



Hate Mail

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I have the unenviable distinction of being the only Canadian children's author who has been the target of hate crimes and death threats for the subjects about which I choose to write.

The first time I became the target of a 'hate crime' was before the term had even been coined. In the 1980s, I wrote freelance articles and book reviews for my local newspaper. I did a book review of Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. This was the very first Western book written about the Ukrainian famine, and this was before the fall of the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, there were still people who would openly admit their admiration of Stalin and knowledge of the Stalin-orchestrated famine that killed 10 million Ukrainians was nil.

My local newspaper devoted half a newspaper page to the review and included photographs from the book. After it was published, my father-in-law's medical office was defaced with swastikas. Someone kept on calling my in-laws' home, asking for me (our number was unlisted). Once, when I was there and answered the phone myself, the person read portions of my book review back to me and then yelled at me for my "lies" about Stalin. He then threatened to kill me. While the police

had ignored the swastikas, they did take note of the death threat and provided plain clothes police for myself and my family for the next few days. I contacted the newspaper, naively thinking they would consider what happened to me newsworthy, but they didn't. Instead, I was informed that I should stop writing reviews.

I took their advice and started writing books. In 1996, *Silver Threads* was published, and in 1998, *The Best Gifts*, then *The Hunger* in 1999.

A dozen years went by with no other hate incident and I put it out of my mind.

But also in the back of my mind was the story of the Ukrainian famine. It bothered me that most people in the western world had no awareness at all of one of the biggest genocides of the 20th century. What we don't remember, we are bound to repeat, and that is why I write about injustices that have been brushed under the carpet. *The Hunger*, my first novel partly set during the Armenian genocide, had been warmly received. I felt it was time to write about the Ukrainian famine.

The problem with a topic like this is the sheer magnitude of tragedy. People can get their heads around one death, but how can one