

# ***The Broken Key* \***

by

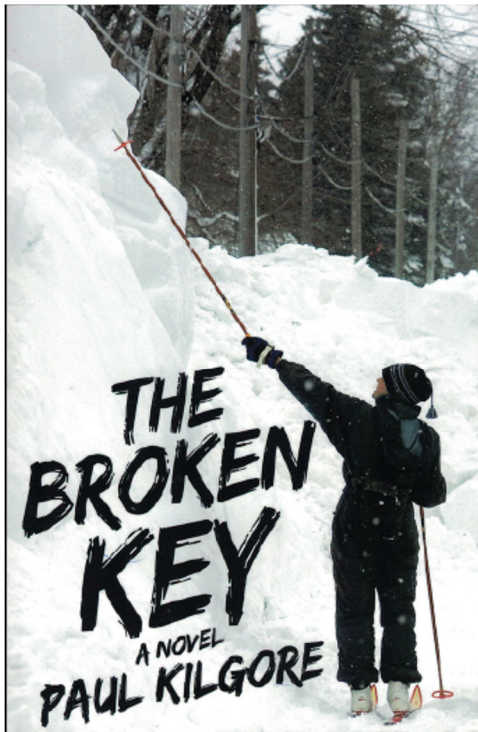
**Paul Kilgore**

**Reviewed**

by

**Lindsay Grier Arthur**

Duluth lawyer Paul Kilgore's most recent work of fiction,\*\* *The Broken Key*, addresses the turmoil and confusion faced by young adults as they move from the safety of academics into the endless



choices and uncertainties of the real world. Hard life decisions all become jumbled together in a virulent mental conundrum for 27-year old Tom Johnson as he stumbles through a plethora of career failures, lost loves, premature deaths, and disappointed parents.

This first-person stream-of-consciousness novel takes the reader on a scenic journey through Tom Johnson's muddled life, plagued by a lack of true friendships that might provide him the support he needs to find meaning in his life. Johnson somehow makes it through high

school in Duluth and college at the University of Minnesota unscathed by the uncertainties of emerging adulthood. Then,

---

\* MPC Books, Maitland, Florida, 259 pages (2017).

\*\* Kilgore's first work of fiction, *Losing Camille*, a collection of short stories, was published by Black Lawrence Press in 2010. It was a finalist for the Minnesota Book Award for Novel and Short Story in 2011.

suddenly and for no apparent reason his life caroms through a series of failures. First, he tries the seminary in Chicago, but leaves the program after a year. Then he tries reuniting his old band buddies and doing some gigs in rural bars in the Duluth/Superior area. That endeavor also ends abruptly for unknown reasons. Next is law school, to follow in the footsteps of his highly successful father, who is a senior partner in the biggest law firm in Duluth, but he walks out of the middle of a final exam that he expects to ace, again for no known reason, and much to the enormous disappointment of his parents. Along the way, a brief marriage to his high school flame ends in divorce and later a promising relationship with the daughter of a local physician ends when she moves away to California to be with a sister. Despite the closeness of his friendship with her, he makes no effort to contact her or keep the relationship alive.

In the end, by pure happenstance, while working as a law clerk for his father's firm, one of the senior partners offers Johnson an opportunity to acquire a small rustic resort comprised of a few modest cabins located on a remote lake north of Duluth, aptly named Dead Wolf Resort. Again, by pure chance, the daughter of the former owner of the resort returns for a visit, and they eventually marry and live a childless, largely hermetic life together in their wilderness cabin outside Duluth.

The hallmark of great fiction is a captivating story filled with compelling characters. It's hard to identify Tom Johnson as a compelling character or to regard the events of his life as a captivating story when Johnson has no real dreams or aspirations and when all the obstacles he faces are self-created. Wandering aimlessly through a confused and insecure young adulthood that he escapes through no effort of his own is hardly the stuff of great novels. On the other hand, Kilgore paints a very vivid picture of the mental and psychological anguish facing thousands of young Americans as they enter adulthood, often entirely unprepared to make the critical decisions that will lead them to a happy and rewarding life.

Kilgore's selection of an Everyman name, Tom Johnson, for his hapless character, causes the reader to reflect on what has to happen to prepare all the Tom Johnsons of the world to confront their ghosts with vigor and enthusiasm for life. This is an important

question to ask, and Paul Kilgore's novel provides an interesting and compelling format for the debate.

≈≈≈

## Reviewer

Lindsay Grier Arthur is the author of three legal textbooks, a photography book, and an award-winning novel, *The Litigators*, which was published by Scarletta Press, a division of Mighty Media. His most recent book, *How to Write a Truly Great Novel*, was released by Archway Publishing in September 2018. He previously co-founded and managed the litigation firm of Arthur, Chapman, Kettering, Smetak and Pikala in Minneapolis. Following his retirement from law in 2015, he has dedicated his professional life teaching creative writing courses and conducting writers' workshops. He is a graduate of Princeton University and the University of Minnesota Law School.

He can be reached at [lindsayarthur327@gmail.com](mailto:lindsayarthur327@gmail.com).

≈≈●≈≈

Posted MLHP: November 5, 2018.