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April 2006

# OurWorld

Alberta's Premiere 50+  
Lifestyle Magazine

**SHIRLEE SMITH MATHESON**  
The Write Stuff

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Story and photograph  
by Joanne Elves

Within the first few minutes of meeting Shirlee Smith Matheson, I thought for sure the interview wasn't going to happen as planned.

First I misplaced my question sheet and then I turned at the wrong Tim Hortons. When I finally got to the Calgary Aero Space Museum, I was flustered.

I was supposed to talk to her about her successful writing career and the airplanes suspended from the ceiling of the museum, but the conversation took a turn.

And I mean a hard left rudder turn.

We started talking about cars. And we didn't stop. How was I supposed to know she liked pre-ABS and pre-power window cars — just like me?

There we stood, surrounded by prop planes and jet fighter planes, yakking about the pros and cons of owning and driving vintage cars. That was definitely not on my list, but then again — maybe flying by the seat of your pants makes you discover things in a whole new way.

A group of school kids was about to descend on the museum for a guided tour of the history of aviation so we took our conversation to a quieter location.

Once inside a cavernous boardroom, I learned

about the passion Matheson pours into every book she has written. And, over a lifetime of raising a family and moving through the four western provinces, she has found the time to write seven novels for young adults and coming on eight non-fiction books.

But don't be fooled by the label of non-fiction. The material she writes is far from being textbook dry. Between having a lifetime of rich adventures and meeting colourful characters, Matheson has woven some remarkable accounts of days gone by.

Matheson may have been born in the bustling city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, but was raised on farms. While she was a young girl, the family moved to a farm west of Red Deer. When she was in Grade 5, her family moved to Lacombe.

Life on the farm was typically a little bit lonely so Matheson became a robust reader. Interestingly her favourite stories were biographies of Canadians and every time her dad brought one home she would read it as fast as she could.

"I didn't know I was a writer when I was a kid," says Matheson. "But teachers could see that I could write."

Her skills were quickly put to use on the junior high newspaper and yearbooks.



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Her heart was swept away by Bill Matheson, her high school sweetheart, and they married shortly after graduation. She became a dental nurse and alongside Bill they moved with his occupation all over southern Alberta. Along the way, they had two girls, Hayley and Britt, and she obtained a BA in English.

“Bill was born in Peace River,” says Matheson. “When he took me back home to Peace River to see what it was like, I fell in love with the country. That was it – it was such a connection.”

It’s a good thing she liked the northern landscape — the family shifted north to Hudson’s Hope in B.C. so Bill could work as a surveyor on the Bennett Dam.

“I worked for the town of Hudson’s Hope and that’s how I started meeting some of the crazy characters I write about,” laughs Matheson.

All sorts of things were happening in the north and Matheson realized their stories would disappear when they did, so with pen in hand she started interviewing the locals and legends and interestingly many of them were bush pilots.

The first of the captivating people was Jimmy “Midnight” Anderson and his is one of the first stories in her Flying the Frontier series. Matheson called his story *Jackpine Savage* because the wing-tips of Anderson’s plane were stained green from slapping the treetops.

Matheson adds, “His nickname was Midnight because he could see at night so well. He let me write his stories. When I contacted Fifth House Publishers, they suggested contacting other bush pilots and the list grew quickly.”

Her latest book, published last fall, is *Lost: True Stories of Canadian Aviation Tragedies*.

Her next collection, *Strange Flights and Fliers*, is expected on the shelves this fall.

One of her fondest books is *Youngblood of the Peace*. It became her favourite because she spent many weeks spanning three years travelling with a priest throughout the native communities of the north.

In the 1990s Matheson began spending a great deal of time at the Calgary Aero Space Museum researching and interviewing the people who work there. One interview lead to another to the point where she was spending so much time there the museum hired her as their administration officer. Matheson says she loves it there. It’s a wonderful

part-time job that fuels her passion for writing about aviation.

“Writing is passion. If you calculate money per hour, it’s not even on the radar screen,” says Matheson. “You have to have the passion. And you just do it. If you find a publisher and readers that want the books, it’s very rewarding.”

Her greatest reward, however, is hearing from the characters she writes about or their descendants who say she has captured the adventure and recorded it accurately for others to see.

The books Matheson writes for her young adult audience mix stories from her youth, historical adventures and contemporary fiction. She’s even incorporated her passion for hotrods in *Fastback Beach*. (I plan to read the book to find out if she used her 1940 Ford Sedan Deluxe or the 1956 Mercury pickup.)

Matheson smiles as she tells of her favourite editor. “I have an editor who is 15 years old — my granddaughter (one of five grandchildren). She is so good at going through my books and letting me know what is geeky, then sets me straight with the expressions that are right on. She modernizes my writing.”

Awards and accolades have followed her writing career. Many of Matheson’s young adult novels have won prestigious awards. She has been a finalist in short story competitions, won awards for historical writing and been flattered with an honorary arts degree from Northern Lights College of British Columbia. She has also served as writer-in-residence in both Medicine Hat and Calgary. See her website at [www.ssmatheson.ca](http://www.ssmatheson.ca).

The awards are impressive but she doesn’t seem fazed by them.

“I go to schools and read to the kids. They love to hear the stories but even more, they want to hear the story behind the story. I love their enthusiasm.”

Speaking of enthusiasm, when asked if she ever plans to shut off the computer and quit working the answer is a solid and enthusiastic, “Oh no, no, no.”

There are still crazy characters, flamboyant pilots, epic stories of aviation and histories of unsung Canadian heroes for Shirlee Smith Matheson to write about. 