

SIUE's Valerie Vogrin, a Woman of Creative and Conscious Words, Wins Spokane Prize for Short Fiction

by Megan Weiser

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EDWARDSVILLE - If Valerie Vogrin, professor in Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Department of English Language and Literature, had her way, women would be "absolutely intolerant" of corrupt conduct.

"I'm happy to think that maybe women are becoming less tolerant of bad behavior," said Vogrin, winner of the Spokane Prize for Short Fiction, judged by Karen Karbo. Her winning short story collection, *Things We'll Need for the Coming Difficulties*, will be published in late fall by Willow Springs Press. Karbo described Vogrin's manuscript as "original, wickedly funny, satirical at times and heart-bruising."

As Women's History Month comes to a close, Vogrin shared her thoughts on the role of writing in her life, and the need for women to write and define their own stories of success. "In her collection's title story the protagonist is a former academic who finds herself ill-prepared for life in a much-changed, post-disaster world. Now that the things she thought defined her—her skills in translating poetry and university teaching—are unavailable, she must reinvent herself and find a new source of self-worth," said Vogrin, who joined the faculty of SIUE in 2003. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in creative writing, literary editing and literature.

Vogrin's first novel, *Shebang*, was published by the University Press of Mississippi. Her short stories have appeared in print journals such as *Ploughshares*, *AGNI*, and *The Los Angeles Review*, online at *Hobart and Bluestem*, and in *The Best Small Fictions 2015*. In 2010, she was awarded a Pushcart Prize.

Writing is something that is both natural and necessary for her. "I wrote my first story when I was five," Vogrin said. "It was about 10 pages long, written and illustrated in different colors of crayon, and concerns a family's difficulties with a mischievous cat. I can't remember a time when stories were not important to me."

"To be a writer is to engage, through stories, with the question of what it means to be a human being," continued Vogrin. "I am happy to be considered a woman writer, following in the footsteps of my contemporary literary heroes – Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Toni Morrison."

To young women – writers or not – Vogrin offers this advice, "Define success for yourself. When I was younger, I was enormously ambitious, but my ambitions were almost solely centered on achieving outside validation, such as receiving a big publishing contract, selling a lot of books, and having a prestigious literary career," she said. "Today, I have a fulfilling, challenging career as a professor. I'm still writing. In fact, I'm actually enjoying the process more than I ever have, and I continue to learn something new with every draft."

Vogrin continued her guidance to women by citing a literary example. “In my graduate writing workshop, we recently discussed ‘Dorni?ka and the St. Martin’s Day Goose,’ a story by Helen Oyeyemi in which an older woman thwarts a hungry wolf, and thereby protects the young women traveling through the woods on Mount Radho?? by virtue of love, resolve, magic and self-sacrifice.”

“Talking animals and flying sleighs aside, these contemporary fairy tales portray the world as I know it. There is no shortage of hungry wolves in our world,” Vogrin continued. “Women are victims of harassment, physical assault and trafficking, and our reproductive rights are threatened. Yet, a story like Oyeyemi’s helps us imagine and even inhabit a world in which the wolves are thwarted. It suggests that women have the ability to rescue ourselves.”

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Photo: Valerie Vogrin, professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, is the winner of the Spokane Prize for Short Fiction.