

# Crumagrackle

A Novel

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By

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## ABSTRACT

In 1905, Lenna, newly graduated from Whitehall Training College in London, England, secured her first teaching post, a class of Primary Three students. It was all she ever wanted, except that she also desired Andrew Kerrigan, her betrothed. Although tempted to defy the socio-political convention dictating that married women could not hold salaried positions, she and Andrew postponed their wedding instead. Before the first term ended, Andrew died in a freak train accident. Lenna needed her post more than ever but was fired for refusing to cane a student.

Since London held only rain and painful memories, she decided to join her brother on the Canadian Prairies. Befuddled with grief, she misjudged the amount of money needed for her trip and put most of the funds from the sale of her house into bonds and hid them behind her parents' wedding photo. She boarded a ship with her few possessions and her cat secreted under her cloak. During a meal conversation at sea, a carpenter named Hank showed interest in her. She resisted romance because her goal of teaching became even more of a priority, and she believed her heart could never mend enough to love again. Lenna experienced increasing inner conflict between the drives of career and love and between agnosticism and faith. While she traveled to her brother's new-found prairie homestead—further than she ever imagined—her heart made an even more formidable trip.

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My grandmother, Helena Pennington Ford, who died when I was six months old, was the inspiration for this story. My memories of my grandfather, Harry Ford, were invaluable in the writing of this novel as it is his voice I recall and his homesteading stories I reflect on. I owe them both a belated debt of gratitude.

Biggest thanks to my husband, Glenn Stumborg, not only for his patience, love and support, but for stepping in to ensure that I stopped writing long enough to eat and sleep.

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

“Art does not come from the mind. It comes from the place where you dream”

(Butler 13).

I acknowledge we are on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis. I respect the First Nations and Métis ancestors of this place and deeply respect my relationship with them and this beautiful prairie I am privileged to call home.

My paternal grandmother, who I never knew, left England for the Canadian prairies in 1906. She joined the thousands of immigrants from the British Isles who relocated to Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century. A large body of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, exists concerning the period of time when people from Europe and the United Kingdom were encouraged to emigrate to Canada. Boyd and Vickers state that “[t]he 20th century opened with the arrival of nearly 42,000 immigrants in 1900. Numbers quickly escalated to a record high of over 400,000 in 1913” (3). Since the 1970s, Canadian historical societies have sprung up, encouraged by government funding from local municipalities, Parks Canada and provincial culture departments to produce historical accounts of their communities. Two large volumes of *Pioneer Women of Saskatchewan* are the work of the Saskatchewan Genealogical Society. The editor, Celeste Rider was inspired by a tombstone inscription, “In Silence We Remember.” With the assistance of the genealogical society she gathered remembrances from over 700 people, united in their desire that these women will not be forgotten. In *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, Francis and Palmer enumerated over four thousand historical prairie publications and the bibliography continues to grow.

There is no doubt that women were wanted in Canada at the turn of the century. Advertisements in publications such as “The Last Best West” and other propaganda distributed throughout the United Kingdom, clearly made the need known, and thousands heeded the call.

From the perspective of some historians, the immense amount of prairie historical literature isn't enough. In *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History*, Carter et al point out the domination of male imagery in the traditional mythology of the West. Rather than focusing on the all-male farmers, cowboys, chiefs, politicians and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the contributors to this collection of essays re-examined immigration to the prairies through women's eyes. This offered new ways of understanding settler history. I am thankful to these feminist historians for, indeed, when I searched for examples from the female perspective, the 740-page volume of *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, for example, allowed a mere 27 pages (3.6 %) for the chapter titled "Prairie Women." At the same time, the authors acknowledged that "[w]omen have always played a strong role in Prairie history" (397).

There are many first-person accounts of prairie settlement, such as *Butter Down the Well* by John Collins and *Gully Farm* by Mary Hiemstra, whose autobiography recounts her experience as a ten-year-old girl moving to the prairies with her family. There are collections of first-person accounts, gathered into volumes; one of these is *Salt of the Earth* by Heather Robertson. *The Homesteaders* by Sandra Rollings-Magnusson is a collection of homesteader's reflections on the hardships and joys of settling in the Prairies. These and other works tend to focus on settlement and homesteading and, like much immigration literature, gloss over the experiences encountered along the way. The descriptions of travel are often limited to a mere sentence stating that they came by steamship, then by train. In *Gully Farm*, the ship is briefly described and then the author states, "[m]ost of the trip to Canada was uneventful, and some said it was dull, but I enjoyed it" (39). Nellie McClung described her cousin's voyage simply, "[s]he braved the terrors of the Atlantic" (15). Kathleen Strange, in her autobiography, writes, "[t]he voyage and the railway journey across America were without particular adventure" (ch. 1).



In contrast to the common focus on settlement, my thesis, *Crumagrackle*, is a historical novel concentrating on what it took for a woman to travel alone from England to the Canadian prairies in 1906. I don't know what motivated my grandmother to leave her home country, and travel to Canada. As she hadn't yet met my grandfather, I imagine her as a single woman travelling without male accompaniment, which was stigmatized at the turn of the twentieth century—as were women in general. Stigmatized is a mild term when one reads the official wording in Canadian government legislation, noted by Nellie McClung in *In Times Like These*: “[t]he 1906 federal Election Act decreed flatly, ‘No woman, idiot, lunatic, or criminal shall vote’” (ch. 4). The Dominion Lands Act forbade women to claim a homestead without a husband whose name appeared on the land title. Although the rules for women were undergoing changes, there were incidences when women, whose husbands died, had no rights to the land, even after working alongside their husbands for years. It was the era of no rights for women.

Within this socio-political climate, the physical journey of my protagonist, Lenna, demanded courage, fortitude and a thick skin in order to be undeterred by what people might think of her. During this time, ships and trains were improving, but travel from England to the Canadian Prairies took more than a week by ship and four days by train, barring storms, derailments and other common delays. Lenna would have been stigmatized for travelling alone; her inner journey was even more arduous than the physical one. Before leaving England, in addition to being dismissed from her teaching post, Lenna's fiancé was killed in a train accident and her mother died of heart disease. Grief overshadowed much of Lenna's thinking, to the point where she second-guessed herself and her desires, making mistakes such as underestimating the financial resources required for emigration. Interestingly, Kate Harris begins her book, *Land of Lost Borders* with “[m]aybe all meaningful journeys begin with a mistake. Some kind of

transgression or false turn or flawed idea that sets a certain irresistible odyssey in motion” (5). It was a combination of all of these that started Lenna off on her journey from London. During the time of her personal angst and financial constraints, the societal-political climate was fraught with flawed ideas including corporal punishment in schools, which Lenna rebelled against, causing her to lose her treasured teaching position. Additionally, Lenna rebelled against society’s restrictions. Women’s careers were expected to end with marriage; unmarried women were further demoralized for being unable to attract a husband.

Grant Faulkner, prolific writer, professor and executive director of the popular National Novel Writing Month states “[w]rite what you know’ might be the single most uttered writing maxim” (75). For writers of historical fiction this directive proves challenging. How can you know a time period in which you haven’t lived or individuals you have never met? Duncan Sprott, co-author of a craft book on writing historical fiction, offers a useful strategy: “[w]hat you don’t know, you can find out. And you are allowed to imagine” (171). Sprott’s insight situates historical fiction as a meeting ground of research and imagination. Saskatchewan writer, David Carpenter elucidates this notion further: “[t]he writer is usually steeped in research before the writing begins, but what he or she imagines is likely to be more vivid, memorable and deeply effective than that driven by an accumulation of facts” (iv). Sprott’s emphasis on imagination in writing historical fiction and my longing to know my grandmother led me to imagine her life through a fictional lens. Through story, I can call an imagined grandmother into being. Anne Doughty, a contributor to *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writer’s and Artist’s Companion*, somewhat captured the essence of my desire: “I could not understand my own life and times if I did not go back and reconstruct the life of my grandparents and great-grandparents...who had lived and loved and faced up to whatever life threw at them, often with a courage that would

never be recognized” (123-4). David Carpenter points out: “I began to suspect we don’t really exist until someone writes about us. This early suspicion has become an article of faith. How can we exist as a nation or a region until we have been reinvented and reclaimed in the great forge of a writer’s imagination?” (i). Since it is people who make up nations and regions, I add people to his list. Carpenter continues: “[b]y some profound process we gain an identity from writers’ words living in the minds of readers, television viewers and movie goers everywhere, all because someone wrote a story” (i-ii). Fiction opened the possibility of accessing my grandmother’s era because I had so little knowledge of her personal history.

The difference between historical writing and historical fiction is explained by James Thom in his craft book: “[b]ut the historian's viewpoint faces backward only. He is limited to looking back in time; the historical novelist is not” (2). This allows me the opportunity to imagine what my grandmother’s life might have been like, in her time, with blatant gender restrictions, a desire for both career and family, and with an adventuresome spirit. Like my protagonist, my grandmother wanted something more than she could have by staying in Great Britain at the end of the Industrial Revolution.

While inspired by my grandmother, the protagonist of *Crumagrackle* is not my grandmother, although some of her features are modeled on what little I know about her. In developing the character of Lenna I chose to use dialogue, journaling and interiority, influenced by other writers of historical novels. After reading Anne Lazaruko’s *Dollybird*, a historical novel set in a similar locale and time period as *Crumagrackle*, I rewrote the entire novel in the first-person. Lazaruko uses first-person points of view for her two protagonists allowing close perspectives of their characters and motivations. In *Crumagrackle*, Lenna endures deep grief, and she struggles with indecision. I came to realize that readers would better understand her

insecurities, motivations and idiosyncrasies with the close lens that the first-person point of view offers.

Lenna is a single woman, in her early twenties, with limited resources, who must rely solely on her own merits as a school teacher. Because of being fired from her first teaching position, one which she treasured, she has minimal work experience. Grief-stricken and bereft, Lenna boards a ship with her few possessions and her cat secreted under her cloak. Her goal is to join her brother, who left his coal mining job three years prior in the pursuit of a homestead on the Canadian prairies. On the ship, Lenna meets a carpenter who shows interest in her, but she resists romance; the pain resulting from her fiancé's death caused her to close her heart to romantic love. Her desire is to be a self-sufficient woman and teacher. However, Lenna experiences increasing inner conflict between the drives of career and love; it is this conflict which has inspired the novel's title. *Crumagrackle* derives from English vernacular slang meaning dilemma or conundrum.

Writing historical fiction presents vocabulary challenges. In order to be true to the era and people in that era, I found that I had to think and write vocabulary, diction and syntax that sound strange to the modern reader. John Mullin discusses the quandary of writing vocabulary in a recent article in *The Guardian* referring to Andrew Miller's, *Now We Shall Be Entirely Free*, a novel set in 1809: "[f]or Miller, as for some other contemporary novelists, history has become an escape into the wonderful. The challenge is language: how do you make your characters' sentences belong to another age?" I remember distinctly my grandfather's English dialect, how he dropped his h's and taught me pronunciation of words like ha'penny, when I was about six years old. He used words that I didn't hear from anyone else, except his sisters on occasional visits. I wanted to include this dialect in my story, knowing that my grandmother's speech would

have sounded similar to his, since she came from a nearby English locale. But I used the dialect only minimally. In the same *Guardian* article quoted above, Mullin describes the result of the language dilemma in the novel, *To Calais, in Ordinary Time*, by James Meek. In this novel, set in 1348, Meek fashions very different language dialects for each of three characters. Mullin states, “[t]here is a delight about this, but also a price to pay.” I found delight in remembering my grandfather’s voice and including his dialect in Lenna’s Mum’s speech and a few minor characters, but I am afraid that too much of it, in more characters, might have cost me the price Mullin mentions.

It is difficult to think of writing a settler story in the twenty-first century without acknowledging that the vast prairie of Saskatchewan was not free land to claim. Thousands of settlers, encouraged by government officials, ignored the fact that this land had been inhabited for millennia. I pay honour, gratitude and respect to the land that we are privileged to live, work and write on. Although my story is not about the Indigenous and their right to their homeland, I am in a position, as a settler’s granddaughter, to be educated. I do not want to ignore the fact that immigrants would have known about Indigenous inhabitants. Lynda Gray, in her book, *First Nations 101: Tons of Stuff You Need to Know About First Nations People*, writes, “Ignorance is not the same as being brainless or unintelligent; rather, to be ignorant is to have a lack of knowledge about something. To counteract ignorance, we must educate” (3).

Many writers have increased my sensitivity to the issues raised by homestead claims, especially works such as *Bare Bones and Feathers* by Louise Halfe and erasure poems and others in *The Red Files* by Lisa Bird-Wilson. Laurie Graham, author of *Settler Education*, sheds further light on the hardships colonization placed on the people here. *Threads in the Sash: The Story of the Métis People* by Fred J. Shore informed me about the great nation of the Métis and

their culture before their lands were taken over and their way of life severely diminished. The knowledge of what we know now presented a persistent crumagrackle in the writing of this story. In portraying Lenna as an intelligent and sensitive young woman, she would have knowledge of Indigenous inhabitants on the prairies. After consulting with Dr. Jenna Hunnef, who teaches Indigenous Literary History and the Politics of Form, I chose to mention but not elaborate on Indigenous content in my thesis work. Not because she dissuaded me, but because I came to the realization that to pursue the issues properly, I would do well to follow the recommendations stated by Graham in an interview with *Puritan Magazine*: "[m]y advice would be to attend to your blind spots. Learn them. Learn to see them. Start shrinking them. Learn everything you can about the place you live. Be exhaustive and slow about it. There's so much settlers haven't learned, that we haven't been told, that we've been encouraged to ignore." It is for this reason that I include the mention of Indigenous content. I have also been influenced by the wise words of Bill Waiser who wrote, "Saskatchewan's rich history before provincehood had become...a world we have lost. And the people of the province were poorer for not knowing that past or choosing to ignore it" (630). I choose not to perpetuate that mistake. Some blind spots have become visible simply by researching this project, but there is so much more I need to learn.

One of the common prescriptions for writing fiction is that conflict, in ever-increasing degrees, is imperative to drive forward the plot of the story. There may be a difference between how male and female writers treat conflict. Gender stereotypes inform attitudes toward writers, whether male or female. Female writers may be more likely to prioritize inner psychological conflict over the physical, using more interiority and less action to do so. As I investigated this probability, I came across several articles on gender-conscious approaches to narrative theory including one where Dorice Elliott discusses the work of Virginia Woolf:

Woolf also examined women novelists' relation to literary realism. She notes that, like those of male authors, women's novels have a correspondence to real life, but that even in the realm of the supposedly real, masculine values tend to prevail: [t]his is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. Such attitudes, according to Woolf, not only hampered the reception of novels by women authors, but also affected women's ability to write truly and artistically. (1)

Woolf wrote about literary realism almost a century ago, and twenty years have passed since Elliott's discussion of it. Although feminists have done much in the intervening years to reverse this dynamic, the fact that I was still feeling shreds of the androgynist-centric prescription compelled me to discuss my choice to emphasize psychological rather than physical conflict.

This world has no end of conflict—violence, wars, crime, torture, abuse, bullying and now, an uncontrollable global pandemic. Many stories, both fiction and non-fiction focus on harm and evil. *Crumagrackle* does not. Instead, my story centres around the goodness of humankind. Natalie Goldberg in her craft book, *Writing Down the Bones*, draws attention to the importance of kindness: “[w]e have a responsibility to treat ourselves kindly; then we will treat the world in the same way. This understanding is how we should come to writing” (76). Harris, in discussing her book, *Lands of Lost Borders* at the U of S, said that in the many kilometres she and her friend cycled, illegally crossing checkpoints at midnight in forbidden areas of Tibet, they were terrified that they would be accosted, confronted or attacked at any moment, but it never happened. She stated, “[w]e found out that the world is more about people being good.”

Likewise, along the four thousand miles that Barbara Kingscote rode her horse, alone, from Mascouche, Quebec to Abbotsford, British Columbia, she expected that she might run into bad

experiences. Instead, she found: “[a]long our way, I lost the need for certainty about tomorrow, and found instead the generous heart of my country” (2).

Wrestling with how to juxtapose conflict and kindness, I was drawn to a relatively new genre of fiction, perhaps not new, but with a newly-coined word to identify it—Uplit—as in Uplifting Literature, described by Danuta Kean in *The Guardian* as “the new book trend with kindness at its core,” and by Hannah Becker as the “book genre designed to lift your spirits.” The kind of readership Uplit serves is explained by Kean: “more and more book buyers are seeking out novels and nonfiction that is optimistic rather than feelgood. And an appetite for everyday heroism, human connection and love – rather than romance.” Kean quotes Joanna Cannon, a former psychiatrist, and now prize-winning author of several Uplit novels, who believes that writing is an exercise in wish fulfilment: “I write about communities, kindness and people coming together because that’s the society I wish for. I write what I’d like to happen.” Harper Collins states that the popularity of UpLit “coincides with a world which is in turmoil, so it only makes sense that readers are turning their sensitivities toward stories and characters which champion empathy, understanding, kindness and love.”

Even Uplit novels contain some sadness. British author of Uplit fiction, Ruth Hogan writes, “[w]hen I began writing *The Wisdom of Sally Red Shoes*, I wanted it to be a book about hope and living life to the full. But I’m with Dolly Parton when she said, ‘If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain’, and so I also wanted to tackle some more difficult and painful issues” (327). Likewise, my protagonist had to endure grief and loss and even some painful mishaps to come to know joy and fulfillment.

To be true to myself as an artist, emulating authors of Uplit fiction and taking Goldberg’s advice regarding kindness are key. I desire to do my best to treat the world and all creatures in it



kindly, and to treat my characters that way as well. I found that I could not create harm for the sole purpose of pleasing the reader looking for that kind of thrill. I take encouragement from Faulkner's words, "[a]n artist is by definition a menace to conformity" (120) and "[t]here's nothing sacred about any narrative rule" (120). The type of conflict prioritized in *Crumagrackle* is the protagonist's inner turmoil related to choosing between career and marriage, rebelling against socio-political and educational restrictions and the additional challenge of overcoming grief and allowing herself to love again.

Every journey ends with a destination and Lenna's is her brother's prairie homestead. Henry's character is mainly encountered after he began farming and became attached to the parcel of land allotted to him. I chose this destination because my grandfather passed his love of his prairie homestead on to me, beginning on the day he led me to the garden by my four-year-old hand and taught me to put seeds into the soil. Spending days with him and hearing his farming stories endeared me to the soil he loved. The British Columbian writer Don Gayton in *Landscapes of the Interior; Re-Explorations of Nature and the Human Spirit*, coined the term "primal landscape" to describe the emotional connection to the place we are born and spend our childhoods. In *Crumagrackle*, it was necessary to include a few chapters of life on the homestead to elicit this connection and portray the vast beauty of the landscape, sky and wildlife. Even though Lenna reached her destination, she took longer to complete her psychological and emotional sojourn. It was on the prairies, reunited with her brother, where she found healing and wholeness.

Long before the St. John Ambulance organization evaluated and acknowledged my dog, Laddie, and me as a Pet Therapy Team, I have believed in the value of animal therapy. Pets provide an environment of unconditional love, acceptance and comfort for people who enjoy

them. Animals help people cope with all kinds of stress and anxiety. Creagan et al. state several benefits of pet therapy observed in patients at the Mayo Clinic: “[t]he physiologic effects of petting an animal are quantifiable; they include increases in serotonin, dopamine, prolactin and oxytocin” (103). These hormones and neurochemicals are essential to a person’s mental health. The value of pet therapy is an underlying thread in *Crumagrackle*. Lenna’s cat, Gressy, is important to Lenna’s well-being, especially her mental health, as she grapples with the emotions of grief and loss, and the stress of travel and relocation. Advice from a number of people to get rid of the cat was difficult to ignore but it was, perhaps, coming from people who might not have experienced the benefits of pet therapy. Gressy remains as a minor but important character to aid Lenna’s healing, whilst, for the most part, hindering her physical journey by frequently escaping from Lenna or from her cabin and running away.

In the writing of this novel, it is not only a fictional character that I have imagined into existence, but also what it took for her to travel to Canada, in a time of personal and socio-political turbulence. As Lenna reunited with her beloved brother and shared his appreciation of the beauty and vastness of the Canadian Prairie, she found the healing from grief and turmoil that were holding her back from being her true self.

This thesis work extends the values of optimism, kindness and generosity, common to the UpLit genre, into the realm of historical fiction. Along with Goldberg’s advice to write kindness and Sprott’s to use imagination to fill in the gaps, is encouragement in the form of a quote from Faulkner which sums up why this is the kind of writing I endeavour to do. “Being an artist goes beyond the work of art you create. It will flow into your life and influence how you treat people, the way you love, the way you taste food, the way you stare up at the sky, the way you vote, the way you drive, the way you wash your dishes. Seriously” (243).

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