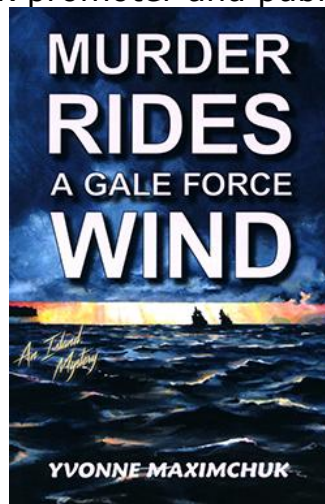


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Bob Harris is a Vancouver writer, book promoter and publicist.



This month he interviews new CWC member and mystery author **Yvonne Maximchuk** from Echo Bay, a remote community on the Pacific West Coast.

Bob Harris' interviews are nothing less than a beautiful gift; crafted with such sincere interest that I unearthed deeply-felt motivations of which I had not been aware. I came away surprised with an enhanced sense of self-worth, accomplishment and talent!
Yvonne Maximchuk

* **Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with Yvonne Maximchuk:**

Your debut fiction novel *Murder Rides a Gale Force Wind: An Island Mystery* was self-published in 2022. In 2013, your memoir *Drawn to Sea* (Caitlin Press) was released.

You also collaborated with B.C. coastal legend Bill Proctor in authoring and illustrating two non-fiction books published by Harbour Publishing: *Full Moon, Flood Tide* (2003, over 10,000 books sold) and *Tide Rips & Back Eddies* (2015).

And, you've produced an all ages colouring book *Colour the British Columbia Coast* (2016) which sold out with Harbour Publishing.

I would like to begin our chat today, Yvonne, with a brief recollection of your transition from the 1980s life of an artist in White Rock, B.C., to that of a pioneer, naturalist, painter and author residing in the remote community of Echo Bay on Gilford Island in the Broughton Archipelago on the Pacific West Coast.

In 1978 I unwillingly became a single mom, raising my one and three year old in White Rock, BC. A short stint working for the Canada Revenue Agency showed me that my children had not only lost their father, they had also lost me, their mom.

After much soul searching I applied for welfare, promising myself that if I wasn't making enough money as an artist to support us by the time they were school age I would get a job. It took me four years but I didn't have to get a job. During that time I enjoyed mainly drama free relationships including one with a crab fisherman, Albert, now my husband.

When my children spent holiday time with their father, I ran off to sea. Over an eight year period, Albert worked his way up the coast and each visit to him took me further from home.

About 1981 he switched to fishing prawns in the Broughton Archipelago and we all loved it. There was a small community at Echo Bay; a fuel dock, post office, and an elementary school. There were art galleries on Vancouver Island and plenty of scenery to paint and prawns to fish. It took two years of planning to make the move to a floathouse in Echo Bay but in October, 1986 we did it. I was already an artist and naturalist by nature, and kept a journal as I matured, travelled and learned. I became a pioneer by circumstance, although again I believe that to be an expression of my being.

What attracts you to mystery fiction as a reader and writer?

As a reader I've always preferred a good mystery to a romance, or biography (except biographies of artists.) I have an (apparently annoyingly so) inquisitive mind. A mystery is a safe place to exercise mental curiosity and sifting facts and fiction to retrieve the nuggets of truth that achieve a satisfying ending. You can learn a lot about life and people by reading a good mystery.

As a writer, I didn't set out to write a mystery, per se. My initial objective was simply to write a story that reflected my world and offered to the readers an experience of contemporary life here, in relation to the historical life presented in the two books I did with Bill Proctor.

When you shifted from non-fiction to writing fiction, what influenced you to write mystery?

I had heard often that characters can take on a life of their own as they are being written. This seems to be true of story as well because mine grew into a mystery by way of the 'events' ideas that came to me as I was imagining the people, their backstories, how they look, dress and act, what relationships they have to each other.

In a 2022 interview with Tyson Whitney published in the *North Island Gazette*, you mentioned that writing fiction was harder than non-fiction and memoir. Can you expand on that and what you learned about genre fiction?

I realized about halfway through that 'Mystery' was the only genre that would be even a loose fit for *Murder Rides a Gale Force Wind*.

The book breaks a lot of the 'rules' of the mystery genre. There is no single main protagonist inside whose mind we live. I wanted it to be more true to life, in that events come to a head by way of how much people know of 'what happened', what conclusions they come to with the information they have and what actions they take. Although there is a body, people die, there is no real evidence that a crime was committed. Therein lies the mystery...

What motivated you to write *Murder Rides a Gale Force Wind*?

I believe it is the same thing that motivates me to paint. I just like to write, and paint. I experience an unceasing upwelling force of ideas at all times. While I'm asleep I am dreaming paintings or problem solving or characters dialogue. For every idea that comes to me only one out a thousand takes root and grows into a visual or literary expression. I got lucky in that the 'do it' gene seems to be coupled with the 'creativity' gene. Writing a novel seemed a do-able-challenge, and I hoped mine would enrich people's lives the way mine has been enriched by the books I've read.

It is incredibly rewarding to have an idea and manifest it as something that others can truly enjoy.

What is the premise and what inspired it? Describe the setting and lifestyle of your main characters.

In my paintings, I've used the image 'iceberg' as a metaphor for how much information people have - 10%, the tip of the iceberg. What we don't know is the 90% below the surface, the unknown. I've noticed throughout my life,

that people think they know what is happening or has happened and take action-based on very little factual information.

The one thing I have already deeply explored, love and cherish is my home waters; my first and easiest decision about the book was to anchor the people and the story in this geography.

The characters lifestyle is also an accurate portrait of what those who live here need to be and have - independence, resourcefulness, boating skills, the capacity to 'watch your wake', i.e. your impact on others. They need to be self-motivated and balance a capacity for solitude with the need for companionship. They deal with everything urban residents deal with up to and including abusive behavior, racism, and death plus some unique extras.

How did the book's title emerge?

The initial working title was 'My Echo Bay Story' until it grew into a mystery when it became 'A Mysterious Echo' for a while; both much less than gripping!

There is no public transport (or roads) to Echo Bay; boat access only. One day we had to go to Port McNeill for an important appointment. We need to have reasonable weather to make the 28 mile run in our 18 ½ foot boat and it wasn't too nice that day. Albert was fully occupied handling the boat and while I felt anxious, making distraught noises or talking to the skipper only adds to the stress. I decided to occupy my mind by trying out title ideas. It took me about half an hour to come up with 'Once Upon a Gale Force Wind.' I vacillated between that and 'Murder Rides a Gale Force Wind' which I settled on after writing the climactic storm and fight scene.

Please describe the research involved for the book. What aspects were most challenging?

I don't know much about police procedures, my research involved a series of long emailed questions and answers with Chris Stewart, a retired RCMP officer. He got quite excited about my story and character Margaret Morris and gave me much more than I had initially imagined. Mostly though, the book is a product of what I already know or have experienced and it was a fun challenge to find the right places and characters to carry what I knew.

How long did it take to complete from concept to final sign-off by your copy editor and release by your own SeaRose Publishing?

I picked up the first 350 printed copies from Island Blue in Victoria near the end of January 2022. The serious writing began after the publication of my colouring book in 2016. After that was done, I felt I could put all my writing energy into the story that had been simmering for a couple years. So...3 years on the back burner and 5 writing hard.

I would like to know about your writing routine. How do you approach a project? What is key in planning it and keeping organized during your research and writing?

I juggle a lot of activities and find a somewhat school-like routine works best for me. I wake up at 6:00 a.m. generally and write from 7-10 six days a week. Only if I see whales go by the house, do I permit myself to stop, get in my boat and go see who it is. Afternoons are for painting or pottery, later in the day I garden.

I have a multipronged approach, you might say scattershot. I put scribbled notes, bits and pieces of reference or ideas that come to me, websites to look at, dialogue I remember or overhear, questions to ask certain people, etc. into a dedicated file folder.

It's a mess. I don't plan. I go through the notes on Monday morning and write character outlines, bits of dialogue, scenes, and then slowly build and weave things together, more like a collage than an orderly weaving. Eventually I draft a timeline and make any adjustments necessary because it bugs the heck out of me when I'm reading a book and there are timeline discrepancies. I probably need more writing education because I don't know much about 'story arcs' or plotting. Basically I build a written piece the same way I construct a painting; thinking about rhythm, adjacent colours/words, seeking an arrangement of elements/structure that conveys an emotional quality.

As with my painting procedure, I trust my 'gut' to give me notice when something is 'uncomfortable' and needs to be addressed. Reading out loud is absolutely essential. Re-writing is absolutely essential. A trustworthy editor is absolutely essential. My editor Pam Robertson first wrote me with seven pages of suggestions and I did every single one of them.

Reflecting on your path as a non-fiction writer and mystery novelist, who and what are your influences and why? Past and present. Are there mentors?

I can only equate influences with what attracts me and that I emulate, or attempt to: the list of authors is long and mostly contemporary. I'm drawn

to a wonderful genre of writing; mostly women authors, deeply well-researched, a story and heroine woven of historical, literary, mystery with romance and maybe a soupcon of passion, great characters, detailed and strong sense of place.

I pulled several from my bookshelf which have stood the test of time and numerous re-reads. Katherine Neville- *The Eight*, 1988, Carolyn Hougan- *The Romeo Flag*, 1989. Ruth Wind- *In the Midnight Rain*, 2000, (several aka's including Barbara O'Neill), Susanna Kearsley- *The Winter Sea*, 2008 (aka Emma Cole.) All these authors have impressed my reading psyche with at least (and some-times only) one stand-out book.

I attended an excellent five day writing workshop with Paula Wild in 2015, before completing *Drawn To Sea*. The best takeaway was "Have a writing time, have a writing place, and have a writing buddy." I can do without the third if I must but not the first two.

Jackie Carmichael surprised me with her encouragement and informational assistance and opportunities. She, more than anyone, mentored me. I thank them both so much for their encouragement and support.

Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way* has been invaluable to me as a writer as well as artist.

What "light bulb" moments have you experienced along the way? And the milestones you've accomplished?

"Light bulb" moments for me are about identity....when the "I really Am a writer!" feeling swept through me, years after the "I really Am an artist!" one. Actually completing a book is an incredible milestone. Each of the five have been deeply rewarding experiences.

Self-publishing was a milestone and a whole new learning curve I'm still navigating; there are hurdles to overcome with marketing that the big publishers/marketers have a tight hold on.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how and purpose).

From time to time, I remember that I need a 'reading week' and I collect a pile of books; some from my 'to read' list or random choices from library, second hand and new purchase. Then for one week I read, eat, garden or walk and drink wine as I feel to. This is my prescription for mental therapy and de-stress.

It is best to be alone for this week so there are only your own needs to think of. Lacking a week, I read in the bathtub for an hour on Sunday.

If you were tasked with orienting a pair of big city crime fiction authors to rural coastal crime and had to organize a tour of remote community settings and lifestyle, where would you take them? Why?

Anywhere in my world is amazing and interesting, which can't be said for most urban areas.

I would take them to all the places my character Kit Sampson takes her passengers! Viner River, the Burdwood Group, to the midden beach of Echo Bay Park and the walk in the woods by the creek. I would show them where the hooded nudibranchs colonize a kelp patch and take them out when the whales go by.

We might tour the local kayakers floating village, the local sport fishing lodge, Echo Bay Marina and of course, my art studio and retreat. Like me they would have to invent their own crime because basically there isn't much.

How has membership in Crime Writers of Canada and participation in other organizations benefitted you?

I was first advised to become a member of The Writers Union of Canada by Jackie Carmichael and subsequently received funding for a library reading from TWUC; also I've listened to some of the webinars. There is lot of helpful educational advice and marketing information.

Only recently did it occur to me to do a search for mystery or crime writers associations. This interview with you (thank you for your interesting questions) is a direct benefit from reading my first of Winona Kent's newsletter for CWC.

Are there writer's conferences, book fairs and events that you would like to attend in 2023?

Probably, haven't thought that far ahead as yet.

What have you read recently?

A gripping book I had to read slowly, Noah Hawley's *Before the Fall*. What a book. I'm trying to examine it for its structure. Also, I was discouraged from

chapter titles but I like them; if Noah Hawley can use them, I can use them...

Am currently reading *Voices in the Ocean, A Journey Into the Wild and Haunting World of Dolphins* by Susan Casey; very difficult to read the horrendous brutality of human treatment. I can't read it in bed so have something in the previously listed genre for that.

What keeps you writing?

Can't not write!

Are you planning another book?

Yes, concept quite vague, just a germ at the moment...a post-apocalyptic... magic realism story of the revitalizing of annihilated flowers. I know, weird, right? Probably set right here, again.

Do you have a pet peeve?

Readers who read so fast they miss the finer key points and ask me to explain what happened at the end. Read slow, dear reader, read slow.

Thank you for today's chat, Yvonne. I've enjoyed research time spent in Vancouver Public Library-Central Library reading the books you and Bill Proctor produced together. I also enjoyed perusing your *Drawn To Sea* memoir in the library's Special Collections.

To wrap up, kindly give me flash answers to:

Your favourite beverage.

Stoneleigh Sauvignon Blanc white wine.

A Canadian female painter who inspires you.

The incomparable Emily Carr, writer and painter!

The most memorable book gifted to you.

Had to go way back in time for this, Christmas morning for several years there would be a new Trixie Belden book under the tree for me and I would spend most of the day reading it. Now there's an early role model.

Your favourite historical landmark on the Pacific West Coast.

Puffin Cove, the homestead built by Neil and Betty Carey and chronicled in his book "Puffin Cove," also Billy's Museum.

An unexpected, thrilling moment from fishing with Bill Proctor.

When I fished with him, one of our first 'shore days' at Haida Gwai'i we landed the rowboat at Pillar Rock on Graham Island, just south of Langara island. I know it isn't a flash answer but this is what I wrote about that day.

"I'm in bliss, alone and painting. My gaze lingers on the impossibly blue sea, the monumental stone spire. Sandpipers run forth and back, playing tag with the rolling edge of surf. Warm wind plays a soft tune in the spruce trees cradling the beach. I hug myself with the thrill of it all and squeeze out a bit of Prussian Green.

"Let's go row through the swell." Billy's voice breaks into my painting dream a long while later. I'm as good as done anyway, and stiff. "Just leave your stuff there, it'll be fine." I guess it will; there's not a living soul on the beach but us. I pick up my camera and climb into the rowboat. Bill shoves it out into the surf and climbs in.

Billy is a total maniac in a small boat but when he says, "Let's go for a row", I can never say no. I take pictures from the bow as the little dinghy sashays through the swells. Big green rollers lift us up...up...we hang high on the wave tip for a long second and then whoosh, down we plummet toward the flat rocks, the round rocks, the sharp and pointy rocks. I'm sure we're going to hit wrong or slide or end up ass over teakettle but we never do. Billy has an unerring instinct for pulling the oar a little left or a little right at the absolute last moment. I scream a lot for the fun of it and use up a roll of film. I don't get a photo op like this every day, and the roller coaster thrills just keep coming."

From "Drawn To Sea- Paintbrush to Chainsaw-Carving Out a Life on BC's Rugged Raincoast"

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*Thank you so much for this, Bob. Your thoughtful, insightful and informed questions took me into some unexamined territory and some great memories. Engaging in the act of thinking, and writing these last two days renewed my energy and inspiration to take the next story off the back burner and put a little flame under it. So-an unexpected gift, for which I am deeply grateful. I look forward to meeting up with you at the Vancouver Boat Show (February 1-5, 2023).*

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