

• Meet the Author •

Caroline Woodward

Grades
K–2, 3–5



Photo courtesy of thewordonthestreet.ca

Caroline Woodward grew up on an isolated homestead in northeastern British Columbia. Without electricity, television, telephone, or running water, her imagination was influenced by her relationships with domestic and wild animals, farm work, the land itself, and books. She began her education in a two-room school and earned degrees from the University of British Columbia. Her paid writing career began in Grade 11 with a column in the *Alaska Highway News*. She is the author of seven books so far, with *The Village of Many Hats* (Oolichan Books, 2012) published most recently. Caroline is a lighthouse keeper living near Tofino, British Columbia.

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

Your author note indicates that *Singing Away the Dark* is based on personal experience. How much of you and your experience are reflected in this story? Are you really incredibly brave?

CW: This is the most autobiographical book or story I've ever written. Where I grew up, a mile-long walk to school was not unusual even in our sub-Arctic winter conditions. In fact, I was lucky because just the year before I started school in 1958, our area welcomed the arrival of the school bus. Before the bus, children rode horses to school. My parents' homestead was three miles away from the school via bush trail and a road, OR six miles away through the neighbor's farm and two roads. The bush trail was full of coyotes and bears, and it was too far—especially if a horse was spooked—for a child of six to safely ride, and often too cold to make the trip in the winter. My father was away for five or more days a week working at sawmills or other camp jobs during the winter, and my mother was at home with three younger siblings, so it was up to me to get to the school bus stop. Did I mention that we didn't have a tractor or a car at this time,

just horses? Honestly, I feel like I grew up in the 20s, not the late 50s!

On a visit back to the north some years ago, my school bus driver reminded me how the neighbors heard me singing from a good distance away and saw me saluting the trees in their yard! I'd forgotten, of course, but that kindly driver's amused comments opened the floodgates of memory. I remembered how I wanted to yell at the hoots and howls, but my throat dried up with fright, and something inside me decided to turn the yell into "Oh Susannah" to convince the hidden creatures that I wasn't afraid of them or their noises; and that I wasn't a six-year-old girl all by herself in the darkest spot of that walk to the bus stop! I ended up convincing myself and belted out a medley of songs in that tunnel of trees thereafter. I don't think I was incredibly brave, just highly imaginative and quite determined not to be a girly-girl!

Tell us more about the Peace River region of British Columbia, Canada. How did it shape you as a child? How does it continue to influence your work?

CW: This region was the last major frontier for homesteading in Canada, but it was first

Meet the Author

settled with forts for fur-trading purposes in the late 1700s. Its wealth of furs, and the agricultural potential of its vast amounts of open prairie, were noted by explorers like Alexander MacKenzie and Simon Fraser. But because of its remoteness, settlement by people of mainly European origin occurred in waves just before and after World War I, the Dust Bowl Thirties, and after World War II when war veterans were enticed with “free” land to clear and fence. This policy displaced the native people who hunted and picked berries on the land and resettled them onto reservations. The oldest evidence in B.C. of human settlement, 10,000 years ago, was “discovered” in a cave in this region.

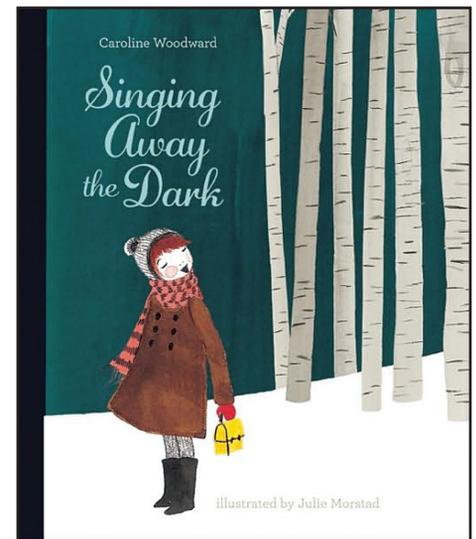
As a child, I rode our placid work horses bareback along the fence lines to make sure our cattle hadn't broken through from the range land into our grain and hay crops. I also counted them to note any new calves or missing cattle. We worked very hard, picking rocks and especially roots from newly cleared land, tending the large vegetable garden, picking wild fruit, sawing wood in a family team, shoveling grain, snow or manure . . . it was an endless, seasonal round of chores, but it was work that was valued by my parents and we children felt competent and good about being useful, too.

There was a pack trail pounded deep into the riverbanks (we called them “the breaks”) across the coulees and to a salt spring where

deer would come, close to the Beatton River. The Dunne-za (Beaver) Indians had used this trail to hunt game for eons. In the early days, when my father was living in a little cabin, he would trade tea, his homemade bread, and tobacco for fresh meat. Sometimes we'd find arrowheads or pemmican, turned up by the plough. During the last Ice Age, the Peace Valley was an ice-free corridor for dinosaurs fleeing in a futile attempt to escape the cold, so there are fossils aplenty in the Peace region as well.

I never read a single book or story about the Peace River region when I attended school or university. We read about England, New York, Scotland, Ontario, or anywhere else but the exciting, amazing place called the Peace River region. Thank heavens I had parents who were both avid readers with a rare home library (three full shelves) and I had *My Book House* and *Alice in Wonderland* and *Heidi!*

One of the most compelling reasons for me becoming a writer was to redress the dearth of literature about this special place, this raw, new, ancient and spectacularly beautiful place. So far, three of my books for adults, *Disturbing the Peace*, a collection of short stories, *Alaska Highway Two-Step*, a mystery novel, and *Penny Loves Wade, Wade Loves Penny* (Oolichan, 2010), a novel which utilizes Homer's *Odyssey*, are set in the Peace, as is *Singing Away the Dark*, of course. My personal opinion is that we writers bond to a certain landscape like ducks to



their mother's face and feathers, and even though we may range far afield, even though we may grow to love many other places on this earth, our knowledge of the annual seasons and all the senses we possess can most accurately be evoked when we write about that particular landscape.

Now over 11,000 acres of Class I and II agricultural land, which is extremely scarce in this province, is threatened by yet another hydro dam on the river. This would impede the Yellowstone-to-Yukon migration of ungulates like caribou and elk, deer and moose, and the nesting areas of many birds, not to mention sacred areas for at least three First Nations populations. Many Peace River residents and former residents like me oppose this plan to use the Peace region as an industrial sacrifice zone.

Please reflect on the illustration process for *Singing Away the Dark*. Did you supply Julie Morstad with photographs of your home countryside? Did you include many illustration notes in the text?

CW: No, that would have been more fun (for me) but I have never even spoken with

the illustrator! Our only communication was via the editor, which I can understand, having worked for a publisher myself. It takes a designer, an artist, a writer and an editor to make a book. Julie is a brilliant, award-winning illustrator so I had complete confidence in her work, and besides, she's from Saskatchewan, where they know about cold! I love these illustrations exactly as they are and fully realize that a story like this is not meant to be a documentary film.

You've written for adults as well as for children. How is both the writing experience and the product of the writing different when the intended audience is children?

CW: Now that I've gone over to the "bright side" of writing for children, with *The Village of Many Hats* for 8-11 year old readers most recently, I have to say that I'll be doing more writing for children. To have children sing along with me and talk about what scares them on their way to school (big dogs barking, a spooky house, fast cars, teenagers) reinforces the sense of joy, discovery and intensity that I feel when I'm writing for kids. When children don't understand something, they are so upfront and honest and they just ask me to explain myself! It's so refreshing. The Land of Children is a more universal place than the fractured lands of rural, suburban, or urban adults, divided or united by class, race, creed, gender, country of origin and access to

education, never mind the vagaries of literary taste and assorted egos.

However, it is my task as a writer to determine where my own unique material, the stuff that has its hooks in my heart, belongs. Some of it is meant to be a zinger of a Letter to the Editor, the big stuff insists on being a novel, despite my fervent wishes not to have to write another one, and still more material is meant to be a poem about the birds I see from my lighthouse island, an essay about writing, or a radio play for the CBC. Or a short story. Or a picture book or novella for children or teens! I publish in at least six genres and I guess that's why!

What ideas are you working on right now? Any other stories that are bubbling on the back burner and not quite ready to make it to the page yet?

CW: I am enjoying an online writers' workshop right now, where each of us has to produce 35-40 pages every three weeks, to be critiqued by our colleagues in the workshop. Suddenly I find myself writing a dystopian novel set in 2050, with a teenage heroine at the wheel of a skillfully converted fishing boat. All my boating and light-keeping experience is at play. Notice I didn't say 'at work,' because I'm having way too much fun! I'm also slowly amassing my third collection of short stories for adults that are about altruism, being of service,

and being useful, in the fields of social services and international education and youth work.

How can readers learn more about you?

CW: www.carolinewoodward.ca, and I'm on Facebook and a blog at <http://woodwardon-words.blogspot.com>.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of seventeen picture books, most recently Inside the Books (Upstart, 2012) and Stay Close to Mama (Hyperion, 2012) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

