

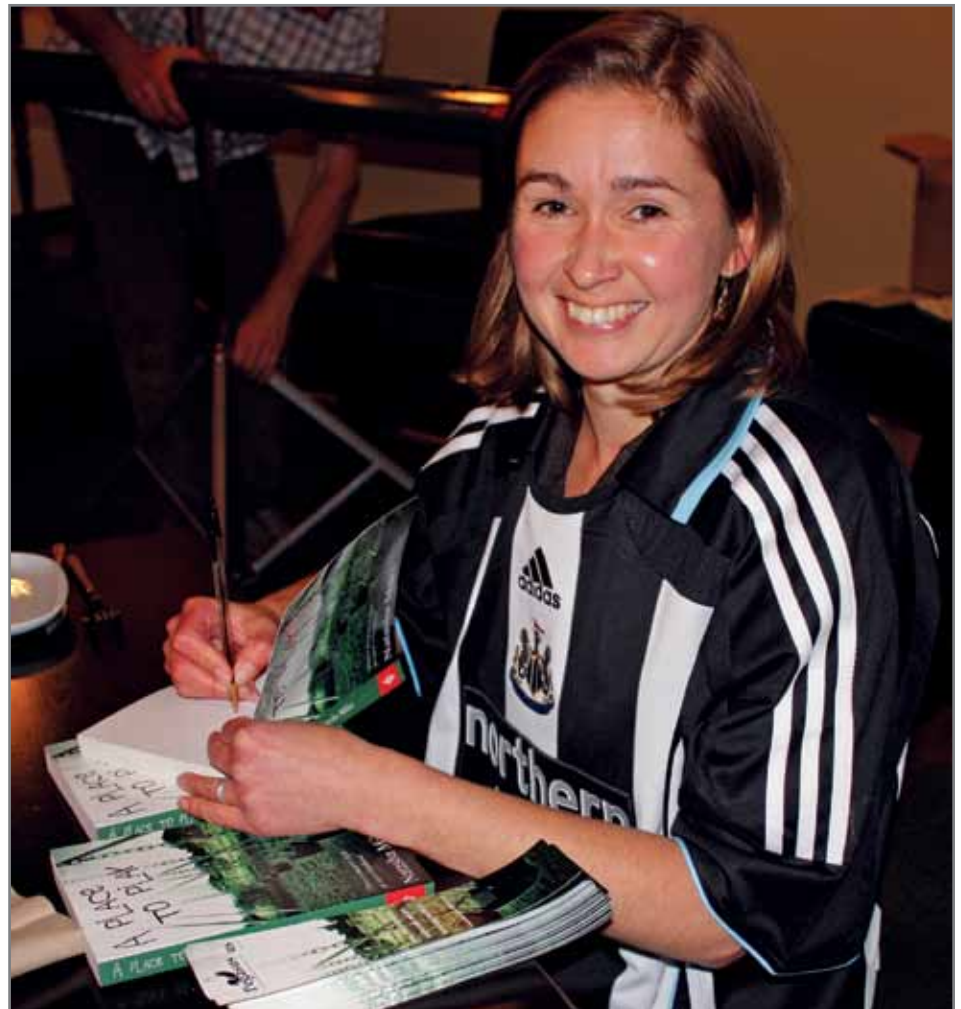
Why I write

A principal draws on her experiences as a child in suburban London in the 1970s and 1980s and writes a novel set in the not too distant future when playing fields are a thing of the past.

by Natasha Miles

They say that there is a novel inside each and every one of us and ‘they’ are quite right. Any novel is a tale in some form or other of the human experience and what better place than to start with our own life. Think of the great characters that you have come across in your time, think of those who did not appear to be so great but now ponder on what were they thinking inside or hiding from you as your paths crossed? What if you chose not to get off the bus at the stop you intended to get off but chose to wait just one more stop? What if you didn’t get to work on time for your first job? What if you chose to attend SFU and not UBC? See, it’s not so difficult to come up with a story based around any of these scenarios is it?

But why a novel? Over the last 12 years when I started on a MBA in Educational Management, I have pushed myself to achieve academic goals to better myself in my own learning in the field of education. One of the lasting legacies for me from these years of writing, for ex-



ample, a thesis or an exam on Canadian Literature, has been that I enjoy writing. Being able to take the time to achieve a creative goal for myself was a new and incredibly rewarding experience. One December day at the end of 2008 during a wet Port Hardy Christmas, having finished reading yet another novel the night before, I literally woke up feeling that the time

was right to write the novel that had been nudging me from inside telling me that it was jolly well about time it was written. Three characters appeared out of the blue that day: Rudi, his sister Trojan and their plump friend Martha and they started telling me how the story of *The Last Field in England* would be told. I hadn’t worked it out beforehand; I

Photo of Natasha by Jan McMurray, New Denver Valley Voice

needed them to help me tell the tale. We worked together, the four of us, on the story and told anyone who cared to be reminded that a playing field is a precious space for children to be able to access for them to have their right to play. Of course there's a reasonable quota of baddies (mainly adults) in the story and a couple of twists and turns but be rest assured that the three friends use their wit to overcome the odds stacked against them.


The novel morphed into *A Place to Play*. It took me six months of rejections from Canadian publishers (saying things like, 'It's not Canadian enough,' and from UK publishers, saying things like, 'We like your style but don't think the story is for us,') for me to put the manuscript to one side and let it collect a thin layer of dust. Embarking upon a new adventure into the West Kootenays and SD10, followed by a snow-bound Christmas holiday I blew off the dust and did a revamp of the novel in sections. This task coincided with hearing about a small UK publisher who was being interviewed on CBC Radio 1 who said they would welcome manuscripts from first-time writers. Working with the publishers has been a learning experience through which I have become a little more adept at proof reading, have had to relearn some English word usage as Canadian vocabulary has managed to creep in after five years in BC and have had to start to use the digital world to help me market myself as a writer. I reluctantly created a Facebook profile and a blog, which I prefer, with a specific aim to be 'found' through internet searches as the author of *A Place to Play*. One perk of Facebook, I discovered, is being able to see the Facebook page from my publishers and knowing what the pundits are

saying about my novel.

The novel inside me grew out of my experience as a child in suburban London in the 1970s and 1980s. I remember playing outside from dawn until dusk in parks and fields (yes, they do exist in suburbia today ... just). I believe that my generation is the last generation that was able to play outside without the fear of strangers, without the trappings of the internet and social networking. What I have seen in recent years in BC is that the use of social networking by teenagers is taking away their time in face-to-face communications with friends. I recall, recently, when a teenager who we took to the local hot springs as an end of year treat, who had all his friends with him (New Denver is a small place) still went on to Facebook to talk to them.

UNICEF's *Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31* states that a child has the right to relax, to play

and to take part in a wide range of recreational activities. Too many children I have worked with in recent years are carers for their younger siblings, need to take part time work in order for their family to survive or are over or under weight due to neglect. Their right to be a child, to have a childhood needs to be protected even in developed nations like Canada and the UK. I hope that my novel adds to the growing concern that children are not playing, that they are growing up too fast and that they don't know how to deal with human face-to-face interactions.

As for the success of my novel, time will tell of course, but the tale has been told, the characters have found peace as their mission was accomplished and I have achieved an ambition set around 1977 or so when my brother and I wrote a book together on ghosts complete with pictures. The ghosts were orange. 

Natasha Miles is Principal of Lucerne Elementary Secondary School, New Denver, in the Arrow Lakes School District. She became a permanent resident in Canada in 2006 having previously taught in the UK and Europe. Her first novel, *A Place to Play*, is published by Pegasus Elliott MacKenzie Publishers and is available from <http://pegasuspublishers.com> Natasha can be reached by email at natasha.miles@sd10.bc.ca



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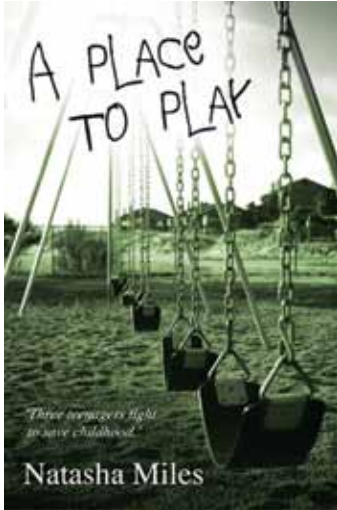
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An excerpt from

A Play to Play

by Natasha Miles

published by
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“Remember I told you that there are four schools left in each of the Federation’s cities.” The teenagers nodded. “This is the only one that still has its playing field. The other ones lost theirs years before the schools were closed. A real tragedy.”

“Why?” asked Martha.

Instead of answering the question he turned to Rudi and asked his own. “Did you have fun, Rudi?” he asked pointedly.

“Yes, I ... yes I did,” he admitted.

“Good. Then let me show you why it is a tragedy that the other schools lost their playing field. Are you sitting comfortably?” Rudi wasn’t so he sat down in front of them on the grass. Dr. Grey pointed his laser again at the central point.

At first nothing seemed to happen. Then the children suddenly saw people appearing from behind the trees at the edge of the field. Some of the people were carrying balls, others bags. Some were eating what seemed to be chocolate bars, a few had stubby white sticks hanging out of their mouths. “They’re our age!” Martha said in amazement.

“Ssh! Watch. Listen!” was all Dr. Grey said in reply. A group of teenage boys wandered over to the ‘pi’ posts

and threw their jackets in a heap. The one who had been carrying the ball threw it onto the grass and suddenly the boys split up all over the space, shouting and laughing but all running after the ball. From time to time one of them would kick the ball to another and on other occasions a boy would hurl himself at the ball to impede its current direction.

Trojan nudged Martha and pointed at one of the benches. There sat three girls, talking to each other and giggling. One took out a hairbrush and brushed her hair even though it looked quite glossy from their viewpoint. Suddenly one of the young men who had been chasing the ball sauntered over to the girls on the bench and offered them a white stick. The three girls shook their heads and started giggling again. The boy’s shoulders dropped and he turned back to his friends. The girls continued to giggle and then collapsed in fits of laughter.

“What do you hear, Martha?” asked Dr. Grey.

She stopped looking at the girls on the bench. “I hear laughter.”

“And what about you, Trojan?” he asked.

“I think I hear ... I can hear, if you can I suppose, I can hear fun.”

“And you, Rudi the Brave. What do you hear?” the old man asked one more time.

“I can hear the past, can’t I? They aren’t here are they?” Rudi replied solemnly.

“You are all right of course. What you can hear and what you can see doesn’t exist. It is a mere projection that an old man keeps to remind himself of when he was young. It serves a purpose though for you. I want you to know but I think you already know if you look deep inside your own hearts that this is what your childhood, your teenage lives should be like. Listen to that laughter. Listen to that fun. Do you hear that every day when you study? No, I don’t think so. This is what they took away from you when they first got rid of the playing fields and then closed the schools.”

Cover Art



Our cover art this month is by Megan Graw, a Grade 10 student at Dawson Creek Secondary School. She used pencil crayon, pencil and ink. We thank Megan, her teacher Lorraine Beggs, and Principal Keith Maurer for sharing this work.

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