

MAIDEN FROM THE SEA

A Novel

NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

Praise for Nellie P. Stowbridge

“*T*here are many—this writer included—who now consider Newfoundland to be the epicentre of the country’s narrative voice and a key component of our national identity. Some say it is a sense of community, others point to the area’s inspiring landscape, while others cite the province’s Celtic storytelling roots. All three of those elements come to play in *Catherine Snow*, the fictionalized account of one young Irish girl’s tryst with tragedy.”

THE CHRONICLE HERALD

“*N*ellie Stowbridge writes with freshness, humour and passion.” (About *The Newfoundland Tongue*)

THE COMPASS

“*T*he whole book is studded with wonderful, fresh, rich words and phrases that stimulate, enrich and enlighten your understanding of life in the 1920s on this island.” (About *Far From Home*)

THE NORTHEAST AVALON TIMES

This page intentionally left blank

*Maiden
from the Sea*

This page intentionally left blank

*Maiden
from the Sea*
A Novel

NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

PENNYWELL BOOKS
ST. JOHN'S

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Strowbridge, Nellie P., 1947-

Maiden from the sea / Nellie P. Strowbridge

Electronic monograph issued in multiple formats.

Also issued in print format.

ISBN 978-1-926881-75-1 (EPUB).--ISBN 978-1-926881-76-8 (Kindle).--

ISBN 978-1-77117-044-4 (PDF)

I. Title.

PS8587.T7297M34 2012

C813'.54

C2012-901436-2

© 2012 by Nellie P. Strowbridge

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of the work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems of any part of this book shall be directed to Access Copyright, The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency, 1 Yonge Street, Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5E 1E5. This applies to classroom use as well.

PRINTED IN CANADA

Cover Design: Adam Freaque

FLANKER PRESS LTD.
PO BOX 2522, STATION C
ST. JOHN'S, NL
CANADA

TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

WWW.FLANKERPRESS.COM

16 15 14 13 12 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities; the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$24.3 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada; the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation.

DEDICATION

To readers who recognize themselves as never wholly separate from other selves, and to my family: the heart of my life.

*To the memory of a true friend,
Faye Styles (1948-2007),
one of life's unique treasures.*

Each day we begin life, not from
where we are, but from where we
have been.

The mind is life's most seasoned
traveller.

PROLOGUE

I WALK DOWN a gravelled path, my feet scattering loose stones. The dark emptiness in front of me is a chasm I fear falling into. The pole light above Ochre Cleft Cove no longer blazes on waters rolling like loose skin over a mammoth body. From above the door of a bungalow upon the hill, a sudden stab of light unwinding into an amber lane shatters the darkness; a rectangular frame of light fills a window in the house. Its beams break the darkness around me; beyond it, an arc of light burnishes dark water. I walk out on the empty wharf toward voices of the sea. Images rise out of its waters: boats, people, romping whales . . . A strand of my own dark hair crosses my face, as if it is her hand touching my skin, the wind her whisper, before I step over the wharf into the past . . .

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER 1

Maiden in the Sea

THE *TEMPEST* LURCHED in the stormy Atlantic Ocean, and Genevieve winced for the hundredth time at the jolt against her hip. The cold, hard side of the ship's passenger hold was an insufferable place. Anger at nobleman Monsieur Laurier for sending her on this voyage added to her discomfort. He and Madame Laurier had insisted that they were shipping her away from France to a new world so that her life would not be jeopardized by Catholic and Huguenot conflicts. Their reason for paying her passage on a ship journeying to an eastern port named for Saint Jean in a new-found land had nothing to

do with religious politics. Genevieve was sure of that. She had heard Madame Laurier tell an acquaintance that the ship would be journeying on from Saint Jean to an island named Saint Pierre. "A fine place for Genevieve," she'd said with a sardonic smile. "She has the advantage of having English, as well as her own tongue, spoken in this household. There's men abounding from England and France and hardly a woman to spare. She'll be put to full use."

She had been nothing more than a scullion to them, just like her mother was before she disappeared when Genevieve was twelve. It was Madame Laurier's doing that Genevieve was sent away. She had heard, in the whispers of the servants, that Madame believed she was growing up with a countenance too pleasing for her own good. Monsieur Laurier was regarding her, his lingering look like a spider crawling on her scallop-white skin.

The young émigré wrapped her hand so tightly around the heavy cross hanging from her neck her palm stung. Another lurch of the ship and her mouth felt awash with her own bile. The winds had not always been favourable and the prolonged voyage had taken a toll on supplies. There was not much food in her stomach. She was sick of eating burgoo made from turnips and the leaves of cabbages carried in earth-filled baskets and suspended beneath the topsides of the ship so sea rime would not ruin them, sick of the ship rocking and rolling, and the stench of

bowel slops, and vomit. Every time a passenger retched, a jolly-looking Scotswoman seemed fond of exclaiming “Gardylloo!” as if she were looking out a window in her house and shouting down to the people on the street to clear the way for her slop bucket.

Genevieve urged and placed her hand over her mouth. *I have to get on deck away from the smothering, sour smell of other passengers and the stench of slop pails*, she thought desperately.

Stumbling, she crossed over the bodies of people still asleep in the early morning and climbed the swinging rope ladder. Damp, salty air hit her face and her whole body was caught in convulsing shivers. Her eyes half-closed, she staggered toward the taffrail of the ship and retched painfully; the boat heaved, throwing her headlong over the rail into the air. She was falling, arms and legs flailing. She hit the briny, chilly sea, the force of her fall dropping her beneath the surface. Ribbons of seaweed wrapped around her body, stinging her like wild nettles. Cold, salty water filled her mouth, choking her. Her lungs felt an explosion of pain.

Voices bubble against her ears. Laughter comes muffled. A child cries. A voice calls, “Elizabeth!”

CHAPTER 2

The Fishermen's Catch

THE SUN SPILLED its light in an orange blaze that September morning as two fishermen pulled their fish nets to empty the catch. When the final net was hauled, the younger man straightened to wipe sweat from his brow. He lifted his head. Out across the bay, the ocean moved seductively like a blue satin gown on a mysterious form. The fisherman thought he was imagining a soft, white hand. Then he saw the outline of a body and strands of hair flowing out from it; his exclamation drew his father's water-galled gaze to the spot and beyond, to a ship sailing a fair distance past the body.

Without hesitation, the men sculled their boat to where Genevieve floated, her bonnet hooked on a growler jutting out from a small island of cliff. The bonnet string had tightened across her throat. The older man reached his gaff over the vessel and freed the snagged bonnet; then he quickly hooked Genevieve's clothes and dragged her sodden body toward the boat. The men lifted her slight form over the gunnels and laid it motionless in the bottom of the craft. Slimy lumps of white-bellied fish with brown-speckled backs slipped from under her body, their white eyeballs in a dying stare.

"Not a stir!" the older man said, shaking his head. He seized Genevieve by the legs and swung her upside down, letting her skirts fall around her like a soaked parasol. When she didn't open her eyes, the old man laid her face down in the bottom of the boat. With one arm under her chest, he pounded on her back.

Her rescuer quickly turned Genevieve over as coughing erupted and water belched from her open mouth. She gagged as if to throw up. Her eyes blinked open and she stared into the man's grizzly face, her eyes stretching in fear as his hand touched her throat. *He is going to kill me*, she thought.

Her ears crackled with water as she strained to hear the older fisherman's words, spoken in English. His voice sounded as if it were under water as he exclaimed, "'Tis a woman fer sure under that pretty blue dress."

“Look at the mane o’ dark hair!” the young man exclaimed.

“How’d she come to be in the water?” the older man wondered aloud. “She must’ve fallen off a ship. But no one will be back fer her. Be time the sailors would’ve got the sails down and the ship turned, they’d think the girl gone under. If ’tis a mean captain, he is on for reaching port wit’ these favourable winds in case they’re on for changin’. By now he’d be wantin’ to replenish his supplies.”

The young man shook his head. “We’d not got her if her bonnet hadn’t hooked on a growler. She’s young—looks me oewn age.”

The older man’s hand touched the tight little chin fitting into Genevieve’s white neck, welted from seaweed stings and the cut of her bonnet strings. His finger traced a curve starting from the little hollow above one cheekbone all the way to the other cheek and the fringe of dark eyelashes.

A splash of fresh water washed over Genevieve’s face and body, startling her. Then her tongue reached out for the pleasant, thirst-quenching fluid.

“The salt water in your hair and clothes idn’t good. It’s hard on clothes and it’s not like you got a shiften of clothes to change in. So you got the full flush of me freshwater keg,” the old fisherman explained in a rough voice.

“The girl’s skin, sure, is as fair as the day, and her eyes, they’s the colour of bluebells.” The young man licked his lips

and turned his head toward harebells nodding in the cracks of the cove's cliffs.

The old fisherman glanced at the young one. "What temper of mind is yer in now, Luke? Don't git no ideas. This one's not fer you."

"Do you see anyone who is?" Luke's right hand let go of the oar as he sculled the boat toward shore. His hand swept around what looked like a cove. At first glance, it looked to be a dismal place. Out from the inland of thick forest, tuckamore trees leaned toward the edge of high cliffs jagged-toothed enough to cut through the most optimistic thought.

The old fisherman eyed his son with a keen look. "Let me finish. She may not be our religion."

"There's no skin says she isn't," the son answered brazenly. "She's wearin' a cross around her neck. 'Tis a Christian she is, for sure."

When Genevieve saw that they weren't going to hurt her, she pointed to herself and tried to clear her throat of hoarseness as she spoke in a tremulous voice, "I'm Gen-ev-ie-ve." Her teeth clattered from the cold.

The young man nodded, smiling pleasantly around white even teeth. "Genevieve, a good French name, that is. I'll call you Genny. I'm Luke." He tilted his head toward the other fisherman. "And this is me fardher, Joe."

Joe grunted as he dipped his head in acknowledgement.

Genevieve breathed a sigh of thanksgiving that she could understand the men. The circumstances of her birth had given her that liberty. She had been born to an English servant girl in a nobleman's *maison* in France. The father, a Frenchman, was already married. Monsieur Laurier had no children and he wanted to raise what he termed this "ill-conceived" child as his daughter. He threatened to send the baby away if her mother didn't conform to his wishes. Madame Laurier had christened her new daughter Genevieve, after the patron saint of Paris, who was born on the same month and day, January 3. She had died in 512—more than eleven hundred years ago. All this, Genevieve's mother had confided to her just before she disappeared.

Genevieve's thoughts were interrupted when the bottom of the boat grated against the shore. The old fisherman jumped out onto a small beach, myriad stones and seashells scattering under his feet. He hauled on the boat until it was high on the beach. Then he collared the stem with a rope around a huge rock embedded in a steep incline. As Luke bent to lift Genevieve from the bottom, the old man looked at him shrewdly.

"You want yer time wit' the maiden, don't you, Luke?" The old fisherman shook his scruffy head. "She may be Catholic, but her tongue's not Irish. You can tell that by the few words we heard outta her. A fine stock of young ones you'd raise—and on this near-barren rock too."

"Someone's got to settle here, Fardher. We can't keep goin'

back.” There was defiance in Luke’s voice. “This big island is not all barren. There’s berries, fish, and wild birds: the auks that paddle on land and the flying birds that pitch. Then there’s wild goats we saw on the point. We could survive.”

“Until pirates landed and livered us. Besides, our family is all back in Ireland.”

“Then what can we do wit’ the maiden?” He nodded toward a point of land jutting out of the cove west of them. “We’s goin’ back to the ship after our haul on the morrow.”

The father eyed the heavy cross hanging around Genevieve’s neck. “No matter what her religion, I ain’t takin’ no woman with us. The captain won’t allow a woman aboard. ’Twould be bad luck. Bad luck doubled we’d have then, after the snubnose cod we caught yesterday, a sign of trouble as it is. There’s Red Indians—the *Beothuk*—to take her, a white woman. Maybe they’ll breed her to see what mixed colour they’ll get.” He laughed.

The old man reached to grab a fish. He held it by the head, his finger and thumb stuck in the fish’s eyes. He flung it into a puncheon on the beach. Then he turned back to get the rest of the fish. He flipped a small one from the boat onto the beach.

“Git the last fish, Fardher,” Luke cautioned. “You know ’tis hard luck to leave a fish in the boat.”

Cold waves shuddered through Genevieve as the young fisherman, his body hunched against her face, reached his arms

PRAISE FOR NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

*F*ar From Home

“This book is involving, informative and refreshingly unsentimental regarding children who are often cruel to each other and certainly always merciless towards starfish and sculpins.”

THE TELEGRAM

“The whole book is studded with wonderful, fresh, rich words and phrases that stimulate, enrich and enlighten your understanding of life in the 1920s on this island.”

THE NORTHEAST AVALON TIMES

MAIDEN FROM THE SEA