

The Always Surprising Jill MacLean

BY KATHLEEN MARTIN



AT ONE TIME IN HER LIFE, Jill MacLean tells me, she spent her days in a laboratory studying rancid cod. I pause for an instant, caught by the word “rancid.”

“The fish were infused with copper,” she adds, by way of explanation.

Her voice is light, tinged with a British accent. I have known her long enough not to be surprised by the seeming oddity of a career encompassing rotting fish and award-winning novels. Jill is never what you expect.

We first met almost five years ago when she was looking for a publisher for her debut novel, *The Nine Lives of Travis Keating*. We’ve been friends ever since, meeting up a few times a year for lunch. Today, however, we are chatting on the phone, and I’m learning details I hadn’t asked about before. She moved to Canada from Berkshire, England, when she was nine. Her dad was an aeronautical engineer and was transferred to Nova Scotia.

“I was delighted to be living in Canada, and still am,” she says. “I loved it from the beginning. It was a big adventure.”

She had one sister, six years older, and a mother who was “totally unthrilled” about moving to Canada. “I suppose I was aware of that. She was only 40 when we moved, and her health wasn’t good. She died at 53, when I was 21.”

I knew that Jill loved to kayak and canoe, exploring backcountry landscapes in places like outport Newfoundland. I hadn’t known that

her first job was at the Banook Canoe Club in Dartmouth, though I’ve had more than one person whisper to me at writers’ events that Jill can portage a canoe solo.

“Urban myth?” I ask her.

“My canoe only weighs 42 pounds,” she says.

Jill speaks carefully, as though patiently allowing the proper words to slip out. In my mind, I picture her easily. She is slender, with delicate features and short white hair. She looks like somebody’s grandmother. It’s her eyes – dark brown and expressive – sometimes thoughtful, sometimes wistful, most often lively – that tell you that she is anything but retiring.

Of course Jill is somebody’s grandmother, and those who have followed her career in children’s books since *Nine Lives*, will know that it was her grandson Stuart who occasioned it.

“Write me a book, Nan,” he said to her, when he was nine. He wanted something with hockey and snowmobiles in it.

“I don’t think I ever would have thought of writing for kids otherwise,” says Jill.

She had been writing for years, though – in and amongst work as a biologist, the demands of her then husband’s work as a clergyman, and parenting two children. At first, she churned out romance novels, which paid the bills and allowed her to travel to places as diverse as the High Arctic and the Lesser Antilles to research the settings of different stories. It also honed her writing skills.

“People were surprised when *Nine Lives* first came out that I knew about developing characters and plot. The genre fiction was an apprenticeship for me, where I really learned how all of that worked,” she says. “And the books helped finance my poetry.”

When Stuart approached her, she had just launched her first book of poetry, *The Brevity of Red* (Signature Editions, 2003), which was nominated for the Atlantic Poetry Prize and the Acorn-Plantos Award.

The Brevity of Red is a reflection on loss. Before Jill turned 40, not only had her mother died, but her sister, too. And also her 17-year-old daughter, Janet – in a car accident. I remember when Jill first told me about her. I remember that her voice remained the same as she spoke; it didn’t shake, it didn’t drip with emotion. It was her eyes that changed, deep sadness sweeping across them – and then calm.

“Around ten years after my daughter died, I knew I wanted to write something about it. I didn’t know what. But I knew I had to try,” she says to me today. “Poetry came to seem like the form in which to express something about the death of a child.”

At that time, she also began graduate work in theology. “It was partly because my former husband was a clergyman. I’m not what you’d call a ‘believer.’ I went with a whole bunch of questions. My thesis was on the last four chapters of the Book of Job. It is the only place I know of in Hebrew scripture where chaos is admitted as a legitimate part of creation, as opposed to creation making order from chaos. What I was trying to explain in my own head is what is this word, ‘accident’?”

The Brevity of Red and her thesis are, she says, “the antithesis of writing for Harlequin. It was interesting holding those things simultaneously.”

And then there was Stuart’s request.

“I knew nothing about hockey. I knew there was something called icing and a blue line, but not how they connected. And I didn’t like snowmobiles. But a promise is a promise,” she says. And so she got to work, setting the story in a small fictional village in Newfoundland, the province where Stuart was born, and lived at the time.

The Nine Lives of Travis Keating, while neatly meeting the requirements of hockey and snowmobiles, also explores elements of chaos. Travis’s mother has died and he is in a new place trying to make sense of forces beyond his control: a bully, abandoned animals, the dynamics of other people’s lives. The book won the Ann Connor Brimer Award, was on the short list for the CLA Book of the Year for Children Award and was nominated for reader’s choice awards across the country. In addition, it has been selected for the 2012 International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Honour List.

Jill’s second book, *The Present Tense of Prinny Murphy*, picks up on one of the characters in *Nine Lives* and tells the next part of the story from her perspective. “Ann Featherstone, my wonderful editor, had been afraid that Prinny would take over *Nine Lives*. I knew that Prinny needed her own book. I knew that before I finished writing *Nine Lives*. While I was waiting for *Nine Lives* to be published, I wrote *Prinny*. Although I didn’t know it then, having a sequel ready was a really good marketing strategy.”

The Present Tense of Prinny Murphy landed almost as many awards and nominations as *Nine Lives*, including a second Ann Connor Brimer Award. Jill followed with *Home Truths*, the story of a bully, told from the bully’s point of view. It was initially supposed to be the third in the *Nine Lives* series, inspired by the character of Hud Quinn, who bullies Travis. But the strictures of publishing dictate that one can’t have a young adult novel as the third in a trilogy when

the other two books are for middle readers. So *Home Truths* became a stand-alone book, and Hud made way for the character of Brick MacAvoy.

“I don’t know where the characters come from – and I don’t want to analyze it in case they stop,” says Jill. “But I suspect in a way that *Nine Lives* was the seed for possibly most of what I’ll write.”

When she writes, she does it five days a week. “I’m a morning person, so the earlier I get at the computer the better. But when you write a book, you are writing 24/7. It’s always there, always working. When you wake up in the morning, the characters are talking to you. I love that.”

The last time we had lunch, back in December, Jill was mulling over the intersection between poetry and fiction, and reading all of the free-verse novels she could get her hands on. She ran through a list of some of her favourites for me: *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Ewer Wolff, *Out of the Dust* and *Witness* by Karen Hesse, *The Crazy Man* by Pamela Porter.

The idea of writing her next piece as free verse was gnawing at her. I could see that. How to do it well was the question. How to figure out the limits and opportunities implicit in the form. Would it work?

“The title came into my head and bang, that was it,” she tells me now. “A free-verse novel called *Nix Minus One*. I’ve done the first draft and two major revisions.”

Despite the success of her last three novels, she is still taking her draft of *Nix* to the Carver-Stinson Writing Workshop this fall. That she is willing to work to get this book right – to learn all she can that might help it – doesn’t surprise me. But no doubt what she writes will. 🐾

Kathleen Martin is an author, editor and reviewer based in Halifax, and a former regional officer for the Canadian Children’s Book Centre.



Books by Jill MacLean

Home Truths

DANCING CAT BOOKS, 2010

The Present Tense of Prinny Murphy

FITZHENRY & WHITESIDE, 2009

The Nine Lives of Travis Keating

FITZHENRY & WHITESIDE, 2008