

THE SAVING POWER OF

Love and Stories



An Interview with Maryann Macdonald

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Maryann Macdonald is an author of literature for children and young adults telling tales about characters as diverse as a baking hedgehog, a prodigal bunny, jazz composer and pianist Mary Lou Williams, and a pair of pink loving friends. Yet Macdonald's exceptional storytelling skills are not limited to her books. Listening to Macdonald recount the story behind her book *Odette's Secrets* reveals her ability to charm not only readers, but also listeners, with her peaceful manner and melodic voice.

Odette's Secrets is stunning. It is an award-winning historical fiction story based on the real life experiences and relationships of Odette Meyers, a Parisian Jewish child who survived World War II by being a human purloined letter, hidden "in plain sight" in the French countryside.

Odette Meyers's experiences are modern examples of ancient biblical themes, such as courage and faith, which Macdonald has crafted into compelling children's literature. Like the biblical Esther, Odette must keep her Jewish identity hidden in order to survive. Madame Marie, Odette's Catholic neighbor, like the biblical Rahab, must deceive others and risk her life keeping God's Chosen hidden. Esther's and Rahab's stories are significant to Jewish and Christian traditions and our communal memories, and children and young adults who are intrigued by *Odette's Secrets* will be well prepared to engage with such complex biblical narratives. In addition, the book is a sensitive introduction for children to the topic of the Holocaust.

Elie Wiesel's brief novel *Night* describes unspeakable horrors endured by those confined in Auschwitz. Wiesel

expresses his commitment to bear the weight of remembering the suffering and slaughter of so many, including "the little faces of the children." Seven times he laments, "Never shall I forget...."¹

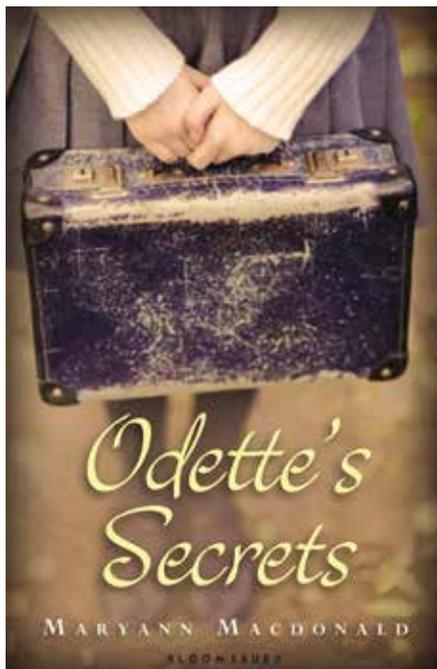
Wiesel reminds us that we have an ethical responsibility to remember those who have either perished during or survived horrific periods in our history. As one scholar notes, "Remembering is a way of valuing, and what we choose to value and what to neglect is a measure of our morality."²

Like Wiesel, many have embraced the vocation to remember and witness the darkness and dehumanization of the Shoah. Yet, there are other stories, hopeful stories full of love and courage, that also need to be remembered. Stories, such as *Odette's Secret*, told with grace and sensitivity, acknowledge the portentous evil of World War II while primarily focusing on the relationships between those most vulnerable and those who held them and hid them safely throughout.

Odette's Secrets is unique. It is a type of fiction based on historical events and set in a specific place and time, but differs in that the narrative is not rendered in prose but in poetry. Yet it is not only historicized fiction, but biographical. *Odette's Secrets* is the successful attempt to capture the voice and experiences of Odette resulting from Macdonald's superb research, exemplary writing, and rich imagination. And, as evidenced in Odette Meyers's life and Macdonald's book, poetry, like story, is powerful.

While Macdonald explains her choice to tell Odette's story in free verse within the interview, I would additionally suggest that poetry is the perfect medium to communicate a story about secrets. Visually, poetry

Maryann Macdonald photo © Stefan Falke.



is written in a structured form, allowing for the majority of the page to be white space. The free-verse poetry present on the page draws the eye but simultaneously highlights the substantial white space around the poem and even within the poem's form. This white space is a visual representation of hiddenness, of what is left unsaid, of secrets.

As Macdonald retells Odette Meyers's experiences for readers, she is essentially remembering Odette's life and presenting these memories to her readers. In *The Healing Power of Stories*, Taylor writes, "Remembering...is putting back together or putting together for the first time, fragmented parts of past experience in a way that gives the past meaning in the present—and the result is story."³

This is an apt description of Macdonald's crafting of *Odette's Secrets*. After extensive research, Macdonald "puts together" the "fragments" of Odette's memories and "past experiences." And she does so with poetry, a medium that is itself fragmentary, mimicking the act of remembering.

In addition, the structure of poetry limits the author's ability to represent superfluous details, constraining the writing to necessary elements. In other words, Macdonald's choice to restrict herself to poetic storytelling mildly echoes Odette's experience of compulsory secret keeping. It is an author's brilliant act of empathy.

On another note, reading Macdonald's book provides pedagogical benefits for teachers and students. Stories provide something for facts and dates to adhere to within the imagination of the learner. Stories are the perfect vehicle for internalizing history and providing contexts, making historical information easier to recall.

During our interview, Maryann Macdonald spoke about her experiences researching *Odette's Secrets*, her writing process, and other writerly wisdom.

What attracted you to Odette's story?

MM: *When I lived in France between 2006 and 2008, I was taking a walk in Paris with my husband one day and passed an elementary school. There was a sign on the stone wall of the school commemorating the students of that school who had been deported during World War II. I was so curious about that!*

I began reading about the lives of children in France during World War II, especially the lives of Jewish children, who were under particular duress. I also went to an exhibit at the Hotel de Ville on the 11,400 children who were deported. They had photographs of many of them and their names were listed on the walls. It was intensely sobering.

At that time, I learned something really interesting. We think of France as a collaborationist country, and on the official level they were, but on the personal level they were not. Amazingly, eighty-six percent of French Jewish children survived! The reason so many children were able to survive was because they hid in plain sight. About seventy-five percent of the Jewish adults survived too: more than in any other European country. I never knew so many French children survived. How did they manage it, I wondered?

*Thoughts of these hidden children were in the back of my mind while I was going on with my everyday life. One October day, I was invited to the American Library in Paris to read my Halloween book, *The Costume Copycat*, at the library's Halloween party.*

*After the party, I went into the stacks to explore and found a book by Odette Meyers called *Doors to Madame Marie*, which told the story of someone who had been one of those hidden children, and described her experience in detail. I was captivated!*

What connected you to Odette?

MM: *I thought Odette had a lot of intellectual and emotional honesty, and courage. I admired that. I also somehow felt close to Odette and her story.*

I knew the story of Anne Frank, of course; everyone does. But many children were hidden on their own without their parents; a crucial difference. So when I found the autobiography of Odette, I was extremely taken with it, because it recounted that experience in detail.

Odette wrote with such sensitivity and honesty that I just became sort of obsessed with her story. I started going all around Paris and looking at all the places where it took place. I went to see her neighborhood and her school and the park where she played, and I went to see where her cousins lived. One day I told my husband of my enthusiasm for Odette's story and he went with

me to her old neighborhood. The atmosphere of the neighborhood is such that you can close your eyes and almost be there in the past. So much of Paris is like that. It's like time-tripping.

We were standing outside her building and I said, "I just so much wish that we could go in." But you never can, because there is always a great big locked oak door that prevents strangers from entering Parisian apartment buildings. My husband said, "Let's just see if we can." He pushed his fingers against the door and it swung wide open.

There we were standing in this hallway where Odette had played and there was Madame Marie's apartment at the end of the hall! I thought this seemed like a sign: I had to write this book for children.

What was your research process like?

MM: I had to face the fact that even though I loved Odette's story so much, it really wasn't my story. It belonged to her family. I knew that Odette had died, but I also knew that she had a son, Daniel, who lived in Paris. So, I screwed up my courage and I called him and left a message. He called me back and invited me over for lunch and we made an immediate connection.

He told me that his mother had often told her story in schools and libraries and synagogues, and she would want it to go on. So he gave me permission to write it as a story for children. I was thrilled. Daniel was also very generous in that he shared with me photographs of his family, his grandmother's handwritten memoir, and a couple of filmed interviews with his mother and grandparents. He showed me a film, "The Courage to Care," in which his mother had participated.

The film showed interviews with people who had been hidden or saved by righteous gentiles. Odette's unofficial godmother, Madame Marie, figures heavily in Odette's story. She saved Odette and her mother on Black Friday, July 16, 1942, the day the French police came to arrest Jews for deportation.

Madame Marie heard them coming and hid Odette and her mother in her broom closet. Then she invited the police to come in and have a drink and she pretended to be very complicit in their desire to rid the neighborhood of Jews. All the while, only a few feet away, Odette and her mother were hiding in this broom closet.

That's terrifying.

MM: Absolutely! So then I decided I needed to take a trip to the place where Odette had been hidden. She and three friends were taken to the Vendee by train. A woman took them, a Resistance fighter whose job it was to transport children to safe houses. Anyway, Odette

arrived in this rural village and was taught how to pray like a Christian child before she was even given anything to eat. It impressed upon her how crucial it was that she must never, ever say that she was Jewish.

On the trip and in the village where Odette lived, I kept trying to see everything through her eyes. What was the same? What might have been changed? The area is still considered remote, and much was unchanged. Of course, we had no idea of the address of the house Odette had stayed in or if any members of the family who had lived there still existed. My husband, out of the blue, asked a passing woman if she knew the Raffin family.

Your husband tried the door of the apartment building, and he asked the woman, a stranger, for information.

MM: Yes, he was my ally. He gets very enthusiastic about things.

So do you!

MM: That's true. So the woman told us where to go. We walked to the house and looked up to see these large shutters. They opened and there was this old man standing at the window and he said, "Can I help you?"

"We don't mean to disturb you," I said. "We just heard about what happened in this house during World War II."

"Come in, come in," he said. And he came downstairs and let us in. He turned out to be one of the children living with Odette when she was in hiding. His name was Jacques Raffin, and he showed us where he had played in the garden with Odette as a child, and he took us into the kitchen where they had shared their meals.

We also went to visit the church and the school Odette attended, and we went to the tiny hamlet where she later lived with her mother. All of this was totally thrilling.

Why the choice to write in free verse instead of prose? Did this choice cause any specific challenges?

MM: Once I did all the research, I could kind of see the story coming together, so I sat down to write it. I wanted it to be as if Odette herself was telling her story to children, because I thought that would engage them. But of course I'm not Odette and I had to write it in the third person, and that wasn't working.

So I rewrote it, with Daniel's permission, in first person. Odette loved poetry. She thought its beauty helped her to survive the ordeal that she went through. That's why I wrote her story in so-called free verse. I'm not a poet by any means. I was just trying to convey her childhood voice.

I was discussing *Odette's Secrets* with my daughter and she got so excited when I mentioned that poetry was the way Odette regained her voice. She noted that poetry both restored Odette's voice, and poetry gave you the ability to represent Odette's voice. I was wondering if you had any thoughts in response to this?

MM: *I guess I feel that finding poetry as the way to tell Odette's story was a gift, the kind of gift we are given when we persist in our efforts as writers to make our words as true and real as we can. Maybe I internalized Odette's story to such an extent that this outcome was inevitable. But it is lovely and profound to note that poetry restored Odette's voice and gave me the ability to represent her voice.*

Anyway, I worked and worked on the story, writing, rewriting, tweaking, rearranging, re-tweaking, and consulting with Daniel. He was very patient with me, and would suggest details that he thought were appropriate, such as the name of Odette's doll, Charlotte.

There were too many people named Henri in the book so we had to give one a different name. Everything else was constructed as much as possible from what we knew to be true about Odette's life. We didn't construct dialogue unless we were alluding to conversations that were mentioned in the book or that were mentioned in Daniel's grandmother's memoir. We really tried to make the book completely Odette's.

About that time I started looking for an agent. A friend of mine in Paris suggested someone, and I guess that agent liked the book because he took me on. Later, I found out that his father had been a hidden child in Poland. Isn't that serendipitous?

Your whole story about this book is serendipitous!

MM: *It is, isn't it? I believe in that sort of thing.*

So do I.

MM: *You can call it whatever you like: grace or destiny.*

Grace. I'd call it grace. What relevance do you see this story having for readers today?

MM: *Well, it seems to me that it is a coming-of-age story. In this process, we all need to develop some emotional honesty about who we are. Odette did that.*

What are your favorite children's books and authors? Who are your influences?

MM: *When I was growing up I loved the work of English writers. I loved reading *The Secret Garden*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. I also adored anything about pioneers, especially the *Little House* books. I read every book they had in our local library about pioneers!*

My dad took us to the library every other week. Since there were eight children in our family, at least seven of us would go with him and we were allowed to take out seven books each—a lot of books! When it was time to go back to the library, we would panic and run around the house trying to find our books and accusing each other of lending them to friends or whatever. Even though those library excursions must have been a pain for my father, he did it. He gave us that gift. And almost all of us became readers.

*Today I would say, in terms of children's books, I like Gary D. Schmidt, John Green, and Richard Peck. Richard Peck is one of my closest friends. He's a Newbery winner and he's written many books. The third book of his *Grandma Dowdel* series, *A Season of Gifts*, is dedicated to my husband and me.*

*Among adult books, I tend to prefer memoirs or autobiographical books; authors such as Mary Karr and Tobias Wolff. A book that I finished recently—and I've read it three times already—is *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr. It's just a stunningly beautiful book. I read it once aloud to my husband and he said, "That book should be a manual for writers."*

What's your next project?

MM: *I think I'm going to write about an individual who was significant during the Civil War period. Women's roles were changing during that time and they were significantly involved in the war. Children were, too. That's something I hadn't realized until I began researching. I've been reading a lot of Civil War diaries. The New York Historical Society Library is not far from here. Have you been there?*

Yes I have. It's beautiful.

MM: *It's great. They have open stacks there and quite a good selection of Civil War memoirs and diaries. Some look like they haven't been touched in a hundred years. So it's a lot of fun to just sort of plow through those. I'm narrowing in on who I want to write about and I'm really enthusiastic but I don't want to say too much about it yet. I can feel the enthusiasm building and when that happens I know I'm on the right track.*

Faith is a significant theme in *Odette's Secrets*. What would you like to tell us about faith?

MM: *Madame Marie's Catholic faith informed Odette's faith.*

I love the yellow blanket that Madame Marie made "out of love" for Odette. And how she attached Saint Michael and Saint Christopher medals to it. Blankets in general make children feel safe, and then to have these icons of protection attached is just wonderful.

MM: *Yes, wasn't that the sweetest detail? Madame Marie was a genius, I think. She was an uneducated, working class woman who was a real spiritual genius. Madame Marie gave Odette a great sense of protection. I loved the way she taught her about the heart.*

Yes! I love this, "The heart is like an apartment... every day you must clean it and make it cheerful... If you make your apartment extra nice, God will come and visit you too."

MM: *The quote is so masterful. Madame Marie was an amazing person. And she had a profound effect on Odette. You know, another thing I was thinking about faith is that the word "enthusiasm" means inspired or having God inside you. And I think when you are on the right track and you are inspired, then you have a divine mandate to write whether or not you feel it will capture the popular imagination.*

Talk a bit about secrets. What are the difficulties of secret keeping? What are the effects?

MM: *One difficulty is that secrets sneak out. They always get found out. And one of the effects of having to keep secrets is that you can forget what the truth really is. You start to delude yourself. Odette starts to forget who she really is. She has to work to find herself. I loved a lot of things about this story, especially Odette's search for identity. I found this occurring in other memoirs of hidden children; that they lost touch with who they were.*

When I talk to children in schools, not just about Odette, but about writing in general, I always ask the children, "Who is a good liar?" And then I raise my own hand because it liberates them. Being a good liar can help you if you want to write fiction, although it's a bad thing if you want to write nonfiction. We often talk about the difference between the two.

Any words of wisdom for librarians and teachers?

MM: *I'm just in awe of these people. They are so influential. If it hadn't been for those librarians who kept that library open when I was young—I mean they just opened up the world for me and my family.*

And teachers can be absolutely the same. I volunteered in the New York City public schools for many years in a program called Authors in the Schools, which got cut about a year and a half ago. Some of the teachers I met were just awe-inspiring and what patience

they have! For anyone interested, there is a free teacher's guide for Odette's Secrets on my website⁴. One teacher told me that he can't get enough books on Anne Frank so whenever he sees a book like mine it's an asset, because he wants to broaden the kids' perspectives.

What is your writing process or routine like?

MM: *I have my tentacles out scanning for things that interest me and once I find them they kind of have to stand the test of time. Do I get bored with it, or do I really care about it? And if I care about it, and I care about it more and more, and that's when I have to begin to shape it into a book—if I can shape it into a book.*

I guess a good example of this is my book The Christmas Cat. I often walk in the park and stop in the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the way home, and I saw a Leonardo da Vinci drawing on loan from The British Museum. It was the Madonna and Child holding a big fat squirmy cat. It was so lovely. I wanted to know why da Vinci drew this. Was it conceivable that the baby Jesus had a pet cat, and if so, how did the cat come into his life, and how did it impact his life? Using what we know of Jesus's childhood and weaving a cat into that story was how I wrote the book. It was a lot of fun and it took a lot of faith to see it through because other writers and editors often didn't share my enthusiasm.

So, this is part of your process, first enthusiasm and then obsession?

MM: *It's absolutely my process. It makes me think of what Eli Wiesel once said, that God made man because he loves stories. As writers, creators, we have to love our stories, too, to love them into existence. And we also have to work consistently and not just when we feel like it.*

How do you motivate yourself to do that?

MM: *It's never easy, is it? When I'm in the writing mode I force myself into the chair everyday. And I find the best thing to do is to get out of the house, because if you stay in the house to write, you're going to make a sandwich. Then you're going to put the laundry in.*

I agree. I think walking helps my writing.

MM: *Yes. I think it does. Dickens walked all the time. Do you know this book? Becoming a Writer by Dorothea Brande? That's what she says. "Stimulate yourself in wordless ways, walking, listening to music. If you consistently refuse to talk or read you will find yourself compensating for it to your great advantage." This is a wonderful book. It was published in 1934—the same year Odette was born.*

Do you have any secrets you'd like to share with readers?

MM: *Well, I wanted to be a writer when I was a child, but I was too shy to admit it, because I didn't know anyone who was a writer. But then when I was a teenager I met this woman named Mary O'Neill who wrote a book that is still in print called Hailstones and Halibut Bones. It's poetry for children, about colors. Mary O'Neill was my uncle's friend and she was lots of fun. She laughed, and she baked great cookies. Through her I began to see that it was possible to live in the real world and be a writer. That's one of my motivations when I talk to children in schools: to make that connection with them if I can.*

Any last thoughts?

MM: *We lived in England for a very long time, about twenty-four years, and an editor there once asked me, "Do you specialize in emotional turmoil?" And I responded, "Now when you mention it..."*

That's where the good stories are!

MM: *Well yes, in a way, because you don't have a story if there's not a problem. And so often problems are of an emotional nature. But let's be honest. Sometimes children like horrors, too. I was hooked on martyr books at a very young age.*

The only other thing I want to say is that someone asked me a very interesting question last year. They asked me, "Do you see a connection between all the books you write because they seem so disparate?" And I had to think about this for a little while. But then I realized, yes, my books are nearly all about the saving power of love in one way or another. That's the story I like and when I see it I want to tell it again and again in as many ways as I can.

Macdonald's *Odette's Secrets* is a coming of age story set in a dark and dangerous time. Odette experiences confusion, loss, and fear. She wrestles with her identity and her ability to use words. Yet, in the midst of these she also experiences trust, protection, play, and the beauty and wonder of poetry. Odette Meyers survives that time and her story is one of tenacious faith and sacrificial love that ends on a hopeful note.

Macdonald's accomplishment is a particular type of literary magic. Because good literature is experiential, readers vicariously experience the reality of the story they are reading. And as one writer states, "We live out our lives in time, moving from birth to death within a particular slice of history."⁵ Therefore, one of the miracles of *Odette's Secrets* is that it allows readers the opportunity to experience a portion of Odette Meyers's life even though she lived her childhood in a different "slice of history" than our own.

Also Macdonald's impulse to retell the same story of "the saving power of love" again and again is not unique to her. It seems to be a common passion of writers. Robin McKinley, who has written a number of *Beauty and the Beast* stories as well as other books with similar themes, affirms this tendency. She explains "I read somewhere... that each writer has only one story to tell; it's whether or not they find interesting ways to retell it that is important."⁶

Macdonald has succeeded with elegance and passion to tell and retell stories highlighting the theme of the "saving power of love." And these two elements, love and stories, are the keys to Macdonald's heart, so much so that she has said, "Stories are where my heart is. Stories can save us."⁷ ■

1 Eli Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960) 32.

2 Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories: Creating Yourself through the Stories of Your Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 39.

3 Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories: Creating Yourself through the Stories of Your Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 38.

4 www.maryannmacdonald.com.

5 Sandra M. Levy, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans., 2008) 11.

6 Robin McKinley, *Rose Daughter* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997) 292.

7 www.maryannmacdonald.com.

Books by Maryann Macdonald

Hedgehog Bakes a Cake,
Illustrated by
Lynn Munsinger
(Bantam Books, 1990)

Rosie Runs Away,
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet
(Atheneum, 1990)

Rosie's Baby Tooth,
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet
(Atheneum, 1991)

Rabbit's Birthday Kite,
Illustrated by
Lynn Munsinger
(Bantam Books, 1991)

Rosie and the Poor Rabbits,
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet
(Atheneum, 1994)

The Costume Copycat,
Illustrated by Anne Wilsdorf
(Dial Books for Young
Readers, 2006)

The Little Piano Girl, by
Maryann Macdonald &
Ann Ingalls, Illustrated by
Giselle Potter (Houghton
Mifflin Harcourt, 2010)

The Pink Party,
Illustrated by Judy Stead
(Amazon Children's
Publishing, 2011)

The Christmas Cat,
Illustrated by Amy June
Bates (Dial Books for
Young Readers, 2013)

Odette's Secrets
(Bloomsbury, 2013)

How to Hug,
Illustrated by Jana Christy
(Amazon Children's
Publishing, 2014)

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