

# B-town's Karol Lagodzki's First Novel A Finalist for PEN/Hemingway Award

For local author Karol Lagodzki, writing his first published novel *Controlled Conversations* (Sunbury Press, 2024) was as much a personal obligation as a creative pursuit.

A finalist for the 2025 PEN/Hemingway Award for a debut novel, the story draws from Lagodzki's experience growing up in his home country of Poland during the period of martial law and strict government supervision between 1981 and 1983. When telephone switchboard operator Emilia is ordered to monitor the calls she connects, she stumbles upon a coded conversation that leads her to act against the oppression.

Lagodzki, 56, was compelled to write *Controlled Conversations* when recent politics in the United States began to mirror his childhood experiences in Poland.

"It was important to tell a story

about regular people who were facing an impossible situation in that autocratic regime," says Lagodzki. "While we no longer have telephone stations where calls are being connected by hand, when many feel they cannot say what they believe their truth is in public—and online is public—then we live in an autocratic society."

Lagodzki is a "Bloomerang," having first lived in Bloomington between 2001 and 2003 when he attained his M.B.A. at Indiana University. After traveling the country, in 2009 Lagodzki moved back to work for Cook Medical where he is a senior global product manager and writes in his spare time.

"I really enjoy my day job, and when that happens it also helps you to feel good about your creative calling because they are not competing with each other," says Lagodzki.



Karol Lagodzki's novel, *Controlled Conversations*, draws from his experience growing up in Poland during the period of martial law and strict government supervision between 1981 and 1983. Photo by Morgan Kraemer

"At the same time, it is important for me to compartmentalize my life at work versus my life as an artist so I can be fully who I am when I write."

Lagodzki credits his wife, Meg—a local painter and successful artist in her own right—for being a partner in his writing success.

"As a writer I often have imposter syndrome, and while it didn't go away when I got shortlisted for an award, it did feel good," says Lagodzki. "It also meant other people agreed the story needed to be told and that was extremely rewarding."

Lagodzki is currently shopping his latest finished novel that follows two timelines: 1395 Poland and near-future 2030 in a small university town in Indiana that "may or may not be Bloomington." Visit [klagodzki.com](http://klagodzki.com) for updates. —Elizabeth Ellis



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