

Book Fair Author Spotlight On...



John Wilson

I Am Canada: Shot at Dawn

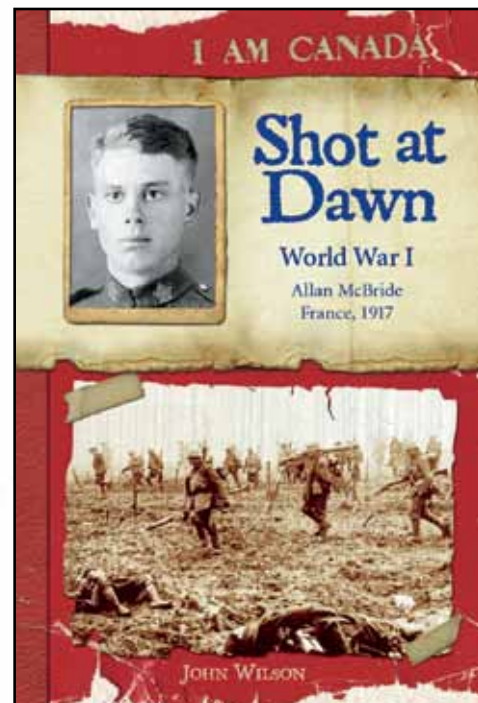
Q What inspires you to write?

A I love telling stories, even if I'm the only one listening. When I was ten or eleven years old in the early 1960s in Scotland, my Dad used to tell me stories about the life he had led in India thirty years before. The stories were from a different world where he had hunted tigers from the backs of elephants, chased wild boars armed only with a lance and stalked crocodiles by the Ganges River. I thought these were the coolest stories I had ever heard and I used to lie awake nights imagining the life he talked about and creating adventures based on what he had told me. Even though I never wrote any of my imaginings down, that's when I became an author. All I do now is find a piece of history that intrigues me, imagine an adventure happening around it, and write that adventure down.

Q What advice do you have for young writers?

A Three things:

1. Don't let anyone tell you writing is difficult. You know enough words and how to put them together, the rest is up to your imagination and practice.
2. Be different. Don't write the same story that someone else wrote last year. Find a new angle, a quirky character, an unusual way of saying things. Make a story yours.
3. Don't give up.



Q What was your favourite book when you were growing up?

A When I was really little, I loved Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* books (I still do). A little older and I devoured Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* books and W.E. Johns' science fiction stories. Then it was on to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. My favourite book is any book that takes me to a different place, whether it's Mr. MacGregor's garden or Narnia.

Q What do you like to do when you're not writing?

A Travelling round the country and going into schools to talk to kids about my books and the stories behind them. I also love reading, hiking and watching old movies. Of course, this isn't a fair question because I'm writing all the time. If I'm not sitting at my computer, I'm making up stories in my head. Is this normal?

Q What has been the biggest achievement of your career so far?

A One morning, after a presentation at a high school in Toronto, a grade 10 boy came up to me and told me he hadn't read a book since he was nine or ten years old, but that he had picked up and read one of mine. He said, "I didn't know a book could be that interesting. I'm going to try another one." I write all of my books for him.

Q Why did you choose to write a story about the effect of battle on a soldier and the importance of understanding what might lead him to see desertion as his only option?

A Several years ago, I visited the War Museum in Ypres, Belgium. At the time they had an exhibition which consisted of over 300 brown envelopes pinned to a wall. Each envelope had a name printed on it: the name of a British or

Commonwealth soldier shot by his own side during World War I. The names included 25 Canadians and the majority were shot for desertion, running away from a battle. The significance of the envelopes was that a brown, government-issued envelope was often pinned to the soldier's chest to give the firing squad something to aim at.

Most of these men were little more than boys who, today, would be treated for stress-induced trauma instead of being executed. I was moved by the exhibit and realized it was an aspect of World War I that was not covered in books. A soldier's choice in war is not simply between bravery and cowardice. Sometimes, when they can take no more, a soldier's body and mind take over and try to save him the only way they can, by getting him out of danger. It's a sensible response, and remember, the vast majority of these young men weren't career soldiers; they were civilians who had volunteered or been conscripted.

