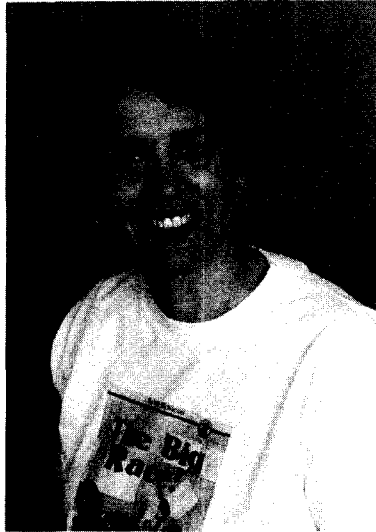


Profile: Sylvia McNicoll

• Gisela Sherman •



Sylvia McNicoll

Résumé: Sylvia McNicoll craint que les parents et les éducateurs n'aient réussi à faire de la lecture une obligation des plus contraignantes. À l'inverse, dans ses séances de lecture et d'animation culturelle, elle cherche à éveiller l'imagination des enfants et à les initier au plaisir de la lecture. Cette volonté de satisfaire les aspirations des jeunes lecteurs d'aujourd'hui est à la source de ses récits, toujours émouvants et pleins d'humour.

Summary: Sylvia McNicoll has much fun entertaining children at book talks. She loves to arouse interest in her own books and reading in general. She fears educators and parents have become so adamant about the importance of reading, they've turned it into broccoli. She'd rather show kids the joy and magic of books — turn them back into chocolate treats. She is convinced good books must not only thrill, but connect with a reader's inner identity or they ultimately do not satisfy. Her efforts to connect with modern children, their interests and concerns, have resulted in wonderful novels of humour and poignancy.

The packed auditorium buzzes with infectious excitement. Three hundred middle school students jostle, chatter and glance around expectantly. Then they grow quiet. A tall dark-haired woman wearing a white karate gi and a blue belt enters the room. She obliges the challenge of some macho types by flipping

them easily over her hip. Superman style, she strips off the gi and reveals her trademark painted blue jeans and the T-shirt with her latest book covers emblazoned on the chest.

For the next hour Sylvia McNicoll sprays whipped cream beards on her audience, gives cucumber facials, demonstrates how to catch tigers with a snare pole, and reads relevant selections from her books. On other visits she'll share her hamster or snails or chocolate cookies, show the Egg People videos her own children filmed. Sometimes she reads from a rejected manuscript, asks for opinions on a work in progress, swings a rubber chicken, anything to raise excitement for her books and reading. She once boasted she would do cartwheels if it would get kids' attention, and then kept that promise with five spectacular vaults across the lawn at Eden Mills's literary festival.

McNicoll explains her enthusiasm for entertaining readers: she likes showing off. She considers the satisfaction of meeting her audience a perk of her writing career. She's also practical. In order to survive financially, Canadian authors must earn some of their income from book talks and workshops.

There is another reason. The visits are part of McNicoll's strategy to make reading desirable and accessible to the next generation. She believes book talks make readers aware that writers are real people. Once kids become interested in authors' personalities, they become curious about their books. Along the way they find they like them, so they begin the habit of reading, or break out of the rut of reading formula series. Circulation statistics of Toronto libraries support this theory. They show that after an author has visited, many more of his/her books are signed out, not just after the reading, but even a year later.

Sylvia McNicoll has always loved reading. But the people in the books she read as a child in Montreal were alien to her. "Realistic" stories were fantasy. It was always summer. Baby sisters wore cute dresses and blonde curls. Even at home, storybook fathers wore suits and ties. Her dad was a blue collar worker. Her family were hard-working immigrants. Every story family owned a dog and a cat. Sylvia could never figure out why storybook dogs said "bow wow." Even her dog didn't speak the same language. The heroine she and her friends read about, Nancy Drew, was a twenty-year-old who did stuff a thirteen-year-old might yearn to do. Their language, too — sleuth, roadster — was of another world. McNicoll says, "We wanted it. We read it. But it wasn't us."

Anyone, even a white, middle- and working-class kid, feels alienated from literature if it doesn't include them. So now she writes realistic stories about real kids. Her characters have overbites and dyslexia, find marijuana in their sister's room, worry about the Gulf War, grades, divorce and anorexia. Their parents cope with the pressures of job, finances and family with varying degrees of success. In *Blueberries and Whipped Cream*, Christina's father arrives at her school, "short and round with his beer belly hanging over his belt ... He was wearing his hard hat ... dirty old work clothes and steel toed boots and carrying — geez how embarrassing — his big black lunch pail." Christina's small room is painted with cheap paint bought on sale — not what she dreams of. Her mother, a factory seamstress, is dying of cancer and her father copes by

drinking too much. But we feel this family's anguish and love and strength. Christina's mother refuses a painkiller so she can stay awake to see Christina dressed for a dance. She can't eat, but she says. "Nurse, just see. I look at my daughter and I am full."

In *Walking a Thin Line*, Lauren's Nanna's bottom stretches her polyester pants with the elastic waist, and she spends her days glued to the TV, but her hugs "felt soft and inviting, like the cookies."

Understated emotional scenes of ordinary people trying their best are one of McNicoll's greatest strengths. They include Christina's race to bring her mother's childhood treat to her, and her realization that it is time for her mother to die, Cliff's dad's letter in *Facing the Enemy*, Neil comforting his sister under the stars in *Project Disaster*, Lauren visiting her anorexic friend in hospital in *Walking a Thin Line*, one of literature's most moving family Christmases in *Bringing Up Beauty*, and, of course, giving up Beauty.

McNicoll went to high school with a girl whose mother died. She always wondered how "Christina" coped with the burdens of housework, schoolwork, social life and grief, so *Blueberries and Whipped Cream* became her answer. She believes young people need a book like this to see that someone with horrible problems can cope. She's disturbed when teachers tell her they withhold it from a class because someone's parent is dying.

For that novel, McNicoll meticulously researched cancer and coping with grief. The same amount of study goes into all her writing. She says, "A picture may be worth a thousand words, but so is a bit of research." The perennial advice to new writers, "write what you know," bores her. She prefers "know what you write." *Walking a Thin Line's* funny bits, such as the "Weight Whippers" meeting, were based on her own battles with weight. For the rest, she spoke with doctors, counsellors, patients and their families, then had them read the manuscript for accuracy. For the Stage School Series she's now writing as Geena Dare, she has immersed herself and her family in visits to theatres, ballet recitals, arts schools, biographies and texts. McNicoll believes that research not only enriches her stories, but also her life.

The mother of three teens, McNicoll says she works hard to stay up-to-date with kids' interests and styles, but then laughs and wonders aloud if Charlotte Brontë worried about being dated. Her novels are told from a Canadian perspective, in Canadian settings — especially Burlington and Montreal, with references to Canadian landmarks and authors — Robert Munsch, Paul Kropp, Betty Jane Wylie.

McNicoll remembers being so intense in her teens that she briefly considered suicide when she didn't make the field hockey team, so she tries to be sensitive to the intensity, longings and raging hormones of both her characters and her audience. Her characters are breathing, thinking, modern, kids. They note their parents' weaknesses with acerbic wit. The girls are interested in basketball, auto mechanics and roller blade hockey, as well as mascara, breasts and babysitting. Boys love baseball, cars, Bon Jovi, want a dog, wear an earring. She carries the ideal '90s male perhaps too far, since the tough boys are generally

the bad guys who set tigers loose in the mall, bully, and cheat on exams. Her male protagonists tend to help girls win at baseball or science projects, bake cookies, say sensitive things — and are great kissers with incredible eyes. That said, it's hard not to care about Cliff Hansen in *Facing the Enemy*, who covers his love and worry for his soldier father with shrugs and wisecracks but shows a touching concern for his young sister and for humanity in general.

Facing the Enemy is a beautiful story that deserves more recognition. It was begun during the Gulf War as McNicoll's way of dealing with her own fears. She clipped every war headline and used them somehow in her story. She visited a military base when she and everyone there were upset during the horrible days when no one knew how "Desert Storm" would end. A vehicle technician gave her the story she put in the letter, told her about the scorpions. Using real facts makes her stories three-dimensional. And she likes to save her imagination for the way her characters feel, rather than the setting or events.

She knew that teenagers go through a stage when they don't get along with a parent. It passes. But what if that parent should die first? The guilt would last forever. Cliff is positive that his dad will be killed overseas before he gets a chance to tell him he loves him. He also falls for Farrah, a girl from Iraq, who faces prejudice here, and fears for her family over there.

That prejudice is something McNicoll also knows and strives to address in her work. As the daughter of German immigrants, she suffered the schoolyard insults. She knows what it is to be born in Canada, feel Canadian, but be regarded an enemy within your own country. She worries that we work so hard to promote multiculturalism, but all we need is one war and so much of the hatred comes back.

McNicoll knew in grade four that she loved to write, but she thought it wasn't something a real person did. After graduating from Concordia University in Montreal with a BA in English, she worked in corporate banking for seven years. Staying home to raise her children let her slow down and reflect and begin writing again. In 1986 she took a course with Paul Kropp at Sheridan College. Her first night there she realized that writing for kids was what she really wanted. During that twelve-week course she completed the first draft of *Blueberries and Whipped Cream*. It was published by Gage in 1988, in Australia in 1989, and optioned for a film in 1990.

McNicoll credits Kropp's novel *Wilted* (now published as *You've Seen Enough*) as the major eye-opener for her. It was the first time she read a book written in first person that was funny, easy to read and poignant. The chapter in which Danny fights with his mom about his glasses reached out to her. It reminded her of the glasses she had to wear as a child — not smart stylish ones, but the cheap ugly ones her parents could afford. That chapter connected with her inner identity, something she feels strongly that good books have. She says the currently popular horror series books may "thrill," but they don't connect and ultimately don't satisfy. If a book connects with children, their interests, and what they are, if they see themselves in literature, they'll like it. *Wilted* showed Sylvia her style could be acceptable. She could write a book.

Since then, she has published sixteen books with that combination of humour, action and poignancy. They range from first chapter book to middle grade and young adult novels. McNicoll explains this variety: "I love writing so much, if the market demanded it, I'd write books for children in the womb."

She finds writing for and reaching teenagers is really satisfying, especially when she speaks to a group diagnosed as tough kids who hate reading. It thrills her to hold their attention, to know that she has reached them. She described one incident that touched her. In a southwestern corn-stalk town an intimidating hulk with an earring blocked her path. He held up his copy of *Facing the Enemy* and uttered one word: "Magnificent." She's moved to know about the girl, daughter of a crack-addict mom, who attended counseling with *Blueberries and Whipped Cream* under her arm, and quoted from it.

Since the value of reading has been discovered, educators and parents frantically push reading as something kids "should do." McNicoll reduces this to the equation "have to = hate to." She (and this author) remembers those days when she rushed through her class-work just to steal time to read a book. Now she fears we have made books the equivalent of broccoli. She'd like to turn them back into chocolate — delicious, desirable. Her tongue-in-cheek solution is that we punish kids for reading too much — make reading sinful, make it chocolate. In that way, she calls Stein and his cohorts good after all. We don't approve of him, so he becomes a forbidden pleasure. Maybe we should make kids write detailed book reports about his work.

McNicoll's seventh published book, *Bringing Up Beauty*, won Ontario's Silver Birch Award for 1996, and Manitoba's Young Readers' Choice Award for 1997. She calls these the "ultimate trophies" because the children themselves pick the winners. These awards have restored her belief that kids do prefer a wider range of reading than is provided by typical series books.

A combination of generosity, passion and practicality is McNicoll. Of her profession she says, "I truly believe you can love something and earn a living at it. But children's writers seem to be expected to write as a charity. We must make a living at it too." Yet one sees her concern for children in the way she talks with them, signs the last book and scrap of paper, gives one more interview, answers questions for a school project even after the girl tells her she didn't buy her books.

Recently she took a course on screen writing. It helped her think more visually and made her more aware of structure, but film work is not for her. She considers herself a writer of books. Asked about the future, McNicoll replies she's very happy to continue what she's doing now. She just wants to write good books and reach her audience. She says, "If the whole world stopped, I'd keep writing."

Novels by Sylvia McNicoll

- Blueberries and Whipped Cream*. Gage, Jeanpac, 1988.
- The Tiger-Catcher's Kid*. Nelson Canada, 1989.
- Jump Start*. Series Canada, Collier MacMillan, 1989.
- More than Money*. Nelson Canada, 1990.
- Project Disaster*. Scholastic Canada, 1990.

Facing the Enemy. Nelson Canada, 1992.
Bringing up Beauty. Prentice-Hall, 1994. (Silver Birch Award, Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award).
The Big Race. Scholastic Canada, 1996.
Walking a Thin Line. Scholastic Canada, 1997.
A Mom and Dad's Guide to Martial Arts. Coles Notes, 1998.
Double Dribble. Scholastic Canada, 1998.
Grave Secrets. Stoddart, 1999.
Smokey and the Gorilla. Scholastic Canada, 1999.
Dan — Clowning Around. Stage School Series (written as Geena Dare). Orchard Publishing, 1998.
Matt — Heartbreak Hero. Stage School Series (written as Geena Dare). Orchard Publishing, 1998.
Lauren — Singing Sensation. Stage School Series (written as Geena Dare). Orchard Publishing, 1998.

Gisela Sherman took that same *Writing for Children* course at Sheridan College with Sylvia, and since then has published three books — *King of the Class* (Scholastic), *There's a Snake in the Toilet* (Simon & Schuster) and *Grave Danger* (Scholastic). She teaches a writing class at McMaster University, is vice-president of CANSCAIP, and is working on the next novel.