

## A detailed, child's-eye view

AMY REISWIG

The civilizing influence of children on a gold rush.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Frances Backhouse

As the year turns over and many of us look forward to keeping (or breaking) resolutions, I look eagerly forward to the new crop of books from Victoria's writing community—as strong and vibrant as arbutus in winter. What better way to inaugurate the new literary year than talking to Victoria's currently-crowned Butler Book Prize winner, Frances Backhouse?

Backhouse is a writer who knows a thing or two about winter, having grown up in Ontario and around Montreal and Calgary. She also spent several winter months in the north at Berton House Writers' Retreat in Dawson City, Yukon, while researching and writing *Children of the Klondike*, her fifth book. "I'd been to Dawson many times," she tells me, "but not in winter. Seeing the river freeze up was key and being able to walk the streets while writing. I thought I had done most of my research, but it turned out I was wrong."

Published by Whitecap Books in 2010, *Children of the Klondike* is the long-gestated sibling—following after 15 years—to *Women of the Klondike*, and has become an equally high achiever. *Women of the Klondike* was a finalist for the 1996 VanCity Book Prize and runner-

up for the 1996 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Nonfiction, and now *Children* has won Backhouse the 7th Annual City of Victoria Butler Book Prize.

"I was quite relaxed that evening because I didn't expect to win," she laughs over coffee in the heritage house she shares with fellow Butler-winner Mark Zuehlke. Their house was built in 1898, she tells me, at the height of the gold rush she chronicles. The ability to appreciate these kinds of details connecting people and places across time is part of what makes Backhouse such a compelling writer and deserving of the award win.

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The Klondike story, like any historical event, is not one story. "History often gets told through one lens," she explains, "but there are so many ways to tell the same story." Even within the perhaps small focus of children, you have children born in the Klondike, those brought with their parents, those who snuck off and

went alone or who were sent for once the family claim was established. "The more ways you have to tell the story, the richer the story. It helps broaden our perspective."

Though the individual stories of Klondike children might at first seem like narrowly-defined vignettes, Backhouse does provide a broad historical view through her careful selection. For example, the book's first tale is that of Graphie Grace Carmack, born on January 11, 1893, in Fort Selkirk, daughter of one of the men whose discovery started the gold rush. It's an apt opening partly because it relates to the beginning of the stampede, but also because it addresses the issue of whose history is being told. Graphie's mother was a Tagish woman with ancestry connected to both the Tlingit and Tahltan peoples and, as Backhouse writes, Graphie's lineage "extended back ten thousand years or more."

Her care to include the First Nations perspective, specifically that of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and their displacement, reminds us of the gold rush's broader historical and cultural context. Backhouse describes the loss of traditional lands and how "much of that had been overrun by non-Natives who were rapidly tearing up the creeks, cutting down the forests, and killing off the wildlife"—simple yet devastating and important facts lost in the romance of most Klondike histories.

Revealing often lost or overlooked facts is Backhouse's specialty. Drawing heavily on newspapers, letters and unpublished journals and memoirs, Backhouse recounts touching scenes of how the presence of children changed their parents' lives, but also how they were a driving force in Klondike society's development in general. She shows how the area's growing number of children spurred improvements in housing, nutrition, education and medical care as well as changes in organized entertainment such as sports, theatre and even newspaper content.

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*Women of the Klondike*

## Children of the KLONDIKE



FRANCES BACKHOUSE

foreword by Ted Harrison

Like a gold miner with his pans, she sifts and finds details that teach us not to underestimate the impact of society's smallest people.

"Everything was such big news," she says. "People knew they were taking part in an event that was capturing attention around the world" and therefore virtually every detail of life was recorded somewhere—they just needed someone with the vision and determination to find them and make them live. Backhouse thus presents exceptionally well-documented details of travel (for example, one seven-month-old was packed in a trunk like a pile of clothes during a week-long trip in temperatures of minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit), play (like tobogganing in baking pans) and more unfortunate

realities of growing up amid brawling, booze, brothels, even child prostitution. We see, through Backhouse's text and many photographs, children being born, playing, learning, working, travelling, being loved, abandoned, buried.

But Backhouse's children are meant to be not just seen, but heard, and she incorporates as much of the children's actual voices as possible. For example, a child's letter to his absent gold-fevered father: "*Now, do you think that your children are such dumb-founded, thick headed fools as to have you part from them again and spend another such a year as they did the one past....As we don't care for Dawson and are not anxious for you to spend \$2500 car-fare on us, you must prepare yourself to return for good. Your loving son. Lu.*"

The book is personal and written with a light touch that respects the sweetness and suffering of these long-gone little ones and everything their experiences have to tell us. Not only does Backhouse illuminate a fresh aspect of gold rush history, she builds breathing characters and genuine lives that remind us of, and initiate reflection on, our own.

So as you reflect on 2010 and your hopes for the new year, resolve to read more local writers like Backhouse who can take you places you wouldn't normally go and introduce you to people you'd never otherwise meet. And what does the award-winning, intrepid traveller, biologist, journalist and Chilkoot Trail-hiker Backhouse hope for in the new year? "Just to make it through my first year of grad school."



Amy Reiswig is an editor for the provincial government and therefore really loves reading and reviewing good writing. Her reviews and other non-fiction have appeared in the *Danforth Review*, *Quill & Quire*, *The Malahat Review* and *The Walrus*.