

## **CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING**

# **Miriam Körner on writing sled-dog fiction for children**



Kidlit author Miriam Körner lives in a teeny cabin in the bush near La Ronge, in northern Saskatchewan, with her husband, Quincy, and their sled dogs. The couple started an adventure company in 2004, specializing in sled and canoe tours. Körner also began penning travel adventure articles for magazines. But in the last few years, she has turned her focus to writing and illustrating books for kids. Her first middle-grade/young-adult

book, *Yellow Dog* (Red Deer Press, 2016), recently won the 2018 Snow Willow Award, chosen by youth in Saskatchewan. *Yellow Dog* and her follow-up, *Qaqavii* (Red Deer Press, March), tell the stories of young protagonists in the North who come to understand themselves through the land and dogsledding.

Q&Q spoke with Körner about her approach to writing about life in the North.

### **How did you start writing fiction?**

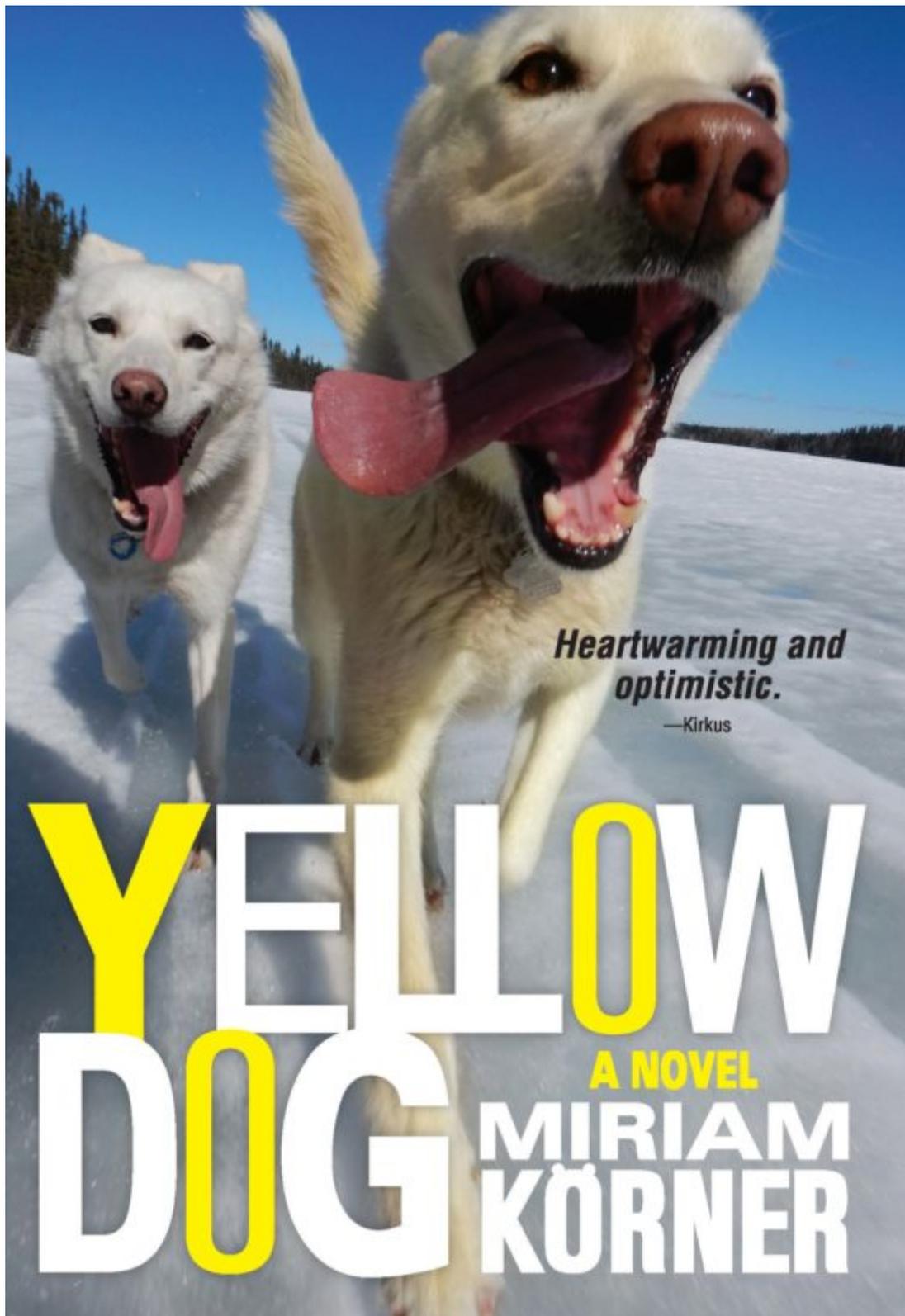
I started with picture books. I took an online class with [Alice Kuipers](#) and then I went to Seaside Writing Retreat with Kathy Stinson and [Peter Carver](#). Peter read my picture book and said, “I think there’s a novel in here.” He also advised me that it’s way easier to break into the children’s market by writing novels as opposed to picture books. So I did – and I really enjoyed it and it came to me fairly easily.

A year later, I attended a writers’ retreat in La Ronge, where the late [Richard Wagamese](#) taught me how to connect to my characters. The first thing he said was, “Everything you know about writing, leave it. Forget about it for now.” So I was sitting there with a crudely drafted outline — and it was already painful to do that outline — but after I left the workshop I just sat down and started writing. What Richard Wagamese taught me is to open your channel — as he always called it — and leave your ego by the door. Don’t worry about who your audience is going to be and what critics are going to say. Just write the story for the story’s sake.

### **Sled dogs hold a really special place in your heart. Can you tell me about the dogs?**

When I came from Germany I worked as a dog handler, which basically means shovelling a lot of poop. And then you get to train the young team. I bought two dogs from my old team, and then we just started collecting rejects. We didn’t take dogs from the streets like Jeremy [in *Yellow Dog*], but from mushers who had puppies that they didn’t want. They were an accidental breeding or they weren’t fast enough for their racing team – and they were issue dogs. But there was always a reason why they didn’t perform on somebody else’s team, and it was really fun to figure out what that reason was and how to make them perform for us. And quite often we turned these dogs that had been rejected into excellent leaders.

When we started touring, just going out in northern Saskatchewan to the trapline cabins – most of which are not in full-time use anymore – I would always picture what it would have



been like, 50 years ago. There would have been a dog team to greet us, and there would have been a trapper with some rabbit stew. We would meet some of these old guys who would say, “Oh, I used to have dogs when I was young.” We’d talk about our dogs, and they’d talk about their dogs. And all of these little stories became the memory of the old man in *Yellow Dog*.

**Talk about the process of writing *Qaqavii*.**

After I was done writing *Yellow Dog*,

I thought, “How am I ever going to write another novel?” There really was no recipe I could follow. The only thing I had to go by was what Richard Wagamese had said: write the story for the story’s sake and open your channel. And it just happened, like with the first book.

For four years, we had raced the Hudson Bay Quest between Churchill, Manitoba, and Arviat, Nunavut. And we met some of the mushers out there – racers who were over 70 years old, clad in caribou clothing, with traditional qamutiit [sleds] and only speaking Inuktitut. And that dog culture was so strong in the Arctic. We could see the ease that the mushers had on the land and with their dogs.

I had started writing a non-fiction book about this experience, but it didn't go anywhere. I realized that this was bigger than non-fiction. The book is a mix of my own experiences [seen through the eyes of Emmylou, the protagonist]. Emmylou wonders what life was like before there were skidoos, trucks, and roads. And what was life like before the European traders came to the Arctic? Why did we go this way? Did we need to go this way? What would have happened if we didn't? If we had just come to this place and accepted Canada as a place where we can learn from the way of life that was there, and adapt to it, rather than trying to adapt everybody else to our way of life that had already proven not to be working in Europe – otherwise people wouldn't have come here.



**You're sharing Indigenous peoples' stories. Can you tell me about the process, about the care you take in doing so?**

There isn't a process in the sense of "These are the steps I need to take." The most important part is personal connection. And dialogue. If you want to avoid stereotypes then I think then we have to dig deep and we have to see the person as the person and not as a

representation of something. So, yes, in [*Yellow Dog*] Jeremy's grandpa speaks Cree, so the assumption can be made there is some Cree heritage, but he doesn't represent all Cree people or Woodland Cree people, he just represents Jack. I learned in that writing workshop with Richard Wagamese that when people tell you their stories they don't automatically give you their permission to retell them. And I've had some experiences where people share traditional knowledge and ceremonial knowledge with me. And there's a trust that I'm not going to put that into words and write that down somewhere. I wouldn't ever share knowledge that wasn't appropriate to share.

I felt very confident in *Yellow Dog* because it's set in my community and I'm very connected and accepted in my community. So I feel very safe in doing what I do. With *Qaqavii* it was a lot scarier because it wasn't set in my own community. But I do have friends in Arviat and one of them happens to be Shirley Tagalik, an editor of a really wonderful book called *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True*. She read the manuscript and made sure it would ring true to kids reading it in Arviat. That's what was important to me, that the characters appear true. It doesn't mean what they say and do is representative of Inuit along Hudson Bay, but that they could be possible characters, possible real people. When the book came out, I was really nervous until I heard from readers in Arviat how much they loved it. And I thought, "Yes! I got it. It's OK." But it is scary, and I think we do have a responsibility – Indigenous writers and non-Indigenous writers. As non-Indigenous writers, we have gotten it wrong so many times, we can't afford to keep getting it wrong. At the same time, we cannot not tell our stories out of fear of getting it wrong, because that is, I think, even worse. We need that dialogue, we need the exchange of our ideas and our experiences.

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