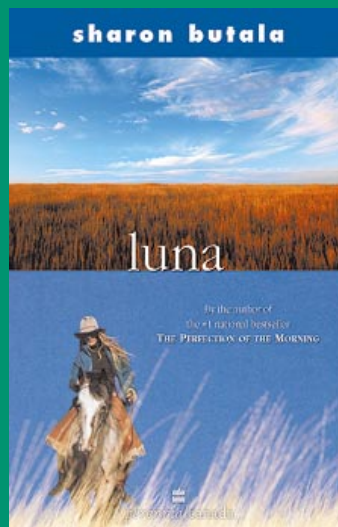


Luna

SHARON BUTALA



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A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

I began to write, after an abortive start at nine, when I was about thirty-eight and had come here to the ranch to live. I discovered that I couldn't paint anymore, and I needed to fill my time and writing presented itself. I discovered pretty quickly that I could write, and wanting to get better and believing I could, I set out to do that. At first I wrote out of excitement and curiosity and then I began to write out of the desire to develop my craft enough to be able to say the things I wanted to say. And then to say them more and more compellingly—which continues to be my quest.

My first book was published when I was forty-four, pretty late in the game. And for a long time I was angry about the twenty years I felt I'd wasted while others were learning to write, until one day I realized that while others were struggling with craft, I was living my life. Now I had a wealth of experience. As a mature woman, I found that basic craft was not so hard to learn.

I understood that a writer needs her own writerly world and I found very quickly that mine would be the agricultural people of southwest Saskatchewan where I had come to live at thirty-six and which was entirely new to me. Only Wallace Stegner had written about this place and the people and he had stopped in 1952, having written about it in its infancy, and at that, from a male point of view. That left the way open for me to reinterpret what I saw, and to do so from a woman's point of view. We had rather different opinions about this place, it turned out, although I doubt he knew it. I'm pretty sure he never read one of my books. (He died at eighty-four in 1993.) The irony is that now we are occasionally reviewed together.

My book The Perfection of the Morning came as a complete surprise to me. I had never planned to write non-fiction, and to write about nature was never in my plans, either. That it should be (so far) the most successful of my books astonishes me. All I ever wanted to be was a novelist. I began writing short stories because I didn't know how to write a novel, and once I knew how, I tried, not successfully, to give up writing short stories. Now I find myself back at it again, working on my third collection. As I write this, I have published eleven books. Not bad for a painter!

*Although one of my novels, *The Gates of the Sun*, is written from the male point of view, I am most interested in women and their lives, which I find to be most often constricted and warped in the traditional world by male expectations and by the “don’t rock the boat” attitude of the dominant society. It’s clear to me, anyway, that women suffer greatly in this traditional life and that much of that suffering is unnecessary and cruel. Hence, I write about women struggling to make sense of their own lives in the face of incomprehension, whether willful or not, of both the society and their families. I prefer to write about so-called ordinary women, not those with unusual gifts, or luck, or both, and who thus rise to the top in places usually run by men. My women would tend to turn away from such a prospect, in favor of a self-defined way. When they do find themselves, they are mavericks, I think. *Iris*, in *The Garden of Eden*, is the best example of this so far.*

I am very interested also in the spiritual world and in the human craving for some unexplained and undefined thing, which turns out to be a need to connect with Spirit. I write about this, also. One of the ways to Spirit is through solitude, and alienation from the surrounding society tends to lead to solitude. Having spent a lot of my life as an outsider, I like to think—at sixty I’ve given up trying to belong—that I have a good vantage point to view the culture in which I live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Butala was born in 1940, in an outpost hospital, “an old house that I think was run by the Red Cross where Mom would come down to have her babies,” in Nipawan, northern Saskatchewan. She is the second oldest in a family of five daughters. At the time, her father had a sawmill located roughly west of where Squaw Rapids is today.

Growing up with a Catholic French Canadian, French-speaking father and an Anglican Irish-Scots, English-speaking mother left Sharon Butala with a life-long sense of alienation and with the feeling of not quite belonging to either culture. Raised as a Catholic, Sharon Butala began school in a “forbidding, extremely old-fashioned convent in St. Louis, Saskatchewan. Everybody in town except our family spoke French at home and when we lived in that vil-

lage we were surrounded by our French family for the only time in our lives. I still have a ‘French’ family and an ‘English’ family—though there isn’t a drop of English blood in our veins.”

Her mother passed on her love of books to her children:

*My love of books and my sense of “good” books as opposed to “trash” was developed in me by my mother, who loved books herself and knew all the children’s classics of her era and insisted we read them. So I started out reading good books and remember one year when we were terribly poor (I hadn’t started school yet), when my older sister and I got for Christmas together, one copy of R.L. Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verse*. So even though I had a somewhat conflicted relationship with my mother, I owe my literary life to her, I believe...*

After spending the first four years of her life in the bush, Sharon Butala’s family lived in a series of small prairie towns:

We were poor—that has affected me all my life in ways I don’t think I can ever measure—and though it was unpleasant, heartbreaking sometimes, I am not sorry. It has given me a perspective I don’t intend to forget.

In 1947, two of her sisters were stricken with polio in an epidemic. One was severely handicapped at the time, while the other sister developed post-polio syndrome in middle age. In 1953, when Butala was thirteen, she moved with her family to Saskatoon, where her father had a job as a mechanic. She worked and paid her own way through university, obtaining a B.A. in Art and a B. Ed. with a major in English from the University of Saskatchewan. Between her third and fourth year, she met and married her first husband. Their son, Sean Hoy, is an actor who currently lives in Saskatoon. From 1969 to 1972 she was a Special Educator at Princess Alexandra School in Saskatoon. From there she returned to university where she completed work for a post-graduate diploma in the Education of Exceptional Children and became a faculty member of the College of Education.

After the failure of her first fourteen-year marriage, and after beginning a career teaching at the University of Saskatchewan, she remarried and has lived for the past twenty-five years on a remote ranch near the Montana-Saskatchewan border. Here, using the vast, beautiful short grass prairie as her setting, and for her subject the lives of agricultural people—among whom she feels fated to live—she became a writer.

I began writing about a year into this marriage as a response to my sense of alienation from the society around me and to loneliness and the need to exercise my brain. I had thought I would return to painting, since my first degree was in art, but I found I couldn't. So I began to write instead... As soon as I started writing here on the ranch I really liked it and I soon discovered I was good at it. Early on I was "discovered" by the late Caroline Heath, editor, critic, and founder of Fifth House Publishers, and she encouraged and helped me very much. Her belief in me helped me to believe in myself when I ran into obstacles. She said she would publish my first novel before it was even finished. It was only in first draft stage and unfinished when she saw it—and she hadn't yet started her publishing company!

While Sharon Butala first began writing in 1978, she dates the beginning of her career to 1949 when she wrote her first unpublished novel, which was read solely by Butala and her mother.

All I remember about the genesis of this is that, when the idea occurred to me that I might do this, I was more excited than I can ever remember being up to that point. It was a purely creative moment, conceived as such by me, and something quite different from drawing paper dolls and creating wardrobes for them. This felt more pure and wonderful.

Her journey towards finding her voice as a writer was not an easy path. She described this journey in a *Globe and Mail* interview in 1988:

I wrote about fifty pages of the novel that everybody is writing these days, about urban life, single mothers... I realized that I had no idea how a novelist puts a novel together... I had to learn to write.

Sharon Butala took writing classes, including one taught by the Saskatchewan writer Lorna Crozier. The results of her hard work (she wrote a lot) were realized in short stories, many of them published in literary journals, including a story that was published in Oberon Press's 1983 collection, *Coming Attractions*. The Saskatchewan Writers Guild has also played a fundamental role in her development as a writer.

I often think that if it weren't for the Saskatchewan Writers Guild and its programs, I might never have succeeded as a writer. It's a wonderful organization. It doesn't lose sight of its goal, which is providing writers with support, education, professional development, and opportunities to meet successful writers. It provides a kind of place you can call home as a writer.

*Down here at the hay farm I don't socialize much. You don't get to be successful sitting around talking about writing. You've got to write. So I do, every day. But if you're an artist and you don't live in the city, it's hard to find like-minded people. In some ways, that's more important than anything else. (Taken from an interview with *Prairie Books Now* in the winter of 1995.)*

Country of the Heart, her first novel, was nominated for the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award in 1984 and a short story collection, *Queen of the Headaches*, was shortlisted for a Governor General's Award in 1986. A loosely linked trilogy of novels, *The Gates of the Sun*, *Luna*, and *The Fourth Archangel*, form an evocative and highly praised portrait of prairie life. Her most recent short story collection, *Fever*, won the 1992 Canadian Authors Award for Paperback Fiction and was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1991.

While writing *The Gates of the Sun*, which tells the story of the men who live and work on the prairies, Sharon Butala realized that the lives of the women of the prairies also

needed to be told. “It seemed to me that somebody had to speak for these women, somebody who had lived with them and could transmit the texture of their experience. And I felt I was in a position to do it.” The resulting story is *Luna*.

Her non-fiction work *The Perfection of the Morning* is the story of her own personal odyssey, an account complete with dreams and visions. This work, published in 1994, remained on bestseller lists for over a year and won the Saskatchewan Non-Fiction Award and the Spirit of Saskatchewan Award in 1994. It was also nominated for a Governor General’s Award.

It was followed by another bestseller, *Coyote’s Morning Cry*. In 1998, Sharon Butala won the Marian Engel Award for a woman writer in mid-career. *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields*, recently published by HarperFlamingo Canada, is a companion volume to *The Perfection of the Morning*. *The Perfection of the Morning* and *Wild Stone Heart*, Sharon Butala’s two memoirs, offer detailed accounts of the people, places, and ideas that have shaped her work.

In 1996, she and her husband turned their ranch over to The Nature Conservancy of Canada to establish The Old Man On His Back Prairie and Heritage Preserve. The Butala family began the ranch in 1913. She now has a grandson, and continues to pursue in both fiction and non-fiction the possibly unanswerable question: What is nature? She lives in Eastend, Saskatchewan, with her husband, Peter.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON BUTALA

Q. When did you decide to write *Wild Stone Heart*? And what inspired you?

A. *I didn’t actually know what the book was going to be about. I had all these chaotic but, I thought, interesting notions and facts swirling around in my head for a couple of years, I think. Finally it began to come together—not without a lot of mistakes and false starts. I had to think how to make a book out of it all, to find a narrative thread, and that was hard. Of*

course, it was the field itself and my experiences there that inspired me.

Q. In the section called “The Gift” you wrote that as you began writing, your tiredness left you. What role does the act of writing play in your life?

A. *Writing is ninety-nine percent of my life. I’ve always said that I felt I had to choose: would it be life or would it be writing? And I chose writing. But I also feel that to write the book was an obligation, a duty, that I owed to the people of the field, and so when I got down to business, with the proper attitude toward the work, the tiredness went away.*

Q. Which writers have had an impact on your work?

A. *I think I’ve been impacted as a writer by all the writers I’ve ever read: both what to do and what not to do; both how I dreamed of sounding, and what I wanted to avoid ever sounding like. Nowadays I am picky about my fiction reading. I no longer have time to read authors who don’t have anything to say to me that I don’t already know. That cuts out a lot. I wish now to write not only beautifully, but with wisdom. I think of writers like Toni Morrison, Nadine Gordimer, David Malouf, Saul Bellow, and I think it is impossible for me to achieve, but nonetheless, I aim for their level of mastery. Alice Munro is my favourite writer of short stories.*

Q. What are the major events that have influenced and continue to influence your work?

A. *I suspect divorce is at the head of the list—or divorce while the mother of a young child. Being born and raised into what was largely wilderness is another. Being poor, having a handicapped sister, moving into southwest Saskatchewan and an agricultural world when I was thirty-six. Managing to attend university when it was expected none of us would because that was only for people who had more money than we did. And then discovering how much I loved it, and how knowledge was perhaps what the world was made of.*

Q. Many of your novels delve into male-female relationships, as well as the roles of women. Do you remember what first drew you to this subject? Or is it just a natural part of living in the twentieth century?

A. I was drawn to writing about the male-female relationship out of being a relatively well educated, professional woman of the twentieth century, who also had experience as a single parent and as a divorcee. My life experience showed me a lot about this and because I felt so much of what happens to women even now, even here, is so unfair and sometimes downright cruel that I wanted to talk about it. But I was part of the wave of feminism that started with Betty Friedan's book, although I didn't become active until the late sixties and early seventies. I am not active in the same sense out here in the country.

Q. You divide the book into three sections: wild, stone and heart. These three sections also comprise the title. Where did this idea come from?

A. Actually, it was Phyllis Bruce, my wonderful editor, who came up with the idea and I thought it was a good one. Looking the sections over, I saw those headings made sense, so I used them. I don't know why she wanted to do that, but I suppose it is because the book needed more shape.

Q. *Wild Stone Heart* touches upon themes that run through all your work. How do you view this book in relation to the others that you have written?

*A. Well, it goes best with *The Perfection of the Morning*, of course, in terms of its interest in what nature might be. It has a good deal less to do with feminist issues or issues of personal alienation. On the other hand, it has a lot to do with spiritual development and I've tried always to make that my subject to some degree.*

Q. You speak of many perspectives of the land, including the European notion that land is a commodity and the Native conception that the land is valuable and sacred in and of itself. What do you think will result from our non-Native understanding and treatment of the land?

A. I think if we don't keep fighting the big corporations about pollution and the individualistic idea that if they own the land they can do anything they want with it, we will destroy what's left of the wild. The whole book is a tribute to the wild and our ineluctable need for it as human beings.

Q. You speak of the field in *Wild Stone Heart* as a sacred space and a place that both guided and taught you about the great questions of life. Do you have insight into what role that field will now play in your life?

A. Yes, but I can't really talk about it. I go there less often for the time being, but my connection is no less powerful for all that. I've done the work that I believed needed doing.

LUNA



Luna tells the story of a community of women who work and live in Eastend, Saskatchewan. They are ranchers' and farmers' wives and most of them are as fully capable of telling their own story as they are of running a ranch or farm. Making a living out on the ranchland of southwest Saskatchewan is hard work and it always has been. *Luna* is the multi-generational story of the women who live and work in this harsh environment.

Selena is a rancher's wife. A strong woman, she works hard day and night helping her husband on the ranch and raising their children. Working with her husband, Kent, for most of her life, her jobs are slowly being taken over by her grown sons. Pushed back indoors, but fearful of tipping the delicate balance of emotional, environmental, and economic territory, Selena restrains herself from questioning too much about her way of life and her role within it.

Diane, Selena's sister, despairs over her life as mother and wife. Rejecting ranch life, she moves with her children to Saskatoon. Selena is appalled by her sister's actions and feels this rejection quite acutely.

Date-raped by her boyfriend, Selena's daughter Phoebe questions why neither her father nor her former boyfriend will believe her. Deciding to keep the resulting baby, Phoebe gives up on her dream of attending university. Kent, Phoebe's father, struggles to understand what his daughter is facing.

Rhea is the eighty-year-old matriarch and one of the pioneers of the community. She lives alone in the farmhouse that she has lived in for sixty years. Finally left with the freedom of solitude, she rests in her husband's armchair, a chair that is now her own. A wise and strong woman, she gives guidance to her niece Selena and great-niece Phoebe as they struggle to understand why Phoebe was raped and why no one will believe her. And to comfort them she tells them a healing earth-mother creation myth.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) In an interview with *The Globe and Mail* in 1988, Sharon Butala states, "I didn't set out to write a feminist novel. I wanted to transmit the texture of the experience of these women, and it came out feminist. And that's okay, although it's the kind of feminism that most feminists reject vehemently." How is this observation realized within the novel?
- 2) In an interview with *Books in Canada*, Sharon Butala describes the role of Selena:
When I wrote Selena, I was trying to say, look, this woman is honourable. She's leading the life that women have led down through the centuries in cultures all over the world. She's leading it uncritically, and she shouldn't be uncritical. But I wanted to give her the respect that's due her for the way she's built a world. The women down south don't question their lives out loud every day, because if they did their world would collapse. And I don't blame them for that. That's the role of a writer, to look at society and be critical. And if those very same women have read Luna and liked it, then it's partly because I didn't hit too hard. I didn't say, you can't live like this.
What are the differing attitudes towards the role of women within *Luna*?
- 3) Do you agree with Butala when she says that the role of a writer is "to look at society and be critical"?
- 4) Upon losing her outdoor jobs to her sons, Selena begins to reflect on her circumstances. How does Selena's struggle between acting out a traditional role and realizing her own desires play out in *Luna*?
- 5) In an interview with the *Globe and Mail* in 1996, Sharon Butala contends that, "the myth of the West is very much a male myth. It's where men can be men and women can stay home and shut up. And so I'm trying very hard to write a more rounded picture." Is this idea brought to life in the lives of the female characters in *Luna*?