

In the Midst of Heroines:

An Interview with Canadian Author Marthe Jocelyn

Marthe Jocelyn is the winner of the Vicky Metcalf Award given annually to a Canadian author for a body of work that is inspirational to Canadian youth; Jocelyn won this prestigious prize sponsored by the Writers' Trust of Canada in 2009. I was unaware of her immense influence in children's literature until I reviewed her recent nonfiction work for the journal *VOYA* (*Voices of Youth Advocates*) this year. *Scribbling Women: True Tales from Astonishing Lives* (2011) not only introduced me to currently obscure (for the most part), but important in their time, female writers, but also acquainted me with a unique voice in young adult literature. Jocelyn offers a catalogue of children's books and also has a growing list of fiction and nonfiction for teens. After contacting her and expressing my interest in an interview, we began a productive email chat. I trust that American readers will discover the charm and complexity of subject matter Jocelyn chose for her YA (young adult) books.

JAH: You have been writing for a long time and won a major award in Canada for your body of work. Tell our readers about that award and its importance in Canadian children's books.

MJ: The Vicky Metcalf Award is an annual prize "given to the author of a body of work in children's literature that, in the opinion of the judges, dem-



onstrates the highest literary standards." In other words, a Big Fat Honour, not to mention a lovely purse of \$20,000, bestowed as part of the Writer's Trust Awards.

JAH: I am pretty impressed with that. You originally wrote for children, right? Did the transition to young adult literature grow out of that or did it just kind of happen?

MJ: I don't think of myself as having made a transition, because I still write for children as well as for teenagers. Some of my characters got older along with my daughters, but my daughters are now in their twenties and I am (happily) stuck in adolescence. I also continue to publish board books, picturebooks, and middle grade novels.

JAH: Readers might want to know a little about how you write. Is the process different for nonfiction than for fiction?

MJ: Jumping into a new work of fiction is often an exuberant time—from a few days to a few weeks. I like to crash-write a first draft and then start over. For me, it is much easier to revise than to write, so if the initial writing can happen without too much pondering, then I have a heap of material to pick away at. With nonfiction, the first glorious weeks are spent greedily reading, with a little note-taking

on the side. Once I know the general parameters of the book I imagine I'll write, then the agony begins.

JAH: Are you a full-time writer?

MJ: Yes, I'm a full-time writer, which I would not recommend to anyone hoping to make a living. I try to teach or speak to make ends meet, but mostly I write or read or think or make pictures all day long. Nice, eh?

JAH: I agree. That does sound like a pleasant way to live. What prompted you to become a writer?

MJ: When my older daughter was nine, I had an idea about a ten-year-old girl who becomes invisible in New York City, and I just started to write it down, a litany of adventures in our downtown neighborhood.

I took a writing class, then finished the book and began to write others. I had my own little business, designing and making toys and children's clothing, but after four or five books, the writing took over.

JAH: As mentioned earlier, I discovered your work when I reviewed *Scribbling Women* for *VOYA*, which is primarily aimed at librarians and educators. I was fascinated by the women you selected and the painstaking research you did for the book. Would you discuss how you came up with the idea for the book, how you selected the women, how you researched them, and finally, why that title?

MJ: As I mention in the introduction to *Scribbling Women*, the seed was planted while I did research for my previous nonfiction book, called *A Home for Foundlings*. While writing that, I came across the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife to the British ambassador in Turkey in 1717. One particular letter, written to a friend in England, changed the course of medical history with its clear description of the method used by the Turks to inoculate their children against smallpox. Lady Mary's brother had died of this illness; she herself had survived, but was severely scarred. The epidemic in England was killing one person in six, including hundreds of children. Impressed with the extraor-

dinary success of the Turkish method, Lady Mary petitioned the queen until inoculation was tried and eventually adopted.

I wondered, as I read that letter, what other observations were casually, or intentionally, noted through the centuries by writers who were women, and therefore more likely to be ignored. Of course I discovered dozens and dozens, and left undiscovered thousands more. I could write volume after volume and never be done. So choosing only eleven subjects was a challenge. The publishing schedule helped with that, forcing a cut-off date. The final list includes the women (and one child) who lingered in my brain and vibrated with kid-appeal, as well as showcasing writing that would be meaningful to a young reader. Lady Mary, for instance, was eventually cut, despite her thousands of pages of letters, because the style and context required too much extra discussion. The interpretation of the texts is the behind-the-scenes aspect of these stories—trying to keep the narrative flowing while encapsulating the history of whale-hunting, for instance, or synopsisizing the war in Vietnam in two paragraphs.

The title is a direct and ironic reference to the sneering remark with which the author Nathaniel Hawthorne dismissed the women writers amongst his peers: "a damned mob of scribbling women" (quoted in Mott, 1947, p. 122). In a letter to his publisher in 1855, he went on to say that his own success was imperiled "while the public taste is occupied with their trash." Too bad he doesn't know how eighth graders across the country still suffer through *The Scarlet Letter*.

JAH: I like the concept of using women and girls who are not necessarily well known now, although some were at the time they wrote. In fact, the only writer I knew was Nellie Bly!

MJ: It's my challenge to librarians to see how many of the women they've heard of. You'll be glad to know that you are not alone in being introduced to most of these writers for the first time.

When I talk to students, I like to begin with a thousand-year-old quote from Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting in the Imperial court of Japan: "I really can't understand people who get angry when

they hear gossip about others. How can you not discuss other people? Apart from your own concerns, what can be more beguiling to talk about and criticize than other people?" (p. 3).

Realizing that the legacy of gossip is essential to being human—particularly a reading and writing human – is a great place to start with any biography, which is rarely an unbiased account—it is what or who you choose to put in, as well as what or who you leave out.

JAH: I think my favorite woman in the book was Ada Blackjack; her adventures living in such isolation with only men near the Arctic Circle, and her harrowing tale of survival fascinated me. Do you have a favorite or not? If so, who would that be?

MJ: People ask me often which of the women is my favorite, but I really truly can't decide. I agree that Ada's story is a touching one (especially the fact that even though she was barely literate, under *dire* circumstances she felt compelled to *write it down*), but each of the 11 has some astounding quality that kept her in the final lineup.

JAH: The research for the book is impeccable, like your other nonfiction work, *A Home for Foundlings* (2005). I am glad you suggested I read it before moving to your historical fiction text, *Folly* (2010). I am amazed at the scholarship that went into getting these two works of nonfiction completed. Describe your process of gathering factual information for each of these books, *Scribbling Women* and *A Home for Foundlings*, as they are in such different publication formats.

MJ: I am a novice at writing nonfiction and tend to be disorganized, so my approach—involving teetering piles of unsorted books, a blizzard of paper, and illegible sticky notes—would likely horrify a more accomplished writer or a librarian. However, the random reading is what leads me inch-by-inch from one text to another, from website to bibliography to index to thrift store finds to library stacks.

With *A Home for Foundlings*, I had access to the image collection of the Foundling Museum in London, so almost all the photographs in the book were reprinted *gratis*. That was a *huge* gift. I

also spent several days in the London Metropolitan Archives (during a ghastly heat wave), barely nibbling at the 800 linear feet of primary source material that sits in their storage. There is simply no more evocative experience than holding a scrap of flannel that symbolizes the handing over of a baby by a mother to an institution.

With *Scribbling Women*, I used the Internet a little more to track down where the primary sources might be. I spent time at the Nantucket Historical Society while studying Mary Hayden Russell (whaler's wife), but had to rely on newfound connections in Australia, England, and Vietnam to uncover documents and personal narratives about some of the other subjects. I read Ada's diary, on file at the Dartmouth library, and the letters of Margaret Catchpole (transported horse-thief), in facsimile rather than in person. Because of the difficulty of amassing abundant images, it was clear from the beginning that this book would be presented as stories, rather than as typical picture-based nonfiction. We did include at least one image per woman, and although we have a portrait of Sei Shonagon, who lived a thousand years ago, poor Mary Hayden Russell is represented by a whaling boat.

JAH: I can see *Scribbling Women* used in a biographical/autobiographical unit in teaching, and *A Home for Foundlings* fits into any study of culture. How do you envision teachers and librarians using these texts?

MJ: Although it was not my original intention to create a source for lessons, I've been delighted to hear from educators about the many ways the books are useful. *A Home for Foundlings* makes an interesting companion reader to any fictional work involving orphans or foundlings (not just my own!), and can also be part of a unit on family history.

Scribbling Women, apart from the obvious biographical and historical connections, easily inspires a whole series of creative writing exercises, from the poetry and lists of Sei Shonagon—creating a 10th-century version of texting—to the monosyllabic diary entries of Ada Blackjack, the memoirs of Hatty Jacobs and Doris Garimara, and the witty anthropological observations of Mary Kingsley. . . .

I'm working on a Teacher's Guide, so please check back for a wealth of classroom opportunities!

JAH: I have to confess I fell in love with feisty Mable Riley. Her story, subtitled *A Reliable Record of Humdrum, Peril, and Romance*, was first published in 2004. Is this your initial foray into historical fiction with a young girl as the protagonist?

MJ: *Mable* was my second historical novel. My first was *Earthly Astonishments*, which features a girl who is 28½ inches tall and joins an exhibition of human oddities in Coney Island in 1884. By the time I got to Mable, four years later, I was a little more confident and was also jumping in from a different rock, the one that has tangible inspiration underfoot—in this case, family history in the form of my grandmother's diaries.

JAH: The "Acknowledgments" tell us that this story, set in small town Ontario, Canada, in 1901, was inspired by two of your grandmother's diaries that you found in her attic. I understand they formed the concept for this book about Mable. Where was the genesis for the character and the plot outline?

MJ: My grandmother in real life was more like my heroine's prissy sister, Viola, than like Mable herself. She was pious and formal and certainly towed the line of duty. In the back of one of her diaries, however, she had written some (dreadful) love poems, with references to trembling lips and blushing velvet cheeks. It was the surprise of bumping into a new angle of my stuffy and obedient Gram that made me think of a young girl trying to meet expectations but barely containing her curiosity and sauciness in the course of any day.

The plot was entirely fabricated (my grandmother's diaries were deadly dull!) and came from simply imagining a very small pond—the village of Sellerton—and realizing that even a not-very-big rock, in the shape of an opinionated widow, could cause tidal-sized ripples in 1901.

JAH: I like the intertwining of four varied forms of written expression here: Mable's journal where she records her everyday life; her creation of "A Romantic Novel" featuring the unfolding of Hel-

ena's melodramatic tale; Mr. Goodhand's reading of the local paper's Personal and Social Notes"; and, finally, the humorous rhymes Mable used for spelling exercises or to note specific events. Journal writing is something we like to encourage, so having the model for students is an inspiration. Did these all work into your plan at once, or did you add any later?

MJ: I knew from the start that the book would be written as a diary, and that there would be a (for the time and place) risqué secret writing project, the Romantic Novel. The rhymes appeared soon after, when looking through the reading primers used at the time as part of my research. The offerings were so uninspiring that I knew Mable would object and be forced to create her own. More research led me to the newspaper archives of the Ontario town where I live, and to the actual Personal and Social Notes published daily. They were so good that I have used many of them verbatim.

JAH: Helena's adventures that Mable relates for her friends back home show your connection to *A Home for Foundlings*. The "Introduction" of that text relates the inspiration for your choice of the Thomas Coram home, since your grandfather lived there. This book is an amazing work of nonfiction as I think your personal interest really resonates for the reader. Can you talk a little bit about the process of writing this one as compared to *Scribbling Women*?

MJ: Funnily enough, because my grandfather died when I was two, he was as unknown a subject for me as were the scribbling women. And although I use him as an example from time to time, and have a couple of pages at the end that focus on his life after the foundling hospital, the book is not about him.

Along with most other literary humans, I am fascinated with the idea of orphans, or better yet, foundlings, because they represent *secrets* and parcels of *unknown*, which are the key to any story. And here was a foundling in my very own history! Living with hundreds of other foundlings! Although there are several biographies of Thomas Coram, the founder, there is nearly no recent writing about the

hospital itself, so my research was based on sources starting back in the 1700s. Much of what I looked at, housed in the London Metropolitan Archives, consisted of letters or lists or account books, or what is called “token”—the small objects (left by mothers with the babies) that would optimistically serve as identity tags, should the parent ever be able to reclaim her child. I hoped that by displaying some of the actual materials as images in the book, along with my personal interpretation and emotional links, the reader might have a sense of the impact that those scraps of paper had for me.

JAH: *The Home for Foundlings* leads us to *Folly*, your most recent historical fiction work. Mable taught me what folly means—foolish and thoughtless—so I was ready for that (p. 210). However, the tour de force of using three narrators, some separated in time, was unique. Mary, James, and Eliza all advance the plot, and I confess the mystery stymied me for a couple of chapters. The information from the *Foundlings* book is interspersed throughout and is certainly integral to the story. Where did these voices originate? The time switches add to the mystery of the plot line, and I wonder how you conceived this angle.

MJ: While I was researching for *A Home for Foundlings*, I realized that there was a novel—or two—in the stories I was learning about. Even before that, in fact, when my father gave me a thread of information as to where his father had been raised (“the Thomas Coram orphanage” is what he remembered), I followed it to discover the present-day Coram Family organization, who offered me a transcript of the original report about my great-grandmother’s application to leave her son in their care. All a-tremble, I read her story, torn between the thrill of being the first person in my family to know our own beginnings and the über-thrill of a writer cutting the ribbon on a gift-wrapped idea.

There needed to be at least two voices, a mother and a child. The other voices, and the time shift, came in to illuminate the shame so entwined with having or being an abandoned child in the late 1800s, and to add a small sheen of mystery. As a few reviewers helpfully noted, the mystery is not particularly mysterious, but I wanted to highlight

that a single misunderstanding can affect an entire life.

JAH: You suggested a look at your first foray into historical fiction, *Earthly Astonishments* (2003), might be revealing. You continue to explore your interest in orphans here with Josephine, although I doubt if you have any personal connection to dwarfism. Her parents sell her into white slavery because I think she scares them. After she escapes the MacLaren Academy for Girls, Little Jo-Jo is turned into an amazing creation; her world of slimy freak show entertainment reminds me of today’s fascination with reality TV and its focus on the bizarre. How did you ever discover this phenomenon of Coney Island hoopla set in the 1880s? R. J. Walters and his Museum of Earthly Astonishments did not exist, but you must have based your novel on similar establishments.

MJ: Living in New York, I went often to Coney Island, both for the beach and for the grimy history of the boardwalk and the carny culture. Curiosity led me to discover its amazing, glamorous, and notorious ups and downs as a destination and a home to hundreds of outsiders and misfits. There were dozens of “dime” museums and astonishing spectacles to bedazzle the tourists, so the Walters museum would have fit right in.

JAH: Only 28 inches tall and 12 years old, Josephine’s cleverness and spirit get her out of some pretty unsavory situations. How did you conceive her?

MJ: Josephine was originally conceived as a curmudgeonly elderly fairy, captured and imprisoned by a Victorian impresario. After several chapters, my writing group suggested that I eliminate my human sidekick and make the fairy a real girl. I already had several scenes in mind where her tiny size was essential, so I began to research just how small a human could be. I found several historical role models for people this size—and Josephine was born.

JAH: Are Miss MacLaren and her Academy based on your research into similar schools of the era?

MJ: Honestly, I don't think I researched the Academy at all, relying on a lifetime of reading novels about harsh Victorian schools. It was meant to be slightly cartoonish in extremity, and who better to inform on the subject than Dickens, Fielding, and Brontë?

JAH: You have another later historical fiction novel with *How It Happened in Peach Hill* (2007) that examines a different form of chicanery—fraudulent spiritualism. Annie and her mother Madame Caterina are 1924 grifters who travel from small town to small town while they bilk a vulnerable public with fake fortune-telling and séances. Annie is so vulnerable that my heart went out to her as I read. She is caught up in her mother's schemes and forced to play along, but she is sadly aware of the con games they play. These scams are part of today's world, too, but your research into the particular practices of that era is fascinating. What inspired your interest?

MJ: I wrote a short story by the same name in a collection called *Secrets* (2005) that I edited for Tundra Books. I was playing with the idea of having a child be the sidekick for a criminal parent. The idea came from a lovely, creepy story by E. L. Doctorow about a family of murderers. Obviously death could not be the crime in a children's book, but psychic chicanery holds a wealth of possibility.

JAH: Annie yearns to be free from the con and works hard to escape. Where did her character's fiery, feisty spirit come from?

MJ: Annie's unusual upbringing and her lifelong familiarity with playing tricks gives her the quick thinking needed to be in control—or at least to pretend that she is. Her spirit came from her mother, don't you think? Personality traits need to be inherited by characters just as they are in real life.

JAH: I also love those old wives' tales that appear as titles for each chapter and foretell what will happen. Where did you find those ironic captions? One of my favorites starts Chapter 18: "When a strange dog begins to trail you, good luck will follow" (p. 138), and another is before Chapter 11: "In ancient Egypt, when a cat in a private house died a natural

death, all the residents shaved their eyebrows" (p. 80). Always good information to have, I would think.

MJ: Some of the proverbs I used for chapter headings are common ones, but I dug and delved in old books (and online, of course) for sayings that would faintly relate to the content of each section. I did not make anything up, though I was tempted.

JAH: A moving young adult fiction book is the last one I read for this interview, *Would You* (2008). The title refers to the game Natalie and her high school pals play as they spend what should be an idyllic summer. They ask each other loaded questions where either answer has the potential for disaster. Natalie's sister Claire is heading off for college in the fall and Nat is jealous. That ends abruptly when Claire is hit by a car after she stumbles away from a break-up with her boyfriend. In much of the story, Claire is in a coma, and Natalie and her mom and dad deal with the grief of watching a brain-dead daughter slip away. Natalie's story is painful, yet poignant to read. I found it oddly peaceful and reassuring. Where did this idea originate?

MJ: This is the most personal of all my books. My sister was hit by a car and seriously brain-injured when she was 27 and I was 21. I made the characters closer in age and much younger, but my own experience was the seed for this story.

JAH: The emphasis on donating one's organs is a powerful reminder for all of us, especially teens as they are usually young and healthy. What motivated you to write this one?

MJ: It is interesting that you refer to an "emphasis" on organ donation, since I think there are only two or three pages in which the characters are concerned with that aspect of the tragedy. It was actually a member of my writing group who said, Hey, wouldn't donation become part of the issue? And I realized that the teens might have a particular take on that process that the adults would not.

Although the initial idea for the book came from events in my own youth, by the time I was

ready to write on the subject, I was living with two teenage daughters who have irreverent views of the world. I was curious to show real horror and sorrow absorbed by kids whose usual mode of expression was black humor.

One of my daughters has since lost a dear friend in an eerie duplication of the accident in the book. I was moved to see the comradeship amongst the mourners, and still the uncrushable ability to find something to laugh about even while grieving.

JAH: Finally, what are you doing now? Do you plan more young adult nonfiction, more historical fiction, more fiction?

MJ: Right now I'm working on *four* books simultaneously, which is stretching it a bit thin, even for me who likes to keep my brain jumping around. I'm making a picturebook with my daughter (our second collaboration), as well as a sort of craft book, a middle-grade adventure fantasy co-written with a friend, and a YA novel that unfolds through linked short stories. Whew.

JAH: The women and girls you feature are strong and assertive, no matter where or when they existed. Did you intend for this to happen? What are your inspirations for featuring girls and women in your writing?

MJ: I don't really have a clever answer for this one. My characters come along one-by-one and each one needs conflict to make a successful story, which often means disagreement with the world and an effort to fix things. I myself am somewhat cowardly, so I suppose I write girls who embody an element of who I imagine being. A sign of my cowardice is that I haven't yet tackled a boy as a main character, so hopefully I'll conquer that fear someday soon. In the meantime, just look around. We are in the midst of heroines every day.

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The last sentence of our interview tells me what drew me to the works of Marthe Jocelyn. Her characterizations of girls like Mable, her young teen females like Annie and Natalie, and her women like Mary and Ada Blackjack give us strong female voices to read about and appreciate. Listen to Mable's conversation with the suffragette Mrs. Rattle when her heroine has to leave town or face prosecution:

"We're friends now," I ventured.

"Yes," she said. "We're friends."

"I supposed one good thing is that we are writers," I said. "We could write letters to each other, could we not?"

"Of course!" she cried. "Writers never have to say goodbye. We simply write another letter." (p. 243)

With four books in the pipeline at once, we should not have to say goodbye to Marthe Jocelyn anytime soon, and I am grateful.

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