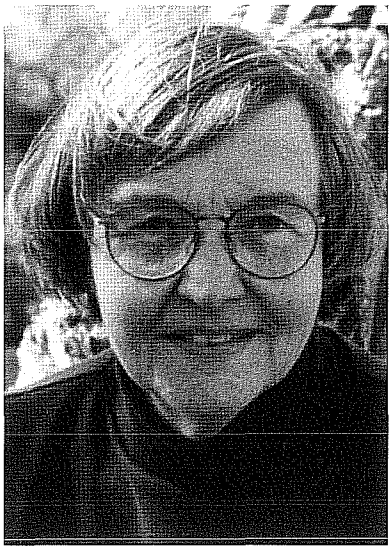
An Interview with Marianne Brandis

• *Gary Draper* •



Marianne Brandis

Résumé: *Dans cette entrevue, Marianne Brandis explique la genèse de son œuvre littéraire et, surtout, de ses romans historiques. Elle montre l'influence de son contexte familial et définit ses goûts littéraires et ses objectifs en tant que romancière. Fascinée par le langage, l'histoire et la formation de la personalité, elle commente sa carrière d'écrivain, de ses premières publications à ses plus récents projets, tout en s'attardant sur son autobiographie récemment publiée,* ***Finding Words****.*

Summary: *In this interview, Marianne Brandis explores her own roots as a writer and the ways in which she works, especially in the creation of her historical novels. She examines the influence of her family background, her tastes in reading and learning, and her goals as a writer. Discussing earlier work as well as current projects, Brandis reveals her love of words and her fascination with both historical patterns*

and individual character. She also shares some of what she learned about herself and her work while writing her recently published autobiography, ***Finding Words.***

> "Writing is woven into every part of my day and my life. It is art and craft, profession and career and job. It's a large part of who I am."
>
> — Marianne Brandis, *Finding Words* (113)

Marianne Brandis is one of Canada's most consistent and engaging writers of historical fiction. The stories she has set in Upper Canada are among the most successful and honoured recreations of that time and place in our collective past, and a generation of young people have been attracted to and enlightened about early Ontario life through her work.

Born in the Netherlands, Marianne came to Canada with her family in 1947. They lived in British Columbia and Nova Scotia before moving to Ontario. She began writing in her teens, trying her hand at short stories, plays, and poetry before finding her voice as a novelist. She published her first novel, *This Spring's Sowing*, in 1970, and in 1977 she began writing historical fiction. *The Tinderbox* (1982) follows the challenges, setbacks, and successes of thirteen-year-old Emma Anderson who, on the death of her parents, must learn to take responsibility both for her own life and for her younger brother's. Many of what would become Marianne's signature strengths are evident in this novel. It is a gripping story, peopled with plausible characters and set in an environment that is alive with historical detail but never burdened by it. It was followed by two award-winning sequels, *The Quarter-Pie Window* (1985) and *The Sign of the Scales* (1990).

In 1992, Marianne published *Fire Ship*, set in York (Toronto) during the American attack on and occupation of the town in 1813. *Rebellion*, published in 1996, tells the story of Adam Wheeler, aged fourteen and newly arrived from England, who becomes involved in the 1837 Rebellion led by William Lyon Mackenzie. Her biographical novel for adult readers, *Elizabeth, Duchess of Somerset* (1989), recreates the life of a lady who lived in England from 1667 to 1722 and who, in the culmination of an eventful life, became one of Queen Anne's chief advisors. *Special Nests* (1990) is a short novel for adults. Like *This Spring's Sowing*, it is set in modern-day Canada; unlike the earlier book, the story contains flashbacks to World War II in Holland.

Marianne has a gift for animating the past, for bringing to life not just the times but the mindsets of her characters. While occasionally larger-than-life persons from the past do appear — such as Mackenzie in *Rebellion* — her real concern is for the private lives of ordinary people. The reader comes away with a sense of what it must have been like to live through such times and conditions.

Recently she has moved into life-writing — another kind of history, a

different way of bringing the past to life. *Singularity* (2000) is a fourteen-page chapbook about being a single — and singular — woman. *Finding Words: A Writer's Memoir* (2000) invites the reader to share the writer's own sense of her life as immigrant, as daughter, as single woman, as writer, and the like. Her gifts for the telling detail and the well-shaped anecdote serve her as well in illuminating her own life as in bringing to vivid reality her invented characters from the past.

Marianne received a BA and an MA from McMaster University in Hamilton. In addition to writing as a spare-time activity, she has worked as a writer in private radio stations and at the CBC. From 1967 to 1989, she taught writing and English literature at Ryerson Polytechnical University in Toronto. She is now a full-time writer living in Stratford, Ontario.

Gary Draper: *Marianne, I'd like to ask you about your beginning motivations or intentions as a writer, as opposed to your retrospective assessment of that beginning-writer self. Perhaps we'll come back to that, but for now can you tell me when you began to write, and why?*

Marianne Brandis: In the beginning was the pen. Literally. I was given a fountain pen for one of my teenage birthdays. I can't remember which, but we were still in Terrace (BC) so it would have been the sixteenth or seventeenth birthday, maybe the fifteenth. I still have the pen: an Esterbrook pen, black, sturdy (nothing delicate — a businesslike pen). It's impossible now to understand what a delirious experience that was. There were no ballpoints then, at least not in Terrace. I wrote with a straight pen, dipped in inkwells, and I had had a short-lived, cheap, and inefficient fountain pen that had a propelling pencil at the other end of it and never quite worked well. I had borrowed a fountain pen once from another girl at school and been severely reprimanded by my parents: I was to return it immediately and not to do such a thing again, because if it got broken or lost we would have to replace it, and fountain pens were expensive. My mother and father each had one fountain pen. For the rest, there was nothing but pencils and straight pens.

So a fountain pen was *special*, and it had to be used. By then I had written school assignments, and I remember trying something creative with a short (two or three paragraphs) personal essay, and with a book review. That was as far as it had gone. What I had been doing, however, was reading, and I loved the world (all the worlds) of books. That fountain pen was the tool that suddenly made writing easy, wonderful, on-the-way-to-being-professional. I watched my parents writing their long and fluent letters to friends and relatives in Holland. *That* was how I wanted to be able to write, and when I began writing with my new pen I immediately, in my imagination, entered that league. (As I said in *Finding Words*, the correspondence between my parents and Holland was one of the important components in my image of the writer, or writing, of communication through the written word.)

So I took some paper and my new pen and sat down at the desk in our living room and wrote a short story — or what I thought was a short story, of

the sort that at that time were published in magazines (I had in mind something like the *Ladies Home Journal*). I had never given a thought to literary form or structure or style, nor (so far as I recall) had we studied any such thing at school. In any case, the magazines published stories that were very unlike what we studied in school (though goodness knows that was not very literary — this was the early fifties in the boonies; we were not reading *Dubliners* or Hemingway). What I did know about the magazine stories was that they ended happily, with the man and woman headed for married bliss. Bliss of any kind sounded pretty appealing, and there was an element of magic in it: maybe, by constructing something like that on paper, I could make it happen to me. (I have a box full of early writings, but I know that those early stories are not among them: I distinctly remember disposing of them at one time — too embarrassing to leave around.)

I know that those early stories had nothing whatsoever to do with my real life of farm, small northern town, school — nor with the work on the farm, at school, and at the movie theatre where I made popcorn and sold candy and juice to the customers. From my reading I had collected images of urban, sophisticated adult life, and it was from there that the stories came — until a few years later when I wrote something which was set on the farm (or at least in that town) though the characters and events were still totally imaginary and (I suspect) *totally* unbelievable and unconvincing. The point was to get *away* from the world around me: literature was about other places, other lifestyles, people unlike those I knew. That was the *point* about literature — right?

GD: *Okay, so a pen, and an image of the writer, and some model stories. Good. Now, you say that you loved "all the worlds of books." Is that books in general, or some particular books, or both?*

MB: First: "all the worlds of books," if I may. I mean by this the worlds created in books, and the look and feel of the books themselves, and then the worlds I began to create when I wrote. (The world created by words is never like the real one, of course. We don't need another one of *those*.)

In *Finding Words* I describe getting books by mail from the Victoria Public Library. Those books were mostly what I read, and they were a very miscellaneous collection: Canadian literature and history, nature and exploration, British novels mainly of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were biographies and travel and so on. From somewhere I got a few *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* books, but for the rest I read adult books. We had some books ourselves, but we had not been able to bring many from Holland (we brought no more belongings than could be packed in a few wooden crates and some trunks). We did bring as many of the *Jalna* books by Mazo de la Roche as my mother owned then, and we all read those. Among the few books at my school in the early years (we had no library, just a shelf of battered volumes at the back of one of the classrooms) was *Pride and Prejudice*, and I read that repeatedly. *Lord Jim* was also there, and so was some

kind of old-fashioned encyclopedia.

Somewhere I found a book called *The Royal Road to Romance*, which was romanticized travel. I borrowed books from the people across the road, who were bookish: there were a lot of detective stories, mainly American, on their shelves. Somewhere I found a few historical novels. (I'm talking about the early days; by the time we left, when I was seventeen, the school had a small library, and so did the town; those libraries had much the same range of subject matter, only a slightly larger choice than I had had up to then.)

No one book was an outstanding influence: I think it's dangerous when there is, because it induces a beginning writer to imitate. What leads to writing is the love of words in general, and of the magic of creating worlds with them, rather than of one particular book, which too often means an obsessive identification with one character — and that has little or nothing to do with the love of words.

GD: *Funny, isn't it, that we often speak of enjoying a book because it's so true to life? And yet, as you say rather vehemently, the world created by words is certainly not like the real one. When you began to write — as an adult, I mean — were you conscious of a distance between the worlds, or were you making a verbal facsimile of it?*

MB: I don't think I ever thought that books were like life — probably not even a facsimile. A painting more than a photograph — and that's not original, of course. But literature is true to life in another sense — it comments, criticizes (often by selection and distortion and so on), in that it's like Greek myths, or fantasy and science fiction.

In university I loved medieval literature and history, and I wrote my MA thesis on *Beowulf*. I learned (and understood) a lot about allegory. There's an element of allegory in much literature: a literary level which parallels and frequently touches the "real" one. ("Real" and "reality" are words that — like "truth" — set off warning bells.)

My first books were set in modern times; the first to be published, *This Spring's Sowing*, is an apparently simple story about a woman in her thirties facing death and figuring out how to live the six months or so that (she is told) remain to her. It was a beginner's novel but it at least touched on the idea that facing death sharpens some of your relationship to life. I'd write it differently now, with more than 30 additional years of living under my belt. In fact, I wrote a short novel, *Special Nests*, in about 1990 which in a sense comes back to the same idea. I'd write *that* one differently if I returned to it. But in those two books I have something of what might loosely be called allegory — in any case a complex relationship between the "told" story and the feelings that people facing those situations might have.

At a certain point I began to write historical fiction, and there I knew very well that I couldn't recreate history precisely as it had been. I was selecting and shaping, and keeping in mind what the readers (not just young adult ones, but any readers of any age) would be able to deal with, would be

interested in. I mostly left out some of the really grotty parts of history, not out of squeamishness but because I was always reminding myself of what the story was that I was telling — what my focus was. But I dealt with some of the grottiness of 1830s Toronto (did you know that there were slums there, at that time, comparable to the ones in Dickens' London?).

I *could* have written more about the grottiness of life, as Dickens sometimes did. (In fact, I did, once or twice, most noticeably in a book that was finished but never published, set in the London of William and Mary and containing quite a lot of various kinds of corruption, vice, and sheer physical dirt.) But I balanced that with the other things I was interested in focusing on: things such as emotional stress, class issues, social isolation, and others — this is no place for a lengthy list. All these existed in the historical period and, I hope, would resonate in the life of the modern reader. The story had to be at least not a falsification of the historical facts, and it had at the same time to work on a human level — and work as a story. I tried to give something of the feel of what it would have been like to live in the past — walking long distances, living in houses where the only light came from a candle or two or a smelly lamp, cooking meals from scratch rather than using half-prepared foods, sewing clothes by hand, living in complex households with many servants, complex societies with innumerable "class" issues that modern readers wouldn't think of unless I showed them at work. My historical novels attempt to create slices or glimpses of the past and draw the reader in to share them. I as writer can go only so far: then I have to trust the reader to be drawn in and share with me in creating/recreating some experience of what life must (or at least might) have been like then, for *this* character in *this* situation. (I never create averages or generalizations — always specific characters in specific times, places, social niches.)

GD: *I very much want to follow up on the issue of writing about the past, but may I just take a momentary detour? A few minutes ago you said that what leads to writing is the love of words. I* think *I know what you mean, but I wonder if I could ask you to expand on that a bit.*

MB: To me the love of words is the core of all writing. Even in writing which appears to focus on ideas, or character, or suspense, or whatever, words are the medium and the tools.

The love of words involves various things: the look of them on the page, and the way they make a sentence, and the way in which rearranging the sentence or using synonyms for the words first chosen can change emphasis and colour and therefore meaning itself. It involves being interested in the origins of words, and in equivalents in different languages, and in the things that words can *and can't* say. It means loving dictionaries and other reference books. It involves noticing how many words are needed to convey something and when one is using too many or not enough. It means the layout of text on a page, linked to content and meaning but having a value of its own. It involves the love of the word spoken and sung. It involves brooding over

the difference between prose and poetry, and how the same word can change colour in different contexts. It involves minute sensitivity to all the uses and meanings of words. (I don't claim to have perfected all this — thank goodness, because that would mean the end of the trail — but all of them are ongoing endeavours and obsessions, hobbies, and delights.)

When people ask me how you can recognize a potential writer in a young (or not-so-young) person, I think it is this quality — this interest in and awareness of words — that I would focus on. If that isn't there at the start, it may be impossible to learn (or to care about) the rest of what it takes to be a writer, and perhaps the love of words can be acquired. But if it's there at the start, it's a very definite indication. It is probably also one of the things that keeps a writer going through the very long process of writing (say) a book-length work (fiction or non-fiction), especially through the revision, one of the important aspects of which is *getting the words right.*

GD: *Thanks for that lovely response, Marianne — it seems just exactly right (do I mean "true"?) to me. Let's come back to the historical aspect of your writing. The first of your books I read was* The Quarter Pie Window. *I remember wondering* how *you knew the things you evidently knew, and I mean mostly material details. I'm thinking about the very small details, like what might a boy carry to eat on a long journey, and did his pants have pockets. How did you find the answers to such questions?*

MB: Researching such small details is always the most difficult, because no one at that time wrote the information down. I found my information in several types of sources.

First of all, there was my experience of growing up on the farm in Terrace from 1947 until 1956. The life we lived there really was very primitive. We lived economically, and during the winter we bought very little fresh fruit and vegetables: we lived on what we were able to preserve from the produce of our own farm. That made it easy to imagine myself back into a time like the 1830s. What did we eat in February, or April, or August?

That meshed with what I found in the historical sources. If I found (for instance) a reference to bad wheat harvests, I could translate that into a diet with less bread and more potatoes. In a farm household in the early nineteenth century (or almost any time during centuries before that), bread might be made once a week, which meant that it would be scarce towards the end of the cycle; furthermore, wheat had to be ground at a mill (doing it at home with mortar and pestle or some other hand-operated device was possible but time-consuming) so in households farther from a mill (common in nineteenth-century Ontario) flour would be rarer. When the roads were bad, wheat sometimes had to be carried to the mill on the farmer's back. Imagine how rare flour was then!

About pockets: I always look carefully at historical costumes (real ones in museums, and pictures in books). I distinguish between high fashion and what ordinary people wore. Where precise information is lacking, I work on

probabilities. The very tight "small clothes" (knee breeches) that men wore in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries almost certainly had no pockets because a tight fit was essential (look at the pictures). (But this was of course high fashion; ordinary people made themselves more comfortable.) But men at that time had waistcoats with small pockets (the watch and its chain indicate that) and had pockets in their coats. Trousers, when they came in, were looser than the tight small clothes, and in prose sources there are references to money and handkerchiefs being carried in pockets; also papers, etc. The fact that in pictures you so seldom see people carrying bags (look at people on the street nowadays — everyone has a bag) indicates that they carried their belongings on their person.

Women in the mid-nineteenth century had pockets under their skirts. A woman's pocket was usually not part of the garment but was a loose pouch attached to a tape which was tied around the waist under the skirt, and access to the pocket was through the "placket," which was the opening where the waist of the skirt was fastened — where now there would be a zipper. When women's (or at least ladies') skirts became very tight, towards the end of the nineteenth century, they started carrying handbags.

My information about these and many other subjects comes partly from a lifetime of being interested in history and of living myself into what I read about — and not just absorbing what I read but also asking questions. ("Okay, so this is how they did this, but what about...?", and that would take me further.) I read historical fiction, non-fiction history, biography, letters, diaries, anything. My family was interested in history: we'd discuss historical things at the dinner table, and Mom and Dad would recall how things were in their youth, and recall stories they had heard from their older relatives. It was part of the air I breathed. I looked at pictures and maps. Quite a lot of this was already in my mind and awareness before I began to write a particular book, but then for each book I had to do a lot more research.

Fortunately, there is more and more interest in these details of ordinary life, so more and more information is available. The recent interest in women's life-writing (women have always been interested in ordinary life because that is, for the most part, the only life they have had) has led to the publication of a great deal of material (diaries, letters, etc.) that helps provide such information. Finding it is the problem, but that's what research is all about. For each book I've written, I used (not necessarily read from cover to cover) several hundred books on dozens of subjects, not to mention maps and pictures and museums and actual places and occasionally interviews with experts.

GD: *Well, that explains how you get into the pockets of your historical characters. Now I'd like to know how you get into their heads. It strikes me when I read any of your historical works that you've managed what seems to me the hardest feat of all: to create — what can I call them — mindsets? psychologies? inner selves? that are distant enough from us that they don't seem like time travellers from the twenti-*

eth century set down in past worlds, and at the same time are enough like us, or like us when young, that they don't estrange themselves from us. In other words, your characters seem to think and *speak in a way that I find plausibly nineteenth-century, but not so distant from me that I can't identify with them and their plights and their triumphs. How do you do that?*

MB: That is a wonderful question, and one that no one has ever asked me before. I do indeed try to achieve that, and because no one asked this question I assumed that I was not succeeding. You've described exactly what I aim for: characters who think and talk and act like nineteenth-century people (or denizens of whatever period I'm writing about) but have a sort of universal humanity (what a grandiose term!) that allows us to share with them. Several things contribute to the creation of their minds, attitudes, vocabularies. In the first place, my parents had a good deal of the nineteenth century about them (I don't mean this in a derogatory way but as a matter of description). My mother, when we arrived in Terrace in 1947, was startled to hear young kids calling adults by their first names. In Holland a child would call an older person either Mr. or Mrs., or Aunt or Uncle. When my mother remarked on this to Enid, the wife of our sponsor (the sponsor was a cousin of my father's — too complicated to explain here), Enid said, "But I'm not the child's aunt." True enough, but in Holland we children called our parents' friends Aunt and Uncle as a matter of respect. My mother's frame of mind was clearly, in part, that of an earlier time. She also, when there were gentlemen visitors on a warm day, politely invited them to take off their suit jackets: until they were invited to do so by the hostess, it was assumed that they would keep them on. There were several dozen of such customs, and being familiar with them meant that I could "see around" the mindset of the twentieth century, understand other mindsets and imagine my way into earlier ones.

Another component was my reading of nineteenth-century novels, mainly English ones, which I did in my early years and still do quite regularly. The world they created became so familiar that they contributed to my feeling like a stranger in the twentieth century.

I approached the study of English literature from the historical angle: this led to that, this influenced that, history is rooted in and reflects social conditions, the attitudes, assumptions, and expectations of its time. (Old-fashioned, now, this approach — but it's still far and away the one that comes most naturally to me, and it goes along with my interest in history in general.)

Then, when I began more consciously to research historical time periods, I read published letters and diaries whenever I could. In all my reading of original sources (including nineteenth-century fiction) I paid attention to idiom, sentence construction, ways of expressing things, and to the assumptions and ideas that infused the story and characters and their relations with each other. When writing the books I never wrote in a nineteenth-century

style (because I wanted readers to feel at home in that world, and an unfamiliar idiom would have prevented that) but I deliberately avoided anachronisms. In connection with this more specific research, I also read books about the times and about the ideas that were held then about society, history, women's and children's lives, and many other aspects of social and intellectual history — philanthropy, for instance, and popular fiction and the periodical press, and literacy, and so on.

An inescapable part of all this is the class system as it existed then. (I'm not implying that we have no class distinctions now, but the present-day way of slicing the loaf is different from the earlier one — and I'm not going to embroil myself in a discussion of that.) When I came to write about class distinctions in nineteenth-century Canada, I found — or felt — that I understood them quite well. The situation in Canada was not identical to that in England, but it was based on it — and it was complicated by various factors to do with pioneer life and the fact that not all the classes as they existed in England were present in similar proportions in Canada (comfortably-off English people seldom emigrated; only the uncomfortable did) and that ideas which had been more or less suppressed in England exploded into view once the people who held them arrived here. Here again my family background in Holland, and the customs, ideas, assumptions, and expectations that my parents brought with them to Canada enabled me to link easily with the mindset of the nineteenth century, and again I explored, refined, and articulated my instinctive understanding by extensive reading.

The class system is, in fact, one of the important foundations of the plot in the trilogy made up of *The Tinderbox*, *The Quarter-Pie Window*, and *The Sign of the Scales*, and is important in different ways in the other books. It can be front and centre, but it is just as likely to lie unarticulated behind the characters' actions, words, decisions, relations with other people. The ambivalent position of Emma, in the trilogy, can't be understood without taking into account the fact that, while considering herself the daughter of gentry, she is put to work as a chambermaid. This anomalous position plagues and worries and depresses her, and it means that when she reaches marriageable age she is very uncertain about ever finding a suitable mate. In book four of the series (a book that I began but never finished) I was going to grapple with that.

The assumptions of the class system lie behind the ending of *Rebellion*. One of the people who read it in manuscript found that Adam's being allowed to become an apprentice in the paper mill, rather than the dogsbody he has been so far — a development from which he himself derives enormous satisfaction and delight — doesn't sound like much to be pleased with. But for him, coming from the very poorest kind of family, even being a dog's-body had been something, and rising into the ranks of apprentices is a great step forward. Only by getting into Adam's mind-set and taking into account not merely his economic situation but also his assumptions about

class is it possible to understand his pleasure.

GD: *So, now that we've entered the minds of your characters, I wonder if I can ask about the link between you and them. Are they all you, or versions of you? Do you have to reach into yourself to create a character — even an unsympathetic one? Or do you use models? Or is it creation out of whole cloth? Or a bit of all three?*

MB: Except when dealing with actual historical figures, I never model any of my characters on particular people I know. Let me first say a word about using real historical figures, which I've done several times. These people actually appear in the historical documents, but there is usually very little about their personalities, behaviour, etc. Often, with the less important ones, there is nothing more than the name and perhaps a few actions or decisions. There, as with other areas of research, I find what I can, and I have to keep reminding myself that anything about them which appears in the historical record was filtered through the eyes of other people, friends or enemies, strangers, newspaper reporters, whatever. Neither friends nor enemies can be trusted to be at all objective. I have to take what there is and infuse it with *my* experience of human nature, and my reading (nineteenth-century literature, diaries, letters, social history is probably most useful here) and then try to make the person come to life.

There's an immense amount of guesswork involved, but since the historical record (in that area even more than most others) contains a fair amount of bias and ignorance, misunderstanding and propaganda, opinion and conjecture, perception and deception, my guesswork is just one more version of what that person might have been like. I never falsify the record: invariably the record tells me far too little, and what I have to do is use those few poor bits of "evidence" to create what readers will, I hope, accept as a human being of that time and in that situation.

I've never used any living person as a model for my fictional characters. and that is because I start at the other end. I begin with what the story needs: the kind of character needed in this story, *this* set of human dynamics. The point-of-view character of course receives special attention because she/he is the eyes and mind and perceptions and emotions through which the story is filtered and presented. So far as I can remember, most or all of my stories begin with a character facing a dilemma. If you asked me to formulate in words what the seed was, that was what I'd give you. That means that an embryonic central character is there at the start. That character will, at that point, be vague, a bit of a generalization, but I have a sense of what he or she is like, and then I start working on making that character flesh and blood, background and personality and quirks. The dilemma is where the story begins. How that character deals with that dilemma (it need not be a physical opponent, or clear physical danger: in fact it's likely to be something more subtle) is the "motor" that, as it evolves, drives the story forward. The dilemma will certainly involve opposing characters, and the central character will have helpers — though formulating it like that makes it look far more

black-and-white than it usually is.

The central character and the others are therefore shaped to fit the requirements of the story, the situation. They are made up out of what I know about the time and place in which the story is set (information derived from my reading); they are also made up out of my understanding of human nature and human dynamics. Into them go bits and pieces from everywhere — my reading about modern times, people I've met (or know well), my talk with people who are, like me, interested in what makes humans tick. I draw on paintings and photographs (I *love* historical portraits with their depiction of human appearance and dress — and the conventions of portraiture — in different times and places).

Early on in the whole project I write a biography for each character (more detailed for the important ones, briefer for the minor ones), complete with dates and details, and as I proceed I can revise that if necessary. For the book I'm writing that is set in Toronto in 1884 (*Amanda*, to which I'll return when I've finished the present one) I know that my older characters were born in the 1830s or thereabouts, and one of those had an evangelical background, so I had to do some research into that so that I would understand and be able to present his attitudes and behaviour more clearly — and he's a very minor character. Another is a widow who engages in philanthropy: what sort of person is she? Writing these biographies is crucially important because it helps me to think of these characters as "real people," solid, rounded, equipped with at least a number of the attributes that real people have. They also, in the process, become life-size, rather than diminished by the perspectives of history. In the book itself, very little of this "biography" may actually appear, but it's there to help me make the characters seem alive.

Inevitably the characters have something of me in them. The fact that most of them are solitary and a number are orphans undoubtedly reflects my own life and background. I wasn't an orphan myself, but the experience of being an immigrant and having to learn Canadian ways as a child — while my parents were learning them from *their* perspective, so that the three of us were moving forward on parallel tracks, and they were not able to give me much help because they knew nothing about being a child in Canada — this, together with other elements in my character and background and world view, meant that instinctively I created my characters as loners.

And, yes, the unsympathetic ones also have something in common with me — an attitude that is too businesslike or too earnest, too wishy-washy when decisiveness is needed, or too awkward socially.

Those components are not "inserted" in a conscious kind of way; in spite of what I've been saying, the creation of characters has a great deal to do with my instinct and subconscious and my sense of what a story is and how it works — with an unarticulated sense of what people are like and how this person would react in this situation. Once I've written the "biographies," I put them aside, and when I'm writing the first draft the characters take

shape through action and interaction, dialogue and thoughts, with the information from the biographies working at a subconscious level. It's at the revision stage that I might deliberately return to the biographies.

For the books set in the early nineteenth century in Canada, I drew on my experience of living on a pioneer farm in the north of BC from 1947 until 1956. My experience of the class system comes partly from the fact that my parents were "gentry immigrants" and that differences of background, interests, ideas, assumptions, and expectations were an intrinsic part of who I was and the family around me. When I came across such things in the research I did, I understood them. I also understood about immigration, exile, foreignness. But I constantly had to merge my gut understanding with the often different details of how these things were in the nineteenth century. My experience brought to life the information acquired during research.

GD: *Marianne, in light of what you've been saying about research and creation, can you say something about where the dividing line lies between history and fiction? Does a boundary even exist? Or is that the right metaphor? Would a cooking metaphor work better? How many cups of historical fact to how many pints of imagination makes up the ideal stew of historical fiction? Let me ask you this first: what metaphor might work?*

MB: What a question! Give me a minute or two to think about that.

I'm a bit uncomfortable with cooking recipe metaphors, being such a mediocre and reluctant cook myself. I usually like metaphors from weaving (as in weaving complicated tapestries), so I'm considering whether that fits here. In actual fact, I think, I really have to start with my image of the process and then find a metaphor to describe it, but backwards is often as good as forwards (depending on where you want to go).

I think, though, that we have to look at the terms first. Maybe that's what's causing the difficulty I have in formulating an answer. "History" — that is, the recreation of history, our looking back at the past and trying to understand or recreate or at least analyze and describe it, whether in academic or popular form, as fiction or non-fiction, in pioneer villages or museums or recreated battles — is itself almost entirely fictional, or at least more so than most people realize.

The other terms that are crucial here are fact and fiction and truth. Too often, fact and truth are taken to be synonyms, but I disagree *strongly* with that. Fact is a matter of data, information, and there's a great deal less of it than most people realize. What is loosely regarded as fact is very often opinion, generalization, misunderstanding, prejudice, conjecture, etc. Fiction is regarded (with justice) as "invented," imagined, though it often has a good deal of fact in it. Truth is much bigger than either of them and exists in both: a fact can be "true" but it usually doesn't get you very far, unless you have a deplorably limited definition of "truth." Truth lives equally with fiction: an imagined character, or imagined events and circumstances, can contain a

larger measure of truth than any mere fact does. I've just been writing a short fictional piece which contains truths that I could not tell in *Finding Words*: writing about this experience in the form of fiction allows me to conceal the facts and therefore reveal more of the truth than non-fiction permitted.

What was it that you asked me? Oh, yes — about what metaphor might work. I haven't come up with one yet, and I'm trying to think why not. I think it's because when I'm writing I don't think of the ingredients as being either "fact" or imagination/invention. The division is not nearly that clear. If I draw on my memory of my childhood on the farm in the north of BC in order to recreate some aspect of life in Ontario in the 1830s, what I dredge up is already a combination of fact and such "fictionalizing" elements as selection, highlighting one element at the expense of other aspects, taking it out of context, maybe making it a touch more interesting or dramatic (quite apart from the possibility that my memory is faulty), and then no doubt reshaping it to fit the 1830s — which is shorthand for "what I have learned about the 1830s by research" — and is therefore itself a blend of fact, selection, oversimplification, generalization, conjecture, etc.

That is as close as I can come to describing what goes on in the creative/recreative process of writing history — this kind of history — and I can't really find a metaphor for the proportions.

GD: *Wow! Now it's time for* me *to catch my breath.*

Okay. One thing we haven't talked about at all is the audience for your books. As many of your books are marketed, at least, they appear to be intended for what gets called the young adult audience. I'd like to know what your take is on this. That might mean such things as do you have young readers in mind as you write? (And if not, what's the marketing about? Is it just marketing?) If you do, when did you begin to think about writing for young people? And — I think most importantly — how does that affect your writing?

MB: When I wrote *The Tinderbox*, the first of the YA books, I didn't have young people in mind. I used a young person as my central character because I wanted to explore aspects of life in the 1830s and show them through the eyes of someone just stepping out from the world of "home" into the larger public world, and principally I wanted to have this step taken in the context of a traumatic shock, the fire that kills Emma's parents and leaves her abruptly on her own, without her parents' mediation between herself and the world. The same circumstances shown through the eyes of an older person wouldn't have anything like the same impact or newness — and, furthermore, I wanted readers to feel as though they themselves had been suddenly transported to that world, feel as though they themselves were on the threshold, seeing things with new, inexperienced, perhaps rather anxious eyes — feel, in other words, more like a young person dealing with unfamiliar things than an adult.

When that book was categorized as being for young people, I was a bit

startled, but I accepted it. It was clear that there was a market for this kind of thing, and I was realistic enough to be willing to fit into that niche. The next four books were perhaps tailored a bit more to fit that kind of reader, but I've never had a sense of talking down to such readers (in the sense of simplifying the language, etc.). I do, however, keep the stories a bit less complex than I might do when writing for an adult audience (which I've also done) and I bear in mind that younger and older audiences will be interested in different aspects of the past. Again, it's a matter of where I focus rather than of simplifying the area on which I do focus. As it is, my books are fairly complex for this category, and on my not-so-very-far-back-burner I have a book which began as a book for adults, then was re-visioned to be for young people, and is now back to being aimed at adults. The process of working that out led me to give extremely careful and detailed thought to the differences between historical fiction for adults and for YA readers. I talk a bit about it in *Finding Words*.

One interesting thing to me is that adults have read these books that are marketed as being for YA readers and have not found them in the least "juvenile." That is, to me, a great compliment; it means that I've been able to interest a wide range of readers.

Marketing is, I suppose, unavoidable. Thirteen-year-olds will, in general, be interested in different things, and be "caught" by different tones and approaches, than older readers will be. But these are only generalities, or generalizations. An older reader who dearly loves to live imaginatively in a simpler and more innocent world (though I don't mean to imply that this describes all YA books — it certainly doesn't describe my own) will enjoy something written for young people. Teenage readers, living in a tough world, may be happier with something more adult. The generalizations don't take that into account.

The question about the way in which this affects my writing is the crucial one. I've touched on this, but I just want to come back to it. When I visualize my "ideal" reader, I visualize someone of no particular age but with considerable interest in history and in how people lived at some particular period in the past. If I'm recreating historical events, I do everything I can to draw the reader in — grab him or her by the imagination and pull them into the action, though not necessarily into the most obvious role or position. Dan, in *Fire Ship*, is not handed a gun and put on the front lines (though in that confused bit of history — the American attack on Toronto in 1813 — there hardly was such a thing as a front line); instead, I involve him in caring for the wounded. I work out something which is as "probable" as it can be, in the circumstances of that time so far as I understand and visualize them. And there isn't any reason why an adult reader can't identify with Dan, just as (I hope) a younger one might be able to. There is, after all, a young person inside each of us. It's the interest in history — in reliving history as though one is *there* — that is the central quality I reach out to in my readers.

It is because of that that I pay so much attention to the details of life — researching them exhaustively, though in the actual writing I'm extremely careful not to let all that research become intrusive. Attentive readers recognize its presence, but it ought never to get in the way of the essential human situation.

In a sense, therefore, the marketing of my books as YA doesn't affect my writing very much — only, really, in the choices I make about subject, plot, and action, and to some extent in the way in which (for instance) current events and issues of that time are presented. But an adult character — adult in 1837, say — might himself be aware of only a few obvious aspects of a complex political situation, and express himself in an unsophisticated way. To have a workman in 1837 think and talk like a modern-day history professor would be totally inappropriate. My books are not sugarcoated history lessons but attempts to recreate how things might have been at that time in history. If the characters express biases or ill-informed opinions — well, that's human nature.

GD: *Good. May I just take a brief tangent? On several occasions, now, you've said something along the lines of "as I said in* Finding Words." *It begins to sound as though in the process of writing that book you learned things about yourself as a writer that you hadn't known before. Is that true?*

MB: Yes, I certainly did, though what I learned was so extensive and at the same time nebulous that it's impossible to deal with it all. The most important thing I learned was that my writings had all along been based much more closely on my own life than I had thought — my outer life but also, very significantly, my inner life. There was extensive transmutation (for instance, from one time period to another, and one place to another). But Emma Anderson, growing up in the 1830s in pioneer Ontario, had a lot in common with Marianne Brandis growing up in pioneer British Columbia in the years around 1950. I had the same dislocation from one social niche into another, the same confusion of identity, the same sense of being on my own, figuring it out largely for myself. I had very similar desires and fears and ways of looking at and relating to the outside world. The tapping of those deep-buried experiences was, at the time of writing, instinctive; though as book followed on book I began to notice recurring patterns that, I thought, must be somehow significant. It was later, when I was examining my own life closely and consciously enough to turn it into words, that I started really thinking about those patterns and noticing similarities between my characters' personalities, lives, and development and my own. My characters were loners and introverts: so was I. Their inner lives and outer actions showed a pattern of fearfulness at first and then determined challenging of the fears: so did mine. But it was never a clear or straightforward process. In the first place, memory and imagination had transformed my experience to a considerable extent — and in an irregular and unpredictable way. It was always intensely complex, and what came out was coloured by my observations of

other people's lives, and my reading, and everything else that came from other sources. It was when writing *Finding Words* that I analyzed and found words for all this, and for me *Finding Words* is always the great adventure, the bringing things out of the murk into at least enough light to begin to see them by.

The short answer is, of course, that it's impossible to write a memoir without learning far more in the course of the work than you "knew" at the beginning. At the end you look back and think — "Considering how little I knew then, why on earth did I think I could write a memoir?"

GD: *Can you say anything about what you're working on now?*

MB: I'm writing a biography of my mother. She was a remarkable person. She was brought up in an upper-middle-class family in Holland with all the comforts and luxuries. She studied law but did not write her final exams and never practiced. During World War II she lived in Holland and, when her husband (my father) was taken prisoner by the Germans, she had two small children and had to survive unimaginable danger, fear, hunger, etc. Then they moved to the north of BC, where they/we lived on a pioneer farm. After that (by this time she had rheumatoid arthritis) she went back to university. Increasing illness kept her from being fully a working woman, but all through her adult years she wrote extensively (much of it was never published). I am using all that material, together with memories of those who knew her, to show that this is a remarkable story: an immigrant story, a woman's story, a story of Holland and Canada and life in the twentieth century.

GD: *Do you have more Canadian historical stories still to write? More stories for young people?*

MB: The book to which I will return after finishing the biography of my mother (and one on which I've already done a couple of years of work) is a historical novel set in Toronto in the 1880s. It will be for adult readers, and I don't want to say anything more about it for now. As for stories for young people — I can't say. The two projects just mentioned will probably fill the next four or five years, and goodness knows where my mind and imagination will be then.

GD: *I have to tell you how much I appreciate your willingness to answer questions that I'm sure you've rehearsed to yourself, or have answered at other times and in other places. And I'm specially thankful for your doing it in a way that was so wonderfully clear and thoughtful. Thanks so much, Marianne.*

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Awards and Honours

The Tinderbox was an "Our Choice" book selected by the Canadian Children's Book Centre in 1983-84.
The Quarter-Pie Window was the winner of the 1986 Young Adult Canadian Book Award presented by the Saskatchewan Library Association and of the 1986 National Chapter IODE Book Award. It was a Canadian Children's Book Centre "Our Choice" book in 1986-87.
The Sign of the Scales won the 1991 Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People, and was selected by the Canadian Children's Book Centre as an "Our Choice" book in 1990-91.
Fire Ship won a commendation from the Toronto Historical Board in 1993.
Rebellion won the 1996 Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People and was selected by the Canadian Children's Book Centre as an "Our Choice" book in 1996-97. It also won an Award of Merit from Heritage Toronto (formerly the Toronto Historical Board) in 1997.

***Gary Draper** teaches English at St. Jerome's University in Waterloo, Ontario. He is an editor with **The New Quarterly** and **Brick Books** and a long-time fan of Marianne Brandis's writing.*