

# National Post

The life and art of Susan Musgrave: She may be a prolific poet with 20 books to her name and a nomination for the Governor General's Award, but for the wife of accused bank robber Stephen Reid, it's her life that gets all the attention

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Byline: Cori Howard

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Illustrations: Color Photo: The Times Colonist / Stephen and Susan in 1987. The couple, who were married that year, met when Susan edited Stephen's best-selling novel Jackrabbit Parole, which he wrote from prison.

Color Photo: Jessica Bushey / Susan's toy-plastered car has become a fixture in her seaside home of Sidney, B.C.

Color Photo: Jessica Bushey / 'I feel much less alone now than when Stephen was using [heroin]. At least now I know he's safe, alive and healthy.'

Color Photo: Jessica Bushey / Susan Musgrave

When I arrive at Susan Musgrave's house, I know I'm in the right place because of the car. Plastered with kids' toys -- everything from little dolls to plastic letters -- it has perhaps become more famous than the poet herself. At least it has in the seaside town of Sidney, B.C. Here her eccentricities have now become a bit more banal than to the rest of the country, where the mere fact of marrying a bank robber is still considered shocking. To her neighbours, she is a hard-working poet of the West Coast, a prolific writer with 20 books to her name and a nomination for the Governor General's Award. But to the rest of the country, she is better known for her outrageous life.

Susan emerges from behind her house, her hands wet and sticky with mud. "I have to get this garden done," she says. "I'm not very good at it."

It looks beautiful to me, with flowers in pots and ivy twisting up the front porch. There are wildflowers and a kitten, a tree house and a hammock. The morning

sunshine filters through the trees, creating a patchwork of light and shadow that sparkles with the ocean breeze. "A poet built this place," she says, wiping her hands on her jeans. She looks haggard, her eyes sunken and dark, her hair unkempt and grey. There is a wildness about her and about this house by the sea. The front porch is laden with shells and bones and the skulls of animals, Indonesian artifacts and a gargoyle shrouded in cobwebs. "There's a lot to do to keep this place going," she says wearily. "Stephen used to take care of the house."

Stephen Reid, her third husband, is now in jail awaiting a trial for an alleged bank robbery and shootout in nearby Victoria in June. A former member of the Stopwatch Gang, Stephen once made the FBI's most-wanted list after 140 robberies netted him more than \$150-million. He was eventually caught and while in prison, he wrote the best-selling novel, Jackrabbit Parole. Susan edited the book and in the process, they fell in love. The couple were married, behind bars, in 1987. When

Stephen was released two years later, he began living a somewhat normal life, becoming a well-respected member of B.C.'s literary community. But about two years ago, he got back on heroin, which may ultimately lead him back to the cell.

Now Susan likely faces a future of prison visits and an empty bed. It leaves her alone to take care of their daughter, Sophie, 10, and Charlotte, 16 (whose father was Susan's second husband, a drug dealer who also spent time in prison). She waters the plants, cooks the meals, does the laundry -- not to mention the interviews, photo shoots, daily prison visits and correspondence with the lawyers. It doesn't leave much time for finishing her novel or writing new poetry or keeping up with the mail. In creating a sensational life, Susan has always struggled with her life upstaging her art. She has used her life to emblazon her poetics, and her poetry to smooth the rough edges of her life. In doing so, the line between fact and fiction has blurred and with it, the line between her image and her real self? But will her work ever get the recognition it deserves?

Today, the domestic chores are wearing her down. As she hangs the wet laundry outside, she tells me that when Stephen phoned from prison last night, she had to ask him how to light the barbecue. Then when he called again after dinner, he had to explain how to turn it off.

"Poor Stephen," she says as she hangs another towel, "it probably makes him feel more helpless. He can't do much from where he is."

He'll probably be able to do even less if he is sentenced. The phone calls would then take place only once a week rather than

five times a day as it is now. The letters will begin again. Their relationship will revert to how it began, with a man behind bars plying the poet with the words of love and a woman in her house by the sea, lonely, writing poetry.

It is fitting, then, that her next project is a compilation of the letters she and Stephen wrote to each other more than 10 years ago, the last time he was in prison. Looking through the pile in her office, she tells me they have to be carefully edited. She doesn't want the sexual parts made public. For a woman so open to the media and so willing to share all the minute details of her life, this reluctance is uncharacteristic. She hands me a piece of paper with paragraphs blackened out.

Stephen writes: "I love you so much Susan. Drinking your Amstel, watching the sun go down. Yes. Let's live quietly. At times. Mostly let's be alone together. Me, you and Charlotte. We're a world. But. We still need an apartment. Mattresses to soil. Dark blinds to keep the voyeurs from drooling all over the window sill. A TV to drown out the oohs and ahhs. The sweetest sound in the world is the downstroke of your zipper when I pull it."

The poignancy of these love letters seems all the more remarkable now that this couple is likely to relive their beginnings, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Susan writes: "I am so close to you in that visiting room that the loneliness is worse when I leave. The closeness with you accentuates the loneliness I feel being around other people. I stop to buy gas and my heart stops. I stop for something to eat and I can't swallow because my heart's blocking the way. And all my other organs. Today, as I turned north on to 133, I thought there'd

been a mistake. I was going to turn around and drive back and say, 'There's been a mistake here. I'm not meant to leave. My heart's inside there. My liver, kidney, islands of pancreas, soul'."

As I read this in the leafy courtyard at the back of the house, I realize this is how Susan must be feeling now, again. This heart-rending sadness she wears like a shirt of bricks. But she says it's better that he's in jail, better than before when he was on heroin and causing chaos and distress in the house. "I feel much less alone now than when he was using," she says. He'd always be losing things, searching for his keys, leaving wood on top of the wood stove. "At least now I know he's safe, alive and healthy."

The sadness of being left alone is tempered by the fact that it's these emotions that stir poetry. She tells me her poetry comes from loneliness and grief, not happiness. If that is so, she may be writing a lot of poetry over the next few years. Her latest book of poetry, *Things that keep and do not change*, came out in April. It was her first poetry collection since *Forcing the Narcissus* was released to great acclaim in 1994. And some critics were wondering what had happened to the prolific poetess of the West Coast.

But these days she doesn't have much time to contemplate, let alone write anything down. The phone is always ringing. Between calls, Sophie streams through the living room in a long white robe and disappears. She re-emerges in a short, blue sundress, bright-eyed and looking for the kitten. Susan goes to the kitchen to make tea and cinnamon buns for breakfast. Moments later, Charlotte glides into the kitchen in a long satin nightdress. The

kitchen is soon full of laughter and clanking dishes. Susan looks at her girls in their flowing dresses and jokes about being underdressed in her jeans and a black T-shirt.

As Charlotte unloads the dishwasher, she tells me about the all-night rave she went to on the weekend. Sophie is icing the buns and showing me her nails. The conversation turns to drugs and raves and the need for moderation. Susan, hugging Sophie, jokes, "Your dad was never into moderation." And, as Sophie looks up at her mom, she says, "My dad always told me to bring a warm jacket wherever I go, even if it's not cold, because you never know when you're going to need it."

"Did he?" Susan responds with a laugh. "That's a good bit of wisdom."

Between the tea and the cinnamon buns and the laughter of young girls, there is a veil of normalcy in the house. But Susan flits from one task to the next, scattered and unfocused and forgetting to pee. It's not until Sophie crawls on her lap that she remembers she had set off for the bathroom an hour before. She forgets to turn off the oven -- twice -- and in the car, preparing to drive Sophie and her friend to the pool, she can't find her keys.

"Yesterday, I was in the grocery store in Sidney," she says after we drop off the kids, "and twice I saw people that I thought were him." She says she has to learn how to cope with the anxiety, the sense of panic that makes her feel so frenzied. "I get tired of being a good survivor," she says. "I want to collapse, but something doesn't let me. The kids. I can't give up."

Susan's current state of distress is further

heightened by the fact that she hasn't been in her office in two weeks. She's a very disciplined writer and is normally in her office with the door closed for at least a few hours a day. Fortunately, when everything happened with Stephen, she had just finished the latest draft of her new novel, *Cargo of Orchids*. Now she is supposed to be working on two articles and a book about how to make money as a poet. And with Stephen's legal costs mounting and a household to support, she may need to read her own book. But who knows when she'll get to that. Life is taking up too much time.

As we drive up to a restaurant for lunch, I ask her if she's ever recognized and harassed when she goes out. She says people don't usually recognize her -- she has overheard conversations in restaurants where people beside her are talking about her and Stephen. "They often get their facts wrong," she says. "And sometimes I want to correct them, but I don't."

She tells me that a woman recently came up to her car to examine the toys. While they were standing there discussing Barbies and Lego, the woman whispered, "How is he?" Susan laughs. It gives her some measure of comfort that so many people think they are part of her family and privy to her secrets. "It's like there's this automatic intimacy between me and the rest of the world," she says.

That intimacy has been carefully crafted over the years, built up from poems that have offered her readers a window into her dark and tormented soul. Her skill as a poet was discovered while she was in a mental hospital at 16; she has been writing ever since. She has published 12 books of poetry, four children's books, two novels

and two collections of essays. As her life grew ever more sensational (taking off with the drug-dealing client of her first husband, a lawyer; travelling the world with him and their daughter Charlotte, marrying Stephen in prison, posing nude for *Saturday Night* magazine), she created an image of herself that doesn't necessarily reflect the real Susan Musgrave. And yet, this is who her readers and newspaper reporters know -- the wild, sea witch of her poetry who takes dangerous risks and embraces life with a passionate, and at times, violent, intensity.

"Susan is a great media figure," says Patrick Lane, a 60-year-old poet also living on Vancouver Island, and one of Susan's close friends. "I've never seen the media love anyone as much as it loves her. From the waif-like hippie girl living with Indians on the Charlotte Islands to living in Colombia with drug dealers, Susan is attracted to the exciting part of life."

But with fame comes criticism, and Susan has long been frustrated by claims that her life is more interesting than her art. "It's possible, you know, to be a good writer and have an interesting life," she says. "Some people think it's not possible, not Canadian. But I don't plan my life to shock people. I don't want an exciting life. I don't need a dose of reality. I need domestic calm, a cup of tea and someone to barbecue for me."

"People find her life more fascinating," Lane says. "I wish they would pay more attention to her art, which is magnificent. Her writing stands with the best of the last half-century in North America. But people are more interested in her life and that's the burden she has to carry because she created it."

Susan created it, at least partly, by

plundering her life experiences for her poetry. In doing so, she has done what all good writers do. But after a career that has spanned decades, fact and fiction have begun to merge. Looking back at her poetry, Lane says, it's easy to find evidence of foreshadowing, evidence that her art imitates her life. This is from her 1994 collection, *Forcing the Narcissus*:

"He wanted to be with me forever, he said,/but I knew they'd catch up to us/sooner. I'll tell the judge, in my innocence/I found no justice. Maybe he'll have mercy/but I doubt it."

But there is also evidence that her life imitates her art. The day Stephen allegedly robbed the bank in Victoria, Susan, unaware, was at home writing her first poem in two years: "Now I know this: between birth and death there is only loneliness, so big sometimes it makes love seem spectacularly small, with no grave big enough to contain our grief. Loneliness takes the good out of all of our goodbyes . . ."

The crossover between art and life has always been fluid, but they have been increasingly inseparable for Susan. That, Lane says, has made her more of an object than a real person. "The greatest danger," he says, "is when the artist begins to believe the fictions they've created are real and they start to imitate their own art in their lives." After W.P. Kinsella wrote *Shoeless Joe*, Lane says, the writer travelled the world talking about baseball and became his own art, despite himself. The same could be said of Salman Rushdie, Ernest Hemingway or Milton Acorn. "To some degree, Susan has had a difficult time escaping from the character she's created."

But with recent events, Susan says she is more aware of the ironies of constantly writing down her own life. After more than a decade, she has fallen right back into the same voice and the same style in her daily letters to Stephen in prison. There is the sense of life as a circle, of ending how you began. There is the weight of finally having to face the seemingly inevitable fall of an addict.

Visiting prison again and acknowledging the pain that is yet to come, she admits writing is her way of having control over her life, of "exorcising the trauma of it," of getting strength out of circumstance rather than being victimized by it. "I know it's going to be a long time," she says sadly. "So there's nothing to do but carry on and see if anything useful can come of it through writing."

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