

# Prolific columnist pens first book

by JORDAN ROSS

The voluminous lifetime output of the English writer G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) is said to have equalled 2,000 words for every day he spent on Earth.

If Manitoba's own MaryLou Driedger keeps up her current

pace, she might just give Chesterton a run for his money.

Driedger, a veteran newspaper columnist and blogger, doesn't struggle with writer's block.

"I'm a write-aholic," she joked earlier this month from a picnic table in Winnipeg's Stephen Juba Park, a stone's throw from the Exchange District condominium she shares with her husband, Dave.

"People make sense of the world in different ways, and I guess my way is to write."

Driedger has been a *Carillon* columnist for 36 years. She calculated she has produced about 1,500 columns to date. She has also contributed to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and faithfully posts a new entry every morning on her blog, *What Next?*

Not long after retiring from teaching in Hanover School Division, Driedger read a book that recommended retirees try something different.

But when she sat down to write her first book—a historical novel geared towards middle schoolers—she found writing in a new register, and for a new audience, was more challenging than she expected.

The resulting book was a journey for author and protagonist alike.

*Lost on the Prairie* is a fictional reimagining of a train journey from Kansas to Saskatchewan that Driedger's grandfather, Peter Schmidt, took as a boy in 1907.

Schmidt died from injuries sustained in a car accident when Driedger was just seven years old.

"Writing this book really helped me learn more about his life," Driedger said.

When Schmidt was a boy, his family moved from Kansas to Drake, Sask., a village midway between Regina and Saskatoon.

One day in 2014, while helping a relative pack for a move, Driedger found a memoir written by her grandfather's youngest sister, Alma, that recounted the family's train ride north, through Omaha, Neb. and Minneapolis, Minn. The memoir stated each of Alma's brothers travelled in a separate boxcar alongside livestock.

When the train arrived in Saskatchewan, "the car with Pete and the horses was gone," Alma wrote. The disappearance was never explained, but Peter did reunite with his family.

"Where had he gone? I was really intrigued with that," Driedger recalled.

She plunged into a prolonged period of historical research that began online. Retracing the train route using rail company data, Driedger looked for places where a car could have come uncoupled. One such spot was the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota.

In 2016, Driedger and her husband drove down to the county seat of Sisseton, S.D., where Driedger dug in at the local library, scanning 110-year-old newspaper clippings on microfiche.

Driedger also drew on her own childhood memories of train rides from Winnipeg to Drake to visit her grandparents. She and Dave also took a train journey through Ukraine.

As Driedger worked on the manuscript, she joined children's literature workshops and travelled to writing conferences in Toronto and Saskatoon, where she received encouraging feedback. A Winnipeg author group also provided valuable critiques.

Driedger said her prior writing experience gave her the discipline to keep writing and editing, and the perseverance to deal with rejection letters from publishers. (The book is published by Wandering Fox, an imprint of Heritage House, which specializes in western Canadian fiction.)

The book is geared toward children between the ages of eight and 12. Driedger kept her nine-year-old grandson in mind as she worked.

"There's an adventure in every chapter," she said. "I'm hoping adults will enjoy it too."

The book depicts a boy emerging from a sheltered upbringing into the wider world, where he encounters people from all walks of life.

"He's got to use his brain and be self-reliant," Driedger said.

Young Peter bumps into Mark Twain and is invited to stay for a while with an Indigenous family on the Reservation. Driedger worked with a local First Nations consultant to ensure those scenes were accurate and culturally appropriate.

Driedger added a study guide to the back of the book. She said she hopes classrooms can read the book together.

Gregarious by nature, Driedger said it's hard launching a book at a time when book clubs, writing workshops, school visits, and book tours have all been cancelled or moved online.

Ever prolific, she's already at work on her next book, set in Steinbach and tentatively titled *Sixties Girl*.

*Lost on the Prairie* is available from Amazon and Indigo, and from McNally Robinson Booksellers, which will host a June 16 virtual book launch event starting at 7 p.m.



MaryLou Driedger's first novel, *Lost on the Prairie*, is inspired by a train journey her grandfather took in 1907.

JORDAN ROSS THE CARILLON