Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium
by Myrna Kostash

Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

Despite being of Ukrainian origin, Edmonton author Myrna Kostash has long felt an affinity for Greek culture. In elementary school, she even identified herself as Greek when the teacher asked about her ethnic background. Already then, she sensed that being Slavic was less desirable.

Many years later, a visit to the library in St. Peter’s Monastery rekindled Kostash’s interest in the links between Greek and Slavic cultures. She embarked on a quest to discover their spiritual connections and to resolve issues about her ethnicity. As a result, she took two trips to the Balkans to learn more about these topics. She refers to this undertaking as “the Demetrius Project.” A saint revered by the Slavs as well as the Greeks, Demetrius died as a martyr in 304.

Myrna Kostash is a well-known journalist who received the Matt Cohen Award for Lifetime Achievement in Writing in 2010. She previously wrote about her ethnic background in All of Baba’s Children, a portrait of the Ukrainian Canadian experience in Canada. A decade in the making, Prodigal Daughter is her tenth book.

Written in lyrical, vibrant prose, Prodigal Daughter is part travelogue and part memoir – a detailed account of findings from her travels to Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Macedonia. Of her journey to Crete, Kostash writes, “We make our way over the stony roads that link the villages, winding around mountainsides of boulders. Bits of precious earth, ground up between the rocks, clutch the exhausted roots of spiny bushes and dying trees” (33).

The book is divided into two parts. The first section chronicles Kostash’s first trip to the Balkans in 2000 and her search for evidence supporting the presence of St. Demetrius in each culture. The second portion documents another trip two years later. The latter section is by far the more interesting of the two, for it includes her reflections about the project as a whole.

One of the book’s strengths is the author’s passion for her subject. During her travels, Kostash arranges countless interviews with art historians, archaeologists, priests and theologians in order to pick their brains about St. Demetrius. From one country to the next, she finds inconsistencies both in his biography and the manner in which he is depicted in the frescoes. These discoveries heighten readers’ interest in her findings while at the same time creating a certain level of tension from chapter to chapter.

Throughout the book, Kostash demonstrates her ability as a storyteller. Some of the most memorable vignettes describe her meetings with an archaeology professor and an art historian in Belgrade. As well, Kostash renders her own interpretation of Demetrius’s final day, along with an account of the events leading up to his death.

Winner of the 2011 City of Edmonton Prize, Prodigal Daughter is a thought-provoking book. It will particularly appeal to readers with an interest in Ukrainian Canadian culture, the Eastern Church and the cultural history of the Balkans. On the other hand, the sheer volume of names and dates may occasionally overwhelm those less familiar with medieval Balkan history.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and editor.

Buy Prodigal Daughter at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):