

## First Time Lucky

June 2012

Quill & Quire

By Cheri Hanson

More than a decade in the making, Anakana Schofield's debut novel finds a fitting home

Vancouver author Anakana Schofield is a study in contradictions. She claims to have spent the last 10 years "locked away" in a tiny apartment on the city's west side, painstakingly crafting her debut novel, *Malarky* (Biblioasis). Yet since emigrating from Dublin to Vancouver in 1998, Schofield has confronted her new home with the enthusiasm of an ethnographer – diving headlong into the local art and poetry scenes, and exploring the city's geography, its labour history, and, especially, the social-realist writing that flourished here in the 1960s and '70s. In the work of authors like D.M. Fraser, Betty Lambert, and Helen Potrebeko, Schofield found her cultural bearings, and further inspiration for documenting "extraordinary ordinary" lives, much like that of the Irish mother at the centre of her novel.

Released in April, *Malarky* is a darkly comic, fast-paced novel structured as a series of 20 episodes. The book plunges the reader almost claustrophobically into the story of Our Woman, the novel's primary narrator, who tackles grief, lust, infidelity, and madness while scrubbing the floors of her country farmhouse. "I wanted to be utterly relentless in how I went into this woman's life and her world," says Schofield, 41, sipping tea at a local deli. "I am a real passionate defender of people who live with dignity and desperation."

An accomplished critic and essayist who regularly contributes to the *London Review of Books*, *Geist*, the *Vancouver Sun*, *The Recorder* (an Irish journal edited by Colum McCann), and CBC Radio, Schofield says she became frustrated with her first, unpublished novel and began working on a sideline novella "for respite." That project evolved into two parallel narratives and, finally, the lean, 224-page manuscript published as *Malarky*, virtually without any editorial changes. "What you see is what we received," says Biblioasis publisher Dan Wells.

Prompted by author Annabel Lyon – who had published a limited-edition chapbook, *Saturday Night Function*, with Biblioasis in 2007 – Schofield initially sent the manuscript to John Metcalf, who serves as fiction editor for the small press based in Emeryville, Ontario. "I read the first two

pages and I thought, ‘This is a book we have to do,’” says Metcalf. “It was very well written, wildly funny, and strange.”

It was also one of just five or six “perfect” books Metcalf says he has encountered in his 30-year publishing career. (For his part, Wells says he is “certain that this book is one of the top handful of novels that will be published in Canada this year.”) Schofield’s agent, Marilyn Biderman, negotiated the contract before Metcalf performed minor nips and tucks on the manuscript, followed by a copy edit from writer Jean McKay. Schofield and her partner, Jeremy, a visual artist, even provided detailed input on the geometric cover, designed by Gordon Robertson.

The sense of collaboration and enthusiasm from Biblioasis has been thrillingly unexpected, says Schofield, who quickly realized that her work would be safe with Metcalf. “I just thought, ‘This man gets my book,’” she says. “I fought for 10 years to write this book this way.”

Of course, good intentions alone aren’t enough to break a first novel, especially one as challenging and multifaceted as *Malarky*. However, initial reviews have been strong, and the book appears to be on its way to becoming a word-of-mouth success.

Most notably, the novel was hand-picked for this summer’s Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program, a promotional coup for any emerging author. Titles selected for the program receive face-out display in Barnes & Noble stores across the U.S. and promotion on the retail chain’s digital platforms, including its popular Nook e-reader. Alumni of the program include *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold, and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel.

For Biblioasis, that enviable visibility comes with significant risk. Co-op fees for the program are just \$1,500, but to cover Barnes & Noble’s initial 4,500-copy order, the publisher pushed *Malarky*’s initial print run to 7,400 copies, its largest first printing to date.

To build on the attention, Biblioasis is also creating online and print ads for both the U.S. and Canadian markets, offering giveaways and sample chapters on social media sites such as Goodreads, and touring Schofield widely. By late April, the author had been booked for more than 18 events and festivals across North America.

Back in Vancouver, the *Malarky* launch party was an entertaining mashup that mirrored both Schofield’s personality and the diverse cultural worlds she inhabits. The event at People’s Co-op Bookstore included ukulele

songs, fiddle music performed by Schofield's 12-year-old son, Irish food prepared by her Japanese-Canadian mother-in-law, and some healthy pours of Jameson Irish Whiskey. An enthusiastic crowd mingled, ate, and listened to the petite Schofield read from her novel in an atmosphere she compares to London's Notting Hill Carnival.

It's an appropriate reference for the English-born author, who identifies as Irish-Canadian. Before making the "impulsive" decision to immigrate to Vancouver, Schofield says she had a wonderful and eclectic life in Dublin. She penned a one-woman play, worked as a documentary film researcher and producer, held drama workshops for children, completed a peace and reconciliation project in Northern Ireland, and even sold ice cream to theatre patrons and cleaned toilets in a youth hostel.

Writing has been the one constant throughout her peripatetic life. After moving to Vancouver, Schofield was mentored by author Lynn Coady as part of a creative writing certificate program at Simon Fraser University, and she has completed a residency at the Banff Centre, where she worked with novelist Caroline Adderson. "I did benefit here from what I think is an extraordinary system of mentorship," says Schofield, who has experienced little ego and hierarchy in Western Canadian literary communities. "I find it very progressive."

Schofield is equally idiosyncratic in her pastimes away from the page. She collaborates on art projects, organizes public action events, and regularly performs cartwheels and handsprings in the gymnastics studio – a childhood passion she credits with lending discipline to her writing. She also took up sledge hockey this winter after watching the sport during the 2010 Paralympic Games and meeting local competitors. "It was fantastic," says Schofield, flexing a bicep made strong by manoeuvring herself across the ice. "You get to go around like a demented reindeer."

As the cherry blossoms begin to fall, Schofield is gearing up for several months of touring and promotion. She has almost finished a footnote novel to *Malarky* based on a minor character named Beirut, but she's eager to write a Vancouver-based story. The city she now calls home has inspired her to embrace unconventional forms, and given her the courage to face *Malarky's* tougher moments. "Irish literature is still very patriarchal," says Schofield. "I think I was more intimidated there."