

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT PRODIGAL DAUGHTER 2010

1) Like all good texts of creative nonfiction, *Prodigal Daughter* is a hybrid text. It's part travelogue, part historical exploration, and partly a narrative of a personal and spiritual journey. The unifying thread and the organizing metaphor (if that's not wrong way to think about him) is Saint Demetrius. He's a complex figure who is appropriated and venerated by a number of cultures and historical narratives.

Can you talk a little bit about how Saint Demetrius came to be at the centre of this book for you?

There are 2 versions of this "origin" narrative: the one in the book and the one that is the more truthful story, which out of discretion I have not used. But the published version is close enough: in search of an entry point into a book about Byzantium that I had wanted for years to write, I came across the figure of a saint venerated in the Orthodox Church whose story as told by the Church was exactly the perfect "hook" for me. St Demetrius, according to the hagiography, was martyred in the northern Greek city, Thessalonica, in 304, for the crime of professing faith in Jesus Christ. A couple of centuries later, however, he reappeared in the form of a saint working various miracles in defense of his beloved city, Thessalonica, which was under sustained attack and siege by barbarian marauders. Historically, these barbarians were Avars and Slavs from beyond the Danube, and they never did succeed in taking the city, although they settled in the region, Macedonia. It was this coherence of Slavic ethnicity and the Orthodox spirituality of Byzantium (I was baptised into the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada as an infant) that inspired me to begin this book's journey: I had a subject.

What did Saint Demetrius stand for when you began the journey of *Prodigal Daughter*, and what does he stand for now that you've come to the end of this particular chapter of writing and life.

For the first three or four years of the project (it did take ten!), I was obsessed by the ethnic implications of "my" saint, namely that a Greek saint, who performed miracles to defend his people, eventually also became a saint venerated by his enemies, the Slavs, my people, when they became Christians. But, as the book discloses, there were a number of turning points in my journey with Demetrius that complicated this simple ethnic formula, points which rerouted my journey, first into an enfolding within the Byzantine world in the Balkans and Constantinople, and second within the Church herself. Having written the book, I am now a faithful member once again of the church of my childhood, and the travelling icon of St Demetrius still goes with me where I go. What he "stands for" is of neither an ethnic nor historical nor even cultural significance but for what all saints stand for in Orthodoxy: an ideal representation of a human being "who is what he ought to be."

2) In part, this book is about your somewhat reluctant return to your childhood roots in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. You're a feminist, a leftist, and a humanist. All this makes for a fraught relationship with your childhood church, so you naturally moved away from it as a young adult. After what you describe as a number of failures of the core ideologies of your youth (the Left, student radicalism, even feminism), you recently found yourself yearning for something else: new meaning and a sense of the sacred.

Can you talk about this path back to Orthodoxy? How did your journey across greater Macedonia and the history of Byzantium help repave an old path differently for you?

I certainly had no spiritual *intention* for this journey. As with all my previous books, I was initially motivated by intense curiosity about history, and, in the case of *Prodigal Daughter*, by all the narratives – stories – that have been told about Byzantium, the Balkans and Eastern Christianity, all of which form a kind of cultural grammar for me (and which for most other people, I imagine, represent a triple whammy of exoticism if not downright weirdness). But even so I admit that on previous travels through the region I was always drawn to Orthodox churches as spaces of genuine repose and reflection. Even socialist feminists need that! Perhaps it was just the familiarity of them that drew me in; I certainly wasn't very interested at that point in the *content* as opposed to the form of the life of worship they embodied.

But, when it came time to write the book, I realized that, if I were to understand the Byzantine world in which St Demetrius came to be venerated, I had better reacquaint myself with the closest representation of that world in our own time, namely the Orthodox Church. I was living in Saskatoon at the time, as writer-in-residence at the public library, and so I decided to go to a Ukrainian Orthodox church there, to Sunday services on a regular basis. There was much I had forgotten about the forms of worship and much that I never had known or understood (in my childhood in the 1950s the services were entirely in Ukrainian, a language I barely spoke), so I began to read seriously about the history and theology of the Church. For the first time in my life, I read the New Testament, in the form of the Orthodox Study Bible, had a host of questions about what I was reading, and sought the conversation and counsel of a Ukrainian Catholic, Byzantine rite, priest and theologian at the University. He was absolutely brilliant – a deeply consoling mixture of intellectual erudition and spiritual intuition – through whom I became aware of and was prepared to acknowledge something which I mention only glancingly in my book, a deep yearning for the Divine.

Of course, this journey back into Christianity would not have succeeded had I not been convinced, and remain convinced, that there is no contradiction between the core and enduring values of (socialist feminist) humanism and

those of the basic Christian teachings. The elaborate mysticism of Orthodox theology is something else, however. I'm still on that journey.

3) One of the purposes of this book, it seems to me, is to shed light on an ignored and forgotten era: the 1000-year history of Byzantium. *Prodigal Daughter* is an attempt to engage seriously with the Balkans, a place that still today is so often dismissed as backward, laughable and even murderous. What was the impetus to fix your attention on that time and place?

When I was travelling around eastern and south-eastern Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s (for my books *Bloodlines* and *The Doomed Bridegroom*), I became aware of a persistent mythology about “where Europe ends.” Wherever I was – Athens, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Prague, Cracow, Warsaw – people locally insisted that where they were was precisely where Europe “ends.” Which is to say that, where it ends, “Asia” begins. “Asia” signified Turkey in some cases but mostly it signified the Europe that was Orthodox, used the Cyrillic language, had been included in the Ottoman or Czarist Empires, had fallen within the Soviet bloc of countries, had been inflamed by “ancient communal hatreds” well into the 20th century, or some combination of these.

What struck me most was that, first, my relatives who still live in Ukraine were thus “outside” Europe, apparently, and, second, that a large part of the territory “outside” Europe had fallen historically within the borders of Byzantium or been contiguous with it. I was incensed. How was it possible that such disdain and ignorance could be expressed about a thousand-year Empire of astonishing political, cultural and spiritual achievement? (By the way, Byzantines never called themselves such – the term was first applied by a Renaissance German scholar – but named themselves Romans right to the end, as successors to the Late Roman Empire. The city of Rome “fell” in 476 to a Germanic army but the Roman Empire just kept on going, from its new capital of Constantinople, until its defeat in 1453 to the Ottomans.) So began my project to bring into view through a work of literary nonfiction at least some aspects of this world of European otherness.

It's interesting (actually, maddening) that the first publisher I approached with a proposal to write under the working title *Demetrius: Seduction by a Saint*, turned it down on the grounds that “we've never heard of St Demetrius and we don't care; write about St Francis.” Of course this did force me to think about how I would make anyone care about St Demetrius – by making the reader care about the narrator, that is me, as it turned out – but I admit that if I read about one more narrative of a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostello, I'm going to scream.

4) You are a writer who is very rooted in Western Canada and in the Ukrainian Canadian community, and as such, there's a sense in which you write from the margins of margins (just as I do). You too write from an Eastern European tradition

that largely goes ignored in this country and in the English-speaking world in general. You work in Edmonton, a place that remains on the margins of most Canadians' imaginations. You write as a Canadian, and we ourselves constitute one big margin in the English-speaking world. Finally, you write as a woman, and if the recent VIDA statistics on women and publishing are accurate, then this last fact too still makes us marginal.

What does this kind of marginal perspective bring to you as a writer? How does your gaze encounter the world differently because of your marginality? And are the margins moving to the centre at all? Do you see more space for stories like yours now than before? For example, you recently won the Writers' Trust of Canada's Matt Cohen lifetime achievement award (congratulations!). Should this award give other marginal writers and writers of nonfiction hope that our work may find a more central place in the world of reading and publishing?

These are big questions I'm not sure I can cover here except in short-hand as it were. To begin with: the Matt Cohen prize for a life of writing came as a huge surprise: frankly, I didn't realize anyone at the Trust (jury members are all in Ontario) had noticed that one *can* have a "writing life" in Edmonton. As Matt had been a friend, this award meant a lot to me. But I cannot say it's resulted in my work receiving any more attention (any less marginalized): for instance, to date, ten months after publication, *Prodigal Daughter*, has received only three reviews, two in Alberta and one in Winnipeg.

So as far as this book is concerned, I don't feel the least that there is "more space" for stories like mine, but it's a gamble I have to take as these are the stories I want and must write. It's no good wishing I were on the *Globe's* bestseller lists when I'm not willing to make concessions to being there, namely living in Toronto in the thick of things and writing about market-friendly subjects. The only one of my books that was a bestseller was my very first, *All of Baba's Children*, which was based on interviews with Ukrainian-Canadians in Two Hills, Alberta, of all places. To this day I cannot tell you why I chose the subject (I was still living in Toronto as a freelancer in 1975 when I returned to Alberta to do the research, and never went back to Toronto) or why it made such an impression. It's still in print, being read by a new generation. For awhile in the 1970s, being a women's liberationist or "women's libber" as feminists were called back then, was a boon for a young writer like me in Toronto when feminism was so new and provocative and creative. A number of us women writers came into our own then thanks to Canadian magazines that were trying to keep up with the movement. But that's all over and, as the VIDA survey revealed, women are again vastly underrepresented in the magazines.

My second book, about the 1960s in Canada, was an almost complete flop (lots of reviews but mostly negative) as it managed to be celebratory about left-wing radicalism just as the Reagan and Thatcher era was opening. Since then,

I've written back and forth between what I call my New World and Old World subjects, all of them until *Prodigal Daughter* receiving the kind of attention that has disappeared from the publishing world for mid-range writers like me: the reviews, the promotion trip, media interest. Add to that the fact that nonfiction even in its literary or "creative" mode is largely neglected at festivals, conferences and writing programs, and no one should be surprised that a Ukrainian-Canadian left-wing feminist nonfiction writer is not at the epicentre of Can Lit.

5) Finally, I'd like to talk about the writing process of creative nonfiction. I've heard you say that the hardest thing about writing CNF is finding (or imposing) structure. In your book, you had to bring together a vast amount of historical data, competing narratives of Demetrius's life, a travel narrative, and spiritual journey. Talk a bit about your struggle to find structure in this book. Is structure always the key struggle for a writer of nonfiction? If so, why? What, in your view, makes for a successful piece of creative nonfiction?

Creative or literary nonfiction is rightly called a hybrid genre, as you pointed out at the opening of this interview. The problem of structure is central, as the various elements of this hybridity - travelogue, memoir, historical summary, reflection, scene-setting - each demands its own kind of structure. How then to unify them all within an overarching structure?

My first thought was to organize the material chronologically, that is following the historical development of St Demetrius himself, from early Christian martyr to saint in the Byzantine church to his reception among the Slavs. All the other material I had gathered from my travels, interviews, reading and note-taking would be sorted accordingly. This was my first draft. I sent this to an editor I had worked with on *Bloodlines*, an editor perfectly in tune with what I try to do with nonfiction. Her suggestion was the single most important intervention into the question of structure: that I organize the material not according to (impersonal) history but according to *how it had happened to me*. Thus: I had first approached Demetrius from a remembered childhood memory of the Slavic Orthodox church, then I had sought him by travelling around the ancient Byzantine world in the Balkans, and finally had encountered him in his most spiritualized aspect, the young martyr whose story could not in fact be known. The next seven years of writing were simply the effort to order and reorder within that overall structure.

They also involved the arduous process of allowing myself to speak more intimately about myself than I've done since *The Doomed Bridegroom*. In the case of that book, my most experimental work of creative nonfiction, it was merely a question of revealing myself as an erotic subject. It was even harder to reveal myself as a seeker of the sacred within the Orthodox Church. (Somehow I think it would have been less fraught had I been on a spiritual journey with yoga, say.) I've taught writing classes in creative nonfiction for

years and I always tell participants that we writers of creative nonfiction must always answer two questions before we're done. One: why am I telling you this? Two: what does it have to do with me? I've never had trouble with the first, as my subjects have always been urgent or intriguing; but the second has demanded a closer introspection than I have been prepared to undergo, until St Demetrius made me.

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