

Fictional series preserves Ukrainian heritage

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FOR THE STARPHOENIX

Marion Mutala has found a unique way to communicate to upcoming generations some of the religious and cultural elements of her Ukrainian heritage. The retired educator has written a trio of books that take a fictional character, Natalia, back to Ukraine to experience her family's roots.

The *Baba's Babushka* series is based on Mutala's own family history.

In the first book, *Baba's Babushka: A Magical Ukrainian Christmas*, it is winter and a colourful babushka lands on the head of Natalia, a Canadian child of Ukrainian descent, and magically transports her back in time to Ukraine. There she meets her Baba, or grandmother, as a young girl, and learns about Ukrainian Christmas traditions.

"The 12 meatless dishes of the Christmas Eve supper represent the Last Supper and the 12 apostles," Mutala said. "Kutya, the first dish eaten, is wheat and honey which signifies prosperity, peace and good health. The bread or kolach has three round loaves on top of each other. Three is the sign of

the Trinity. The round shape is a symbol of God's unending love for us."

In Mutala's second book, *Baba's Babushka: A Magical Ukrainian Easter*, Natalia is once again transported to her family's homeland just in time for Easter.

"Natalia receives a written Easter egg," Mutala said, "and learns about the celebration of Ukrainian Easter, or Velykden. She learns that an egg is the symbol of new life and that Easter is the time to remember that Jesus died on a cross to save people from their sins, and was resurrected. The traditional 40 days of fasting prior (which is a time of soul cleansing) is followed by a great feast."

Completing the trilogy is the newly released *Baba's Babushka: A Magical Ukrainian Wedding*.

"In this book, Natalia's Baba and Dido are getting married and coming to Canada, just like my grandparents, Tessi Woznakowski and Stefan Dubyk, did," Mutala said. "This book is all about the wedding traditions and the religious significance of the elements, including the korvai, the ornately decorated wedding bread."

Each book contains a glossary of Ukrainian words at the back, as well as recipes



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Retired educator Marion Mutala launches the third book of the *Baba's Babushka* series this month.

for some of the food items featured in the story.

Mutala's books are all exquisitely illustrated, with one full-page, full-colour illustration opposite each page of text. The first two volumes were illustrated by Wendy Siemens, an art teacher at St. Joseph School. Amber Rees did the third book.

"For the Easter book, drawings of the pysanka or Easter egg are based on an egg designed according to my specifications by Gerry Zerbecky," Mutala said. "The central symbol is a cross which stands for the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. There are white triangles for purity of faith and connection between God

and people, yellow wheat representing the land my grandparents farmed, and red poppies for their Ukrainian homeland. The blue background represents the prairie sky. The egg is finally dipped in black dye, which is symbolic of eternity."

The korvai wedding bread in the third book was based on the artistry of Mary Calist, who created a lavishly decorated bread, rich with religious and traditional symbols: A cross, the sun, flowers and leaves representing nature, and tiny doves, which are the symbol of peace. On top is a wheat-woven circle to symbolize undying love, family life and prosperity.

Mutala will launch her third book with a Ukrainian party on Oct. 28 at 7 p.m. at McNally Robinson Booksellers. Wes Funk is the MC and the HoloSay Choir will sing traditional Ukrainian wedding songs.

"As a door prize, we'll be giving away a basket filled with symbolic wedding gifts: a religious icon, a jar of honey, a shaker of salt, some wine, and of course, garlic. All have spiritual or traditional significance."

The party will also include a traditional Ukrainian wedding blessing ceremony

where bread is touched to the head of the bride and groom, they are lightly sprinkled with salt and they kiss each other on the cheek — all while the choir and guests sing Na Mnohality or "May God grant you many happy years together."

Mutala says she came up with the idea for the books while photographing her 80-year-old mother wearing her colourful babushkas. "I wanted to write a story that would preserve our Ukrainian traditions — both religious and folk — that will be lost if we don't document them."

Mutala's books were published by Your Nickels Worth publishers. The first book was released in 2010 and won the Anna Pidruchney Award. For three years running, it was in the top 100 books sold at McNally Robinson. The second book, published in 2012, was nominated for a Saskatchewan Book Publishing in Education award.

The Catholic school system in Moose Jaw includes Mutala's books into its curriculum as resource material.

Baba's Babushka books are available at local bookstores and through www.basbabushka.ca.