. Their disembodied voices dotted the sweep of the wind, which muffled their words.

Their voices floated closer. I peered through the leaves of the river birch tree, squinting to focus. Two blonde boys traversed the screen framed by the shimmering leaves, single file. Lane was first, the taller one, darting through my range of vision. The second boy wore a cap, with panels of alternating red, blue and yellow, and under the cap, platinum blonde hair. His head was shaped like Spenser's, and as he lumbered along, shifting his weight from side to side, Spenser's gait, I could not attest that his feet touched the ground.

Tristan did not have a jaunty cap of red, blue and yellow, unless he got it from summer camp.

"Tom! Tom!" My voice broke as I screeched through my vocal chords.

He didn't hear me.

"Tom! Where did Tristan get that cap?"

I was still surrounded by the scrim of drooping river birch branches.

"Tristan isn't wearing any cap," he answered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Kramar is an educator and author whose memoir, *Searching For Spenser: a Mother's Journey Through Grief*, explores how she was transformed through the death of her disabled child.

A graduate of Grinnell College, she received an MA in journalism from the University of Iowa. Subsequently employed as lifestyle editor for the Denison Newspapers, her work received awards from the Iowa Press Association Better Newspaper Contest and Herbert Bayard Swopes Memorial Awards. In 2012 she received a PhD in English from the University of Kansas and taught English composition, drama and American literature. Previous to the PhD, she was employed for twenty years as a civil rights investigator by the Kansas Human Rights Commission.



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from *Searching for Spenser* captured the first place award in the Kansas Authors Club Contest.

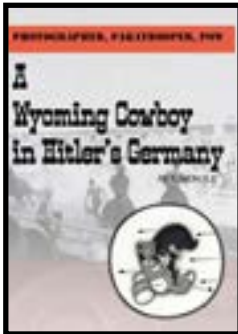
She and her family live on a small farm in northeast Kansas where they produce organically grown fruits, vegetables and free-range eggs.

Please contact Margaret at: <http://www.margaretkramar.com/>.

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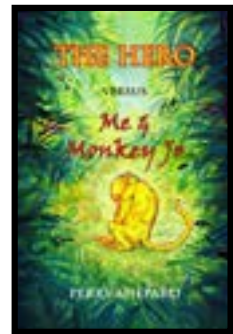
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