

# An Interview

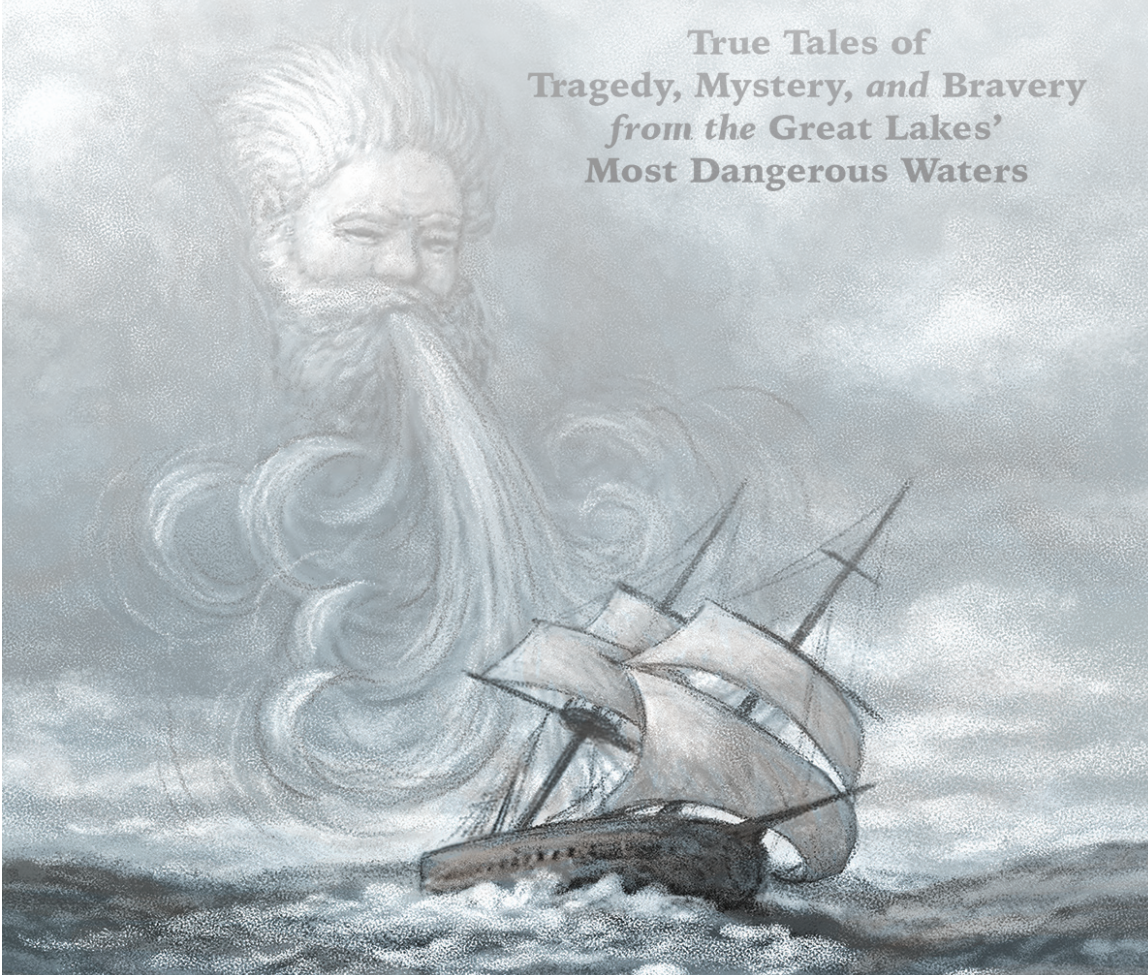
with

## Barbara Joosse



*Death's Da*

True Tales of  
Tragedy, Mystery, and Bravery  
from the Great Lakes'  
Most Dangerous Waters





**WHS Press** What inspired you to write *Death's Door*?

The name. What reader wouldn't want to find out about a passage called "Death's Door"?

Also, I've often heard the phrase, "If these walls could talk!" So, I thought: What if this dangerous and mysterious passage could talk? What if it remembered the tragedies on

its water. What would it say? Would it have feelings?

And then, what about the people? Very quickly, the story became less about the passage itself, and more about the people who formed the Midwest—the hardy, innovative, brave, greedy, intrepid souls who became the bedrock of who we are!



**WHS Press** What do you hope your readers will take away from reading this book?

Two things:

1. Nature—Death's Door—can't help what it is. It's up to us to adapt to

nature, not ask nature to adapt to us. This is environmental wisdom at its best.

2. Modern readers are not so different from people of another time.



**WHS Press** How has your experience as a best-selling author influenced your approach to creating *Death's Door*?

After 57 books and 50 years of writing fiction, I wanted to use my talents as a fiction writer to tell this history in an engaging and exciting way. And I love love love Wisconsin, my home state. This is a labor of love.





**WHS Press** *Death's Door* is filled with fascinating historical details. How did you go about the research and how did you choose which stories to include?

I have to say, the research was tough! Publications from the Wisconsin Historical Society Press must be historically accurate, and that meant I had to back up words with facts. That's hard for a fiction writer. But eventually I developed a nose for sniffing out good historical stories—and this

passage has lots of them. I used libraries, archives, museums, interviews, and the internet, as well as exploring the area on my own.

Choosing the stories was pretty simple. I wanted a range—a mosaic—that showed the *reasons* people took the passage: greed, love, cabin fever, duty. So, variety. Then, I wanted to feel my heart beat faster when I thought about each story. I wanted to toss and turn in bed because the story swept through my restless brain at night.



**WHS Press** What is the most surprising or interesting thing you learned while writing the book.

I simply could not believe the stories of the mail carriers. These came from an obscure publication, *Going for the Mail*, a history of Door County/Washington Island postal carriers. Henry Miner's amazing story is just

one of many, and they were all breathtaking. Luckily, this little gem of a publication includes the carriers' own words, including Henry Miner's. Otherwise, I doubt I could have guessed that this eight-day trip was truly taken in temperatures of thirty degrees below zero. Or that Henry ate fat pork and molasses as he trekked to keep up his strength! Not even a fiction writer could make that stuff up!



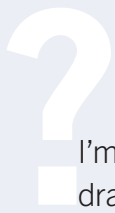


**WHS Press** Do you have a favorite adventure of your own on the Great Lakes?

I live on the harbor in Port Washington, Wisconsin. I see the moods of the lake, up close and personal. And I walk along the lake every day. But I'm a landlubber.

To get the feeling of the passage, I booked a kayak trip along Death's Door.

My darling granddaughter, Lucia, was my kayak partner, a position she has probably lived to regret. We paddled zigzag fashion, never keeping up with the group, laughing all the way at our complete and total incompetence! We were able, despite our handicap, to see the bones of shipwrecks and the amazing pictographs along the cliff wall.



**WHS Press** Are there other questions that you wish someone would ask?

I'm so mindful of the techniques that can draw in my readers. I really wanted to encourage readers to participate in the reading—to stop and think about what they would do in any particular situation. So, I often included the words listen, look, and think.

Renée Graef, the illustrator, took a similar approach by separating panels, sometimes using as many as four panels to illustrate one very short sentence. Here's an example

where both techniques were used. We wanted to demonstrate the essence of cabin fever, a feeling familiar to modern readers when they feel trapped inside their rooms or homes. Renée used five panels to draw out the feeling:

1. Feel it!
2. The creepy crawlies, like mosquitos buzzing under your skin.
3. Like you can't stand one more minute on the island
4. One more minute
5. Staring at the walls of your room.