

By Shari Narine

A creative writing class, the love of minor hockey, and determination have all come together to create Jennifer Jeffrey's first juvenile fiction novel.

"I felt I had a story and I wouldn't give up on it. I felt I wanted to capture this hockey world and I was just simply going to do it," said Jeffrey, who lives in Calgary.

Mattie and the Wolverines is the account of second year peewee (now referred to as Under-13 or U13) player Mattie Keller, who wants desperately to make the elite Wolverine team while struggling against the unwanted attentions of Kevin, an older boy who dislikes Mattie. Surrounding Mattie is his best friend Garrett, who geeks out for music as much as hockey, and Mattie's older sister Hallie, who is tired of hockey, but appreciates her brother's love for the game. And when it looks as if the Wolverines hockey program will only survive if the club joins with archrivals the Bashers, Hallie springs into action with an extraordinary plan.

Jeffrey is no stranger to writing having earned first honourable mention (Kay Parley Prize) in Canadian Stories' creative non-fiction category in 2016. In fact, Jeffrey's writing has appeared in two issues of Calgary Hockey Magazine. One of her articles, "Farewell to Hockey for Now," was a reflection on how she had enjoyed being a "hockey mom" and how "gut-wrenching" it was when her son Alastair stopped playing.

It was this love of hockey culture that spurred Jeffrey on.

Mattie's adventures first found voice around 2014 as a comic strip, with Jeffrey drawing "stick figures." Then it came to life as a graphic novel, once more with stick figures. These configurations were presented more as funny vignettes. Then on the advice of her daughter Imogen that every book needed a plot, Jeffrey started writing a novel. At about that time, she had enrolled in a creative writing class at Mount Royal University.

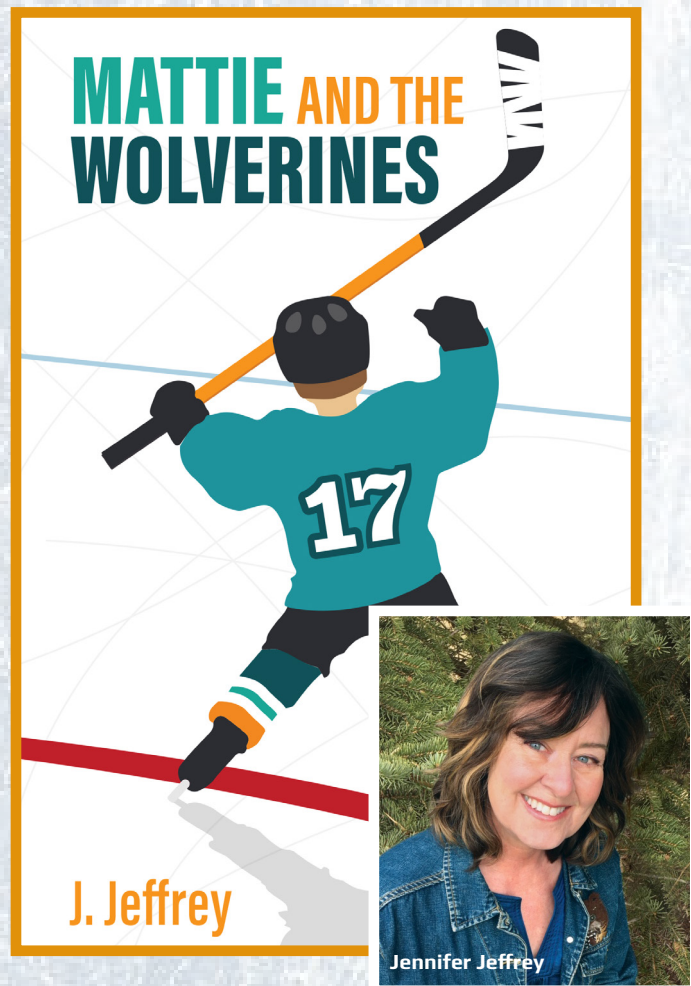
Jeffrey admits writing a novel was "super challenging" compared to creating the graphic novel. "Someone has likened (writing novels) to digging ditches. To me, I use the analogy (that) you're doing a huge big puzzle, but you're also making a puzzle. It's very hard work, very," she said.

Mattie and the Wolverines is geared toward readers ages nine to 13 years old. Jeffrey said she found few hockey stories aimed at this age group.

But more than that, it's an age group that Jeffrey, who has a degree in child studies (as well as art history) finds is a "delightful, delightful" time of growing up.

"I think that's the age when kids' personalities are starting to come through and it's a fun age. It's a challenging age. I think there's a lot of challenges coming up for young adolescents. The hockey crowd is, of course, a very lively bunch. I guess I thought it would be fun to write a story for kids around that age," she said.

With that in mind, Jeffrey is careful to create characters who break stereotypes that are still too common in today's society. Hallie's friend Megan is a hockey player, who after playing in the boys' league up to the second year of U13 has now joined the girls' league and Hallie's babysitting "gang" has a boy interested in joining. Mattie's best friend Garrett is First Nations and Mattie's tormentor Kevin plays hockey, but his passion lies in cooking.



"Why I wrote this age (is that) I think that kids are really finding themselves, their self-expression, how to bolster their self-esteem. They're starting to think of goals and things," said Jeffrey. "I tried to break those stereotypes a little bit and just allow for the fact that, come on, we all have interests and whatever they are that's fine."

Perhaps the most delightful aspect of *Mattie and the Wolverines* is the easy way in which Jeffrey weaves hockey slang into the everyday conversations of Mattie and his friends. In fact, the novel includes a glossary for hockey terms. Jeffrey got help with that from her son and his friend, who also served as her technical advisor.

"If anybody had ever told me I would have written a hockey book years ago, I would have thought it not likely," said Jeffrey but admits that she plans to write a sequel. That will be, no doubt, welcome news to those who read the novel as it ends on two cliffhangers: how do the Wolverines do over the course of the season and does the club manage to succeed without having to join the Bashers?

Jeffrey may self-publish the sequel, too. She approached a handful of traditional publishers for *Mattie and the Wolverines* and had been hopeful that talks with Coteau Publishers would have been successful. However, shortly after those talks began, Coteau stopped publishing.

Mattie and the Wolverines will be available initially through the online Friesen bookstore and then available for order online (and perhaps in select stores) through Chapters/Indigo, Amazon, and Barnes & Noble.

Interested readers can also check out Jeffrey at jjeffreywriter.com and on Instagram at [_jennifer_robin](https://www.instagram.com/_jennifer_robin).