

## A CONVERSATION WITH MARGI PREUS

### What inspired you to write *West of the Moon*?

The story was inspired by my great-great grandmother's diary. She emigrated from Norway in 1851 and kept a diary of her experiences which I was reading (in English translation, fortunately) thinking that she might make a good subject for a novel. But when I ran across a passage on board the ship in which she hires a maid, a young girl traveling all alone with no prospects in America, I suddenly became a lot more interested in this girl, about whom very little was known.

### Describe the research you undertook in writing the book.

I got to read a lot of Norwegian fairy tales which was pure pleasure. I also read other diaries and letters of Norwegian immigrants of the time, about the immigrant experience and about 19th century Norway. *Growth of the Soil* by Knut Hamsun was my constant companion while writing.

### What did you enjoy most about writing this story? Did you encounter any challenges in the process?

Once I had the language of the fairy tales in me, it was fun to write with that kind of language, rhythm and pace. The biggest challenge was knowing what should happen next! My previous two novels were based on the lives of real people and so I had their real experiences to follow, but I knew next to nothing about this girl, so had to make pretty much everything up!

### "I got to read a lot of Norwegian fairy tales which was pure pleasure."

### What do you hope readers take away from your book?

I hope they have an enjoyable reading experience, that's my main desire. I don't really have a goal about what I want to "say" when I start out writing a novel, but in this story it turns out that my protagonist Astri has many ethically challenging

decisions to make. There are many more questions than answers in this story, I think, and I hope readers will take a little time to consider them.

### "Once I had the language of fairy tales in me, it was fun to write with that kind of... rhythm and pace."

### Please share a little bit about your journey to becoming a published author.

I started making up plays in kindergarten and most of my life I've been involved in theater in some capacity (including 25+ years writing for and directing *Colder* by the Lake Comedy Theatre in Duluth) but I always, always wanted to write stories. It took me a long time to figure out how to do it, I guess.

### How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

Anything outside that doesn't involve sitting in front of a screen: skiing, paddling a canoe, gardening, swimming, walking in the woods.

### Could you share a little about your current work or plans for a future project?

The sequel to *West of the Moon* is what I'm floundering around in right now.

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## 27TH ANNUAL Minnesota Book Awards

### YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE WINNER

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The Creative Writing Programs  
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### *West of the Moon* by Margi Preus

PUBLISHED BY AMULET BOOKS/ABRAMS

A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY  
THE FRIENDS OF THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

## SUMMARY

Thirteen-year-old Astri and her younger sister, Greta, long to leave Norway and be reunited with their father in America. After a daring escape from a mean goat farmer, Astri retrieves her little sister and, armed with a troll treasure, a book of spells, and a possibly magic hairbrush, the two set off for America. In this exciting tale the two girls journey across the sea on an adventure that they hope will lead them to their father—but trouble along the way threatens to separate the sisters forever.

Margi Preus accepts her award at the 27th Annual Minnesota Book Awards Gala on April 18, 2015.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

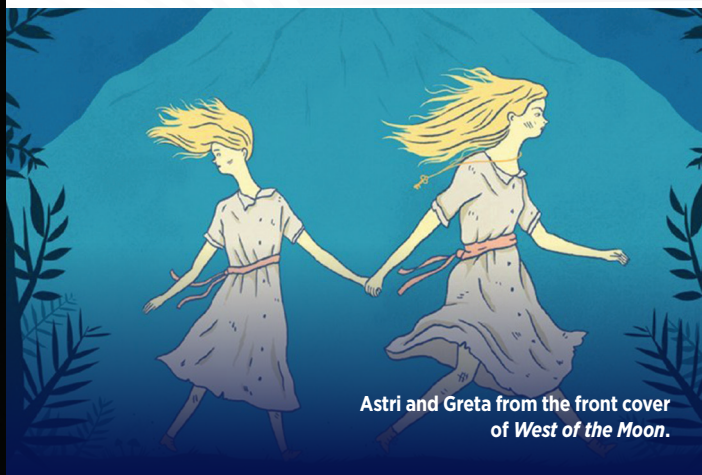
1. At the beginning of *West of the Moon*, the author develops a strong sense of place without naming the country or time where the novel is set. List some clues she gives in the first pages that tell you about setting.
2. Astri's aunt, who is supposed to be her guardian and protector, sells her to Svaalberd the goatman. Later, Astri goes back to rescue her sister Greta before leaving for America, even though she risks being recaptured. What do we owe to our family members? What if a family member is uncaring or mean?
3. The goatman treats Astri horribly while she lives with him. What would you have done in Astri's place? Did Svaalberd deserve what happened to him?
4. Astri makes wishes for several fairytale objects, like seven league boots or a magical ball of yarn. Although she doesn't receive these items, she does get something from each person who helps her along the way. What "gifts" is she given by the dairymaid, the farmwife, and the innkeeper? How do these gifts help her on her way?

5. Astri asks herself a lot of questions about the rightness or wrongness of things. "It isn't stealing to take something that's stolen already, is it?" she asks. And, "Is it all right to use a bad thing for a good cause?" And, "Is it a worse sin to lie to my sweet sister than to steal from a cruel master?" What are your answers to these questions?
6. Think about where Spinning Girl is when Astri and Greta leave her. How does her story end? What do you think happened to her?
7. Older passengers on the ship form relationships with both Astri and Greta, and their help makes it possible for the girls to survive in America. Would you call these adults a new family for Astri and Greta? Why? Who are some people in your life who have offered you help when you needed it most?
8. The author did very careful research to make sure the story was historically accurate. How does reading the appendix at the end of the book change or enhance your view of the story?

## ABOUT MARGI PREUS



Margi Preus is a *New York Times* best-selling author of books for young readers, including *Shadow on the Mountain* and *Heart of a Samurai*, winner of a Newbery Honor and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Children's Literature. Preus has traveled the globe to research her novels and, along the way, has made friends in Japan, Norway, and many other places. She lives in Duluth, Minnesota. Visit [www.margipreus.com](http://www.margipreus.com).



Astri and Greta from the front cover of *West of the Moon*.

# 27TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards, presented by 3M Library Systems, is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

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