

Resident Writer

An interesting chat with UPEI's resident writer Janire Kulyk Keefer.

By Candi Mackey

For the last 3 months Janice Kulyk Keefer has been at UPEI, serving as a writer in residence to help students and teachers improve their writing. Recently I had a chance to interview Janice.

Q: When did you first begin writing?

A: As soon as I could.

Q: Why did you begin writing?

A: I needed to. Writing is an art and artists are a special group of people. There is an inner drive sort of like runners have to run, writers also have to write.

Q: Where do you get your ideas?

A: Sometimes I see an interesting person and I wonder what they are like. Other times there is something inside and I need to get it out.

Q: Did you keep a journal when you were small?

A: I kept a journal, yes. But it wasn't just things that happened to me. Sometimes I'd write about an incident in the supermarket or someone I saw out walking.

Q: Do you write about things that are familiar to you?

A: You take something outside you which is different and you make it familiar. You always have to be observing, always looking.

Q: Did you do much writing in school?

A: In high school I wrote for our yearbook. I wrote while at the university of Toronto and won a creative writing contest. At the University in England I was always writing, usually to keep my sanity.

Q: Did you ever work on a newspaper?

A: I never worked on a newspaper, but I contributed articles part of it was because I had to get all A's to keep my scholarship and there was not much time for other things. I regret this now because I could have been a lot more fun.

Q: Did you ever enter any writing contests?

A: I submitted to contests like the CBC Radio literary competition in 1985. Here I made contacts Publishers became interested in my work. I had to banish the people looking over my shoulder, I couldn't think of what my mother or my father would think if they read my work.

Q: How long did it take before your first book was published?

A: I think it's more how long it took to get my shortstories published. There were many rejections. First you have to make contacts. I did this through the Radio Competition.

Q: Do you travel a lot to get ideas?

A: You don't always have to travel. I have traveled across Canada with my family and I won a scholarship and studied in France for one year. I love traveling and feeding my imagination. I was lucky enough to give lectures on Canada in Sweden, Denmark, and a few other places.

Q: Do you feel that university and a degree in English played an important part?

A: When I think of all the years I spent in School - there were so many. I do not think you can be a good writer unless you are a good reader. You have to read and to talk about your reading. You have to be a sophisticated and critical reader and you have to be a critical revisor of your own writing.

Q: Did you ever wake up in the middle of the night and thing you had a great idea but be unable to remember it the next day?

A: Dreams are a wonderful source of ideas for shortstories and poems. I work late at night and I can't turn off my imagination when I got to bed. Sometimes I solve my problems in my dreams. I used to wake up and turn on the light to write down my thoughts but my husband didn't like this so now I go out to a table in the hall. The worst is when you don't wake up until it is too late. You have shadows and wish you could remember it, but you can't and it crumbles away.

Q: How long do you feel it takes to write a book?

A: My first book was a book of shortstories, it came out in 1986. I had my doctoral degree in 83. If you are independently wealthy and have a word processor or if you can shut yourself away with your ideas it may only take a few months but if you have kids or a husband, wife, or lover, or if you have a job and a house to run, it can take years and years. Sometimes the problem with being a fast writer is that you don't always do your best, but if you are too slow you will never get it written. I tend to write quickly.

Q: Did you have a lot of support from you family when you first decided to be a writer?

A: My parents aren't readers. My mother is a designer,

my father is more mathematically inclined and my sister is a painter. Both of my parents were supportive. My father was very, very good. My mother still thought I should be a dental hygienist. She was thinking of practically, that I might meet a dentist. My father said, "No." He said that if I wanted to write then I should. I had to do what I wanted to. After that they both became tremendously supportive. I went to Banff for 6 weeks while my mother took care of my youngest child who was 3 at the time. I couldn't have done it without them.



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