

Writer Amy Thomas recently moved to Moscow, Russia with her family. She took time out of a busy winter day to talk with Angela Cerrito about writing, networking, inspiration and culture.

**How is living in a foreign country influencing your writing?**

I've thought about this a lot. I think there are two main things.

One is I've slowed down on submitting. When I read over my work now I look at it and notice, "This is really American." I think being here and being I writer, I've noticed that there are some things we all have in common as human beings. Other things are purely American. Many people live in an urban environment. Story I'm working on now that was in suburban setting. Now I'm revising and the setting is urban setting. I think it will work in the European market too. When I look at my work, I ask myself: *Will my neighbor understand this? What assumptions am I making? How can I explain this and make it more universal?*

The second thing I've noticed is the notion of community is coming out a lot more in my writing. It is very important in the Russian culture more so than anywhere else I've lived in the US. In Montana there might be a thousand acres between you and your neighbor but you have your eye on each other. There is something comforting in community here even though the distance is much closer. And the idea of community, community experience, traditions and community in daily life is strong.

**How long do you plan to live in Moscow?** About 3 to 5 years

**Have you had opportunities to connect with other writers outside the US?**

We're starting a Moscow critique group through SCBWI in January. Everyone knows English, but the people have a different background from freelance magazine work to screenplays and we are all working on projects for children now.

**Tell me about the sequester in France:**

It was wonderful. There was so much information and in a short time frame. I'm certain that I'm going to look back on it and say it was a turning point for my writing. I think what was helpful was to hear from experts in their field – illustration, translation, editing, writing. Whatever that aspect we could hear from that person, then have a meal together, and then free time to follow up after you've had time to reflect on what they said. Having that extra time really helped. I was able to come down to breakfast and meet with an editor who was going through manuscripts. Talking to experienced writers and getting their professional advice was really helpful. I came home and once a week I read through my notes and decide the next thing I want to work on. For example, I've re-written a story in storyboard form. One person suggested adding elements from my own childhood. I've re-written it again. I don't think I would have thought on my own to try those two directions. I'm taking more risks with my writing and starting to feel comfortable with that. The methods are uncomfortable... but the results are becoming more comfortable.

I'm making serious revisions and it isn't easy. I'm learning how to change sentences that I love but don't connect to the reader. I'm being bold about changing. The best part of the sequester was having the variety of people there. Writers at different points in their careers, editors, illustrators, even a translator. We talked about the cadence of our work – and how music influences mood. The cadence and the rhythm can affect the tone and work of your story. Everything, everyone was amazing and very helpful.

**What are you working on now?**

A warm story about snow. This is a picture book. We were in Montana and South Carolina and now Moscow. So our time in the south was bookended by these snowy places. It always surprised me when people in the south said they don't like snow. It inspired me to write this story.

**Is it a challenge submitting work from overseas?**

I have some projects that are submission ready. Excited about upcoming Bologna conference, just love the list of speakers and know they'll have great suggestions for my work. I'm considering waiting until after the Bologna conference to send out submissions again. Life here in Russia is less hurried than in the US. We send mail out only once a week – on Tuesdays and it takes three weeks to receive it. I take my time. If I miss a Tuesday, I know I can always send it next week. It's the same thing with trains. They have a schedule, but if you miss yours there's another one coming soon, you don't have to wait a half an hour. In a way it feels like I have more time.

Amy's website: <http://www.amynthomas.com/>