

You May Think This, But An Interview with Maggie de Vries

Valerie Raoul (VR): As a specialist in autobiography and gender, I'm interested in your book from that point of view. The title, *Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Sister*, tells us it's a story about your sister, but also about you remembering her—part biography, part autobiography. Did you have any models in mind for this type of memoir?

Maggie de Vries (MD): The only book that I was consciously influenced by is *Experience*, by Martin Amis, where he talks about his cousin who disappeared. They didn't know what had happened to her for years. Finally, her body was dug up in the back garden of a serial murderer in Britain. He writes about her with such sensitivity and love, I found it deeply touching. My sister had already gone missing when I read that book and I cried and cried. I don't read much non-fiction—more children's fiction, because I'm a children's writer and book editor. It's hard to say where exactly the inspiration or the models came from for this book. I was really feeling my way in the dark.

VR Since you are a writer, I'm sure you were very aware of the structure of your book as you were writing it. I wonder to what extent you had a plan for shifting the focus back and forth between Sarah's story and your story and intertwining them. How did you manage the various degrees of identification and distance involved?

MD I pieced the book together at first in a certain sequence based on association. It was a strange book to write, because I was living it at the same time I was writing it; there was no distance. On the same day I could be writing the manuscript and an event would happen that

would later be in the book. For example, the book starts with my learning that they found my sister's DNA on the Pickton property in Port Coquitlam. That happened on August 6, 2002. I'd already been working on the book for several months when I received that news. I attended the preliminary hearing in January 2003 and I conclude the book with that, but I was in the process of finishing up the book at that time. So I was living it and writing it, and couldn't really plan it. Plus, I was constantly discovering more material, whether it was through meeting people who knew my sister, or finding my mother's journals and having her go back through them. They were filled with material about Sarah, and I also asked my father to go back through his old notebooks. I went through old letters from my parents that I found in an orange bike bag in my father's basement, and realized they were really helpful. Like journals, they have dates, so you can tell exactly when things happened. I've always kept all the letters that I've received. Then I started finding letters from my sister. I didn't remember that I had those letters until I discovered them.

VR Was it difficult for your mother to relive the past?

MD My mother didn't remember that she'd written anything about Sarah in her journal. She was doubtful. When she looked she found an enormous amount of material with a lot of useful details, but also a lot about her own feelings. I went back through my own journals, hoping to find things about Sarah, but I found almost nothing. I was in my early twenties and completely absorbed in my own life, whereas my mother was trying to work with Sarah to make changes in her life. Mum wrote about everything that was happening, and I just wrote about my own selfish existence. Once it was known that I was writing a book about Sarah, people who knew her just appeared in my life. So I was writing the book, and simultaneously receiving all the material. It was a process of pulling everything together, putting things in, moving them around, adding some quotations.

VR Did you decide from the beginning to focus on Sarah, rather than all the missing women?

MD At first I thought I was going to include stories of other missing women and their families. I interviewed five of the families that I knew the best and wrote long pieces about them. But my editor was concerned from the beginning about including other stories, and felt it would be better if the book focused on Sarah. I had to go through two

parallel shifts. One was finding out I had enough material to write a book about Sarah. The other was shifting from wanting to do this for the other families, to wanting to create the best book that I could, which are two completely different things. Both of those changes happened while I was working on the book.

VR Was there pressure on you to get the book out quickly, while all this was in the news?

MD My deadline was January 7 (2003), and I only started writing in the fall, when I was also doing my job. Over Christmas I just locked myself away for two weeks and worked on it. Working with Sarah's letters over Christmas was the hardest thing to have to do, because they're so lively and happy and real. By January 3rd I had a 400-page manuscript, and I sent a very rough first draft to my editor, Cynthia Good at Penguin. She phoned me in January to tell me that she had quit. It wasn't only my editor leaving, it was the head of the publishing house! It seemed quite a disruption, but she was still willing to edit the book. It meant I had a month's break, which I needed, but then I had less than a month to re-write it. I took out all the material about the other families, and some parts where I became too preachy. I also had to take out tons of guilt. Cynthia told me to make it chronological, and that was an amazingly useful piece of advice.

VR It certainly helps the reader when you put in what year it is at the beginning of each section, and mention the names of the women who went missing that year. It's very effective for putting what was happening to Sarah in context.

MD It's easier to have a timeline. But what she was saying is that chronology has power in terms of telling a story. Chronology itself pulls the reader through.

VR Especially in a documentary kind of exercise, as this is.

MD There are lots of ways of working with time, in any kind of writing. I did finally start at the end and go back. I had to cut the manuscript up, almost sentence by sentence, and put it all in chronological order and then rewrite the whole thing so that it flowed.

VR An interesting process, but the book still comes over as very polyvocal, because there are so many references to other people's perspectives, through the letters and diaries. I work on diaries, and I was very interested in the different diaries that are part of the book. Citing her journal enables Sarah to speak, so that you're not always speaking for her.

- Could you tell me more about her diaries? How did you have access to them? What were they like? Did you use just a small part of them?
- MD She always wrote, all her life. She wrote letters as a child, and stories, and diaries as a teenager, but we don't have those. The diaries that we have are from the last four years or so of her life.
- VR Was that because someone she was living with kept them?
- MD Yes. Wayne, who's in the book. She spent a fair bit of time at his place, and kept her things there, including her diaries. She sometimes shared parts of her diaries, she would hand them around. I had seen some of it before. After her death, on several occasions when I had them in my hands I found them very painful to read. I would read a little bit and then put them away.
- VR Had she read Evelyn Lau's *Runaway*? It seems a possible point of comparison. That was a very extensive diary, and Lau went on to become a writer.
- MD I doubt it, but I don't know. Sarah clearly had writing talent and was driven to write, but she used her journals mostly in a private way, although both Wayne and another man that Sarah knew gave me pieces of her journals. This other man had copies of a lot of pages. If she didn't have a book to write in, she would write on scraps of paper. Her writing was spread around. Some is missing, and all of it might have been destroyed.
- VR That's the trouble with diaries—you never know who destroyed what, either.
- MD Some pieces are probably still out there in other people's possession, and maybe more pieces will come to me. I'm finding people are coming forward who knew Sarah. Wayne gave me her journals soon after she disappeared, and I've kept them. I think I have eight books, and none of them is completely full. Two of them have almost nothing in them, maybe a couple are more than half full, and the rest are somewhere in between. Sometimes she goes back and forth, it's not a consecutive series. She might have access to this one this week, and another one next week. I transcribed all of them, and put them in order.
- VR Do they tend to be recording events, or are they introspective?
- MD More introspection. She writes about some horrific events that I didn't include. I didn't want to include anything that would have the potential to be sensationalist. I felt that there would be enough of that with this whole thing. I didn't need to use Sarah's journals that way. Some of them don't make any sense; they are just rambling. Probably she was

- very high when she was writing some parts of them. Or they don't make sense to me, because I don't know enough about what's going on. Some parts wouldn't be of that much interest to anybody other than her.
- VR You and your mother both also kept diaries. Was that something that a lot of people in your family did? Or do you feel that gender makes a difference—that more of the women did? Were people doing it for the same reasons, or for different reasons?
- MD My mother is the most regular journal keeper. She still writes regularly, every day. She re-read twenty years' worth of journals to help me with the book—about forty journals. She highlighted all the sections to do with Sarah and then recorded those parts on tape. I haven't read her journals, and don't want to, just the parts she wanted to tape for me. My journals are much more spotty, in terms of when I keep them. Mum does more recording than I do, and also more sorting out, making sense of it, expressing feelings. My aunt, Jean Little, the children's author, also keeps journals.
- VR Many writers keep a journal as a workbook or place to collect ideas.
- MD Yes, she has shelves of them. But as for the men in my family, my father kept notebooks where he would record things, but he didn't analyze.
- VR We have a new centre here in the UBC library called SAGA (Studies in Autobiography, Gender and Age), of which I'm now the director. It will be a place where people can archive family documents such as diaries and letters. I was also interested in Sarah's story because I've been involved with a project on narratives of trauma. We've been looking for the ways in which writing, or artwork like Sarah's, can have a therapeutic value in coping with trauma. Would you say that writing and drawing were therapeutic for Sarah? And has writing this book had a therapeutic effect for you, or was it difficult?
- MD Both. I think for Sarah, for sure, her journal writing had a therapeutic value, and her art as well. It had more purpose than that, though, because she wanted to tell the world about her life. She often writes to an audience, addressing other people, for example: "You may think this, but . . ." She did pass some of her diaries around, so I think she wanted to be heard. She also wrote poetry. Some people write poetry just for themselves, not for anybody else, but I feel that she had both those purposes in her writing. It reflects the anger in her life. She felt compelled to write all the time, through fourteen years of living downtown, and to draw.

VR That's pretty amazing.

MD Well it's amazing, and it's not. It's amazing partly because of the stereotypes we hold about women like Sarah. We think they're just sitting there, high, and out on the street. But they actually have lives and generally try to create something and make something of their lives within their context.

VR Do you think it could be effective if there were more facilities for women (and others) in the Downtown Eastside to express themselves creatively?

MD Absolutely. There are efforts in that direction. Those kinds of facilities really need to come from within the community. It doesn't work for people to come in from the outside, because we don't understand enough. But yes, absolutely, there's a lot of writing that goes on down there.

VR Right now I'm teaching a class on the intersections of class, race, sexuality, and gender in autobiographical writing. It seems that Sarah's experience was marked by the fact that she was a black child living in a white middle-class family, and the only black child in her class at school. Do you have anything you'd like to share about that aspect of her story?

MD Class, race, and sexuality in representations of difference: that's Sarah. Her life. She was at all of those intersections. Yes, growing up in a white family was alienating for her. Since the book has come out, I've heard from a number of people who have been struck by the parallels between her experience and their experience—they also have felt that alienation. Not always because of race, sometimes simply because of being adopted, or a foster child, knowing that they don't belong; also knowing that the people with whom they did "belong" rejected them.

VR Was she ever curious to find out about her biological mother?

MD Yes she was, but not curious enough to pursue it. I think that by the time it became possible for her to do that, she wasn't in a position where someone would seek out a biological mother. One would want to be able to say, "Here I am, I turned out well," and Sarah didn't feel that way about herself. It would be hard to go looking for your mother and say, "Here I am, I'm a mess." We found out a bit more about her background through everything that happened since she disappeared. Because of all the media attention, we actually met people who knew her as a baby, and found out her mother's name, and heard things

about her. Sarah has two children, so there is something for them to learn about their roots.

VR Was she happy that they were not adopted by strangers?

MD Yes. She made the arrangement with my mother for her to care for Jeanie, not so much with Ben, but eventually that's how it turned out. Of course, the same thing happened with them, in a way, because they can't grow up with their mother, and they're growing up in a white family. Some of the situations of Sarah's life are being repeated in her children's lives. They aren't alienated in the sense of not knowing anything about where you come from, but what they do know is hard. The good thing is that Sarah really did care about them, and she let them know that. It's really good that we have photographs of her with them.

VR They will know about her story, because it is public. It may be a very hard thing for them to deal with at some point.

MD Her story is part of a larger one. Class, race, and sexuality—those intersections are important, not only specifically in terms of Sarah's story, but for the whole Downtown Eastside situation. Sex-work is defined by class in some ways, because it's a hierarchical system; if you are working on the street, you're in the bottom class, and you often come from lower strata in society. Race also plays a role. If you are working for an escort agency, you might be getting your Master's at UBC and paying for it by working relatively few hours compared to anywhere else that you could work, and it could be quite a workable arrangement. And even though the laws are the same for sex work, across the board, nobody's going to arrest you. But they will arrest the woman on the street, because of the hierarchy that's in place. That hierarchy works within sex work as well, in that it's hard to draw people together because if you're a stripper, you want to be able to say, "I'm not a sex worker"; if you're working for an escort agency, you want to be able to say "I'm not working on the street"; if you're working on the street, but you don't inject drugs, you want to be able to say Everybody wants to distinguish themselves from everybody below them, so you have all these pockets and it's hard to draw everyone together.

VR It was very poignant at one point in the book when Sarah said that she really didn't want to go on the Downtown Eastside, that she was never going to go down there, and then she did.

MD The system as a whole pushes people lower and ignores the lowest. I

went to the National Victims of Crime Conference in Ottawa, put on by Justice Canada. I was listening very carefully to the language that was being used, to see who was being included and who was being excluded when they talk about violence against women. Mostly they're talking about violence in traditional family structures. They're not including the violence that might happen to somebody like Sarah.

VR There's often a sense that anyone who's out there doing that is almost "asking for it," by exposing themselves knowingly to certain dangers.

MD Yes, that if they just stopped doing it, it wouldn't happen. But people don't say, "Well, if you hadn't got married, your husband wouldn't beat you." Violent men who attack women choose vulnerable women. We've set up our society so that sex workers on the street are very vulnerable, and predators know where to find them. I also went to a session on what is changing in BC in terms of support for "victims and their families." Again, it's being constructed so that the only people who deserve concern and support are those with families who care about them.

VR Presuming they have one.

MD Yes, and that the family has contact. Many of the missing women did have contact with their families, and that was extremely important in their lives, but they didn't live with them. They lived in a community of people who knew what they were up to, and who supported them, and were loyal to each other. There's a real awareness of what's going on, but the people who knew them weren't able to file missing persons reports because they weren't family. The definitions become very important. I brought that up at a session and somebody else said, "Yes, and also sometimes a victim of crime is a victim of their family." That's another permutation that the language used makes difficult to acknowledge.

VR "Significant others" needs to be defined differently.

MD It's interesting how language is constructed in such a way that it pushes survival sex workers out of the picture. We have special services just for them, but those services are chronically under-funded, and those services are "down there" where we don't really have to think about them. When I was driving here today I was thinking about what we, as a society, believe about prostitution. I've said over and over again that there are changes we can make that would make life safer for women like Sarah. The Green River murderer said that he couldn't stand prosti-

tutes. I would imagine that whoever is responsible for the deaths of Vancouver's missing women shares that attitude. But we've set it up so that prostitutes are almost non-human.

VR People want them out of sight and out of their mind.

MD Yes, they do. It doesn't mean that people who kill them aren't to be held responsible for their actions, but as a society we actually support the attitudes behind that killing, which is awful.

VR In a way, there is a class issue in the fact that Sarah, having grown up in your kind of family, had a sister who could write her story, whereas so many others might not have anyone who would ever have access to the kind of infrastructure that you need to be able to get your story out. Could you explain about PACE, and how you're trying to make this book of some benefit to other people in similar situations?

MD PACE (Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education) society is an organization in the Downtown Eastside that's been around for almost ten years. It's peer-driven, which means that many of the women who work and volunteer there have a background in sex work, or are currently still in it. There are similar organizations elsewhere: STELLA in Montreal, PEERS in Victoria, MAGGIE in Toronto. They are working with women on their own terms, from a place of respect, not trying to rescue women or trying to get them out of sex work unless they want out. PACE focuses on the distinction between sex work where there is choice, and survival sex work, where choices are more limited. Most women in sex work on the Downtown Eastside are survival sex workers who don't have other viable choices. I've been on the board of PACE for a year and a half, and learned a great deal from them. Half the royalties from the book go to PACE. This book may be a useful tool in letting people understand a bit more, not just about Sarah but about her world. I hope it will make people more willing to support the efforts of a group like PACE. I believe that any change that does take place around sex work needs to be driven by sex workers, otherwise it won't work. It's not appropriate when the powers-that-be just sit in a room somewhere and decide what to do. Right now, in Ottawa, Libby Davies and Hedy Fry are co-chairing a committee listening to people on the subject and trying to make some recommendations for changes that should take place at a federal level. It would be really useful if they could travel across the country and listen to women who are actually working in the sex trade and hear a range of points of

view, but funding for that is limited.

VR You mentioned that you had interviewed other families, and obviously you've talked to a lot of women down there too. Do you anticipate writing anything else about those other women's stories, or do you think other people will?

MD I hope other people do. Nobody has asked me to, and I'm not sure that that's my best path. For now it's lobbying government, and supporting the work of organizations like PACE. The families of the missing women are people who've lost loved ones and they're suffering as a result of their loss, but being a family member doesn't necessarily give one automatic insight into what would be best in terms of that person's life— particularly when that person is living a life on the margins. As a family member, you are trying to rescue them from that life, and what you want is for them to stop doing what they're doing. While that makes perfect sense, it doesn't automatically give you insight into what might make that life safer or better. Until Sarah went missing, I was focused on wanting her to stop doing what she was doing. I would not have been a useful person to consult with on what changes could be brought about for people in general around sex work or drugs. I had fairly liberal ideas about those things, but I didn't have any special knowledge. Really, it's the people who are in that world that we need to listen to. Families are in a different position vis-à-vis the whole thing, including me. It's been an incredible struggle to try to get my mind and heart over a lot of big humps, to somewhere where I can try to think clearly about these issues.

VR One of the really valuable things in your book is that it comes out as an account of a learning experience for you, and the reader participates in that. There could be a film or documentary based on this material. Would you feel that would have this educational kind of function, or is there also a danger of voyeurism and sensationalism?

MD Absolutely. There may well be a documentary, and it's very important that it not be sensationalized. There is a contract in place, an option, and the agreement that we reached was that I would be as involved in the whole process as possible, and they agreed that the purpose is a learning experience. By focusing on going back and forth between my life and Sarah's life, and not doing too much reenacting, I think they can avoid the sensationalistic.

VR To me, it seems that your book recounts your own investigation into

what happened, in terms of Sarah's life and the effect on your family. It's parallel to the police investigation into what happened to Sarah and the other women, and yet it was not at all like a detective story. In a detective story, death is never real, it's at a safe distance. When you list the names of the women who died each year, it brought it home to me, as a reader, that this is not a fiction, it is not an investigation being done for the sake of the pleasure of investigating.

MD That's what happens when you write about your own experience.

There will be Stevie Cameron's book, which will focus more on Robert Pickton, as I understand, and I hope that she manages to avoid being sensationalistic. I know she's a very accomplished journalist, but it seems to me that her challenge is in a way greater than mine, because she is at a remove and she's chosen to focus on that side of things. I was able to stay away from it, I only touched on the gruesome side. I'm really glad this book is already out and the trial hasn't even started. I didn't even have to address whatever it is that will come out in the trial.

VR Will you go to the trial?

MD I doubt it. I think the trial is going to unfold, as it should, and there will be the appropriate outcome. I don't know that, of course, but if there isn't, I'll just have to see how I feel at that point. Right now, I am fairly confident that the trial will happen and that nothing is required from me to make that take place. Yet I do see a purpose for myself in sharing my story.

VR Now you have some distance from the writing of this story, are there things you would have done differently? Do you have any advice for anyone else who might be embarking on a project in any way like this?

MD It seems that projects like this must each be unique. I can't imagine how I could have done this any differently, because I didn't really have any idea of how to go about it until I'd done it. I needed to have something down in writing: I could only achieve distance by having something there that I could step back from. And I needed feedback from another person so that I would have a lens to look through other than my own very confused one. I'm glad that I had a contract before I wrote the book, because otherwise I think I could have worked on it forever, very slowly, and never have finished. I needed to be forced to do it. I found it very difficult to come to the place where I thought I had the right to write this book. That was perhaps the biggest struggle, because I started thinking about wanting to write something in the

summer of 1999 after I'd spent a year dealing with the police, meeting families, getting to know the Downtown Eastside better and finding out more. After dealing with the media, I wanted to write about it myself. I did write something for a magazine, but it was rejected. I realized it was too painful to go out and persuade someone to want to hear this story. I can handle rejection with my regular writing, but I couldn't with this. Getting an agent and a publisher was a really good step, because then I'd set myself up so that I had to do it.

VR You've talked in interviews about how all the media attention, and the spotlight on your family, have been stressful at times. Do you feel it's changed you as a person? Or as a writer? Will the writing you do in the future be different, even if it's children's writing?

MD Maybe. As far as media attention is concerned, it's much better now because I have a book in place, so I'm not just fodder. Before they could take whatever I said and use it however they wanted. People who choose to can now read the book, and this is controlled by me. That makes me feel on much more solid ground and much happier to talk to the media. Before, I became very tired of it, because you do the same thing over and over again, and often they use only two minutes or forty seconds and you realize that you wasted your time. Or they misquote: in almost every single media experience I've had, although many have been positive in many ways, there have been mistakes.

VR I noticed one just recently in *BC Bookworld*, where it said you were adopted, when you actually aren't.

MD Yes. That's a substantial error. People have to work fast, they don't have time to go and check everything. It's ephemeral. As far as being changed by all this, I know I am. I feel what happened is a tragedy, but also meeting people through writing the book has enriched my life, and so has spending so much time with Sarah's writing. It's so important for these stories to be told, but is it worth the price that has to be paid? If you write a personal story like this, you have to be willing to suffer the consequences.

VR It raises a lot of ethical issues around writing about other people and for other people. But I feel that you've done a service to the women who've disappeared by giving a face to at least one of them, and making readers like me feel that we almost knew her. I can see that it took a lot of courage and I'm glad you did it.