

Stepping inside another's shoes

Is writing from another culture's perspective stepping into another's shoes, or is it cultural appropriation? Must one have a genetic affiliation with a culture in order to write about it?

Gillian Chan, Lynne Kositsky, and Marsha Skrypuch are three Canadian children's authors who have created fictional characters within their own cultural background, yet each has also written works of fiction told from another cultural point of view. How was the experience different for these three authors, in terms of research challenges, writing the story, and sharing the story with the public when they wrote from the perspective of another culture compared to when they wrote from within their own culture?

Gillian Chan is a Canadian children's author who was born in and raised in Britain. When she and her Chinese husband immigrated to Canada in 1990, neither of them knew anything about Chinese Canadian history, but they had both experienced first-hand what it was like to be an immigrant. As a writer, Gillian was fascinated with other immigrant experiences. Her first young adult novel, *The Carved Box*, was written from the point of view of Callum Murdoch, a Scottish immigrant. While this novel is set in another century and required much meticulous research, Callum's immigrant experience was from within her own heritage. "But it is written from a boy's point of view," she points out. "And I am not a boy."

For her most recent project, Gillian decided that she wanted to challenge herself even further. She looked at the children's literature that had been written on Chinese Canadians and saw that much of it focused on the building of the railways. When Scholastic began publishing the *Dear Canada* series, Gillian realized that it would have to feature different Canadian cultures and ethnic groups in order to be truly broad in scope. She was fascinated by the Chinese Immigration Act and its ramifications. She had initially wanted to write a novel set during the repeal of that Act in 1947, but Scholastic was interested in an earlier time frame. As she embarked on her research, she realized that Vancouver in 1923 would be ideal setting to explore. A pivotal point in Canadian history was July 1st 1923, when the Chinese Immigration Act was brought forth. This act banned Chinese immigration to Canada for the next 24 years. This had enormous impact on the Chinese immigrants who were already in Canada. Because there had already been restrictions on Chinese women and children coming to Canada, most of the Chinese in Canada were men whose families still resided in China. These men would visit their families when they were able. They would send money home, and some would sponsor their families to come to Canada. The Chinese Immigration Act changed all that. Suddenly, men had to decide whether they

would stay in Canada without their families, or go back to China. Apologists liked to point out that the Act did have some positive aspects, like the Head Tax being abolished, but the Act had a devastating impact on Chinese immigrants in Canada. As Gillian did her research, she discovered that even after the Act was law, immigration did not end immediately as those whose papers were already processed were still able to come. Some classes of immigrants were exempt, for example, politicians, diplomats and other important people, but these were very rare. "This was a time the Chinese community in Canada faced both internal and external pressure," said Gillian. "I thought it would be the perfect place to set a novel."

Gillian chose her main character to be a 12 year old girl named Mei who was brought over by her father in 1919 at age 9. Her father had gone back to China in 1909 in order to marry and start a family. Mei didn't meet her father until he visited China again in 1919. Her father had come back to China in order to bring his wife to Canada, but the family convinces him to take his daughter Mei to Canada instead. Gillian plunges the reader into Mei's exciting life and all the changes that are in store for her. Mei's father allows her to attend school, something she would not have been able to do in China. Also in China, she has a three year old brother and there is still the question of whether he is going to remain in China or come to Canada with his mother before the Chinese Immigration Act takes effect.

Gillian is meticulous when it comes to research:

"I always hit the books first. I wanted a firm historical framework before I started. I looked at both federal and provincial archives and I found that up until 1872 the Chinese in Canada could vote provincially in British Columbia and then that right was taken away. Aside from not being able to vote in provincial elections, provincial disenfranchisement had other ramifications in terms of what professions the Chinese Canadians could take a part in and what schools were open to them. Federal disenfranchisement came later. The next thing I did was read the newspapers of the time. I read the Vancouver newspapers in English and I got hold of the *Chinese Times* in Chinese for the period 1922-1923. My husband translated it for me."

"One research problem that I had was that it was difficult to get stories from people who were alive at the time. I did manage to find tapes of anecdotes and transcriptions of oral histories. I also interviewed some people whose parents were affected by the Chinese Immigration Act. While I was doing research I did not encounter a language barrier. All of the interviewees spoke English, and the only time I needed Chinese translation was for the newspapers. While I was doing the research for this novel, I made some good contacts within the Chinese Canadian community. The reception that I got for my project was 100

percent positive. The usual reaction was that this was a story that needed to be explored and hadn't been done from this point of view."

The Chinese Canadian community was essential for Gillian's research. She made contact with a man named Howe Lee, who ran a Chinese War Veterans' group. A spin-off contact from Howe Lee was Larry Wong, the curator at the Chinese War Museum in the Chinese Cultural Center in Vancouver. This curator and historian helped Gillian by finding some family stories and memoirs that dealt with the time in which her book was set. "He knew that I was approaching the topic seriously," said Gillian, "and he helped me immensely with research details."

"The Vancouver Public Library was a fantastic resource for my *Dear Canada* novel. I flew to Vancouver twice in order to do extensive research. I found quite a lot of material on my own. For example, I was able to get the immigration records on microfilm for 1923. I also discovered "InfoAct", which is a service provided for a fee by research librarians. I found this to be a huge time saver and a wonderful resource. They looked up the school curriculum for 1923 for me, and they found out whether it would be possible for my character to take the tram. I also used interlibrary loan, and I visited the University of British Columbia library. I found pictorial records and a very good bibliography of Chinese Canadian history. I also found tracts of a missionary society. Everything was in English except for the *Chinese Times*. Gillian is looking forward to having the opportunity to do readings of her *Dear Canada* novel within the Chinese Canadian community once it is published, her husband's family has had some preview readings, and they are very positive about it. Prior to embarking on writing young adult novels, Gillian had two books of young adult short stories published. In her collection entitled *Golden Girl*, was a story called "Small Town Napoleon" which was told from a Chinese Canadian's point of view. Gillian has done readings from this story in classrooms, and she has had students of Chinese background come up to her afterwards and tell her that they loved the story and could relate to it.

When Gillian first became published in book form, some people assumed that she was of Chinese origin because of her last name. When she was married in the 1980s it was standard practice in England for women to take their husband's name. It never occurred to her that people would assume she was Chinese. Something that added to the confusion was the fact that Kids Can Press did not include author photos in their early books. "One time I showed up for an interview," said Gillian, "and I could tell by the woman's face that she was surprised that I wasn't Chinese."

Gillian goes to great lengths to make sure that people know that she is not Chinese. "I don't want people to think I'm passing myself off as something that I'm not. My picture is on my

web site and whenever I book a school reading I link the school to my web site so they can see my picture, and they're not surprised when I get there."

When asked why she decided to write from a Chinese immigrant's point of view, Gillian explains: "Having changed countries myself, I think it is easy for me to step into the shoes of someone else who has done that. I think the immigration experience is rich in terms of understanding people and their motivations. It is a universal experience that is specific to communities, but will resonate with all readers."

Immediately prior to writing her *Dear Canada* novel, Gillian wrote *A Foreign Field*, which is told from the dual points of view of two teens: a Canadian girl and a British boy during World War II. Gillian notes that in terms of how she approached the research, there wasn't much difference. "The research was slightly easier because the setting was 1943 and people were alive to be interviewed, but they were older and many had faded memories."

Gillian found a World War II pilots' club called "The Old Eagles". "I interviewed them," she said. "They provided a wealth of little details that makes history come alive: how all barrack rooms smell of boot polish and sweat -- things like that -- they could fill them for me. I also found that chance conversations had a serendipitous magic. One conversation with an artist friend led to my introduction to George Neale, a Hamilton man who trained in Hagersville. I interviewed him at length. He was the best source for little details. For example, I found out that the Canadians always made sure to invite the Brits and the Aussies back home on holidays. The local butcher would always find extra on the ration when that happened. George was like Larry, my Chinese curator: he was a living resource."

"Something that was a huge help with my research for this book was letters. The Imperial War Museum in London, England has several collections of letters donated by British airmen from World War II. This was a gold mine in terms of looking at the wartime Canada through the eyes of the British trainee pilots. These letters were useful for details and also for the slang of the time. What I found interesting was that one of the boys whose letters were at the museum was very concerned about what was happening to his dog at home while he was away at war. I worked that into my book so that my character Stephen is worried about his dog."

Gillian also spent time at the National Archives in Ottawa while she was researching for *A Foreign Field*. Of particular help was a highly detailed war diary on microfilm of SFTS 16, the flying school at Hagersville where the novel is set. She also found the Canadian Warplanes Heritage Museum in Mount Hope to be helpful. They had the plane that her

character Stephen trained in and she was able to climb inside. In addition to her hands-on and library research, Gillian found the Internet to be an invaluable resource. "I love google."

A Foreign Field was published in the fall of 2002 and Gillian has done many readings with it. She has frequently encountered people in her audiences whose parents had experiences similar to Stephen's and Ellen's.

Gillian notes that while there was no difference between the two cultures in terms of depth of research, there was a huge difference in terms of stress levels. "For the *Dear Canada* novel, I had to do so much more because I didn't have the absorbed knowledge of Chinese Canadian culture that I do with British Canadian culture." Gillian had the most difficulty with "little attitudinal things". For example, she would not automatically know how Mei would to feel at a certain event and she did not want to assume that the reaction would be the same as someone with a British upbringing. "I would ask my husband to make sure that I got it right. This was the hardest book that I have ever written. *A Foreign Field* was easier because I knew the attitudes without having to ask."

Gillian has strong opinions on the issue of voice appropriation: As a writer, you have to re-create the time, and you also have to get into minds of the people who lived then, but I quote the American essayist, Cynthia Ozick, who wrote that, 'metaphor allows the reader to see inside the familiar heart of the stranger.' That's what good writing, historical or otherwise should do. It should allow a reader to explore the different lives but also to see that inside these lives there are things that will be the same, universal experiences and emotions. Creative writing takes a leap of faith, and a leap of empathy. Both the reader and the writer must do this. Careful research is essential. If this is lacking then I do think that it can cause offense, understandably so. There are many books, for example, with an English setting written by Americans (mysteries in particular), and I read them avidly and with great enjoyment, but just occasionally there will be one where there is a glaring error, either factual or linguistic, and that annoys me - the lack of care annoys me."

Lynne Kositsky is a Canadian children's author who was born in Montreal and grew up in England. She has written novels from a number of different racial and ethnic points of view. Her *Rachel* novels in the *Our Canadian Girl* Series are told from the point of view of a black girl in Acadia. Lynne decided to write from a black child's point of view because she is the adoptive mother of two black children. When her children were growing up, she realized that there wasn't much positive for them to read that would reflect a black Canadian point of view. This was something that was always at the back of her mind. While Lynne was researching Acadia for another book, a friend told her that American slave ships had docked in Nova Scotia on their way to New England. This rumour of history fascinated Lynne. She spent a lot of time looking for the story, but could find

nothing. But as she searched, almost by serendipity, she came upon another, equally fascinating story: during the Revolutionary War, the British would offer freedom to the slaves if they fought with them against the Patriots. However, when Britain lost the war, the slave owners came looking for their "property". Eventually the British decided to ship all of the Black Loyalists out to places such as Nova Scotia to begin a new life. Lynne tucked that tidbit of history into the back of her head for the time being. Some time after that, Lynne saw a National Film Board production about two women who worked in Nova Scotia together and became friends. They ultimately found that one of them had slave ancestry and the other was descended from slave owners on the same plantation. Lynne added this detail to the story that was growing in the back of her head.

When her agent came to her about the *Our Canadian Girl* novels, Lynne proposed a series about ten year old Rachel, who escapes slavery in 1783 South Carolina and settles in Birchtown, Nova Scotia. Penguin liked the idea, and gave her a contract, so Lynne started her research in earnest. Lynne was assisted in her research by Prof. Patricia Clark at Seneca college, who taught Black Studies, and Laird Niven, the archaeologist of the Birchtown site. Lynne visited Birchtown, Nova Scotia: "I looked at the lay of the land, visited the archaeological digs, and spoke to the archaeologist and descendants of the original settlers. I found a rock near the place where the boat must have come in. It was incredible to stand on that spot, stare down at the red-flecked water, and imagine what it must have felt like to be a stranger in a strange land. I also visited an archeological site on land where Rachel would have lived." While she was in Nova Scotia, Lynne found a number of books of local history which proved most useful, including a book of costumes of the Loyalists. One of the books she found was written by a white man who had noticed that many black people had the same last name as he did. He researched it and found out he was descended from slave owners and that many of these black people were his blood relatives.

Lynne makes the point of never reading works of fiction set during the era of her own books while she's doing research. Unlike Gillian, who relies heavily on interlibrary loan and library visits, Lynne likes to own the books she uses. She tends to get used books on abebooks.com. She also uses the Internet extensively. One book that she wanted to get her hands on was called *The Book of Negroes*. This was a log book written by the ship captains of the slave ships and it contained a wealth of information, such as the names of individual slaves, what they looked like, and whom their masters had been. This was an incredible find, but it was prohibitively expensive to own. Lynne's Internet sleuthing uncovered a copy of *The Book of Negroes* on the web. She left the url open for ready reference on her desktop as she wrote and researched. Because her *Rachel* books are set in 1783-1785, Lynne could not interview descendants or survivors of the time. It was also difficult to locate narratives written by blacks, although there are one or two quite famous ones that she utilized. Lynne also located transcriptions of oral histories of whites talking about black slaves and how horribly they were being treated. There seemed very little in the way of

newspaper accounts; however, she did find "wanted" posters for runaway slaves. On the inside flap of *A Mighty Big Imagining*, the first *Rachel* novel, there is a mock up of an actual poster.

Lynne also looked up old court cases in Nova Scotia. She wanted to see if black people ever went court to establish their freedom after being stolen back into captivity. All of the research she did was in English, but she did look up dialect of the Southern States so that she could reconstruct, as far as possible, how slaves spoke. One of the biggest challenges Lynne encountered while writing her *Rachel* books was being true to the time while not being offensive to modern readers. A prime example of that is the word "nigger". In the 1700s this word was used extensively by both blacks and whites and it was not defamatory, at least when used by blacks of themselves, but she did not want to use it in her novels because it is now considered a pejorative term. To resolve her dilemma, she coined her own word: "nigra".

When asked about why she decided to write about this topic, Lynne explains: "As far as I know, there were no works of fiction for children about the Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia. Most black Canadian books are about the Underground Railroad." Lynne was also aware that this was a piece of history that was about to be lost. "There are only six or eight black people left in Shelburne, and I met three of them. They were thrilled with what I was writing."

Lynne has done readings from her *Rachel* series in classrooms where most of the kids are black, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. "I have also had wonderful letters from black people. I got a letter from a girl who was a descendant of the Black Loyalists of Birchtown, and I also got a letter from a black librarian who was absolutely thrilled with the *Rachel* series." Lynne has received not even a shred of criticism for writing from a black point of view. Like Gillian, Lynne has very strong feelings on the concept of cultural appropriation. "They always tell you to 'write what you know' but you can also write what you can research and what you're passionate about. No one in the black community had done this story," Lynne said. "People told me that this was a story that needed to be told. We are all human beings and I write to shed light on the wrongs that have been done to various people over the centuries." *Rachel* is not portrayed as a victim or in a condescending way. "I have respect and empathy for my characters." While Lynne steps into the shoes of many different cultures and people in her stories, she has found that some groups are "off limits". "I wrote a picture book about the Haida Gwaii," she said. "I have had wonderful feedback about the story, but publishers won't touch it."

Like Gillian, Lynne understands that there can be problems when one writes from an unfamiliar cultural point of view. "You sometimes see books where the writer is

condescending and that's a problem, but I hope my books are not like that. If the stories are not being told by that particular ethnic group and the stories need to be told, it doesn't matter who tells them as long as it's done respectfully." Every time I write a book, it is completely different. Even when I revisit a topic or era, I look at it from a different angle."

Lynne has learned from experience that the term "cultural appropriation" rather misses the mark. Even when writing about one's own culture, readers can be offended. Lynne's first novels were written from a Jewish perspective: "Both of my parents are Jewish but I was not raised in a religious way. I had to research about Jews as much as the other cultures. However it was a good place to start." The first two novels that Lynne had published were *Candles* and *Rebecca's Flame*. In *Candles*, Anya steps back in time and into the shoes of Este, a Jewish girl in Nazi Germany. "When *Candles* came out, the Jewish community was thrilled and I was invited everywhere. I had been teaching in a Jewish school when I was writing *Candles*. I read it to my class as I wrote it and they loved it." Lynne had an entirely different reaction from the Jewish community when *Rebecca's Flame* came out.

"*Rebecca's Flame* is set during the Irish Famine and in the story a Jewish girl converts to Catholicism. *Rebecca's Flame* was a disaster as far as the Jewish schools were concerned because Rebecca had converted. I found this very frustrating because it was a realistic scenario. I have done readings from this novel with the Irish community and I have received positive feedback. I have read the Rachel books to Jewish groups to great enthusiasm. I have also read my Jewish books to black groups and white Christian groups and that was fine too. Why is *Rebecca's Flame* offensive to the Jewish schools? I feel that Rebecca's conversion reflects reality. Intermarriage is close to 50% in the Jewish community today, and we should discuss the truth, not shove it under the carpet."

When Lynne was doing research for *Rebecca's Flame*, she contacted the Jewish Museum in Dublin but received no reply, so she researched Polish Jews and British Jews and transposed the information. "I knew that there were both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in Ireland at the time, the Sephardic community dying out and being replaced by the Ashkenazis, so I made sure to have both in the book. I also looked up Jewish marriage conventions of the time, and transposed that information onto Ireland."

Lynne was able to find extensive information on the Famine itself, on the musical instruments her characters played, and on the coffin ship her characters traveled to Canada on. "I also looked up government records for appropriate names and I found a whole family of Woodlocks. After I wrote the book, I went to the town in Quebec where Rebecca and Sean Woodlock, her Irish husband, had settled, now called Shannon, and found from the local record that there was a real Sean Woodlock who had settled there during the same period. It was a revelation. I also went to Grosse Ile, the quarantine island. It was a very

emotional visit. The land in the cemetery was undulating because the coffins were buried three deep and the ground had fallen around them. All I could think was that my little Bridget, Rebecca's sister, was buried there. Characters become real to me."

Lynne's upcoming novel is called *The Thought of High Windows*. It will be out in spring 2004. This novel is set in France during the Holocaust: "*High Windows* came about by serendipity. I watched a TV program called *Reunion* about a group of Jewish children who had escaped Germany during the Second World War and hid out in a castle in France. Theirs wasn't the usual Holocaust story that you see over and over. I contacted the film producers and they put me in touch with the people who had been in the film. That was an enormous help for the research for this book. I also located an autobiography by one of the survivors, written in Hebrew, which had been transcribed into English on tape. I found an unpublished diary by another survivor in German. I had that translated onto tape myself, but it turned out not to be as useful as I had hoped, as it was extremely similar to the first source. When I thought I had done enough background work, I created my story as an overlay."

"The first draft of *The Thought of High Windows* had the characters doing a tremendous amount of travel because in real life, that's what happened. However, all that movement weakened the story. When I rewrote it, the story stayed the same, but the structure changed. Instead of being linear, the characters stay put for the majority of the novel, and much of the traveling is told in flashback. I also had to change some of the physical locations to cut down on movement."

"I included some negative Jewish characters, rather unpleasant girls in the castle who tease the female protagonist, and there is a Nazi soldier near the end who is portrayed positively. I did this because that is the truth, not necessarily about the children who really lived in the castle, but about life, and I was striving for realism. I wanted the novel to be interesting too, and for that, one needs conflict and characters with depth. In the *Rachel* books, there is conflict, and there are black characters who are negative. Even Rachel herself is not a totally positive character because I wanted to make her a real little girl. When her baby brother is born, for example, she is so jealous she feels the family should put him in the rubbish. I received no criticism from the black community over this, but my historical contacts for *The Thought of High Windows* have shown me that they perceive a problem. It has been pointed out to me that I may not receive good reviews for *The Thought of High Windows* because nearly all of the Holocaust books for children or young adults that have been written so far have only good Jews and bad Nazis. However every group has good and bad, and every person has good and bad in her. That's what makes us human."

Marsha Skrypuch is a children's author who was born and raised in Ontario, Canada. The first novel that she had published was *The Hunger*, a time travel historical in which a contemporary teen steps into her Armenian great grandmother's shoes in 1915 Turkey. The sequel to that novel, *Nobody's Child*, will be published in fall, 2003. It is a straight historical, set in Turkey between 1909 and 1918.

Why would a fifth generation Canadian spend more than ten years researching and writing novels about Armenian immigrants? As was the case for Lynne, serendipity played a large role: "I wrote monthly articles for a small historical magazine in Brantford Ontario in the 1980s. My focus was always the immigration story of a particular family. I had done a story on my own grandfather's immigration from Ukraine in 1912, and a story on a Vietnamese family who came here as "boat people" in the 1970s. Carl Georgian, a local man who had read my profiles called me up and told me that I should do a story on the immigration of his father. Why? I asked. 'Because my father was one of the original Georgetown Boys.' 'That's great', I said. 'But who are the Georgetown Boys?'

Marsha soon found out that in 1923, a Canadian church society sponsored the immigration of 100 Armenian orphans between the ages of 8 and 12. These children, all boys, were orphaned as a result of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey. "I interviewed Carl, and found enough about his father to write my freelance story, but the interview left me with more questions than answers. For example, what happened to the parents of these children? And why were there no female orphans?"

Answering these questions took Marsha on a long exploration, much of which was spent at the Multicultural Historical Archives at the University of Toronto, where she listened to the taped oral histories of the Georgetown boys, and pored over a variety of rare documents and photographs. She even discovered a tape recorded by Carl Georgian's father -- one that his own family knew nothing about. She arranged for a copy to be sent to Carl, who was thus able to discover much new information about his reticent father's early life.

A series of phone calls also led her to a few elderly surviving Georgetown boys, but none were willing to talk to her in person. "They didn't know who I was, and they didn't trust me," said Marsha. "Maybe they thought I was a Turkish spy."

Even some of the tapes in the archives were off-limits to Marsha: "Some of the tapes were sealed to ensure that no one listened to them until after their death." Unlike Gillian and Lynne, Marsha could not turn to the Internet when she first began her Armenian research because she was doing it in the 1980s, before the Internet was useful.

Like Gillian, Marsha utilized inter-library loan. "I developed an extensive list of books on the Armenian Genocide, and since virtually all were difficult to obtain, I requested dozens through inter-library-loan and waited patiently, hoping that something -- anything would arrive to enlighten me." Books did trickle in, but it was a tedious process. "It took months for some of the books to arrive, and then not all of them were useful. I felt like I had reached a brick wall in my research."

One of the items that arrived via inter-library loan was a video tape of a CBC documentary on the Georgetown Boys. Marsha tracked down the producer, Dorothy Manoukian, who read an early draft of her manuscript and then put her in contact with Aram Aivazian of Burlington Ontario.

"Aram was a survivor of the massacres, but not a Georgetown boy. Most importantly, he was willing to talk to me and his memories were crisp. We agreed to meet at the Burlington Public Library, and after a 30 minute interview, Aram decided that he could trust me. He led me to his car, opened the trunk, and pulled out a huge old-fashioned suitcase stuffed full with an extraordinary collection of books. My jaw dropped. In that suitcase, he had virtually every book that I had been trying to locate. He handed me a yellow sheet of paper with the titles of each book scrawled line by line. 'Sign this as proof that you borrowed them,' he told me. 'And I'll load this suitcase into your car.' Aram's books and crisp recollections provided me with the Armenian component of *The Hunger* from a male point of view, but I still needed to find out what happened to the women."

No female survivor was willing to tell Marsha what she had to live through. "Since no one would talk to me, I had to speculate. After I wrote Marta's experiences, I shared them with women survivors. Their response? 'Who told?'"

Aram Aivazian died before *The Hunger* was published, but Marsha was honoured when one of his sons called her and asked if she would speak at his funeral. "I was the only non-Armenian there," said Marsha. "And it was a privilege to give Aram tribute."

The publication of *The Hunger* in 1999 was enthusiastically received by the Armenian Canadian community. "The Armenian Cultural Centre threw a book launch for me. I was interviewed on Armenian TV and favourably reviewed in print media." Ironically, once the novel was out, all the people who had been hesitant to help her initially now stepped forward. "But I had already written the novel," said Marsha.

Writing *Nobody's Child* was much easier because of the community support. "Arsho Zakarian, the librarian at the Armenian Cultural Centre, provided me with tremendous

resource material," said Marsha. "I already had extensive notes from writing *The Hunger*, but because that novel was only partially set in the past, I didn't need as much detail as I did for *Nobody's Child*. Arsho educated me in terms of food and clothing and maps and household interiors of Armenian and Turkish homes. She also helped me with Armenian phrases and sayings, and she read my manuscript for accuracy.

Arsho also arranged for Marsha to meet with Hermanie, a friend of Arsho's, who had lived in the city of Marash, where *Nobody's Child* takes place, and whose father was a Genocide survivor. Marsha spent a whole day at Hermanie's house and watched as she cooked up a traditional Marash wedding feast. Once the cooking was done, Marsha, Hermanie and Arsho sat down and ate it. "This was better research than all the books in the world," said Marsha. "There were some food items that I had read about, but I couldn't really visualize." In addition to the food, Marsha gleaned many tidbits of information by simply listening to the anecdotes that Arsho and Hermanie told her as they cooked.

Marsha has strong opinions on cultural appropriation. "Almost everything I had read about the Armenian Genocide had been written by Armenians for Armenians. One problem with this is that it is hard to remain objective when writing about genocide when it was your own family that has been killed. What struck me in my research was the fact that every Armenian who survived the Genocide had been assisted in some way by a Turk or an Arab. I didn't want to write about victims. I wanted to write about how some people survived. Stepping into another culture's shoes gives you that fresh perspective."

After spending nearly ten years immersed in Armenian and Turkish history and culture, Marsha was ready for a change. "My grandfather immigrated to Canada from Ukraine in 1912, but I was two generations past that, and not familiar with Ukrainian customs or history." Marsha had, however, delved into some Ukrainian history to write two of her picture books. *Silver Threads*, written by Marsha and illustrated by Michael Martchenko, was published in 1996. "Prior to the publication of that book, I'd had little contact with the Ukrainian Canadian community, but almost immediately, my phone began to ring. Various Ukrainian groups and schools asked me to do readings. "Many people assumed I would speak Ukrainian because of my name," said Marsha, "and at first I was embarrassed that I couldn't. In fact, one woman said to me, 'How can you write about this when you're not a *real* Ukrainian?'" By the time *Enough*, Marsha's second Ukrainian folk-tale picture book (also illustrated by Michael Marthenko) came out in 2000, she had suddenly become a "real Ukrainian."

Hope's War, Marsha's second novel, was published in 2001. The idea behind this book came about by serendipity. "I was doing research for *The Hunger* when I happened upon a news item about a Ukrainian immigrant who had been accused of being Nazi war criminal,

and even though he was exonerated, doubts lingered. I was fascinated with the story," said Marsha. "And it gave me an idea: what would it be like to be the granddaughter of someone thus accused?"

She decided to plunge in both feet. "I didn't know what really happened in Ukraine during World War II," explains Marsha. "But I decided to find out." Marsha read all the books she could find about Ukraine and WWII that were available in English. "Instead of using inter-library loan this time, I bought a library card for McMaster University. They have an extensive Ukrainian history section, and I could get the books I needed quickly this way."

Because Marsha was already known within the Ukrainian Canadian community, she got help, even with such a touchy topic. Nel Nakoneczny, the librarian for the Ukrainian National Federation in Toronto, was a huge help. "There were a number of books that I needed for months at a time, and McMaster would only let me have them for a couple of weeks. If Nel had these books in her collection, she would mail them to me and let me borrow them for as long as I needed."

Marsha contacted the families of people who had been accused of being Nazi war criminals. "My first surprise was how easy this was. These people were not hiding in shame. I warned them that I was going to do some deep digging and was interested in the truth, not just a story." Within 10 minutes of phone calls, Marsha had set up her first meeting. Over the course of 6 months, she interviewed one accused man, and the grandchildren, daughters, sons, and spouses of men who had been accused. In the following months, she met with lawyers who represented these men, and neighbours, past and present. "Instead of learning the gritty details of despicable people who had collaborated with the Nazis, I heard stories of men who as young teens had themselves been victimized by the Nazis. And instead of Nazi collaboration, I heard of young men and women who tricked the Nazis in order to steal weapons and fight back."

Marsha also sat in on an actual hearing, and obtained transcripts of completed hearings through the Internet. "I encountered a problem. I had wanted my novel to be about the ripple effect of a crime in the past, but as I dug deeper into my research, I could not find a single instance of criminality. I decided to keep my mind open and let the research define the story."

One wonderful resource was *Litopys UPA* which is a collection of reprints of original documents and materials relating to the history of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. The whole set was more than 35 volumes, and it is written mostly in Ukrainian, but has English summaries, which are available on the Internet. These volumes contain letters, memoirs,

diagrams, code-names, photographs, manouevres -- a treasure trove of information on the Ukrainian resistance. Professor Peter Potichnyj, one of the editors of the series, was a history professor at McMaster University. Marsha contacted him and he was very helpful in leading her through the data and translating when necessary. "Professor Potichnyj had been in the underground when he was 13 years old, so aside from his academic assistance, he could tell me the first-hand gritty details of what it was like to be a teen in an army that was literally hidden under the ground in the woods."

Unlike Gillian and Lynne, who were able to do the bulk of their research in English, Marsha confronted a language barrier for both her Armenian books and her Ukrainian books. "For *The Hunger* and *Nobody's Child*, I relied on Aram and Arsho to help me with the Armenian. Like Gillian, who could rely on her husband to translate the Chinese newspapers, Marsha relied on her husband's parents to translate the Ukrainian books and papers. "There was one professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, France, who was an expert on Ukraine in WWII, but he spoke only French and Ukrainian. I wrote a letter to him in English and my in-laws translated it into Ukrainian and I faxed it to him. When his response came in Ukrainian, they translated it back for me into English." All of the Nazi correspondence and government documents was in German, but Marsha was able to find several versions of English translations. "I didn't rely on a single version. I found two versions of the translations, but then still went back to the original and had a German speaker translate it for me. I found that there were important subtleties between the various translations, and I didn't want to misunderstand."

When *Hope's War* was published, some people who didn't know her background presumed that Marsha was writing an autobiographical story. "My mother is potato famine Irish and my father was born in Canada, but some people just looked at my unpronounceable last name and made assumptions." Ironically, when *The Hunger* came out, people did the same thing. "For awhile, I was thought to be an anorexic Armenian."

Marsha didn't know how the Ukrainian community would react when *Hope's War* was published. "I had positive and negative Ukrainian characters because I wanted to reflect reality," Marsha said, echoing Lynne's statement. "I was pleased with the reception *Hope's War* received in the Ukrainian community, but I have also been delighted by the response of Jewish readers. There were many victims of the Nazis, and to talk about one group is not meant to diminish the suffering of another group."

Since the publication of *Hope's War*, Marsha has received numerous letters from Ukrainian World War II survivors who have thanked her for telling their story. "Some of these letters are in Ukrainian, others in English, and some have come from Poland and Ukraine, others

from the U.S. and Canada. *Hope's War* triggered these survivors' memories, and they've told me so many more stories. I have enough for another novel."

Marsha has found little difference in terms of writing within her own culture, or writing about another. "I had to learn from the ground up for my Ukrainian books as much as for the Armenian books," she explains. Both *Hope's War* and *Nobody's Child*, are told from intertwining male and female voices. Echoing Gillian, she says, "I'm not Armenian, but I'm also not a guy. I wasn't raised Ukrainian, but that doesn't stop me from researching."

The one difference that she initially found was in the marketability of topics in terms of publishers. "No one wanted my Armenian book for a long time," Marsha said. "One publisher told me that it was well-written, but that I should choose a more marketable ethnic group. What she didn't seem to understand is that I chose the Armenian Genocide specifically because no one knew about it. Hitler himself said, 'Who remembers the Armenians now?' I am passionate about exposing forgotten injustices. I will never write on a topic simply because it is marketable."

Neither Gillian, Lynne nor Marsha have found researching their own culture any easier than researching another culture. All three authors use similar research methods. Each initially researches broadly, then narrows down to memoirs, oral histories and interviews. Each author uses the Internet extensively, and each relies heavily on books, librarians, historians and archivists.

Gillian has received only praise for writing from a Chinese Canadian perspective, although she did have some misunderstandings when some people assumed she was Chinese because of her name. Lynne has been rewarded with enthusiastic thanks from the black community in Canada for writing her Rachel series. Ironically, the only criticism Lynne has received from cultural groups was when she was writing from the perspective of her own Jewish community, and that was only for a single novel. Like Gillian and Lynne, Marsha has received no criticism for stepping into an Armenian's shoes. However, because of her Ukrainian last name, Marsha has had people assume her Ukrainian stories are autobiographical.

All three authors agree that when one writes from the perspective of another culture, it is imperative to respect that culture and to do extensive research. As Gillian says: "Any fiction is the work of imagination. If we only 'write what we know' it would be boring. Most fiction is appropriation of some sort. In creating any character, other than one that is purely autobiographical, an author is immediately guilty of voice appropriation. In thinking about this, I like to quote L. P. Hartley from his wonderful novel *The Go Between*: 'the past is a

foreign country; they do things differently there.' As long as the writer researches thoroughly and steps into the character sympathetically I do not think that cultural appropriation can occur."

Lynne points out that it is not only acceptable to write from the perspective of another cultural group, but it can be preferable -- otherwise one can fall into a rut: "There are problems in writing only from the perspective of one's own cultural group. There are some people who write the same book over and over and I find that so boring. I would rather research different cultures because I learn from that too."

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch has an Honours Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from UWO (1978) and a Master of Library Science from SLIS (1982). She is the author of three children's picture books: *Silver Threads* (1996); *The Best Gifts* (1998); and *Enough* (2000), and three young adult novels: *The Hunger* (1999); *Hope's War* (2001); and *Nobody's Child* (2003).