



“I’m intrigued by the jigsaw puzzle of transforming historical facts into a fascinating story.”



Spies, Secrets, and Sabotage: Rich Territory for New Historical Fiction

How things have changed since Karen Autio was a little girl dreading the appearance of the basket containing old, boring black and white family photographs. Back then, she endured hours of listening to her grandmother talking about distant relatives and her former life in Finland. “That’s something I’d love to be able to do now.”

These days, Autio’s biggest challenge is knowing when to stop researching when she’s writing historical fiction. “I always have far more information than can possibly be used in one book. Sometimes it’s hard to discern when to stop doing the research, decide which bits to include, and start writing.”



Fortunately, Autio doesn’t have to squeeze everything she learns about a particular period into a single novel. “When I finished writing *Saara’s Passage* [the second book about Saara, daughter of Finnish immigrants and a survivor of the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland* in 1914] I realized I wasn’t done telling Saara’s story.” *Sabotage*, the final installment in Saara’s trilogy, explores in fiction a little-known incident in Canadian history. “[There was] a plot by German agents to destroy the massive Canadian Pacific railway bridge in my hometown of Nipigon, Ontario, in 1915. I’d found it hard to believe the story, but by doing more research, I located several sources that gave more details.”

A plot like this is a gift to a writer of historical fiction. Set against the backdrop of the First World War, paranoia and suspicion coloured the actions of Canadian citizens and government representatives alike. What Autio does particularly well is to take such an event and bring it to life by involving her cast of characters in a way that makes it difficult to tease apart fact and fiction. When the process works, readers respond. “The most rewarding part of the writing process is the delight from creating a world and characters so ‘real’ that they direct the story—and the joy in hearing how readers respond to the story.”



About the Book

German spies? Sabotage plots? Innocent people interned in camps? Believe it or not, this is northwestern Ontario in 1915. The danger hits close to home for battling siblings Saara and John Mäki. Can they work together to save their family?

Sabotage is the sequel to *Saara's Passage* and completes the trilogy about the Finnish Mäki family in early Thunder Bay. In response to reader demand, this novel features more about John: the chapters alternate between Saara's and John's points of view.

Also by Karen Autio

Second Watch

Second Watch is based on true details of Finnish immigrant culture in Ontario and the sinking of the great *Empress of Ireland*. Over the eight years that this Canadian Pacific steamship sailed the Atlantic Ocean, it transported more than 117,000 passengers to Canada. The sinking of the *Empress* on May 29, 1914, remains Canada's worst maritime disaster during peacetime. Of 1,477 passengers and crew on board, 1,012 were lost—more passengers than in the sinking of the *Titanic*. Yet the *Empress of Ireland* and its fate remain little known to most Canadians.

Saara's Passage

Saara is trying hard to put her horrible experience aboard the doomed *Empress of Ireland* behind her. She goes to school, roller skates with her best friend, and enjoys her new baby cousin. And she is so looking forward to starring in the school play!

But nightmares—and unanswerable questions—continue to disturb her. War is declared, and the future of the whole world looks uncertain. Then her family is struck with another heavy blow: tuberculosis. Saara's beloved Aunt Marja must go to the sanatorium in Toronto. Who will care for baby Sanni?

Author Q & A

Q: Why did you choose to write about the plot to blow up the CP railway bridge in Nipigon?

A: I was intrigued by saboteurs actually having been in my small hometown in northwestern Ontario. I was struck by the similarity to today of how fear and suspicion of a group of people leads to paranoia that can escalate out of control.

Q: What themes do you find recur in your work?

A: I've written about events in Canada's history that haven't had much attention: the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland*, tuberculosis and living in a sanatorium; sabotage and internment in Canada during the First World War. I also focus on the value of family stories and heritage; faith; purpose; hope in the face of tragedy; persistence; and reconciliation.

Q: Do you have any advice for other writers?

A: Read as much as you can, especially in the genre you want to write; keep writing, submitting your work, and adding to your idea file. Find a supportive and honest critique group. To have my writing critiqued is invaluable. I also learn so much from critiquing someone else's writing and reading other people's critiques of that same piece of writing.

“When I get stuck in my writing, I head out for a walk or chop vegetables and make a pot of soup. Or I talk the scene over with a friend—that usually gets the ideas flowing again.”