

Interview with

# Rita Espescht

Canadian Women Reading and Writing  
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Rita Espescht left a senior editor position with a Brazilian publishing house to immigrate to Canada in 2001, when the growing spectre of organized crime made it increasingly difficult for her to live and work in Brazil. She has published fourteen books for children, three poetry collections, a co-authored series of eight Portuguese language-arts textbooks for children, and journalism in Brazil's top newspapers and magazines. She has won numerous literary awards, including the Jabuti National Prize, the Paraná's State National Literature Prize, the João de Barro National Prize, and the "Revelation Author" prize. Since coming to Canada she has begun to expand her writing from her native tongue, Portuguese, to English, and is currently working on fiction for young audiences. She is Edmonton's PEN Canada Writer in Exile for 2008/2009.

We interviewed Rita Espescht (R.E.) for CanWWR on March 20, 2009 at the University of Alberta.

CanWWR (Clare): I want to start by asking you about your first interaction with literature when you were a child. Did you have as much access as you wanted to books you were interested in? Did people guide you towards certain books or did you come to them yourself?

R.E.: I come from a poor family in Brazil, and that means that you usually don't have access to books at all. Nowadays, public schools have very good libraries. Each classroom will have its own library. But back then it wasn't that common. But my mother worked full-time, and because I'm very old it was different back then. (Laughter) So she worked eight hours. School in Brazil is just half, so it's four hours a day. So I'd spend half of the day at her work place. Nowadays it doesn't happen, but back then it did. And there was a library at her work place.

CanWWR (Patricia): What did she do?

R.E.: She was a public servant. She used to do what computers do today. Numbers here, numbers there. (Laughter) It was in a train company, so to see where each car of the train would be at every single moment of every day. So, she was a human computer.

CanWWR (Patricia): Yes, it sounds very complex.

R.E.: No no, just mechanical. Just copying from one page to the other. But there was a library for adults, not for kids, and there was a very old lady there that didn't really care. So I read all sorts of weird books. (Laughter) Very strange, I don't even know the names of the authors because that didn't interest me at all.

CanWWR (Clare): Did your mom know that you were reading those?

R.E.: No, it's different there. I don't know, she was working all the time, she didn't really know what I was doing or not doing. (Laughter) So that was my first contact with books, these very strange books that I was reading when I was seven to ten.

CanWWR (Clare): Did you enjoy them?

R.E.: Yes, yes, very good. Very exciting! (Laughter)

CanWWR (Clare): Did that get you in trouble at all? I think if I were reading adult books when I was seven my parents would've been a bit angry with me.

R.E.: They never knew. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Devorah): What were some of the topics?

R.E.: Let's say there was lots of passion. (Laughter) My cousins used to buy classics, international classics. Book stores love them because they don't have to pay copyright, so that's how I got to Jules Verne, which is "Julio" there. All of those that everyone reads when they are young—[Mark Twain's] Tom Sawyer, etc.

CanWWR (Clare): So did your reading go in that direction, or did you stick with the more passionate books? (Laughter)

R.E.: Yes.

CanWWR (Patricia): Family reading. (Laughter) Was it Tomaso

Sawyer? What would the name be?

R.E.: Usually in Brazil you don't translate. In the case of Jules Verne, it was because it was so old that it still came through Portugal. In Portugal they translate everything. They don't say Maus, they translate it. Elsewhere in the world it's Maus, because it came from here, but in Portugal they translate everything. So it's Carls Marcus, not Karl Marx. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Clare): So did your reading habits change once you were able to actually buy books for yourself?

R.E.: From sixth grade on, I went to the public university, where they had those schools for them to learn about us. So we were the guinea pigs. So from the age of eleven, on, I was within the university context. So then everything was different. I had contact with real literature and culture, met up with artists and writers. They were within the university and we had access to them. It was the whole environment. Because we were in the middle of the dictatorship so the university was one of the few places where you weren't living in a make-believe world. So that was really good.

CanWWR (Clare): So when you had access to a wider collection of books, did you find yourself drawn to any particular genre, author or titles? Or did you just read everything?

R.E.: Everything. I was very interested in everything non-fiction, the political side. That was something else that was funny too, because those teachers saw a chance to make us think critically! (Laughter) And then when I was in high school I had two more weird teachers. One tried to kill herself at the end of the year. She was amazingly good. The second one was himself a poet, a very well-known poet, and he was as well known for his writing as he was for his love of spirits. (Laughter) It was chaos, but creative chaos. I think because it was within the university they didn't really feel that they had to stick to a curriculum. So this teacher, we studied poetry all year long. It was contemporary poetry, very good poetry. And then the next one that I had, he was a literary critic. The first day of school he said, "Okay, whoever doesn't want to come to this class, I'm telling beforehand. I'm going to pass everyone." (Laughter) "So if you don't want to come, don't bother, because you're going to pass and it will be good marks." So half of the class disappeared, but the half that stayed was so good.

CanWWR (Clare): Yes, they'd be really committed to being there.

R.E.: And it was a literary critic style. So we spent four months with one poet. Over the whole year, we got to three writers.

CanWWR (Devorah): How old were you?

R.E.: That would be grade twelve, here.

CanWWR (Clare): Do you come back to any of those? Do you reread some of them?

R.E.: Yes, like Guimarães Rosa is probably the best ever Brazilian writer, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, the poet. The modernists Brazilians of the 1920s. And that's when I started to publish too. These teachers, both of them were involved in publishing. The university had this literary magazine—but I think you're going to get to that later.

CanWWR (Clare): Yes, I think that gets into the next question, so we can move on.

CanWWR (Devorah): Can I ask a side question? I'm just curious about your school, did you get chosen to go to it, or did your parents place you in that school?

R.E.: In Brazil for you to get to university or schools that are hard to get into—because it was public in the sense that it was free and supported with government money, but it wasn't in the regular public school system. So there are tests. Because the educational system is so unequal, you can't really rely on marks, because marks in this school and that school will mean completely different things. So it was a test that a whole bunch of people took.

CanWWR (Devorah): Right, right. My real question, though, is if you've always been a writer, or if there was a moment when you started to write? Some writers have a moment when they decide they have to write, or there's a person that approaches them and tells them, "I think you can be a writer." Some people do it for survival, they just have to write every day. So how did you come to it?

R.E.: I always liked to write, but it was just fun when I was a child. So I used to edit my own newspaper. (Laughter) Sometimes it had like three copies. (Laughter) But that was just playing. When I was in high school I used to write poetry, but still just for myself. I would write in boring classes and then at the end of the class they would go straight to the garbage. But then there was a contest, and then this guy came to the class and told everyone that I had won, but I had never entered the contest. My friends told me that they got the poems out of the garbage, and they entered them. (Laughter) And the thing is, contests there, they are good in terms of money sometimes. So I was fifteen and I got some money from a poetry contest. So I was filled with this deluded notion that there was money in it. (Laughter) And then when I realized, it was too late.

CanWWR (Devorah): And that was the moment when you became more serious, would you say?

R.E.: Yes.

CanWWR (Lindsay): Maybe we could talk about your writing

process and how's it evolved over time, since high school, and if you could describe a typical writing day. Do you have a typical writing day? A routine?

R.E.: Yes, well, the thing is, I started writing poetry then, and I published a book when I was nineteen. Self-published. Because it was a time when it was a poetry fever, so if you sat in a bar for two hours at least four poets would go to your table trying to sell their books. So we had a group, we used silk screen to do posters with poetry, and then we'd glue them on the streets, people would do poetry on napkins bars, so it was everything poetry. I was just writing poetry and studying for a long time. But it's not something that you can make any money with, of course. So for poetry there isn't a regular day, because you can't have a regular day with something that's so on the side, so it's whenever. But then I started writing for kids, when I had my daughter—I always wanted to write for kids, because that's the only thing that makes money in Brazil. But I would feel like a fake if I did it just for that. (Laughter) I really wanted to but I couldn't. But then when I had my daughter, "Aha! Justification—yes!" (Laughter) So then I started writing for kids, and I worked as a journalist. So I was writing all day long as a journalist and, on the side, writing books for kids. Sometimes I have a structure or skeleton before, sometimes I don't. So it isn't really always the same. For example, I'm horrible with book titles, book titles, so the book titles that I have that I like—and there are some that I really like—they came before the books. "That's a good title, I should write a book about it!" (Laughter) I use lots of things from dreams, from my own story, I most likely use lots of things that I read but I have a horrible memory, so I hope my stuff is new. (Laughter) I think that's it. Sometimes the characters will drive it, sometimes it's plot. It's not always the same. As for having a routine—not with writing literature, but for other writing projects I have one. Like I was involved, up until two weeks ago, with writing a dictionary for children. It's a monolingual Portuguese dictionary, and that was almost four years, six thousand entries, with a partner over the internet.

CanWWR (Lindsay): Wow. So do you prefer to write children's literature, or do you enjoy your journalistic work, or do they feed into each other?

R.E.: They do, a lot. What I like about journalism is that you have a chance of being paid to study. If you're writing about something you have to read about it. So if you ask about what I read, it goes to whatever I'm working with at any time, because I don't really have a lot of time to say, "Okay, I'm going to read what I like." But I read a lot about whatever I'm doing. So I've read lots about dictionary making. (Laughter) I do script-writing too, and when I was doing a movie about Aborigines in Brazil, I had lots of reading about that. So it goes along with the work usually.

CanWWR (Lindsay): So do you find you're a solitary writer? Do you have a similar community like you had in your nineteen-

year-old days with your group of poets?

R.E.: That's harder, I think. I would link up with associations of writers, so I helped to start our state writer's association in Brazil. We just created an association here of immigrant writers, so that kind of thing, that's usually what I work with. Or when you work with something that's not specifically book form. So I have a book that's for little kids. I say it's a graphic novel for toddlers. (Laughter) So this is the kind of thing that you don't do by yourself, I work with an illustrator. I'm writing a play, so I have a dramaturge. For many projects I'm working with someone.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, this is a related question, and it takes me back actually to Clare's first question. And that's about what you read right now. Whether the reading helps your writing or feeds your writing, what authors you particularly enjoy? Now these might be Brazilian authors, but do you enjoy Canadian writing too?

R.E.: I'm starting to get to know Canadian writers. I moved here almost eight years ago but I had no English at all.

CanWWR (Patricia): Slow process, yes.

R.E.: And unfortunately the same way that you don't know a whole bunch about Brazilian authors here we don't know a whole lot about Canadian authors there. If you're anywhere in the world everyone knows about Americans but that's it. (Laughter) Other than that, you don't know about Brazilians, I don't know about Canadians.

CanWWR (Patricia): So Margaret Atwood isn't a big name in Brazil?

R.E.: No.

CanWWR (Devorah): Well, did we recognize any of the poets you named?

R.E.: No.

CanWWR (Patricia): Of the Canadian writers that you're acquainting yourself with, whom have you enjoyed? Who's at the top of your list for Canadian writers?

R.E.: I'm reading a woman now that I'm really enjoying. She reminds me a lot of a writer who was my hero back then, Clarice Lispector.

CanWWR (Patricia): Oh yes, Lispector! I know Lispector.

R.E.: It's Elizabeth Smart.

CanWWR (Patricia): Oh yes, By Grand Central Station I Sat

Down and Wept?

R.E.: No, I'm reading, it's called In the Meantime.

CanWWR (Patricia): She was a writer-in-residence here.

R.E.: I know, the people who lent me her book told me.

CanWWR (Patricia): I recommend that after that you return to By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, that was her big break-through, scandalous novel—so scandalous that it was banned in Canada.

R.E.: Oh, then it must be good! (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): Her mother bought up all the copies that she could and burned them. It was written in the late 40s but it didn't actually get reprinted until the mid-60s. She was fascinating as a writer-in-residence. Anyone else, besides Elizabeth Smart?

R.E.: I've been reading lots of children's literature. Kenneth Oppel. Many of the locals here because I started reading some people that I met. So Mary Woodbury, those were friends that I had been reading.

CanWWR (Patricia): Kit Pearson, has she come into it?

R.E.: I've read some.

CanWWR (Patricia): Okay. So do you find that reading actually feeds your writing or is your writing entirely separate from your reading?

R.E.: No, I think it feeds it a lot. It's actually dangerous. I can't read the same author for too long because otherwise I start to write like that. So it feeds a lot, especially in terms of style.

CanWWR (Patricia): I'm really interested in the organization you mentioned of immigrant writers. Has it just started?

R.E.: Yes, it will be one-week old tomorrow. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): Oh! It started in Edmonton, did it? And who's part of the group?

R.E.: There are lots of people here, because we're not getting only professionals. It's like if you go the Writer's Guild you'll have the absolute beginner and the professional, so that's what we're doing too. We have around one hundred people that are in touch over the internet, and we have meetings with about seventy people, but the core group is about fifteen people. Lots of countries. We just had one from Madagascar. We didn't have anyone from there before. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): So it's very international isn't it? That's fabulous. Are your meetings held electronically, or do you meet in person?

R.E.: No, we had a multilingual writers gathering in November last year. The official name is Writers Beyond Borders. But the demographics is immigrants/multilingual. We're using this slash because some people might not be multilingual. Suppose you come from an English speaking country in Africa. But it's a culture that's so different that it doesn't matter. But most people come from different linguistic backgrounds.

CanWWR (Patricia): And you conduct your business in English?

R.E.: Yes. Because that's the only language everyone speaks. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): I'm also fascinated with this dictionary project.

R.E.: This is just the first version.

CanWWR (Patricia): When will it come out?

R.E.: I'm a very lucky woman, so when it was almost over—it's a dictionary, so spelling is something important right? So we were like, "Yea, it's over!" Then we have a spelling reform. (Laughter) So we just had a spelling reform that they've been trying to do for the last twenty years or so and then they finally do it now. So it's already mostly adapted but some of the rules that they changed—because it's not only in Brazil—there are things, especially hyphenated words, you just can't trust your own judgement because it's open to interpretation. So we're now waiting for the list of words, of every single word, so we can see how that will change. Book stores sell books but the big business is the government programs.

CanWWR (Patricia): The libraries will buy them.

R.E.: But it's not the school libraries that buys them, it's the government that buys them. So they buy like two million books at once and then they send them. And it works much better because they are such a big buyer they are able to really get the prices down. So it's good for the kids because they get the books, and it's good for the government because they pay less, and it's good for the publishers.

CanWWR (Patricia): That's excellent. Well, congratulations on the project, and I hope it doesn't take forever for the adjustment for the reformed spelling. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Devorah): I have two questions. You're writing in English now, right?

R.E.: I'm trying to write in English. I had three or four books

published in Brazil since I moved here, and none here. So I'm trying to write in English, but more and more I'm seeing that I shouldn't use all my time in English, because the market here is very very small. My first poetry book was self-published. Then I had a second poetry book that was a very small publishing house.

CanWWR (Patricia): Why did you leave Brazil?

R.E.: Because of violence, criminal violence. It was getting so scary, absolutely scary. It was funny though, I went back two times ever since I moved here. The first time was about the same, but last year I went and I felt it was different. It was much better compared to when we left. But it's still very bad. The year that we left, it was like a war zone. I had a gun on my head more than once, or a knife. And it's so every-day.

CanWWR (Devorah): What year was that?

R.E.: When I left, 2001. Sometimes it was funny, sometimes tragic-comic. You can't go to the slums and do whatever you want. You need authorization to do anything. There was this candidate for city council that ignored this rule and went to campaign there without asking for permission from the drug dealers. It was close to the end of the year, so he went dressed as Santa Claus, giving gifts to the kids, and the drug dealers tell the kids to kill him! It's the only country in the world where the kids actually kill Santa Claus. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): I'm interested in the reason why it has been such a violent society. Is it because of poverty, is it because of a lack of enforcement of the laws, is it corruption? I know it's a combination of things, but what, in your view, is the leading cause of the extreme violence in Brazilian society?

R.E.: Well, it is a combination. It's hard to pin-point one single cause. I think, for example, if you look at countries that are all poor, it's okay in a sense. Some of the countries are very tiny and rich people, they kind of live outside of the reach of the poor. But in Brazil you have a significant middle-class that's big enough to have all sorts of advertisements and so it's so much wanting and so little having. I think that's part of it.

CanWWR (Patricia): No, I think that really captures it. So much wanting and so little having.

R.E.: But there are other things too. One thing that's very peculiar is that during the dictatorship the military had this brilliant idea that they would get political prisoners and throw them to the sharks. So they took them and put them along with the regular prisoners, the hard-core criminals. They thought they would be massacred. But it happened the other way around. They organized, initially to get better conditions, but they really liked being organized. (Laughter) And ever since they've been better and better. My city, it was scary because it was so fast. Because

that's when they first started opening franchises of organized crime in other cities. So when they got to my city it was like one year you have one situation, the other year it was like, "What happened to this place?"

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, this has been great. Thank you very much. Thank you!