

# Glued to words

After penning 24 books for both children and adults alike, Sheree Fitch remains stuck to storytelling. Story by Thomas Hodd

It takes only a minute with Sheree Fitch to realize you're in the company of a woman in love with language.

We're at a small, bright café near the Dartmouth Ferry Terminal in Halifax chatting over lunch about her life as a storyteller. She's dressed in a white, long-sleeved summer shirt, jeans and a light purple scarf. It's the kind of comfortable flair only a successful author can pull off.

Her latest award-winning book is *Pluto's Ghost*. It's about a young man named Jake Upshore, a troubled but misunderstood teenager whose girlfriend goes missing. Told from Jake's point of view, it's a touching, thrilling story about what it means to be sensitive in a world expecting men to be tough and confident.

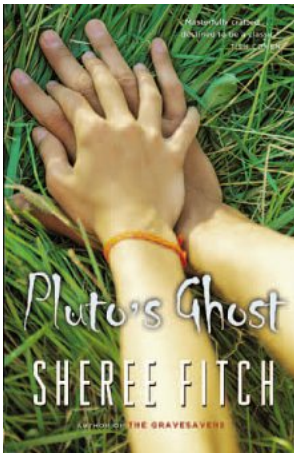
Fitch admits it was risky to write from a young man's perspective, but her desire to tell Jake's story kept her going.

"It took four years and thousands of pages, but I wanted to see Jake's heart and try to understand what it was like to be dyslexic. Sometimes it's the quest to understand the other rather than a journey towards self-discovery," Fitch says.

Fitch's own quest as a storyteller began from an early age.

The daughter of an RCMP officer, she was born in Ottawa, but the family moved to New Brunswick soon after her birth. She lived in Moncton until she was 13, and then moved to Fredericton after her father was transferred. Not surprisingly, it was through her mother and father that Fitch first discovered the magic of words.

"Dad's parents were teachers, so he grew up in a book-rich house," Fitch says. "He had a storehouse of poems he had to memorize when he was young, and he would perform them for us after work. Mom would also sing songs to us, and do



silly wordplay"

In Grade 2, Fitch encountered Mrs. Goodwin. Fitch wrote a poem as part of a class assignment, and Mrs. Goodwin liked it so much she posted it on a felt-board during the School Fair. Fitch thinks of it as her first published poem.

"Teachers are my heroes," she says with pride. "Mrs. Goodwin had such a big influence on me."

After graduating from Fredericton High School, Fitch encountered another hero: the late New Brunswick writer and English professor, Fred Cogswell. She met Cogswell attending her first Maritime Writers' Workshop in her late teens. It was a brave moment for the young writer.

"I remember giving him my poem and asking if he thought I could be a poet," Fitch says. "I waited for what seemed an eternity, and then he looked up at me and said 'My dear, you already are.'"

And so began a kind of mentorship relationship between Fitch and Cogswell. He encouraged her to write more, and gave her chapbooks of poetry to read.

He would also visit her periodically to have one-on-one conversations about writing and literature, and drop off chocolate chip cookies for her kids. To Fitch, people like Cogswell and Mrs. Goodwin were more than just teachers.

"They were permissionaries – people who gave me permission to dream," she says.

It wasn't an easy road, though. At 24, Fitch found herself divorced with two young children. Writing took a back seat to survival. She enrolled in a bachelor of arts degree at St. Thomas University, supporting herself and her family with summer jobs and school bursaries.

Then, in 1987, she published her first book, a collection of nonsense verse inspired in part by her kids, *Toes In My Nose*. For most young writers, this is a moment of triumph and validation. But Fitch didn't feel like she had arrived on the literary scene.

"My first book didn't make me think I was a writer," she confesses. "It wasn't until an editor called and asked what I was working on next that made me begin to believe I was a writer."

Fitch went on to complete her MA at Acadia University, in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. There she met Donna Smyth, a writer and Canadian literature professor who encouraged her to pursue her love of children's literature.

"It was hard to find people who were interested in children's literature at that time," Fitch says. "When I met Donna, I felt like someone took the handcuffs off me."

Fitch successfully defended her MA thesis on the oral tradition of storytelling in children's literature. Rather than pursue doctoral studies and write about other children's authors, she returned

## books



Sheree Fitch's latest book, 'Pluto's Ghost,' came out last fall. PHOTO: LUCINDA LAREE

to Fredericton to continue her own creative-writing quest. She had begun to garner both regional and national attention: Fitch's *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen* had appeared in 1992 and won the Mr. Christie Book Award for excellence in writing Canadian children's literature while an earlier book, *Sleeping Dragons All Around*, won the Atlantic Provinces Booksellers Choice Award.

From 1993 to 2001, Fitch published nine additional books, including a collection of adult poetry, *In This House are Many Women*, and an educational book for would-be writers, *Writing Maniac: How I grew up to be a writer (and you can, too!)*. In 2000, she won the prestigious Vicky Metcalf Award for a body of work inspirational to children.

But living the life of a children's author felt somehow limiting for Fitch.

"I just did the next thing and the next thing," Fitch says. "But there were other voices in me that wanted to get out"

Then in 2001, Fitch's second husband took a new job in Washington, D.C., where they stayed for almost a decade. The experience was liberating for her, both personally and creatively.

"I had the freedom to be whoever I wanted to be," Fitch says. "The solitude was wonderful. I also don't think I could have made the switch to prose if I hadn't gone to Washington."

During this creative period, Fitch published 10 more books, including works of fiction for young people as well as her first adult novel, *Kiss the Joy as it Flies*,

which was shortlisted for the 2009 Stephen Leacock Award for Humour.

Since her return to Canada in 2009, Fitch has continued her storytelling success. *Pluto's Ghost* was recently awarded the Canadian Booksellers Association Young Reader's Book Award, was a finalist for the Atlantic Independent Booksellers' Choice Award, and is shortlisted for the Arthur Ellis Award for excellence in Canadian crime-writing.

Fitch has also become a spokeswoman for reading and literature. In addition to honorary degrees from Acadia University, St. Mary's University, and St. Thomas University, Fitch is the honorary patron of the New Brunswick Coalition for Literacy as well as the honorary spokeswoman for the Read to Me Program, a non-profit literacy organization which distributes free books to every baby born or adopted in Nova Scotia.

But with 24 books to her credit, what drives Fitch to continue to write?

"It's about that urge to connect," she says. "It's about storytelling and what glues us to words."

Such passion for stories is what energizes Sheree Fitch. And with a new novel already "percolating," as she describes it, readers will soon have the chance to delight once more in the magical words of one of Atlantic Canada's most versatile storytellers. **S**

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