



# POLSKA, 1994

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## Polska, 1994 by Isla McKetta Editions Checkpointed

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### SYNOPSIS:

Structured around the nocturnes of Chopin and the poetry of Milosz, *Polska, 1994* is a powerful coming-of-age story set in post-communist Poland. Living in a town that feels desperately too small, Magda longs for her past and fights against the many secrets surrounding her family. Why did the secret police interrupt her brother's birthday thirteen years ago? Is truth always desirable?

*Polska, 1994* explores oppression with a moving intensity and remains a vibrant homage to the depth of Polish cultural heritage. Between seventeen-year-old Magda and the Iron Curtain, who will emerge as the victor of this quest?

### THE AUTHOR:

Isla McKetta became interested in oppression as a child living in Pinochet's Chile, and a year spent in Poland after the Cold War led her to pursue undergraduate degrees in Political Science and Sociology. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Goddard College and worked in various capacities for the literary magazines Pitkin Review and Farfelu. Isla speaks several languages and makes her home with her husband in Seattle, Washington (USA). She co-authored *Clear*



*Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art* from Write Bloody Publications in 2014. Isla reviews books at *A Geography of Reading* and is on the board of Richard Hugo House. She can be reached on her [blog](#) and social network (Twitter: @islaisreading).

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[Editions Checkpointed](#) is an independent digital publishing company based in Paris, France, specialized in fiction and nonfiction literature related to conflict and volatile settings.

# Author Interview: Isla McKetta on Writing from History

Posted on [March 7, 2014](#)

Isla McKetta is a Seattle novelist, book reviewer and blogger at [A Geography of Reading](#), and she also serves on the board of [Richard Hugo House](#). Isla and I met during our Goddard MFA program six years ago and I have been reading her work ever since. I'm thrilled that she has two new books coming out almost at the same time, [Clear Out the Static in Your Attic: A Writer's Guide for Turning Artifacts into Art](#), co-authored with Rebecca Bridge (in March 2014, from Write Bloody Publishing) and [Polska, 1994](#) (in May 2014, from Editions Checkpointed).



Isla lived in Pinochet's Chile and in post-Cold War Poland, she speaks several languages, and she studied political science and sociology in addition to creative writing. Talking to her is always fascinating and enlightening. Thank you, Isla, for taking the time to answer a few questions for *Rewriting History*.

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Photo 1 Isla's School ID and Bus Pass, Poland, 1994  
– Isla McKetta's Collection

**Your two upcoming books: one is fiction, one nonfiction. How different is it to write in these two genres?**

I've just released [Clear Out the Static in Your Attic](#) through Write Bloody Publishing, which is a book of writing prompts co-authored with Rebecca Bridge. We're both content strategists at Portent, Inc. and I spend a lot of time writing for the Internet in that breezy, accessible tone that offers helpful advice and (ideally) leaves the reader feeling like they've learned something. This nonfiction book carries that tone. In it we share the best writing advice we've learned and offer some exercises to help writers find the inspiration within. It was a fast and fun book to write (we started writing it in January 2013 and advance copies arrived on my doorstep in February 2014).

In contrast, writing [Polska, 1994](#), my novella, was the most delicious struggle. Both books required a process of taking information and distilling it, but with *Polska, 1994*, there was so much more for me to figure out along the way. I had to learn why I was writing the book and start to understand the questions I was asking. And then there's the process of creating characters and the plot. I was so much more involved and I worked on the book in various forms for roundabout 10 years. The story started to take shape while I was in graduate school at Goddard from 2008-10 and I've been polishing and honing the prose ever since. Once the story became whole, I started keeping a tally of drafts and I think the very last pass with my editor at Editions Checkpointed brought me up to number 23.

But I want to stress how wonderful all that work has been. I often say that writing is the hardest thing I've ever loved doing, and this process of exploration and the quest for perfection has really opened

me up as a human being. It's helped me become more empathetic and to grow up a little. It's helped me understand who I am and what are the fundamental questions I'm trying to answer in life.

### **What themes do you explore in your writing?**

The easy answers are love and loss, but of course it's more than that. I also struggle with silence and oppression. I was a shy, introverted kid from a family with Southern norms. Early on I got the message that if I smiled pleasantly and didn't say a word I was the best company in the world. I'm not at all saying that my parents weren't interested in me, but that quiet smile is still the first one I carry into any new encounter. What that means is that I often feel like people don't know the real me – that I have to stifle that person in order to be who the world wants me to be. You can imagine that what's resulted over the last thirtysome years is a feeling of being bottled up. This has made me interested in the ways we oppress each other and ourselves on a personal level. That shushing gesture from a parent to an older child or the way a wife looks at a husband to get him to change his behavior at a party.

I spent a year in Chile as a child while Pinochet was in power which was where I started to understand that oppression happens on a much larger scale. As Americans, we were protected, but I overheard enough to know about the protests and that people were rounded up in soccer stadiums and then disappeared. Some of the magic of being a kid is that I'm sure some of the information I heard is distorted or wrong in some way but it all seemed so vivid. I'm sure I didn't really process it at the time, but I developed a profound sense of injustice that was only deepened during the year I lived in Poland after the Cold War. This interest led me to pursue degrees in Political Science and Sociology as an undergrad. I thought I would change the world through working at an NGO or something, but over time I realized the best way for me to speak out was through writing.

I am also interested in truth. I come from a long line of storytellers and embellishers, which is a wonderful resource if you are a fiction writer, but I also found that I always want to know what the real truth is in the story. Sometimes that's getting the facts right and sometimes it's understanding the human truth.

**Polska, 1994 is an intense and lyrical coming-of-age story that draws from the recent history of Eastern Europe – from World War II to the resistance behind the Iron Curtain and the messiness of freedom once the borders imposed by the communist rule collapsed. Magda, the seventeen year-old protagonist, is strong and vulnerable, wise and naïve, loving and unable to see love – a complex hero who grabs the reader from the very first page and doesn't let go until her story is told and her voice heard. The word “voice” carries a lot of meaning in your story. There's a polarity that runs through every scene between “silence” and “voice.” How is this reflected in the structure of your book?**



The use of “voice” is twofold. The weird answer is that I have a visceral reaction to certain voices. The timbre of them either makes me weak in the knees or want to run. I've been really interested in that reaction and whether there is some phomonal secretion through speech or something. I haven't taken the time to delve into the science, but I did bring that feeling into the book with Magda's instant attraction to Jacek.

Photo 2 Skaters in Warsaw, 1994 – Isla McKetta's Collection

Secondly of course, the dichotomy between voice and silence gets down to exploring the issues I've discussed above – to speaking out. Magda's struggle is in many ways to break the silence of her family. I think she'd be almost as happy to find out what really happened as she would be if her mother stepped onto the doorstep. And silence can be one of the heaviest things. It's almost worse than a lie because you can convince yourself that a lie is true, but an imposed silence carries this weight of acknowledgement of what happened but we choose not speak of it. So Magda looks to the river for answers. Of course it cannot really answer her, but talking to the river gives Magda a way to break her own silence and to start to understand what she needs to know about her family and herself.

**Is the fascinating, almost subliminal appearance of the street musician tied into your silence/voice (be erased/be heard) story spine?**

I'm glad you asked about the musician. One of the things I loved most about writing this book (and I hope the next and every one thereafter) is the way that everything I'm reading, listening to, and experiencing converges at the right time. I'd been writing about how Magda was struggling with Jacek and with being a sexual being and there was this street musician that I encountered every day on my way to work. He started talking to me and at times made me profoundly uncomfortable. I didn't know how to handle the whole thing so I put someone like him in the book, playing, of course, *Murmures de la Seine*. He also reminded me of those side characters that Kieslowski sometimes uses in his films that serve no greater purpose than atmosphere, so I kept him.

**When I first read your book, it was called *Murmurs of the River*. How did you choose your final title, *Polska, 1994*?**

I wanted so badly for the title *Murmurs of the River* to stick, but the title has always been a struggle for this book. For years I had no idea what to call it. I figured that a title would come to me, so I just called the book *Polska*. Then as I neared what I thought was the end (ha!) of revising the book, I felt pressure to call it something. I came up with pages of ideas and thoughts that helped pick out some of the themes. But none of them sounded like a title. I decided for a while to call it *Murmurs of the River* because the music I went back to time and time again as I revised the book was Chopin's *Murmures de la Seine*. I listened to each of the three individual nocturnes on repeat in the background as I edited each of the three sections of my book. One day it hit me, in the way encountering foreign words sometimes does, that those pieces were about a river and my book was in many ways about a river, so...



**Photo 3 Toruń Skyline on the Shores of the Vistula (Wisła), Poland, 1994 – Isla McKetta's Collection**

But people hated the title. Or, worse, didn't care about it at all. I'd always assumed that a publisher would want to put their stamp on the book anyway so I let it go. My editor and I went back through the title process and then she read on my blog (<http://www.islamcketta.com>) about how I'd originally called the book *Polska* and got excited about that line of thought. I'd worried way back when the working title was *Polska* that it wasn't specific enough about the story or that it limited the audience too much.

But the book really is a portrait of Poland as I found it in 1994, so *Polska, 1994* it is.

**You spent a year in Toruń, Poland as an exchange student in 1994-5, when you were about Magda's age. How much did you remember about the life of a high school girl in Poland, and how much did you research anew when you put together your story? Did you find your memories of those times and places reliable? What made you excited to write the book in the first place?**

Nineteen ninety-four was a fascinating time to be in Poland. The Berlin Wall had been down long enough that people were realizing capitalism was not the answer to all the world's problems and yet the memory of the Soviet Union was still very fresh. I wanted to document what it felt like to live in that incredible time. But I also wrote the book because I loved the Polish people and I wanted to understand them better. Overall, and this is a wide generalization, but there was also this underlying sadness I was interested to explore. In Poland when someone asks how you are, it's rude to say you are well and people don't smile on the streets. There's also this incredible history of being betrayed by neighboring countries and sometimes by neighbors. Still, when you get to know Poles, they are deeply sincere and generous. I wanted to dig deeper into that and to celebrate it a little. I hope I've both been honest and done the country justice.

I remembered some things and more came to me as I wrote. Luckily I'd kept a diary while I was there. And the Internet was a godsend. There were places I remembered or had written about in my diary, but memory is tricky. I'd do a Google Image search for a particular place that I did not have photos of and just seeing the pictures brought back even more memories. I also keep in contact with a few people. But I did a ton of research for this book, too, especially at the outset before I knew what kind of story I wanted to tell. I read Norman Davies in particular and everything I could get my hands on about the history of the Polish resistance at the UW library. When I realized the crux of the story lay in the period from 1977-1994, I set aside some books about the Warsaw Uprising that I'm still excited to get back to. And I haven't been back to Poland since 1995 so the image of how it was then is the only image in my head. I think if I had visited again (which I do hope to do), writing this book set in one specific moment in time would have been harder.

There was a period of writing the book, too, where I had to let my story live on its own and I stopped reading about Poland then. But when I went back to re-edit the book after finding a publisher, the first thing I did was start reading Polish books and watching Polish films again. Now that the book is finished, the first thing I did was pick up more Polish books and movies. I am not Polish (although I am 1/4 Ukrainian) and I did not grow up there, but something about living among Poles stuck with me and shaped who I am. It's a part of me that I love, so it's been a pleasure to immerse myself in that again.

**Your story is part detective story, with Magda trying to piece together the story of her mother and also to disentangle the history of Poland in '81 (when there had been street riots and rubber bullets, and tear gas) from her family's history. How much of that history you knew before you spent time in Poland, how much you learned there, how much you discovered afterwards? What was your story of laying down Magda's story? Did you talk to many Polish people in preparation for this book? Did you study the history of the Solidarity and how it reached towns and cities outside Gdansk?**

I had some really great teachers when I was in Poland and people were very open about sharing their stories with me when I was there. They talked a lot to me about their experiences under the Soviet Union and some of the complexity of how things were changing with the Polish state. So when I started researching the book, I took the background of some of the stories that had stuck with me as

the basis for my research. It helped to focus on Toruń because it's someplace I knew well by the time I left, but almost all of the places in the book are places I've been to and photographed.

**You once mentioned that writing this book was a way to appreciate and understand the Polish culture that you loved when you were there. Did you partake of the customs and traditions of Poland, such as Wigilia or the Easter service?**

I was lucky enough to be welcomed into two families officially while I was there and many more unofficially. One set of drafts of this book was actually the process of laying out all the Polish things I had experienced and wanted to include in the book. It's interesting to me that what remains in the book of those traditions is more what I researched and less what I experienced. For example, we did a sort of Wigilia at the home where I was living, but I did not ever go to Mass on Christmas Eve or otherwise. And of Easter I experienced more of the big feast than the church service (although I have taken a basket to be blessed on the Saturday before Easter twice, once with a Polish family in Idaho and once in Poland). So most of the ceremonial aspect of the book is based on research I did. The lighted graveyard for All Soul's Day was something I participated in and which left a huge impression on me. But traditions like Andrzejki are included based solely on research. And at one point I thought I'd include Smigus Dingus (a day when boys pour water on girls for some reason I don't understand) or International Women's Day, but neither fit the story.

I was very glad that pisanki (intricately painting Easter eggs with wax and dye) fit the story, though, because it's a tradition my family kept from the Ukraine and it's something I do almost every year although my family is not at all religious.

**You mentioned once that you grew up without religion. How did the immersion in a culture that has such a long religious tradition shape or change your understanding of its history?**

I am fascinated by religion, and by the Catholic religion in particular. I remember watching my best friend in Chile cross herself as she prayed and knowing that I had to learn more. So being in a very Catholic country wasn't intimidating or anything. I wish, actually, that I'd participated in more ceremony while there. But I have enough reverence for religion that I never know where I fit in with a service, so I mostly avoid them. For example, I've never taken communion because I believe it's sacred, even though my own beliefs are less theist and more spiritual. Still, that gesture of crossing oneself is one I borrowed from my Chilean friend and Polish friends and it's something I use almost superstitiously (though shyly in the anti-religious Northwest).

What I loved about the Catholic Church in Poland was how much of a role it played in the political life as well as the religious one. By that I mean the stories of priests helping with the resistance or saving Jews in World War II (I know those stories go both ways). The US seems sometimes conflicted about how secular we want to be and in Poland it just wasn't a question. So it was interesting to see what that was like.

**Your novel develops like a musical piece. Can you talk a bit about the structure, the two voices used in the first part, the past and the present, and then the change of tense and pace as Magda completes her journey, in Part II?**

I always wish I had a better musical education, because I feel like there is something about the way music is structured that I intuitively understand and bring to my writing, but I don't have the language to talk about it in the way I would like.

The structure of the novel was a struggle for a long time, but finding Chopin's *Murmures de la Seine* was a big help in giving me a consistent key that I could return to whenever I was editing the book, no matter what was happening in the real world. At first I wanted the reader to go on a linear journey with Magda as she was spurred on her quest, but the tone wasn't right. It wasn't until I realized that Part I of the book should be told in retrospect that the feeling was right. As the action of the book moves forward, the reader is then immersed in how Magda got to the river (as remembered in past tense) and also the present tense moments when Magda is speaking to the river that break through the narrative. Part II then is in present tense as the action moves forward.

When I found the bits of poetry from Miłosz that serve as titles for the various chapters, I knew in my heart that all the pieces were in the right place, but some of the later drafts were focused on honing some time markers and things to help readers follow the train of events.

**You use cultural references that are both Polish and universal. Copernicus, Chopin, Polanski are Polish names that have universal recognition. By using them, and their boundary-breaking science or iconoclastic art you foreshadow Magda's journey through a world where the old rules don't apply anymore, but where there aren't good new rules to follow either. Did you choose your cultural references to mirror and enforce the exploratory aspect of Madga's journey?**

Wow, that's a fantastic question and I wish I had. I chose referents that meant something to me, which, in many cases were the ones who had reached prominence in western culture. I think it says something about the Polish culture, though, that there are all these amazing scientists and artists who emerge from there and then achieve that kind of acclaim in their respective fields. Maybe it's true of all countries and I'm just more attuned to Poland. At various times I included some less recognizable names (like the bands Kult and Varius Manx), but not all of them survived the litany of drafts.

Because this is a book written in English, by an American, about Poland, I never assumed that the main audience was Polish. That changes the shape of the book. For example, passages that explain Polish history are just a way to get myself in trouble with a Polish audience because they have the depth of knowledge that I do not. But for an American audience, that history gives essential context.

**What's the greatest piece of writing advice you've ever received?**

The greatest writing advice I ever received, and there are so many I've passed along in *Clear Out the Static*, is from [Micheline Aharonian Marcom](#). She talks about revising as a process of raking a garden. First you work out the boulders, the things that are obviously in the way, then you work on the pebbles and get them in the right place. Eventually you are working with the sand.

That advice helped me stay sane through the various drafts of this book, because at first I wanted all the language to be perfect so I'd clean it and make it beautiful. But then the scene had to move or be taken out or fundamentally changed. I was trying to rake the sand and there were all these boulders in the way. Micheline helped me trust that I would still remember to fix those things in a later draft.

**What's your next project?**

I'm writing about love and the various ways we change ourselves to be loved. The book is in a very rough state and for a few months I thought it might turn into a book of poems, but now I think it will be a novel or novella. Honestly, at this point after months of editing two books and the months ahead of marketing them, I'm really just excited to get back to writing, period. [END]

Interview retrieved from <http://roxanaarama.com/2014/03/07/author-interview-isola-mcketta-writing-history/>

An excerpt of *Polska, 1994* is also available on [Cecile's Writers' Magazine](#).

*Polska, 1994* will be released in French on 26 June 2014.

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