

Sanctuary: The Story of Naturalist Mary Majka

Backgrounder

“I always felt I had been given a mission, and while I never felt a distinct vocation, the great theme in my life has been to love and to serve. These are the two things that dominate my life.”

~ Mary Majka ~



Those who discover the secret to resilience let adversity shape, but not define them. They discover that by focusing on a goal beyond themselves, they are able to transcend the pain and grief of the moment by perceiving these as only temporary circumstances.

Mary Majka is one of these people and how she allowed the losses of her childhood to guide her to her destiny is the basis for this biographical book.

In spite of a childhood interrupted by tragedy and an adolescence cut short by war, Polish-Canadian immigrant Mary Majka grew to be a woman who would devote her life to preserving the natural and cultural heritage of her adopted country. By drawing on the strengths of her ancestors and the healing power of nature, Mary rose above grief and loss to show that ‘who’ we become can profoundly influence the generations that follow.

Immigrating to Canada after World War II, Mary quickly distinguished herself as a leader and visionary in a country just beginning to take notice of the environment. Through the decades of her life in Canada, her flamboyant character and keen sense of humour made her popular with the media and sought after for speeches and interviews.

Her work and commitment to nature earned her a number of awards, among them an honorary doctorate from the University of New Brunswick, a Lifetime Achievement Award from Environment Canada, the Queen’s Golden Jubilee medal, TIAC Volunteer of the Year, the Order of New Brunswick and in 2007, the Order of Canada and, most recently, Province of New Brunswick Volunteer of the Year.

Sanctuary tells the whole story of this determined and decisive woman who helped build a culture of conservation in her adopted country; how she used the events of her childhood, incarceration during World War II, and subsequent immigration to Canada to find her rightful place in the world; and how she found the motivation and the courage to become a pioneer in the environmental movement, a passionate advocate for the protection of wildlife, and an unrelenting proponent for heritage preservation.

But, this is also the inspirational story of a woman finding her power and purpose in mid-life, of learning to act on beliefs and to respond to the passions and desires of her heart.

"Naturalist, educator, writer, and community activist, Mary Majka has done more to preserve the natural and cultural legacy of the Bay of Fundy than anyone in our time. Sanctuary is an engaging and clear-eyed portrait of her indomitable spirit — a celebration of a courageous life — and an important book."

~ Harry Thurston, author of *Tidal Life, A Natural History of the Bay of Fundy*

"Deborah interlaces the very facts of Mary's life and accomplishments with imagery and prose to offer a deeply felt account of not just a woman's life opened up to the public light but also her spirit and her dreams—surely a gift for her audience."

~ Paula Sarson, editor

"Deborah Carr's fabulous biography of the courageous life of one of Canada's great pioneering environmentalists goes a long way in demonstrating what a single individual can attain through the power of observation, understanding, and the application of findings to move decision-makers and governments on matters of environmental conservation and protection . . . The book is a must-read for everyone, a work that cannot fail to educate, inspire and ignite all of us!"

~David Nettleship, Oceans Association

"It is no small feat to be able to compress a life as fully lived as Mary Majka's has been into a readable, entertaining volume. Carr has done an admirable job in collecting up the myriad of threads of Majka's life and weaving a living history and legacy that is honest without being sycophantic."

~ Jodi DeLong, Atlantic Books Today

"Sanctuary is a delight to read – serious in parts, sad in others, yet overwhelmingly hopeful and inspiring – a true tribute to the complex, feisty woman who was the driving force behind the internationally acclaimed Mary's Point Shorebird Reserve on the Bay of Fundy."

~ Leslie Cockburn, Nature Trust of New Brunswick

"Read this book for entertainment, for inspiration and for truth about what it means to be fully human."

~Joan Czapalay, Director, Nature Canada

About the Author

Deborah Carr has been a full time professional freelance writer since 1999. She prefers to write creative non-fiction, and her specialties are nature, conservation, people profiles and travel topics. Often, her own photography accompanies her articles. She has written for Homemakers, Saltscapes, CARP, Outdoor Canada, Nature Canada, Wildlife Canada, Atlantic Salmon Journal, and Progress magazines, among others.

She believes in the power of creative expression and so encourages others to find their own voice through her own series of writing workshops under the name *Nature of Words*. During her workshops she provides space for both seasoned and beginning writers to learn new techniques and play with words in a relaxed setting guaranteed to encourage creative flow.

She blogs about her spiritual path and also speaks to various organizations on the inspirational life lessons she learned while delving into the life of an astonishing and intriguing woman.

In 2007, she was chosen as finalist in the Atlantic Journalism Awards, Best Profile category, for her word portrait of Chuck "The Woodchuck" Bernard in Saltscapes Magazine, and in 2011, Sanctuary was short-listed for the Atlantic Bookseller's Choice Award.

You can find more information on Deborah online:

Freelance website: www.deborahcarr.ca

Blog and writing workshops: www.natureofwords.com

Facebook site: www.facebook.com/deborahcarr.writer

Note from the Author:

In 2003, I began weekly interviews with 80-year-old Polish-Canadian naturalist, Mary Majka. Something in me realized her story was important and that it was imperative to gather her memories as a record for future generations. And for myself, I wanted to know what it took to become a woman like her.

It has been a long, difficult journey during which I not only learned the hidden stories of her life, but also a great many wisdoms for my own.

The result is *Sanctuary*.

It is the story of how a young Polish girl named Marysia faced sorrow, loss and war alone, and through this discovered a healing connection to nature. It is the story of how she evolved into the award-winning woman known as Mary Majka, who played a key role in preserving the natural and cultural heritage of New Brunswick and encouraged others to pursue their passion and make their own mark on the world.

But beneath all this, it is the universal story of finding *sanctuary* – of achieving that sacred place of acceptance and refuge, both in the world and within the soul.



Sanctuary is a book for anyone who has questioned the value of their own life; any man or woman who has looked within and thought, *"I know there is more to me than what I show"*. It is for anyone who has seen something they wanted to change, then walked away from it doing nothing. It is for anyone who has held a tiny creature in their hand and felt the transition as its struggles subside and trust enters its bones. It is for anyone who has walked in nature and felt the pull and power of a force beyond their own understanding

On its own, this is just a book...it has no value until you pick it up and read it. If its words and story resonate with you - and change you in some way - then my work has gained value. Because the book can travel where Mary and I cannot and will carry its message much further than either of us might on our own. And when both of us are gone, it will remain...a tangible reminder of a life well and authentically lived.

Mary's story has profoundly influenced my own life. It has caused me to look deep within myself, to begin seeking my own true nature and looking for ways that I can influence my world with the gifts I possess. It has led me to speaking opportunities I could never have foreseen when I took on this project.

I hope you find truths for your own on its pages.

I leave you with this quote from Mary:

"Throughout my life, I was very much aware that it is not what you have, or what you do, or what you achieve that makes happiness. It is your personal dream, your personal aims that will bring you happiness."

All my best,

Deborah Carr

PS: And, as a bonus, because I also indulge my sweeter side, I've also provided the recipe for Mary's Famous Nut Torte, so you can make it for your book club meeting. Enjoy!

Sanctuary Book Club Questions

- 1.# What do you think the author was trying to show by beginning the book with the visit to Aquila, the Majka's rundown, deserted Caledonia Mountain home?
- 2.# In the preface and the prelude, the author presents some of the different facets of Mary. What were your initial thoughts or feelings about this woman? Did they change as you read the book?
- 3.# In what ways do you think Mary's life in Poland and freedom as a young child contributed to the woman she would become?
- 4.# How did you feel about Maria's (Mary's mother) child-rearing methods and her actions following her husband's death? What lingering influence do you think Mary's relationship with her mother had on her adult life?
- 5.# Why do you think Mary was so close to her father? What effect, if any, do you think losing her father during her adolescence had on Mary's own relationships with men?
- 6.# Why do you think the author put off relating the background story of Mary's father's death until Chapter Nine?
- 7.# What elements of her upbringing helped her to survive emotionally and physically during the war years when she was apart from her family?
- 8.# How do you think she felt when she was finally reunited with her family at the end of the war, but learned there was no place for her with them? What other time(s) in her life, did she experience this?
- 9.# Did the Majka's experience arriving in Canada and their struggles in Ontario illuminate anything for you regarding life for an immigrant in a new environment?
- 10.# Why do you think David Christie moved in with the Majkas and never left? In what ways do you think his childhood contributed to his willingness to be so fully enveloped within the Majka family dynamic?
- 11.# The author writes, "She'd involved herself in so many different projects, organizations, and events that her life must have seemed almost frenzied at times." What do you feel was (were) the underlying motivation(s) driving Mary to achieve so much in her life?
- 12.# In what ways, do you feel that Mary and David complemented each other? What are your feelings about their relationship?
- 13.# Mary said, 'If I didn't do these things, I wouldn't be me.' What kind of life wisdom does a statement like that carry? If you had to describe the 'real Mary', how would you do so?
- 14.# How did the author's use of vignettes at the beginning of each chapter affect how you felt about Mary as you read through her story? Why do you think she used this technique?

15. #Mary accomplished many things in her life, but accomplishments come at a cost. After reading this book, what do you think the costs were to Mary and to those closest to her?

16. #After reading the book, do you find any inspiration on its pages for your own life? Does reading about Mary's accomplishments encourage you and raise possibilities, or does it intimidate you?

17. #What is the significance of the cake-making scene at the end of the book?

18. #Why do you think the author finished the book as she did? What was she trying to say?

Mary's Famous Nut Torte Recipe



Mary's nut torte recipe has been in her family for at least five generations. It achieved local fame when Mary began making it for members of the naturalist clubs who reached their 300th bird sighting. On top of each torte was the 300th bird, artfully depicted with fruit and nuts.

"It is a pleasure for me," she says. "I think about the people who will enjoy it later. When I make this for someone, I know they appreciate the fact I went to all this trouble to portray their accomplishment. This is one of my creative outlets."

Cake

8 oz nuts (walnuts, pecans, hazelnuts or almonds)
12 eggs, separated
10 Tbsp sugar
2 tsp vanilla extract

Grind the nuts in a blender (or purchase ground nuts). Preheat the oven to 300°F. Separate the eggs. Beat the egg yolks with 8 tbsp sugar. Beat the egg whites and when they start to peak, add the remaining 2 tbsp sugar. Beat "until you can sit on them". Combine the egg yolk mixture with the ground nuts. Add vanilla. Gently fold in egg whites. Fill a well-greased 10" springform pan. Bake for 1 hour or until firm. Do not remove from springform pan until the cake is cool.

Filling

2 cups whipping cream
2 tbsp sugar
3 tsp vanilla extract
1 c. orange juice or wine
Fresh or preserved fruits (strawberries, kiwis, apricots, tangerines, cherries)

Whip cream until stiff, add sugar and vanilla extract. With a long, sharp knife, cut the cooled cake into three layers. Sprinkle each layer with juice or wine. Fill with whipped cream and fruits. Top with whipped cream, then decorate with remaining fruit and nuts. Press dried bread crumbs or cake crumbs into the sides. For variation, whip the cream with instant coffee or cocoa (in which case, do not use fruits). The torte is best when made a day in advance, then left in a cool place.