



# AQUA

GULF ISLANDS LIVING

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## The Show Must Go On!

*Live theatre on Salt Spring  
makes COVID-era shifts*

### HAMMER & NAIL

New Kate Braid memoir  
adds to built legacy

### CREATURE LOVE

Deborah Strong: art  
and compassion

### PEARLS OF WISDOM

Galiano's Jenny Brooklin  
shines while making music

ARTS | BOOKS | FOOD | CULTURE | COMMUNITY

# PENDER'S *Journeywoman*

POET, WRITER AND BUILDER  
KATE BRAID

By Cherie Thiessen

WHEN YOU PUT POETRY AND CARPENTRY TOGETHER, THE RESULTS CAN BE AMAZING. A person skilled in both knows how to weigh words as carefully as driving nails, construct poems and non-fiction as precisely as a builder, frame beautiful structures that can take on the world and do it all without wasting a single word or piece of wood. On Pender Island, that someone is Kate Braid.

In 1976, Braid was 30 years old and halfway through work on a master of arts degree at Simon Fraser University when she decided she needed a break. She was looking around for an inexpensive sanctuary where she could get away from it all and regroup when a friend told her about a place she had been renting on Pender Island.

"So I came over to check it out but I had no intention of staying. I had never been to the island, so it was just a jaunt. She showed me a cabin way out in the bush with a view of the water looking south toward Victoria, and I stepped out unto the deck, overlooking that incredible view and I said, 'I'll take it.' The rent was \$400 per year, which even in 1976 was crazy. It had no running water or heat but it did have electricity. So I wound up buying a woodstove and putting it together and people on the island helped. Eventually my husband and I bought a place here."

But how does a woman halfway through her masters degree suddenly veer into construction? What did it take for her to pick up her hammer and nails and head out there in the late 1970s to join the "boys" on union and non-union jobs on high-rises, bridges, houses and apartments? Turns out to be the simplest reason in the world.

"I was running out of money. I had planned to stay for one term and then go back to school, but I loved Pender so much that I stayed a year. There weren't any tradi-



PHOTO COURTESY KATE BRAID

Above: Photo of Kate Braid taken by Dan Scott used on the cover of her memoir *Journeywoman: Swinging a Hammer in a Man's World*. Above right: Braid at a recent literary reading.



tionally female jobs at the time: waitressing, home care, receptionist. So I was at a party and I said to the guys, 'I am going to have to leave the island because I can't find work,' and one of the guys said, 'Why don't you take my job? I just quit as a carpenter,' and I looked at him like he was insane because everyone knows girls can't do construction. I said 'I haven't built anything,' and he said, 'That's easy. Lie.'"

So she did. She also borrowed a toolbox and a hammer.

"I thought, well, even if I only last a week, I'm going to make some money. I told the contractor that I had built houses up north, but it turned out this guy was from the north. He hired me, but as a labourer not as a carpenter. He told me later he knew I had lied, but the guys had been slowing down on the job and he thought with a girl hanging around they might want to impress her."

She tells me about that first day on the job when a worker on the roof told her to hand him up a crescent wrench and she asked, "What's a crescent wrench?" He drew a picture on a block of wood and threw it down to her.

As for why she stayed in construction so long, that answer was simple too. She loved it!

"I worked really hard but I got stronger and I loved everything about it. At the end of the day I could see the results of what I had done. When that job finished I was offered another on the island, so I got to stay here for another year."

In 1978 she started her pre-apprentice course and was soon so busy and exhausted every night that her nightly journal entries got shorter and shorter, and that's when she noticed that those abbreviated entries were getting more and more like poetry.

On a recent Saturday, Braid launched her new book *Hammer & Nail*, published by Caitlin Press, online. In addition to reading from selected passages she answered questions from some of the 70 viewers participating via Zoom. Someone asked her about the connection between poetry and construction. Braid replied that putting words together for a solid goal was very much like constructing something three-dimensional. In both cases you want the end result to be beautiful and lasting. On the other hand, however, with the latter there's a blueprint. You're following orders, and trusting that whomever is responsible for these plans or giving you orders knows what he or she is doing, although in 95 per cent of cases it is a "he." With poetry it's free fall. You are totally on your own.

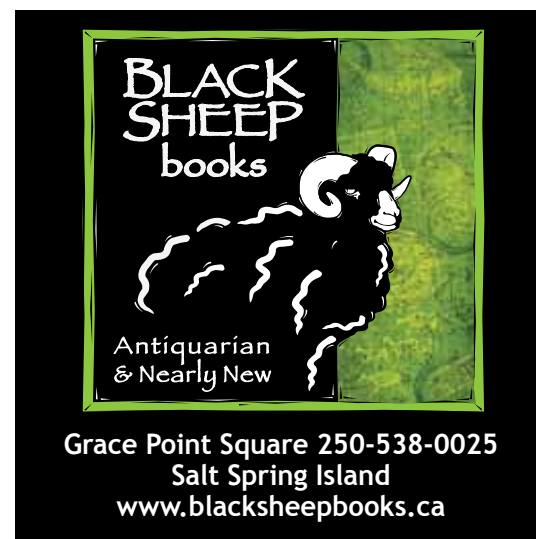
She did go back and finish that MA in 1979 and three years later she also finished up the 2,000 hours she needed to complete her fourth year and become a fully qualified journeywoman carpenter — one of the first qualified female carpenters in B.C.

With her first publication in 1991 (*Covering Rough Ground*), she won the League of Canadian Poets' Pat Lowther Award for the best book of poetry by a Canadian woman. Since then she has been the author of 17 books, from essays to poetry, memoirs to biographies,



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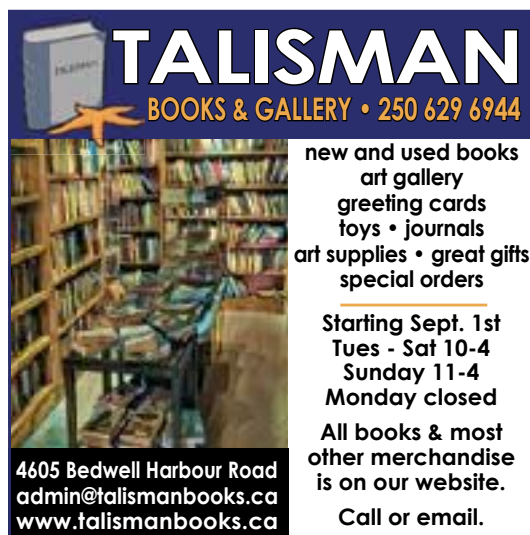


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and two editions of an anthology as well: In Fine Form, co-edited with Sandy Shreve.

Braid, who kept journals of the male construction culture and her feelings of isolation, nervousness and even fear that she later turned into poetry, has moved on, but she says she still has a passion for concrete and for framing.

"We mixed concrete by hand in those days. There's something magical about taking liquid and turning it into rock. And my favourite moment in construction has got to be after we've framed a building before we put the ply on and you look up and it's so beautiful."

There's also something magical about taking words and turning them into beautiful poems and she's got that covered too.

By 1995, in spite of loving construction, she was tired of the isolation and, being the only woman, so realizing that she wasn't going to stay in the trade, she went back to school, this time to do an MFA at UBC. Her thesis resulted in another winner. Inward to the Bones: Georgia O'Keeffe's Journey with Emily Carr won the Vancity Book Prize in 1999.

The multi-talented poet, writer and carpenter journeywoman was also an educator, teaching at BCIT, UBC, SFU and eventually Vancouver Island University (previously Malaspina College). In 2012 she wrote her bestselling publication called Journeywoman: Swinging a Hammer in a Man's World. Braid said it took her over 20 years to write and it

finally took shape when she overcame her fears and abandoned fiction in favour of fact.

"Desperation has always served me well," she confirms.

In response to a question at her launch, Braid said that sadly very little has changed in relation to the numbers of women entering the building trades. It's five per cent in Canada, up from only four per cent.

"It's the isolation and the male culture that ultimately drives women away. Women can do this, but the men need to let us in and they need to hire more than one woman at a time. The culture may be changing with the younger men coming in, but the men learn the culture from the older men."

The writer, who loved construction and how her body responded to it, tells women to "Follow your gut. What do you want to do? If your body is telling you it feels good, try it." ★

**You can hear Braid read from some of her works at the author's extensive website — [www.katebraid.com](http://www.katebraid.com) — which includes readings, interviews, reviews and bio. Hammer & Nail is now available at bookstores and she is again hard at work on a collection of essays.**

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