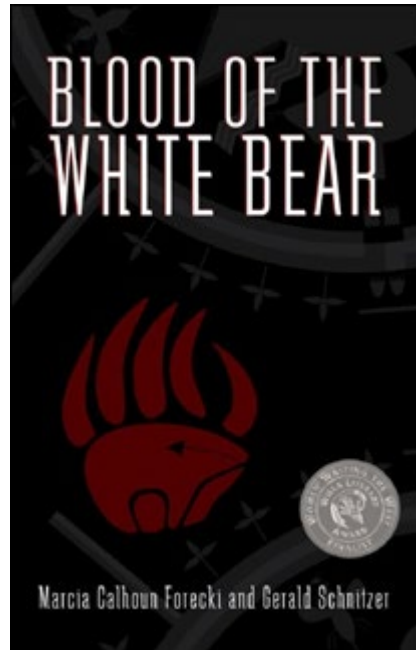


The Story Behind *Blood of the White Bear*

by Marcia Calhoun Forecki and Gerald Schnitzer

In 2010, I edited a charming and very funny memoir called *My Floating Grandmother* by Gerald Schnitzer. Jerry tells about growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930's, in an energetic Jewish family that included two bootlegger uncles and, of course, his floating grandmother. The writing style reminded me a lot of Neil Simon, that wonderful self-deprecating humor. We communicated by email about my edits and questions. Through that correspondence, our friendship grew. I was overwhelmed when this amazing storyteller asked me to collaborate on a project that became our book, *Blood of the White Bear*.



Jerry was always modest about his resume, which included screenwriting, producing and directing movies, documentaries, television series and commercials. He was responsible for the film made by the government of an atomic bomb tests in New Mexico in the 1950's. As our friendship grew, Jerry shared more and more details of his inspiring life. Jerry wrote the screenplays of nearly all the Bowery Boys movies I watched on Saturday morning television as a child. He made a documentary about commercial fishing narrated by William Conrad, with music composed and played by Gustavo Santaolalla. I admit it, I was star struck.

Jerry sent me fourteen pages of handwritten notes about a virologist, Dr. Rachel Bisette, pulled to the Four Corners by visions of the White Bear Kachina. There she fights a lethal pandemic. One elusive indigenous woman, Eva Yellow Horn, carries the gift of immunity. In her search for Eva, Rachel discovers power beyond science, and the truth of her parents' death. Fourteen hand-written pages. It was a beginning.

I stared at those fourteen pages for a long time. Where to start, how to find the characters, how to tell a coherent story from someone else's notes? I had read and loved John Barry's non-fiction book, *The Great Influenza*, about the pandemic of 1918, so I felt I had a pretty basic understanding of what happens when a zoonotic disease jumps species, from animal to human.

The two ingredients needed for an epidemic are high lethality of the disease and ease of transmission. When both criteria are met, in a world of rapid and prolific travel, the potential for a pandemic arises.

The science was easily available on the internet. We decided to write about a fictional, mutated hantavirus. These viruses are endemic to field mice, and epidemics have broken out from time to time in the American southwest. The virus was called Sin Nombre. The Unnamed virus! I also found a lot of information about public health practices, including CDC protocols.

We hit upon the title, *Blood of the White Bear*, referring to the immunity found in the old healer's blood. For Aleut and Haida people, the bear is a symbol of motherhood and child protection. For the Lakota people, the bear also has healing symbolism. I loved writing the loving yet mysterious character of Eva Yellow Horn, our book's white bear.

Our collaboration, *Blood of the White Bear* was published in 2013. The book went on to become a finalist in the Willa Awards sponsored by Women Writing the West.

Jerry lived in California and I live in Iowa. We collaborated by email and telephone. We never met face to face. Now we never can. Jerry passed in January 2016. Jerry was 98 years old when he died. Jerry saw stories in everything. He influenced me as a writer probably more than I know. I was also proud to call him a friend.

Masks reveal as much as they conceal in Blood of the White Bear, a novel that smoulders with mystery and crackles with suspense, so much so that readers may start seeing Kachina dolls over their own shoulders in the wee small hours. - Gary D. Rhodes, writer and filmmaker.

Marcia Calhoun Forecki has published three novels and a memoir about her deaf son. She has published numerous short stories, including "The Gift of the Spanish Lady," about the 1918 influenza pandemic, which was a Pushcart nominee. See, www.meforecki.com

Blood of the White Bear

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