

Interview with writer Ruth Kozak



Ruth Kozak dressed as favourite author Jack Kerouac at a theme-party

I met Ruth Kozak at the Vancouver Greek Summer Fest, in July. We ran into each other at the bus stop, nodded politely and exchanged a comment about the weather – the mandatory icebreaker in Vancouver.

Before I knew it, she was telling me about her life in Greece, Alexander the Great, being a travel journalist and teaching ESL in rich Athenian families. Since the bus ride took only so long, I asked her to grant me an interview for *The Westcoast Reader*.

Two weeks later, Ruth welcomed me in her cozy apartment in Vancouver Eastside. Ruth and Cheeky, her (much too) vocal parakeet. The place was full of enchanting mementos and souvenirs from her many travels.



Ruth and Cheeky

We spent a few delightful hours in which she talked about her love of writing, the hurdles of being a freelancer, her favourite authors and her upcoming historical novel, *Shadow of the Lion*, to which she dedicated twenty-two (yes, 22!) years of her life.

WestcoastReader: Let's be predictable and start at the beginning. When and how did you start writing?

Ruth Kozak: I started writing when I was about eight years old. At that time, World War II was going on, so I would entertain my classmates with little war propaganda plays in my grandparents' backyard, in Ontario.

Then, when I was twelve, my father took me on a train trip across the Prairies. He had just returned from overseas and he was coming to be a minister at a church here. The trip took three or four days and it was a great adventure for me. By the time we got to the Coast, I had started writing stories about Pioneers and Indians in little line-scribblers.

When I was sixteen, I wanted a typewriter really bad, and I thought I was going to get one for Christmas. But I got a wristwatch instead. I guess my parents wanted to make sure I got home on time. Then I got the typewriter for my birthday. I remember it was an Underwood. And so I spent all my teenage life in my bedroom, typing stories...

WCR: What made you choose historical fiction, of all genres?

RK: Because my father was a minister, I was fascinated with stories from the Holy Land, and that led me to Roman history. Then, in grade 11, I heard about Alexander the Great in history class. I became instantly fascinated with him, and I spent all my time researching his life at the library.

In my senior year of high-school, I almost failed all my classes because I was too busy writing a novel with an Alexander theme. That's how entranced I was with him! And now, many years later, I'm none the wiser.



Ruth at her graduation

WCR: What about later on, when school was over and reality hit? Did you start writing professionally?

RK: Right after high-school, I got a job as a copy-runner in *The Vancouver Sun* newsroom. It was basically an apprentice reporter job. I think they call them interns now. By that time, I had decided to become a crime reporter, I think mainly because of all the Mickey Spillane books I was reading.

However, the senior editor had other plans for me. He didn't want me covering court cases. I was a fragile young woman, so he expected me to cover tea parties and such, even though I had absolutely no interest in that sort of thing. There was a well-known woman journalist at the time, Simma Holt; she was working at the news desk and she wanted to train me, but the editor wouldn't hear of it. It was 1953, those were the times...

So, instead, I ended up in the news library. That was fine, because I was in charge of the biographies and crime files, which was much more exciting than frilly tea parties.



Ruth, in her days at *The Vancouver Sun*

WCR: Were you still doing creative writing in your own time?

RK: Yes, that same year I wrote a play called *The Street*. It was based on a real and very tragic story that had happened to my first love, my first serious boyfriend. He and his friends got talked into trying this drug that none of us knew anything about. It was heroin, but, back then (again, it was 1953), we knew nothing about addictions. Three of them ended up hooked on heroin for life. And they were all nice boys, especially my boyfriend – he was such a nice boy!

WCR: I had no idea these issues dated from the 50's.

RK: They did. However, people didn't talk about such things in those days, and I wasn't supposed to know anything about it. After all, I was a young woman and a preacher's daughter on top of that. But I wrote this play. My parents were censoring all my writing, so I felt obligated to turn it into a redemption story. And it wasn't really a redemption story... it was just very sad and tragic.

Many years later, in the 90's, a friend of mine, the artistic director at Theatre in the Raw - they were doing a lot of social commentary - helped me produce it. Around that time, the city was

trying to implement programs to control the drug situation, and I remember we had panel discussions with police and drug counselors.

WCR: What happened next?

RK: I gave up writing after I got married. We had to move away, so I also quit my job at *The Vancouver Sun*, right when they were moving into the new building on Granville. It was crushing to me, because I loved that job so much.

I followed my husband to Edmonton, became a housewife and started a family. We had two children. My husband wasn't taking my writing seriously, so the only time I could do it was at night. I remember feeling so frustrated that I almost threw my typewriter away. So I gave up writing and took up painting instead, to satisfy my creative urges.

WCR: What gave you the push to resume your writing?

RK: In 1970, I separated from my husband and I came back here, in Vancouver. I started going to night school, taking writing classes, and that got me going again. But it was hard, extremely hard. I had the children with me, but I was getting no child support. For a while, we had to live in a hippie commune. That was a wild time of everybody's life...

I couldn't get my old job back at *The Vancouver Sun*, because now they were asking for a Library Science degree, as they were just getting into computers. I didn't want a boring office job, so I ended up working as a supervisor in a daycare, because I loved children. I grew up in a family with great compassion and that helped me understand the tough situations in some of the families I worked with.

WCR: Where are your children now?

RK: My son lives in Burnaby. He's a well-known blues musician, Steve Kozak. He has a band, the WestCoast All-Stars, maybe you've heard of them. My daughter lives in salmon Arm and she is a painter. My only grandson is 26 years-old and lives in Santa Barbara – he's a surfer dude.

WCR: I understand you are also a prolific travel journalist. I did pay attention at the bus stop, you know.

RK: I started publishing travel articles in the 80's in *The Globe and Mail*. My kids were all grown up, so now I could travel freely. The first story I sent out sold well, so I thought, hmm, I could really do this thing. And I've been doing it since. I have also been teaching travel writing classes at the Vancouver School Board Continuing Education since 1994.

I wrote for *The Vancouver Guide*, *PlanetEye Traveler*, *Europe Up-Close*, *Senior Living*, among others, and now I have my own travel writing site, travelthruhistory.com. It's very exciting because I get submissions from all over the world, even from places like India or Azerbaijan.

WCR: How many countries have you visited?

RK: Let's see... Greece, Macedonia, England, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba, Turkey, Germany, Italy, France, Argentina, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Morocco and what was then Czechoslovakia. I was very lucky in this regard. Oh, I also won a trip to Malaysia through the BC Travel Writers' Association. That was so much fun!

My biggest regret is not having seen Egypt, but I'm still hoping. I want to take a jeep safari there and visit Alexandria. It's all under the sea now, but I would love to simply stand there and imagine it.



Ruth showing me a Minoan-style lamp

WCR: Could you tell us about a few exciting places that you feel are underrated? Places that are not so visible in travel guides and that are not constantly swarming with tourists.

RK: I have to admit that I am partial to Wales, because my family is of Welsh origin. I would say the small towns in Wales, like Caerphilly (which has a beautiful mediaeval castle), are definitely worth visiting. Also, I could recommend the Bodrum Castle in Turkey, dating from the Crusaders' time.

In Greece, I go to a lot of small villages that are not flooded with tourists. When I started going, Santorini was a lot less busy, but now it's a celebrity hot spot. There are many other places that are just as fabulous and not that crowded and expensive. How about the South Peloponnese, with the Venetian castles? And there are so many smaller Greek islands that are quite beautiful and relatively cheap.

WCR: How about here, in Vancouver? Any hidden gems you recommend?

RK: I think that, these days, nothing is truly hidden, since you can look everything up on the Internet. But there are places that deserve more attention than they get. In my travel writing classes, I often give my students this assignment: **"be a tourist in your home town"**. Too many people don't know what's going on in their very own neighbourhoods.

Some of my favourite Vancouver spots are: the Burnaby Heritage Museum, Finn's Slough - where Finnish fishermen lived in little boathouses, Strathcona - which was the Black area in the early days of Vancouver, Steveston -with the old cannery (now a museum), the boatworks and the bunkhouses... there are so many.

WCR: Do you find it hard to freelance? What advice would you give a freelancer?

RK: It is VERY hard. You have to have something else that pays the bills; you can't rely solely on freelancing. When I started out, I used to get 100\$ per story. Now you're lucky if you get 20\$. You have to be very dedicated, but you also have to know where to draw the line. At my travel writing classes, I always tell my students: "You can't be giving stuff for free all the time. That's why you're not getting paid, because you keep giving stuff away."



Ruth lecturing at the Surrey Museum

WCR: I'm sure our readers would like to know about your experience as an ESL teacher in Greece, back in the 80's.

RK: When I went to live in Athens, I had to figure out something to do for a living. I had worked with multicultural families in my daycare job here, and part of that was teaching ESL at pre-school levels. So I took my books with me, I got in touch with Greek families, and soon I started picking up lessons. I was teaching children through art classes, using bingo cards and a lot of conversation about everyday things. That approach is now common, but it was unconventional in those days, and many parents were surprised at it.

WCR: Were they curious about Canada, about your life here? I wonder how much they knew about it in those days before the Internet.

RK: Some of my pupils were. I remember this very bright little boy who just loved to read from National Geographic, so I would use it a lot in our lessons.

A funny incident comes to mind: you may not know, but, in the early 80's, brightly-coloured sweat pants and tops were very much in style here. I had brought one with me to Greece, a neon-yellow sweat suit, and I wore it to one of my ESL lessons. The pupil, a little girl, started shouting at her mother: "Mommy, Mommy, Ruth's wearing her pajamas!"

WCR: I'd probably say the same even now, but you can't fight fashion trends. Did you also teach in a language school?

RK: I didn't want to work in a school. I preferred private lessons, because they gave me a chance to go into people's homes and see how they really lived. They also helped me get to know Athens very well, because I was running around all day long.

I met some very interesting people. At one point, I was giving ESL lessons to a blind man who was a ship chandler. He had gone blind at the age of ten and still retained a memory of sight. He was very rich, had a yacht and lived in a posh area of Athens. I was also translating brochures for him when he needed to buy supplies, and so I learned a lot of new things myself.

WCR: Let's go back to literature for a bit. Who were your main literary influences?

RK: I started out with Hemingway and Jack Kerouac, then Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams. They were my main writing heroes, but there were many others I liked, of course. I remember that when my play, *The Street*, first came out, some people compared my style to that of Tennessee Williams. I was thrilled and very flattered; it was a huge compliment.

When it comes to historical fiction, I would say that Mary Renault was my main influence. I was captivated with how she took all these cold historical facts and weaved them into such wonderful stories. At first, I had to be careful not to subconsciously copy her style; that's how much I admired her work.

WCR: It seems so hard to create a believable story just from historical facts. Especially when it comes to details of everyday life.

RK: It becomes easier once you get there. During my first trip to Crete, I was reading one of Mary Renault's books, *The Bull from the Sea*, about Theseus and the Minoans. I went to Knossos, I was looking around, and I was thinking: "Holy Mackerel, she's got it! It's just like it was!" Of course, most of it is now in ruins, but you can easily imagine how everything was.

I'm also going to museums all the time, to get a better look at everyday objects that they used in ancient times, things such as jewelry, tools, or utensils.



Close-up of Ruth's workstation

WCR: Do you watch any historical series or any period dramas on TV? And do you keep a critical eye when watching historical movies?

RK: I'm a big fan of the series *Rome*, I think it's outstanding. With each episode, I am amazed at the attention to detail in costumes and sets. At first, I wasn't sure about certain things, like the use of opium. You know, when Marc Antony gets dissipated... but then I thought, it was probably so, why not? These things were probably happening back then, just like they happen now. You just don't read about it in history books.

As for movies, I remember that, when the first *Alexander the Great* movie came out, the one with Richard Burton from the 50's, I was very irritated. I thought: "Get real!" It was really hokey and it had such phony sets. I hated it. I was looking forward to Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. I liked it and watched it several times, although I disagreed with a lot of the casting.

WCR: What about the 1963 *Cleopatra*, with Liz Taylor?

RK: What can I say? It's a classic now. It has that entertaining and colourful quality, so you can take it for what it is. As long as you don't take it for historical fact, because that it is not.

WCR: So what would you say is your biggest pet peeve when it comes to historical fiction?

RK: Sloppy research is my biggest pet peeve. I don't mind switching facts and dates, resurrecting the dead or leaving out certain historical figures - you are writing fiction, after all. But you need to be careful and re-create the feeling of the era as accurately as possible. If you can't travel to the actual place, get in touch with people who do or spend more time in the library.

To give an example: one of my friends and mentors, Scott Oden, is a critically-acclaimed historical novelist. He wrote *Men of Bronze* and *The Lion of Cairo*. He lives in rural Alabama. The man has never traveled to Greece! I helped him with his research when I was there, I sent him photos and wrote him letters. What I mean is that, if you truly care, you find ways to get it done; you don't compromise on your research.

WCR: Time to talk about your book. Or, better said, books, because I know there is another novel you plan to publish.

RK: In 1979, I went to Greece for the first time, and I felt like I had been there before, I had all these déjà vu feelings. I also went to England and visited Stonehenge. As I stood in the circle, I was hearing the voice of this girl, Alwyn, telling me her story. It was as though I was channeling her, as outlandish as that sounds.

So I started a novel called *Dragons in the Sky*, about a young Celtic girl, acolyte of the Druids, who witnesses a murder and gets kidnapped and taken to Greece. Parts of it were in bardic verse, because bards told the stories back then. I am currently reworking this book, because, yes, I do want to publish it. I have done readings at my writing workshops, and the feedback was very good.



Ruth Kozak at her work station

WCR: And now you have just finished your main project, *Shadow of the Lion*, about Alexander the Great.

RK: To be precise, the action of the novel takes place at the time of Alexander's death. It actually deals with the aftershocks of his death: who will get to rule, and at what cost? It's about how corruption, political intrigue and power struggles lead to the fall of his empire.

WCR: Your all-time favourite historical figure, and you start off by killing him. I'm already intrigued.

RK: Oh, his spirit is very much alive in the book! You get to see him through the eyes of all those who knew him: his family, his generals, his lovers and his enemies. Alexander never truly died. More than two thousand years later, here I am, talking to you about him.

WCR: How long did it take you to finish it?

RK: I worked on this book for twenty-two years. Yes, twenty-two, since 1990... It's my life's work. When I finished it, I couldn't believe it. I even had a wrap party at a Greek restaurant here.

It was hard when I began the editing process and I had to start cutting. You get attached to your work. But now it's all done, and I'm hoping to have it published soon. That is now up to the editors, but I am also prepared to self-publish, if need be. I don't feel like I have five-ten years to wait to see it in print.

WCR: We are looking forward to seeing it published as well, and I have no doubt it will receive plenty of interest. Thank you for this wonderful conversation, Mrs. Kozak.