

# Slow and steady wins the day (twice) for poet Kelly Norah Drukker



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Montreal poet Kelly Norah Drukker walked off with the Concordia University First Book Prize and the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry at the recent QWF Literary Awards. Her book, *Small Fires*, was 13 years in the making. Marie-France Coallier / Montreal Gazette

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A word to all you multiple literary award nominees out there: be ready when the time comes.

Kelly Norah Drukker can testify from fresh experience. At the recent QWF Literary Awards, when most thoughts in the room seemed inclined toward the just-departed Leonard Cohen — and maybe, in a very different way, the newly elected Donald Trump — the Montreal poet effectively stole the show by walking off with the Concordia University First Book Prize and the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry.

“The first time (her book’s title was called), my heart was pounding, but once I sat back down I was able to relax,” Drukker recalled. “I’d already had more than I ever expected. Then, when they called it again, all I could think was ‘I’ve prepared one speech, not two!’”

It should be said that in the end Drukker did rise to the second-speech occasion, thanking The Word bookstore, where *Small Fires* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 115 pp, \$16.95) had its Montreal launch, for its role in nurturing local writers.

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And in the first speech — the one she had prepared — her comment that the book she was being rewarded for was 13 years in the making hopefully occasioned rethinks among everyone in earshot who has ever complained of how hard it is to write a book.

A good starting point for a conversation with Drukker is the place that served as a direct poetic muse for her. The Aran Islands are more mythologized than actually experienced first-hand — you see them off in the distance if you’re rambling on the west coast of Ireland, but relatively few travellers take the trouble for a visit, and fewer still think of staying there for an extended period. Drukker did, and on the evidence of *Small Fires* the time was well spent.

It started when Drukker found herself with a bit of spare time and money following a post-university job teaching ESL in Switzerland.



Kelly Norah Drukker grew up in Morin-Heights and studied at John Abbott College and Concordia University. Marie-France Coallier / Montreal Gazette

“My mother said to me, ‘Why don’t you go to Ireland? We have roots there, and we’ve never been there.’ I spent some time in Dublin and loved it, but I realized I wanted to be out in the country. I also knew I wanted to be beside the ocean, but I didn’t have a car. I thought, ‘An island would be ideal. You’ll always be near the sea there.’”

She learned about the Arans from a guide book, and once there, was never in any doubt that she’d come to the right place.

“I was completely taken in by the landscape, and the quiet of it,” she recalled of her impression on her initial four-day visit. “There aren’t a lot of cars, there are no billboards, hardly any trees. You’re surrounded by fields, sea and sky, early- and pre-Christian ruins.”

Enchanted, Drukker was determined to go back, an opportunity that came when she was offered a replacement position running a local youth hostel for three weeks. But if she thought it would be all inspiration and creation, she was soon put straight.

“One night, for some reason, every guest had left, so I had to change 22 beds in one day — that’s sheets and duvets. I woke up the next day with sciatica so bad that I could hardly walk.”

Eventually Drukker got ambulatory again, and with that three-week stint extended to eight months via the fortuitous offer of a house-sit, she found herself with a little more freedom to create. Sketches written “sitting on a rock in a field on a sunny day” were fleshed out and refined — back home and over three subsequent visits — into the poems that make up the first third of *Small Fires*.

Further inspiration was found during stints in France's Midi-Pyrénées. But it would be a mistake to view *Small Fires* as a travelogue in the guise of a poetry collection. Nor are these poems mere local colour pieces. Drukker can capture something of the soul of a place in just a few lines, and she can also take the reader back in time with a rare immediacy, as in "The Silken Threads", an evocation of the oppressed lives of Lyon silk workers in the 1830s:

*It spins and cords the muscles  
tight across your back  
your arms as heavy  
as wet branches.*

It's almost too perfect that a writer so concerned with a sense of place grew up in a town most of us think of as a temporary tourist stop: Morin-Heights in the Laurentians. Drukker's Netherlands-born father was a hairdresser (he ministered to the head of a McGarrigle sister at least once), her mother an attendant to special-needs elementary schoolchildren. The house, Drukker said, was "full of music and reading and storytelling." Hardly surprising, then, that the poetic impulse struck early.

"A poem I wrote when I was 11 — it was a little school assignment, about a leaf or something like that — suddenly made me understand that sense and sound could be married in a very short form that was pleasing to me," she recalled. "Then, in high school, I had a very close friend who also wrote, and we started to identify ourselves as poets. Plot was never something that motivated me; it was always more about describing what was around me."

Drukker did her CEGEP at John Abbott College in St-Anne-de-Bellevue, where poet Ruth Taylor was an important mentor. She learned German "because it was the closest I could get to Dutch, my father's first language" and went through the undergraduate Creative Writing program at Concordia before embarking on the travels, funded by ESL work, that led her to the Arans and to the project that turned out to be longer than she could have known — indeed that took a form she could not, for a long time, even visualize.

"For a long time, they were just individual pieces," she said of the poems. "I found the idea of a book very daunting. Then, at one point, a writer friend who had finished a novel said, 'Why don't you just take an envelope and stick the finished poems in it? Let them accumulate, and see what happens.' I took her advice. Psychologically, to see that envelope get thicker and thicker was really nice."

Asked how hard it was maintaining a consistent poetic voice over such a long period, Drukker said her biggest challenges were more technical in nature.

"I became lighter on punctuation, for one thing," she said. "Going over the earlier versions, I would find myself thinking, 'What are all these commas doing here? The line breaks are already doing their work.'"

Clearly it all worked out, but even so, that 13-year spectre is hard to dismiss, especially for a non-poet lay person. When I half-jokingly asked whether book No. 2 might appear sometime sooner than 2029, Drukker chuckled but otherwise took the question completely seriously.

“I’m in a place where I’m not running around to a hundred different part-time jobs. Hopefully I can be a little more focused,” she said. “So we’ll see.”