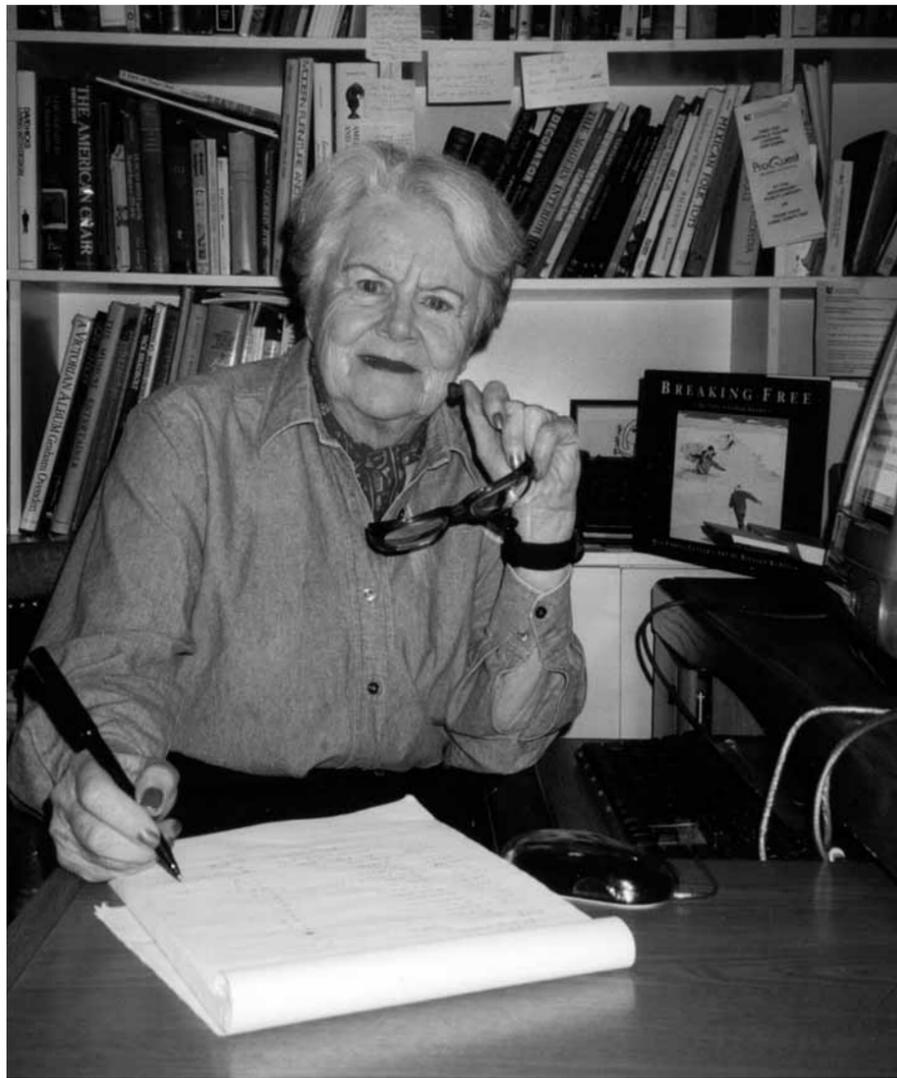


Tundra Books turns 40!

by Gillian O'Reilly



May Cutler, founder of Tundra Books

"May was a pioneer for us all," says Kathy Lowinger, publisher of Tundra Books, the company founded 40 years ago by the remarkable May Cutler.

The oldest children's book publisher in Canada is celebrating its 40th anniversary in many ways – the production of two fascinating samplers from its picture book and fiction collections; a gala on May 15 in Toronto during the conference of the International Reading Association; and an online contest to win the best of Tundra's backlist. This is a year to

applaud both the many ways that founder May Cutler led the way in the Canadian book publishing industry and also her successor's development of a strong and multi-faceted list of books and talented ensemble of authors and illustrators.

In 1967, journalist May Cutler founded a small publishing company that produced architectural and children's books. Although the architecture list was short-lived, Tundra soon became a thriving publisher of high-quality children's picture books.



Kathy Lowinger

In 1995, after almost 30 years as a publisher, May was ready to retire. She sold the company to McClelland & Stewart and Tundra's operations moved to Toronto along with one staff member, Catherine Mitchell. Kathy Lowinger, formerly of Lester Publishing, took over as publisher and the company has continued to this day – producing both the fine quality picture books that Cutler championed, as well as a growing list of award-winning non-fiction and fiction.

There is much more to the story. "Tundra was a pioneer in the quality of books; a pioneer in the quality of production; a pioneer in people telling their stories – the books told Canadians about themselves in an honest and loving fashion; a pioneer in selling directly to the US and a pioneer in selling foreign rights," says Lowinger. "May opened the door for every other publisher that came along."

Passionate, funny, fierce, energetic, original – May Cutler is all of these things. Born in Montreal, the daughter of a policeman and the product of a difficult childhood, she attended McGill University, where she served as features editor at the *McGill Daily* newspaper. She then went on to study journalism at Columbia University in

New York. It was here that she started exploring art galleries – a free form of entertainment for an impoverished student – and developing the knowledge and tastes that she brought to her publishing venture.

She returned to Montreal in the late 1940s to work as a journalist. In 1967, finding it difficult to integrate her life as a mother of four small children with her life as a freelance journalist, she decided to start a publishing company. There were other Canadian companies emerging amidst the heightened nationalism of the time. "A neighbour, Maynard Gertler, seemed to be successfully running his own small publishing firm [Harvest House]. So I thought I could do it too," recalls Cutler.

Her first books were a short series produced for Expo '67, but she soon moved to architecture books and children's books. For a while, she ran a bookstore as well – the first to sell only

Canadian books – but finding it unprofitable, she decided to concentrate on the publishing side.

One of her early ventures was the publication of her own YA book, *I Knew An Old Indian Woman* – a book that was turned down for funding by the Canada Council. (This was at the time when publishers had to apply for funding on a painstaking book by book basis, in contrast to the later block grants which supported the publisher's entire program.) Cutler went ahead with publication and, when interviewed in the fall of 2006, she was tickled to still be receiving royalty cheques.

In 1971, Tundra published its first picture book, *Mary of Mile 18*. Author and illustrator Ann Blades was just 20 when she submitted the manuscript, a story set in and written for the small northern British Columbia community where she was teaching. The story, and the simple but fresh and colourful art,



Catherine Mitchell

spoke to Cutler. Wanting the funds to produce a quality picture book, Cutler again applied to the Canada Council. *Mary of Mile 18* did not appeal to the jury and the book was turned down. Cutler was furious and decided to publish the book anyway; it went on

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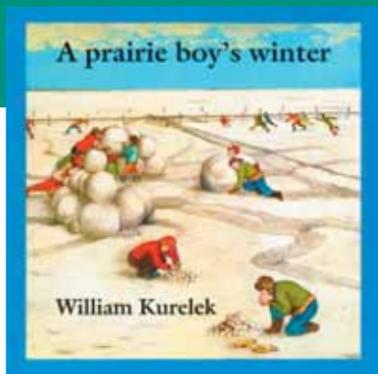
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to national and international success. She didn't reapply to the Canada Council until block grants were instituted a few years later.

Tundra's second book was *A Child in Prison Camp*, Shizuye Takashima's illustrated memoir of the internment of Japanese-Canadians, a story not previously told in Canadian literature. In the next two decades, the Tundra list grew to include William Kurelek, Ted Harrison, Warabé Aska, Dayal Kaur Khalsa, C.J. Taylor, Stéphane Poulin and Song Nan Zhang. Tundra's sophisticated picture book format included non-fiction – from Bonnie Shemie's books on architecture to Song Nan Zhang books on China – and fiction like Stéphane Poulin's Josephine books or Dayal Kaur Khalsa's *I Want a Dog*.

Many of Cutler's illustrators were people she had found through their gallery exhibitions, several were self-taught, and most had never been



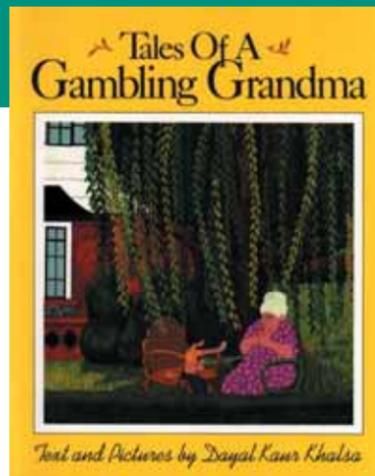
published before. Always on the lookout for fresh and original stories and images, Cutler would ask them if they could write something about their childhood or if they would be interested in illustrating certain stories. The results were books like William Kurelek's memoir of his Ukrainian-Canadian childhood, *A Prairie Boy's Winter* – a book which went on to sell 250,000 copies in nine countries.

A sense of how May Cutler looked for new talent can be found in an obituary for Dayal Kaur Khalsa, published in *CM Magazine* in 1989. In it, Cutler remembered meeting the self-taught artist when she brought in her illustrations in 1982. "They did not

impress for idea, content or technical proficiency, but they had one quality that is less common that you would think: strong colour sense."

Cutler initially commissioned Khalsa to create a series of board books full of bright colours and simple images, but the books did not appeal to adults. Then Khalsa brought in her next book. "Dayal talked about the Grandma book long before she showed it to us. I remember staring, incredulous, at the first illustrations, at grandma taking an orange-juice bath on a train, at the fridge filled with borsch in case the Cossacks came back. Here was a unique talent." In the next seven years, Tundra published 10 more books by Khalsa, who named her spunky protagonist May, after her publisher.

May Cutler's concept of "Canadian children's books as works of art" meant that Tundra books were always characterized by high quality, and thus



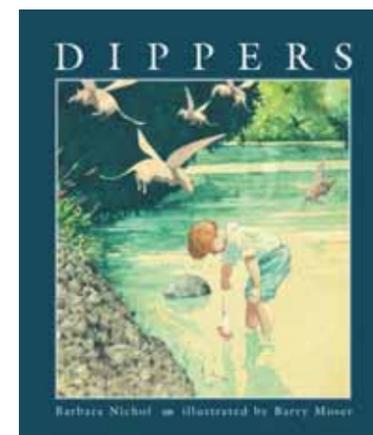
expensive, printing. "I felt I owed it to the artists," she says. The initial advances to the authors might not have been large, but the company's vision also included keeping the books in print for a long time. Today, Kathy Lowinger speaks proudly of the number of books from Tundra's early days that are still in print.

To help finance the production of high-quality picture books, Cutler made a point of attending international book fairs in Bologna and Frankfurt and selling foreign rights to her books – an example which led newer Canadian publishers to do the same. To better reach the American market, she opened an office in upstate New York from which US buyers could easily order – a practice emulated by other Canadian publishers and distributors.

While observers have described Tundra's picture book output as a celebration of the cultural diversity of Canadian society, Cutler did not consciously pursue "multicultural books." She was simply on the lookout for stories that hadn't been told before. Catherine Mitchell (who joined the staff "as a general dogsbody" in 1989 and is now Director of Rights and Special Markets) says that one of her lasting memories is a lunch held at the house Cutler rented for the summer of 1995 in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. Among the guests were several Tundra authors and illustrators including Roch Carrier; Quebecois artist and author Gilles Tibo; Czech-born author and illustrator Ludmila Zeman; Chinese-Canadian artist and author

Song Nan Zhang; and Italian-Canadian Montrealer Antonio de Thomas. "They were talking, sharing their experiences and their differences. Song Nan Zhang sang a song in Chinese and the Zemans sang the same song in Czech. It kind of typified what May had been able to achieve, that she had allowed these people to tell their stories and share their experiences."

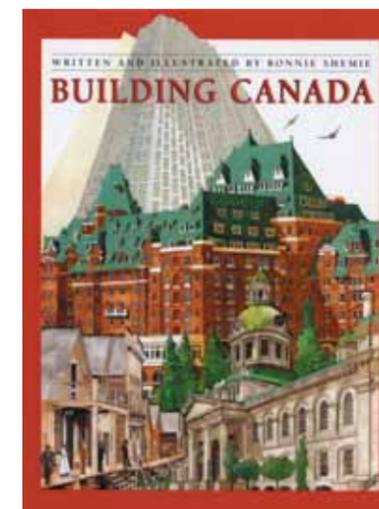
Kathy Lowinger, who took over as publisher in the spring of 1996 recalls, "It was a very intimidating prospect." A former Executive Director of the Canadian Children's Book Centre, she adds, "We had known at the Centre what an enormous act of creativity it was to build Tundra Books."



Building on Cutler's foundation, Lowinger has successfully expanded Tundra's list to include a range of genres. If May Cutler's passion was picture books, Kathy Lowinger's passions were, and still are, fiction and non-fiction for older readers.

Lowinger sites passion and bravery as qualities essential to the production of fiction. She adds that the non-fiction list "builds on what May started. I believe that, for kids, non-fiction is as interesting as fiction. We tell our non-fiction writers that we want them to use the same literary quality as if they were writing fiction."

The result has been a fully rounded



list for the company – with many award-winners among its fiction, non-fiction and picture books. Its wide range of authors include Marthe Jocelyn (winner of the inaugural \$20,000 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award in 2005 for *Mable Riley*), Linda Holeman, Richard Scrimger, Cary Fagan, Gena Gorrell, Jack Batten, Irene Watts and Barbara Nichol.

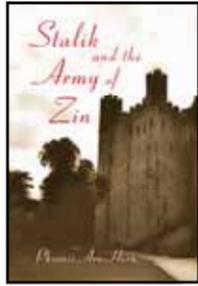
Carrying on the traditions founded by May Cutler has required three conditions, says Lowinger: "We have to be brave ourselves. We have to surround ourselves with people who know that they are doing. Our staff of nine have vigorous disagreements but always with respect. And we are very fortunate to be in a business context that lets us spread our wings. The support from owners McClelland & Stewart and Random House gives us the liberty to be as creative and risk taking as we want to be."

Looking back, Lowinger adds, "I hope we've carried the banner for May. When we do books like Barbara Nichol's *Dippers* or Don Quixote or Michael Bedard's *William Blake: The Gates of Paradise* or Val Ross's *You Can't Read This* – books that are 'out of the grid' – it's a homage to her." ☺



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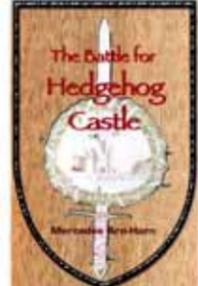


By Phoenix Arn-Horn, published December, 2006 Youth fiction, fantasy, 422 pgs. 5x7.5"
ISBN 0-9738230-1-1

A colorful, witty and charming tale of the adventures of an eleven year old boy who is accidentally teleported to a strange land where he is mistaken for a demon slayer. There he meets a variety of friends and foes and helps to rescue them from the clutches of an evil magician. This is a remarkable, richly woven and enormously ambitious work that captivates the reader right from its opening page.

Stalik and the Army of Zin will appeal both to the young reader — and to the young reader's parents; such is the quality of Arn-Horn's writing. This is her second published work. Her first, *The Cat Who Was A Hero*, was published in 2005
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Stalik and the Army of Zin is "a gem of fantasy and fun."
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By Mercedes Arn-Horn, published November, 2006 Youth fiction, fantasy, 456 pgs. 5x7.5"
ISBN 0-9738230-2-X

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Dr. John W. Miller, renowned Canadian author and theologian.

Phoenix and Mercedes Arn-Horn are 13 year old twins living in Kitchener, Ontario.
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All books are also available at Chapters.com and Amazon.com