

Q&A with Margit Liesche, author of *Triptych*

**What inspired you to write *Triptych*?**

*Triptych* was conceived at a summer writer's workshop with this exercise prompt: 'My mother never...' I quickly added, 'lived in the same world as me.' My parents ended up in the States by default, as refugees, after they were forced to leave their missionary post in China, and Soviet-ruled Hungary refused to allow them to return. In her adopted country, my mother never seemed to fit in. She clung to Old World traditions and, if you asked her, 'home' was always in Hungary.

The workshop sentence grew into a page. Then the magic click. I realized I wanted to write about a mother-daughter relationship, specifically about how a refugee mother's sense of loss and displacement might influence her daughter's life choices and character. The page blossomed into a chapter that helped to define the early mother-daughter relationship between Edit and Ildiko, a driving force behind *Triptych*.

**The 1956 Hungarian Revolution plays a big role in *Triptych*. In the book's beginning, there's a scene of a child being interrogated by the Soviet secret police, the AVO. It's so human, and terrifying. How did that scene come about? Was it difficult to write?**

For me, the '56 Hungarian Revolution has always had significant meaning, and childhood memories from those troubled times inform *Triptych*. In '56, my parents' concern for family in Hungary permeated our home. The reason for their worry was made vivid to me by *Life* magazine photographs. I was seven. Carnage in Budapest streets; corpses decomposing under powdery lime; bloodied lifeless bodies strung from trees in the park. The grainy black and white images remain etched in my memory today. The subsequent visit from an escaped freedom fighter who had stubs for front teeth and missing fingernails, penetrated that memory bank vein as well.

During that period, I couldn't help imagining what it might be like for my cousins living in Budapest. What was it like living under a dictatorship, a terror state, where fear and oppression

by Soviet-Stalinist rule was a way of life? Where there was no trust, not among classmates or teachers, not even among family members. Where you had to watch what you said, had no choice in music or what you read, where clothing and food, the basic needs, were unavailable or so costly they were out of reach.

Yes, it was a painful scene to write, but creating that child, that moment—an 11-year-old girl, caught up in this nightmare of repression and terror, trapped into defending her mother—allowed me the opportunity to better understand just how difficult and traumatic the situation was.

**You chose to tell the story in a split narrative, 1986 Chicago and 1956 Budapest. Why?**

I didn't originally set out to write two story lines. Originally, the story was going to be told from Ildiko's viewpoint with flashbacks to events of the revolution. An early reader suggested I bring the flashback scenes to life, render them in real time. It was a challenge that at first I resisted, but then fully embraced.

And once I wrote the interrogation scene, I realized there was real power in the parallel telling of Evike's and Ildiko's stories. Ildiko's mother's search for her twin and, subsequently, Ildiko's search for her mother's killer, drives one part of the story; a child's impulsive act to protect her mother drives the other.

**In the story, the Madonna is a mother neither girl ever knew. Why did you choose to portray the mothers in this way?**

In writing *Triptych*, I wanted to illuminate courage in the face of tyranny, but also show the dark side of insurgency and the ripple effects on the next generation. In talking to relatives and other Hungarians who experienced the revolution, I learned of survivors who were able to move on with their lives. But for many others, resulting emotional and social challenges were not easily resolved. Alcoholism, fractured families, and post-traumatic stress disorder were not unusual.

So in *Triptych*, the pull of 'home' and the fervor of the Hungarian Revolution absorb both mothers: one in the fight for freedom; the other in the displaced feeling of émigrés, cut off from family, friends, and country. Both girls feel the emotional abandonment of their mothers—hence the theme, “*Why wasn't I my mother's cause?*”

### **What is the role of fairytale in 'Triptych'?**

'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' carries the story from start to finish. It highlights both a child's wish for escape and happiness as well as the reality of a rote existence even in high places, until honest emotion breaks the spell.

In a key scene early in the story, the fairytale is a bridge between the refugee mother, Edit, and her daughter, Ildiko, where the child, who loves reading, is trying to communicate with her mother, whose passion is embroidery. The child recognizes storytelling as a way to draw her reticent mother out, get closer to her.

### **Are any of the main characters patterned after real people?**

Kati. Growing up, I knew my mother had an adopted sister, Manci, and I knew she died at a young age. Though my mother sometimes spoke about her sisters and brothers, she—*they*—remained a distant mystery to me. I didn't learn the truth about Manci until I began researching *Triptych* and a cousin informed that Manci was a teacher, had been “ravished” by Russian soldiers in 1945 when she was 20, and died from T.B. shortly thereafter.

Creating Kati and making her a pivotal character in the story gave me a chance to reflect on Manci and her too-short life, what she went through, and to mourn her.

### **What's the significance of the title?**

The scene with Edit doing her embroidery and Ildiko reading shows their special form of communication. Just prior to her untimely death, in a prescient act, using her needlecraft, Edit incorporates her daughter's favorite story into a legacy. A three-panel legacy to guide Ildiko's journey of discovery and, ultimately, to know the healing power of forgiveness.

**Previous to *Triptych*, you had written more traditional mysteries with a recurring character. Why do something different?**

I've always had a soft spot for strong, accomplished women, women who did things outside the ordinary. When I set out to do the Pucci Lewis stories (*Lipstick and Lies* and *Hollywood Buzz*), I wanted to capture that point in history with a focus on the wonderful WWII band of flying sisters, the Women Airforce Service Pilots. At the time, there was very little out there about these ladies. The process also led me to discover the women in WWII intelligence. In telling their stories, I accomplished what I set out to do: to shine a light on these unsung heroines and their wartime contributions.

Besides the focus on trailblazing women, I learned that I liked to build stories based on little-known slices of history. Those books helped me to understand who I am as a writer. And before I'd even completed the second one, I had been bitten by that writer's workshop bug. In my own genealogical backyard, I discovered inspiring women and historical nuggets to mine. I couldn't wait to start digging.