

# Myrna Kostash and the Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar Program

Spring 2002

—Ian Angus



Myrna Kostash

The Institute for the Humanities is pleased to announce that Edmonton-based author Myrna Kostash will be the Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar in Spring 2002. As visiting scholar she will meet with students and faculty and deliver the Grace MacInnis Memorial Lecture. Previous Grace MacInnis visiting scholars include Shirley Williams (1993), Joy Kogawa (1995), and Lynn MacDonald (1997).

Myrna Kostash's writing of creative non-fiction combines reporting indebted to New Journalism with a literary concern with expressive form which sustains both intensely personal questioning and political engagement. Her work has been widely reviewed and described with numerous accolades. She has been called "an extraordinarily gifted writer" by Alberto Manguel, "an incisive chronicler of social history" (*Globe and Mail*) and "one of Canada's most intelligent and conscientious writers" (*Books in Canada*). Her work has been widely read and discussed as a model of engaged and reflective political writing. She was recently shortlisted for the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for political writing for *The Next Canada: In Search of the Future Nation* (McClelland and Stewart, 2000). Current projects deal with topics arising from her persistent travel to, and study of, the Balkans.

Myrna Kostash is the author of six non-fiction books, is a frequent contributor to periodicals and anthologies, an occasional writer for radio and the stage, and has taught creative writing at many universities and summer writing schools. She has been writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library (1996-7), the Whyte Museum and Gallery (1995), and The Loft in Minneapolis (1994), was Ashley Fellow at Trent University (1996), and Max Bell Professor of

Journalism at the University of Regina (1989-90). She is also a frequent juror for literary competitions by the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Manitoba Arts Council, the Alberta Foundation for the Literary Arts, and the Governor-General's Non-Fiction Award and other organizations. She is also on the board of The Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta.

In addition, she has been active for many years in writers' organizations and in the politics of writing. She is past Chair of The Writers' Union of Canada (1993-4), a founding member of The Periodical Writers' Association of Canada, a founding member and President of the Writers' Guild of Alberta, serves on the executive committee of the Canadian Conference of the Arts, and is an active participant in many artists' organizations.

Kostash's most recent book, *The Next Canada* has provoked many reviews, critiques and accolades. It records reflections on her interviews with young Canadians (25-35) active in artistic, political and economic life. Kostash compares the views of these Canadians who will influence our future nation with the ideals of her own generation of the 1960s. While she records many fascinating cultural, economic and political shifts, her main interest is in the attitude of young people to the ideals of social justice that dominated the sixties and contributed to the formation of her own vocation as a political writer. Despite a tendency to be skeptical of labels such as feminism, socialism and nationalism, she finds that the new generation associate being Canadian with a striving for social justice. Across the linguistic divide that has come to be associated with postmodernism, she finds a continuity with the ideals of the 1960s

that sounds a new note of hope in beleaguered times.

Myrna Kostash's Grace McInnis Memorial Lecture will take its theme from the comments and debates aroused by *The Next Canada* and will reflect on the creative writing of the history of minority peoples and critical social movements.

Kostash's writing has always been socially engaged and has contributed to widening and reforming the accepted view of events. Her celebrated first book *All of Baba's Children* (1977, reissued 1987) traced the history of the generation after Alberta's Ukrainian immigrants and contributed to the construction of a multicultural history of Canada such that she subsequently became a major voice in debates concerning multiculturalism. *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls* (McClelland and Stewart, 1987) revealed the gender and economic constraints that entrap many girls and young women. She concluded "Two things would help her realize her possibilities: democratic and non-sexist social and economic institutions; and her own conviction (let her be given space and autonomy enough!) that she can be and do more than she was ever allowed to imagine. Let her imagine herself bold and clever and sovereign. Let her imagine herself a woman." *No Kidding* was awarded the Alberta Culture Prize for Best Non-Fiction and the Writers' Guild of Alberta Prize for Best Non-Fiction.

*Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation* (Lorimer, 1980) told the history of the formation of

the New Left in Canada at a time in which it was being buried by the resurgence of the Right. Kostash has a remarkable ability to tell an engaging story while undoing the settled interpretations that would relegate it to a detail. Her work is a valiant struggle for what one might call 'minoritarian history,' or history written by those excluded from power. The book can also be read as the story of the formation of Kostash's own political sensibility which is expressed in her writing as the combination of personal questioning and political engagement.

In *Bloodlines: A Journey Into Eastern Europe* (Douglas and McIntyre, 1993) she followed her own origins back before the emigration to Canada into the tangled politics of Eastern Europe. It is perhaps the most tragic of her books, since it explored the common and interwoven roots of Eastern European ethnicities just prior to the explosion of ethnic violence in that region. In the introduction, Kostash noted that "I did not know in 1988 that everything was about to change—visits to Serbia and Ukraine at the end of 1991 were a kind of coda to my journeys—and so this is not a book about the revolution. This is a book about memory." While it has been, to some extent, sadly overtaken by events, it can nonetheless be read as a reminder that the turn of events was not an inevitable result of ancient conflicts, but was a political response to the fall of communism. Perhaps this historical 'chance' was more than that. Throughout her work, Kostash writes more of memory than of revolution, though she writes often of the desire for revolution. It is a profoundly Canadian political sensibility that guides her work: the combination of memory and longing for change. Looking back, looking forward: a change that would preserve as it overturns.

*The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (NeWest Press, 1998) is her most personal book. It describes an erotic journey of attraction to Eastern



European dissidents that pursues and explicates a tangled relationship between politics, power and desire. Probing the misunderstandings between the western New Left and dissidents in Soviet-style societies, it nevertheless wants to assert that they had a common project of recovering grassroots democracy that has been buried by subsequent events. This remarkable book provoked Lynn Crosbie to say that "Myrna Kostash writes like a bohemian Tosca—*The Doomed Bridegroom* is a lyrical, lovesick, and compelling antidote to the commonplace memoir."

Myrna Kostash's work has always been a battle with the commonplace, an opening out of the flattened present through memory and

desire that imprecates the most personal questioning with political struggles and the experiences of the battlements. Her Grace MacInnis Memorial Lecture in Spring 2002 will be a memorable experience that the Institute for the Humanities is proud to present.

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*Myrna Kostash will speak at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby on March 14 and at the Vancouver Public Library on March 15, 2002. For more information, contact Trish Graham at [grahama@sfu.ca](mailto:grahama@sfu.ca) or 604-291-5855.*