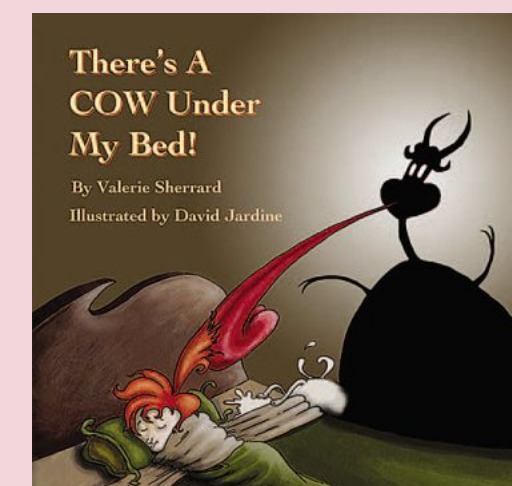


timline

Valerie's bookshelf



PICTURE BOOKS

- Miss Wondergem's Dreadfully Dreadful Pie (Creative Book Publishing, 2011)
- There's A GOLDFISH In My Shoe! (Creative Book Publishing, 2009)
- There's A COW Under My Bed! (Creative Book Publishing, 2008)

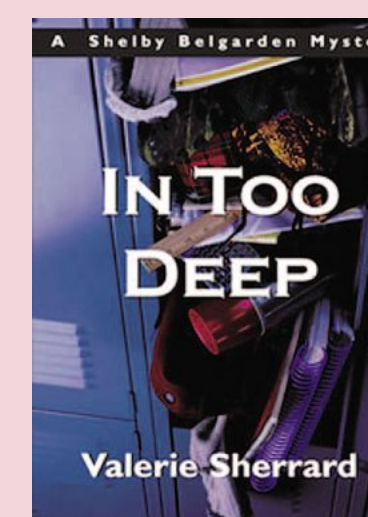
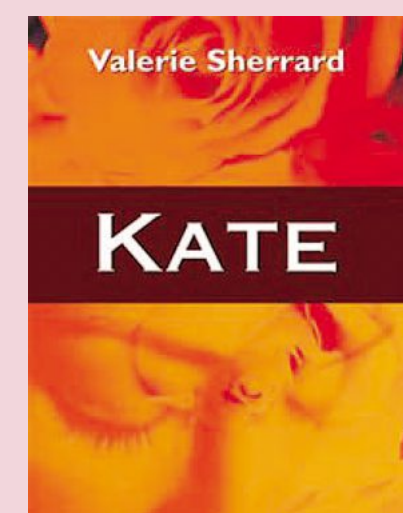
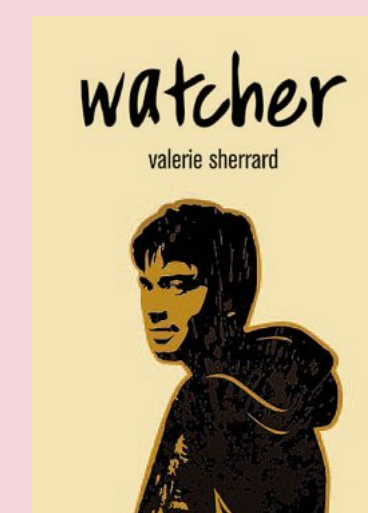


JUNIOR

- The Glory Wind (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2010)
- Tumbleweed Skies (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2009)

YOUNG ADULT

- Testify (Dundurn, 2011)
- Accomplice (Dundurn, 2011)
- Watcher (Dundurn, 2009)
- Three Million Acres of Flame (Dundurn, 2007)
- Speechless (Dundurn, 2007)
- Sarah's Legacy (Dundurn, 2006)
- Sam's Light (Dundurn, 2004)
- KATE (Dundurn, 2003)



THE SHELBY BELGARDEN MYSTERIES

- Searching for Yesterday (Dundurn, 2008)
- Eyes of a Stalker (Dundurn, 2006)
- Hiding in Plain Sight (Dundurn, 2005)
- Chasing Shadows (Dundurn, 2004)
- In Too Deep (Dundurn, 2003)
- Out of the Ashes (Dundurn, 2002)

NON FICTION

- Vanessa Hudgens, Superstars Series (Crabtree Publishing, 2010)

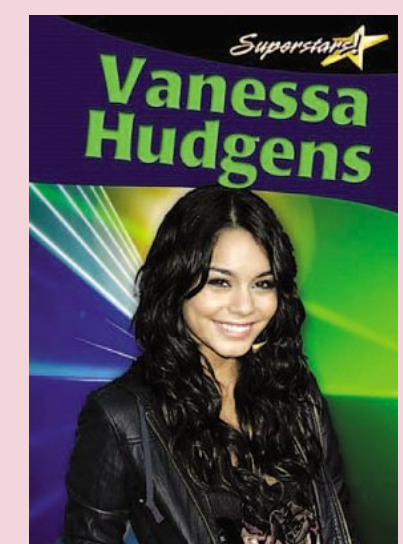


PHOTO: DANIEL MARTINS / CANADA/EAST NEWS SERVICE

Smells like teen spirit

Valerie Sherrard spent 30 years dreaming of one day becoming a published author. In less than 10 years, she published 20 children's books with her latest, 'Testify,' hitting shelves this week. Story by Thomas Hodd

It's a Tuesday afternoon, and I'm sitting in the delightfully cozy Books Inn Bookstore in former Newcastle, sharing a coffee with Young Adult (YA) author, Valerie Sherrard.

In 1986, Sherrard decided to become a foster-mother to try to bring in a child around eight years old who would fill the gap between her other children. Instead, she received a 16-year-old girl.

"I was very so nervous when our first foster child came," Sherrard admits. "I wanted to do a good job, and I'd taken the prep training but it wasn't until she was actually here that it hit me what a big responsibility it was."

Sherrard must have done something right, because over the next 18 years she would foster 70 teenagers. During this period, she also worked as director for a group home for several years.

"It was a lot like fostering," Sherrard says. "Challenging and interesting."

All of this experience with teenagers added up to a wealth of potential writing material. Now, 25 years later, Sherrard is a finalist for the \$25,000 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award for her 2010 junior novel, *The Glory Wind*.

Set in a small prairie town, Sherrard's novel is about an unexpected friendship that blossoms between a young man, Luke, and a girl named Gracie, and the damage that comes from small-town gossip. The book has already garnered several awards and nominations, including a Bronze Medal from the 2011 Independent Publishers Book Awards, as well as winning the prestigious Ann Connor Brimer Award for children's literature in Atlantic Canada. It's also been nominated for the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People.

Not bad for someone who led a much different life until just a few years ago.

The middle-child of a military family, Sherrard was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, but spent a good portion of her youth in Belleville. It was here that Sherrard's love of books began.

"Both my parents read to us when we were young," Sherrard says. "And my father would often read us poetry."

As a testament to the family's devotion to books, when Sherrard's father was transferred to Germany they had a meeting about whether or not to get a TV.

"In the end, we didn't bother," Sherrard says proudly. "So books were a huge part of our entertainment."

It was also in Germany that Sherrard discovered she had a talent for writing, thanks to her Grade 6 teacher. "I will never forget it," Sherrard says. "After handing back my story, Mr. Lower stood at my desk and said 'This is really good. You could be a writer someday.' After that, I always kept it in the back of my head - someday I was going to write a book."

returned to Miramichi after an unsuccessful marriage. Needing to provide for her son, Sherrard took up a variety of odd jobs, including working at a doughnut place in Douglastown as well as waitressing at a local restaurant.

"Waitressing has been my favourite thing to do," she says, "besides writing."

Sherrard eventually remarried and became a stay-at-home mom for her growing family. And 30 years after that moment with her Grade 6 teacher, Sherrard finally decided to put pen to paper.

The first major hurdle was time. Sherrard was working two jobs, leaving precious little time for being creative. Luckily, Sherrard was an early riser, so she would write for a couple of hours and then get ready for work. It's a discipline she has kept for almost 10 years.

"Morning is my best time," she says.

The second hurdle was getting her first book published. Drawing on her experiences as a foster-mother, Sherrard penned a tough, honest tale about 14-year-old Kate Benchworth, who is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Sherrard sent excerpts of it to 18 publishers in Canada, three of whom asked to see the full manuscript.

Upon hearing the news, Sherrard was elated. "It was dance-around-the-house-like-a-maniac-excitement," she says.

Nor did Sherrard forget the debt she owed her old teacher.

I DON'T WANT TO JUST TELL STORIES ... I WANT THEM TO HAVE SOME VALUE.

VALERIE SHERRARD

"I hadn't seen Mr. Lower for years, but I knew his first initial and knew he had come back to Canada. So I went on Canada411 and got addresses for every A. Lower, and sent letters to them all to thank him. A week later I received an email from him!"

Then fate intervened. Sherrard had already started thinking about her next project - a mystery novel. One day, while talking to the editor about the Kate manuscript, Sherrard pitched the idea of a mystery series.

"They liked it right away," Sherrard says. "They felt writing mysteries would be a better way to launch my career."

And so the first book Sherrard ever wrote was not the first one she published. Instead, Sherrard published *Out of the Ashes*, the first of several teen mystery novels about a young crime-solver named Shelby Belgarden. Published in 2002, it was a hit with young readers and was nominated for a Red Maple award as well as an Arthur Ellis award for Crime-Writing.

The award nominations gave Sherrard the confidence she needed to keep writing. Her second Shelby Belgarden mystery soon appeared, followed by *Kate* (her first written book). Over the next six years, Sherrard would go on to publish an additional eight YA novels, all of which garnered praise from readers and countless nominations from award juries.

"It's better winning than being nominated," Sherrard chuckles.

In 2006, Sherrard decided it was time to try writing

full-time. She also expanded into picture-books and junior novels. Her first picture-book, *There's a Cow Under My Bed!*, appeared in 2008; her first junior novel, *Tumbleweed Skies*, was published in 2009. Both titles were on shortlists for several children's literature awards, including the Blue Spruce Award, the Hackmataack and the Anne Connor Brimer Award.

Equally impressive is Sherrard's confession that she doesn't follow the usual writerly route of producing several drafts. Instead, she works slowly, crafting as she goes until she arrives at the final product.

"I'm mostly a clean writer," she says. "Conscientious and careful as I go."

It's an approach that has served Sherrard well. In all, she has published 20 books in the last nine years. As further testament to Sherrard's commitment to the craft, she is currently working on three projects: a YA novel, a junior novel and her first adult novel.

"I know - adult novel - it sounds pornographic," Sherrard laughs. "But it's not that at all. I just felt the subject matter was a bit too heavy for younger readers."

Having said that, Sherrard admits that her favourite stories to write are those geared to the 9- to 14-year-old crowd. She also really enjoys going to schools and libraries to give presentations.

"It's a good way to promote literacy," Sherrard says. "And the Grade 8s are fun to present to because they are so hostile."

What strikes you about many of Sherrard's books is they aren't simply cute or entertaining. They are tough, honest stories about young people facing real social issues: Kate Benchworth has a terminal cancer; Gracie's mother in *The Glory Wind* is rumoured to be a prostitute; and the object of Shelby Belgarden's first investigation is a young man who she suspects is an arsonist and possibly a victim of sexual abuse.

"I don't want to just tell stories," Sherrard says. "I want them to have some value."

"Another case in point is *Testify*, Sherrard's latest young adult novel, due to be published this week by Dundurn Press. Young Shana Tremain agrees to break the law in order to save her friend Carrie from a molester. The outcome of the trial sets in motion a series of troubling events for Shana and her close-knit group of friends.

There's a clear message here about justice, trust and the limits of friendship. And it's already getting attention from reviewers.

There's also evidence Sherrard's writing abilities have rubbed off on her children. She and her daughter have been working together on a YA novel for the last few years. And her son is a successful musician and songwriter. Her husband, Brent, is also a published YA author.

Given all her success, what has Sherrard found most frustrating as a writer?

"My husband interrupting me while I'm writing," she jokes. "I'm also slave to my four cats, and I wait on them all day. It's easy to let yourself get distracted, but it's all part of the creative process." ☺

Thomas Hodd currently teaches Canadian literature at the Université de Moncton. He can be reached at tomhodd@gmail.com.

The Glory Wind

An excerpt from Sherrard's award-winning novel published by Fitzhenry and Whiteside

It was a long way to the Taits' house if you went by the road, but only about a mile cutting through the spring barley fields. We followed the path I always took, making our way along the edges of the crops.

There was a slight breeze, the dancing kind that makes a prairie crop ripple, like shimmering green waves racing over the heads of the grain. Without warning, Gracie stopped, staring at them, transfixed.

She said nothing. Her breath slowed and deepened until I became aware of it to the exclusion of all other sounds. A small hand rose from her side and travelled across the space between us, found mine and took hold of it as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

I'd never held hands with a girl before. Once the shock wore off I realized it wasn't entirely unpleasant. And besides, no one could see us, out there in the field, which is why I decided not to pull my hand away.

I snuck a few cautious glances at Gracie's face, mostly focusing on her eyes, which were full and shining as she stared out over the field. Her head began to move ever so slightly, following the sway of the grain. Within a moment or two her body was moving to and fro as well, and then she tugged her hand free and stretched it out in a motion that looked, for all the world, as though she was stroking the top of the field.

"Do you think," she said suddenly, "that the field is green where they buried my daddy?"

"Sure," I said. "They always bury people in green fields."



I think it's some kind of a rule." She nodded. "I don't quite seem to know why my daddy died in the war," she said.

"I guess his time had come," I told her wisely. I'd heard Pastor Lockhart say that at funerals for some of the junction men who had gone off to fight and not returned.

Gracie didn't speak for a moment. I was searching through my head, trying to find something on the subject that might be helpful, but when she spoke again, all she said was, "I guess we better go get those eggs for your mother." ☺

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