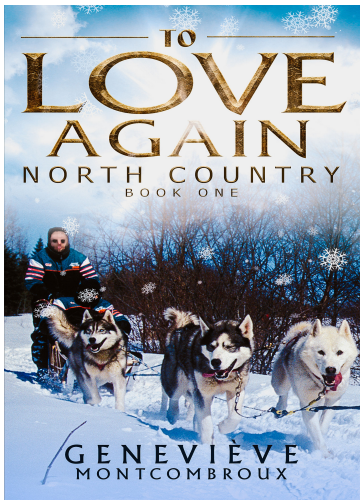
An Interview with Genevieve Montcombroux



March, 2022 Featured Guest
at
Time with Tannia

(http://timewithtannia.com)

By:

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés

Welcome to Time with Tannia. Before we talk about your prolific literature work and your doll-making skills, I would like to begin with the entrepreneur.

1.) You have three successful ventures: (a) the founding of a high school newspaper at the young age of twelve; (b) the establishment of a ballet school with French as the language of instructions; (c) the founding of the Inuit Sled Dog International organization. Share briefly with our readers the reasons for their outset and the "secret" of your success.

I do not have a secret.

a) Founding of a high school newspaper: Shortly after WWII schools had nothing. We bought the necessary books at second hand bookstores and ate only bread for three days. Paper to write assignments and daybooks, we bought new with ration tickets. It came with the admonition to not waste it. We wrote drafts on back of old envelopes and wrapping paper carefully smoothed out. When I started at the lycée (an elite high school, acceptance by competitive exam, gender segregated) I was the only one (or so I thought) not to have a “grown-up” attaché-case. While walking to the market, I saw that the florist needed an extra person to deliver flowers on Sundays (on foot). At first they refused, then agreed. You need to remember that in the late forties early fifties, students in France did not go out and get a job, so the florist were intrigued. No pay, but the recipients always tipped generously. In no time I had bought my attaché-case.

When I finished my first novel, I wanted to publish it. Interesting a handful of other students was easy. I suppose I appointed myself as an editor and assigned each girl a topic. Besides the first installment of my novel, I went out interviewing... the florist. As I mentioned above, the schools had nothing. My reporters and I supplied the paper (bought with my tips) and we handwrote our reports, each girls making five handwritten copies. After the ‘newspaper’

was assembled, we let the other girls read it. It quickly drew the teachers' attention. It was confiscated while they read it before allowing it.

b) Establishment of a ballet school: My husband and I emigrated to Canada in the late sixties. When we moved to Winnipeg after a spell in the Arctic, and three years in Churchill (Manitoba) where I was asked to teach ballet and did successfully (I had a ballet background and taken some teacher training), I soon discovered there was little offered to girls in the French language. We had glorious years with some students becoming professionals. One of those took over the school – still running – when she completed her teacher's training and I was ready to retire and spend more time with my Canadian Inuit sled dogs.

c) **Founding of the Inuit Sled Dog International Organization:** In the early seventies, alarm had been risen about the loss of the Canadian Inuit sled dogs. Inuit were deploring their loss of identity, identity intimately linked to the dogs. Of course, I followed the efforts of a few individuals to re-establish this landrace dog. It was misguided and depended on grants. Not surprisingly, it ended. I couldn't let this happen and contacted other mushers (driver of a team of sled dogs). We formed an informal organization to help circulate the genes of our dogs and began providing information via a website. I had already done extensive research about those dogs I loved. Hence, a book was born. The first edition was slim. The first volume of ***The Canadian Inuit Dog: Canada's Heritage*** grew to become a third edition, renamed ***The Inuit Dog of the Polar North***, to include the latest scientific developments in archaeology and DNA testing.

The Inuit Sled Dog International also grew. We were able to help some Inuit communities rebuild dog teams by supplying purebred pups. With the development of the internet and FaceBook, I dropped the website. https://www.facebook.com/groups/realdog/ is now our center for the Canadian Inuit sled dog.

2.) Were those successes one of the reasons for your 1983 YWCA Women of the Year nomination? What pivotal effect did that nomination have on your career?

The nomination was a surprise and I believe was due to my opening the ballet school in Saint-Boniface, the French district of Winnipeg. The effect was an encouragement to continue.

3.) You are also a doll maker. How has the art of doll making helped you to rekindle your creativity while perpetuating a family tradition? Where can our readers place a commission order or purchase them?

There was a dark period of my life. My writing fell apart. A neighbor had a baby girl. A new baby always delighted me, and I wanted to give her a little gift. My grandmother (who raised me) created dolls, always beautifully dressed with knitted garments. I made a small doll for the baby girl. Before I knew it, everyone in the village and the neighboring villages wanted one of my dolls, including one to look like a child, now grownup and gone to Australia. For a few years, making baby dolls, portrait dolls and knitting teddy bears occupied my days along with my Inuit sled dogs. Eventually, it spurred me to start writing again.

I am sorry to say I no longer make baby dolls nor take commissions.

4.) Now let us explore the world of the multi-genre and multilinguistic author. What are some challenges and advances of your multilinguistic abilities? How does this language ability influence your writing?

Initially, I didn't think I could write in English. My first romance since moving to Canada, I wrote in French and sent it to a publisher in France. It was accepted and two more novels commissioned. Before book two could be published, changes took place in the publishing industry. My long standing and respected publishers became part of Hachette. The new bosses promptly killed the romance line. At the same time, I was publishing children's stories in French with a couple of Canadian publishers, writing short stories and poems most of which found a niche in anthologies.

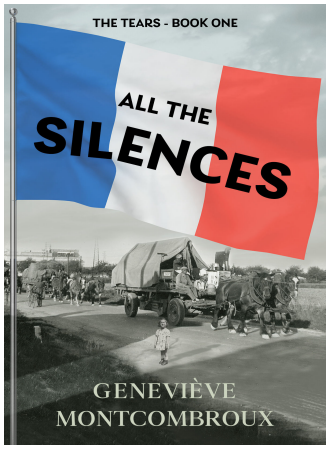
Royalties were meager. That's when I decided writing in English would lead to an income. Besides ballet, I had worked as an editor for a scientific publisher (training on the job) in the U.K., and as an editor for a general publisher in Canada. I believed I was fluent in the language and didn't expect it to be different from writing in French. I was at ease with English and Spanish and had translated from those languages. Writing in English should be easy. Believe me when I say I had never encountered such challenge! Eating humble pie for a few years while the rejections piled up made me only more determined to succeed. Then my English husband, teacher and academic editor, offered to read my manuscript, pointing out the traps that the English language set for foreigners. Writing is a perpetual learning, whether it is the craft of writing or the use of the language.

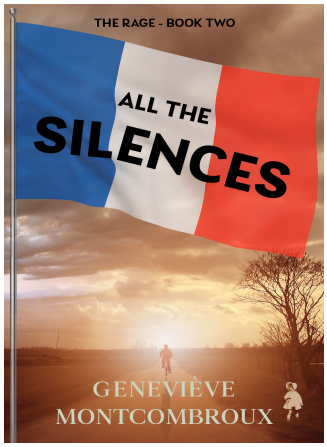
5.) For over a decade, you wrote a column and have published articles at the *Dogs in Canada Magazine. Were these articles based exclusively on your experience with the Inuit Dog or just a mixed bag of dogs topics?*

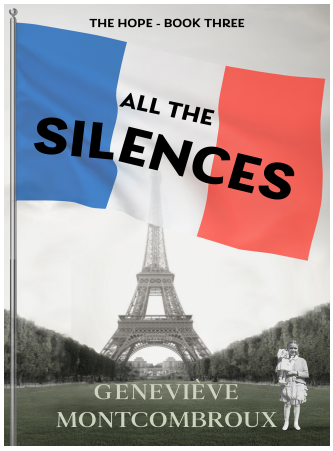
Writing for Dogs in Canada Magazine began with a column about Canadian Inuit sled dogs. After I submitted a feature article, the editor-in-chief encouraged me to look further afield. The naive interviewing skills I had developed for my newspaper in school surged again with much more maturity. While I covered arts and entertainment for a weekly program for the French radio in Manitoba, I interviewed the Royal Mounted Police K9 unit, the Search and Rescue Dog Association, and so on, for feature articles.

6.) In addition to writing dogs articles, your work has appeared in the *Anthology of French Poets* and several French short story anthologies. How do those participations help to further your writing skills and penned reputation? Would you recommend such to other authors?

Being versatile in writing helps keep the mind open and probably benefit each discipline. Poetry helps being more lyrical in telling a story. In a short story the writer has to make a point in few words and bring a punch to the conclusion, as it does in writing magazine articles. That skill applied to a full length novel will help concentrate the story without cluttering it with inconsequential verbiage. However, an author has to have a feel for the different genres and a strong desire to pursue it.







7.) During the Covid-19 Pandemic, you released your historical WWII trilogy, *"All the Silences,"* in which you narrate the Occupation of Paris and France by the Nazi Regime. What aspect of your French *R*駸*istance obsession led you to pursue extensive research of* original documents and unpublished diaries to set the storyline for this trilogy? Did the development of the Pandemic play a vital role in your desire to publish it now?

All the Silences are based on a few real events and original documents. I was a small child during the Occupation of France. I have lived events that I never wanted to think about, never mind talk or write about. But after the Liberation my grandparents put away a box of papers. Unknown to them I retrieved many of them. Still too young to understand their importance, I picked and chose. What I was reading about the Résistance, made sense of the people that came and went in the house during the war, as did the strict rules about not speaking to strangers, not accepting candies or chocolate from the Germans or being suddenly picked up by my grandmother in the Métro while she'd say to the policemen her child was sick (I was a good actress, LOL). We always were let through – I suspect she was carrying messages or false papers. I retain a memory of fear about her when this happened.

Every book that was written about the Résistance in France I would buy if possible, borrow from the library and copy. It was an obsession, and I can't tell what motivated me. It was a strong need, although I'd get depressed for two or three days after reading some new material.

It lasted until a few years ago, when I met a German woman, a handful of years older than me, running a knitting club. A friend had dragged me there. The next day, I visited Rose on my own and we talked. A friendship was born. She too, had lived the war. Soon I realized I was liberated from that unknown burden I carried since childhood. ***All the Silences*** took shape in my mind. The imperative urge to write it kept me awake at night. I transformed my obsession into

research. I finished ***The Tears***, the first volume of ***All the Silences***, just as Rose passed away. She didn't have a chance to read the book.

8.) Would you please summarize each book for our readers and why your trilogy set itself apart from other books of similar thematic?

Right from the decision of finally writing a novel set in the war, I knew I was going to concentrate on women's lives to show their struggle and how they were drawn into actions they never thought they were capable of. Women in France had no rights. They couldn't vote, own property, have a bank account in their name or take decisions about the family. A woman was literally owned by her father, then by her husband. Charles de Gaulle gave the vote to women in 1946 but it was not until 1960 that women could have their own bank account. There is no romance in the trilogy, even if one secondary character falls in love with a German captain. It is not a romantic series. I hope I have captured the feelings and atmosphere of the era.

The Tears, **Book One:** Tears flowed when the German army marched into France, especially into Paris. The de Montregard family is torn apart by death and misplaced loyalties, from being well off to having to find work, and struggle to find food to survive.

The Rage, **Book Two:** In the Rage, the Germans have consolidated their hold over Paris. The apparently benign cooperation of the early days gives way to brutal force on the part of the occupier. The fledgling Résistance gathers in strength. Adolescents are no longer content to scrawl Vs for Victory on walls and tear up posters. They want bigger action.

The Hope, **Book Three:** The Résistance is strong. Liberation is close. The women, who have struggled to feed their families, while helping the Résistance as much as they could, are still desperate to find food as famine stalks the city. As events come to their climax, they have to cope with losses and betrayals. But they also relish moments of joy and happiness, until tragedy strikes again.

9.) Besides historical romance, right now, you are engaged in writing your new romance trilogy, North Country. This one is set in Canada's Yukon Territory, featuring sled dogs. The first installment, *To Love Again*, was released in November 2021. When contracted to write a trilogy, who determines the topic and setting of the novels? How do you deal with the defiant Muse to remain focused and creative through the completion of the project?

At the same time I research for my next WWII novel, I write a romance. My editor give me free rein. My Muse likes the diversity. At this moment, she is knocking on my door wanting a romantic story. She and I just finish ***Racing North*** (Dec. 22) and we have started on ***Northern Vet*** (Feb. 23) to complete the series. She doesn't interfere with the war research. When that's done, she'll don her war hat on.

10.) In 2003, you received the Queen's Jubilee Medal for your artistic accomplishments. How do you manage your ego after receiving such an award? Did it influence your attitude toward future projects?

This was another surprise. *Me? Why me*? was my reaction. I didn't even have a dress to attend the ceremony two hours drive away when I got the call. On my way to Winnipeg, I stopped at a clothing store and got outfitted. I tend not to dwell on things like awards. When I opened the ballet school, it was because of my love for ballet and children. It wasn't for glory or money but to enrich their young lives. In the spring, we toured rural schools and my reward were the looks of wonder in the spectators' eyes – the community was usually invited to attend. I wrote for the love of writing, the fact I could write in both French and English was just a bonus.

11.) How do the events of your past, molded you into the person you are today? Do you have any regrets?

Regrets are useless and don't help one move forward. For the better or the worse, all those years behind me shaped what I am today. Past events could have made me bitter, but it is not in my innate temperament. My personal philosophy is to turn the page.

12.) Where can our readers buy your books and contact you?

All my books – at least those that are still in print – are available on Amazon, some at other retailers as well. My contact is on my website https://www.genevieve-montcombroux.com/

13.) A word of advice for survivors of traumatic events wanting to use writing as a therapeutic venue to find inner peace.

First a survivor has to recognize the cause of the trauma. It is easier nowadays. There is literature on the internet, help is readily available. Not so in my younger days. We didn't talk about that. We didn't talk about the war, the Occupation, the hunger or the bombings. There were no counselors to help children of my generation. Adults didn't look for help. Psychiatrists were for mad people only. That was the atmosphere of the era, and it lasted until the eighties when it was realized the country was going to lose its history, and organizations sprung up to collect testimonies.

Indeed, writing helps bring a different perspective to the traumatic events. Putting the demons onto paper makes them smaller. The survivor can beat them. They never go away, but they are put in chains rather than they putting the survivor in chains.

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés, author of *El Espejo de mi Alma* (BoD 2015) .
Author's website: timewithtannia.com **Stock photography website:**
https://www.bigstockphoto.com/search/?contributor=Boricua63&safesearch=n
Gift Shop: http://www.zazzle.com/teolpuertorico

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Interview Comments:

Name:	Carol Turnham
Date:	March 4, 2022
Comment:	Thank you for a wonderful interview with Genevieve, a lovely kind and helpful lady and an excellent author.
Name:	Tannia E Ortiz-Lopés
Date:	March 8, 2022
Comment:	Thanks for your kind words. Yes, she is indeed a very interesting person and a fruitful author.
Name:	Geneviève Montcombroux
Date:	March 8, 2022
Comment:	Thank you. You lift my spirits. Take care in these difficult times.
Name:	Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés
Date:	March 9, 2022
Comment:	Keep inspired while enjoying your month in the spotlight!
Name:	Giselle Roeder
Date:	March 25, 2022
Comment:	Wow! Reading this interview, I am in awe of you, Genevieve. Yes, you had quite a lot to deal with – and lucky to express yourself and write in several languages – and you did not let bad memories put you "in chains." I had to smile when I read your sentence, "We didn't talk about that… the war, the hunger, the bombings." Interesting that THAT is the title of the first book of my memoir, "We Don't Talk About That" – living as a German girl through WWII, experiencing practically the same things you or the French people did. Just had different enemies… especially the Russians with their atrocities, rapes and murders. The war in Ukraine affects me greatly and gives me nightmares. I am fascinated by the Inuit dogs! Once, at a visit to Alaska, I stared at a wonderful 'sled-painting' in a gallery, but it was a Sunday, otherwise, I'd have bought it. On a bus tour, I couldn't wait. I really loved your book "Love in the Land of the Cariboo." I think it was the cover picture that draw me to it, remembering the painting in Alaska!