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REMEMBERING THE EMPRESS

Ottawa writer Caroline Pignat tells *Peter Robb* about her new book on the sinking of the Empress of Ireland on May 29, 1914, in the St. Lawrence River. The death toll was 1,012, making it the worst Canadian maritime accident in peacetime.

UNSPEAKABLE
Caroline Pignat (Penguin Canada)

Q Who are you?

A I was born in Ireland, grew up in Ottawa and now live and teach in Kanata. I married my Grade 8 boyfriend (crazy, huh?) Tony, and we have two kids: Liam is almost 19 and Marion is 13.

Q How many books for young readers have you written? What are they and what are they about?

A I have published five novels with another coming out this fall and one more contracted for 2015:

- *Egghead* (2008), my first, looks at bullying through the eyes of two bystanders: the friend of the bully and the friend of the victim. It has received awards and nominations and is a recommended read by KidsHelpPhone.
- *Greener Grass* (2008) won the 2009 Governor General's Award and follows a young girl and her family during the Irish famine in 1847. The sequel, *Wild Geese*, follows Kit's emigration aboard a coffin ship, her time at Grosse Isle quarantine station in Quebec, and her life in Bytown under the care of Mother Elisabeth Bruyère.
- *Timber Wolf* (2011) is a stand-alone told in the voice of Kit's brother, Jack. Mid-winter in the Canadian wilderness along the Ottawa River, 12-year-old Jack is alone, injured and lost. He is soon discovered by an Algonquin boy and together they learn about life, survival and what it truly means to be a man of honour.
- *Unspeakable* (May 2014) is a story about the sinking of the Empress of Ireland on May 29, 1914. Seen through the eyes of a young stewardess, *Unspeakable* is about lost lives, lost hope and lost love. Ellie survives the sinking and learns to move through her grief, guilt and regret. By telling her story, Ellie shares the unspeakable.
- *The Gospel Truth* (Fall 2014) is set on a Virginia tobacco plantation in 1858. It involves a slave woman named Phoebe and a Canadian visitor modelled on anti-slavery activist Alexander Milton Ross.

Q What attracts you to a story?

A I love strong characters and have always been inspired by the strength of the human spirit. It fascinates me to learn of an historic event like the famine or the sinking of the Empress and to imagine what it must have been like for those who lived through it. How would it change them? And what can we learn from their story?

Q Why did you choose to write about the Empress of Ireland?

A I graduated from Canadian schools and universities, heck, I've been teaching in them for years, and shamefully, I'd never even heard of the Empress. But, as I asked around, apparently most of us hadn't. The Empress of Ireland was lost to the St. Lawrence a century ago, but perhaps the greater tragedy was how its story, the stories of all those aboard, has been lost over time. It makes me wonder how many more of our stories we've lost. It makes me want to find and share more.

Q This is the anniversary year of the beginning of the First World War? We tend to focus on events in anniversary years. Do we know enough about our history?

A Because war broke out 10 weeks after the sinking, it's not surprising the Empress of Ireland was lost in the news. There were greater, global tragedies. No, I don't think we know enough about our history. Even if we could rhyme off dates and facts (which most of us can't), it feels like we've forgotten the people. We've lost the stories. We've filled our heads with fake dramas on television and left little or no space for real stories of truly inspiring characters. When I do author visits and speak to students of all ages about the famine, Irish immigration, life in Upper Canada and now the sinking of the Empress of Ireland, they are enthralled by the facts and fascinated by the people: Elisabeth Bruyère was 29 when she was sent to take care of things in rowdy Bytown. Alexander Milton Ross risked his life posing as a birdwatcher touring plantations while he gave slaves the tools to find freedom. Father Robson and Dr. Benson gave their lives to help the waves of typhus-ridden immigrants arriving on Canadian shores during the Irish famine while Father Cazeau found hundreds of families to adopt those famine orphans. And Dr. Grant

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BOOK LAUNCH

Author Caroline Pignat will launch her new novel, *Unspeakable*, on May 31 from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at D'Arcy McGee's, 655 Terry Fox Dr., Kanata.

of the Empress of Ireland helped save the lives of many survivors. These are our heroes. These are the people our kids should know about. And they want to know about them. Why aren't we telling those stories?

Q What do you teach? To what grade?

A I have taught elementary, intermediate and high school over the years. I am a religion and English teacher and I teach Grade 12 writer's craft at All Saints High School in Kanata.

Q Is there a direct line between teaching and writing for you?

A *Greener Grass* started as a story I wrote when I was a Grade 11 student at Notre Dame High School in Ottawa. The seed that sprouted into an award-winning trilogy was with me as a teenager. I want to do whatever I can to help my students and readers sift through the stories they carry and find the one they must tell. I want to help them find their voice and the courage to speak it. It's the way I teach — but also, apparently, a recurring theme in my novels. Everyone has a story. Those stories in the past must be found and retold. And those in our present, the ones sitting in those desks or around our dinner tables, those are the ones that we must nurture and truly hear. Make time to listen.

Q Teaching is a demanding profession? How do you find time to write? When do you write?

A It was crazy when I was teaching full time. I only wrote on weekends. But now, I teach part time and write, research or do author visits in the afternoons. It's the best of both worlds and my family hasn't "lost me to the 19th century again."

Q Why is YA literature important?

A I see great things in today's youth. Enthusiasm. Potential. Openness. Above all, I see an eagerness to make a difference and the optimism to think they can. Young people are just finding their voice. Just learning their own stories. Just starting to really live them and own them, really. Literature helps with that. Great YA literature meets these kids where they are at — on the borders of childhood and adulthood.

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