

"She's not gentle," says Goliger. "But fair. Serious, and fair." Goliger, who co-won the Journey Prize for a story she workshoped with Itani, still receives the occasional prodding phone call from her former teacher: "She'll say 'So, you must be finished your book, you must be well under way.' The conversation will spur me to redouble my efforts."

When working on her own books, Itani rises between 5 and 5:30 a.m. (by 4 when her grown children are home). She decided this morning that book promotion or no book promotion, she needed to write, so she rose early and polished off a short story she'd had hanging around, in draft form, for months – then mailed it off (she positively glows, reporting this). No wonder she has a reputation for being, as an *Ottawa Citizen* writer once described her, "efficient, fuss-free, and supremely sensible."

Itani may present as a nonsense-free zone, but her life has hardly been one for the faint of heart. She eloped at a young age, and has encouraged her own two children to do the same. "It's great fun," she says, eyes twinkling. She has lived in seven Canadian provinces, as well as in England, Cyprus, and Croatia. She raised her family primarily in Ottawa and maintains a home here, but travels frequently to Geneva, where her husband, an official with the International Committee of the Red Cross, is based. She relishes describing the various escape plans she devised while living in Croatia during the Bosnian War, one of which involved renting a car and driving due north across the Austrian border. In 1981 she moved with her young family to Germany, not knowing a word of the language at the time. "She's always packed a lot into life," says Anderson. "She's made the most of her time."

Unlike most writers – who wrestle endlessly with the fact that they *must* give into the instinct to write, despite the risk of



The maxim "write what you know" has never worked for Itani. "I've always gone after what I don't know," says the Ottawa writer. "I've always wanted to ride that edge of discovery."

She was soon living in Edmonton, where she enrolled in a writing class offered by W.O. Mitchell. And that was that. Itani – who was also earning a psychology degree and caring for two babies at the time – gave

a letter to her publisher, Itani wrote, "War flattens me. Some days I can hardly put pen to paper."

She immerses herself in it nonetheless. While in Geneva she was tentatively delv-

travelling by train with her mother and grandmother, the two mouthing silent conversations in the seats next to her; nor to remember that the vibration from the stomp of a foot on the floor could get the attention