



## Website

[www.ssmatheson.ca](http://www.ssmatheson.ca)

# Shirlee Smith Matheson

Shirlee Smith Matheson has lived on a farm near the Riding Mountains in Manitoba; on a farm near Sylvan Lake, Alberta, where her older brother still lives; in Lacombe, Alberta; Vernon and Hudson's Hope, British Columbia; in Australia; and in Calgary.

As a child she enjoyed the *Dr. Doolittle* books, *Mary Poppins* and the *Anne of Green Gables* series. However, she longed for stories about the prairies, which lead her to the nature books by Red Deer writer Kerry Wood. In Lacombe, when Shirlee tried to sign *Grapes of Wrath* out of the local library, the librarian refused until Shirlee agreed to report to her parents what book she had taken out. She loved John Steinbeck's books so much she credits his writing with influencing her own. Along with Steinbeck's work she discovered Margaret Laurence and Farley Mowat. Her parents always supported her reading and her writing. Her maiden name "Smith" as part of her full name is in tribute to them.

Becoming a writer, Shirlee thought, was not realistic for somebody whose writing consisted of keeping diaries and writing poems privately. However, when she and her husband moved to Vernon, she joined a writer's group. She began entering their Christmas contests and winning prizes for her short stories. For six or seven years Shirlee consistently won prizes in their contests.

Encouraged by these successes, she applied to the six-week Writing Program at the Banff Centre and was accepted. W.O. Mitchell was the head of the program; other instructors were Alistair MacLeod, Irving Layton,

# Bibliography

## Adult Non-Fiction

*Youngblood of the Peace*: (Lone Pine, 1987); 2nd edition, Detselig/Tameron Books, 1991

*This Was Our Valley* (co-authored with Earl K. Pollon): Detselig/Tameron Books, 1989; 2nd printing 1991; 2nd edition, 2003

*Flying the Frontiers — A Half Million Hours of Aviation Adventure*: Fifth House/Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1994; 7th printing 2005

*Flying the Frontiers Vol. II, More Hours of Aviation Adventure*: Detselig/Tameron Books, 1996; 2nd printing, 1997

*Flying the Frontiers, Vol. III, Aviation Adventures Around the World*: Detselig/Tameron Books, 1999

*A Western Welcome to the World - The History of the Calgary International Airport*: Cherbo Publishers, 1997

*Lost — True Stories of Canadian Aviation Tragedies*: Fifth House/Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005

*Maverick in the Sky: The Aerial Adventures of WWI Flying Ace Freddie McCall*: Frontenac House, 2007

*Amazing Flights and Flyers*, Frontenac House, 2010

[NEW]

## Teen Novels

*Prairie Pictures*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1989; 2nd printing 1994

*City Pictures*, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994 (sequel to *Prairie Pictures*); B. Wahlstroms Bokforlag, Sweden 1995

*Flying Ghosts*, Stoddart, 1993; 2nd printing 2005 (taken over by Fitzhenry/Whiteside)

*The Gambler's Daughter*, Beach Holme, 1998 (sequel to *Flying Ghosts*)

*Keeper of the Mountains*, Thistledown, 2000

Richard Lemm, Phyllis Webb and Orm Mitchell. "They set me on a professional path."

Ideas for books seem to present themselves, as Shirlee's move to Hudson's Hope confirms. *Youngblood of the Peace* came about when community members came to her with the idea. "It snowballed from there." Robert Kroetsch and Ruth Bertelson, from the Banff Centre course, offered to write letters supporting her application to Canada Council for a writing grant. Her second book, *This Was Our Valley*, came as a result of her and her husband both working on the Peace River power projects in British Columbia. Life continues to present her with ideas. As well as her work in non-fiction, she is a successful children's author. "It is a relief after working hard on a non-fiction book to work on a children's story." It isn't that one is easier than the other, just different.

Shirlee works at the Aero Space Museum Association of Calgary four days a week and writes for the other three days. "I've worked office hours for so much of my life that I work the same hours when I write," she says. She estimates that she does dozens of revisions. "For one short story I wrote 27 drafts. If I had done only 26 it might still be in my desk drawer." She seeks out authorities who are knowledgeable in the fields she is writing about to scrutinize her manuscripts. "I want the details to be exact. I write for the experts," she says. "I must get the work as good as possible before sending it out, because editors are so overworked they don't have time to clean up messes."

Shirlee's definition of success is taking pride in having written her books well and knowing that they add to society's collective knowledge. Awards are not the measure of success for her. "Awards are nice," she says. "Publishers like them because they mean extra sales and there is a certain validation ... but to get an award is not the be all and end all."

Shirlee says censorship is "the insidious restrictions that come about because a certain individual doesn't like your book or doesn't want that kind

*Fastback Beach*, Orca Book Publishers, "Orca Soundings" series: 2003

*Jailbird Kid*, Dundurn Group, 2010 [NEW]

## Awards

- Alberta Culture: First prize for Non-Fiction; Roderick Haig-Brown B.C. Book Prize: finalist for *This Was Our Valley*, 1990 — *This Was Our Valley*
- 99s Organization of Women Pilots: Canadian Award in Aviation, 1999
- Athabasca University, Distinguished Alumni: 2001-2
- Emerald Award finalist for Environmental Excellence: 2001
- Northern Lights College, British Columbia: Honorary Associate of Arts degree, 2001
- Canadian Children's Book Centre "Choice" for all teen novels. (1992, '94, '95, '98; 2000, & '03)

## Memberships & Associations

- Writers Guild of Alberta
- Writers' Union of Canada
- Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators & Performers (CANSCAIP)
- Canadian Children's Book Centre
- Young Alberta Book Society
- Canadian Women in Aviation International, Rocky Mountain High Chapter
- Aero Space Museum of Calgary (Lifetime Member)
- British Columbia Aviation Museum
- Nanton Lancaster Society

of thing published." She asks, "How can you write about issues if you are not going to strike some sensitive points? If censorship stops somebody like me reading *Grapes of Wrath*, I think it is totally wrong." Shirlee acknowledges that she does self-censor her work. "If leaving a swear word out of a novel for young adults is self-censorship, then that is my choice, I'm the writer."

Shirlee acknowledges that she has had help along the way, such as from W.O. Mitchell and George Melnyk, as well as from professional associations through memberships in the organizations listed. In giving back to the community, she has taught many creative writing courses. She's served as Writer-in-Residence for the Alexandra Writers Centre Society (1997), the Medicine Hat Public Library/Medicine Hat College (1996), the Calgary Public Library (1998) and Don Bosco Elementary/Jr. High School (2001).

Shirlee enjoys giving public readings. Her readings and workshop attendees range from primary school students to adults. She can be contacted via her website ([www.ssmatheson.ca](http://www.ssmatheson.ca)) or through her publishers.

With ideas constantly coming to her, it isn't hard to imagine Shirlee's future. "Every time I finish an intense work I say I am never going to write another book. Then somebody comes along and says, 'Have you heard this story?'"

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