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Baba's Babushka



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Entertainment

A holiday tribute to baba

By Darlene Polachic
for The Saskatoon Sun

Marion Mutala's book for children, entitled *Baba's Babushka*, is more than just an entertaining story. It is a tribute not only to her Ukrainian culture and heritage, but to her family as well.

"I got the idea for *Baba's Babushka* six years ago," says the longtime teacher. "It is the story of a little Saskatchewan girl, Natalia, who finds a head scarf that magically allows her to time-travel to an earlier day in Ukraine."

It turns out that Natalia has been transported to the home of her great-grandparents where she meets her baba, or grandmother, as a little girl. It is Christmas Eve and Natalia observes the traditions that have characterized the Ukrainian celebration of Christmas Eve for generations, including the multi-coursed Christmas Eve meal.

The book is beautifully illustrated by local artist Wendy Siemens. What makes it all the more unique is that the story characters Siemens has depicted were all drawn from photographs of Mutala's family.

"When I first got the idea for this story, I took pictures of my mom, Sophie Mutala, wearing a head scarf or babushka. Mom is the baba in the story. Wendy used my photographs of my mother to draw the baba."

Mutala is Natalia in the story, and the faces of other family members appear, as well.

The whole project evolved from Mutala's fascination with history and her interest in her own family's story. That fascination increased when she and three of her sisters paid a visit to Ukraine.

"I often wondered about my grandparents, Tessie Woznakowski and Stefan Dubyk, who came to Saskatchewan in the second wave of Ukrainian immigration in 1912," she says. "They were married in Saskatoon. Grandma worked in the King George Hotel. Through the magic of PhotoShop, their wedding photo hangs on the wall in several of the book's illustrations."

Baba's Babushka is set in Hafford, where Mutala's grandparents lived. The actual house, she says, is still standing.

"The details of the Ukrainian Christmas Eve meal are very accurate. I did a lot of research to make sure they were. The story is fantasy, but it is historical fact, as well."

"I realize that the word babushka is actually a Russian word, but that's what my mother and my baba called it, so that's what I've called it in the story." Mutala says the Ukrainian word for the colourful head scarf worn by many older Ukrainian women is khustka or khustky.

Mutala has been a teacher in Saskatoon for 30 years at both the elementary and high school levels. She has a master's degree in administration.

Baba's Babushka is her first book, but she has several more in mind.

"I worked with Heather Nickel and Your Nickel's Worth Publishing in Regina. She looked at my manuscript and said, 'Marion, you have way more than you need here for one book. Why not make it into four books?' So we pared things down and made *Baba's Babushka* about the traditional Ukrainian Christmas Eve supper. There will be other books to follow."

Baba's Babushka is a beautifully crafted volume with 18 pages of text and a full-page illustration for every text page. The text pages are bordered with a traditional Ukrainian design.



—Photo by Darlene Polachic

School teacher Marion Mutala's new children's book, *Baba's Babushka*, explores Ukrainian Christmas traditions

The book includes a glossary of Ukrainian words and expressions at the back.

Mutala officially launched *Baba's Babushka* at McNally-Robinson on Oct. 14 and has been delighted by the interest. In two weeks, she sold more than 400 books, and was thrilled to see *Baba's Babushka* hit No. 1 on McNally's bestselling list.

Baba's Babushka sells for \$14.95 and is available at McNally-Robinson, Indigo, Coles, Chapters, the Western Development Museum giftshop and Meewasin Authority. It can also be purchased by calling Mutala at 244-1562 or contacting her through baba1@sasktel.net.

"I think everyone wants to find out about their past," Mutala says, "and is interested

in learning about the traditions and customs that are relevant to our heritage.

"I wrote *Baba's Babushka* as a legacy for all of us and our children.

"I once met a baba who said to me, 'We need to document our culture, our heritage, and our traditions or they will be lost.' This is what I have tried to do."