

“Perhaps
it will help
a little if I tell
a story.”¹



Margaret Marshall Saunders

1861-1947

Margaret Marshall Saunders turned her ideals into compelling stories and became a celebrated writer, lecturer, and advocate for animal rights and social justice. Her novel about an abused dog, *Beautiful Joe: An Autobiography*, was the first book by a Canadian author to sell more than a million copies worldwide.

“Beautiful Joe is a real dog,” she wrote in the preface. “He belonged during the first part of his life to a cruel master, who mutilated him in the manner described in the story. He was rescued from him, and is now living in a happy home with pleasant surroundings, and enjoys a wide local celebrity.”

Beautiful Joe won the hearts of young readers in North America and Europe. The first American edition, published in 1893, sold out in 10 days. The story was eventually translated into 18 languages, including Esperanto and Braille. Today it is largely forgotten, except by literary historians and by fans in the town where the real Beautiful Joe once lived. But the story of the storyteller still has lessons to teach us.

Like most overnight sensations, Miss Marshall Saunders spent years learning her craft. Her success came from a combination of hard work, good market research, and the unfailing support of her family. Her father, Edward Manning Saunders, was a respected Baptist pastor, author, and historian. Her mother, Maria Freeman Saunders, worked tirelessly in the church and community, campaigning for temperance, women’s rights, and the protection of minors. The Saunders’ home in 19th-century Halifax bustled with seven children and a huge assortment of pets, including a garage full of rabbits and a white mouse that young Maggie carried up her sleeve.

At the age of 15, Maggie was sent to a boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland, to study languages, history, and literature. Her letters back to Nova Scotia were filled with homesick longing, details of daily life, and characteristic wit. “I cry all the time when it does not interfere with my lessons,” she wrote. Drying her tears, she spent the following year perfecting her French in Orléans, France. She returned to Halifax at 17 and settled into an earnest routine—teaching, helping at home, and working with her mother on social causes, including a campaign against baby farming.²

1 \ *Beautiful Joe*, 14.

2 \ *Baby farming* referred to the unregulated foster care or boarding of babies for profit. Some babies were sold for adoption; some died mysteriously; some were raised as servants.

Her stories for children emphasized the humane treatment of animals. Her adult novels addressed social issues, including child welfare, poverty, and the legacies of colonialism.

Maggie wrote, but only for herself and in letters to family and friends. One family friend was Dr. Theodore Rand, a pioneering educator. He was delighted by a letter she had sent, and encouraged her to write more. “What shall I write?” she asked. Dr. Rand advised her to write about things that she knew (“the beauty of our wintery scenery ... the stillness of the woods, the rabbits’ track in the snow”). But like many novice writers, Maggie favoured more exotic themes. She wrote instead about “a man, his wife, and a robbery” set in Spain. She scribbled daily while her sister Rida did the housework for both of them, and completed the short story in three weeks. Maggie and Rida were delighted when it was accepted for publication by a popular magazine in New York. They shared the \$40 cheque. The year was 1884. Maggie was 23.

Encouraged by her family, she continued to write. Maggie became “Marshall Saunders” in print and in life. Her first short novel, *My Spanish Sailor*, was a shipboard romance. It was published in England in 1889, for distribution in England and Canada, and was a modest success.

In 1892, while visiting her brother in Meaford, Ontario, she heard about a local dog who had been mutilated by his cruel owner and then rescued and adopted by a kind family. Around the same time, she learned about a literary competition sponsored by the American Humane Education Society, focusing on “Kind and Cruel Treatment of Domestic Animals and Birds in the Northern States.” The contest called for a novel in the spirit of the English animal classic *Black Beauty*. It was a perfect match for Marshall, combining her love of animals with her passion for writing.

Marshall wrote her story from the point of view of the dog, relocating it from Meaford to Maine to appeal to the American sponsor. She wove in details that paid homage to the founder of the American Humane Education Society, George Angell, including a reference to his Bands of Mercy campaign. She named the dog's human companion Laura, after a sister who had died, and gave Laura a clergy family like her own. It took her six months to write the winning manuscript. The judges were charmed. Marshall accepted the praise and the publicity, but wisely declined the \$200 in prize money, opting instead to keep the copyright and find another publisher. *Beautiful Joe* was published the following year by the American Baptist Publication Society, to instant acclaim.

Now in her 30s and with an independent income, Marshall travelled frequently, lived for extended periods in Boston and California, and published an impressive range of short stories, newspaper articles, and novels for both adults and children. Her stories for

children emphasized the humane treatment of animals. Her adult novels addressed social issues, including child welfare, poverty, and the legacies of colonialism. Like **Anna Leonowens**, she was a regular contributor to *Youth's Companion*. She devoted herself to good causes and was active in dozens of voluntary organizations, including the Humane Society, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Local Council of Women of Halifax, where she served along with **Edith Jessie Archibald**. She campaigned vigorously against child labour and in favour of supervised playgrounds in Halifax.



In 1901, Marshall delighted loyal readers with *Tilda Jane: An orphan in search of a home*. Her rambunctious orphan predated *Anne of Green Gables* by seven years. Marshall later co-founded the Maritime Branch of the Canadian Women's Press Club with *Green Gables* author **Lucy Maud Montgomery**. They hoped that networking would empower women writers to negotiate better treatment from publishers.

Marshall used some of her royalties to install an aviary in the Saunders' family home on Carleton Street in Halifax. This provided the setting for *My Pets: Real happenings in my aviary*, a collection of essays published in 1908.

In 1911, Marshall Saunders was awarded an honorary MA from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. It was a rare distinction for a woman at that time. A few years later, following her mother's death, she moved with her father and sister Grace to Toronto to be closer to other family members and to the publishing world. When their father died,

Marshall and Grace moved again to a custom-built bungalow in north Toronto. It featured an expansive indoor aviary for dozens of birds, with a flight shaft connecting the basement to a bright sunroom. There was space for dogs and cats and other foundlings, and castles to shelter toads in the backyard. People routinely brought injured creatures to the door to be nursed back to health.

Although *Beautiful Joe* continued to sell well for many years, the book was not without controversy. Debates raged about the portrayal of "dumb" animals—dumb meaning speechless, not stupid—and about the morality of attributing human qualities to non-humans. Marshall's style of writing fell out of favour, and she found it increasingly difficult to publish new work and pay the bills. Her final book, a Victorian romance, came out in 1927 when Marshall was in her mid-60s. She and Grace turned to public speaking, touring Canada and the United States with illustrated lectures about animal welfare, their pets, and the rights of women and children.

In 1934, Marshall was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the highest civilian honour for a Canadian at the time. In the same year, she also received a medal from the *Société Protectrice des Animaux* in Paris, France. But honours could not keep her from poverty or protect her from a long, misunderstood struggle with depression. Friends and admirers rallied, and she was sustained for a time by financial aid from the Canadian Writers' Foundation. The Local Council of Women of Halifax also sent money in gratitude for her years of service.

When Marshall died in 1947, *Saturday Night* magazine published a tender eulogy naming her "Canada's most revered author." She is buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto. Monuments honouring her life and work stand today in her birthplace of Milton, Nova Scotia, and in Beautiful Joe Park in Meaford, Ontario.

"I will stop just here," says Beautiful Joe at the end of his story, "though I would gladly go on, for I have enjoyed so much talking over old times, that I am very sorry to leave off."³



3 \ *Beautiful Joe*, 351.

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4 \ In Ray MacLeod's *Hope for Wildlife: True Stories of Animal Rescue*. Foreword.

And now ...

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"As much as our work is about healing wildlife, it is also about healing the human spirit," Hope says.⁴

Beautiful Joe would agree, and Margaret Marshall Saunders would approve.

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IMAGE CREDIT

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