



Carillon columnist MaryLou Driedger's second novel, *Sixties Girl*, is infused with the cultural milieu of the 1960s, and her upbringing in Winnipeg and Steinbach.

Columnist’s second novel delves into 1960s

by JORDAN ROSS

The twists and turns of the 1960s are the backdrop of MaryLou Driedger's new novel, which whisks adolescent readers back to an era of rapid change with more than a few parallels to the present.

Sixties Girl is the coming-of-age story of Laura, a girl who is grappling with transformations happening close to home and around the world.

Set in 1960s and present-day Winnipeg, the book follows Laura as she navigates the ups and downs of adolescence. A grown-up Laura also recounts her eventful childhood to her grandson, Will, who finds contemporary echoes in the decades-old stories.

Sixties Girl arrives less than two years after Driedger's debut novel, *Lost on the Prairie*, which spent 14 weeks on the McNally Robinson bestseller list and was shortlisted for two awards.

Seated at her kitchen table last week, Driedger said the response to her first book "totally blew me away."

It wasn't long before her B.C.-based publisher, Heritage House, was calling to ask if she had any more stories to share. As a matter of fact, she did.

It's a Manitoba book through and through. It's rooted in Winnipeg and rural Manitoba scenes and settings and places.

– MaryLou Driedger

That won't surprise anyone who knows Driedger, a retired schoolteacher and self-described "write-aholic" who maintains a daily blog in addition to her *Carillon* column, *Viewpoint*, which has run for 38 years and counting.

"Writing is the way I make sense of the world," Driedger said. "I'm always thinking about what the next book is going to be."

The idea for *Sixties Girl* had been percolating for a while. *Lost on the Prairie* was based on her grandfather's immigration to Canada, but Driedger also longed to write more autobiographically about her own upbringing in southern Manitoba. She was just eight years old when her family relocated to Steinbach from Winnipeg.

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Manitoba scenes and settings and places."

When Driedger sat down to write, what spilled out was not a novel, but a series of short stories, each with their own plot.

"I didn't think I had it in me to start another book when I was still engrossed in *Lost on the Prairie*, so I started writing these short stories about a little girl growing up in the Sixties," she explained.

Driedger began reading the stories to fellow writers, and the response was effusive. Acting on a suggestion to give the collection a narrative through-line, she began reshaping the stories into a book for an adult audience.

Her publisher liked the resulting manuscript but asked her to rework the stories for the middle-school audience that devoured *Lost on the Prairie*.

"It's just such a great age," Driedger said. "They're so keen and so interested. When I visit schools, they have a million questions—such good questions."

Driedger set to work again, enlisting the help of her friend and editor, Deborah Froese.

"Rewriting the book was tough, it was a slog, and I had to do it in such a short time. Basically that's all I did for probably about three weeks," Driedger said with a laugh.

The book's cultural backdrop will be familiar to many: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, Woodstock, the space race, Expo 67, Beatlemania, the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"Those things left a real impression," Driedger said. "That's when I went through my childhood and teen years and a lot of big changes were going on in the world."

She recalled huddling under her desk for school safety drills during the Cuban missile crisis, and, a few years later, meeting university classmates who had married draft dodgers.

There aren't many middle-years books set in the 1960s, and Driedger realized many children today don't know much about that decade. That was underscored during the pandemic, when her grandsons in Saskatoon would absorb the stories she told them over Zoom.

"The boys were fascinated," Driedger said. "They sat there and they just listened and they asked questions and they were really interested in what had happened to their grandpa and me in the Sixties."

"That kind of reinforced for me that kids might be interested in these stories, because it is such a different world than they're used to."

Different, and yet alike. Driedger sees parallels between the 1960s and today, when children are coping with rapid social and technological change.

The book explores some tough issues, including puberty and body image, the death of loved ones, and the undiagnosed post-traumatic stress that many parents brought home from the 20th century's overseas conflicts.

Driedger dedicated the book to her three siblings, whom she consulted when writing about aspects of their shared childhood, including their mother's cancer diagnosis.

"Some of the stories are a little bit more edgy and maybe a little bit more grown-up topics," Driedger said, "but I talked to teachers who teach that age of kids, and they all said, 'No, go for it, we need to talk about this with kids.'"

Driedger balanced those heavy topics with more lighthearted moments, like her memory of watching Queen Elizabeth II's motorcade from the roof of St Boniface Hospital, where her dad was an intern.

As she wrote, Driedger kept her grandchildren in mind. She also drew on her relationship with her grandparents, mother, and mother-in-law.

Her background research included revisiting all four of the Winnipeg houses she had lived in as a child.

"They're all still standing, and I took photos," she said. "That was kind of a pilgrimage I made while I was writing the book, to go back to all these places that I had lived in and try to imagine them as settings for the book."

Sixties Girl isn't a straightforward sequel, but Driedger's two novels share a narrative thread: Laura is the granddaughter of Peter, the protagonist from *Lost on the Prairie*.

Driedger will launch *Sixties Girl* at McNally Robinson Booksellers on Friday, April 28 at 7 p.m. The event, which will be hosted by fellow Winnipeg author Colleen Nelson, will take place in-person and online.

Copies of the book are also available locally at the Mennonite Heritage Village gift shop.

Driedger is already at work on two more book projects—a 'between-quel' of sorts about her mother's childhood during the Great Depression, and a picture book about the acclaimed Winnipeg-based visual artist Wanda Koop.

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