

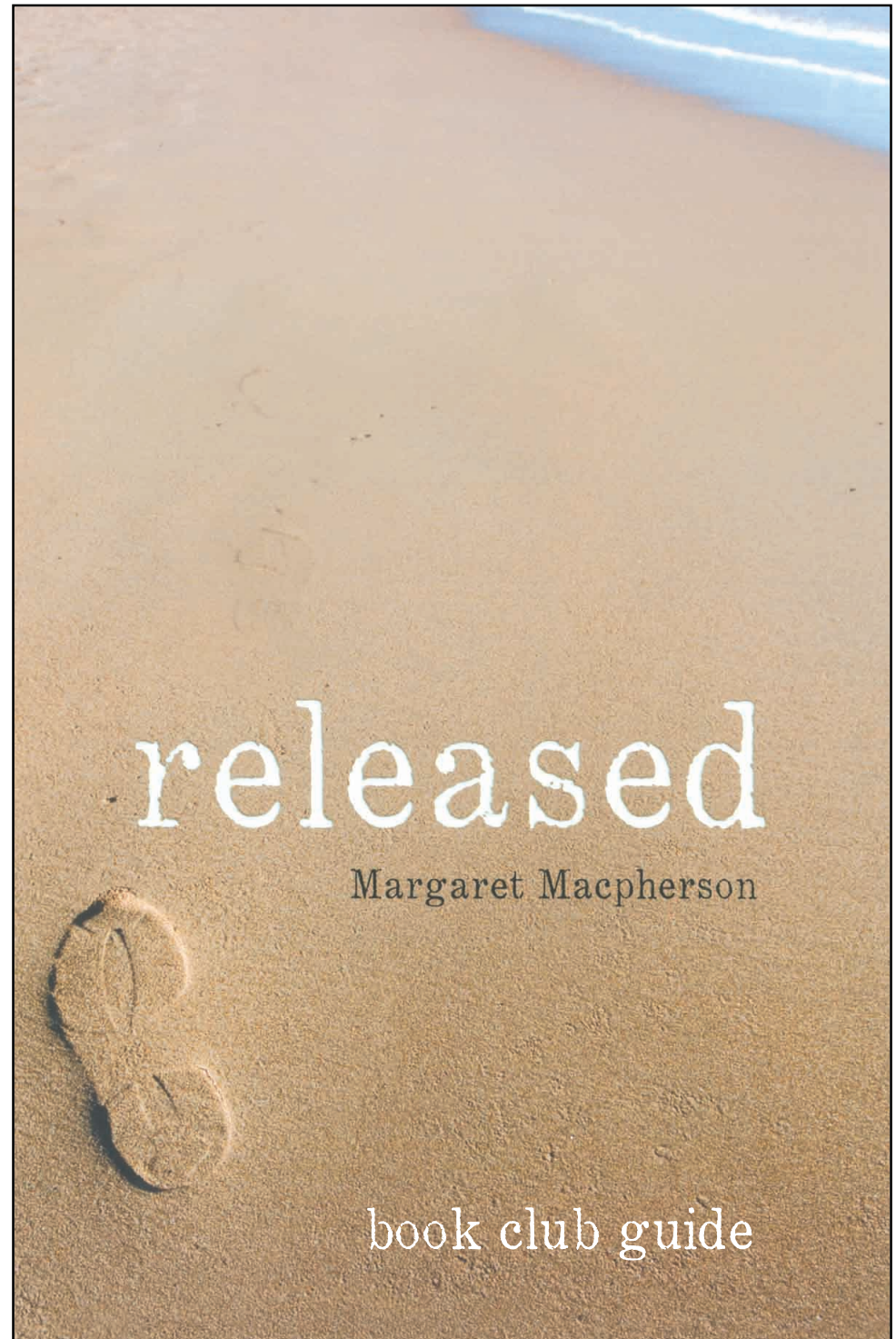


About the Author

Margaret Macpherson grew up in the Northwest Territories on the shores of Great Slave Lake. She currently lives in Edmonton with her husband and three kids. She graduated from the University of New Brunswick with a BA in English in 1984 and received a Masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia in 1997. She has worked as a teacher and journalist in Halifax, Bermuda, and Vancouver.

Her first collection of short fiction, *Perilous Departures*, was published by Signature Editions in 2004. She is also the author of four books of creative non-fiction: *Outlaws of the Canadian West* (Lone Pine Press), *Outlaws and Lawmen of the West* (Lone Pine Press), *Silk, Spices and Glory: In Search of the Northwest Passage* (Fifth House), and the award-winning biography *Nellie McClung: Voice for the Voiceless* (XYZ Press).

Margaret writes poetry as well and was Edmonton's finalist in CBC Radio's 2006 Poetry Face-off.



An Interview with Margaret Macpherson

You write about real places. Do you also write about real people? Would you call this an autobiographical novel? What made you want to write this story?

Like most fictional work, the characters in *Released* are composites, based to varying degrees on real people. Ruth is a composite character drawn from both my own experiences and understanding and from different aspects of a variety of people I have known throughout my life.

For example, I grew up knowing a girl who never lost her baby teeth and then, as an adult, one of my friend's daughters had the same weird dental problem. I also used to have terrible dreams about losing my own teeth and when I visited my Dictionary of Symbols to decipher the dream, I read that losing teeth meant a fear of losing control. This fit so perfectly with the character I was creating I felt it was a gift I absolutely had to use.

In another instance, I met two young women from rural communities who were living in the city of Halifax with emotionally and verbally abusive men. They seemed powerless to leave and I wondered at the circumstances that prevented them from breaking away from these obviously unhealthy relationships. One of these women actually went on to have an abortion in Montreal. She never told her boyfriend of the abortion yet continued to stay in the relationship. Both women saw themselves as “healers of the wounded,” the classic example of women who love too much.

While I didn't have a particularly religious upbringing, my own brief brush with the Pentecostal church gave me insights into fundamentalism and the damage it can do in the name of love. I also know a very special young man who disappeared for some years into a California cult. He was isolated from his family and friends and gave vast quantities of cash to a charismatic leader to maintain favour in the eyes of the organization. All these elements, plus a vivid imagination, helped me to create the character and the events that dictate the life of Ruth Callis.

I wanted to write this story because I honestly believe in the healing power of forgiveness. I've met people who carry around old slights and hurts from the past and it only makes them more and more bitter and unhappy. They can't be released from a grudge until they themselves choose not to carry it any longer. The easiest way to rid yourself of bitterness is to forgive the person who wronged you. *Voilà*, it's no longer an issue.

- Trends in various types of violence against women, as recorded in police statistics, are mixed:
- rates of reported sexual assault have declined since 1993;
- the number of spousal violence incidents against women has declined since 2000 while the rate of violence perpetrated by boyfriends has increased;
- the number of male partners reported to police for criminal harassment has increased.

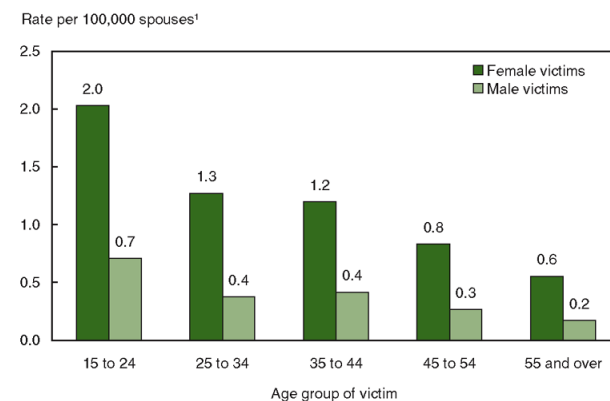
Impact

- Spousal violence has psychological, physical, social and economic impacts for victims, their families and society.
- Female victims of spousal violence are more likely than males to report being injured, suffer lost productivity, experience multiple assaults, fear for their lives, and experience negative emotional consequences.
- Almost 40% of women assaulted by spouses said their children witnessed the violence against them (either directly or indirectly) and in many cases the violence was severe. In half of cases of spousal violence against women that were witnessed by children, the woman feared for her life.
- Studies of the economic costs of violence against women to victims and society estimate that costs to health, criminal justice, social services and lost productivity range in the billions of dollars.

Risk factors

- Young women experience the highest rates of violence.
- Women experience higher rates than men of sexual assault, stalking, serious spousal assaults and spousal homicide.
- Partners' use of psychological or emotional abuse, and frequent heavy drinking by partners, raise the risk of violence against women in spousal relationships.
- Women in common-law relationships and those who are separated report rates of spousal violence and homicide that are disproportionate to their representation in the population.
- Stalking by ex-partners raises the risk of ex-partner violence.

Rates of spousal homicide by age group and sex of victim, 1975 to 2004

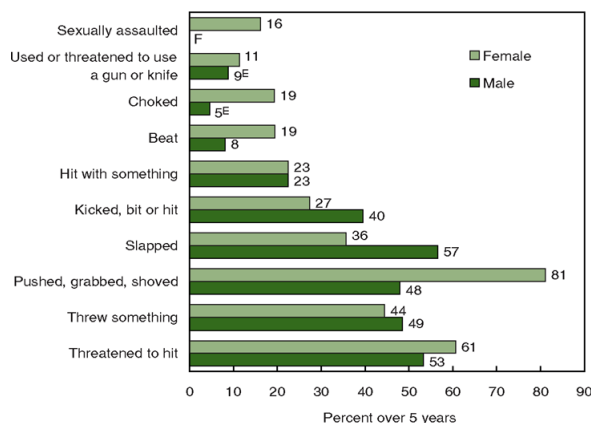


Excerpted from:

Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006

Violence against anyone is unacceptable. However, research has shown that gender plays an important role in the context and outcomes of violence for women and men. Federal/Provincial/Territorial (F/P/T) Status of Women Ministers have joined with Statistics Canada to compile this collection of statistical indicators on five major aspects of women's experiences of violence: prevalence and severity, impact, risk factors, institutional and community-based responses, and victims' use of services. Wherever possible, comparisons are made with the violence experienced by men. This report updates the information contained in the 2002 publication *Assessing Violence Against Women: A Statistical Profile* and includes important new information in a number of areas.

Types of spousal violence experienced by women and men, 2004



Indicators in this document focus on acts of violence against women that have been quantified using statistical survey techniques. The report focuses on behaviours that could trigger a criminal justice response—acts of violence that qualify as offences under the *Criminal Code*. The primary data sources that Statistics Canada uses to measure violence against women are victimization surveys, and data collected by police agencies, adult courts, emergency shelters for women and their children, and other service agencies providing assistance to crime victims. These indicators provide the following portrait of violence against women in Canada.

Prevalence and severity

- Women are more likely than men to be the victims of the most severe forms of spousal assault, as well as spousal homicide, sexual assault and criminal harassment (stalking).
- The rate of spousal homicide has declined in recent years for both women and men, and survey data suggest that the severity of non-lethal assaults against women has also declined somewhat.
- Over the past 30 years, the percentage of persons charged with first degree murder in spousal homicide cases has risen; however, men are twice as likely as women to receive this charge.

The other main reason I wanted to release *Released* into the world is because I believe the fundamentalist church has to take responsibility for producing young naïve women who have no real sense of self worth. It's like a side of the Christian triangle is missing: Christ told his disciples to love their God, and to love their neighbours *as they love themselves*. You can't love anyone unless you know how to love yourself and this is the element that can be missed in the teachings of the radical Christian right. Self-love can be lost in service, and I believe this emphasis on service to others has produced a generation of women who have grown up with real worthiness issues.

You grew up in Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. Can you describe what the social structure was like at that time? How did the native and non-native communities intersect and interact?

Yellowknife was a wonderful frontier town to grow up in during the 60s and 70s. There was a sense of innocence about the community — that anything was possible — and an incredible sense of freedom. My siblings and I really had the run of the town and because it was so far north and we didn't have access to television, it was culturally a good decade or more behind the times.

Prior to 1967 the town was built on gold mining and hunting and trapping. After Yellowknife was declared a capital city, the government moved in and the tenor of the town changed. There was more distinction between government workers and non-government workers, more discrepancies between rich and poor. As well, the whole notion of aboriginal self-governance was just starting to build, so there were mounting tensions between the aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples.

Released deals not only with violence against women, but violence against people who are unable to defend themselves — beyond the abuse Ruth suffers at the hands of Ian, there's also what happens to Jax at the residence, and the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust, for example. What parallels do you see between the characters of Ruth and Jax? Was there a real-life Jax on whom you based this character?

Yes, the idea of institutional oppression is something I wanted to explore in the work. Ruth's morbid fascination with the Jews has much to do with societal culpability. Ruth feels responsible for a history she has had no part in. Her empathy is genuinely felt and yet she can't see Jax's

situation for what it is. Jax is extracted from her true environment, yet instead of accepting it as inevitable, she lashes out at the people in the institution who abuse her. Ultimately, she can't stay in the residence because she can't live by its rules. Jax, in certain ways, represents the natural world, that which is wild and untamed. When the dogs are tamed, Jax disappears. She won't be harnessed. I really love the character of Jax and even though she's entirely invented, she is a great model for Ruth and ultimately the one whose pure spirit helps Ruth recognize the manipulations of the One True Church.

You yourself moved south to go to university. How did it affect you? Do you think kids who move away from home to go to school and are out of their parents' sphere of influence are more vulnerable than kids who live with their parents or have them close by and involved in their lives?

I think moving away from your family is a necessary thing and, indeed, a good thing for young people. I *do* remember not having access to my family when others went home for weekends or high days and holy days like Thanksgiving and Easter, but that was tempered with a tremendous sense of independence.

Do you think living in an isolated northern community makes people more susceptible to influences like cults?

I think people everywhere are in search of community. Perhaps people in northern towns are more limited in the number of choices they have, but, for the most part, I believe fringe religions are fairly indiscriminate and prey on the lonely and vulnerable everywhere.

Why do you think women get into situations like Ruth does with Ian?

Ruth is an example of a woman whose sense of well-being depends on the well-being of others in her world. She's constantly seeking approval and is totally estranged from her emotional self. She feels her internal world is not valid, and she searches for acceptance, indeed, love, for external sources. It doesn't matter if it's Jesus or Ian, Ruth needs external approval in order to feel that her existence is justified. Her journey is one of self-discovery and she must suffer immensely before she can begin to feel her own raw humanity beneath the façade of sacrifice.

zealous evangelism? What is the author saying about educational and religious institutions?

6. Some critics have called *Released* a "woman's book." How does it deal with issues that are specific to women? Does it speak to the larger world about domestic violence and physical abuse? Would you recommend this book to a man? Why? Why not?
7. Why does Ruth choose to terminate her pregnancy without telling Ian of the conception? Many Christians consider abortion a sin; what does Ruth think? Do you think Ruth had a choice? Is it possible for her to claim a relationship with God if she is not contrite? What would the Christian church say about this? What do you think?
8. When Ruth escapes from Nimbin, robbed of her money and even her sight, and then is helped by the Saint Vincent de Paul charity group, she is told to "pass on the goodness." How is that experience echoed in her epiphany at the Hope Mission in Sudbury? Is "passing on the goodness" enough?
9. Do you think the man identified in the article about the saved child that Ruth finds in Steve's papers is really Ian? Does it matter to Ruth if it was him? Does it matter to you? Do you think redemption is possible for Ian?
10. The author uses teeth as a metaphor for major life transitions and loss of control. Can you identify the ways this recurring motif informs the narrative and helps the reader understand Ruth more fully? Does the surgical extraction of her baby teeth stunt her emotional growth? What proof do we see of this? Why does Ruth feel an affinity for the Jews? Discuss the relationships between culpability, empathy and guilt.

Questions for Discussion

1. The themes of selfishness vs. selflessness, domination vs. subservience, and abuse vs. suffering run through this novel. Ruth Callis is constantly pulled into worlds that challenge her notion of these things and skew her own sense of self worth. What triggers her initial foray into the One True Church? How does that experience make her vulnerable in her relationship with Ian? Ruth has difficulty distinguishing between pain and pleasure, ego and selflessness both in the One True Church and in her relationship with Ian. Have you ever known anyone who believes they are acting selflessly but is in fact gratifying their own ego?
2. The only way Ruth can forgive herself and her own actions is to forgive her abuser. Have there been occasions in your own life where forgiveness has not been possible?
3. Biblical themes abound in this book. How does Ruth understand salvation in her early formative years? How does she apply this to her relationship with her family? How does she try to be a saviour in her later relationship with Ian? Are women encouraged to play the role of the saviour? What positive aspects are there to this? What negative aspects?
4. Images of things “below the surface” are constantly reflected in the world Ruth inhabits. How do you see her internalizing her reality? Are there cracks in her external world that reflect her troubled feelings? About Ian? About God? How does your internal world reflect on the outside? Are they different? Or the same?
5. Ruth’s childhood friend Jax is removed from her own culture and put in a residential school. Do you think Jax is better off in town or in the bush with her natural mother? What are the ramifications of institutional domination? When Ruth sees the elders from the One True Church trying to call out Satan from a native woman, she is both afraid and angry. Who is the One True Church serving in their

Ruth seems to have a very strong relationship with her father, and yet she finds herself drawn to very controlling men — like the elders, the swami, Ian. Do you think mothers or fathers have more influence over their daughters?

In *Released*, Elsie is the stronger, more forceful personality but don’t forget, she abandons her last infant to the care of her husband. Ruth and her mother must reconcile. She has nothing to reconcile with her father. She perceives his love as unconditional and thus does not have to work to earn it. Initially, she thinks Ian’s love is unconditional, too, but she mistakenly sees his control as some sort of exclusivity.

Ruth’s relationship with her mother is always conflicted, even in the very moving scene leading up to the mother’s death, when it is a one-way conversation. Does her mother’s distance have anything to do with Ruth’s seeking guidance elsewhere?

Absolutely. Don’t we always blame the mother! Elsie’s emotional abandonment of her youngest daughter has everything to do with Ruth’s tenuous sense of self. She forges a life outside the home with Jax but when Jax disappears, she feels twice abandoned. The reason Ruth gets involved with the One True Church in the first place is that it offers her a sense of belonging.

Are there similarities that you can see between this novel and your earlier short-story collection *Perilous Departures*? Are there any particular themes or concerns that you find yourself returning to in your fiction?

Oh, that’s a tough question. I suppose my take on the north is somewhat idealized in both books, the same way we all tend to idealize our childhood. If I’m really honest with myself, I’d say my personal spiritual sensibilities keep coming to the surface in my writing. I am a great believer in love, both human love and divine love. I think the notion that we are all creatures struggling to find meaning, beauty, truth and a greater sense of illumination in our world runs through my work. I made a very conscious attempt not to demonize Ian. He is himself a victim of systemic abuse. He strikes out because he has been struck. And, of course, the framework of the book insists that there is redemption of Ian, as there is for all of us.

You've worked as a journalist and a non-fiction writer for many years. How does writing fiction differ from reporting or writing-non-fiction?

It's way more fun. You're not just telling someone else's story or retelling a known event. You're no longer confined by the facts. For me, the joy of writing is in the creation, finding your characters' voices, letting them reveal themselves on the page, running with it. I always find that if I trust that imaginative part of myself, what comes to the page finds its own meaning and the words speak more deeply and more knowingly than if I tried to force words and contrive meaning from those words.

You also write poetry and song lyrics, don't you? What's your favourite type of writing? How do you decide what genre to use when you have an idea? Does something just come to you as, say, a short story or a poem?

When my kids were small I wrote more stories and more poems because I had less time. Recently, I'm much more interested in novels and I'm in the middle of writing a new one because it's been running around in my head for the last three years and the voice and tone feels right now that I've starting writing it.

Where do your ideas come from?

Life. The domestic. The ordinary. I think people are incredibly complex and fascinating and contradictory. I can't imagine writing historical fiction or doing a lot of research on a certain era or setting. I have a terrific interest in human psychology. In fact, it was my minor in university. Human relationships fascinate me and I like to try to plumb the psyche of my characters to divine interesting bits of truth.

How do you write? Do you polish as you go or do you do a really rough draft and then a number of rewrites? When you're editing, how do you decide what to keep and what to cut? Do you ever get so attached to characters that you are unable to cut them?

I write in scenes, small chunks of text that ultimately add up to a full manuscript. I generally become quite attached to that first draft of a scene but after some time has elapsed, and I've written a couple more scenes, I go back to the original one to see if I still like it. That's when I do some polishing. I'm getting better at figuring out the structure of a novel, so I throw less away.

In one of my earlier drafts of *Released* I had half the story told from Ian's point of view. I did tons of scenes when he was a kid, watched him struggle with his father's death, introduced the Captain. Oh, it was almost half the manuscript. Then one day, I tossed it out. I decided this had to be Ruth's story and not Ian's.

I still think the process of writing his story was valuable, however, because I learned a lot about him and figured out some of his motivations, some of the reasons behind his woundedness. But it was tough to throw away some of that writing. There were some powerful scenes in the work that ultimately I decided I didn't need.

Do you write every day? When? Do you set yourself a goal for a certain amount of time or a certain number of words per day or per week? Do you ever have periods when you dry up and can't write? Do you use any writing tricks or exercises to "prime the pump"?

I write once I bundle my three kids out the door for school so, for the most part, I work mornings and take weekends and summers off. It's just too crazy around my house with kids underfoot. Once they're gone, I happily ignore all the housework and sit down at the computer to work. I usually only stick to the computer for a couple of hours — two, maybe three on a good day, unless I'm really into a scene. Then I can whip out 5000 words in a day; they just flow. That doesn't happen often but when it does we end up having scrambled eggs or beans on toast for supper and my husband scowls a lot and complains about having no clean laundry.