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Introducing . . .

MARSHA SKRYPUCH

by Monique Polak

"I've always loved being able to provide information and solve problems that way." Marsha Skrypuch could be talking about writing any of her 11 children's books, but she isn't. She's explaining why, in 1982, she gave up a successful career as an industrial sales rep specializing in cutting tools to return to university for a Master's degree in Library Science. At first glance, cutting tools, library school, breast pads (in another incarnation Marsha invented and marketed a washable breast pad for nursing mothers) and children's books make an odd list, but they are all linked by Marsha's interest in providing information and solving problems.

In nearly all her books, Marsha explores bits of history that have gone largely unnoticed. *The Hunger*, *Nobody's Child*, *Aram's Choice*, *Call Me Aram* and *Daughter of War* focus on the Armenian genocide and are all interconnected. *Silver Threads*, *Enough*, *Hope's War*, and *Prisoners in the Promised Land: The Ukrainian Internment Diary of Anya Soloniuk* (part of Scholastic's Dear Canada series) all explore untold chapters of Ukrainian history. "Uncovering untold stories is a very important thing. A lot of people who claim to be promoting tolerance are really suppressing other people's stories," Marsha insists.

I first "met" Marsha in 2004 when I attended her presentation at that year's Packaging Your Imagination workshop day. The notes I took are full of exclamation marks and asterisks – testimony to Marsha's exuberance and the importance of what she has to share. Marsha began her workshop that day by confiding that she'd failed Grade Four. "If I can get published," she added, "anybody can!" Along the same lines, Marsha told her audience that the sign of a true writer is: "You get excited about a good rejection!" But her presentation was more than just a pep talk. Marsha told us, too, that unlike writers who write what they know, she has always preferred to write about things she's interested in knowing about. "I write what I can't find to read."

Our paths crossed again last summer at Book Expo when I was seated next to Marsha during a Best Bets event. Marsha was there to promote *Prisoners in the Promised Land*. When she told me there'd be a Montreal launch for her book, we made plans to get together. So that is how I got to spend an evening with Marsha, learning firsthand about how she manages to do everything she does. Because Marsha isn't just a full-time author. She actively mentors other writers, she moderates 17 listservs (including CANSCAIP's), she visits schools, and together with New Brunswick children's author Valerie Sherrard, she runs the Authors' Booking Service. And I nearly forgot to mention that she's the founder and organizer of the Brantford Children's Book Camp. No wonder one of Marsha's editors calls her, "the author who never sleeps."

Marsha turned up at my house with a cutting tool in hand – a state-of-the-art mandolin to slice fruits

and veggies. “You’re going to love it!” she told me. And this, I learned, over the course of our evening together, is the secret of Marsha’s success. Not the mandolin slicer, but Marsha’s excitement about whatever she’s up to.

There was an upside, it turns out, when Marsha failed Grade Four. She began going to the Brantford Public Library, determined to teach herself to read. “I wanted a big fat book,” she recalled. The book she chose was Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and it proved inspirational. “I liked that *Oliver Twist* was about a child in a time of danger, but who had control over his life. It was all about him. That really blew me away. It was the first time in my life that I could see the movie in my head.”

Ironically, Marsha didn’t discover picture books until graduate school. Two in particular stood out for her: Tim Wynne-Jones’s *Zoom at Sea* and Robert Munsch’s *The Paper Bag Princess*. Marsha was impressed that both were respectful to children. “They didn’t assume kids were stupid.” Marsha was also impressed by Michael Martchenko’s illustrations for *The Paper Bag Princess*. “I told myself that if I were ever able to write a children’s book, I’d want Michael Martchenko to illustrate it,” she said. That wish came true twice for Marsha, when Martchenko illustrated her picture books *Enough* and *Silver Threads*.

Marsha credits author Jane Urquhart with teaching her to write. In 1992, Marsha took a summer course with Urquhart at the Humber School for Writers. “Jane made us concentrate on one thing. Instead of a hand, she’d have us describe the position of a finger.”

For Marsha, the 1993 *Packaging Your Imagination* workshop day was what she calls a “watershed experience.” By then, Marsha had written a 500-page adult novel about the Armenian genocide. She had also written a couple of children’s stories and a craft book manuscript. When she came home from *Packaging*, she began preparing several submissions to children’s publishers. Within two weeks, she received contracts for her books *Silver Threads* and *The Red Boots*, as well as for books about egg craft and folklore. Almost immediately Marsha found it necessary to find an agent. After going through five agents in quick succession, in 1996 she hooked up with Dean Cooke, who usually represents writers for adults. He has represented her ever since.

Marsha finds she works best when she has more than one project going at a time. “The research for one will be coming through while I’m writing another one.” Marsha is an enthusiastic and meticulous researcher: “I love the research. It feels like I’m not working.” And Marsha isn’t one to rush the research phase. “It took me ten years of research before I could begin to write the Armenian stories.”

The writing part comes far more quickly. Marsha describes herself as a “chunk writer,” adding, “I write maniacally.” She gets to her computer by about 10:30 or 11 A.M., most mornings – after she’s run or worked out at the gym and had a cup of freshly ground Hawaiian coffee. Once she’s working, she guards her writing time. “If someone phones during the day, I say, ‘I have ten minutes to talk.’ Some people probably think I’m rude or abrupt.”

Though Marsha has a home office in a loft on the second floor of her Brantford, Ont., home, she does most of her writing on a laptop in the family room downstairs. “That way I can trick myself into thinking I’m not working.”

Marsha relies on her husband Orest, to whom she’s been married since 1981, and her son Neil, who’s 23, to help solve her computer problems. “They’re both computer nerds. They laugh when people say I know a lot about computers and on-line stuff,” she said. Orest, an eye surgeon who teaches skiing and

flies planes in his spare time, also plays an important role when Marsha begins a new book. “You have to know all sorts of minutiae when you’re developing characters – and he’s a font of minutiae.”

A YA novel takes Marsha about six months to write, though the bulk of the writing usually happens over one month. “I can write 14 hours a day.” For Marsha, the hardest part is finding the beginning. “Sometimes, I’ll start a book and it won’t go. I can rewrite the first chapter 20 times, 50 times.”

Marsha’s interest in the Ukrainian-Canadian experience is deeply personal. Her paternal grandfather – who makes a cameo appearance in *Prisoners in the Promised Land* – was interned as an “enemy alien” in Jasper, Alberta. “He was nearly shot when he escaped. Bullets went whizzing by his ears.” But what about Marsha’s Armenian stories? Those, she says, grew out of a sense of moral responsibility. “I realized that if I wanted people to step into my shoes, then I should be willing to step into theirs.”

Marsha learned firsthand that raising awareness about little known historical events carries its own risks. After the publication in 2000 of *Enough*, which is about one girl and her father and how they save one village from the Stalin-induced famine in 1930s Ukraine, Marsha’s father-in-law’s office was spray-bombed with swastikas and she received hate mail. She contacted the police, who ended up attending some of her launches. “They bought books, too.”

In spite of Marsha’s crack about police officers buying her books, it’s obvious this was a frightening time. “I wondered if I should go ahead with *Hope’s War*, a novel about someone who’s been unjustly accused of Nazi war crimes. I was worried about my family’s safety.” In the end, her resolve to tell stories some people didn’t want told was strengthened.

*Nobody’s Child*, published in 2003 and Marsha’s first entirely historical novel, was Marsha’s breakout book. “It was the one that changed everything. The Armenian genocide was beginning to be in people’s consciousness, which was bizarre considering how long ago it happened.” In 2005, the book was nominated for the Red Maple Award, Rocky Mountain Book Award, and the B.C. Stellar Award. Marsha’s work has been nominated for many other awards since then, including nominations for the Golden Oak and Silver Birch Awards, as well as the CLA Children’s Book of the Year for Aram’s Choice.

Marsha says she’s held many of her books in her head for years before sitting down to write them. In addition to doing the historical research, Marsha feels she has to know her main characters inside-out before she can begin telling their stories: “I have to be able to take him or her through the whole day.”

For Marsha, *Prisoners in the Promised Land* represented a major departure from her usual third-person point of view book. Since the Scholastic series uses the diary form, Marsha had no choice but to use first person. “I’d been dead set against writing in the first person. I’d seen it done poorly so often, especially in my critique groups.” But Marsha found she liked working with the first person point of view more than she had expected. Would she try it again? “I think so.”

The diary form presented other challenges, too, such as writing in the present tense and having to include short entries. “The trick was to work with that rigid format and still have character development, plotting and suspense. Once I got into it, I loved it.” Marsha said she’d jump at the opportunity to contribute another book to the Dear Canada Series. So far, the entire collection has focused on girls’ diaries, and Marsha would like to see the inclusion of boys’ voices.

Mentoring other writers is as important to Marsha as producing her own work. “Mentoring is a huge part of who I am.” When I asked her why, Marsha didn’t need to stop to consider her answer. “Because I never had it. The first time I met writers was when I went to my first CANSCAIP meeting.”

Marsha has a special interest in working with emerging Ukrainian-Canadian writers. At the time of this interview, there were 26 people in her Story Friends Yahoo group – a group of writers exploring stories connected to their Ukrainian roots. “They just found me after they read my work.” Again, her motive is to help these new writers overcome some of the obstacles she faced earlier in her career. “People come to me with the same issues I had. I try to help them write their stories.”

Marsha is especially proud of *Kobzar’s Children: A Century of Untold Ukrainian Stories* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside), a collection of stories she edited, most of which came to her through her Story Friends group. All royalties from the book have gone to the Ukrainian Civil Liberties Association.

Marsha also runs Kidcrit, a free, private, on-line group, in which children’s writers respond to each other’s work. (The group had 28 members when I interviewed Marsha.) Many Kidcrit participants, including Marina Cohen and Mahtab Narsimhan, have gone on to have their work published. Mahtab doubts she would ever have published her YA novel *The Third Eye* without Marsha and Kidcrit. “The manuscript had to be ‘sleekified.’ That’s a Kidcrit term,” Mahtab explains. “The first critique I got was from Marsha. She cut down my first chapter by 25 per cent. And then everyone else jumped in. Marsha also introduced me to my editor Barry Jowett at Dundurn.”

Participating in Kidcrit is harder than it sounds; participants have to deal with a demanding taskmaster

– Marsha. “Poor writers don’t last more than four days because they can’t take the heat. The ones who are good and realize you have to revise a story a lot become very good – and end up being published. Each participant has to be actively critiquing or he or she gets kicked out. They talk about me with the pointy shoes and the wand. The pointy shoes are what kicks them out; the wand waves them back in,” Marsha said. Sitting across the table from Marsha, it’s easy to imagine her waving a wand – but not wearing the pointy shoes.

Among the other listservs Marsha moderates are ones for the Canadian Coalition for School Libraries, the Ukrainian Civil Liberties Association, and of course, CANSCAIP’s. All of that, says Marsha, is really no big deal, but the listserv members regularly express their astonishment at Marsha’s ability to solve problems and their gratitude for her efforts. She is always the first one to post members’ reviews when they appear in publications like *The Globe & Mail* and *CM*.

I asked children’s writer Karleen Bradford to sum up Marsha’s contribution. Here’s what Karleen had to say: “Marsha makes the Energizer Bunny look lackadaisical. She gives generously of her expertise and her commitment to helping new writers and, in addition to writing supremely well-researched novels, she makes time to help out the writing community in many other ways. Setting up and moderating the CANSCAIP listserv is just one example.”

Then there’s the Authors’ Booking Service, which was born in April 2006. It grew out of a private arrangement with children’s writer Valerie Sherrard. She and Marsha found that when it came to arranging speaking engagements, it was easier to negotiate for each other, rather than for themselves. They now represent 70 children’s authors and have a waiting list of others eager to sign on. The authors pay the service \$25 per booking – but all they have to do is show up and do their reading or workshop.

Like the Authors' Booking Service, the Brantford Children's Book Camp also just kind of happened. In 2002, Marsha presented at Toronto's first children's book camp. The experience made her realize that Brantford, the town where she was born and has lived for most of her life, could use a children's book camp of its own. "Hockey is big in Brantford. It's Wayne Gretzky's hometown. But books – well, not so much." But by the summer of 2003, thanks largely to Marsha's efforts, Brantford had a children's book camp, which has gone on to become an annual event. Last summer, nine authors worked with 53 youngsters. There was also a parallel camp for adults, introduced in 2006. "Before that, there were all these adults who kept trying to sneak in," Marsha said.

Marsha also made time last summer to teach at the Humber School for Writers – the same place where she had previously taken a writing course with Jane Urquhart. "I felt like I'd come full circle."

Marsha Skrypuch is the sort of person who hasn't forgotten where she came from. And that's a good thing for us readers – and writers.

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