

Q&A with Sarah deLeeuw

Author of *Soft Shouldered*

Winner: Gold Award: Best Article B.C./Yukon 2014

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TMS: *When did you know you wanted to write a piece like this about missing women on B.C.'s Highway of Tears?*

SD: Most of the creative non-fiction that I write, I do so with a small-scale entry point. I have a vision of something very concrete and very specific and I tend to work from that and expand outward. So once I had this moment, this small-scale spark — which was picking up a very young woman [along the highway and giving her a ride] — I knew that that could be stitched into a larger montage of a whole slew of events across northern B.C., including things like the abduction of Nicole Hoar. She was a tree planter who I think in many respects got Canada speaking about missing and murdered aboriginal women in the corridor from Prince George to Prince Rupert — although, quite ironically, she was a non-aboriginal woman. It's kind of hard, I suppose, to live up here as a woman and not understand this violence is everywhere. And since I write about everyday things, I write about those violences.

TMS: *To what extent is this a personal essay for you — are you close to anyone who has lost a daughter in this way?*

SD: I worked with some of these families when I was a counsellor in Terrace, B.C. Also, [in 2014] Cody Legebokoff was convicted of murdering four women, three of whom were aboriginal, here in Prince George. He left the bodies of these women on trails that I run on regularly. A very close friend of mine, who's a hereditary chief and an executive director with a First Nations organization in town, worked with all of the families during the court advocacy process. So it does feel like a very personal issue for me. It feels very, very close. The trails that I run on are trails where women's bodies have been dumped. It feels impossible, in some ways, to not write about this. I have hitchhiked these sections of highway as a young woman myself when I needed to get home late at night. And I've worked with families whose daughters, sisters and mothers have gone missing. Their

stories aren't my stories to tell — but my relationship to this landscape and geography is my story to tell, and I think it's politically imperative to tell that story.

TMS: *Do you struggle with that question: "Do I have a right to tell this story?"*

SD: I absolutely wrestle with it. I think issues of voice appropriation are things that writers should grapple with. I have always made a point of speaking in my voice. I attempt to present myself in these essays. Even when I write in second person I have always been careful to never tell a story from somebody else's perspective. They're my stories and my tellings of the things that I bear witness to. At a personal level, I have many friends who are close to me and with whom I speak through some of these issues. I certainly am not alone when I'm writing essays. People who are very active in issues of missing and murdered aboriginal women know that I write these things and have never been anything but supportive. I think there's a general feeling that there have to be the voices and stories of allies.

TMS: *Where did you get the idea to open with the description of Shoulder Dystocia?*

SD: When I originally wrote that essay, that wasn't there. It was an add-on after the fact. But that was me as a fairly mature writer knowing that the essay was lacking a central and extended metaphor. It wasn't strong enough yet to be submitted. It really wouldn't have merited publication without some additional logic and finesse to it. The metaphor itself came from teaching Introduction to Reproduction in medical school. I'd also interviewed a midwife for another book where I was interviewing health care professionals. I interviewed her and she talked about really dangerous births that she'd attended. It just snapped into place. I thought, *this* is the central metaphor. We have word after word and medical description after medical description of every other ailment, but we have no idea what to call children who are born and go missing.

TMS: *I want to ask you about the tone of the piece. It's urgent but you're not scolding the reader. There's empathy for the people you're writing about, but there's empathy for the reader too; you say, several times, "may this not happen to you." How did you arrive at that tone?*

SD: I suppose partly it's a personality quirk. I don't really think that an abrasive, scolding, blaming tone tends to reach a broad audience. There's certainly a bit of a political imperative to the tone that I choose to take. I am quite interested in the construction of beautiful and poetic language, which doesn't work well with a didactic argumentative presentation. I want there to be a sense of being able to understanding one's self in the presence of this piece, because I think that being able to do that — understanding "this absolutely could be me" — allows for the debate to be busted open in a way that I feel is more productive than, for instance, a litany of numbers. I certainly feel there's a place for

numbers and hard-hitting factual information about colonial violence. Academically I'm quite interested in trying to extend those arguments. But important and urgent political events deserve poetry as well.

Jeremy KLASZUS conducted this interview for TMS.