

Q&A with Deborah Carr

How did you start writing?

I had been working for the federal government for 17 years when I hit a wall that I now realize was my midlife muddle. I became very discontented, sensing there was more to me than what could be fit into an eight to four job. I had a sneaky feeling that I had 'potential', but that I would never know the extent of my creative abilities unless I rebooted my life. So, I left my job. Then, faced with an open field of play, I set about exploring what kind of landscape I wanted to live within. I had always enjoyed writing as a child, but certainly never considered it a career choice – in fact, even as an adult, I didn't believe I could make a living from writing. It was certainly uncharted territory for me, but once I opened myself to the idea of it, the path widened in front of me. My writing has now supported me for more than a decade and I have never been happier or more fulfilled. It's an incredible feeling to splash words on a page, then come back later, reread it and wonder, *Who wrote that?*

Why did you write *Sanctuary* and how long did it take to write?

The actual book took me a year to write, but the process was much longer. I began interviewing Mary in 2003. At that time, I had known her for about 15 years and had been hugely entertained by the stories of her escapades. Her lifestyle certainly intrigued me, but it wasn't until I reached a certain stage of evaluation in my own life that I began to see hers in terms of purpose and achievement. Frankly, I wanted to learn what it takes to be a woman like her. I wanted to discover the motivations drove her to a life dedicated to cause and what wisdom she had gained through her experiences. I actually felt compelled to write her biography. At that time, I had been a non-fiction writer for four years and admittedly, did not have the skills to undertake such a large task as a biography, but felt if someone didn't begin documenting her life immediately, there was danger the details would be lost. I knew as long as I had the background material, the story would come in its own time...when the storyteller was ready to write it.

Did the work change from the way you originally envisioned it along the way? If so,how?

Frankly, this was a very difficult book to write – especially for a first time author. Much of Mary's early life in Europe could not be corroborated; she lived her teen years separated from her family. So, I needed the reader to be clear that these were Mary's memories, not my own research. I also wanted to show the Mary that I witnessed during our interviews. Naturally, I see her differently than she sees herself. How could I bring these differing points of view together seamlessly? I briefly thought about writing a present-time vignette at the beginning of each chapter, then discarded the idea as too risky.

In October 2009, three months before the manuscript was due, I hit a brick wall. I knew the manuscript had big flaws, but I didn't know how to fix them. Mary had involved herself in so many different projects at the same time that tackling it chronologically was confusing, so I had

arranged the events thematically according to her various areas of interest – education, conservation, wildlife and heritage. It still seemed to lack something. Then, when a friend suggested that I start each chapter with a vignette from our interviews (she knew nothing of my earlier idea) I decided to take the leap and try it. When I gave the draft to two friends to read, they felt it worked beautifully and pulled the story together.

However, during the first round of actual editing, my editor felt the book should adhere to a distinct timeline, so, with great trepidation, I shuffled it back into chronological order again. At that point, I was extremely glad that I had compiled two large Bristol board charts of timelines. The editor's instincts were right on and it came together very nicely in the end. And I think the vignettes give it a personal tone, allowing the reader to share my experience hearing her stories, while introducing them to the complexity and charm of Mary's character.

What was it like working so closely with Mary Majka?

Knowing this would be a long process, we had to tackle it in small chunks, so we decided to set aside Thursday afternoons for the interviews. On some days, it was like cozy afternoons with a wise old friend. On other days, it was frustrating, as Mary is used to assuming control of any given situation, and while that is her strength, it can be sometimes difficult for others. As a freelancer often on a tight schedule, I'm used to controlling the flow of an interview, so this was a difficult adjustment for me. As well, interviews might be interrupted by a phone call, a flock of cave swallows, visits from some of her many friends, or sometimes cancelled entirely at the last minute. However, once I dispensed with my own agenda and timetable, then made myself ready to receive and accept whatever the day brought, we both had more fun. Sometimes, I came home after four hours with a half page of typed notes. Other days, I came home with 16 or more. Some days – like the day Mary sent David upstairs to look for something in a box of files and he found the old thick-framed glasses he lost twenty-odd years ago - we laughed until it hurt, then at other days, as we explored painful memories, it just plain hurt. She never ceased to amaze me with the depth of detail contained in her memories.

Writing a biography naturally constrains a writer to a certain set of facts and a certain narrative flow. How did you find working under such constraints?

I've only written non-fiction, so I am accustomed to the constraints of writing real life. What I found difficult was the sheer complexity of a life well lived and the wealth of material contained within the many threads, themes and directions. It was frustrating to have to exclude a wonderful anecdote or event because it did not contribute to the narrative arc or because it could not be wrestled into its place in time without interrupting the story flow.

What do you see the current role of the writer in larger culture? What do you think the role of the writer should be?

Writers are here to bear witness to the world and to tell its stories so others can learn, grow, enjoy or maybe see a world of possibility in their own lives. How writers tell these stories can influence the direction a society takes...or better or worse.

What is the best piece of advice you've heard, on writing or life (not necessarily given to you directly)?

First of all, simply write. Regardless of whether you think your words are good or not, just write. Second, make time to dream. We are raised to believe that dreaming is frivolous, a waste of time, but writers and artists need to make time to dream and not feel guilty doing it. My best lines, most profound thoughts and my most ambitious ideas come to me when I'm in the bathtub, eyes closed, toes relaxed, mind drifting.

Who has, for better or worse, had the single greatest influence on your life?

Without a doubt, my husband, because he has encouraged me to try new things, to have courage and faith in myself. He has been a tremendous supporting influence and has been there to gently push me outside my comfort zone. Next in line, I would say Mary. Her life has been an example to me of what can happen when a person remains true to their nature. I believe that, like the shorebirds in the story, we are born with an inner knowledge of the path our lives should take, but somewhere along the way, we get sidetracked into someone else's goals or ideas of who we should be, often to the detriment of our own desires. Mary followed no one's path but her own and she remained true to her nature. By doing this, by fearlessly sharing her inherent gifts, she served the world in a great way. We can't all be a Mary, but we are not supposed to be. I believe God has a purpose for each person and we are uniquely designed through genetics and life experiences to fulfil that purpose.

What is the biggest obstacle or challenge you have faced and overcome in your life so far?

This book.

What other writers do you like? Which book had the greatest impact on you? Why?

Most certainly the Bible has had the greatest impact on me for the obvious reasons. But my favourite contemporary authors in non-fiction are Terry Tempest Williams and Kathleen Dean Moore and for fiction, there are too many to have a favourite. I've read so many wonderful books lately, but I can say that Terry Tempest Williams and Kathleen Dean Moore books make me stop in my tracks. Their heart-stopping imagery, lyrical voice and lean prose give me a model to work towards in my own writing. However, following their example, I may have to start calling myself Deborah Freeman Carr.

What was the last great book you read? What was the last great film?

The Good Earth was the last great book. I was always a fan of *Dances with Wolves* for the cinematography and the music score, but recently re-watched *August Moon* and absolutely loved every minute of it.

Is there a book you've been meaning to read?

The Cellist of Sarajevo

What is your most secret, guilty pleasure?

Well, it's not really a secret, but I love a steaming hot bath with water to my chin, silence and the window wide open so I can smell the forest and hear its sounds.

Are you currently working on anything new?

I am on hiatus. Taking some much needed dream time and learning to play again.

Do you have any advice for writers who are trying to get published?

My advice for new writers is this: don't write to get published. Write to feed your heart and express the murmurings of your soul. Write to clarify the world around you as only you can see it. When you clear the way to that inner river of wisdom and voice, then your words will find their own place in the world.