

An Interview with Deirdre Kessler

• Shannon Murray •



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Deirdre Kessler

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue, l'auteure Deirdre Kessler nous parle de l'importance de la littérature dans ses activités professionnelles et personnelles; elle s'attache à définir la place privilégiée qu'occupe l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard dans son imaginaire et nous fait part de ses projets d'écriture.

Summary: In this interview, children's writer Deirdre Kessler discusses the place of writing among her varied interests, the importance of Prince Edward Island to her life and art, and her plans for the future.

Part I: Writing for Children

SKMM: You have a wonderfully full and varied CV: university and school teacher; poet and fiction writer for adults and children; literary critic; lobbyist for the arts;

textbook and technical writer; administrator of a research institute. When you're asked at parties what you do for a living, what do you say?

DK: I say, "I'm a writer." If anyone then asks what I write, I put children's fiction first, then talk about whatever project I'm currently working on — the script for the Parks Canada video on Montgomery, the biography of Wanda Wyatt, or teaching children's literature.

SKMM: *Where does "children's writer" fit in all those other occupations?*

DK: Being a children's writer fits under and around and over all of the other things I do to earn a living and keep my mind active. Some of the stories that please me most on the deepest levels are stories for young people.

SKMM: *What started you in that direction?*

DK: It's likely that the stories I was read as a child started me in the direction of writing children's stories myself. My mother, Irene Donnelly, had a profound appreciation for good writing and good stories. She was superb storyteller, as were her mother and father before her, and had a keen eye and ear for what would appeal to us children. Childhood books gave me tickets to ride. Like many other writers I know, I not so much *read* books as *lived* them.

Among other childhood passions, which largely had to do with animals and the outdoors, I was horse crazy; I *lived* *Black Beauty*, *My Friend Flicka*, the *Black Stallion* books. When I was seven I took a train by myself from Philadelphia to Detroit and spent the summer with cousins at a horse farm near Pontiac, Michigan. My cousin, Cecily, and I were responsible for Softy, the pony she deeded to me the next summer when she got a horse, and for the other six horses in the barn. We cleaned stalls, carried water, fed, and groomed the horses, and when we were all through, we got to ride. That was the payoff. I never complained about the hard work.

We played Pony Express by stacking bales of hay in the exercise yard and jumping on and off Softy as he cantered. We shot each other off Softy, who would simply graze around us while we lay dead on the ground. We didn't even need a bridle for him. Softy lived to be 38 years old and always had a good home.

Cecily and I would enter into extended fantasies together — she was a reader, too, and so we did characters and dialogue from our favourite books, like R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. The barn most often became a pirate ship. Hanging from the rafters was a hayhook on a block and tackle that we swung from. We used a bale grappler as Captain Hook's hook. We were fearless.

SKMM: *You've said that you had no idea that the Brupp books were for children when you began them: do you now have a sense that there is some material for children and some that is not?*

DK: Yes, I do. When I wrote the first Brupp book, I thought of it as of St.

Exupéry's *Le petit prince* — that it suited any audience. And I was adamant about the harsh episodes in the early Brupp stories. I thought that children saw reality and needed confirmation in book of what they saw in real life. But, yes, you're right — I now have a sense that there is some material which is better for older children, and some better for younger ones. I understand the general ways in which certain ages take in the world and so am better at directing stories to one audience or another; however, there are always children who seek levels of reality their peers do not seek, and so the challenge is to allude to things at the perimeter of a story which the general reader might miss but the seeker will find. I am eternally grateful to writers who showed me the edges of reality when I was a child.

SKMM: *If you imagine a child audience as you write, how do you keep your address to that audience honest? Do you think as a child?*

DK: It is and always has been easy for me to see as a child and thence to think as a child. The honesty in writing comes from being true to the story rather than being true to the audience, though in the end, the ring of truth encompasses them both.

SKMM: *You've had the unpleasant experience of being banned in one bookstore because of a parent's objection. And you've not shied away from death and even sex (I'm thinking of your contribution to **The First Time**, which Sue Johanson recommended all parents buy their kids for Valentine's Day) in your work for young audiences. Should there be boundaries for a children's book?*

DK: Boundaries. Parents set boundaries for their own children. It is their responsibility to put books in front of or take books away from their children. Writers need to write the stories that have deep meaning to them and leave the setting of boundaries to others.

SKMM: *What do you hope your books mean to the children who read them?*

DK: Freedom. Permission to be. I hope my books are lifelines and imagination quickeners and maps to other places and times. That's what books were and are to me.

SKMM: *Is there one book that you wish you had written?*

DK: *Charlotte's Web.*

Part II: The Place of Place

SKMM: *I think of you as in some ways a true Islander: valuing community, loving the land, and loathing the Bridge. But you're a "Come from Away," aren't you? How did the narrative of your life bring you to Prince Edward Island?*

DK: One day I flipped a penny: heads, Prince Edward Island; tails back to Toronto. My then-husband and I were searching for jobs in the Maritimes.

We'd both taught high school in Saint John, New Brunswick, and had left those positions and our cottage overlooking the Kennebecasis River when my sister had a baby girl in Toronto and I wanted to be close to them. After two years in Toronto, we decided to move back to the Maritimes. But there were no teaching jobs anywhere to be had. We travelled through New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and were heading back west when we thought about Prince Edward Island. A neighbour in New Brunswick once had told me she thought PEI would suit me, so I wanted to come here. My ex-husband wasn't crazy about the idea. We flipped a coin. I'm still here.

SKMM: *Though the Island is clearly in your blood, the desert seems to be a competing landscape. The Island and the desert seem like opposites to me. Are they?*

DK: You're right about the Island and the desert. They are exactly opposite to me. Here, everything is so close, so easily touched and shaped — the landscape is almost doll-like in size and concept. There is so much foreground here — flowering shrubs, dunes, woodlots, farmsteads, villages everywhere. The desert has that pure horizon — no lupins or maples or gabled houses obscuring it. The touch of humans is not everywhere seen.

SKMM: *PEI appears to be particularly fertile soil for writers; why do you think that's so (or is it)?*

DK: What occurred to me in 1996, when I understood something about L.M. Montgomery and had been a writer myself on Prince Edward Island for nearly two decades, was that Montgomery created a template of sensibility which she placed over the Island and which is added to on an unseen but very real level by everyone who reads her work and appreciates her love of this place. She has made Prince Edward Island a good place to be a creator. It is no small thing that she was a woman who made her living — and a good one — as a writer.

SKMM: *The cat in your **Another Story for Another Time** series, Brupp, is very much an adventurous cat, travelling, taking risks, and trusting that nine lives is not his fate. What appeals to you about that sort of picaresque, wayfaring character?*

DK: Probably Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* had the most influence on me as a writer. My mother read us *Huckleberry Finn* when my brother was eight, I was six, and my little sister was four. I reread it every few years and connect instantly with myself as a child listening to the world unfold its small and large mysteries as Huck and Jim float down the Mississippi. And, of course, I love to travel in that desultory sort of way — with no fixed destination, camping wherever whim takes me.

SKMM: *While there is a strong regional connection in your writing (a real thrill for my Islander students who recognize the John Hamilton Gray ferry or the Hillsborough Bridge in your books), Brupp has found his way to translations in other languages. How does the story travel?*

DK: The Brupp stories have been published in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. The books were seen at the Bologna and Frankfurt book fairs, and the rights were bought there over the years. Brupp seems especially popular in Germany, where there have been both trade hardcover and mass market paperback editions. Both Dutch and German editions are illustrated, which the English versions are not. The foreign editions have a little note at the beginning, which loosely translates as, “Brupp lives in Canada. There, things are much different from here — other islands, other water, other names. But cats there are the same as ours. A cat is a cat, after all.”

Part III: Writing, Runaways, and Wildlife

SKMM: *When I taught **Brupp Rides Again** in a UIPEI Children’s Literature class, the students were especially taken with Brupp’s imaginary journal. It strikes me that in much of your children’s fiction, either in Brupp’s journal or his songs, in Lena’s songs or the poems in **Lobster in my Pocket**, and even in **A Child’s Anne**, your own characters imagine, define, and express themselves as writers. Tell us about Brupp’s journal and about the place of writing in your children’s writing.*

DK: I never thought about this before in the way you frame it. I see that you’re right that the characters do express and define themselves as writers. Brupp keeps an imaginary journal as he travels across Canada, distilling what he has seen or learned along the way, keeping himself company by writing when he has no other companion.

When I hear and overhear children at play, I note they often make up songs which unfold from their tongues as smoothly as water flows over stones in a creek. I sense that narrative structure is a brain function, something we humans just do. And when we are lucky to be well-fed and happy and allowed time and place to play, well, the stories and songs we create come naturally and joyfully.

When children are in the moment — not distracted by shame or guilt or interfered with by adults who have intentions they want children to take on, children enter and leave the characters of their imagination seamlessly. The intoned, sung, or spoken narratives of children as they play are like birdsong, bees in flowers, a breeze whispering through summer branches.

When I write, I go inside the characters. They then create the diaries, the songs, the poems. Their act of creation has the valence of my own, of course. If I were a dancer or a painter, my characters would likely do those things more.

SKMM: *You’ve written elsewhere of your tendency to write runaway girls, “girls with sharp tongues, sharpened sensibilities,” and, of course, sharp knives. Are you still drawn to that kind of character?*

DK: When I wrote the essay, “Runaway Girls and Sharp Knives” [95], I think I was at the end of that thematic phase. My preoccupation now is with the theme of home. *Ranch Gang*, the novel I put aside for three years as I completed other projects, focuses more on the achievement of and consequent wrangling with the object of the quest of runaways: home.

SKMM: *I’m not at all surprised to find that you spent two years as a veterinarian’s assistant; you love, you’ve said, “moving among other species.” And in all the children’s work I’ve read by you, there is a child rescuing another creature (whale or lobster or bigfoot), or a creature rescuing a child. Where does that connection come from, and why has it proved so satisfying in your writing?*

DK: Interspecies communication is now understood and valued by many more people than when I was growing up. I have never made the hierarchical divisions that most humans make regarding species. My abiding attraction to native North American culture and spirituality is precisely because of this. Barry Lopez’s tale, *Crow and Weasel*, and other contemporary children’s books have done much to educate about the nature of interaction among the species that share the earth.

One of my earliest memories is being face-to-face with a praying mantis. My mother explained to my little sister and me that the mantis was an insect. That was the first time I’d heard the word, *insect*. The word meant magic — for here was a creature rubbing its forearms together in prayer, and its face looked like something from a fairy story. Imagine the difference in my attitude if I’d been taught, “Eeeuuu, yuk! Kill it!”

SKMM: *In **Bigfoot Sabotage**, your character, Maya, opens the book with a revealing dream-flying experience: where did that idea for dream-flying come from?*

DK: Dream-flying is one of my greatest pleasures. Sometime in the mid-1970s, I subscribed to Karl Pribram’s *Mind-Brain Newsletter*, and read about lucid dreaming. I set up dream flight experiments and they succeeded, unlike the actual flight experiment I performed when I was ten and jumped off the garage roof and landed on my hands and knees in the gravel of the alley. Actually, when I was between the ages of four and seven, we lived next to a Pennsylvania State Highway Department garage, where a huge pile of cinders was kept for various road uses. My brother, sister, and I used to dare each other to jump from a high wall beside the cinder pile. We used to fly off that wall and have our landing cushioned somewhat by the cinders.

Part IV: Other Connections

SKMM: *You’ve taught children and you’ve taught children’s literature and writing for children to adults; do you connect your life as a writer and your life as a teacher?*

DK: At the 1988 Calgary Olympics Writers' Festival, Candace Dorsay, a writer from Alberta, flopped down in the hospitality lounge after one of her sessions with the public and she said, "I'm going to have a pin made. It's going to say: 'Don't ask me, I just write the stuff.'" That's how a good part of me feels when I teach children's literature and when I teach creative writing. But then there is the appreciation and awe I have for writers and my interest in critical thought which see me through as teacher.

SKMM: *A Century on Spring Street: Wanda Lefurgey Wyatt of Summerside, Prince Edward Island (1895-1998), your biography of an Island benefactor of the arts, recently won a writing award from the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation. Does that award mark the end of an era for you?*

DK: It does, indeed. I spent a year and a half travelling from Charlottetown to Summerside to visit Wanda Wyatt and to work in her elegant house, reading all of the 104 volumes of her diary and going through hundreds of letters and thousands of documents she and her family saved. Wanda was related, by the way, to Montgomery's good friend Nora Lefurgey Campbell. The awards night fell very close to the one-year anniversary of Wanda's death. Driving the familiar route to Summerside to the heritage ceremony, especially coming across the Blue Shank Road at dusk, I felt I was finishing a long project in a perfect way.

SKMM: *And now you're the co-chair of the L.M. Montgomery Institute at UPEI, preparing for the fourth international conference on Montgomery, L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture, and helping, among other things, to ensure that Montgomery's work is explored, valued, and known. What do you see yourself doing with the Institute?*

DK: There is much about Montgomery that has become part of popular culture, especially here on the Island; but there is also a wide and deep exploration of the author, her creations, and her era which the L.M. Montgomery Institute can enhance. Dr. Irene Gammel and I took on co-chairship from you in 1997 — notice it took two of us to do what you did alone — and we both have interests in the publishing of research around Montgomery. We've started a newsletter and have been working on a bibliography. The essays from the conference you hosted in 1996 on Montgomery as a touchstone of Canadian culture were published in 1999 by the University of Toronto Press (*L.M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Epperly and Irene Gammel). Of course, I'm pleased that my essay, "L.M. Montgomery and the Creation of Prince Edward Island," is included in the book. What else would we like to see happen through the Montgomery Institute? We would like the works of Montgomery to have a stronger presence in school curricula, especially here on Prince Edward Island. And we are looking forward to hosting summer writing workshops. We're thrilled that Governor General Adrienne Clarkson has accepted our invitation to attend a reception in her honour as

part of the Institute's June 2000 conference. Dr. Clarkson has an honorary degree from UPEI and was present at the Institute's first international conference in 1994. Recently, the Institute began a CD-ROM project entitled *The Bend in the Road: An Invitation to the World and Works of L.M. Montgomery*. This multimedia project is a new direction for the Institute. My co-chair is now Dr. Beth Percival, one of the original members of the L.M. Montgomery Institute.

SKMM: *"Making the connections" seems at the heart of your interest in the work of Cophorne Macdonald, an independent scholar, inventor, and writer who has published two books on the subject of wisdom and how we build a wisdom-based society. You've said that, "According to Cop, if we can align our own little experiments with the larger experiment of the universe, we can begin to sense the higher potentials of the process." What are your own "little experiments," and how do they play themselves out?*

DK: My own little life experiments sometimes blow up. About 20 years ago I thought I could write a story which would demonstrate — make transparent — how human genetics work. I had a vision of how the perfect metaphor and perfect set of characters would work in a perfect narrative. I still am working on that particular story. I have a lot to learn. Portions of the story, "Miss Kincaid Turns to Stone," have been published in a Toronto literary magazine, *paperplates*.

SKMM: *Imagine a dinner party at which all your strongest influences, dead and alive, are present: whom would you invite?*

DK: I love this question. At the dinner would be Georgia O'Keeffe, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, Dr. Frances Dees-Porch (my mentor), Irene Donnelly (my mother), Raoul Julia (actor), Crazy Horse, Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Vincent Van Gogh, Walt Whitman, L.M. Montgomery, Elizabeth Epperly (writer & Montgomery scholar), Linda Tellington Jones (animal whisperer), Harrison Ford (okay, so he's not a strong influence), Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan writer), Shannon Murray (that's you), John W. Smith (poet), Bernie Lucht (CBC producer of *Ideas*), Zora Neale Hurston, Deirdre McClure (musician, conductor & my niece), Lesley-Anne Bourne (writer), Richard Lemm (writer), and Lao Tzu. The dinner would be outdoors, under a ramada in a garden in Tesuque, north of Santa Fe.

SKMM: *And what's next for you?*

DK: Next for me is completion of a young adult novel, *Ranch Gang*. I have also begun writing a new children's book I've been holding close to my heart for three years. And in the summer of 2000 I'm holding Camp Deirdre! Two of my nieces and one nephew all have little babies who need to be introduced to Prince Edward Island in the summer.

Work Cited

Kessler, Deirdre. "Runaway Girls and Sharp Knives: The Quest for True Homes." *Children's Voices in Atlantic Literature and Culture: Essays on Childhood*. Ed. Hilary Thompson. Guelph: Canadian Children's Press, 1995. 95-99.

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