Karen Connelly Gypsy Poet

BY CHRIS TENOVE

She loves her freedom, but became so absorbed in her last work she locked herself away for nine years

ON A CRISP November afternoon, 36-year-old author Karen Connelly stands on a bluff overlooking the marshes of Weaselhead park in Calgary. The sun is about to tuck itself behind the Rockies. In the immense sky, puffs of cumulus glow with the colours of pink neon and campfire embers.

This is the landscape Connelly fled from almost two decades ago, when she tried to escape what she calls her "hereditary tendency towards disaster." She became a gypsy poet, wandering the globe. Everywhere she travelled she collected exotic images and torrid love affairs, both of which appear in her books. At 24 she became one of the youngest winners of the Governor General's Literary Awards. Critics

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hailed her as one of Canada's most promising writers.

Then, in 1996, she travelled to Burma, a nation ruled by military dictators. An obsession took hold of her there. She began a novel about a Burmese political prisoner. To write it, she found she had to lock herself in with the main character. She had to feel the walls around her, the skittering touch of cockroaches, the hunger, the constant fear of abuse by jailers. And that's what she did: For nine long years she imagined she was trapped in a brick jail cell.

"I cried every day for the first four years that I worked on that book," Connelly tells me as she stares towards the mountains. She has a tousled, elfish haircut, a dimpled smile and dark, expressive eyes. Her usual expression is animated and faintly seductive—but now, lost in reverie, her face is blank.

"There were times when I thought I would never be free of it," she says.

Why did she do it? Why would a poet who craves freedom spend most of a decade in self-imposed imprisonment?

CONNELLY grew up near Weaselhead park, in a blue-collar household with an alcoholic father and raucous siblings—a home of loud voices, broken dishes and unresolved arguments. Tracy, the eldest of the five children, was the first to escape. Karen, the middle child, would get letters from her sister from Vancouver. "She was getting into trouble, into drugs," she says. "Even as a child, I understood there was some damage in her that caused her to have a very unstable, unsettled life." At a young age, Karen became convinced that childhood was a kind of prison.

When Karen was 16, Tracy overdosed on antidepressants. Karen didn't talk much about the suicide. Instead, she devoted herself to poetry.

Blake Brooker, a director with Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit theatre troupe, remembers the first time he met Connelly. It was at the back of a local nightclub where on Sunday nights a small group would gather at candlelit tables to listen to poetry. One night a young woman appeared. "She had dark hair and flashing eyes and a face as bright as a penny," Brooker says. Something else he noticed: "Karen was always moved by the oppressed. When she learned about some kind of injustice, it was like a fish hook in her that she couldn't get out."

In Grade 12 Karen went as an exchange student to a village in Thailand. She learned Thai—one of six languages she now speaks—and scribbled beautiful, insightful passages into her journals. Her memoir of those times, published five years later as *Touch the Dragon*, is possibly the only teenager's diary to win the Governor General's Award for Nonfiction.

In Thailand, Connelly escaped not just her childhood but also tasted freedom—and she wanted more. After Thailand she found temporary homes in places such as a Spanish castle, a seedy Arab quarter in France and a

stone cottage on a Greek island. "I was always moving and always falling in and out of love," she says. "I came back to Canada from time to time, but my heart was elsewhere. I did not want my heart to be here."

LATE 1996 found her in Burma, near a Buddhist temple, watching student protesters chant antigovernment slogans on a darkened side street in Rangoon, the capital. Despite their brave shouts, Connelly could see they were ready to run.

In Burma, she had quickly discovered that the Burmese people were under constant surveillance. Military intelligence agents stood watch outside the homes of suspected government critics. Police informants lurked in tea shops and hotel lobbies. And the country's elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was under house arrest.

Burma has been under military rule since 1962. The generals changed the country's name to Myanmar, but many people refuse to honour the name change. In 1988 the Burmese came close to winning their freedom. University students led a peaceful uprising, and for a few giddy weeks the regime tottered. But then a new gang of generals seized power, ordering the military and police to smash all opposition. An estimated 3,000 people were killed, and thousands imprisoned. So Connelly could understand the protesters' anxiety that day in 1996.

From nearby came a rumble of army trucks and the clatter of boots as soldiers jumped down onto the road. The crowd paused a moment, silent and pulsing with adrenaline, then fled into narrow lanes. Powerful headlights lit up the streets, silhouetting ranks of armed men. Marching in front was a commander with his truncheon.

Connelly was paralyzed by a mixture of fear and curiosity. *Would they attack a foreigner?*

From the shadows a voice called: "Miss, perhaps you should not remain in the road. We fear they will hurt you." The speaker was a young Buddhist monk in burgundy robes. He hustled Connelly into the temple compound and up to an open window that looked out over the street.

The soldiers were directly below her. There was only one civilian left, a man who seemed confused about which way to run. The commander shouted, and the man stopped, shrinking in fear. Connelly saw the commander raise his truncheon and swing. The blow sounded like a heavy axe thudding into damp wood, and the beating

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continued until, finally, the commander let his victim stagger away.

Back at her guest house, Connelly realized that the monk had wanted her to see the attack. Like many other Burmese she met, he wished her to carry a message to the outside world.

Connelly made two more research trips to Burma before the military government refused her entry request. After she was banned, she trekked to the jungle outposts of rebels fighting the Burmese army. On one of these missions she contracted malaria and—being Karen Connelly—fell in love with one of the revolutionaries.

Finally, during the next year-and-a-half of research, she began to write *The Lizard Cage*. The novel would tell the story of Teza, a Burmese student who becomes a famous songwriter during the 1988 uprising. His lyrics alarm the military junta, so they arrest him. The novel opens with Teza in his seventh year of solitary imprisonment in a tiny brick cell.

CONNELLY mailed the first draft chapters of *The Lizard Cage* to the Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre in British Columbia, where her youngest brother, David, who had been in trouble with the law since adolescence, was serving a three-year sentence for robbery. One of Connelly's early poems, "This Brighter Prison," describes how her 16-year-old brother outran the police officers who came to arrest him at their mother's house.

"She glorified it a little bit and made me sound crazier than I really was," says David, who, now 31, lives on a farm near Abbotsford, B.C.

If you ask David about his cell, he vividly recalls the painted brick walls, the night light that never went out and the barred window. The outside world seemed like a half-remembered paradise. To maintain contact, he wrote countless letters to priests, artists, friends and family members.

Connelly remembers getting these letters from her brother, written on pages torn out of notebooks. David wrote about the boring routines, the profound frustrations and the hierarchies and power struggles of prison life. He also wrote about the things the mind does to survive when you are locked up.

This became Connelly's preoccupation in writing *The Lizard Cage*: How does an intelligent, creative person cope with imprisonment? Is it possible to find escape within yourself?

T*HE LIZARD CAGE* was published in September 2005 to incandescent reviews. Publishers from New Zealand to the Netherlands bought rights to the book. An American publishing house paid six figures, an unusually lucrative deal for a Canadian novel.

At the same time her book was published, Connelly's personal life took a dramatic turn. She put her profile on Lavalife, an online dating service. Robert Chang, a Toronto architect, soon contacted her by email. The couple married last year.

Connelly says she is happy to be married, happy to have made a home for herself in Toronto and ecstatic to be free of her novel.

So why did she do it?

As Connelly sits on a bench overlooking Weaselhead park, I ask her that question. Why did she force her imagination into a jail cell for nine years? Was it because she saw a whole nation turned into a prison, where an innocent man could be bludgeoned before her eyes? Was it her family connection to prisons—an uncle in jail, a sister who worked as a prison guard, a brother who mailed her letters from his cell? Or maybe her childhood had left a wound that caused her to flee home and then punish herself for her own escape?

Connelly admits there is some truth to these suggestions. But, to her, it simply felt as if Teza's story caught hold of her and wouldn't let go.

Then, as she watches the marshes fade from gold to navy in the dusk, she tells a story from her childhood.

For years, she says, she explored these parklands with friends or her sister, Tracy, but as she got older her journeys were often alone. One afternoon she heard a single frog, croaking. "Of course," she says, "it's nearly impossible to find a lone frog. They stop singing as soon as you get close."

Still, she refused to give up. She waded through the marshes and stalked quietly among the tall swamp grass. For long minutes the frog would go silent, but Connelly was patient.

At last she found it. She watched the frog's throat expand until the skin was nearly translucent, then contract again. She memorized the frog's pebbly brown back, the peaty scent of the marshes and the delicious warmth of a prairie afternoon.

Back home, hunched over her notebook, she wrote and wrote until she had described that moment perfectly: She wanted to be sure that anyone who read that page would hear the frog singing its freedom.

MAY THE HORSE BE WITH YOU

My son-in-law, Matt, has a great-looking Darth Vader mask. One year at Halloween a friend asked if he could borrow it. Matt agreed, and on Halloween night his friend came by to pick it up. Matt was surprised that he was dressed in his usual attire of jeans and a flannel shirt, with the addition of cowboy boots and a black cowboy hat.

"Where's your costume?" Matt asked.

"This is it," his friend replied.

"Well, what are you going as?"

"Darth Brooks."

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