

Inspiration from the Edge

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE

Far more than a pretty setting, Canada's latitudinal fringes play complex characters in the works of well-known authors. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, we discover how breath-taking landscapes and intriguing communities infiltrate many salt-laced tales and the creative process behind them.

FEATURED AUTHORS

Dawn Baker (DB)

Gander resident Dawn Baker has worked as an artist and children's writer for more than two decades. Her work was shortlisted twice for the WANL Heritage and History Book Award. She served as a juror for the 2016 Governor General's Literary Awards, participated in the 2015 TD Canadian Children's Book Week Tour and was the 2016 Winterset Children's Writer in Residence.

Sylvia Gunnery (SG)

Sylvia Gunnery lives at Crescent Beach on Nova Scotia's South Shore with her partner Jim and a few rescued critters, including a bunny and a crow. She has given readings and presentations at schools, libraries and conferences in her own province and across Canada. Her newest YA novel, *Road Signs That Say West*, was launched in February at the Reading for the Love of It conference in Toronto.

Deborah Hodge (DH)

Deborah Hodge of Vancouver is the author of more than 25 books for children. Her recent book, *West Coast Wild: A Nature Alphabet*, illustrated by Karen Reczuch, was the winner of this year's Information Book Award given by the Children's Literature Roundtables of Canada.

Jessica Scott Kerrin (JSK)

Halifax-based Jessica Scott Kerrin is best known for her fiction books for boys, including the eight-book series called *Martin Bridge*, a trilogy called *The Lobster Chronicles* and two related mystery novels: *The Spotted Dog Last Seen* and *The Missing Dog Is Spotted*. Her latest novel, *The Things Owen Wrote*, will be published this fall, and her first picture book, *The Better Tree Fort*, will be published spring 2018.

Andrea Spalding (AS)

With a specialty in children's literature, Andrea Spalding has authored over 30 books in a variety of genres, plays, films, radio and TV scripts and magazine articles. Her writing has earned her numerous awards, nominations and shortlists, notably *Me and Mr. Mah*, which was chosen for the Dalai Lama's list of books that promote cultural tolerance and understanding. A resident of Pender Island, BC, she is also an artist, musician and avid traveller.

Dawn Baker



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Andrea Spalding



How does the experience of living on the coast influence your work?

DB: Living in Newfoundland and Labrador informs every aspect of my life. Our weather is as notorious as our scenery is glorious. I take care to observe and mentally document what I see every day. When I sit down to write, draw or paint, I can recall those images and the feelings associated with them. This is a deeply emotional place.

SG: The East Coast is deeply part of who I am, how I think and how I imagine. My stories and characters have their roots in this place. Beginning with my first Scholastic publication in 1984, I've intended my stories to take young readers into an East Coast experience. For me, it's especially important for those who live here to see themselves in the pages of books.

DH: Living in Vancouver allows me to always feel close to nature. Being around nature gives me a sense of peace and calmness — qualities that make me a better writer.

JSK: The scenes in my head that play out in my stories are grounded in my East Coast experiences. These include place names, heritage sites, architecture and the weather. I've worked with curators, historians, artists and archivists, who all taught me to pay close attention to my surroundings, to be a vigilant interpreter.

AS: I am always inspired by my surroundings. When I lived on the prairies, I wrote *Finders Keepers* featuring the rolling landscape, constant wind and expansive blue skies. A new updated edition has been released by Dundurn. Now I'm on the West Coast, the smell of cedar trees and salt, grey skies and stunning vistas permeate my stories. Landscape is always a character in my books.

How do the distinct culture, language, tradition and landscape impact you?

DB: Newfoundland and Labrador culture, tradition and landscape feature prominently in each and every one of my children's books. It's what they are all about. I hope to reflect our province for the children who live here and to provide an introduction for those who do not.

SG: They're always there, like the air I breathe. Books by other Atlantic writers are a reassurance of who I am and where I come from. Years ago, on a flight to Europe, I was re-reading Alistair MacLeod's *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*. MacLeod's stories took me right back home. In my own writing, I have hoped to get even part way toward having that kind of effect on East Coast readers.

DH: I am always aware of the presence of nature with the ocean, mountains and forest nearby. Many of my books reflect this. My recent book, *West Coast Wild*, is set on the western edge of Vancouver Island, a pristine and magnificent place. It is home to a unique ecosystem where an ancient rainforest meets the sea and where all the animals living there (bears, whales, eagles, salmon and other marine

creatures) are connected in an intricate web of life. It is a special place I wanted to share with young readers.

JSK: The landscape impacts me every minute of every day, as soon as I step outdoors. I'm surrounded by shipyards, fog-horns and historic cemeteries. In the summers, I sail up and down the eastern coast on our boat, aptly named *Cape Fear*.

AS: I live it, and my stories, though fiction, are always an extension of my life experiences. The thing I love most about Canada is that each place has its own traditions, local words, different landscape and wide variety of cultures. The richness of Canada is immense, and I cannot get enough of it.

Are any of the locales or characters of your stories based on people or places you know in your area?

DB: All of the locales in my stories are based on actual places. In *A Newfoundland Year*, some of the locations are Gros Morne, Gander, Eastport, Twillingate and St. John's. It is no surprise these are places I frequent and love! The characters in my stories, for the most part, are fictitious. *A Newfoundland Adventure* is one exception. I tell the story of the Newfoundland pirate, Peter Easton, who was an actual historical figure, and the Irish princess, Sheila NaGeira, a famous legendary character.

SG: I borrow from people I know all the time, just bits and pieces to form a fictional character. It seems natural to imagine my characters in coastal settings such as the ones I experience every day. In *Game Face*, Jay's grandfather, a retired lobster fisherman, says, "Tomorrow, there'll be lotsa boats out there even before five. When you see their lights, you think they're stars fallen to the horizon." During lobster season, I watch those "stars" from my home in the pre-dawn darkness.

DH: Every summer, I take my family to the spectacular Pacific Rim region of Vancouver Island to see the wild, open ocean and the sky that seems to stretch on forever. I have visited this area for some 40 years. Watching the youngest members of my family discover the beach was my inspiration for writing *West Coast Wild*.

JSK: Absolutely. My two recent mystery novels are inspired by The Old Burying Ground, a nationally designated site in Halifax dating back to 1749. One marker bothers me to this day. It is a double gravestone with details about the husband, who died in his 30s, etched on the left-hand side, but the right-hand side remains completely blank. The marker is over 200 years old. No one knows what happened to his wife — perfect inspiration for writing a mystery novel.

AS: *Solomon's Tree* is the perfect example of being able to immerse myself in landscape and culture. Solomon and his Tsimshian family are real. They lived on Pender and we consider each other 'family' despite being from different cultures. Victor Reece, Solomon's father, gave me the name White Raven, a great honour that still brings me to tears. Our friendship immersed me in the culture and this book resulted.



Wind, waves and eagle cries, liven the view from Andrea Spalding's island eyrie.

Could you describe the view from your workspace?

DB: I wish that I could say the view from my home was of the mighty Atlantic Ocean. I do most of my writing and drawing from a cozy loveseat in my family room. The view is of my back garden, which is actually quite beautiful. When paint is involved, I stick to my studio.

SG: Our house is within splashing distance of the Atlantic Ocean. We look out over Green Bay and the distant LaHave Islands, always aware of the mood of the sea, the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, the creatures that live on the water or along the shoreline. I initially positioned my desk to have a view of the ocean, but this was too much of a distraction (and seagulls kept flying into my stories and perching).

DH: I live in an old Vancouver neighbourhood that is full of huge and majestic trees. My writing desk looks out into a backyard of greenery — towering trees and large leafy bushes. It's apparent we live in a rainforest!

JSK: I write from a room upstairs in my 1870s home in downtown Halifax, which I call the library. Next to my desk is a tall window, and I see a slice of my postage-stamp-sized backyard, which includes a pond stocked with koi and a giant maple tree. In the spring, the koi stare up at me, patiently waiting for their daily meal.

AS: I live on a small West Coast island called Pender. Our house is on the side of a hill, so we live with the birds among tree branches and look out over Navy Channel to the next island half a mile away. There is a fabulous view of ocean or moss-covered rocks topped with giant cedar and arbutus trees.

What do you love about working in a coastal community?

DB: Gander is a Newfoundland community rather than a coastal community. The island feeling permeates life here. I meet people every day who ask about my work and often say nice things about my books. I love that! I really appreciate the support and encouragement.

SG: Quiet. Calm. Relative isolation. I love that there's a community of writers in my area. Occasionally, I'll meet one of these writers for a walk on the beach or a coffee and a chat at LaHave River Books.

DH: I love that I am never far from the ocean. When I step outside my house, I can breathe in the fresh, moisture-laden sea air. It makes me feel happy and at home.

JSK: The population is small, friendly and not overly competitive. People here open up with their quirky stories. They are natural-born storytellers. There's lots to write about.

AS: I live in a place that attracts many artists, writers, musicians, acrobats and actors. Here, writing is considered an ordinary mainstream job. The community is totally supportive and we all flock to each other's book launches and art shows. I also love being alone in the silence, able to listen to the sound of the waves, the wind in the cedar trees and the cry of the eagles. These sounds often find their way into my stories.

How long have you lived on the coast? What attracts you to the area?

DB: I have lived in central Newfoundland nearly all my life. The stunning rugged beauty of the landscape and the depth of meaning to be found in our history and culture are also great attractions.

SG: I've lived on the East Coast all my life. These are my roots. There's a simplicity of lifestyle that suits me, including new and long-time friendships and neighbours you can count on. With two beaches nearby, I can walk for hours, bundled against cold winds or wading in the water to cool off.

DH: I was born in Saskatchewan, but have lived much of my life on the West Coast. I am attracted to the grandeur and majesty of our landscape. I am minutes from the ocean and can see the mountains from almost anywhere in the city. I feel lucky to live in such a beautiful area!

JSK: We moved here in 1985. I attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and then, later, Dalhousie University. We've stayed because of the quality of life that Nova Scotia affords and we've raised our son here. He considers himself a Maritimer, but we, his parents, will never move past the status of come-from-aways.

AS: I've lived here 27 years. It's the most beautiful place in the world, and I never want to leave. Every day, when I open my eyes and look out of the bedroom window, it takes my breath away, no matter the weather.



Sylvia Gunnery's home at Crescent Beach faces south with a view of the LaHave Islands across Green Bay.

Have you lived and worked in other areas? How did that impact your work compared to your current location?

DB: I have only ever worked from here in Gander. I try to do what I can to promote my province's traditional identity.

SG: I've always lived and worked in Nova Scotia. As long as I have a desk in a quiet corner, I can take myself into the imagined world of my books.

DH: I lived in the Okanagan for more than a decade. It was lovely, but I always missed the majesty and grandeur of Vancouver's geography.

JSK: I grew up in Alberta and attended the University of Calgary, but I've spent my entire adulthood in Halifax. My newest novel, called *The Things Owen Wrote*, gives an affectionate nod to my prairie upbringing. It will be published by Groundwood Books this fall.

AS: I've lived in two big cities in England: Manchester and Sheffield. Then we immigrated to Edmonton. A lot of my stories are about feelings of isolation, no matter where you live. I love exploring relationships that make connections, particularly exploring cross-cultural connections.

What is the most inspiring aspect about where you live now?

DB: It's the people. The climate, the many historical tragedies and the economic challenges have tested those who live here. Despite that, or maybe because of it, we have a thriving artistic community. From theatre, music and dance to visual art and writing, every discipline is alive and well. Nearly everyone I know is on some level a storyteller. I'm just happy to be one of them.

SG: Nova Scotia is a creative, supportive and inspiring place to live and work as a writer. We have the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia supporting us at all stages of our careers. We have the East Coast Literary Awards, the Atlantic Book Awards, Read by the Sea, Writing on Fire, the Cabot Trail Writers Festival, the Lunenburg Lit Festival, the Port Medway Readers' Festival, One Book Nova Scotia, Arts Nova Scotia and more. How can we not be energized and inspired as writers and readers?

DH: The writing community here is very inspiring. It's

wonderful to live and work among people who know what it means to live in this special place — people who want to protect our coastline. None of us takes for granted the ocean, forests and mountains that are the amazing backdrop to our lives.

JSK: Halifax is a place of history, a mix of old and new buildings, lots of green space, and perched on the ocean. There are great coffee shops and breweries, a symphony, a professional theatre, a gorgeous library, a cultural mix of restaurants and festivals, all within walking distance of my home. This place gives me things to write about as well as the time to write.

AS: The people. I live in a fabulous community where we are all a little crazy, good crazy, creatively crazy. This is the only place in my life I've really felt I fit in. Everyone here has an amazing story, and I love hearing them. My friends and neighbours inspire me.

Can you imagine living or working anywhere else? Why or why not?

DB: Newfoundland is where I live and where I make sense. It's what I write about and what I enjoy illustrating. I'm finishing work now on my newest book, *The Puffin Patrol*, another story about this place. There are still many of them left to tell.

SG: I'm not likely to live and write elsewhere because I'm very happy to be exactly where I am.

DH: I can imagine living in other places — but only locations where nature is a big and beautiful presence.

JSK: I can't imagine living anywhere if I can't be on the water. If we move, it would have to be near the ocean. Lakes don't count, not even the great ones.

AS: At this point in my life, I cannot imagine living anywhere else but on this island. I think I must be one of the luckiest people in the world.

Maryllyn Miller Oke is a freelance writer. With experience in broadcast news and public relations, she writes frequently for the academic and non-profit sectors.