



Jason Franson for Postmedia News

Marina Endicott is author of *The Little Shadows*, a novel about three sisters on the Vaudeville circuit in 1910-era Alberta.

# SISTER ACT

Endicott turns clock back 100 years in story of family bonds

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Ask any heavy metal fan: sisters can be twisted. Luckily, Marina Endicott has enjoyed a deliciously close relationship with three younger sisters:

Thyra, Sarah and Azana. This, despite her alleged bossiness as the eldest in the clan.

"I don't know why they say that," the Edmonton author says. Then, with a self-deprecating chuckle: "I've struggled against it."

Endicott, domineering? Hard to fathom. The warm, soft-spoken brunette oozes

huggability over the phone as she chats about her new novel, *The Little Shadows*, a story set in the wild world of vaudeville a century ago.

Bossy or not, the sisterly bond helped Endicott dream up Aurora, Clover and Bella, the teenage sister act at the heart of the action. The Avery girls (Endicott affectionately calls



Marina Endicott takes part in this year's WordFest, Oct. 11 through 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and [wordfest.com](http://wordfest.com).

them "the girls" or "my girls") are struggling to survive in the realm of polite vaudeville, a more genteel, family friendly style of theatre that was often enjoyed in alcohol-free halls. The Belle Aurores are overseen by their mother, Flora, a woman beaten down by poverty and spousal abandonment.

They're determined to stay respectable, desperate to avoid lowering themselves to lewder art forms of the day. The threat of prostitution breathes down their young necks.

Endicott's two living sisters, Thyra and Sarah, claim to recognize themselves in one of the Avery girls, but the author denies any exact renderings.

"I'm not that good a

portrait artist, but there are many conversations repeated."

She adds, a disclaimer of sorts: "My sisters are fully aware of what I've done. They love it, thank goodness. I'd be in big trouble if they didn't."

A mother of two, Endicott says her daughter has been somewhat of a model, too.

"None of the sisters is her, but being around 15-year-old girls has bled into the book. There's something so lovely about teenage girls," she says.

"We hear about how awful they are, but I've just found that Rachel and all of her friends are so bright and energetic. They have such power and strength."

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# ENDICOTT: Vaudeville-era novel

## FROM FI

The historical world of vaudeville is new to Endicott. Her second novel, *Good to a Fault* — which won the 2009 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Canada and the Caribbean, and was shortlisted for the Giller — is set in contemporary times, as is her first book, *Open Arms*. She happened upon the art form, and the time period, serendipitously. The author kept coming across old pictures of vaudeville artists while doing research for another project, and was captivated by their faces.

“I had no idea there was vaudeville here (in Alberta). I knew it as an ephemeral, vanished art form, but I thought of it as being very American. I didn’t know it was us, too.”

Endicott’s background in theatre fanned the flames.

“The backstage world is familiar to me. I left it and still have a bit of nostalgia for being back there, seeing things from the rear, seeing the underneath and the workings behind the magic of the stage.

“It’s a funny path.” As part of her research, she toured old vaudeville theatres in

Canada and the U.S., including the recently renovated Bailey Theatre in Camrose. Seeing things scratched into the walls, be it the words “Eulelie Josephine 1911,” or a perfectly replicated bottle of whisky, in ink, “gave me a great boost into the book. It was gorgeous.”

Those visits helped her map out the intricate trans-continental travels of her characters, whose adventures see them in places like San Francisco, Sioux Falls, Winnipeg and yes, even Edmonton. Endicott couldn’t resist having her girls live in the Arlington, the famous red-brick apartment building that stood on 100th Avenue for nearly a century before it burned down in 2005.

“I still miss that place,” the author says of the historical walk-up. She’s developed just as big a soft spot for

the vaudeville art form, and even tried to set her Facebook profile location to “Vaudeville.” The social network wouldn’t let her, insisting instead on “Vaudeville-Le-Haut,” which is in France.

“I ought to take it down, but I get very funny French ads in the sidebar, much more interesting than the usual ones.”

Creating a story before one’s time with accuracy is no easy feat, but Endicott is up to the challenge.

“I’m always interested in imagining how it is to live in other circumstances, what it was really like to be on the stage in those theatres, to be part of that company, that world, to be working so hard. They would do at least three and as much as seven shows a day. They were constantly refining and honing their craft.”