

## ASTONISHMENT IN THE WORLD: MY TWELVE BOOKS

Preface: Why “astonishment in the world?” because that is the source of all my nonfiction work. Including magazine articles and essays. And the title I usually give to creative nonfiction writing workshops. The genre is rooted in a moment of astonishment that enters the writer’s awareness from the world outside herself; and then re-enters the world through her memory, her reflection, her imagination. A circular motion of creativity.

BOOK ONE: ALL OF BABA’S CHILDREN (1978, Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton)

**Astonishment:** What possessed me to leave Toronto and an already-flourishing freelance writing career to return to Alberta and settle into a motel in Two Hills Alberta for three months in the summer of 1975? never to go back to Toronto but to stay to write a book that has never gone out of print?

I still don’t know the answer – there was nothing remotely “ethnic” about the way I lived in Toronto where I was a socialist feminist and a Canadian cultural nationalist - but within weeks of the book’s publication my life changed. Whether loving or hating the book, readers and audiences claimed me as one of them; it was a shock.

Furthermore, although I had only a faint awareness of the impact that the official policy of Multiculturalism was having on Ukrainian Canadians in western Canada, it goes some way to explain as well the reception of the book among what I persisted in calling Anglo-Canadians. I embraced my ethnic “otherness” and found common cause with a community I had abandoned as soon as I had left Edmonton ten years earlier...an identity that was not up-ended until the 1990s and the emergence certainly in literary circles of the anti-racism movement when my “otherness” dissolved into Whiteness.

**Reception:** the book tour, the radio shows, the press clippings, the Ukrainian-Canadian *Hromada*, particularly the towns of the Ukrainian Bloc Settlement area of east-central Alberta.

BOOK TWO: LONG WAY FROM HOME: THE STORY OF THE SIXTIES  
GENERATION IN CANADA (1980; Lorimer Pub, Toronto)

**Astonishment:** It was the 1970s when I discovered I was not an American of the 1960s in spite of my intense identification with the anti-Vietnam war movement, the New Left, sex, drugs and rock n roll, the Summer of Love 1967 in San Francisco. And I was reading the gonzo new journalism of Rolling Stone magazine published in New York. As a result of this projected identity, even while a graduate student at the University of Toronto, I missed the Canadian Sixties almost entirely (well, there was a love-in in Queen's Park and I took a snapshot of Leonard Cohen)...and then I went off to hitch-hike in Europe, missed the War Measures Act in October across Canada, and returned to Toronto in 1972 to find a Women's Liberation Movement in full swing.

**The Golden Age of magazine journalism:** I was immediately published in *Maclean's*, *Chatelaine*, *Saturday Night*, *Canadian Forum*, *Broadside*, *This Magazine*, all of them based in Toronto...and would continue to receive assignments for awhile after I had returned to Alberta ....There was radio work and book reviews and the weekend magazines ...travel expenses to cover research across Canada and even to Spain ...and 3000-word limits, unheard of today. And there were arts grants, though not for nonfiction until the 1980s, travel and research grants, competitive to be sure but cultural nationalism sustained this level of support for publishers as well. The small literary journals, the artist-run art galleries, the experimental theatre and dance companies, the National Film Board, which had a studio in Edmonton for awhile...

**METHOD:** I had wanted to write a book-length new journalism treatment of the Canadian Sixties but was thwarted by the need to do a lot of primary and archival research myself, the "graduates" of the 60s movements in Canada having signally failed to produce their own accounts (unlike the prolific British

and American memoirists). But I enjoyed tracking down now middle-aged hippies, revolutionaries, socialist feminist journalists, Red Power activists...and I did a huge amount of reading in order to catch up with what I had missed while living in Europe for two and a half years. The explosion in made-in-Canada publishing meant I had to immerse myself in my own course of Canadian Studies, including Quebec studies.

**Reception:** To this day I am resentful of this gap that I was forced to fill when I am not a scholar...and was partly an explanation of the brutal reception the book received, in 1980, right at the arrival of Reaganism and Thatcherism. My romance of the Sixties was roundly mocked and I slunk out of Canada to spend several winters in Greece. It is of considerable satisfaction that Canadian historians who were born in the 1960s have discovered my book – it was never reprinted – and I find myself quite joyfully cited in footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies.

BOOK THREE; NO KIDDING: INSIDE THE WORLD OF TEENAGE GIRLS (1987, McClelland & Stewart, the Canadian bigtime!)

**Astonishment:** I was now 40 and childless, and in danger of becoming a fuddy-duddy. I decided to find out what was happening in the lives of girls who could have been my daughters: high-schoolers. Were they feminists? Would they even talk to me? And what about the parents – would they want me to report back to them, as it were? Would school principals allow me to spend all day in their schools, sitting in classes, joining girls in the washrooms, hanging out at McDonald's after school...

**METHOD:** I was invited to a Tupperware party, I rode the bus to an employment agency, watched a Ukrainian dance class, toured a low-income housing estate...it was quite an adventure (Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto) And there was absolutely no trouble getting the girls to talk. I'd be introduced in school hallways as "This is Myrna. She's writing a book about me." But I knew enough not to use their real names.

**Reception:** Because I was published at M&S. I had the services of an in-house editor, Doug Gibson, the legendary editor of Alice Munro among others, and who edited my work as though it too were of literary seriousness. This was extremely unusual for nonfiction. The book was very successful, although it did invite audiences and readers, especially mothers, to ask my views on “the trouble with kids these days.” In fact, I “stood with the girls,” my bargain with them from the beginning. ...For years and years afterwards, teenaged girls were reading it. (It had also been published as a paperback)

BOOK NUMBER FOUR: BLOODLINES: A JOURNEY INTO EASTERN EUROPE (1993, Douglas & McIntyre, my only agented book)

**Astonishment:** What had been the experiences of the Generation of '68 in Eastern Europe? There was already a significant bibliography on the '68 Generation in France, the UK and Japan, even Mexico, so I travelled to Belgrade, Ljubljana, Prague and Warsaw, several times between 1984 and 1988.

(A shout out here to Jars Balan, who had already travelled to Ukraine, thanks to whom I made my first visit to the Old Country – as we called it - in 1984. There had been no Generation of '68 of course but because of Balan's somewhat clandestine itinerary I became aware of the Sixties-ers, the *Shistdesiatnyky*, earlier in the 1960s.)

**METHOD:** This was the first time I approached my interview subjects without a tape recorder, for obvious reasons. Even in Belgrade, there had been fallout from the leftist anti-Tito student strikes in 1968 and I had to be discreet. Czechoslovakia was a police state. Martial law in Poland had been lifted only in 1983 and interviewees had to be approached in roundabout ways, although the atmosphere had considerably lightened by the mid-1980s.

*Bloodlines* was my breakthrough book, stylistically. My earlier work had been solidly grounded in the New Journalism (reportage with a point of view) but because of the residual trauma of the attack on *Long Way From Home*, I was

determined to find another way to write nonfiction, Over the winters in Greece, I did just that, away from the critical glare of the gatekeepers of CanLit. In fact, the first story in *The Doomed Bridegroom* comes from that period, my edgiest creative nonfiction near the boundary with fiction: *making things up*. In *Bloodlines* I was not just a narrator with a point of view but a participant-journalist if you like. (I was very much influenced by the nonfiction of Eduardo Galeano's *Days and Nights of Love and War*, a Uruguayan writer on the left.)

So: who was this participant: a Ukrainian Canadian socialist feminist New Left writer who was immediately confronted by “real existing socialism, the only one we’ve got,” to quote Milan in Prague, standing in a queue for onions.

From women I was told: “I’d be a feminist too if I had a small car and a fridge.” From peace activists I heard: “The USSR really is the Evil Empire.” Wherever I happened to be – whether in Zemun or Novi Sad or Košice or even Warsaw, I was told that I was standing at the edge of Europe (Ukraine having dissolved into The East). From poets I heard that they were tired of being The People’s Tribune, they wanted to be left alone. In Ukraine I wondered what had happened to the promises of the Rule of the Proletariat. In short, my worldview and identity were severely put into question and it was from that new point of view that I wrote *Bloodlines*.

**Reception:** It took me four years to write the book and by the time it was published in 1993, the eastern Europe I had travelled around had been tossed into the wastebasket of history.

The book was extremely favourably reviewed (where there still were Book Pages in print media) but this did not help its chances in the marketplace - not with the arrival in 1994 of Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, itself concerned with the wars imploding Yugoslavia, published by Penguin and accompanied by a BBC documentary. My agent did secure me an appointment with a publisher in New York City right there on Fifth Avenue (in the end the editor wasn't interested: my book was “too Canadian.”) ...A word here about literary prize juries: I had hoped at

least to be short-listed for the Governor General's Prize for Nonfiction but the closest I got was a note after the fact from one of the jurors that *Bloodlines* had been on *her* shortlist. Having served on such juries myself, including those peer reviews that writers are promised when they apply for a grant, I know that consensus is often arrived at by choosing everyone's *second* favourite application.

### **Interlude: 1993-1994**

I moved to Toronto to serve as Chair of The Writers Union of Canada (TWUC), a year from hell, as it turned out. In the twenty years since I had embraced multicultural ethnicity in Alberta, the cultural discourse had moved on to that of cultural appropriation, racial minorities, racialization and anti-racism, especially in the large cities east and west. And TWUC members were offering "Unlearning racism" workshops for the benefit of other members.

This climaxed in May 1994, in a hugely contentious conference, *Writing Thru Race*, that TWUC sponsored. Organizers decided to restrict attendance to the conference to racialized writers, the general public being invited to evening programs. As Chair, I had to manage unhappy members including those who resigned by Fax machine and defend the Union against outraged columnists in the newspapers: "George Orwell, where are you now that we need you?" and dark references to "slippery slopes to cultural ruin."

My takeaway from the experience: I had become White and part of The Problem. And I had also been dissolved into Eurocentrism. Having just travelled around and written about eastern Europe, and Ukraine, this really annoyed me. I coined a term, Euro-eccentricity, for those of us whose forbears to Canada were not considered "White men" at all. When my own great-uncle Peter Svarich applied for the government position of Official Weed Inspector in 1920, a columnist for the *Vegreville Observer* fumed that "no White man would stand for it." Two generations later, I was White as the driven snow.

BOOK NUMBER FIVE: THE DOOMED BRIDEGROOM: A MEMOIR (1997, NeWest Press) Not a memoir as such but the outtakes from *Bloodlines* as advised by my agent. I was then told to find a publisher myself.

When the publisher sought a blurb for the back of this book, the redoubtable poet and critic Lynne Crosbie obliged: “Myrna Kostash writes like a bohemian Tosca.” I’ll accept that, as a deft account of what I was up to in this creative nonfiction. The ubiquitous man of letters, Alberto Manguel, reviewing the book in the *Globe & Mail* (those were the days), “Kostash has invented a rich literary genre: the erotic-political memoir...that records her own sentimental education, but also major events of this waning century’s political history.” Indeed, in spite of the subtitle, I eschewed the solipsism of memoir for the “astonishment” - the magnetic appeal - of a rebel male hero embedded in historical circumstances beyond his control, and my reach.

BOOK NUMBER SIX: THE NEXT CANADA: IN SEARCH OF THE FUTURE NATION (2000, McClelland & Stewart)

**Astonishment:** As the “waning century” bled out into a new Millennium, I had become anxious about the generation of 25- to 40-year-olds, the cohort after mine known as Generation X. They had matured in a world of neoliberal economics, enthusiasm for globalization, lipstick feminism and the world wide web: were these young people even Canadians?

**METHOD:** Once again with a tape recorder, I travelled where I had identified interviewees of interest, from Naomi Klein in a Toronto loft to Rahim Jaffer in Edmonton, the first Muslim elected to the Canadian Parliament. From women working in a Vancouver rape crisis centre to inshore fishers in Nova Scotia, from the publisher of an e-magazine in Calgary to an environmentalist in Montreal, from an Indigenous Law professor in Victoria to a gay videographer in Winnipeg. And I embedded them all in their political, social, cultural, economic and gender contexts, but told from my distinct point of view as well.

**Reception:** There were still book pages in newspapers and magazines and increasingly online. *The Next Canada* received middling attention, garnering reviews in the Globe & Mail as well as in the alternative tabloid, Georgia Straight, for example, and was a Finalist for the Writers' Trust of Canada's Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing. But the very generation I had written about was increasingly the generation writing the reviews, and to my bewilderment several attacked me, an "aging hippy," for "hating" young people.

I could see that this was a generation of reviewers who didn't read the books in question, for *The Next Canada* concluded with a quite passionate endorsement of their Canadian identity, impressed upon me by their fierce attachment to the idea of universal health care ("I'm a Canadian because I support medicare") and community ("I'm a Canadian because I don't believe in just the Almighty Dollar"), both statements a code for "I'm not an American," Neither public health care nor community, of course, is guaranteed but as Ian Angus, the Marxist philosopher at Simon Fraser University, interpreted this to me: "They're telling you the Canada they *want*."

*The Next Canada* was short-listed for the 1994 Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing

BOOK NUMBER NINE: PRODIGAL DAUGHTER: A JOURNEY TO BYZANTIUM (2010, U of Alberta Press)

**Astonishment:** Having immersed myself in Ukrainian Canadian ethnicity – identity and community – and in socio-political and generational history of Slavs in eastern Europe, especially the Balkans, I realized that there was one other pool of genetic material, so to speak, in which to plunge: Byzantium. Behind this was my childhood immersion in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of St John's in Edmonton, and something like osmosis drew me into Orthodox churches to join worshippers in Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Istanbul, where, even as museums, they were repositories of extraordinary spiritual and



aesthetic power. And I found myself provoked every time I heard, in Zagreb or Ljubljana, a complaint of “creeping Cyrillization” from the direction of Serbia.

And so, Byzantium, but how to approach such a vast conceptual and historical space as a writer of creative nonfiction? I decided to focus on one personage as the thread that would pull me through the skein of a thousand-year long story: St Demetrius of Thessalonica, Greek Christian martyr of the early 4th century CE venerated by Greeks and Orthodox Slavs alike as Holy Great-Martyr Demetrius 'the Myrrh-Gusher' and, revered as one of the most important Orthodox military saints.

**METHOD:** I began in Crete visiting village churches named for Agios Dimitrios, moved up through the Peloponnese to Athens and north to Thessalonica, the seat of his cult. Into Slavdom in Skopje and Ohrid, Belgrade and Cetinje, Sofia and Plovdiv. As is typical of the genre of creative nonfiction, the book that emerged from all this travel was part travelogue, part reportage, part memoir, and generous amounts of iconography, hagiography, archaeology and ethnology as I made the rounds of scholars, artists and monks. I took notes. Pages and pages of notes.

And I had the inspired suggestion of an editor of literary nonfiction (nonfiction is not often afforded such attention), who having read the first draft, advised a complete restructuring – and so it all fell into place.

I want to make a mention here of the experience I had working with an academic publisher, the University of Alberta Press, who were establishing a trade nonfiction imprint, the Wayfarer series.

There was a considerable negotiation back and forth between me and the publisher before we settled on the closest resemblance to a trade contract (as per TWUC’s model contract). But for the first time in my experience as a published author of trade nonfiction in Canada, I was entitled to a full Bibliography – and I went for it: 14 pages! I wanted to acquaint my readers with the breadth of my research beyond the obvious secondary sources and so I included, for example, texts from a collection of Serbian Medieval poetry, an

excerpt from *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, and my account of handling pages of a 13<sup>th</sup> century illuminated manuscript, written in Middle Bulgarian, in the Reading room of the National Library of Bulgaria in Sofia.

My manuscript was subjected to Peer Review – scholars in the field or adjacent to it - and then – another new experience - a scrupulous copyedit by the Press itself.

**Reception:** *Prodigal Daughter* received sporadic notice -in the journal Canadian Literature, in the Edmonton Journal, and in the journal of the Anglo-Hellenic League, among a few others – but it did qualify me for status of Fellow of the Sophia Institute of Orthodox Thought & Culture at Columbia University in New York and participation in its annual conference (where I learned to my chagrin that employed academics expect to be given free copies of a book I had hoped to sell). And it garnered me an interview with a Greek Orthodox priest with a radio show in Florida: he asked me to send the questions to ask, clearly lessening the burden of his having actually to read the book.

But I was quite thrilled to have been short-listed for the 2011 Runcimann Award (named for Steven Runcimann, the doyen of Byzantine studies in English); I lost out in favour of *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the 20th Century* (OUP).

BOOKS SEVEN, EIGHT, AND TEN: READING THE RIVER: A READER'S COMPANION TO THE NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER (2005 Coteau Books; THE FROG LAKE READER (2009 NeWest Press); THE SEVEN OAKS READER (2016 NeWest Press)

**Astonishment:** *Reading the River* is a conscious modeling of Claude Magris's classic *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*. Could I, I wondered, take a sentimental *textual* journey along *my* river, from the Saskatchewan Glacier in the Rocky Mountains to Lake Winnipeg ransacking nothing like the volume of texts, from Ovid to Kafka, available to

Magris? Yes, I could, from Cree origin stories to canoeists' journals in the 1990s.

But I group *Reading the River* with the two *Readers* because they eventually came to represent a new “astonishment.” This was the moment I came across the site near Ft Battleford of a mass grave of Cree warriors hanged for their role in the Frog Lake Massacre during the North West Resistance of 1885. I first narrated this in *Reading the River*, developed it in *The Frog Lake Reader*; and subsequently carried over to the research into another Indigenous - Settler violent confrontation, The Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, in *The Seven Oaks Reader*.

What happened in that moment at the site of the mass grave overlooking the Battle River where it joins the North Saskatchewan River? From *Ghosts in a Photograph: A Chronicle*:

I read the names on the gravestone and, although there are no dates included in the inscription, I knew they had been buried in 1885, and so I stood transfixed at the granite stone. Up to that moment, I had not taken note of how narrow was the slit in time between the two events: the crushing in 1885 of the last resistance to incarceration on the reserves and the arrival in June 1900 of my paternal grandparents from Galicia. Fifteen years. The gap was fifteen years—but it may as well have been an eon between two chronologies, as though all that had gone before “our” arrival and possession of the land belonged to unrecorded time.

**METHOD:** What are the components of a Reader? I still taperecorded interviews - with a few historians, writers and archivists, Indigenous and nonIndigenous - but mainly the Readers are a compilation of texts arranged as a chronology of events, such as excerpts from scholarly secondary sources, regional histories, newspapers, memoirs and journals, poems and song lyrics assembled along an arc of disinterested research that bends, it must be said, to a point of view, mine.

**Reception:** There were almost no reviews anymore in national media but, in what became a pattern, notices in regional publications from *Alberta Views* magazine to *Prairie Fire* literary journal to *Manitoba History*, a publication of the Manitoba Historical Society. And the local CBC radio drive-home shows.

(And now there are Amazon reviews that garnered the Readers 4.5 stars out of 5 but modest rankings in the entire Amazon inventory of books. For example, last week when I checked, *The Frog Lake Reader* ranked #737,895 in sales; but, when ranked in the subcategory of “First Nations in Canada,” it was #643. What, I wondered, were the 642 titles I was competing with?)

The publisher and I anticipated criticism that, as a nonIndigenous writer, I should not have taken up these histories, and so I was careful to include as many Indigenous sources as I could find as well as the authoritative account of Indigenous scholars. Sales limp along – there are only so many resources that an independent publisher can access or deploy for publicity and much depends on the writer’s own publicity machine, social media platforms. But it did reward me and the publisher with an invitation to the 2016 Edinburgh International Book Festival.

BOOK NUMBER ELEVEN: GHOSTS IN A PHOTOGRAPH: A CHRONICLE (2022 NeWest Press)

**Astonishment:** A friend in Edmonton had directed me to a book “of interest” available in the public library, *Their Just War: Images of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army* (Kashtan Press, 2007). It is an oversize album of black and white photographs among which I saw this:

Two insurgents stand side by side, behind them the woods. They are in uniform and armed, but they seem relaxed, posing; although the older man on the left, who is looking into the camera, seems wary, wearing an expression of melancholic reflection as though—compared to the younger man—he has already seen or experienced much that has unsettled him. For his part, the

man on the right—with his cap tilted over his right brow, his sidelong look, his slouch, the bravado of the naked knife in his belt—is nonchalant. But even his expression, unsmiling, seems a projection of an inner feeling, and he’s not so much looking sideways away from the camera as into a private reverie.

They are men of the UPA. The younger one beside him, of the village of Tulova, has my name: Stepan Fedorovich Kostashchuk.

I had never heard of him. He had fought in a struggle at the tail end of the Second World War on Soviet territory and died forty-three years after my paternal grandparents the Kostash(chuks) had left Tulova. Besides, I knew enough of that struggle to deplore the actions of the UPA.

But “discovering” Stepan took me to the stories of my grandparents: who else had they left behind in Galicia when they emigrated to Canada and began a new Family History? What could I discern of their lives in Canada now that I was more than a hundred years distanced from their settlement? What was the importance of the fact they never assimilated: that they had settled on Treaty Six Territory?

**METHOD:** I would not travel to research this project, unlike my cross-Canada and pan-Balkan itineraries and my side trips to Ukraine for earlier books. I would do my research in local libraries, online and most important in family archives – memoirs, documents, photographs, letters, maps, memorabilia – as well as plumb my own memory bank and pester relatives, including in Ukraine, for their memories. My first draft of the book, titled *Notebooks*, one for each grandparent and each unearthed relative in Ukraine, proved unintelligible and so I reverted to the more conventional narrative style that is this Chronicle.

**RECEPTION:** Not unexpectedly, the book received almost no notice in print media outside Alberta. But a vigorous Facebook campaign in which I posted regularly the photographs, which are only described in the book itself, drew more attention to it. On a few occasions I was invited to present *Ghosts* either by Zoom meetings to book clubs or in person as PowerPoints. Although I was not invited to any book festivals, *Ghosts in a Photograph: A Chronicle* did garner the 2024 Kobzar Literary Award sponsored by the Shevchenko Foundation.

BOOK NUMBER TWELVE: WRITING UKRAINE (Athabasca University Press, 2024)

**Astonishment:** Of these dozen books, *Writing Ukraine* was the only one commissioned, so to speak. As Athabasca University's writer-in-residence for 2022-2023, I was obliged to deliver two public talks during the course of the residency. As the full-scale war on Ukraine had been launched in February 2022, I was asked by the University to "speak about Ukraine." This talk became the basis for the printed version, *Writing Ukraine*.

**Method:** "Ukraine" is a vast subject. I'm not a historian or political scientist nor literary scholar. But what I could offer was a reflection on what my own work over fifty years had to say about Ukraine.

**Reception:** At this writing (summer 2025), it is difficult to gauge the impact of a recently-published small but well-crafted publication except to note that it is short-listed for an award from the Book Publishers' Association of Alberta. It and I as its author were the focus of an evening hosted by MacEwan University's Ukrainian Resource and Development Centre.