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## Why I Write

Janice Kulyk Keefer

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## Why I Write

### Abstract

Because I'm in love with language, subject to that impossible eros whose desire leads to anguish and pleasure, both unspeakable, yet leaving their presences everywhere in the text, their long, narrow footprints tracing a choreography that is my only mark of who and what I am. And my way of signalling to that most intimate yet independent of partners, the reader, who will dance away from me with my text in her arms, making up her own pas de deux, turning my fictions, poems, words into her corps de ballet.

JANICE KULYK KEEFER



Janice Kulyk Keefer was born into a Ukrainian-Polish family in Toronto, Canada on June 2, 1952. She was educated at the University of Toronto and the University of Sussex, from which she received her D.Phil. in 1983. She has lived in England, France and in Nova Scotia as well as Ontario, where she currently makes her home. The author of eight books of poetry, fiction and literary criticism, she has lectured on Canadian literature and given readings from her own work throughout Canada and Europe. She teaches Transcultural Canadian Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

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## Why I Write

Because I'm in love with language, subject to that impossible eros whose desire leads to anguish and pleasure, both unspeakable, yet leaving their presences everywhere in the text, their long, narrow footprints tracing a choreography that is my only mark of who and what I am. And my way of signalling to that most intimate yet independent of partners, the reader, who will dance away from me with my text in her arms, making up her own pas de deux, turning my fictions, poems, words into her corps de ballet.

*A clumsy child, my knees forever encrusted with bandages covering the cuts I got by tripping over my own feet going to and from school. In ballet class I would keel over whenever we had to pirouette, lacking any sense of balance, or so my teacher lamented. In my Ukrainian folk-dancing classes, I was the one who veered to the left when everyone else turned smartly right; steps I had perfectly by memory scattering like wayward birds as soon as I had to translate them into body.*

It's my way of making the world real to me; making up the world, and thus making it mean, though the process has more to do with cloudiness than clarity. A way of exploring, digging up the packed earth of who and what I thought I was, making it friable, fractured and thus a seedbed for countless possibilities, only a minute fraction of which I will ever pursue into printed language. A way of connecting with, intersecting, overlapping with all those who are other than me, whether they are lover, friends, family, strangers – my maternal grandmother, whose love for me was the sky of my earliest emotional landscape or, in a story I have just finished, Maria Alexandrovna Ulyanova, Lenin's mother. Or that friend of my mother's and mother of someone who was once my best friend, a woman whom I knew only as a child, and yet whose dying obsessed me until I could make a fiction from, not of it. Entering her dying and making of it a haunted house to be explored and ultimately evicted from.

Out of a compulsion to retrieve, recuperate the stories, lives, people who would otherwise be lost – those lives we've made obscure by not looking or caring or remembering them.

*In this the particular preoccupation of the writer who's the child of immigrants, who can't help but look both ways – country of origin, country of adoption – before she crosses any fictive street? The stories I grew up on, in*

my swimming-pool-serene, west-end Toronto suburb, stories about a small village in Poland, the river edging my grandparent's fields, on the other side of which was Russia. My mother and my aunt dressing-up in rusty black veils and long, dragging skirts to play mourners at the funerals of all the young Polish men shot trying to cross that border into the Workers' Paradise. The twin babies buried in that village who would have been my aunt and uncle had they lived; all the stories I, growing up, made up about them, alternative selves in another world, another language, that language to which I've remained a stubborn – but not perfect – stranger.

To know who I am; to construct myself, to slough off and slip on selves; to sustain *asacra conversazione* with self, others, language and world, however mediated, conflicted, impossible and desirable. To maintain myself on that site between a consuming belonging to and abject isolation from the community into which I was born. To be able to imagine communities other, fuller, better than what I no longer take as given.

Because it is, if not the greatest, then the most absorbing joy I know.