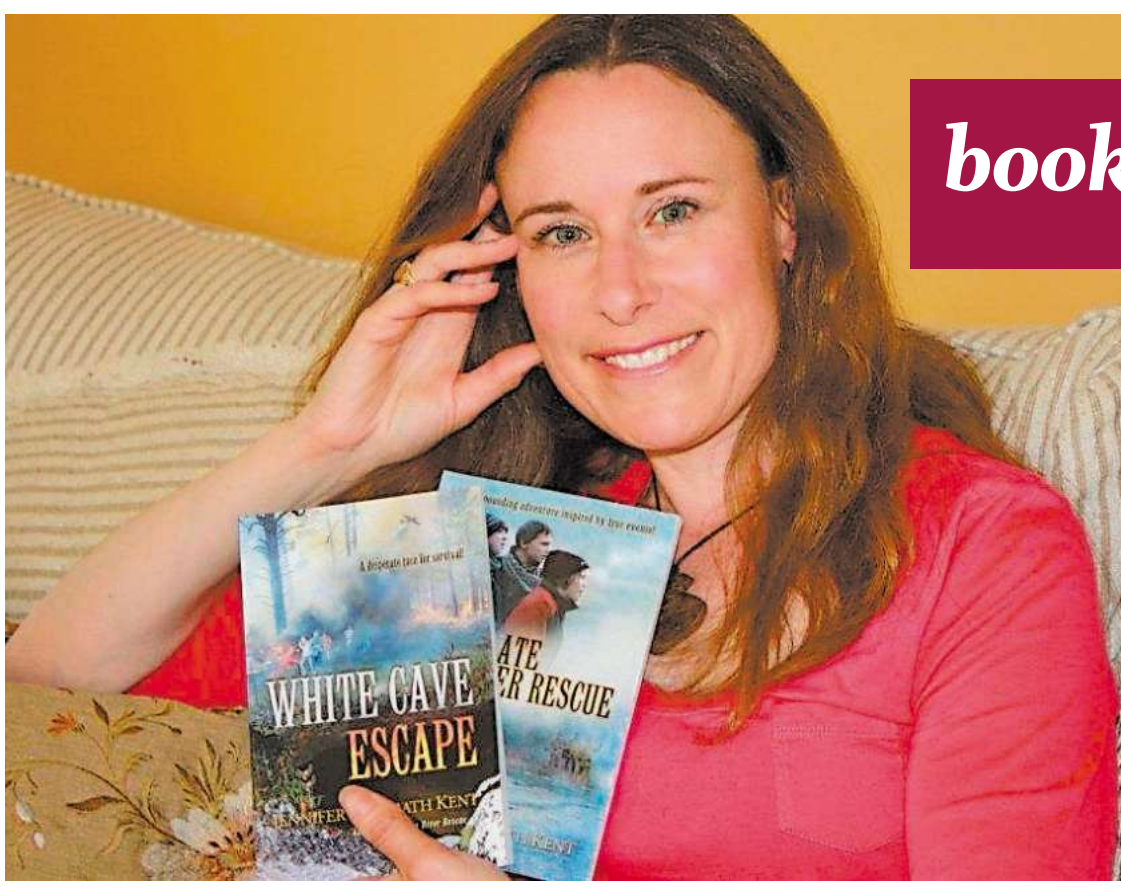


salon



books

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jennifer McGrath Kent, a native of Moncton, is a bestselling young adult fiction writer. Her latest adventure novel, 'White Cave Rescue,' tells the story of four youngsters who find themselves trapped in a forest fire near Hillsborough.

Literary stardom

Award-winning author Jennifer McGrath Kent shares stories about Petitcodiac, Hillsborough with young people. Story by Thomas Hodd

On a cold and wet Thursday afternoon in Toronto, I make my way along the waterfront toward a series of makeshift white tents. Suddenly, hundreds of school kids appear on my left, running and shouting on the grass, munching on french fries and large lollipops. The students have come to take part in the Ontario Library Association's "Festival of Trees," an annual event that celebrates Canadian children's literature.

The tent I've been looking for is standing-room only. Nearly 70 kids and a handful of teachers are sitting in rows of purple plastic chairs, their eyes glued to a woman at the front wearing a blue vest sweater and red heels. She's swinging a stick over her head with a long rope like she's about to lasso something.

Her name is Jennifer McGrath Kent, a native of Moncton and a bestselling young adult fiction writer. She's here today to give a workshop on how to write adventure stories.

"If you spin it at different speeds," she tells them through her portable hand-held microphone, "you can change the pitch and make different sounds."

McGrath Kent is referring to the stick she is swinging over her head. It's known as a bull-roarer and plays an important part in her latest

adventure novel, *White Cave Rescue*. It's about a group of four friends – Shawn, his little brother Craig, his best friend Tony and a young girl named Petra – who find themselves trapped in a forest fire near Hillsborough. It was just nominated for the Silver Birch Award for Fiction, an award voted on by tens of thousands of kids from Ontario. More than 1,500 students regularly attend the awards ceremony.

"It's like being a rock star," McGrath Kent says. "They announce your name and suddenly the kids all start screaming and cheering."

This isn't the first time McGrath Kent has experienced such literary stardom. Her previous book, *Chocolate River Rescue*, was also nominated for a Silver Birch Award. In this adventure, Shawn, Craig and Tony stray onto some ice along the Petitcodiac River and suddenly break away from shore. The police and fire departments can't help, and it's up to Petra to try to save the day. *Chocolate River Rescue* won the 2009 Atlantic Hackmatack Award. It was also shortlisted for the Diamond Willow Award as well as the Manitoba Young Readers Choice Award.

Not bad for a sessional English literature professor and full-time mother to Connor, who's just turning 11, and his soon to be 13-year-old brother, Brennan. Oh, and don't forget the dog, the cat and her Welsh cob pony, Fiona.

Children's literature has always held a special place for McGrath Kent. Her mother and father read stories to her as a young girl and it made a tremendous impact.

"All those hours of being read to aloud and the sense of magic of it all. The stories provided a jumping off place for me," McGrath Kent says.

Not surprisingly, McGrath Kent also finds inspiration in the places that surround her: "It all comes back to place," she says. And it's an approach that has served her well: *Choco-*

late River Rescue and *White Cave Rescue* are both set in the Moncton area. In fact, she still lives close to her childhood home in Hillsborough where it all began.

She prefers to write in the mornings and has an office upstairs in the house where she can look out over the front pasture, the green fields and the pony shed. But her best ideas come when she's washing dishes or in the shower.

"Something about the flow of water," McGrath Kent says, "that gets the imagination going."

McGrath Kent's love for nature and adventure began when she was just a young girl. "I was always going into the woods or exploring abandoned gypsum quarries," she says. It also fitted in nicely with her other passion: books.

"My parents would read me stuff like Farley Mowat and Jack London. Then there were stories like *Treasure Island*, the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I also remember Grade 4 when Dad read me *Lord of the Flies*. I was scared for weeks after," McGrath Kent adds with a chuckle.

After high school, McGrath Kent studied English at St. Francis Xavier University, then got a Master's degree focusing on Children's literature from the University of Victoria. She worked for a time as a freelance writer, including a stint with the City of Moncton, and taught literature courses at Mount Allison University and the Université de Moncton. But she always wanted to publish her own stories, and finally got up the courage to try after reading a book that her mother had given her, Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write*, a collection of short personal essays that affirms writing as a meaningful vocation.

McGrath Kent's first attempts were picture books, a natural beginning for someone with two young boys. But publishers weren't biting.

"The market is saturated with these kinds of books," McGrath Kent says.

Then out of the blue, Nimbus, a publishing firm from Halifax, Nova Scotia called her. They didn't want to publish the picture book she had submitted, but they really liked her writing style.

"Have you written any chapter books for young readers?" the editor asked.

"I'll call you back in an hour," McGrath Kent told them. And the rest, as they say, is history.

This Christmas McGrath Kent has an illustrated book coming out called *Gadzooks, the Christmas Goose*. She's also begun writing her next novel, but she won't say what it's about. "I don't want to jinx it," McGrath Kent admits.

As to whether she will ever make the jump to adult fiction, "I'm working my way up to it," McGrath Kent says. "I think it's a lack of nerve at this point – I'm not brave enough to write it yet," she adds with a laugh.

Just last month McGrath Kent took part in the prestigious Northrop Frye literary festival in Moncton, alongside such Can Lit heavy-hitters as Nino Ricci, Guy Gavriel Kay and recent Scotiabank Giller Prize-winner Linden MacIntyre. She was there last year too. And if Jennifer McGrath Kent's publishing track-record is any indication, she'll be there next year as well. **S**

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