



A Common Pornography

Kevin Sampsell

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In 2008, Kevin Sampsell's estranged father died of an aneurysm. When he returned home to Kennewick, Washington for the funeral, Kevin's mother revealed to him disturbing threads in their family history — stories of incest, madness, betrayal, and death. In *A Common Pornography*, he tells his family's unforgettable story — from his mother's first tumultuous marriages and his father's physical, psychological, and sexual abuse of his half-sister to his own tales of first jobs, first bands, and first loves in the Pacific Northwest in the 70s and 80s.

One of Sampsell's previous books was written as a kind of "memory experiment," in which he recollected luminous details from his childhood in independently amusing chapters. Employing the same form of memoir in *A Common Pornography*, he intertwines the tragic with the everyday, the dysfunctional with the fun, lending the book its undeniable, unsensationalized reality. He captures the many shades and the whole of the Sampsell family — both its tragedy and its resiliency.

A Common Pornography Details

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From Reader Review A Common Pornography for online ebook

jeremy says

composed of brief, chronological accounts, *a common pornography* is kevin sampsell's unabashedly frank memoir. recounting the formative incidents of his youth, sampsell writes with great courage about family drama, sexual exploration, and the inevitable uncertainties of adolescence.

written without pathos, sentimentalism, or apology, kevin never resorts to the banal, woe-is-me affectations that have come to mark so many autobiographical works of late. funny, tragic, touching, and often unbelievable, *a common pornography* is the true tale of one man's precarious, often arduous, journey into adulthood.

go sixers!

Tosh says

I'm going to Powells to do an event for my book "Tosh" in February, and the author Kevin Sampsell is kind enough to interview me about my memoir. Due that I will meet him, I read and purchased his own childhood/teenage memoir "A Common Pornography" regarding his family life, and I'm totally knocked out by it. Each person's history is an individual map of growing up and dealing with one's surroundings. Kevin's book is difficult to put down, and I found it fascinating, in the way he describes his family structure, which is very complicated. Of course, as I read his book, I thought about my book. And I feel that there are common grounds, such as family life, but also the fact that both of us are publishers, and also booksellers (him at Powell's, and me at Book Soup) for a great deal of time. I'm really looking forward to meeting him. And, his book is fantastic. Get it and read the book.

Kevin says

This is it. My first book with a major press. After 20 years of writing for various small presses, it feels good to have this out to (hopefully) a much wider world of readers. The fact that it's about my life makes it even more rewarding. For people who like my fiction, I think there are threads of similarity in this but I also think this book has a wider and more accessible scope. There's funny stuff, sad stuff, disturbing stuff, and some kinda sexy stuff. I think it's my my most layered and complex book. I hope you'll read it and love it. It means quite a lot to me.

Eh?Eh! says

I think Montambo was reading this so when I saw it for sale I flipped through, liked, bought.

I just went to the author's reading at Powell's. If the book doesn't have a "voice" written into it, an attempt to capture an accent or regional slurring, I "hear" the words with a soothing, resonant, deep tone. Male and female characters, all the same. Sampsell's real voice was surprisingly (to me) soft, lispy, and soothingly nerdy. I had a major eyestrain headache brewing and almost decided to just go home from work. The author works at Powell's so he had a good supportive crowd. At the reading there was a proposal, it was accepted,

everyone clapped. I think it made my headache worse, all those happy people and me just an observer. I'm glad I went.

The blurb already speaks of the format so I'll just say I like it. Not every chapter/story was illuminating or touching or brilliant, but not every episode in a life is like that either. Each little bit was a brick in the construct that was his life. Some were better in hearing it aloud, where the author could insert key pauses; comedic timing loses some nuance in writing.

There was nothing extraordinarily heroic or dastardly. I most appreciated the ordinary parts, or rather, the normal screwed-up family tales that sort of reminded me of mine. Granted his was a bit more screwy, and unfortunately tragic for some of his siblings.

The next stage or phase of his life is starting. I'm sure to him it's more of a smeared continuum, taken day by day, but to an observer that proposal felt like the real ending to this book which began with his family history and ended with his feelings about his father's passing.

christa says

I remember the moment like it was yesterday. I was lying in bed in a pair of baggy wide-legged olive green sweatpants, a stained white tank top, and for some reason a bra. A bra?! To bed?! I was just too lazy to remove it. And then, on page * of Kevin Sampsell's memoir "A Common Pornography," I realized that I was in the midst of something really special: The first contender for "Top Three Worst Books of 2010." I felt a rush of adrenaline that my body probably mistook for an aerobic workout.

Until that point, this collection of vignettes about growing up was just boring. But in the section about the upstairs neighbor girl entitled "Jaynee," Sampsell's father is especially attentive to the little girl. Late at night, young Sampsell lies in his bedroom below Jaynee's apartment and hears sounds from upstairs. "We wondered what was in her heart," Sampsell wrote of the little girl. Gag.

I see what Sampsell is doing here. His large family is a collection of half-siblings, and his father is a pedophile first, an asshole second. So he takes a series of unspectacular memories that rarely have anything to do with his family, and provides snapshot of his life -- yet packages it as something prompted by the death of his father, who really plays a very minor role. Like, he wouldn't even be listed in the credits. Some writers can do this -- write in the slow, quiet voice Sampsell is aping. In fact, Nick Flynn just did it in "The Ticking is the Bomb." But Sampsell mistakes "slow, quiet voice," for lifeless tedium about Joan Jett tapes, playing with the neighbor boys, and the collection of high school girls he dated into his 20s.

Frankly, this is a series that should have been titled "Kevin Sampsell: 101 Different Ways to Get a Handy." He steals what the Beastie Boys would call "porno mags"; He gets a handy from one of his friends while his girlfriend hooks up with another dude; He clips photos of an eclectic mix of ladies from said magazines, and files them in a folder; He gets another handy from a freeloader at a film booth in an adult bookstore.

There are girlfriends, and DJ gigs, and rock bands and open mics where he reads his poetry and sorta makes a name for himself as Mr. Poetry Man. But none of this has his fingerprints on it. It is just generic stories that everyone has, but stripped so bare that they aren't stories to relate to.

Joshua says

I loved Sampsell's book. As a writing teacher, I'm always looking for examples of an author choosing the right structure/form to capture the subject matter. And this is precisely what makes "A Common Pornography" work so well: the symbiosis between the vignettes, the accumulation of their power as the narrative goes on. Suddenly, all the short pieces you've read compile themselves into a fully realized portrait, like tiles forming a stunning mosaic.

Mike Lindgren says

Meh. A slapdash memoir of growing up dysfunctional in the Pacific Northwest from the publisher of Future Tense books. Has a modest twist in that it is composed of brief "snapshot" chapters with intriguing-seeming one-word titles: laziness masquerading as structural innovation. Also, the guy seems like kind of an asshole.

Mykle says

Kevin Sampsell's writing has a surgical deadpan quality that instills every word with tension. Which has one effect when applied to his comical or psychosexual short stories, but quite another when he's describing his own traumatic childhood and creepy family dramas in this new memoir.

Honestly, I'm not a fan of the memoir genre. And because Kevin is a friend of mine, this book has a completely different effect on me than it would on a stranger. If you don't know Kevin personally, here are some ways to simulate the highly enjoyable memoir-reading experience I just had:

* Get to know Kennewick, Washington -- Slurpee Capitol of the World, and next-door neighbor to the Hanford Nuclear Mistake. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kennewic...>

* Get to know today's mature, sophisticated Kevin Sampsell, hero of the Powell's Books small press section and publisher of Future Tense Books. <http://www.powells.com/essays/sampsel...>

* See the younger, sexier, more scary Kevin Sampsell in the excellent mid-eighties video documentary "Kevin Sampsell: The Spokane Years" (still looking for the link, watch this space ...)

* Wear a sexy pair of 1950's horn-rim glasses while you read this book. Kevin was wearing them before anybody; he will wear them to his grave.

Olivia says

The linked, flash-nonfiction structure Sampsell used for his memoir is addicting and unique. I tried starting it before bed and thought, "Just one or two more then I'll put it down." This led to staying up all night. The unadorned honesty with which Sampsell approaches his sex life and his family history is refreshing, and, in many instances, flat-out courageous. The only critique I offer is that sometimes the stories within the

snippets felt unfinished, like in "Interruption." I wanted to know what happened after he realized his dad wasn't leaving, but it just ends and is never addressed again. That type of cliffhanger happens so rarely, though, that it feels like nitpicking to point it out. Overall, the structure works beautifully, and I hope Sampsell and other writers explore it further. The icing on the cake for me was getting to see Sampsell read from "A Common Pornography" at "Song Story" and lip sync/roll around on the stage to his old Neon Vomit cassettes. I know I was privy to a rare moment.

Oriana says

I feel really, really guilty that I didn't like this book more than I did. I mean, everything I know about Kevin Sampsell (who is my "friend" on both GR and FB) makes me think he's terrific: really creative, quite influential in the indie press scene, very nice and funny and interesting. And I knew a good deal about this book going in, so I was seriously planning to love it, to be blown away by the captivating insanity of an incredibly fascinating, fucked-up life. I was expecting a lot of blood and gore, as it were. Not actual blood or gore; I mean, I knew it was a story about a super fucked-up childhood, so I thought there would be intensely graphic and emotionally devastating moments throughout. And there *were* a few of those, but they were very far between, and this is a strange thing for me to complain about, I know, because I don't even particularly *like* extremely intense despair or graphic abuse or anything like that at all. But it just seemed like Kevin spent so much time meandering toward the bad things, or like he gave the bad things equal weight in the body of the memoir as he did to things like this one kid's nickname in the fourth grade or a house on fire down the street or how much he liked football statistics or where in his room he kept his porn stash. And clearly this is an intentional tactic, and maybe is meant to be a comment on how much weight bad shit *should* carry in one's memory of one's life, and I really do respect Kevin a lot for putting everything out there like this, honestly I do. But I'm really sorry to have to say that I just couldn't make an emotional connection with nearly anything. A few scenes stick out -- a bunch of his friends getting drunk and failing terribly at a porn shoot; his job at a "taternuts" (potato-dough donuts) shop; some weird experimental poetry performances -- but most of the rest of what I was expecting to be a terribly intense, upsetting book has blurred in my memory -- only a couple of weeks later! -- into just a random jumble of not particularly interesting anecdotes from a lived life.

Lori says

Many thanks to Harper Perennial for sending me a copy of Kevin Sampsell's "A Common Pornography" for review. Had they not generously shipped it to me, I am ashamed to admit I may never have read it. Those who know me, and my taste in literature, would not be surprised by that statement. I am pretty vocal when it comes to non-fiction. I tend to steer clear for many reasons, which I shall spare you the details of here. Let's just say reading "A Child Called It" when I was younger, and more recently "Eating Animals" have scarred me for life (for different reasons, of course!).

My first reaction, as I started reading, was one of disbelief. It's hard to believe that all of this stuff happened to one person. I had to keep reminding myself that this was a collection of memories, real situations that happened with real people. What a crazy life this must have been for him.

My second reaction was "oh my god! His family and friends are going to read this! What will his mother think? What will his SON think?"

It certainly takes a very strong, confident person to take the good, bad, and horrific moments in their lives

and write them all out for the entire world to see. And it's not just enough to write them out, is it? It's a matter of accepting the truth... of holding that mirror up to yourself and not flinching at what looks back at you. It's a matter of understanding that these are the moments that have shaped you, that made you who you are today.

I had to constantly remind myself that the words I had been reading were real. That this was not just a fictional story of made up characters that have all these hilarious, embarrassing, and sometimes frightening things happening to them. That these are real moments that occurred in a real person's life.

I want to thank Kevin for opening up, and being brave enough to share these snapshots of his life with me. He helped me to realise that I am not the only one out there with skeletons in my closet, memories that make my skin crawl and others that make me laugh till I cry. He helped me realise that it is natural to be human.

Don't let this memoir pass you by. Don't wait for a copy to fall into your lap.

Kevin Fanning says

Really affecting memoir. It's so good, because it seems like most memoirs, especially ones having to do with sex or some kind of history of abuse, or so lurid, so tightly focused on the negative. So PORNOGRAPHIC, which is why the title of this book is so perfect. But these are snapshots not just of the bad stuff, but the fun stuff, the boring stuff, the OK stuff.

The taternut section ended up being my favorite, I think. Because for kids growing up in bad circumstances, it's not always all bad. You find ways to make it OK. This is about that.

And it's worth noting that I've met Kevin Sampsell, so is my rating reflective of the fact that I know the person in this book turned out, despite the odds, to be a really genuinely nice, pleasant, good person? Sure it is. So what. Why shouldn't it be.

Lee says

Kevin is a righteous writer/editor/Powell's small-press section curator dude I know from the early Aught's online literary world and EYESHOT. We're both Sixers fans, and at one point in his memoir he mentions Sedale Threatt, the best-named backup point guard during Charles Barkley's (or anyone's) era. Started reading this right after the Canadians beat the US in hockey and finished a little after midnight. I rarely read 216 pages in a single sitting, but I found the short chapters consumable, the language clear and affectationless, and the pace at which he provided serious information about himself and his family intriguing. The language acts the same no matter the content. And, despite the title, most of the short chapters are almost sentimental in their nostalgia for the "common" moments of childhood and adolescence, something I generally find sort of pukey. But not here. In part because without revving up the language or freaking things out at any time, in the exact same very even, nearly anonymous American voice (a good thing), he intersperses confessions re: his family's dysfunction and his, um, lowest moments. At times I was thinking why am I reading this? Why confess all this? But I think the effect for me was like a slideshow, with each image eliciting associations from my own childhood studded with long-gone friends, KISS concerts, Sedale Threatt, and a little later on, shooting hoops for hours (in the pitch dark, in my case) on a certain psychoactive. I guess I'm saying I found it "relatable" -- a very steady, mature, accessible tone lets this connection happen. Insightful, without dropping bombs of hard-won wisdom etc. Other than when I said SEEEEEEDALE THREEEEEEEAT! or when

I emitted one big LOL, I read silently, patiently. Superadmirably honest in content and form. Definitely worth the trip down ye olde memory lane, the author's and the reader's.

Cari says

I don't read much memoir, don't generally enjoy it. What I loved about A COMMON PORNOGRAPHY (in the running for Best Title Ever, by the way) illustrates well what I don't like in more conventional memoir. A COMMON PORNOGRAPHY is written in short segments, roughly--but not strictly--in chronological order. They're fragments, postcards that stand on their own but of course echo each other and build in layers to form an impression of Sampsell's early life. Which is to say, this memoir is written in a way that reflects our actual experience of memory. The experience of reading it feels true, feels like genuine access to the author and the way his mind moves.

Malbadeen says

A few weeks ago I was in the back seat of a car for 12+ hours. I arrived at my friends well prepared for the trip, a bag loaded with all kinds of boredom distractors (sudoku, knitting, novels, short stories, ipod, etc). But on the way out of my friends house I noticed this book on her shelf and started reading it while she finished packing.

I didn't touch the other stuff in my anti-boredom bag after starting Kevin's book. The book is interesting and sometimes funny and sometimes sad and frequently shocking. He maintains the same even handed tone throughout the entire book. There are some parts that had me so wide eyed and curious for reflection that I couldn't believe he just let it be and then I realized that to do anything otherwise would have been inconsistent with the rest of the stories.

But it wasn't just the shocking stuff that kept me turning the pages, it was also the sweet or seemingly benign memories that I enjoyed. Written in short bursts, sometimes just a single paragraph, made it feel like what memories really are: bits and pieces of experiences at times and whole episodes of life changing events at others.
