

Barbara Smucker



There are few people who can claim their career “really took off” in their sixties, but so it was for beloved children’s book author Barbara Smucker. Her classic story about two young slaves escaping northward – *Underground to Canada* - was published when she was sixty-two. Her final book was published when she was eighty-three.

A native of Kansas, Smucker began her writing career in 1937, working for a newspaper in her hometown called *The Newton Kansan*. It was while working as a journalist that she met her husband Donovan Smucker, a Mennonite minister from Ohio. The young couple married in 1939 and spent many years living throughout the United States.

By the late 1960s they were living in Mississippi and it was there that Smucker found herself deeply affected by the civil rights movement. She moved with her husband and three children to Canada in 1969 where Don took a teaching position at the University of Waterloo.

Barbara Smucker embarked on a new career as a librarian at the Kitchener Public Library, where she noticed there were few good books for children on the history of slavery.

A museum visit finally pushed her to write *Underground to Canada* (1977) for children, focusing on two fictional heroines, about the remarkable history of the thousands of Black slaves who followed the “underground railroad” to freedom in Canada. “. . . an exciting story which looks honestly at a social evil and focuses sharply on the individual’s search for dignity.”

Three years later, Smucker wrote another story about injustice, this time closer to her Mennonite heritage. *Days of Terror* (1980) chronicles the flight of a Russian Mennonite family from persecution during the Russian Revolution.

Smucker wrote ten children’s books, many of them focusing on a character that has hope during times of crisis in history. “I try to pick out real people who oppose evil - people who face these evil things with courage. I think that gives kids hope in the face of evil.”

One of her first picture books was *Selina -The Bear Paw Quilt* (1995). It is the story of a young Mennonite girl who has to flee the family farm during the American Civil War. Selina and her family end up in Waterloo where they are taken in by relatives.

Smucker won several awards including the Canada Council Children’s Literature Prize (1979) and the Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1980. She was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Waterloo in 1986.

After her death in 2003, Smucker was remembered not only for her writing career but also for her humanity and generosity. “She just glowed,” recalled a colleague. “She was so serene, her lovely face was so calm.”

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