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Author explores world through the alphabet

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Author Caryn West wanted to take the concept of an ABC book and make "A" stand for more than apple. That, and change the world, too.

The Colorado author has come to Des Moines to promote her recently published book, "The Trouble With the Alphabet," as part of a local 60th anniversary celebration of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Part coffee-table book and part human-rights manifesto, the book came to life after "it took me 45 years to figure out who I am and what really matters to me," West said.

The final product is 26 chapters about countries where children are suffering. Instead of beginning with apple, "A" is for Afghanistan, "B" is for Bangladesh and so forth (with the exception of X, which is for the fictional Xanadu and is an ode to the better angels of human nature).

Each letter is hand-painted in vibrant color amidst a rendering of a child who is native to the land. Accompanying the artwork is poetry written by West from a child's perspective and quotes that lend further gravity to the pain and suffering across the globe.

Turn the page and find an impassioned synopsis by West of what is happening in each country, followed by information about nonprofit groups that the author deems most effective in addressing such problems as genocide, child labor or human trafficking.

It's all the product of a woman who refuses to single herself out as exceptional when it comes to addressing problems.

"I am not trying to posture myself as an expert or better than anybody," said West, whose trip to Iowa was made inevitable when her mother moved here from California. "I am trying to reach those people who have just shut down. They know how bad it is, but they don't know what to do."

Today West will join a panel of professionals representing law, medicine, education and business to talk about the potential of art to impact human rights.

She will also discuss her book at her mother's church, First Christian Church in Des Moines, on Sunday.

First Christian Pastor Tim Diebel said West's visit perfectly coincides with the liturgical season.

"The simple way of talking about Advent is that it is a countdown to Christmas," Diebel said, "but it is more about paying attention to the gap between the way things are and the way things ought to be, and the book does a wonderful job of that."

West hasn't experienced the kind of sorrows depicted in "The Trouble With the Alphabet," but she has endured divorce, foreclosure, failed businesses and severe injuries.

She believes those trials are the truth behind the faces in her book.

"My pain is in there," she said. "Those are my eyes."

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