

Grant Recipient Spotlight

Maria Bouroncle: Giving Voice to History

Maria Bouroncle has written full-time since 2019. Her trilogy about young women in early 20th-century life has been adapted for film, translated into several languages, and is taught at UCLA. A multi-award winner in Finland, Sweden, and the United States, she is currently Writer in Residence at the University of Michigan's Scandinavian Program, where she teaches Swedish literature and creative writing. Born in Gothenburg, she has lived in Washington, D.C., since 2002.



The phone rings at the Nordic Investment Bank in Helsinki, where **Maria Bouroncle** has been working for several years. It's a sunny afternoon in May 1999. "Did you know that Aunt Ingeborg drowned her three children?" her cousin Kristina asks when Maria picks up.

Kristina, who works at a hospital in southwestern Sweden, has just heard the story from a patient. The events took place in the village of Vesene on a cold Easter morning in 1929.

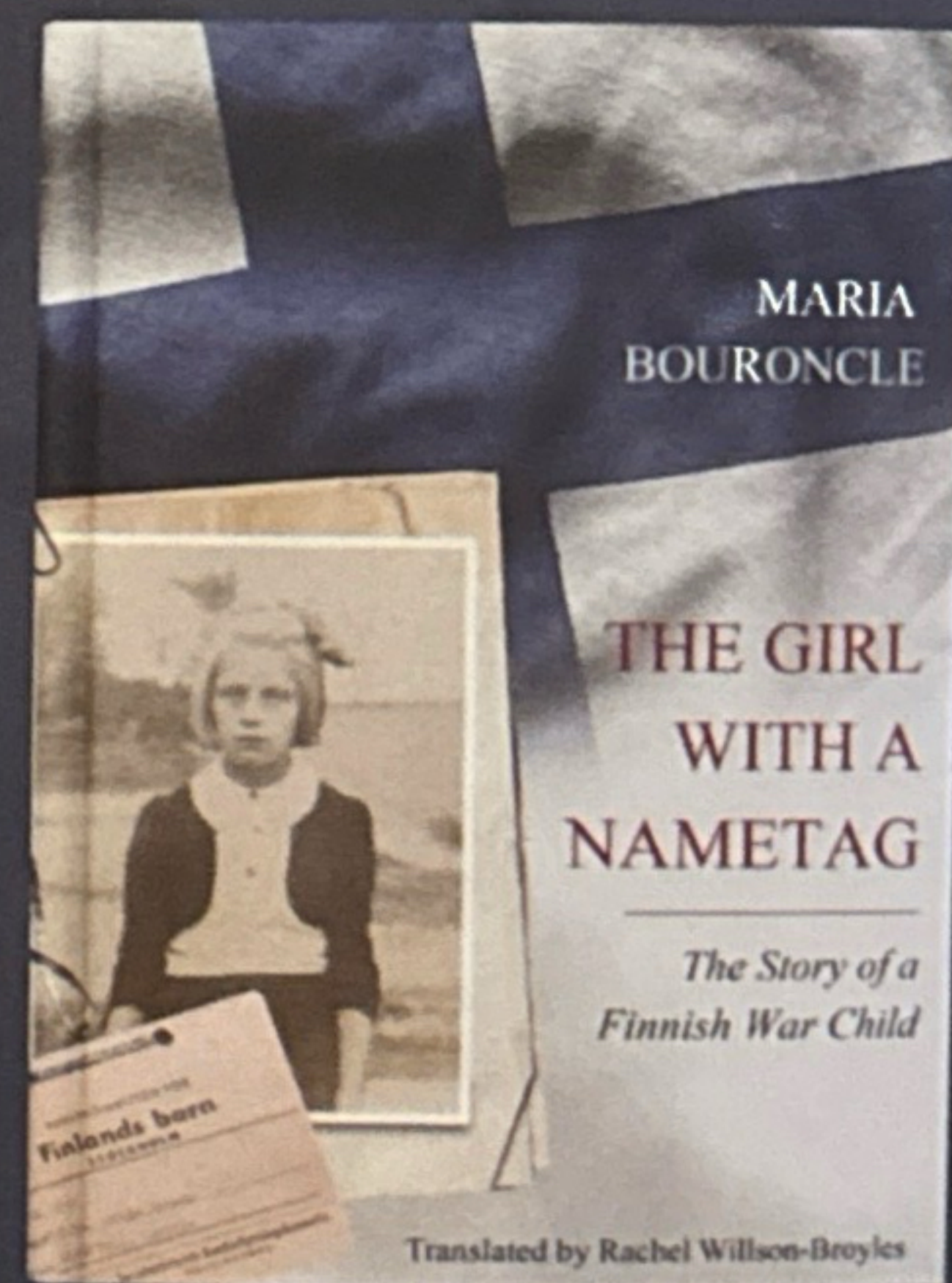
At the time, Maria is a young mother of two and struggles to process what she has just heard. She has grown up knowing Ingeborg, her grandmother's sister, and believes she knows her very well. Yet she has no idea Ingeborg has been married, or that she has had any children. No one in the family has ever mentioned their names: Tor, Efraim, and Lucia.

In 2002, Maria moves from Helsinki to Washington, D.C., to work for the Inter-American Development Bank, and it will be another ten years before she asks her mother about the events of Easter 1929. Her mother, who was only two years old at the time, doesn't remember anything.

Five years later, Maria begins researching the case. She studies police interrogations, medical records, and Ingeborg's letters from the women's prison in Växjö. She travels across Sweden, retracing Ingeborg's steps. The need to document becomes increasingly urgent, as she wants to understand how a woman she cares so deeply about could commit such a terrible crime.

Nearly two decades after that phone call, *It Came to Me on a Whim: The Story of Ingeborg Andersson, Child Murderess* is published on December 8, 2018. The launch is held at Gäsene courthouse, the very place where Ingeborg was declared not guilty "due to insanity and lack of reason" in September 1929. The setting echoes the past: freshly ironed linen cloths cover the tables and trumpet lilies fill the room with their strong scent, just as they did at the children's funeral ninety years earlier.

Family members, neighbors, and others with ties to the area gather to talk about the children and their mother. After decades of silence, memories begin to surface.



A photo of Hilja (to the left) with her parents and two older siblings, Erkki and Sylvi, in front of their house in Kivennapa before she left for Sweden in 1944.

Among those present is an 86-year-old woman, **Hilja Nordner**. She recalls Ingeborg's former husband, Artur, and a long ago visit to the cemetery. As a child, she once heard about three murdered children, but like others in the village, she never spoke of it again—until now.

Only when Hilja mentions her maiden name, Kouhia, does Maria realize who she is: one of the approximately 70,000 Finnish children evacuated to Sweden during World War II. As a 12-year-old, she was taken in by Artur and his new wife, and her life would later become the basis for Maria's second novel, **The Girl with a Name Tag: The Story of a Finnish War Child**.

Hilja was born on August 23, 1932, in Kivennapa, Karelia. In October 1939, when she was seven, the family's newly built home was destroyed by Soviet bombing. Like some 420,000 Finns, her family was evacuated from Karelia. After the Winter War ended in March 1940, the territory was ceded to the Soviet Union.

Over the next two and a half years, the family moved repeatedly across the Savo region: from Joroinen to Mäntyharju, from Mäntyharju to Valtola, from Valtola to Pyhäkoski, and from Pyhäkoski to Asikkala. In June 1942, they returned to Karelia, which Finland had retaken during the Continuation War. Hilja and her siblings—Erkki, Sylvi, Antti, and Sirkka—lived with their grandparents, while their father rebuilt their home on the remains of the barn.

But the return was short-lived. Within a year, the Red Army advanced again, forcing the family to flee. Hilja's father was sent to the front, and she was evacuated to Sweden through the Red Cross. **The Girl with a Name Tag** begins as she arrives in Vesene on September 10, 1944, after several days of travel and two weeks of quarantine.

"Hilja is no longer with us, but **The Girl with a Name Tag**, recently published in English thanks to a generous grant from Finlandia Foundation National, would not have been possible without her support", says Maria.

When the Finnish edition was released last year, she returned to Helsinki for the first time in 23 years—the city where her daughter Linnéa was born and her son Sebastian learned to ride a bicycle. For Maria, the past is never really past—it's just waiting to be found.



A photo of Hilja in 2019 (1932–2024).

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IN ENGLISH



IN FINNISH



A photo of the cathedral in her hometown, Kivennapa in Karelia, Finland (part of Russia since 1944).



A photo of Torpåkra station, Sweden, where her new family picked her up and where the book begins.



A photo of Haggården, her new home in the village of Vesene, Sweden, as it looks today.