

Saturday, April 05, 2008



12 or 20 questions: with Myrna Kostash

Born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, Myrna Kostash is a full time writer, author of *All of Baba's Children* (1978); *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (1980); *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls* (1987); *Bloodlines: A Journey Into Eastern Europe* (1993); *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1997); *The Next Canada: Looking for the Future Nation* (2000); *Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River* (2005). *Memoirs of Byzantium* is a work-in-progress.

1 - How did your first book change your life?

OH BOY, GOT AN HOUR OR TWO? *ALL OF BABA'S CHILDREN* WAS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 1978 AND REMAINS THE BOOK MOST PEOPLE KNOW ME BY EVEN IF THEY HAVEN'T READ IT. I WORKED ON IT WHILE TAKING A SABBATICAL FROM THE TORONTO FREELANCE RUNAROUND. BUT HERE I STILL AM IN EDMONTON 30 YEARS LATER. ONE OF THE REASONS FOR THIS REROOTING IN MY HOME TOWN IS PRECISELY THE RADICAL CHANGE IN MY LIFE THAT *BABA'S CHILDREN* PRODUCED, NAMELY THAT THE UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN COMMUNITY 'NAMED' ME ONE OF THEIRS AND EVENTUALLY I ACCEPTED THE NAME OF UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN WRITER - WITH AN ATTITUDE, TO BE SURE - ALONG WITH MY OTHER LITERARY IDENTITIES SUCH AS NON-FICTION, FEMINIST, NEW LEFTIST AND WESTERNER, AND EMBRACED THE IDEA OF LIVING A UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN LIFE IN EDMONTON (FOR EXAMPLE, 17 YEARS IN THE UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN SOCIALIST FEMINIST HOUSING CO-OP, "HROMADA"). OVER THE DECADES THIS IDENTITY KEPT GETTING MORE COMPLEX AS I TOOK ON HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL BAGGAGE FROM EASTERN EUROPE AND, MOST RECENTLY, SPIRITUAL INHERITANCE FROM BYZANTIUM. AND IT ALL STARTED FROM A MOTEL IN TWO HILLS, ALBERTA, IN THE SUMMER OF 1975.

2 - How long have you lived in Edmonton, and how does geography, if at all, impact on your writing?

I WAS BORN IN EDMONTON IN 1944, LEFT IT IN 1965, RETURNED IN 1975 AND AM STILL HERE, ALBEIT WITH FREQUENT ABSENCES OR GETAWAYS AS WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE OR VISITING LECTURER IN OTHER PARTS OF CANADA OR ON LENGTHY SELF-FINANCED RETREATS ABROAD. UNTIL A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I WOULD HAVE SAID THAT LANDSCAPE HAS NO IMPACT ON MY WRITING, IN THAT I HAD NEVER ADDRESSED IT AS A SUBJECT OF MY WRITING (EXCEPT FOR ONE BRAVURA LITTLE ESSAY ABOUT MONTANA) NOR BELIEVED IT HAD ANY IMPACT ON MY STYLE OR TECHNIQUE. THIS HAS CHANGED SOMEWHAT. DURING THE COURSE OF THE LAST 10 YEARS IN WHICH I HAVE IMMERSSED MYSELF IN THE STUDY OF BYZANTIUM, I HAVE

COME UP FOR AIR IN MY OWN TIME, AS IT WERE, BY ALSO WORKING ON RADIO DOCUMENTARIES AND ANTHOLOGIES ABOUT WESTERN CANADIAN HISTORY, AS FOR EXAMPLE MY MOST RECENT BOOK, [READING THE RIVER: A TRAVELLER'S COMPANION TO THE NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER](#). FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE ON THE [NORTH SASKATCHEWAN](#), I TOOK AN INTEREST IN THE RICH HISTORY AND LITERATURE ASSOCIATED WITH IT, AND NOW I'M A TOTAL PARKLAND PATRIOT (NOTE: NOT THE PRAIRIE). HOWEVER, THIS PATRIOTISM WAS SEVERELY CHALLENGED RECENTLY WHEN I SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS IN [CAMPBELL RIVER](#) ON VANCOUVER ISLAND WHOSE GEOGRAPHY LET ME SWOONING.

Does race or gender make any impact on your work?

RACE HAS HAD A CONSIDERABLE IMPACT IN THAT, ONCE THE CULTURE WARS REDUCED ALL EURO-CANADIAN IDENTITIES TO 'WHITENESS,' LONG-LABOURED-OVER POLITICS AROUND [UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN ETHNICITY](#) BECAME IRRELEVANT IF NOT UNWELCOME. (SEE MY PERSONAL ESSAY IN [BOOKS IN CANADA](#) LAST NOVEMBER, "[HOW I LOST MY HYPHEN AND FOUND MY GROOVE](#).") AS FOR GENDER, AS A NONFICTION WRITER I'VE HAD MANY MANY OCCASIONS TO ADDRESS THE SUBJECT DIRECTLY AS A FEMINIST. AS A CREATIVE NONFICTION WRITER, MOREOVER, I TOOK IT OVER THE EDGE IN A SERIES OF NONFICTION TALES ABOUT THE INTERTWININGS OF HISTORY, POLITICS, ETHNICITY AND HETEROSEXUAL LUST, IN MY BOOK, [THE DOOMED BRIDGEGROOM](#).

3 -Where does a piece of non-fiction usually begin for you? Are you an author of short pieces that end up combining into a larger project, or are you working on a "book" from the very beginning?

I WRITE BOTH SHORT AND LONG ARTICLES AND ESSAYS AS WELL AS BOOKS AND RADIO DOCUMENTARIES. THEY HAVE ALL BEEN DISCRETE PROJECTS, I.E. I SEEM TO SENSE INSTINCTIVELY WHETHER I HAVE A BIG, MEDIUM OR SMALL SUBJECT. HAVING SAID THAT, MY BIG SUBJECTS TEND TO BECOME MONUMENTAL - A PROJECT TO WRITE ABOUT THE LIFE OF A BYZANTINE SAINT, FOR EXAMPLE, BECAME A SHORT COURSE IN [BYZANTINE STUDIES](#), AND THEN A LIFE-CHANGING PILGRIMAGE BEFORE IT SETTLED DOWN INTO A LITERARY NONFICTION COMBINING TRAVELOGUE AND MEMOIR. MY MEDIUM-SIZED SUBJECTS ALSO TEND TO BECOME MORE AMBITIOUS AS I KEEP ON RESEARCHING AND READING. FOR INSTANCE, [A ONE-HOUR CBC "IDEAS" DOCUMENTARY](#) ABOUT [THE FROG LAKE MASSACRE OF 1885](#) HAS BECOME A COUPLE OF HUNDRED OF PAGES OF A LITERARY ANTHOLOGY.

4 - Are public readings part of or counter to your creative process?

THEY ARE PART OF THE POST-CREATIVE PROCESS I.E. THEY ARE PERFORMANCES OF WORK I'VE ALREADY COMPLETED. I VERY MUCH ENJOY DOING THEM BUT IT DID TAKE SOME TIME TO FIGURE OUT WHAT KIND OF NONFICTION WORKS FOR A READING. IT BETTER HAVE A STORY ATTACHED! FOR THIS REASON, I'VE LEARNED TO COMBINE AD LIBBED CONVERSATION AND ANECDOTE WITH THE FORMAL READING. I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT YOU CAN HOLD THE ATTENTION OF THE AVERAGE LISTENER FOR 7 MINUTES BEFORE THEY DRIFT OFF.

5 - Do you have any theoretical concerns behind your writing? What kinds of questions are you trying to answer with your work? What do you even think the current questions are?

I BEGAN LIFE AS A PUBLISHED WRITER WHEN [THE NEW JOURNALISM \[THERE MUST BE A HOT LINK YOU CAN INSERT HERE\]](#) WAS AT ITS PEAK, IN THE EARLY 1970S. BUT I DIDN'T QUITE REALIZE THAT THAT WAS WHAT I WAS WRITING UNTIL I CAME FACE TO FACE WITH THE SNOBBERY OF THE ENGLISH-CANADIAN LITERARY ELITE TOWARD THE GENRE OF NONFICTION AND DECIDED, ALONG WITH OTHER NF WRITERS, TO FIGHT BACK. WE HAVEN'T ACTUALLY 'THEORIZED' OUR GENRE AS HISTORICIZED IT AND GRADUALLY MADE THE CASE FOR THE LITERARY VALUE OF THE BEAST-KNOWN-AS-CREATIVE-NONFICTION. THIS HAS OPENED A WHOLE NEW CAN OF WORMS ABOUT THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN GENRES AND HOW MUCH CREATIVE LYING NONFICTION CAN GET AWAY WITH, AS [WITNESS THE CURRENT KERFUFFLE IN THE U.S. ABOUT FAKED MEMOIRS](#). (CURIOSLY THIS VIRUS DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE INFECTED CANADIAN NF; I CAN ONLY THINK OF ONE HISTORICAL EXAMPLE - *THE MEMOIRS OF GREY OWL* - AND ONE CONTEMPORARY INSTANCE OF IFFY NF - [FARLEY MOWAT'S](#) EARLY WRITING ABOUT THE NORTH.)

6 - Do you find the process of working with an outside editor difficult or essential (or both)?

AS A YOUNG MAGAZINE WRITER I WAS BLESSED WITH TWO OUTSTANDING EDITORS WHO HELPED ME GROW: [ROBERT FULFORD AT SATURDAY NIGHT](#), WHO ALWAYS SENT MY "FINAL" DRAFT BACK FOR A REWRITE AND THUS GOT THE BEST OUT OF ME, FINALLY; AND [DORIS ANDERSON AT CHATELAINE](#), WHO GAVE ME THE CHANCE TO WRITE STUFF THAT MATTERED TO ORDINARY PEOPLE. AS A BOOK WRITER, I HAVE NEVER PARTICIPATED IN WORKSHOPS AND, UNTIL MY FOURTH BOOK, [BLOODLINES: A JOURNEY INTO EASTERN EUROPE](#), NEVER HAD AN EDITOR WHO EDITED FOR STYLE, FORM, STRUCTURE, VOICE ETC AS WELL AS FOR ACCURACY. IT WAS A REVELATION, AND THE WOMAN WAS A GENIUS: SHE REALLY REALLY UNDERSTOOD CREATIVE NONFICTION. SINCE THEN I HAVE DISCOVERED THAT MOST CANADIAN PUBLISHERS SIMPLY WILL NOT PROVIDE THAT KIND OF EDITING, AT LEAST FOR NONFICTION, AND SO I DEPEND ON FINDING JUST THE RIGHT FREELANCE EDITOR TO COLLABORATE WITH. IN MY EXPERIENCE, THIS COLLABORATION IS MOST FRUITFUL WHEN WORKING ON A FINAL DRAFT; EDITORIAL INTERVENTION IN EARLIER VERSIONS HAS SIMPLY LED TO CROSSED PURPOSES.

7 - After having published more than a couple of titles over the years, do you find the process of book-making harder or easier?

IT HAS NEVER BECOME 'EASIER.' EACH NEW BOOK IS A KIND OF FIRST BOOK, IN THAT YOU HAVEN'T WRITTEN THIS ONE YET. AND EACH ONE PRESENTS ITS OWN SET OF DIFFICULTIES. ALSO, THE OLDER YOU GET, THE MORE SELF-CONSCIOUS YOU BECOME ABOUT HOW YOUR WORK FITS INTO THE GENERAL SCHEME OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING IN YOUR COMMUNITY; YOU CAN ANTICIPATE THE CRITICS; YOU'RE AWARE OF WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED; YOU APPROACH AND THEN SURPASS THAT DREADED 'MID-CAREER' DOLDRUMS. YET SOMEHOW YOU KEEP ON WANTING TO WRITE ANOTHER BOOK EVEN THOUGH YOU SENSE YOUR SHIP IS NEVER GOING TO COME IN.

8 - When was the last time you ate a pear?

TWO DAYS AGO AT BREAKFAST, A NOT VERY SUCCESSFUL PEAR I'M AFRAID. YET I

LOVE A CHILLED PEAR IN ITS PERFECT STATE, JUICY AND TENDER-FLESHED, AND I'VE DISCOVERED A BREAKFAST RECIPE OF BULGAR, PEAR NECTAR, PEAR AND VANILLA YOGURT. YUM. AND I REMEMBER A DENTIST WHO CHATTED ABOUT FOOD WHILE WORKING ON MY TEETH; THE PERFECT DESSERT, HE SAID, IS [ROQUEFORT CHEESE](#) AND A CHILLED PEAR...AND IN [SLOVENIA](#) I DISCOVERED [VILIAMOVKA](#), PEAR SCHNAPPES. YUM YUM.

9 - What is the best piece of advice you've heard (not necessarily given to you directly)?

IN A PUB IN WINNIPEG, WHEN I WAS DOWN IN THE DUMPS ABOUT EVER FINDING A WAY TO WRITE WHAT WOULD BECOME [BLOODLINES](#), I WONDERED OUT LOUD WITH [ROBERT KROETSCH](#) WHETHER I NEEDED TO WRITE THE DAMN THING AT ALL. HE SAID SOMETHING LIKE: WRITING A BOOK IS ONLY ONE WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD. THERE WAS MORE BUT THAT'S THE PART THAT STRUCK AND STUCK: WRITING MY BOOKS IS NO MORE OR LESS VITAL A PARTICIPATION IN LIFE THAN IS CULTIVATING TOMATOES, RAISING A CHILD, FIXING CARBUETORS OR ([KROETSCH'S](#) EXAMPLE) RUNNING A BUTTON SHOP. LIBERATED, I WAS ABLE IMMEDIATELY TO RETURN TO THE MS.

10 - What kind of writing routine do you tend to keep, or do you even have one? How does a typical day (for you) begin?

AS A FULLTIME WRITER I DON'T HAVE TO COMPETE WITH A PAID JOB TO FIND TIME TO WRITE. NEVERTHELESS THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS UNFETTERED WRITING TIME. I HAVE TO BE MY OWN MANAGER, ACCOUNTANT, SECRETARY, HOOFER. I LIVE ALONE AND HAVE TO BE MY OWN HOUSEKEEPER, COOK AND GENERAL FACTOTUM. I HAVE AN ELDERLY MOTHER IN EDMONTON. AS A RESULT I WRITE ONLY ON ALTERNATE DAYS. (STAYING ON TOP OF EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE TAKES UP A HUGE AMOUNT OF TIME, AS I'M INVOLVED IN SEVERAL EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES.) JUST TWO MONTHS AGO I MADE THE BIG MOVE TO RENT PART OF AN OFFICE DOWNTOWN WHERE I HAVE NO PHONE. I NOW GO THERE TO WRITE, EVERY SECOND DAY, AND STAY AT HOME TO DO EVERYTHING ELSE. GENERALLY, MY DAY DOESN'T START UNTIL 10:00 AFTER A POT OF TEA AND A COUPLE OF HOURS OF READING NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES. I SUBSCRIBE TO AN INORDINATE NUMBER OF MAGAZINES. (I DON'T HAVE TV BECAUSE I CAN'T IMAGINE WHEN I'D WATCH IT.) WHEN I'M IN FULL-TILT WRITING MODE, I CONSIDER A 4-5 HOUR STRETCH A FULL WORKING DAY. I TRY TO KEEP EVENINGS FREE FOR FUN THINGS OR FOR BEING ALONE AND VERY QUIET. CONTRARY TO THE NOTION THAT WRITING IS A LONELY SORT OF JOB, I FIND THAT, WITH NONFICTION, THE TRICK IS TO GET AWAY FROM PEOPLE.

11 - Where is your favourite place to write?

IN MY HOME OFFICE, AT A 1930S ARTS-AND-CRAFTS-STYLE DESK THAT BELONGED TO MY FATHER; DOWNTOWN AT A STYLISH WOODEN SURFACE NEXT TO LOTS OF WINDOWS. WHEN I TRAVEL I OFTEN WRITE IN LITTLE NOTEBOOKS WHILE LOITERING IN CAFES AND TAVERNAS.

12 - When your writing gets stalled, where do you turn or return for (for lack of a better word) inspiration?

I NEVER FIGHT IT. I WALK AWAY FROM IT. AND FROM ALL LITERARY REMINDERS. THIS IS WHEN I WORK ON MY MUFFIN-BAKING SKILLS OR DO THE PILE OF IRONING WHILE LISTENING TO "[IDEAS](#)" OR GO TO CHURCH AND PRAY FOR HELP. EVENTUALLY THE LEFT BRAIN ALWAYS KICKS IN.

13 - How does your most recent book compare to your previous work? How does it feel different?

I HAVE ALTERNATED BETWEEN 'STRAIGHT' NONFICTION AND 'CREATIVE' NONFICTION FOR SOME YEARS NOW, AND THE MOST RECENT MS - NOT YET A PUBLISHED BOOK - IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE LATTER. HOWEVER, UNLIKE THE EARLIER BOOKS, THIS ONE HAS TAKEN YEARS TO COMPLETE, MAINLY BECAUSE IT TOOK ME TEN YEARS AND FIVE DRAFTS TO FIGURE OUT WHAT IT WAS 'ABOUT.' THAT'S THE TOUGH THING ABOUT NONFICTION: THE 'APPARENT' SUBJECT CAN OFTEN FOOL YOU INTO THINKING IT'S THE REAL ONE.

14 - [David W. McFadden](#) once said that books come from books, but are there any other forms that influence your work, whether nature, music, science or visual art?

ALL THOSE FORMS HAVE INFLUENCED ME AS A BEING BUT THE MOST POWERFUL FORMAL INFLUENCE ON MY WORK WAS READING [EDUARDO GALEANO'S *DAYS AND NIGHTS OF LOVE AND WAR*](#), WHICH GAVE ME PERMISSION TO FOOL AROUND WITH THE BOUNDARIES OF NONFICTION. OR WHAT THE THEORISTS OF OTHER GENRES CALL 'TRANSGRESSION.' WHOOWEE!

15 - What other writers or writings are important for your work, or simply your life outside of your work?

SEE ABOVE. AND, ALTHOUGH IT IS OFTEN ASSUMED, EVEN BY GOOD FRIENDS, THAT I DO NOT READ FICTION, THIS IS NOT ENTIRELY TRUE. MY LIBRARY IS ORGANIZED ACCORDING TO GENRE, AND I MOVE FROM ONE TO THE OTHER AS I CHOOSE WHAT NEXT TO READ. EVENTUALLY I GET TO THE FICTION SHELVES.... I'M SORRY THAT I DO NOT READ MORE POETRY, THOUGH... AT THE MOMENT I'M READING [CLAIRE TOMALIN'S BIOGRAPHY OF PEPYS](#), A GIFT FROM A FRIEND WHO I WAS VISITING IN LONDON RECENTLY, AN EXCELLENT FUSION OF ERUDITE RESEARCH AND NARRATIVE WRITING CON BRIO. I HAVE THE BAD HABIT OF BUYING BOOKS I DON'T GET AROUND TO READING FOR YEARS, SO IT WAS A BIT OF A RUSH FOR ME TO START IMMEDIATELY READING A BOOK THAT HAD JUST BEEN GIVEN TO ME.

16 - What would you like to do that you haven't yet done?

I ONCE WROTE CABARET-STYLE THEATRE FOR AN EXTREMELY LOW BUDGET; BUT MY THEATRICAL IDEAS WERE SO INTRIGUING I'D LIKE TO CHANCE TO REMOUNT THEM WITH \$\$\$.

17 - If you could pick any other occupation to attempt, what would it be? Or, alternately, what do you think you would have ended up doing had you not been a writer?

LET ME PUT IT ANOTHER WAY: IF I COULD COME BACK FOR A SECOND LIFE, I'D LIKE TO

BE AN ITALIAN OPERA SINGER. HAD I NOT BECOME A WRITER - AN OCCUPATION I DID NOT PREPARE FOR BUT FELL INTO - I WAS BEING GROOMED FOR A PHD IN RUSSIAN LANG AND LIT AND DAYDREAMED OF A DIPLOMATIC CAREER IN MOSCOW AND MARRIAGE TO A FRENCH [CHARGE D'AFFAIRES](#). BUT I QUIT AFTER THE MA AND LIT OUT FOR THE TERRITORY: IN THOSE DAYS OF 1969-1970, THE HITCH-HIKERS' ROUTE IN EUROPE, FROM LONDON TO ISTANBUL. I HAD A COIL-BOUND NOTEBOOK WITH ME AND WROTE A FEW PAGES OF A GREAT CANADIAN NOVEL (HA HA HA) WHILE LYING ON A SPANISH BEACH. THE NEXT TIME I PICKED UP PEN TO WRITE, IT WAS TO WRITE GONZO JOURNALISM FOR [SATURDAY NIGHT MAGAZINE](#). (WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?)

18 -What made you write, as opposed to doing something else?

MY FATHER BOUGHT ME A LEATHER-BOUND JOURNAL ONE CHRISTMAS WHEN I WAS A TEEN-AGER AND INSCRIBED IT: MAY YOU BE THE [SAMUEL PEPYS](#) OF YOUR GENERATION. I REMEMBER WRITING AN IMPASSIONED ENTRY ON HOW LIBERATING IT WOULD BE FOR WOMEN IF BABIES REALLY DID COME FROM TEST TUBES. (I'D JUST FINISHED READING [BRAVE NEW WORLD](#).) YOU CAN SEE RIGHT THERE THAT I WAS GOING TO HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THE IMAGINED RATHER THAN ACTUAL WORLD. LATER, I BECAME A HIPPIY WITH AN MA AND DIDN'T WANT A JOB.

19 - What was the last great book you read?

[KAREN ARMSTRONG'S THE BATTLE FOR GOD](#), A 'BROAD CHURCH' OF A BOOK AND ARGUMENT WITH ITS SYMPATHETIC TREATMENT OF THE DEEP GRAMMAR OF SPIRITUAL BELIEF AND ITS CAUTIONARY TALES FOR THE WEST OF THE LOSS OF THE SACRED. FOR SOME REASON, HAVING READ [ARMSTRONG](#), I DON'T FEEL ANY NEED TO READ THE CURRENT CROP OF ATHEISTS...

What was the last great film?

IT WAS A VERY LONG TIME AGO BUT I NEVER GOT OVER THE LAST SCENE OF [ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST](#).

20 - What are you currently working on?

A LONG PERSONAL ESSAY ABOUT THE RE-ENCOUNTER WITH THE MOTHER CULTURE IN ENGLAND AFTER A DECADE 'IN' [BYZANTIUM](#). (I'VE JUST SPENT A MONTH IN LONDON.)

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