

Losing her daughter to a drug overdose stopped poet Susan Musgrave's pen

MARCUS GEE >

MASSET, B.C.

PUBLISHED AUGUST 31, 2022



Poet Susan Musgrave with her daughter, Sophie in the mid 1990s.

ANNE BAYIN/HANDOUT

Whatever was happening in her rich, adventurous, sometimes painful life, Susan Musgrave has always been able to write.

She wrote through her teenage years in the 1960s, when she experimented with LSD and ran away to Berkeley, Calif., with an English professor. She wrote through the break up of two marriages, the first to a lawyer, the second to an accused drug smuggler. She wrote when her third husband, writer Stephen Reid, was arrested for a headline-making bank robbery in Victoria in 1999. She wrote after Mr. Reid died in 2018.

Now aged 71, she has produced a steady stream of essays, food writing, newspaper columns, children's book, novels and books of poetry that have earned her four nominations for the Governor-General's Award and made her what the Canadian Encyclopedia calls "one of Canada's most prominent writers."

But a year back, she suffered a loss that brought the flow from her pen to a sudden halt. This week, she sat down to talk about it on the record for the first time.

Ms. Musgrave is the mother of two daughters. The first, Charlotte, is the issue of her marriage to Paul Oscar Nelson, the accused drug smuggler. The second, Sophie, she had with Mr. Reid.

Ms. Musgrave got to know Mr. Reid when he was serving time for his role in the Stopwatch Gang, a trio of bank robbers responsible for more than 100 heists in the 1970s. She married him in 1986 while he was still behind bars.

He was paroled in 1987 and Sophie was born on Jan. 4, 1989. Picking her up, Ms. Musgrave would later write, "I knew what it felt like to hold all that mattered in the palm of one hand."

Sophie Alexandra Musgrave Reid was full of vim from the start, bouncing up and down in her Jolly Jumper to the Traveling Wilburys. As a kid, she liked dressing in goofy outfits and hamming it up for the camera. Ms. Musgrave's family album shows the blonde pixie sitting on Santa's knee, playing with her beloved stuffed animal "Lionie" and tobogganing in her snowsuit. At school, she won ribbons in everything from swimming to kickboxing to skating.

A shadow came over the family in 1999. Mr. Reid, who had struggled with heroin and cocaine addiction, was sentenced to 18 years for the Victoria bank robbery, which ended in a shootout and a car chase.

Sophie began to struggle herself. Ms. Musgrave got a call from her school: Sophie, only 12, had been found with a bottle of vodka in her backpack. She progressed to marijuana and cocaine, then finally intravenous drugs.

“While other mothers snipped price tags off back-to-school fashions I sat by your bed in the Intensive Care Unit watching your vital signs blip across a screen,” Ms. Musgrave wrote in a poem in 2013.

As a young adult, Sophie cycled in and out of rehab programs. She would come to visit her mother in Haida Gwaii, the wild and beautiful archipelago where Ms. Musgrave and Mr. Reid built a house, and steal money from the local cab driver to buy drugs. One drug dealer made Sophie hack off all her hair, whether out of spite or some obscure street beef Ms. Musgrave doesn't know.

As she moved through her 20s, Sophie seemed to right herself. She became a fitness nut and worked out all the time. She had a dog, a wolf-dog breed called Boss, that was her constant companion. She got married. She started a pot dispensary and reveled in running a business. But when Ottawa legalized cannabis in 2018, she couldn't hack all the paperwork involved in restarting the store.

She started to slide again. She ended up in the British Columbia Interior, which has been hit hard by the overdose crisis. One day, Ms. Musgrave got the call every parent like her dreads: Sophie was in hospital in Vernon, B.C., after suffering an overdose of fentanyl and benzodiazepines in a park. Her heart was still beating but her brain had been starved of oxygen. After four days, Ms. Musgrave gave doctors permission to take her off life support. It was Sept. 8, 2021. Sophie was 32.

For the first time since Ms. Musgrave was a passionate teenager, she stopped writing. It seemed pointless, somehow.

She continued to coach her creative-writing students. She still runs a charming guesthouse in Masset in northern Haida Gwaii, where she serves visitors homemade sourdough toast and cloudberry jam while the house cat Cheddar whines. She cooks, sees friends, answers e-mails and texts. But tears come easily, words less so.

“It's hard for me not to have written anything for a year. That's never happened in my life,” she said over tea at her place on a river just outside town.

A publisher is issuing a collection of her poems, *Exculpatory Lilies*, in September. It includes one, *Postscript*, she managed to pen about Sophie's death. She does some editing. Apart from that, she just isn't sure what is next. She hasn't even had the heart to get a brief death notice she put together published.

In it, she writes that "Nietzsche said that out of chaos comes a dancing star." When Sophie was 9, she went to Cuba with her dad and "they danced in the ballroom of a derelict mansion in the rain."

A week after Sophie died, Ms. Musgrave continues, a friend of Sophie's sister Charlotte had a dream about her. "Sophie wore a ballgown, and, like a star, she danced."

Our Morning Update and Evening Update newsletters are written by Globe editors, giving you a concise summary of the day's most important headlines. [Sign up today.](#)

Sign up for the Morning Update Newsletter

Start your day with news briefs on the day's most important stories as selected by and written by Globe editors.

SUBSCRIBE