

## **Berton House Writers' Retreat**

### **Writer-in-Residence Report**

Elin Kelsey, Writer-in-Residence, July–September, 2008

When I applied to Berton House, I was searching for a supportive place in which to write hopeful environmental books for children. I arrived thinking that I would “retreat” from life and immerse myself in writing. Instead, I discovered a community brimming with inspiring and generous people. Dawson has a thriving arts community and it sits within some of the most amazing wilderness on the planet. I quickly became “immersed” in the life of this extraordinary place and the writing was all the more productive and vibrant for it. I know that this experience will continue to impact my writing and my viewpoints in the months and years ahead.

#### **Writing**

While in residency, I wrote the first draft of a book on ecological footprints for Owlkids Books. I also drafted a proposal for a new environmental/sustainability center to be based at the Yukon Saw Mill in Dawson. I finished the author proofs for a book on whales that I have coming out this December for University of California Press (*Watching Giants: The Secret Lives of Whales* [www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/10693.php](http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/10693.php)) and wrote the final version of a science report for what may become one of the world’s largest marine protected areas—a National Marine Monument surrounding the Mariana Trench. (Please see: “The Deepest Ocean on Earth” report at [www.pewtrusts.org/our\\_work\\_detail.aspx?id=136](http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_detail.aspx?id=136))

#### **Readings**

I conducted book readings for the grades 3–6 students at Robert Service School in Dawson City on September 18. This reading was arranged through Miriam Havemann, Dawson City Librarian in consultation with Jennifer, an English teacher at the school.

I did readings for grades 3–6 students at Whitehorse Elementary School in Whitehorse on Monday September 22. I arranged this reading through Wendy Jickling, an English teacher at the school.

I did a public reading for adults and children at the Dawson City library on the evening of September 18. This reading was organized and advertised by Miriam Havemann.

I gave a public reading for adults and children at the Whitehorse Public Library on the evening of Monday September 22. This reading was organized and advertised by Mairi Macrae, the Whitehorse Librarian.

I conducted a one-day workshop on hope and the environment for Parks Canada Heritage Department Staff in Kluane National Park on September 24.

#### **Media**

Dan Davidson is a true friend of Berton House and he kindly featured me in the *Klondike Sun*, August 27 issue. He interviewed me for two more articles—one about the reading I gave and the

second about me as a writer—that will be included in issues of the *Klondike Sun* this fall. He also wrote a piece about me for the October 3 issue of the *Whitehorse Daily Star*.

Thomas Seibel wrote an article about me for the *Klondike Sun*, August 10 issue.

CBC radio featured a 10 minute interview with me on their drive home program *Airplay* on Monday, September 22. This proved to be quite helpful in attracting people to the public reading at the library that evening.

## **Community Engagement**

*Authors on Eighth, August 14:* Rachel, the marketing assistant at the Klondike Visitor Association was good enough to invite me to help plan the theme and judge the summer reading contest leading up to the Authors on Eighth event. We also toured people through Berton House on the day of the event and worked with Dawn at Jack London’s cabin, and Freddy at Robert Service cabin, to coordinate readings at all three sites. I gave a public reading at the house.

*Discovery Days, August 14–17:* I participated in the 10 km run as well as various workshops and art auctions associated with this wonderful cultural celebration. I conducted a children’s writing activity as part of the kids tent activities.

*International Outhouse Race, August 31:* Miriam Havemann and I entered this popular community event with a submission called “Reading on the Loo”. We used the theme to generate discussion about literacy and KVA responded by awarding a generous contribution of \$100 in our name to a student literacy program in Dawson City.

*Proposal for an environmental center at the Yukon Saw Mill:* While in residence, I had the opportunity to meet with many visiting scientists and environmentalists working on climate change, endangered species, habitat loss, etc. in the Yukon. There is strong interest in exploring the possibility of transforming the Yukon Saw Mill into an environmental/sustainability center that would engage Dawson residents and summer tourists with environmental issues and the north. I have drafted a proposal for the Yukon government and will report on its outcome.

## **Family**

I cannot begin to express my appreciation for the fact that Berton House welcomes families to participate in the retreat. I think this is a very progressive aspect of the program, and one that will surely support the inclusion of more women writers. My family (husband Andy), son Kip (aged 8 years) and daughter Esmé (aged 5 years) resided in Berton House throughout the residency. I was greatly heartened by the fact that this was Pierre’s childhood home, and that we were able to bring the laughter of neighbourhood kids to its rooms. Summer in Dawson is packed full with activities for children and families and we enjoyed so many rich cultural, art and wildlife experiences as a result: can-can dancing lessons from Katie at Diamond Tooth Gerties; canoeing on the Yukon and Klondike Rivers; taking art classes at K.I.A.C; attending the Moosehide gathering; making dream catchers from willows along the river with an elder from the Tr’ondeck Hwech’in nation; hiking “golden sides” in full autumnal colour in Tombstone Park; learning to dive to the bottom of the deep end of the community pool; reading our way through the juvenile section of the Dawson City library; exploring the trails behind Robert Service’s cabin and following them up to the dome; feasting on moose bourguignon, caribou sausages, birch syrup,

salmon, and cranberry sorbet; playing in the Dawson City youth soccer league; hopping on the ferry to visit friends in west Dawson; enjoying coffee nights and concerts at Odd Fellows hall; watercolour painting around town; learning to spin dog fur into yarn and play notes on a fiddle; watching fox, great gray owls, moose, caribou, wood bison, mountain sheep, a grizzly bear and ravens, ravens, ravens; staging light sabre duels on the front lawn; measuring the growth of sun flowers grown under the midnight sun; learning about Jack London from Dale and Robert Service from Freddy; visiting homes crafted and created by their owners all around town and along the river; teaching string games; fishing for Arctic char and Arctic grayling; gold panning at Hunker Creek; reading in bed by sunlight at 1:00 a.m.; biking along the top of the world highway; riding double into town for groceries and the mail each day; feeling the icy fingers of winter in late September...and yet somehow, inexplicably, finding great swathes of time to write.