

Interview for “Rooke's Island: The Prophecy of the Staring Eyes” by Debbie Glade

Today, Tyler Tichelaar of Reader Views is happy to be joined by S.K. Whalen (Sue) and her granddaughter, Miss Vickie, who are here to talk about their new book "Rooke's Island: The Prophecy of the Staring Eyes."

Sue Whalen, grew up in a natural wilderness park in North Vancouver, BC, Canada. Her parents, at that time were the caretakers of the park and ran a store, a food concession, and a gift shop for the thousands of visitors who enjoyed the park each year. A rainforest of giant one-hundred year old Douglas-fir, hemlock, and red cedars, surrounded the family's home. Twin snowy mountain peaks, a deep canyon and a world famous suspension bridge were the view from the picture window of their home. The cable suspension bridge swayed 20 stories above the raging Lynn Creek. Sue loved to hike the mountain trails, swim and fish in the creek. Reflecting back, Sue, says it was these early years that influenced her storytelling and love of nature. Sue now lives in Fall River, Nova Scotia, with her husband Ken and her adult children and grandchildren live near by.

Miss Vickie, Sue's granddaughter was the author's helper. She was the spark and the continued light of the story. Miss Vickie was Sue's connection to the imagination of a young reader—most importantly, Miss Vickie had to like it, or it was re-written.

Tyler: Welcome, Sue I'm glad you and Miss Vickie could join me today. What a great fantasy adventure story you've written. To start out, will you tell us about the main character, Margery Mutters?

Sue: Well, Margery is a middle-aged schoolteacher. The story starts with Margery living in a house at the top of Old Oak Hill in Canyon city. She lives alone, a quiet humdrum, boring life, really. She loves nature and her garden more than anything else. Margery is quite an extraordinary lady, but that part is a secret she keeps under her hat, literally, under her hat. One of Margery's quirks is she always wears a hat on her head. As it happens, the hat becomes very important—a small Saw-Whet owl of only 4.5" high becomes Margery's constant companion and rides in the centerfolds of her hat.

Margery is a granola lady, a mixture of everything, never the same. She always has high energy, as well as being a kind, and caring person. However, often her thoughts and feelings don't match her actions. Always the optimist through every obstacle and danger, she never gives up and has faith that all will be well. There is an inner strength that keeps her going; no matter how frightened she is, never does she show her fears on her face. Often she acts or speaks before she thinks; she becomes annoyed quite easily, judges people far too quickly, stares at people when she shouldn't, and she often shows bad manners at the table. To top it off, she considers herself rather a proper lady—you know the type, a teetotaler and quiet tea sipper. She is a lady who knows proper manners and knows the difference. Margery becomes embarrassed, flustered, and puts herself into a tizzy when her conscience wakes up and she realizes how rude her actions are.

Tyler: Why did you feel such a character as Margery, with the specific strengths and weaknesses you've just mentioned, was appropriate or even entertaining for the plot of your novel?

Sue: Margery's character is an everyday believable women, neither a magical person, nor a super star, nor a stereotype, or a cookie cutter character. Maybe she is like a grandmother, a great aunt, or the person down the street. Why did it work? Because the reader could identify with her, and be part of her magical journey. She isn't boring, as even the smallest imperfection I have exaggerated. The young child might laugh at her, a teenager might love her strength, her fears and her doubts. Older and even elderly people may see themselves.

The plot, the, situations, the owls, the scenes were always written first in draft form and then I would write in Margery. I found her 3-dimensional character, her strengths, her flaws and her few ghastly habits gave her more depth. This made it easier for me to give her a wide range of interesting conflicts and adventures where the outcomes were not predetermined and, not predicable. At the same time I let Margery grow through the process of the novel just like a real adventure.

Tyler: Who does Margery inherit the island from? What happens that brings her to Rooke's Island?

Sue: She learns she has inherited an island from her long lost uncle when a mysterious letter arrives under unusual circumstances. Her life changes the moment she touches the letter; it's as if the letter grabs her, controls her and turns her whole world upside down. Her journey to Rooke's Island begins that moment.

Tyler: Before she reaches the island, Margery stops in Alwyn's Village where she meets some interesting people. Will you tell us who they are?

Sue: The characters of Alwyn's Village are a comical cast including: the repulsive Sydney Snog, the chatty Gabriella (Gabbi) Mooley and her hideous Purple Inn. Of course there are the lazy good-for-nothings Messrs Dicky Doolittle, Messrs Hector Dodge and we mustn't forget the macaroni and cheese coloured cat Mr. Dinky. There is a storekeeper, the perfect Peter Puddley, and the owners of Kettle's Kafe, the carpenter Mugs Kettle and his ever so lovely gossipy fat wife Snippy Lippy.

Tyler: What do the people of Alwyn's Village think about Rooke's Island? Do they make Margery curious or nervous about going there?

Sue: Tyler, for hundreds of years Margery's reclusive uncle and great uncles guard the island. With guns on their shoulders ensuring no trespasser step one foot on the island. The village people are just plain tired of the secrecy; rumors and speculations run wild. On Margery's journey to the island, she also has a crazy old owl that has lost his wits following her and an owl completely made of shells appearing in her dreams. With all this going on she is very nervous; the fear of the unknown gives her a constant stomach ache. I have to say she is more curious than nervous and she pushes herself on to the island. The story is written so you know her curiosity won.

Tyler: Is Rooke's Island magical and completely like another fantasy world, or does it still bear some similarity to the everyday world?

Sue: Rooke's Island on the surface looks like any other island in the real world. The fantasy world is deep beneath the island. The island is divided into three levels called: the Upper Earth, Lower Earth and Inner Earth. The Upper Earth is the surface of the island home of the earthling owls, the Lower Earth the kingdom of the folklore owl, troll, fairy, elf, and gnomish owls. The Inner Earth is miles into the core deep into the center of the island where hundreds and hundreds of ancient owls live. The king of all the owls, his mate Queen of the Ocean, the hundreds of soldier owls the Ings, the hundreds of Indigos the owls that light the earth. As well as the golden owl who holds the scroll, which is the prophecy for the future of the owls.

Tyler: Will you tell us about Margery's encounter with the owls on the island?

Sue: Every chapter has a new magic encounter with the owls—sometimes with one owl sometimes with hundreds of owls. Parliaments of owls live and work in each of the levels on the island. All the owls are very important to the prophecy.

Tyler: Sue, can you tell us about the prophecy of the staring eyes? What is the prophecy and why is it important?

Sue: First the eyes represent all of the owls on the island and on earth. The prophecy was written in the past but it is the future of the owls. As written, the timing and every detail of the prophecy must be followed or the owls will wait another thousand years before a new owl king can be born. It is vital that the owls have a strong owl king so 'Wisdom' can continue to rule over the birds of prey. Margery arrives just in time to help the owls unfold the prophecy.

Tyler: Did Margery's uncles live with the owls and know about them. Was that why they were keeping people from the island?

Sue: The owls were part of the island long before it was inhabited by Margery's ancestors, her uncles, the Rookes. The uncles became part of the owl kingdom, and part of the owl council; they are called the 'No Feathers' by the owls. The owls needed them to keep people off the island and keep the owls' secrets. When Margery arrives everything is ready for her, she had a nice modern cottage and garden. Her uncles built a huge barn called the Scared Barn. The barn is the meeting place for the Parliament owls of all three levels of the island. The prophecy will be read in the barn by the King of all owls called Eyking.

Tyler: Sue, without giving away the ending, would you say that Margery learns anything as a result of her experiences on Rooke's Island?

Sue: Our Margery—that's what Miss Vickie and I like to call her. The prophecy would never have taken place without her help; the owls needed her. The best part about Margery is we find out she is as wise as the wise old owls. You will watch Margery adapt and become stronger as she blends seamlessly into the owls' world and is woven into the prophecy. She is calmer, happier, more understanding and shows great patience with the owls. Not only that, she balances the real world and the fantasy world of Rooke's Island, becoming one with the owls and nature.

Tyler: Would you say then that Margery is really more in touch with the natural world and animals like the owls than with people?

Sue: Margery, being a schoolteacher, has the knowledge and experience along with a natural tendency toward intuitive perception toward both people and the owls. She wants to be part of both worlds, she definitely does not want to be a recluse like her uncles. I guess years of being in the classroom with children helps her understand all the personalities of the owls. She becomes devoted to them. The owls become the most important thing in her life.

Tyler: Miss Vickie, I understand Margery also has a young human companion. Will you tell us a little bit about him? Was it your idea that Margery have a younger companion?

Miss Vickie: You're right; it is a 14 year old boy. He is special; he holds a secret and a promise he made to Margery's uncle. I don't remember whose idea it was; he just seemed always to be in the story. Margery needed him and he helps her build things. I do remember his eight year old sister Megan was my idea and she looks just like me.

Tyler: Sue, where did you come up with the idea for "Rooke's Island"?

Sue: When I was very young, I often visited my Aunt Margery; she collected owl figurines. She had owls everywhere in her home. Back in the day, everyone collected something. My Aunt never had children, so when she was 94 years old, she packed all her owls for the last time in her life and shipped them 8,000 miles by truck, car, and plane to my home. I think the owls were dormant statues in her home for over 70 years. In terms of my life span, I first saw the owls when I was four—I graduated from school—went into the Navy—was married—had children—my children grew up—they had children—and then the owls came back into my life.

The owls arrived in two large cardboard boxes, 312 Friday's ago. I know this because Miss Vickie came to my house every Friday and she was only six when the box arrived. We opened the boxes and both of us stared at hundreds of packages, little mounds of plastic of bubble wrap. We carefully unwrapped each owl; we were so intrigued we placed each owl on glass wall shelves in a room. The room we called the Peach Room where it all started; the magical owls told their story through their eyes. The tiny owl figurines, traveled across Canada, so it is a fantasy made in Canada.

Rooke's Island, shows anything can have a story, if the timing is right. The story bridges generations, starting with my aunt. Yes, the main character is named after her. Why not? Without her owl collection there would be no story. We all prove you are never too old and never too young to dream up a story together. There were ninety years between my aunt and my granddaughter.

Tyler: That is a wonderful story, Sue, and really a tale of women from different generations coming together to tell the story. What do you think your aunt would say to you today if she knew you had written about her and her owls?

Sue: Tyler, my aunt lived two more years after she shipped the owls to me. Once a week she would call me from British Columbia. During these weekly talks, she would always want an update of the story. She loved the fact that I used her name; she couldn't believe her collection was coming to live in a fantasy. She laughed a lot about the characters and the owl personalities. The funny thing was she wanted Margery to be exactly like her, and wanted Margery married. It was like she wanted to live on through my writing. I did compromise as Alwyn's Village is the middle name of my uncle and the river on Rooke's Island is called Lady-Cap which is an abbreviation for Ladysmith and Capilano where my aunt and uncle were from.

Vickie and I put together an ending before my aunt died. Even though it was another two years before we actually finished the book, we used the ending we wrote down for her. My aunt made me promise I would have it published. I'm sure she would love the book; I have sent it to many of her elderly friends that remember her owl collection and received some wonderful letters and notes back.

Tyler: Sue, tell me how you and Miss Vickie first started telling the owl story. Do you remember the moment it began?

Sue: I remember the day we put the owls on the shelves Miss Vickie and I named them. At first it was just for fun; we acted out stories using the owls. The first story was the two ugliest and largest figurines called Eaton and Ardyth; we had them on the day bed fighting, pretending they were defending the owls of an island. We made Eaton and Ardyth the last of the prehistoric birds on earth, great warriors. This first story did become chapters. (Chapter 11: Meeting Eaton, and Chapter 14: Two Owl Birds Meet).

There was one owl who arrived with name scratched on the bottom. When I was seven I etched Eaton on the bottom, unbeknown to my aunt. Miss Vickie decided to keep it this name and my aunt never did find out what I had done.

Tyler: Miss Vickie did you do any of the writing?

Miss Vickie: No I was only six; we finished it when I was nine almost ten. I'm twelve now. We would talk over what would happen next, when I came over the next Friday we would act out the next chapter. I would say what I liked and what I didn't. There was a lot of rewriting.

Tyler: Sue, would you say you had any literary influences from other children's books that maybe you read as a child?

Sue: My favourite childhood book of all time is "Alice in Wonderland." I have read it so many times and still find something new.

Even though "Rooke's Island" was written for young readers, to my surprise I received the following notes. Maybe "Rooke's Island" will be something different to whoever reads it.

A note from an 85 year old women said—"I found it interesting that you paired an older wiser lady with the wisest creatures in the bird kingdom."

A 16 year old girl wrote in her book report—"Margery is a scatterbrain; sometimes she doesn't have a clue what to do, just like me. She must be fifty and she changes her life over night; now that is cool."

A 50 year old woman wrote: “I have read the book twice; I’m just a kid at heart. As we become the graying planet you certainly let us know it doesn’t matter how old or wise we are, human or owls, we can’t predict the future.”

Tyler: Miss Vickie, it must have been fun to help write a book. What were some of your favorite things you did in writing the book?

Miss Vickie: I named most of the owls. I drew the maps in the book, did you notice the maps are owl shaped, and I took the owl pictures. It first started out with storytelling and pretending, and acting out, we never thought it would be a book. I had fun also after the book was published helping with bookmarkers, posters, Rooke’s Island T-shirts, owl cards for each of the owls (like baseball cards). We have done two signings and a book fair that was fun, and this is my second interview.

Tyler: Miss Vickie, do you have a favorite chapter?

Miss Vickie: Yes, Chapter 9, “Secrets of the Giant Redwoods” because we sat beside a huge tree on the path beside our lake. The tree had huge roots I called it the super root highway because I was so small I could hardly climb over the roots. We would pretend that the flap of the tree would open and we would go down the trunk, and sit on a roller coaster and ride under the lake.

I also like Chapter 3, “The Incident at Kettle’s Kafe.” I like the last page. It was an incident we saw at a café when we were out for breakfast. I asked my Nanny to ask the editor not to change anything. The editor said she didn’t change anything—that it was funny just the way it was.

Tyler: Miss Vickie, what do you plan to do next? Do you think you will continue to write books or do you plan to be something else besides an author?

Miss Vickie: My brother and sister want to be part of the next book but I’m sure I will help. I am a figure skater and I skate three hours a day so I don’t have as much time now.

Tyler: And Sue, do you have plans to write any more books, even a sequel maybe to “Rooke’s Island”?

Sue: I have had a sequel in my mind and have started to write snippets and build characters.

Tyler: Sue, before we go, will you tell us where readers can find more information or purchase a copy of “Rooke’s Island”?

Sue: Sure Tyler, you can buy “Rooke’s Island” online from my publisher iUniverse or Amazon books and Amazon Kindle books, Barnes & Noble, Borders, Chapters.ca (Canada).

Tyler: Thank you both for being here today. I think it’s wonderful that you have such a great relationship and could collaborate the way you did. I wish you much luck in making your future dreams become reality.

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