

A Compelling Reason to Write

An exclusive Authorlink interview
with Kay Gill, Author
of *Mirel's Daughter*
(Fleur-de-Lis Press, 2006)

by **Ellen Birkett Morris**

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Every once in a while a writer encounters a story so compelling that he or she is driven to capture it on the page. Such was the case for freelance writer Kay Gill when she finally heard the full story of her mother's turbulent past during the pogroms against the Jews following World War I in the Ukraine.

The result is *Mirel's Daughter* (Fleur-de-Lis Press), a fictionalized account of her mother's remarkable escape as a young girl from the Ukraine to America after the Russian Revolution. Gill tells the age old story of man's inhumanity to man in a fresh, compelling way.

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"I'd heard (parts of) the story from the time I was little. The story was measured against my age and ability to absorb what was going on," said Gill.

Gill pursued her love of story through an interest in journalism, earning a Journalism/English degree from Indiana University. As a freelance writer she co-authored two books, *The Brown Hotel and Louisville's Magic Corner*, and *Kentucky Center for the Arts: Opening Night*.

She would return to her mother's story over time. Each time her mother revealed a bit

more about her childhood.

When her mother was in her early 70s, visiting for Thanksgiving, she shared the entire story, including the verbal and physical abuse that she endured at the hands of bandits.

While many of the details of everyday life had fallen away, her mother had vivid memories of “the bad stuff.”

Gill wanted to write the story in memoir form but her journalistic training, which called for a strict adherence to the facts, and her desire for immediacy led her to consider writing a fictionalized account of her mother’s experience.

This form allowed her to put events in historical context, fill in missing details and present the story in a dramatic way.

Gill began her journey as a fiction writer by signing up for a series of creative writing classes taught by Sena Jeter Naslund, now famous for her groundbreaking novel *Ahab’s Wife*.

Gill found the transition from journalism to fiction and the ability to manipulate the details to her ends liberating.

Naslund helped Gill hone the rhythm of her sentences and offered insights into setting the scene with sensory details and staying true to the feelings of characters.

Naslund advised students to examine whether their writing rang true and reassured them that as writers they were able to make choices about which details they included in their work.

“She’d say ‘Make it Saturday.’ If our story required that something happen on a Saturday and it really happened on a

Wednesday, so what, make it Saturday," said Gill.

Gill also attended Robert McKee's Story Seminar in New York City. She found McKee's text, also titled *Story* and Ursula K. Le Guin's Book *Steering the Craft* useful.

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Yankel, her mother's brother who had died of bubonic plague before the pogroms began, was now cast as a Jewish resistance fighter. Other characters were added to bring depth to the story.

She immersed herself in research to discover the climate, plant and animal life and customs of a Ukrainian village in the years after World War I.

Gill educated herself on the conflict between the Bolsheviks, Ukrainian Nationalists, and die-hard Tsarists.

She did most of her research in Louisville, but also visited the Institute for Jewish Research, The New York Public Library, and Spertus College of Judaica, among other libraries.

She had to sort out accounts of that period in history, since they varied widely depending on whether they were offered by Jewish and non-Jewish historians.

"When writing I had to put myself there. I'd ask myself, what would I feel? What would I see?"
—Gill

She connected with her mother's history when she was perusing a two volume history of the Ukraine that mentioned an unseasonable snow storm that stopped the advance of the Bolsheviks as they marched

toward the White Army. Her mother had mentioned the snow. The line separating the troops went straight through her mother's village of Brusilov.

"When writing I had to put myself there. I'd ask myself, what would I feel? What would I see? I imagined being ordered to take my clothes off and roll in the snow. I would sit there writing and crying," said Gill.

While at times gut-wrenching, *Mirel's Daughter* is a story of triumph and a celebration of the haven and promised land that America was for many immigrants in the early Twentieth Century.

Gill worked on the book off and on for a period of ten years, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.

She credits her longtime writing group, The Just So Writers (named after Kipling's Just So Stories), with encouraging her during the writing of the book, offering constructive feedback on the story and supporting her during the painful process of sending it out.

She sent the manuscript to some 50 agents and editors before sending a letter to Naslund, co-founder of Fleur-de-Lis Press, a small press based in Louisville, Kentucky. Naslund accepted it for publication.

Gill was both "surprised and thrilled" at the intensity of the editing process. Three readers read the book and offered suggestions for clarifications and correct punctuation. Another reader read the book to check for accuracy when it came to Jewish history and rituals. Several more readers helped proofread the galleys.

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—Gill

Gill said holding the book in her hands for the first time was “a dream.” She was especially pleased when the American Printing House for the Blind developed a Braille edition of *Mirel’s Daughter*.

Knowing that Fleur-de-Lis Press had limited resources, Gill and her sons developed a web site, press kits, and mailing materials bearing the cover image of the book. Gill set up a number of book signings in cities where she has contacts and made a presentation to the Jewish Book Council. She has been pleased with the warm reception the book has gotten.

Her advice to first time novelists is to be sure you care about your subject. “Writing a novel is such a long, involved process, your subject has to hold you in its grip for a long while to get it done and get it done right.”

As for getting published, she advises, “Be flexible, consider it a learning process, and don’t get discouraged. You have to try to weave a network of contacts that will pay off.”

Kay Gill lives in Pewee Valley near Louisville, Kentucky, with her husband George Gill. She has had a career in freelance writing and editing. *Mirel’s Daughter* is her first novel, and she is at work on her second, *Magic City*.

**About Regular Contributor
Ellen Birkett Morris**

Ellen Birkett Morris is an award-winning writer whose work has appeared in national print and online publications including The New York Times. She also writes for a number of literary, regional, trade, and business publications, and she has contributed to six published nonfiction books in the trade press. Ellen is a regular

*contributor to Authorlink, assigned to
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