

**A passion for justice: Helwig explores the costs of war**

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Whether she was slaving away in a bookstore to make ends meet, working as a typesetter or trying to sneak across the Thai-Burma border, a common thread has run through author Maggie Helwig's diverse career.

In her fierce desire to undo the wrongs and human rights atrocities of the world, she has travelled around the globe, forming the contacts that would one day inspire her fictional characters.

Helwig's latest work is a novel set in the former Yugoslavia and at the International Criminal Court in The Hague at the trial of a man accused of terrible war crimes. But she is adamant that the book, released today, not be viewed as a political manifesto.

On the contrary, *Between Mountains* is being hailed by critics as a passionate and poetic love story that has put a human face on the repercussions of war.

Described as equal parts thriller and mystery, the novel details the evolution of a relationship between a Canadian journalist in postwar Bosnia and a Serbian-Albanian interpreter. Their attempts to juggle a fragile relationship are threatened by their haunting pasts as well as their livelihoods -- telling and listening to the stories of the victims and perpetrators of war crimes.

"Wars don't end when the shooting stops," says Helwig in a telephone interview from her Toronto home.

"People and the relationships they form with one another are all affected by violence in an ongoing way. The book raises questions of how we can deal with it."

Helwig, 42, has combined her passion for writing and her passion for justice into a successful career as an author.

Today, she splits her time between raising her eight-year-old daughter with her husband, also a writer and former journalist, and working on her next novel, which will be set in Toronto.

Growing up in a literary household in the heart of Kingston, Ont., she started writing early on, publishing her first book of poetry at the tender age of 19.

"I knew from the age of three that I was going to be a writer," she says. "As far back as my memory extends, I have always been writing. Even when I was a toddler, I would dictate my

poetry to my mother so she could write it down for me.”

Her father was a novelist and poet as well as a university professor, which perhaps led to her adolescent suspicion of anything academic and her subsequent foray into earning a BA degree in Latin at Trent University -- taking only one course in English literature along the way.

But as far as activism goes, Helwig says she was the only person in her family who was politically active.

Her activist career included jobs with the East Timor Alert Network in Toronto and England, the Women in Black Network and War Resisters' International.

Her protests against the illegal occupation of east Timor by the Indonesian government led to her being put on a blacklist by the Indonesian government.

“In the late ‘80s, early ‘90s, I was always getting arrested,” she recalls. “Many police officers called me by my first name. One of them turned out to be someone I went to high school with.”

It is difficult to picture this soft-spoken woman throwing vials of human blood at the doors of the Indonesian consulate to protest the human rights atrocities committed in East Timor, or blocking the road to Minister of Foreign Affairs Bill Graham's office.

“The situation in the Balkans was a far more complicated situation to protest about than East Timor, where there was actually a right side and a wrong side,” says Helwig.

“It wasn't the sort of conflict that lent itself to marches and demonstrations.”

*Between Mountains* evolved from the personal relationships she developed with refugees from Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, as well as visits she paid to the former Yugoslavia.

It was also written as a tribute to a Serbian colleague and fellow activist, Dejan Nebrigic, who acted as her visa sponsor on her first trip to the region.

It was his murder in a domestic conflict with his homosexual lover that first prompted her to look at how war distorts personal relationships and causes the normal barriers we hold against violence to go down.

Society in the post-war aftermath of the former Yugoslavia had become so desensitized by ongoing assassinations, gangs and war crimes that domestic violence was no longer taken seriously. Dejan's murder never received the benefit of justice, as his killer did not go to court for his crime.

“When I heard about Dejan's death, I knew that I had to write something that could knit together the big picture of the wars and the extreme intimacy of private relationships, that could talk in some way about how they twine around each other, how they feed into and affect each other, because in a time of war, no personal relationship is entirely private or safe,” Helwig says.

“I also wanted to pay some credit to people like Dejan who didn't give in to the violence around them and who tried to work against the war and extreme nationalism.

“The only genuinely heroic character in my book is named after him.”

A chapter near the end of the novel where Nikolai Marcovic, the war criminal on trial, remembers what it was like to go into the concentration camps, proved to be the most

painful part for Helwig to write.

"For two weeks I did everything I could to put it off. Suddenly I had to clean the house from top to bottom," she recalls.

"Finally I did the whole thing in one day, in one fast go.

"It was painful to have to inhabit the mind of a war criminal, to be able to sympathize with them, to feel what it is like when all the normal restraints of human civilization have broken down.

"You begin to wonder if there's anything in yourself that would prevent you from doing the same thing if these external barriers were removed."

There is an important lesson to be learned from this conflict, Helwig says.

"A few powerful people used deliberate ethnic hatred as a route to power. When there is propaganda between two groups of people, the consequences can be swift and terrible. It could happen here. It could happen anywhere."