

THE

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HOW A POET MUST



Steven Heighton (1961–2022) was the author of nineteen books, including Writers' Trust Hilary Weston Prize finalist Reaching Mithymna: Among the Volunteers and Refugees on Lesbos and The Waking Comes Late, winner of the Governor General's Award for poetry. He was working with editor John Metcalf on a new collection of short fiction when he passed away from pancreatic cancer in April 2022. Instructions for the Drowning will be published posthumously in October 2022.

IT WAS WITH GREAT shock and sadness that I learned of the passing last evening of Steven Heighton. We knew that he was ill, though we hadn't for long. We were certain that he—and we—had more time. His partner Ginger Pharand called it “a forest fire of an illness,” and so it must have been. On February 17 he wrote to say that he'd “just been back from the hospital: barium smoothie and a 12 minute x-ray. It was surprisingly fun. It's a merry crew in the imaging department.” You can hear Steve's usual spirit, playful even in the midst of anxiety. When I inquired about his health he said that there was little to worry about, that the x-ray indicated that there was nothing life-menacing causing the pain he'd been living with. On antibiotics, he was looking forward to a month without weed or alcohol. We found out later that it was indeed

life-menacing, but the prognosis still gave him a year, perhaps longer. If anyone was going to defy such a prognosis, wouldn't it have been Steve? He was, if not quite youthful, then ageless.

I didn't get a lot of time in his presence. We ran into each other here and there over the years, at festivals, events, once at the Ottawa ceremony for the Governor General's Award, the only time I ever saw him in a suit. When we launched his *Reaching Mithymna: Among the Volunteers and Refugees on Lesvos* we were in the middle of the pandemic, and the launch and even the Weston Writers' Trust ceremony, after the book was nominated for the organization's nonfiction prize, were virtual. It was a disappointment, not being able to get together with him to celebrate *Reaching Mithymna*, but we had other books, there would be other times. We'd met the first time a little more than 20 years ago, before Biblioasis existed as a press, when I invited him to Bookfest Windsor in support of his new novel, *The Shadow Boxer*. At the afterparty in his Al Purdy shirt—there's a fine essay here on his relationship to that piece of clothing—black jeans and some sort of cowboy boots (though perhaps my memory is playing tricks), he looked to me like some kind of earnest punk, by which I mean to pay him the highest compliment: think of a slightly older Joe Strummer. He could certainly be mischievous—and we got up to some hijinx that night, playing a prank on a former schoolmate of his turned professor who had since Steve last knew him acquired a British accent—but it was a gentle brand of mischief, one that took a great deal of joy in the absurdity of the world, and of the literary world in particular. He was humble, self-deprecating, and obviously interested in everything, and in everyone, surrounding him. Care, concern, emanated. There are those writers, and we all know who they are, who work to keep the spotlight on themselves at all costs; others, far more rare, willing to divert that light elsewhere: Steven for me is one of only a handful of the latter.

If he was ageless, it was because of these qualities: he hadn't hardened yet into any encrusted position. Being humble, he was still too curious about the world, willing to learn, try new things, consistently aware of what he didn't know, hence he remained

a touch more malleable than some of his other age-sharpened peers. He worked successfully across a range of forms, poetry, short stories, novels, and music, one feeding and bleeding into the next. He worked at translation throughout his career (he called these mistranslations) to be closer to the poets he most admired, and his versions of Paul Celan, Arthur Rimbaud, Osip Mandelstam and others (all gathered in House of Anansi's *Selected Poems* 1983–2020) opened their work to me for the first time: full-bodied and felt, there's no typical translator distance with these poems. Celebrated as a novelist, I think he truly excelled in the shorter forms: he was one of our best poets, a masterful

*Steven Heighton made us better, as publishers,
as people. I can see from the tributes that have
met his passing we're far from alone in this.*

short story writer, a playful essayist. His first two short story collections, *Flight Paths of the Emperor* and *On Earth as It Is*, rank as among the strongest collections published in the last quarter of the previous century in this country; and 2012's *The Dead Are More Visible* is quite easily one of the best of this century. It received universal praise: "The best stories in this book," Jeet Heer wrote in the *National Post*, "are as good as the fiction of Alice Munro or Mavis Gallant. Or, to be more blunt, Heighton is as good a writer as Canada has ever produced"; "As good," Mark Medley agreed in the *Globe and Mail*, "a short story writer as anyone not named Munro... The best (living) author never to have won a Giller Prize." He was working on the edits to his next collection, *Instructions for the Drowning*, when the forest fire struck: it causes me immeasurable sadness that he won't be present to launch the book with us.

It's a strange thing to develop a relationship with writers through publishing their books. There are these intense periods of daily, more than daily contact, for weeks, months, sometimes as much as a year, before a bit more distance enters, you hear from one another less frequently, having less reason to do so, un-

til the next book, and the cycle begins to quicken again. What we were most looking forward to with Steven was the next book, and not only because it promised to be spectacular: it was to work with him, to have reason once again to be in even closer contact, to share jokes and asides and encouragement. To finally spend a bit more time with him, in our backyard or his, coffee or wine or whiskey as the occasion warranted. But also because the next book promised to be spectacular, sparking the missionary element of our vocation: with *Instructions for the Drowning* we were going to work our asses off to try and finally bring him the readership he deserved. As we will, being the least we can do, and what Steve deserves. So: if you're reading this, go read him instead.

Steven Heighon made us better, as publishers, as people. I can see from the tributes that have met his passing we're far from alone in this. He challenged and encouraged in equal measure, almost always getting the balance right. In this age of ironic detachment he risked being earnest, vulnerable, showing care and concern; "hardened against carious / words, spurious charms," there was about him nothing counterfeit; he worked and worried about making the world a better place to be; worried about how he, and all of us, should move through it. And goddamn it is he going to be missed.

DAN WELLS, PUBLISHER
WINDSOR, APRIL 20, 2022



AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK MCCABE

PATRICK MCCABE *was born in Clones, County Monaghan. He is the author of Booker-shortlisted The Butcher Boy, which won the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for Fiction; The Dead School; Breakfast on Pluto, also shortlisted for the Booker Prize; and Poguemahone, out now from Biblioasis. He lives in Dublin.*

By way of Montreal (and Brooklyn, and Montclair, New Jersey), EMILY MERNIN joined Biblioasis as a publicist in January and

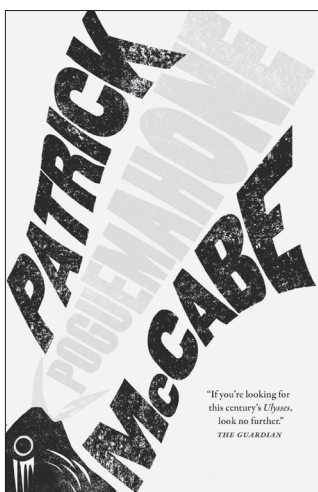
exponentially improved our emoji efficacy, gluten free baking, and daily mile count, to say little of our media campaigns and author interviews.

EMILY MERNIN: *Tell me a bit about yourself.*

PATRICK MCCABE: Well, I suppose I have been a full-time writer for twenty years now. I used to do other jobs, but they are not of any interest to either me or your public. I suppose I have written a lot about contemporary Ireland, the ancient world, and the interplay between them.

EM: *How does the ancient world—folklore, myth—influence your work?*

PM: I was brought up on the Catholic Gaelic tradition, you know, which is filled with all sorts of contemplations of alternate worlds and alternative realities and that is always really appealing to a child. In my case, it became comingled with what we call the “culture of the degraded image.” Popular culture like horror movies, comic fiction, tv, all sorts of things. The various manifestations and expressions of the inexplicable in the modern world and the ancient world became one for me. That is very true of *Pogue Mahone*. It is ancient folklore and contemporary folklore performing a progressive music dance.



There is also an element of hilarity and self-parody as well. I suppose what I like to do in fiction is to do battle with the English language. There is a sympathetic understanding between the two languages—that is to say Gaelic and the English language—in the book but also a kind of mischievous duet. It has been said that the characters speak in English but feel in Irish. Feel in Gaelic, in the Catholic Gaelic tradition, but speak in the Anglo-Saxon, more pragmatic, straight-talking tradition. There is a lot of that kind of dancing going on. Language dancing around itself, as it were.

EM: *It is evident on the page and, well, in moments where characters don't realize they have slipped into Gaelic. Those moments are very poignant.*

PM: Well, it is a serious book and, poignant is what I was looking for. It is ultimately about the greatest horror I've ever experienced, which is Alzheimer's. I haven't experienced this personally, but I have been very close to it. If in the ancient world people said a spell had been cast either on a person, or a town, it might seem to the rational or contemporary mind to be a ludicrous superstition. But, when you are close to Alzheimer's, it is as good an explanation as any. Because that is what it looks like.

In the age of TikTok and in the age of the information superhighway, we know everything and we know nothing more than the ancients really. A simple plague can knock everything out. If this had been a bubonic plague, none of these things would have counted for anything. They would have just been toys. It might happen yet.

EM: *Yes, it might happen yet. I mean, it is obviously a raucous book. But I found it to be quite serious throughout.*

PM: It's meant to be deadly serious—it is the most serious book I've ever written. The overlay of hilarity, self-mockery, and parody is just that: an overlay. The subterranean river running through it is one of dread.

EM: *My next question is about your narrator—*

PM: I've been married for a long time, 40 or 50 years now. I've got 2.5 grandchildren, there is one coming in May. I'm sort of a traditional anarchist, as it were. Imaginatively anarchistic, socially traditional. I like order. It is very easy to be anarchic in your imagination if you are ordered in your life. If you are disordered in your life, all hell breaks loose on both fronts. I like steadiness.

EM: *When I was reading, I couldn't help but think of Joyce, Nabokov, especially when thinking about Dan, and the role he plays as the narrator—*

PM: As a young man I was very influenced by both of those writers. I suppose who you encounter first leaves a lasting mark. I read all of Nabokov's work, some of it I liked more than others. I mean I found *Invitation of a Beheading* impenetrable. But the other ones are linguistically very exciting. It is all about language in a way for me in the end. If you get the beat and the rhythm and timbre of a language right, the novel usually emerges through the language, through the cracks between the words. I don't start off with a story, I never have an idea of where it is going to go. I just follow the language.

This book started off as a traditional, chapter-based book. When I saw what I had, I was in despair, and felt like tearing the whole thing up. I didn't like it, didn't think it was original enough, and then a couple of things happened that kind of released the book. It was like an emotional pressure valve that, when released, the book came out. And it came out in an entirely different form than originally anticipated.

And that was very true with this, you know. A lot of it is set in the 70s and to the kind of rhythm of the 70s, like Dylan's "Desolation Row" or the poetry of Gregory Corso and William Burroughs. It is at once an homage and a means of acknowledging the rhythms of an age which, for me, release the emotions of an age.

A prospective publisher said to me: "I don't understand why it is written in this middle of the page kind of poetic style." I said, "Well you know, if it is good enough for Ginsberg, it is good enough for me. If it is good enough for TS Eliot, it is good enough for me. But also, didn't you know that Irish Leprechauns

“speak in iambic pentameter?” And he said, “No I didn’t,” and I said, “Well they do, and I’ve seen them.” At that point, he terminated the phone call.”

EM: *Yes, well, I am a reader of poetry first and I think, you know, opening a 600-page book of poetry can be daunting for anyone, at first. But it immediately became viscerally clear why you chose this form.*

PM: Yes, well, I completely understand those concerns. If it is difficult to read a 600-page book of poetry, it is equally daunting to write it. I didn’t want to write it unless the story barreled along and was very clear. I am no fan of opaque epics. I love poetry but if something is keeping the reader out, rather than bringing the reader in, particularly now more than in any other age, it is already lost. Because of the proliferation of visceral imagery now, you notice at the theatre or movies, the audience will give [something] ten minutes before glazing over, unless there is something going on that is of interest to them.

So we are in a different time, concentration-wise. I was well aware of what the challenges would be. But I think once I got the note struck, whoever is going to be interested in this, they are not going to be willfully excluded from anything I have to say.

EM: *Yeah, well it is quite stunning, and, in that way, very clear.*

PM: That is very important. Nothing maddens me more than a poem that eludes you unnecessarily when you could have been brought into everyone’s advantage, especially the author’s.

EM: *When you were thinking about Dan, as the speaker, was it important that he was unstable, unreliable?*

PM: If you think about what is happening, it is like a basilisk or a virus (to which we are all accustomed now) has gotten loose. It is the basilisk of vascular dementia, and you don’t know what way that is going to go. You don’t know if what you are being told is

the truth, or if it is one time the truth, and next time not the truth. That is the way that affliction works.

It is also an allusion to general apprehensions of reality. The way, say, a Gaelic Catholic sees the world is not the way, say, an Indian Hindu sees the world. Is a tree the same thing to everyone? What is a tree anyway? Who calls it a tree?

These things only become apparent as you get older and you see them collapse. Like the foundation pillars that maybe held a person's life both intellectually and theologically together crumbling in front of them. What was once very familiar is now terrifying, strange, maybe amusing, but it's not the thing that was there

*"I suppose really what this story is, is one of exile
and heartbreak. You've been exiled from yourself,
that is the ultimate exile, isn't it?"*

before. So what is it? So then it's very important that the narrator had a multistranded view. And the person that he's representing—or is he representing?—what is her reality now?

It is as big a book as it is because the number of questions it is taking on is quite a lot for me. Normally, the focus is narrower than that. This one, you've got two narrators in one, in a way. You've got the Spanish/Portuguese element which represents the dreamlike world of the Latin which is very close, I find, to the Catholic Gaelic, one in that rationality moves in and out of itself all of the time. It is colourful. Linguistically it is impish, daring, and challenging in a way that perhaps the Anglo-Saxon Canadian/American anglophile world, shall we say, is not. Not that either is better or worse, they are just different.

You find those differences between Ireland and England. Superficially, they seem the same, until you start listening, and digging a bit, and you see curious gaps. Interesting gaps.

Those are minor explorations though. I suppose really what this story is, is one of exile and heartbreak. You've been exiled from yourself, that is the ultimate exile, isn't it?

EM: *That was my next question: exile and the role it plays in your work. I know Fogarty—the last name of your main characters—translates to “exiled” in Gaelic. I’ve read quite a bit of exile literature, rarely from Ireland. A lot of German literature. I know there are many different ways to approach the subject. Exile from the self, the country, what kind of country you are talking about, what the historical conditions of exile are. . .*

PM: I love that tradition of European literature. There is an element there of stark, bony exile feel. But then there is the florid Latin/Gaelic, that is equally trying to lasso the notion of exile but is expressing it in an entirely different way. But you are still left with the empty room of Kafka in the soul. Had there been anybody there at all? Did you imagine the whole story? Where did the story come from? Fogarty also means outlaw, being on the fringe, on the perimeter of society. But what is society? Is it made up of individuals? Which brings us to Camus. I’ve been interested in *L’Étranger*—a couple different translations of it.

One translation would open: “Mother died yesterday.” Okay, that is one. Another translation would be: “My mother died yesterday.” Straight away you have two different books, haven’t you? They are both dealing with exile. So, “Mother died yesterday” is the more European, Anglo-Saxon statement of fact. Three words. But then, when you add “my,” it personalizes it, which is the way the Irish mind would approach it. It brings it to the village.

But it doesn’t matter which way you express it, really. The exile is still the same. You are left alone. So, definitely, there is an element of *The Waste Land*. Who knows anyone? Who knows oneself?

These are such heavy questions. I couldn’t have written them except for in the style in which they emerged, a rainbow river that tumbles and torrents along. It had to come out for me that way, all these other things were buried deep. The form helped them to be released.

EM: *Do you think the condition of their being in exile helped you work out other themes that exile compounds? Like madness, alienation, isolation?*

PM: If you look at any of my humble offerings. There is always an element of someone being at the centre of things, but they're not. And they know they're not. In *The Butcher Boy*, there is the illusion of being happy-go-lucky, but in fact the soul is desolate. You will often find, particularly if you examine Irish history, expressions that there is some terrible loss. Maybe even just in the biblical sense, as simple as banishment from the Garden of Eden. A sense of what is missing. People search for it in good work, love, God. It often eludes them.

It seems to me, having come through a God-centered world and now, in its absence, that the exile may be far deeper than we have begun to realize.

The world as it reconfigures itself and moves at such a speed, there are sometimes in the secular world when people seem to me to speak with enormous authority without any great information. Unbelievable confidence, but when you start to pick at this technological delivery, it doesn't do a great deal. That's not to say that I am particularly religious, but I grew up in a world where the psalms were known to very ordinary people, they could quote things, even if they weren't particularly well-schooled or educated, they had a relationship—however oblique—with the classical world which is now laughable...

EM: *Obliterated.*

PM: Completely obliterated, annihilated, and in fact scorned. You see politicians who are attempting to impress but are so fool-hearty and ham-fisted in their delivery that it is nothing but an embarrassment. We may come out of this, I don't know. But I think there is some time left for it to run, before something happens, and the game is up. It certainly does embarrass me. Do you know what I mean by that?

EM: *Yes. The denigration of language that was once universal for a community. Exile as a universal, philosophical, or existential condition, yeah...*

PM: Ultimately, it doesn't make any difference if you were here or not.

EM: *Yeah, and now you might not have the language to express or even approach expressing those feelings.*

PM: Well, that is really worth exploring. Why, it is really good to have a dialogue with younger people because when you get to your mid-20s, these things might start to be of some interest. Because the thin ice that they're fed, it only lasts through the teens. When real emotions start to come in, the language that has been attacked and obliterated could be of service to them. You can see the difference between people who have now realized that and people that haven't.

The ones who haven't would be really fine writers, maybe, and competent. It's not their fault that they have been tumbled into an age where these things have been derided, particularly in America now. It wouldn't be the first time. It just seems to have happened at a furious speed to me. But the 50s and the 70s didn't differ in that respect, so much.

EM: *Kind of a shift but, not really. I would love to hear you talk about the role music plays in the text.*

PM: The beat of the book is set by the appearance of one particular song, which is an old Irish, Scottish folk song called "The Killiburn Brae." A brae is a slope or a hill. It is generally sung to the beat of a hand drum. Like a lot of work songs, it is about the war between men and women. A man speaks about sending his wife down to hell. She is so infuriating that the Devil brings her back and dumps her at the doorway of her husband's house, saying "you can look after her, because I can't handle her." The lyrics of this song are not that significant, but what is significant is the rhythm. It is the first song you encounter and is the musical foundation of the book.

As it moves into different areas, you could encounter the cool crooners of the 1950s, it could be Nat King Cole, or scat beats of the 60s. When it goes into the 70s, it moves into the psychedelic, transcendental phase. You have that absorbing period between

1970 and 1974 when all sorts of outlandish experimentations were taking place. In a way, the book is an homage to that as well, insofar as it is a drug-fueled opera. This sort of thing that was very

**SO HERE I AM
MUSED DAN FOGARTY TO HIMSELF
IN THE PLACE ALL ALONG WHERE I WAS
MEANT TO BE
WITH ME TRAVELLING, SURELY
FOR A LONG TIME
DONE
& ALL ME EFFORTS
NOW CONCENTRATED
ON KEEPING ON MY KITH & KIN
&, IN THE PROCESS, ENSURING
THEIR
GOOD
NAME
NEVER AGAIN, IN MY PRESENCE IS
SLIGHTED**

common at that time. It was possible for record companies to form some of the most outlandish projects imaginable before they ran out of road, and punk came in.

But the circular librettos of the 70s certainly inform the book, as does William Burroughs and George Corso and all those . . . well I don't like the word *experimental*, they are all part of the canon now. They might have been seen as experimental against Tennyson but not now. Just look at Bob Dylan, the most experimental of them all has won a Nobel Prize and is regarded along with Shakespeare. Quite rightfully so, I think.

Dylan told someone that in 1972 that he was a sea-faring mariner off the coast of Barbados. It was all a pack of lies, wasn't it Bob, and it would have turned out to have actually happened to someone like Dave van Ronk. Dylan would've stolen the story and convinced himself that he was there. And if he convinced himself, well, maybe he was there.

It is operating on that level. I have always been interested in that multi-layered aspect of Dylan's imagination. He rang his mother up one time, and he said to her, "I hope you don't mind me making up all these stories." She had read somewhere another pack of lies about when he ran away with the carnival. She said "Oh, absolutely no dear, but why are you doing it?" and he said "Oh, well, I think it helps my career" and chuckles. And, you know, I like to chuckle.

It helps with the condition of exile. There isn't that much of Dylan in the book, just a little bit. Because he is too powerful. If you admitted him in, he could take over, then it's no book of your own, he would scoop the prize again, like he did to Dave van Ronk.

EM: *I found it very operatic, in the way that The Wall and Quadrophonia, are.*

PM: Those albums, at their best, well, I love their absolute audacity. They really shouldn't have the nerve to do those things. I thought that with the original 1500-page manuscript of this book, it was quite tame. Little strokes trying to burst, little veins. Then, when I got them all together, it came out in a torrent. But it was a controlled torrent. The original manuscript was solid and not as imaginative. But it provided the foundation. Like what I was saying: you live a relatively straight life so you can let your imagination go where it wants. If you are living a too dangerous life, and your imagination is going where it wants, you may well end up in trouble. And there is plenty of evidence, with the history of writers, to suggest that. It just doesn't really work. It can be really dangerous. Anyway.

EM: *Well, you have addressed this already, in so many ways, but one of my questions is about the departure from prose. Especially as it pertains to dementia and expressing fractured consciousness. Maybe there is more you want to say on that.*

PM: I have approached it before, in other books, but I've never quite gone full throttle 'til the end. It has been part of chapters here or

there. I suppose, I've never been this close to fractured consciousness. At various times in my life, I've been semi-fractured myself in my perception or I have been associated with people, specifically in those countercultural days, who willfully courted distorted perception. Jim Morrison would be a great hero of ours. All these people who made it very attractive, especially to the young.

But when you are older, my age, and you are close to fractured consciousness to the extent that it terrifies you and terrifies you. You can only do it justice by writing a book like this, which addresses it head on. It is not funny. It is not a cultural fad. It is a nightmare.

EM: *Well, those are all my larger, thematic questions. My final question is what you are reading now?*

PM: I'm reading a book called *Dead Fashion Girl* by Fred Vermorel. It is set in the demi-monde of London's Soho, late 1950s. I don't know why I am reading it. There is a nexus of writing of people like Eoin McNamee and David Peace and a number of other English writers, that seem to circle the same world, a blue-lit, tremulous world of secrets and illicit comingling of the upper and lower classes in Britain. But it also affects Northern Ireland. There is a strange, fetishistic nocturnal world there. Post-war Britain, just before the 60s break, that is very, very interesting. I don't know why, but it is. I don't know if these writers communicate. There is something going on there.



JOHN METCALF ON CLARK BLAISE

I'VE ALWAYS CONSIDERED CLARK Blaise's first two books, *A North American Education* (1973) and *Tribal Justice* (1974), to be two of the best collections of stories ever published in Canada. The stories are as rich in texture and as compelling now as they were when

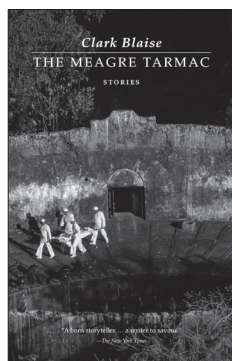
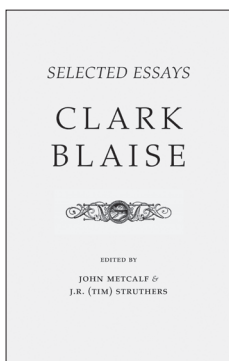
first written. They are wearing well. The wealth of detail and the gorgeous sensuality in the stories are pleasures which are inexhaustible. Significantly, both books are much admired by other writers but still lack the general readership they deserve. These two collections remain among the most underrated books in Canadian literature.

Whimsically, wistfully, in the years since, I've often wondered if Clark's standing in the fervent anti-American seventies would have been firmer with the academic drongoes had *A North American Education* been entitled *A Canadian Education* and had the narrator of the title attempted to satisfy his urgent adolescent sexual curiosity not in Florida but in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, on a snowbank in the alley below the dentist's office.

Blaise wrote of himself in relation to his stories in *World Body* (2006):

Fate, family and marriage have conspired to make me into a hydroponic writer: rootless, unhoused, fed by swirling waters and harsh, artificial light. In Canadian terms, a classic un-Munro. A Manitoba mother and a Quebec father; an American and Canadian life split more or less equally, can do that to an inquisitive and absorptive child. I never lived longer than six months anywhere, until my four-year Pittsburgh adolescence and fourteen years of Montreal teaching. As a consequence, when I was a young writer, I thought that making sense of my American and Canadian experience would absorb my interest for the rest of my life.

But a five-minute wedding ceremony in a lawyer's office in Iowa City forty-two years ago delivered that inquisitive child an even larger world than the North American continent. I married India, a beautiful and complicated world, and that Canadian/American, French/English, Northern/Southern boy slowly disappeared. (I wonder what he would have been like, had the larger world never intervened.) The stories in *World Body* reflect a few of those non-North American experiences. I now live in California, but my California, strangely, presents itself through Indian eyes.



When I first knew Clark fifty years ago as a member of the Montreal Story Tellers I was a young English immigrant from a still-insular England. We gathered from his stories that he had spent his childhood among redneck crackers having chigger-like worms removed from his feet with the aid of carbolic acid and pouring fresh quicklime down the seething, hissing squatty-hole. In Cincinnati he attended school with Israelites and “the coloured,” elementary school students either balding or with moustaches. He spoke French; even more impressive, he understood joul. His mother had studied art in Germany during Hitler’s rise to power; his father, a thuggish, illiterate womanizer was, in Clark’s words, “a salesman, a violent, aggressive, manipulative man specializing in the arts of spontaneous misrepresentation.” Bernard Malamud was his friend. He had been at Iowa in much the same years as Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, and Joy Williams. And to top off all this outré richness, he was married to Bharati Mukherjee, a novelist and story writer of great beauty who dazzled us with saris. I found him (and her) exotic.

When my son Daniel married Chantal Filion, Clark said to me, “At last your people have joined my people.” But by then I was less clear who my people were. I was no longer, as I had been, simply a part of the Metcalf diaspora from Wensleydale in North Yorkshire. I had acquired another country, another citizenship. My first wife was of Lebanese origins, her people from a village not far from Mount Hermon, so my daughter is half British, half Lebanese-Canadian, though American in upbringing. My wife is

Jewish as, therefore, is my stepson. My wife connects me to Quebec where she was born and to Romania, Poland, and Israel. My younger son and daughter are from Tamil Nadu State. My wife and I were the guardians of boat children, a brother and sister from Cholon in Saigon. Over the fifty years I've known Clark, my life, I realized slowly, had become a Clark Blaise life, a Clark Blaise story.

Thirteen years is the longest, by far, that I lived in a single place; Montreal will remain my city for life. Predictably enough, the city did take the place of my warring parents—Montreal is my parents; I am once again their baffled son in its presence. I worked for both Neil Compton and Sidney Lamb (Renowned teachers at Sir George Williams University, now Concordia). I heard my own voice pumped out over the CBC. Later, in Toronto, I sat one night at Massey College high table beside Northrop Frye, across from Marshall McLuhan. In Canada election to Olympus is possible. The myths have touched me, I met my whole generation of Canadian writers and aged with them. I was there when the exiles returned. I got to know the others before they passed away. I started a writing program in Montreal and taught in others in Toronto and British Columbia and Saskatchewan; I think I did find the next generation of talent, in classrooms or through the mails, and with John Metcalf edited four books of “the best” in Canadian stories. More of my stories have been anthologized than I ever thought possible, from my Iowa origins. And it all started by joining a group, The Montreal Story Tellers, the only conscious gathering of English-language prose writers in Montreal this century.

Clark wrote of the group in the memoir he contributed to the book by J.R. (Tim) Struthers, *The Montreal Story Tellers* (1985):

The Montreal Story Tellers is now a part of Canadian literary history. For me, it was the public manifestation of inner maturing. I learned in the group that I still needed an ensemble; despite my immodest flights of fancy, I wasn't yet ready to stand alone. I always had the sense that of the five, I was the one the audience hadn't

heard of, and I was the one they had to endure after the famous Hugh Hood and the sexy Ray Smith and the satiric John Metcalf and the whack-o Ray Fraser. So I learned to tame myself, to wait.

We are now at the age of the rock stars of the Sixties; we've had to change, or run the risk of becoming absurd. The easy work is all behind us—that fire and passion—but I have to feel our best work is yet to come.

We all knew that the stories Clark was writing in those years were extraordinary. His first nationally published story, “Broward Dowdy,” which appeared in the American magazine *Shenandoah* in 1964, was, when I came to read it, a flare that hung in the night sky illuminating and revealing a way forward. We all knew that his stories held a sudden place in the barrens of Canadian writing. We all knew that Clark was writing Canada's *Dubliners* or *Bliss*.

Of these stories, Clark wrote:

I was writing very openly, in the late sixties, of Montreal. The city was drenched with significance for me—it was one of those perfect times when every block I walked yielded an image, when images clustered with their own internal logic into insistent stories. A new kind of unforced, virtually transcribed story (new for me, at least) was begging to be written—stories like (from my first two books) “A Class of New Canadians,” “Eyes,” “I’m Dreaming of Rocket Richard,” “He Raises Me Up,” “Among the Dead,” “Words for Winter,” “Extractions and Contractions,” “Going to India,” and “At the Lake” were all written in one sitting, practically without revision. I’d never been so open to story, so avid for context. I was reading all the Canadian literature I could get my hands on, reading Canadian exclusively; there was half a silent continent out there for me to discover.

I was still discovering the city, or, more precisely, discovering parts of myself opened up by the city. I was respectful if not worshipful of all its institutions. I defended its quirks and inconsistencies as though defending myself against abuse; I was even charmed by things I would have petitioned against in Milwaukee

like separate Catholic and Protestant schools, Sunday closings, and male-only bars. “The Frencher the Better” was my motto to cover any encroachment on the aboriginal rights of the English.

I once heard Clark introduce one of his own readings by saying rather sadly that he was being paid more for reading aloud for one hour than he received in royalties for a year. It’s sometimes impossible not to feel angry about this. We all of us would have preferred to sit at home and receive royalties. We would have preferred readers to listeners. Readers work harder and stand a chance of getting more. But as the principal of a school in which I once worked used to murmur when it was reported to him that children had again emptied their free milk into the grand piano, “We live in an imperfect world.”

None of us was ever seduced, so far as I know, by the idea of performance. We all realized that writing and performing were entirely distinct activities and that for us, writing was the sterner and more valuable task.



Clark Blaise, Ray Smith, and John Metcalf in Toronto, 2015.

Clark's stories ran on wheels, as it were; Clark gave the impression that he was merely the almost invisible track on which they ran. The stories are so beautifully crafted and balanced in terms of their rhetoric that Clark seemed almost to disappear behind them. This was, of course, an illusion. Clark was never openly dramatic, never given to gesture, but he read fluently and urgently and with a fierce grip on the audience which tightened relentlessly. It was rather like watching an oddly silent pressure-cooker which you knew was capable of taking the roof off at any moment.

I said the Montreal Story Tellers was united only in its desire for honoraria. As a bond, that never loosened. But now, looking

Clark's stories ran on wheels, as it were; Clark gave the impression that he was merely the almost invisible track on which they ran.

back, I think that we were held together by much more. We grew together. I don't think the group would have worked as it did unless we were getting from the association something more important than money. Four of us, at least, were writers obsessed by the idea of excellence, crazy about craft. The group gave us an association where craft was recognized and didn't have to be discussed; we were at home with each other, at home in the way that perhaps the disfigured are or the lame, that exiles are in a hostile land.

In my own case, at least, there was a sense in which membership in Montreal Story Tellers was a way of helping to define myself; the company of other writers I respected helped to confirm that I was a writer indeed. We were all younger then, of course, and our hilarity and arrogance masked an unease about our possible futures.

It is still received opinion that short stories are the apprentice work that a writer undertakes before tackling the really serious work of the novel, where the big bucks are. Imagine then how liberating and reinforcing it was for me as a young writer of short stories to read Blaise in the little mags and to listen to him as Hugh Hood drove the Montreal Story Tellers to our readings. Clark often proposed that the short story, far from being fiction's Cinderella, was actually superior to novels.

Most novels are watery, diluted, and bloated, and they do not have anything like the richness of a short story.

What, he asked, was the difference between a Mavis Gallant story and someone else's novel? It's that in comparison, "the novel becomes smaller and thinner than her story."

For me, the short story is an expansionist form, not a miniaturizing form. To me, the novel is a miniaturizing form. I think of the story as the largest, most expanded statement you can make about a particular incident. I think of the novel as the briefest thing you can say about a larger incident. I think of the novel as being far more miniaturist—it's a miniaturization of life. And short fiction is an expansion of a moment.

I think the job of fiction is to view life through a microscope so that every grain gets its due and no one can confuse salt with sugar. You hear a lot about cinema being a visual medium—this is false. It degrades the visual by its inability to focus. It takes the visual for granted. Only the word—for me—is truly visual.

I've always favoured the short story for its energy, a result of its confinement, and for the fact that its length reflects the author's ability to hold it entirely in his/her head like a musical note. You can't do that with a novel. Holding everything, meaning the syllables, the rhythms, the balance of scene and narration, long sentences and short . . .

Such were the intense and radical niblets tossed over from the front passenger seat to the two Rays and me, the peanut gallery in the Lada's cramped back seat.

Critic Barry Cameron wrote of the kinship of Blaise stories with poetry quoting from Blaise's now famous essay "To Begin, to Begin":

The sense of a Blaise story as poem is reinforced by his theory of the function of first paragraphs and first sentences in fiction. No matter how skilful or elegant the other features of a story may be, the first paragraph should give the reader "confidence in the

power and vision of the author.” Genesis is more important to Blaise than apocalypse, for a Blaise story is often, if not always, its beginning amplified or expanded:

The first sentence of a story is an act of faith—or astonishing bravado. A story screams for attention, as it must, for it breaks a silence. It removes the reader from the everyday . . . It is an act of perfect rhythmic balance, the single crisp gesture, the drop of the baton that gathers a hundred disparate forces into a single note. The first paragraph is a microcosm of the whole, but in a way that only the whole can reveal.

It is in the first line that the story reveals its kinship to poetry. Not that the line is necessarily “beautiful,” merely that it can exist utterly alone, and that its force draws a series of sentences behind it. The line doesn’t have to “grab” or “hook” but it should be striking.

Blaise pursued this vision of stories as a form of poetry in the following:

When I “see” a story it is always in terms of its images and situation, the tone and texture and discovery that seems immanent in that situation—and very rarely do these intimations demand a thirty-eight-year-old spinster or a college drop-out on an acid trip. I try to work out a voice that will allow for a simultaneity of image and action. Sometimes it is “second person,” frequently first person, commonly present tense. Sometimes it will have no time-referent beyond the present moment. In my book *A North American Education*, most of the Montreal stories—“Eyes,” “Words for the Winer,” “Extractions and Contractions,” and “Going to India”—follow, at least in part, this pattern. Those are stories of texture and voice—details selected with an eye to their aptness but also to their “vapour trails,” their slow dissolve into something more diffuse and nameless.

In one sense, Blaise’s books are one book. Some critics have accused him of doing nothing much more than writing versions of his auto-



Clark Blaise in Ottawa, 2015.

biography over and over again: the fat child, the English-Canadian mother, the French-Canadian father, life as the son of a salesman in Florida, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati . . . I've never understood the point of this criticism. It is as if such critics believe that the stories are somehow lesser because autobiographical, less imaginative, taking less effort. But the stories are all different in emphasis and detail and each is a wonderfully crafted unique artifact. I suspect that for Blaise there really isn't a clear dividing line between autobiography and fiction; he blurs the idea of genres. We might consider the travel book *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) that he wrote with his wife, Bharati Mukherjee, as fiction, too, because in writing it he uses all the devices of fiction. Read the wonderful section in which he describes attending a lecture on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore during which the electricity fails; it would require only a nudge of this piece of "non-fiction" to become "fiction." Blaise explores the relationship between autobiography and fiction in his third collection, *Resident Alien* (1986), which includes stories and essays and which is essential reading in any consideration of his work. The story "Identity" from *Resident Alien*, as so often in Blaise, could be regarded as a story or an essay or a memoir. What do these labels really mean or matter? What matters is that, once read, these pieces will never leave your mind.

What I knew, at the age of twenty, was suburban life in Pittsburgh in the mid-fifties; I knew it cold. I knew the retail trade in furniture, paper routes, baseball, the charms and terrors of women and gobs of facts in astronomy, sports, archaeology and geography. Those were the elements, in fact, of many later stories and my first novel, but if I had tried it as an undergraduate—and probably I did—it would have come out like warm, flat soda water.

It's alchemy, taking the facts, the common language, the world and characters we know and transforming them into something never before seen, hitherto unknown and forever fresh.

And that, of course, is the point: alchemy. In Blaise's writing the autobiographical is transformed, transmuted by art into stories "forever fresh."

Base metal into gold.



BOOKSELLER BUZZ

Say This: Two Novellas by Elise Levine

"I've clearly got to work backward and read everything else from Elise Levine. Not a wasted syllable in the whole book and it keeps getting better all the way through. Wow."

David Worsley, Words Worth Books, Waterloo, ON

"The first of these two linked novellas is told through the eyes of a woman looking back on the abusive relationship she had as a teen with her older cousin. The second is from the multiple points of view of the family of the man he killed. Told in jarring bursts of prose, this is a chilling, heart-stopping read."

Grace Harper, Mac's Backs, Cleveland, OH

PORTRAIT OF A MANAGING EDITOR

VANESSA STAUFFER *has been managing editor at Biblioasis since 2018. She manages production and preliminary sales materials, sometimes edits, occasionally designs books, and typesets things like this sentence, which she is also writing and which she later intends to proof.*

Biblioasis publisher DAN WELLS taught her that an independent press was the place she wanted to spend her days, along with pretty much everything else she knows about making books.

DAN WELLS: *If it's not true universally, it seems to be true here at Biblioasis: no one as a child, when asked what they wanted to do, said "When I grow up I want to work in publishing." Is this true for you? How did you "fall into" publishing?*

VANESSA STAUFFER: No. Not even close. When I was a child, I wanted to be, and I quote, "a part-time cowgirl and a part-time artist," a career aspiration I nearly realized when I moved to Texas for an MFA at the age of twenty-two. Seventeen years later I was teaching creative writing and survey-level literature courses to undergraduates in Michigan, bored silly and sick of commuting across an international border, applying haphazardly for second-career jobs at libraries and police academies and idly calculating the number of gluten free cookies I would have to bake to pay the bills if I quit, when I saw an ad for an internship at Biblioasis. I almost didn't apply as I assumed I couldn't possibly be qualified. (See: crippling academy-induced imposter syndrome.) It turned out that at some point I had learned how to read and talk about books.

DW: *You're a life-long reader and writer. Surely you'd given some thought to what publishing must be like before you applied for that internship. What did you expect it would be like? What has, thus far, surprised you most?*

vs: Nope: not really. I never gave it any thought, as a reader. The publishing of a book wasn't something that ever came up in lit courses, where the conversation is about texts, which tend to exist

in an abstract realm, rather than the actual physical objects that embody them. (Now I'm thinking about the action of metaphor: if the text is the tenor, the book, bound and printed, is its vehicle. Though of course the text itself is metaphor: abstraction made concrete by language. A book is a picture inside of a picture.) In the academy, at least in my experience, the physical fact of the book—who had made it, and when, and how—generally only comes up as a matter of coordinating textual references in writing or in discussion: “I’m on page 78 of the Norton, which is 104 of the Broadview...”

As a writer, yes, somewhat: possibly the only existing fortunate effect of the first-book competition model that has dominated American poetry. If you wanted to publish a book of poems in the US—at least when I was starting out, perhaps slightly less so at present—you had to win a prize sponsored by a press or by an organization in partnership with a press. So in paying attention to those prizes, I was paying attention to who had published what, which turned into knowing what kinds of books they published, and which markets they tended to reach, even what their books looked like. (Maybe especially what their books looked like.)

As for what all of that actually looked like behind the scenes... I'd honestly never thought about it, which became the source of my biggest surprise. What was astonishing to me (and still is) is the incredible amount of work and coordination that goes into the making, marketing, and selling of every single book. I think most readers think that publishing is essentially just editing, but as someone whose job typically doesn't even begin until the editor has signed off on the manuscript, and who oversees everything between “here's a 250 word description of a book you haven't read, sales needs a thoughtful and nuanced cover as soon as possible” and “finished copies are shipping,” and then pitches in on publicity, I promise that there's a lot more to getting a book into your hands.

So what's not surprising to me is how little the average reader knows about what we do. I'm not sure how I feel about that fact: like I said to you the other day, maybe, like good typography—which should exist to serve the text rather than to call attention

to itself—good publishing is also invisible. Though if publishing is the act of making public, etymologically speaking, it can't be. I'm still trying to work this out in my head.

DW: I have occasionally been accused of forgetting that people have a life outside of publishing. But you evidently do. Tell us a little about it.

vs: As usual, I thought harder than was necessary about this question, and then I started writing an essay about it, and maybe some of that lengthier response will one day appear in these pages. But the short version: it strikes me that publishing is one of those endeavours that doesn't lend itself to 'inside of' and 'outside of'—it's an activity of mind that one doesn't clock into or out of. I am beginning to think of publishing, in its first principles, as a vocation in the way that writing is often (or perhaps I should say: was often) thought of as a vocation. Certainly there are various and obvious overlaps between literary production and the publication of literary production, but the one that's most important to me, individually—the one that feels most like a calling—is the stewardship of language. It is very literally my 'job' to make sure



Vanessa and ECW publisher Jack David not having any fun at all at the Biblioasis 15th anniversary celebration.

we have the right word in the right place just as it is my 'job' as a poet to put the best words in the best order.

It happens that the successful execution of both of those tasks would also qualify me as a 'professional' doer thereof, but, for better or for worse, that's a term I just don't fit inside. (I don't think Twitter's repeated offer for my account to 'Switch to professional' is supposed to be as funny as I find it: I would never.) As ever, I can only turn to etymology in explanation: profession comes from *professionem*: a public declaration. Vocation is from *vocationem*: a calling, being called. A professional speaks. A... there's no equivalent word for this, is there? Those who are called listen. It's Eliot's platinum filament, and the understanding of art not as an expression *of* self but as an expression made *through* the self. Isn't that, too, what a publisher does: act as conduit, as vehicle? I understand publishing—the way we do it, anyway—as fundamentally an act of service: service to each book (and every single word and folio and Oxford comma), service to each author, service to the vital human activity of putting words together so we might better understand each other and ourselves.

You don't ask, say, an Episcopalian about their life outside of being an Episcopalian. I think, perhaps, if you become a publisher, you're a publisher all the time.

A less existentially-imperilled mind would understand the question to mean: what do you do when you're not in the office? I'm an every-day writer, which I think everyone knows means that I sit at a desk every morning with my notebook open and occasionally remove a comma from a line so I can put it back in the next morning. I lift weights in my basement. Sometimes run, sometimes race bicycles slowly, bake two loaves of gluten-free sourdough every Sunday morning. I grew up outside, possibly feral, in a beautiful place, and am in a semi-constant state of attempting to be in nature: walks and backpacking trips and camping. I read, I guess a lot, though never as much as I'd like to.

DW: *Desert Island Books, Biblioasis edition. You get to bring one backlist, one current, and one future Biblioasis title: which will you bring and why?*

vs: I am not convinced this isn't some sort of trap.

Preamble: I hate this question. The answer changes hourly, if not by the minute. At 2:32 pm on Wednesday, May 18:

Backlist: *Ducks, Newburyport*. For the company.

Current: *The Affirmations*, Luke Hathaway's third Biblioasis poetry collection. To remember that my life is larger than my life.

Future: I am excited about so many things, but I suppose one comes to mind more immediately because I just finished my first read and promptly wanted to start over at the beginning again: *The Hollow Beast* by Christophe Bernard, translated by the inimitable Lazer Lederhendler, is coming in Spring 2023. If you'd watch an adaptation of *Don Quixote* inspired by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, or loved *The Luminaries* but think it could have used more sword canes, hockey vendettas, and guys named Steeve, this book is for you. It's absolutely bonkers and I love it.

dw: You started off this interview by saying that, before you got into it, you had given very little thought to what publishing involves. You've been with Biblioasis a little over four years now; you've been, as much as job descriptions mean anything at a smaller independent press like ours,



Jason Arias's preliminary designs for Christophe Bernard's *The Hollow Beast* hanging out on Vanessa's Wall of Cover Comps.

managing editor for more than three of these. You know how much work this is. What keeps you here? What do you like about it? And what do you wish others knew about the work we do here?

vs: What keeps me here? Curiosity. The desire to perfect the unperfectable. (See also: poet.) I am a problem solver by nature: independent publishing has no shortage of problems. And, of course, the belief that what we do can change the world, Darling. (h/t the great Lennie Goodings.)

What I like is making books. This is distinctly different from reading books, which you can do on your own. You need a lot of help, and a lot of collaboration, to make one, and especially to make one public in the way that we believe is our responsibility, which means that I work every day with a lot of brilliant people: the rest of the staff, our authors, our editors, our salesforces and distributors and printers. Our knockout team of freelancers, especially—since I manage production, they’re the people I work with the most: copyeditors Allana Amlin, Emily Donaldson, Rachel Ironstone, Linda Pruessen, John Sweet, and Chandra Wohleber; and designers Jason Arias, Alex Billington (of Tetragon in London), Tania Craan, Zoe Norvell, Natalie Olsen, Ingrid Paulson, Gordon Robertson, and Michel Vrana. If you want to learn patience, professionalism, and grace under fire, along with more than you could ever imagine there was to know about the vagaries of Chicago style or the ideal x-height for a lengthy passage of italicized text, befriend yourself a freelance book person or four.

What I wish others knew: I’m not sure. I was going to say that I wished they knew how thin our margins are, or how damaging multinationals and big boxes are to culture, or just what an incredible amount of work it is to publish a book, but I don’t know if that would change anything in the end. It would still fundamentally be our job to do the best we possibly can for every one of our books and every one of our authors. It will always be hard, and always a new kind of hard: we’re making art here. Which means that it will always be worth doing.

FROM VANESSA'S NOTEBOOK
RECENT PUBLISHING MEMOIR TITLES

Anxious for Historical Reasons
The Answer Isn't No, But It's Not Yes
Now That We Have 'Good Ideas'
We Can Afford To Be More Moral



A FLOATING WORLD

by Marius Kociejowski

A SHADOW MOVES ACROSS my plate. When it reaches full eclipse, which will be in a few months' time, I will be out of the antiquarian book trade forever. Try as I might, I can't rinse the rancid taste of that word out of my mouth. What is *forever* when set against the universe? It's about the length of a sticking plaster. And that we should think ourselves indispensable. A necessary illusion, without it we'd surely lose our will to live. We seek, in whatever small way, to be recognised for what we achieve. The shop in Cecil Court, where I have worked for over a decade, will be closing although its proprietor, Peter Ellis, will continue to operate from home. I wish him well but, and I'm sure he will agree with me, the bookshop is, and will always be, the soul of the trade. What happens there does not happen elsewhere. The multifariousness of human nature is more on show there than anywhere else, and I think it's because of books, what they are, what they release in ourselves, and what they become when we make them magnets to our desires.

The world was made,' says Stéphane Mallarmé, 'in order to result in a beautiful book.' All else—the filling of an order, the cataloguing of a book—is mere procedure. A computer screen will take us further away from, not closer to, the Eleusinian mysteries. Anyway



Marius Kociejowski in London.

I thank Peter Ellis for the best years of my working life. I've had fewer problems with him than with anyone else. This may seem like a backhanded compliment, which it isn't. I've had my share of trouble. I've seen discord: I've seen one man take his own business and cheat it, lie to it, bleed it into tulip-shaped glasses, starve it to death over Michelin-starred dishes; I've seen a man whose mind dissolved at the bottom of a vodka bottle; I've seen another descend into madness. A grumbler Peter may be, quick to anger too, but compared to them, he has been straight as a die. Maybe it's because the book trade is so fragile—so susceptible to the world's

turbulence, and to the vicissitudes of what is or is not in fashion—that it is so often an intemperate zone. This said, I've been lucky enough to be close to what I love. And yet what we love can bring out not only the best but also the worst in ourselves. When the day arrives, and the final turning of the key in the front door lock sounds louder than it's ever done before, it'll be all I can do to keep a stoic face. It is not so much a job I'll be leaving as a way of life.

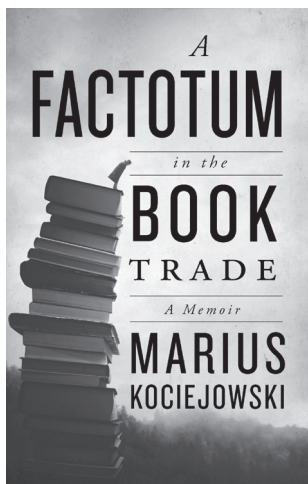
I am not, in the fullest sense, a bookseller, which is to say an independent one, although the opportunities for me to become one did arise. The choice was between selling books and writing them. One would not allow for the other; put it down to some configuration in the brain. I am not so sure I can consider myself a bookshop assistant either and maybe this is because I am deluded enough to believe that a man clutching a rare volume is somehow, if only for seconds at a time, bestowed with a pedigree. It is not how one feels holding a box of cereal. It might be said one can sell them both. The book world is, however, a world in which one might keep one's face. There are less dignified ways to survive, some of them so ghastly the world of the bookseller is by comparison effete. I am, by choice, maybe temperament too, a factotum in the book trade. The tough business end of things has been for others to administrate. I envy them not. I have a phobia for window envelopes. Columns with numbers in them terrify me. Amazingly, over a passage of forty-five years, I have got away with being close to innumerate, which is something of an achievement in a world of sales. I can translate Roman numerals into Arabic, however, and I know which way up a book sits in the hand and on a good day I can even alphabetize. What more can anyone want to ask of me? I have always been at the service of other people, which, for those wanting a satellite reading of where I stand, is the position from whence these words come, the ticklish underbelly of the trade.

I wonder sometimes whether the trade is not taking leave of me. This may sound as if the sun circles the world and that I've put myself at the centre of the universe. *Where's everybody gone?* Secondhand bookshops, once a feature of almost every borough, town and village, continue to close, even in supposedly bookish

places like Oxford and Cambridge. When I first settled in London, in 1974, I could walk from my bedsit in Earls Court Square and within a half hour be at one of six or seven bookshops. My favourite bookseller was Sheila Ramage, the kindest face in the trade, who ran Notting Hill Books. She died on January 24, 2020. At least I had a chance to tell her what her shop meant to me and that it was a place in which I made numerous discoveries. It was always there that I'd find the book I didn't know I wanted. The shop closed down in 2012. Now they've all gone.

So what brought things to this impasse? It is almost too easy to blame outside forces although it wouldn't be a mistake to do so. Town and city are no longer the organic growths they once were. They have begun to operate on a purely functional level that has little to do with what actually brings grace into our lives. You eviscerate a habitat of its culture and the species it supports will find it increasingly difficult to survive or else they'll mutate into something else. Greed is behind much of this, landlords squeezing as much as they can out of small businesses while governments of whatever hue increase rates. There has been an overall failure of imagination, an inability to see consequences. Small wonder Peter Ellis has had it up to here. With the collapse of individual enterprises, and with people finding their solution on the internet it has got so that one area of London looks much like any other, the same wretched chains. Will somebody write the book that'll describe how the internet has changed the cityscape? I could also say the trade at its most rarefied is collapsing from inside, by which I mean there is something that has gone integrally wrong with the trade itself. My compatriots will not appreciate me saying this: the antiquarian book trade is slowly but surely destroying the antiquarian book trade.

If twenty years ago someone told me there wouldn't be a single classical music shop left in London I would have guffawed because, after all, there will always be classical music aficionados just as there would always be readers of good literature. Who, just a couple of decades ago, would have thought it possible? There's nowhere I can go now for a musical fix or where I may abandon my-



(L) Cover design by Michel Vrana. (R) Marius Kociejowski.

self to happenstance. So many of one's best discoveries are made while having a browse. A slack word gathers force: William Hazlitt, in his essay "On the Conversation of Authors" in *The Plain Speaker* (1826), speaks of the human bookworm who 'browses on the husks and leaves of books, as the young fawn browses on the bark and leaves of trees.' We browse on our culture, drawing from it things upon which we may, if we so choose, concentrate and maybe even add to. The computer has shot the idea of the browse out of our skies. We go directly to the thing we require and look to neither side of it. Such discoveries as we do make are accidental and not quite the fruit of a good browse. There may be infinitely more choice, but to be spoiled for choice extinguishes desire.

My favourite record dealer was Sally Rettig, a big woman with a small space between her front teeth who could strike terror into those who blundered into one of her many prejudices. I went into her shop once, seeking out, in all innocence, some recordings of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf singing Schubert lieder. She bellowed at me, 'We don't sell blonde Nazi singers!' The other customers, browsers, were quite unfazed. This was England before it got *sleek*, when so much was still allowable. Character is the greater part of any small business touching on arts and literature. Sally's in music heaven, bless her, and I don't know what happened to her

business partner, Colin Butler, who always produced a wry smile as she launched into yet another of her tirades. What joy they brought into people's lives. A world more amenable would have seen to it their shop became an institution that survived them, but sadly it predeceased Sally and when it did a light went out forever. Walk all over London, you will not find its like.

If I deviate, my purpose is to demonstrate how the character of a city is measurable through its smaller enterprises. I posit the unthinkable. Will the day come where there are no more secondhand bookshops? I think not, but of this I can't be absolutely sure. The driving out of or rather the failure to encourage such enterprises will be seen as yet another chapter in the already overlong history of human stupidity. London is fast becoming a cultural catastrophe. My favourite bookshops are closing one by one. At this rate very soon there will be nowhere left for me to browse. I won't step into any of those jumped-up bookshops that masquerade as art galleries with nice little walnut tables where you sit down and pay three times the price for the privilege. They are the province of hedge fund managers and cocaine addicts, often both one and the same. American dealers with their so-called book galleries started that trend and now, as with so much else, it has crept over here. I want dirt; I want chaos; I want, above all, mystery. I want to be able to step into a place and have the sense that there I'll find a book, as yet unknown to me, which to some degree will change my life.

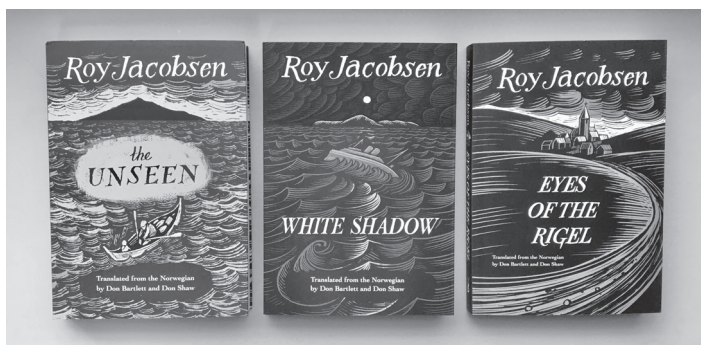
Books can, books do.

Excerpted from A Factotum in the Book Trade (Biblioasis, 2022).



ANDREW HOOD ON EYES OF THE RIGEL BY ROY JACOBSEN

IN HIS SIX MEMOS *for the Next Millennium*, Italian writer Italo Calvino extolled what he saw as the essential values in the future



The Barrøy Chronicles covers feature woodcut illustrations by Joe McLaren.

of literature. The essays cover Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity, and—most relevant to the final novel in Roy Jacobson’s *Barrøy Chronicles*—Lightness. In his first essay, Calvino relates the story of Perseus and Medusa, noting, on the one hand, Perseus’ literal lightness by way of winged footwear, and on the other, his fate to lug with him everywhere the burden of the stone-making Gorgon head.

“Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness,” Calvino writes, “I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future...”

At the outset of this third installment of her story, there’s a diaphanous ease with which Ingrid Barrøy begins what will turn out to be an arduous journey. Leaving the island of Barrøy was unthinkable in *The Unseen*, and heart-breaking in *White Shadow*, but in *Eyes of the Rigel* Ingrid simply departs at the end of the chapter and arrives at the main island on the next. As she heads out in search of the shipwrecked Russian POW for whom she cared for and with whom she had her child Kaja, she covers great distances with the sprightliness and suddenness of a fairytale or myth. In these early pages, it’s her desire that’s important, not her journey, so the journey hardly exists. She rises above her burdens as if by

some enchantment. As finely as Jacobsen captured the heavy expanse of time in his depiction of a remote island and remote family that hadn't changed in centuries, here his prose and storytelling is nimble and fleet, as free of the weight of Barrøy as Ingrid is.

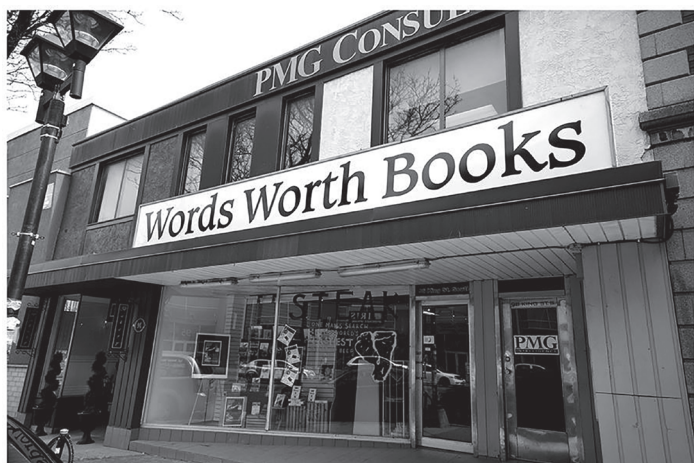
It's the summer of 1946 in Norway. Ingrid, carrying a daughter with the exact eyes of the man she seeks, is "following in his tracks, in the summer, which [her Russian] had left in the winter." The war has technically ended, and the German occupation along with it, but a remnant of conflict still lingers in the out-of-the-way villages, farms, and ports. It becomes clear to Ingrid that the end of fighting is not the same as the end of war. Her asking after the fate of her fleeing Russian stirs a barely settled pot. Each and every community, each personal relationship, remains compromised or marred by collaboration or resistance or betrayal during the war. Ingrid's questioning about events and memories of such a recent past largely serves to revivify a past that most would prefer to forget.

In his celebration of those five essential values, Calvino also explores the importance of their opposites. The lightness with which *Eyes of the Rigel* begins gradually becomes laden, the distance felt more, the weight of Ingrid's child with the Russian growing heavier and heavier. From the outset, the Barrøy Chronicles have been concerned with how this island and its denizens are both a part of and apart from the wider world. Generational isolation and self-sufficiency carry with them their own mix of lightness and heaviness, as does incorporation, and this conflict is broad and alive in this third book.



PORTRAIT OF AN INDIE BOOKSTORE: WORDS WORTH BOOKS

WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK of independent bookstores, they usually think of a shop in a big city, Toronto or New York or London (England) or Paris, something beautiful, picturesque. Bookstores



Words Worth Books, Waterloo, Ontario.

from movies, perhaps, *Notting Hill*, *When Harry Met Sally*, which amounts to the same thing. But I never have. Growing up in Chatham, Ontario, the bookshop I frequented most often was Clem's Book Exchange. The books were warehoused in three large rooms in the back—the front half was more of a jumble thrift—with dirty cement floors and shelves that seemed to be actually holding up the roof; when I progressed from Terry Brooks and John Saul and Stephen King to what Clem, the owner, would have referred to in an affected accent as “literature,” and yes, you could hear the quotation marks, I had to go into an unheated side annex, where the Penguin classics and other school books were kept under plastic because when it rained the roof leaked. Some of my favourite bookstore memories remain among those stacks. Or piles. Or ... whatever they were. I can count the number of times I was in a large city (not including Detroit: at the time it was a place you seemed only to pass through) before I was twenty on one hand, not counting the thumb; bookstores were never part of the experience, unless they were in the mall. If you exclude Coles or Classic Books, which populated Chatham's two local malls and that I most remember frequenting for the bins of discount comic books out front, I think that the first time I was in a real independent bookstore was when I skipped out of grade twelve one afternoon to drive the hour and a

quarter to Port Huron in the us to pick up a copy of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* shortly after the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his fatwā. I don't remember the name of the store, but I remember being shocked by the stacks of books reflecting the harsh fluorescent light, the serviceable utilitarianism of the space. We searched for *The Satanic Verses* everywhere with no success before asking the clerk behind the counter if he had a copy. He eyed us for a second, perhaps assessing whether or not we could be assassins or vandals, before pulling one from behind the counter.

I think of big city bookstores as constellations, beautiful, their own glittering things . . . Regional bookstores, often because they are the only ones within their cities, are much more like the sun: they sustain worlds.

For these reasons and others like them, the bookstores in which I've felt most comfortable have almost always been regional ones. There are some Toronto and New York and London (England) stores where I am reconfirmed in my provincialism before I cross the threshold, and though I've discovered wonderful authors in some of these—David Markson, Eimar McBride, Leonard Michaels—they've never made me feel particularly comfortable. No, this child of Clem's still has a preference for the out of the way and slightly derelict, Southshore Books and the Bookroom at the Court in Windsor, after I started university; C. J. Johnson's in London during my Master's year, though it also most certainly verged on the picturesque, at the time the most beautiful bookstore I'd ever been in; and now, The Bookshelf in Guelph, The Bookkeeper in Sarnia, Waterloo's Words Worth Books. It has nothing to do with size: many of these bookstores are larger than their big city brethren, in part because they can afford to be. These tend, like my Port Huron bookshop, to be even now more utilitarian than big city bookshops, in part because they can't afford not to be. In part it's a question of attitude: they're a little less harried, they can afford a bit more time to chat with a customer; their staff seems a little less judgemental; their stock tends to be,

BOOKSELLER BUZZ

The Music Game by Stéfanie Clermont

"*The Music Game* is a delicious sneak peek into a generation (Millennials, of course) that acknowledges few boundaries, alternates between excess and emptiness, repeatedly taste-tests and spits out adulthood, and ebbs and flows within the cacophony that surrounds them. Yeah, a bit scary. But also exciting."

Kay Wosewick, *Boswell Book Company, Milwaukee, WI*

"Stéfanie Clermont's award-winning debut novel is impressive and makes me look forward to her future writings. The novel is told in short glimpses or snapshots of time in the lives of the main characters and their satellite friends. It is the story of three young women growing into themselves and finding their way in the 2010s. Sabrina, Celine, and Julie begin as idealistic, anti-capitalist protesters, working low-level jobs and struggling to pay rent. They come together and move apart as they form friendships and experience jealousy, rivalry, and grief. They discuss big-picture issues and the minutia of everyday life while they pursue sex, find love, fall into the pits of depression and deal with the death by suicide of Vincent, a young man in their friend circle. Clermont masterfully navigates the blurry devastation of grief with gritty realism blanketed in the writing skills of a poet."

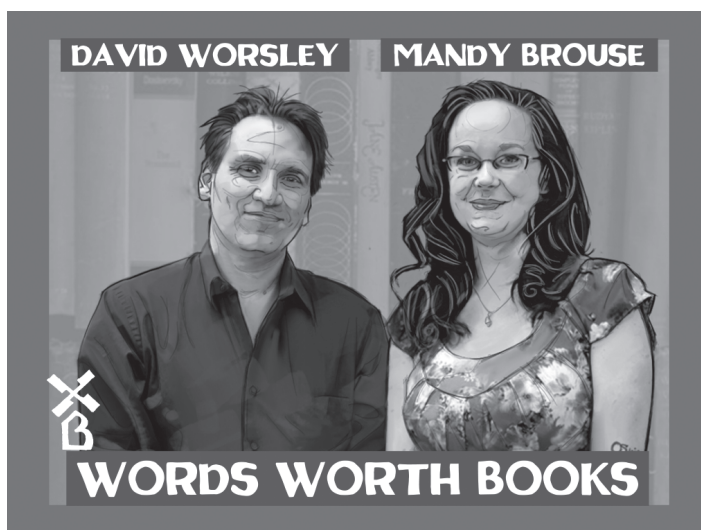
Susan Chamberlain, *The Book Keeper, Sarnia, ON*

both because of the available space and the wider communities they serve, a little more broad. There's less specialization, perhaps a little less sophistication; and with it, perhaps, less shame. Romance and pulps brush shoulders with works of literature and art and history, which makes it much more likely that a reader will have the opportunity to pass from one section to the other. Good

bookstores are at least in part about those opportunities, those possibilities of movement. Viewed from the outside, I think of big city bookstores as constellations, beautiful, their own glittering things, but still I can't help but see them in relation to one another: in Toronto I hop from Ben McNally to Type to Queen Books to Book City to Another Story, and marvel at the different riches to be found at each. But if they're constellations, regional bookstores, often because they are the only ones within their cities, are much more like the sun: they sustain worlds.

I know: I've carried this metaphor farther than it can go. I am still, perhaps, sorting this out. Maybe, as a regional bookseller and publisher, I just want regional bookstores to be given their due. It's always amazed me how often when looking at our top accounts year after year regional booksellers are among them: McNally Robinson, Blue Heron, Words Worth, the Bookshelf, others. This is just as true in the US as it is in Canada: during a business review a few weeks ago our US sales manager expressed surprise that a place like Point Reyes could break our top ten. But how much better our relationships with these shops are, how responsive, appreciative of the ARC sent, the handwritten note, how quick to spark to our own genuine enthusiasm with their own, how much more willing to give a review in the bookstore's newsletter without charging a co-op fee, put out a shelf-talker or staff pick, a bit of unpaid counter or display space. When you're a small, independent Canadian publisher in a market increasingly dominated by foreign industrials and you're fighting for every single sale, a little bit of this goes a long way.

Among my favourite small city bookstores is Words Worth Books. Run jointly by co-owners David Worsley and Mandy Brouse since buying it from the original owners in 2011, it's to my mind one of the best independent bookstores in the country. I think of them as punk rock booksellers par excellence. This has nothing to do with their sense of personal style or taste in music, as I know very little about either, but rather their DIY attitude and inventiveness, their hustle, their independence of spirit, their enthusiastic openness and egalitarianism, their understanding



Worsley & Brouse, North American Indies Series 1, Card #13. Art by Owen Swain.


that Words Worth is more than a commercial enterprise, it's a vital part of the region's social, political, economic, and cultural community. One of my working definitions of publishing (I have several) has been "idealism and how to pay for it": this applies equally to the Words Worth enterprise.

Like so many regional independents, Words Worth has led a bit of an itinerant existence. Begun by Chuck and Trish Erion in Mount Forest in 1983 as Bookcraft, the couple moved the shop to Waterloo, rebranding it as Words Worth Books ten years later, taking up space at various King Street South locations over the years. They ran it for twenty-five years before they decided to retire. David had started working there in 1999 after a stint at kw Bookstore, a used paperback exchange that seemed to be the birthing-ground of many Kitchener-Waterloo booksellers—Mandy got her start there as well, though at a different time than David, as had at least one other current Words Worth bookseller—and had been actively groomed by Chuck and Trish to be their successor. The thought, at the time, was that he would take it over alongside Chuck's and Trish's daughter, Bronwyn Addico; Mandy jokes that she was brought in as a last-minute replacement.

Mandy had begun at Words Worth in 2004 and shown an immediate facility for the more practical if under-appreciated aspects of running a bookstore, such as the bookkeeping, skills David says emphatically he does not possess. They sat down, worked out a business plan, and agreed to take over ownership of the bookstore as partners, which they did in February 2011.

I always assume that most people who open a bookstore do so with at least a small dose of ignorant enthusiasm, but that can't be said of David and Mandy. At the time, both were very experienced booksellers: in David's case he'd been at Words Worth for more than twelve years, and had close to twenty of bookselling experience; Mandy had been at Words Worth for nearly seven, and had a decade in books. When they sat down with their banker, David said, "He took one look at the numbers and said, 'So, you'll be doing this for your pay-cheques,' and Mandy and I looked at each other. That's when the reality of what we were about to do hit us."

For David, there was no real decision. Bookselling was it. I asked him when he first became aware of it as a possible career, a possible calling. He mentioned a time early in his Words Worth tenure. "There was an employee here at the time, her name was

<p>{ words worth books }</p> <p>- SINCE 1984 -</p>	<p>Words Worth 96 King St, S, Waterloo ON wordsworthbooks.com @BooksWordsWorth @wordsworthbooks</p>	<p>#11 2022</p> 
<p>"An inimitable gathering space where regional literature holds its own with international best sellers, local authors launch their careers, and young readers discover new adventures while tucked into a magical nook. Within its carefully curated shelves everyone finds a place to belong."</p> <p>—EMILY URQUHART, author of <i>The Age of Creativity</i> and <i>Ordinary Wonder Tales</i></p>		
<p>BIBLIOASIS <i>read independently</i></p>		

Words Worth, Bookshops Series 1, Card #11 (verso).

Chris Alic. And I watched her for the first few months go up to people in a sort of cool punk rock kind of way and say, you know, this is the one you want! This is the book you have to read! It was the coolest thing in the world. It was like going up to Lou Reed with heroin. You know, I was like, 'Yeah, I can do this! People will walk away with some of my favourites and then come back and say "This was really cool! What else have you got?"' It was the best sort of power that a young person could have. And they actually pay you \$7.15 an hour to do this? Count me in!"

Mandy, in those earlier days, viewed Words Worth more as an initial step in a trajectory that would see her leave bookselling and Waterloo to go to Toronto to work in publishing. In her first year at Words Worth she started a blog, which won a Canadian bookselling prize; but she was looking for more than retail, she wanted a career, something she had passion for, that gave her life shape and meaning. She assumed those things would be best found elsewhere, perhaps in a publicity career at Penguin. But over the years she came to understand that this sense of meaning and purpose was already present in her day-to-day Words Worthian existence. So when she was offered a chance to "take over a well-loved legacy business, it was an opportunity that was too good to pass up. At the time it seemed just right for my life."

When I asked them how bookselling had changed over the past decade that they've owned Words Worth both initially paused. "It's a lot more top down, isn't it," David began tentatively. "There's not as many—hell, I want to be careful—I'm not sure that there are as many surprises coming from the obvious places. Generally speaking, HarperCollins, PRH, Simon and Schuster, Hachette, you pretty much know what you're going to get. You pretty much know what dollar they're chasing. It's Biblioasis, it's LPG, it's Dundurn, it's Book*hug, that's where, oh my God, this novel about a metal head dishwasher ... you'd never see that at the larger houses, times thirty or forty, that's the fun stuff, that's where the synergy is between indie booksellers and publishers." He believes that there's a stronger relationship between independent publishers and booksellers at the present moment than there's been in many

years. “It’s one thing to know the big ten books that’ll be coming out in any season. Yeah, we have to watch for the new Ishiguro, which is great, that’s money in the till. But the stuff that makes your blood warm in the morning is, ‘I just read this book, and I’m the only one on the block who knows about it, and now I get to scream about its virtues from the rafters.’” That’s how he helps distinguish Words Worth from the chains and online retailers.

For Mandy, this is a harder question to answer, because for well over half of the decade they’ve now owned Words Worth the bookstore’s experience has been anything but normal. “After the first five years of ownership we’ve had four years of construction

“What we would like people to know ... is that supporting us supports them, it supports roads, schools, sewers, clean drinking water, a richer community.”

and then the pandemic, so we’ve literally never had one normal year of bookselling where we could definitely say that ‘This is what bookselling at Words Worth is like.’ We look forward to that year, but it’s very hard to say what’s normal for us given our unique experiences. Still, ten years in I think we’re much closer to representing Words Worth as our own bookstore. We’re finally in a position where we no longer feel as if we’re just carrying on a legacy business: this is ours. I feel much more personal ownership of Words Worth now: that’s the biggest change over the last decade.” It’s a long-distance interview, there’s no video link, but I can feel David nodding his head.

In this age of Amazon and “living with intention companies,” I ask David and Mandy what they understand as the primary role of an independent bookseller. What do people—Words Worth’s customers, publishers, sales people, whomever—not understand about what booksellers do?

“How much tape,” David asks, “do you have in that thing?”

“It’s digital and plugged in, David. You can go all night.”

“Then you better get comfortable.” He pauses, dives right in.

“The role of the indie bookseller ... we belong to the community.

We reflect it. I've always chafed at the idea that people have to support us because we're an indie, as if there's virtue in that all on its own. This doesn't work. You don't make friends wagging a finger at them. What we would like people to know ... and the pandemic has done some of this for us, and I don't mean that flip-pantly ... is that supporting us supports them, it supports roads, schools, sewers, clean drinking water, a richer community. The relationship between local dollars and what those local dollars turn around and do, versus what they don't fucking do if there is no tax base." If we don't support one another, he says, "we could become Alabama really fast." Words Worth is invested in every sense of the word in making Waterloo a better place, for their customers and non-customers alike, in a way some other companies that sell books, among other things, are not. "It would be good if that was better known. We need to keep our money where it lives. It's a difficult thing to do, and it's exhausting when the rules of the industry are different for different players. Everyone knows that Indigo has had a tough couple of years—they're a publicly traded company and those numbers are only a couple of mouse clicks away—despite this, you're never going to make me believe they've ever been on credit hold." He laughs. This, he says, is something he "wished people would know and think about."

Mandy doubles down on this idea of community. "We are very much a community centre, and that has been made even more obvious through COVID." She says that though sales remained strong during the first year that the shop was closed to the public as a result of the pandemic, she could feel the weakening connection with her customers. "The sense of community was missing. As soon as we reopened our doors and reconnected with our customers, it became very obvious what that does for our business. That that connection is a major part of our business. And a lot of that comes down to people wanting to talk about what they're excited about. Reading is a very solitary pursuit, so to have a place where you can go and then just start talking about the last thing you read ... I work a lot of weekends and a lot of our regulars just come in to shoot the shit, to be part of the Words

Worth community, and that's just not something that you can get with Amazon. We are part of the reading community."

The past year has had its ups and downs, Mandy and David agree, but "has still been pretty solid." They're not sure that they're any closer to having what they'd called a normal year, but "the shop is viable now."

What they're looking forward to is getting out and slinging some books. Mandy highlights the latest Gay Gavriel Kay, *All the Seas of the World*, and "of course *Hail, the Invisible Watchman*," (Biblioasis) by Alexandra Oliver. David highlights Stacey May Fowles and Jen Sookfong Lee's *Good Mom on Paper* (Book*hug), Tanis MacDonald's *Straggle* (Wolsak & Wynn), Victoria Hetherington's *Autonomy* (Dundurn), and "my man" Ray Robertson's *Estates Large and Small* (Biblioasis) as among the titles he's most looking forward to handselling over the summer months. And Marius Kociejowski's *A Factotum of the Book Trade* (Biblioasis), which he "adored." Though if Marius eschews the title of bookseller because of his competing commitments, preferring to think of himself as the aforementioned factotum, David and Mandy have no such reticence: they are booksellers through and through.

by Dan Wells

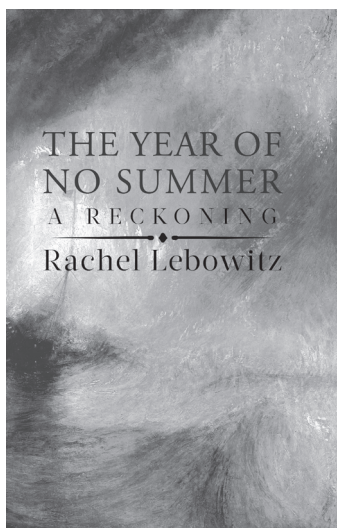


BACKLIST SPOTLIGHT

The Year of No Summer by Rachel Lebowitz

"Lebowitz highlights the parables, fables and myths we humans created in order to weave meaning into our lives and to which we return for comfort."—*Atlantic Books Today*

On April 10, 1815, Indonesia's Mount Tambora erupted. The resulting build-up of ash in the stratosphere altered weather patterns and led, in 1816, to a year without summer. Instead, there



(L) Cover design by Chris Andrechek. (R) Rachel Lebowitz.

were June snowstorms, food shortages, epidemics, inventions, and the proliferation of new cults and religious revivals.

Hauntingly meaningful in today's climate crisis, Lebowitz's *The Year of No Summer* charts the events and effects of that apocalyptic year. Weaving together history, mythology, and memoir, this lyric essay ruminates on weather, war, and our search for God and meaning in times of disaster.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

A note from Rachel Lebowitz

“What are you writing these days?” In Fall 2019, I took a leave of absence from one of my day jobs, so I could have time to figure out where I needed to go. I was taking a “writing leave,” I told people, but that of course was a mistake, because the expectation from all of us was that I would write, and then not doing so felt like a failure. We need to give permission for writing to encompass walking and thinking and reading and sitting with a mug of tea, watching the crows. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, “Remember, writing is not typing.”

I walked, I thought, I noticed birds and the sound of the wind. I thought about how noticing is an honouring. And I read. I read and read and put sticky notes in books and then typed them up into my ever-growing notes file, and then, five months later, just when I thought maybe I'm ready to write, the pandemic hit, and I homeschooled my kid and read escapist fiction instead because my brain stopped being able to process anything. Then my leave ended and I went back to working almost full-time in a pandemic, which meant moving from online to in-person to online to in-person, and that's how it's been for two years. I have written bits and pieces in that time, but nothing that coheres.

Lately, however, I've been obsessively thinking about this book-to-be which is always a good sign. So what am I working on these days? Like many artists, I am trying to make sense of the world. With this climate emergency, I asked myself, "How did we get here?" I asked a question that started with *The Year of No Summer*: "What does it mean to be human?" I wasn't done with this question and I wasn't done with fairytales, either. So, from these has come a grappling. I am using the ancient Greek idea of the elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water and linking each with specific fairytales (some of our oldest stories). I am writing—or thinking out—essays that use as a jumping off point a fairytale to then delve deeper into humans and our relationship with the natural world, moving from the Neolithic Revolution to 19th Century mariners. Lately, I have read about the California and Klondike gold rushes, the history of spinning, and the Middle Ages. I am a frail thing, watching the crows in the trees, and the tide coming in.

Selected and edited by Editorial Assistant Ashley Van Elswyk, the Backlist Spotlight is a monthly feature on our blog. See biblioasis.com for additional columns.



BOOKSELLER BUZZ

Poguemahone by Patrick McCabe

"Shall I tell you what it's like to read Patrick McCabe's *Poguemahone*? You walk up to the bar and there's a drunk on a stool at the end, muttering into his glass. You ignore him at first, but as you wait for your drink, you tune into his monologue and your ear catches a musical rhythm. This is no ordinary drunk, it's the next Dylan Thomas, seventeen whiskies deep, raging in glorious verse against the dying of the light. Grab a seat, my friend. Closing time is a long way off and you're not going anywhere."

James Crossley, Madison Books, Seattle, WA

"*Poguemahone* is a narrative whirlpool: disorienting, overwhelming, and pleasantly terrifying. It was riveting."

Lesley Rains, City of Asylum Books, Pittsburgh, PA

"From the 1970s to present day, Patrick McCabe's novel in verse brings to vivid relief Dan's and Una's memories of the extraordinary antics experienced during hours spent drinking, singing, laughing and crying with their pub mates. It's impossible not to get caught up in the frenetic pace of the exuberant stories that arise from this odd-ball cast. And yet amidst the hijinks are losses, doubts, and human frailties. A big novel as generous, funny and sad as life itself."

Lori Feathers, Interabang Books, Dallas, TX

"The rare novel that earns the 'fever dream' designation, *Poguemahone* is a cross-faded Irish epic about aging, memory, love, and just about every other big literary theme. McCabe writes in an eminently readable stream of consciousness, bending the prose to his twisted will. The resulting story is proof that the Irish avant-garde tradition is as alive as ever. Readers of Sally Rooney and John Banville might not like it, but they were never much fun anyway."

Hank Hietala, Next Chapter Booksellers, St. Paul, MN

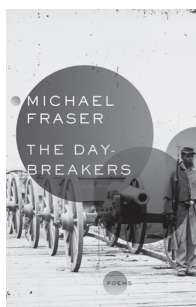
SPRING

FORT WAGNER

They crawled across
sun-scorched beach sand,
clambering beneath cannonball
bombardment blazing from the
fort's stone brow.
The burnt, sour-egg,
sulphur reek flowed into their
rooters as the shoreline convulsed
with each smoothbore cannon-blast.

Men spilled into eternity's
tide-hole in the sloped, quivering
ground hulled around them,
bullets chunked up idea
pots like a dull grubbing hoe.
Every ear-blast boomer wail
presented cutglass-sharp,
heated metal shrapnel tickets to
the breath's sapped tag-end,
the ego's clear pith
repaired to that sky home from
where we all come.

POETRY

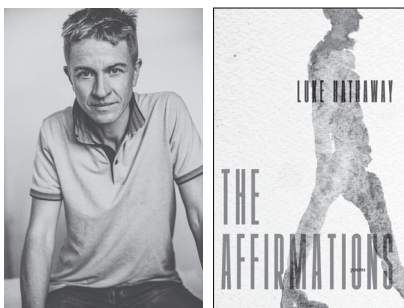


THE DAY-BREAKERS

Michael Fraser

My poems often emerge from images, nebulous memory, and what I envision from historical events... My mind was consumed with Civil War imagery when I revisited Arna Bontemps's poem ["The Day-Breakers"], and a new interpretation immediately materialized! The racist hill was no longer metaphorical, but literal. Of course, all Union troops fought and sacrificed for a greater cause, namely, to maintain the Union and end slavery. However, the outcome was obviously far more precarious and crucial for African American troops who were literally fighting for freedom. The African Canadian involvement certainly deepened the stakes.

MICHAEL FRASER ON THE INSPIRATION
FOR THE DAY-BREAKERS



THE AFFIRMATIONS

Luke Hathaway

I would say that all of us who make things out of words collaborate with one another and with reality in the perpetuation and renewal of language. Where the words are written down, where they are published, a reader can trace those connections: but the collaboration takes place orally, too, in the bedrooms of lovers, on the mattresses where parents sing their children to sleep, in the out of doors where we think about the lineation of the crow-calls . . . Language isn't, thank goodness, ever confined to the page; and I think that for every allusion of which writers and readers are conscious, there are perforce many of which we are not.

LUKE HATHAWAY ON LITERARY INHERITANCE
IN THE AFFIRMATIONS

from NEW YEAR LETTER

The river's white parentheses—
that frozen torrent, roaring silence—
threaten the *logos* of the island.

*All that's necessary strictly
is to silent fall*, wrote Richard, *never
to speake again*. Outwintering me,
turning his bitter water to wine.

You asked me if I write for him
and I said I can't, because he's gone.

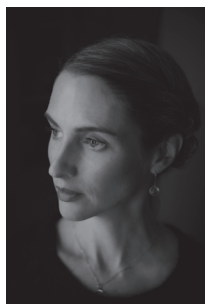
I was to see him in Port Hope
that winter but there was a thaw,
and rain, and then it all froze up
and he forbade me to attempt
the drive, and anything he would
have bid me then I would have done—
in fact did do: I told the phone
goodbye, went home by other ways,
and one month later he was dead.
You are among my loves, he said.

There is that sound beyond all language,
cry of all that's sad and strange,
coyotes howling, wynde and rayne.
I hear it sometimes too in poems,
in the perfection of the rhymes.

THE LIPSTICK EFFECT

You know you need a new one when you're bored
or overcome or underwhelmed or sad,
when you can feel the jangles of your age;
when vapours fill the valleys of your mind
(the news, your kids, the heft of your behind)—
or change arrives, the turning of a page:
you lose a job, move house, cremate your dad,
then add another colour to the hoard

amassed in your boudoir. Their names alone
inspire revolution at some level,
assuring you there's Fire Down Below
a Pirate, Lustering lust, a latent Vamp,
a Dolce Vita waiting where you camp,
and, on the prairie, Cherries in the Snow.
Beneath the paint, you're neither sleek nor evil.
It's just the tubes, the hollow names, you own.

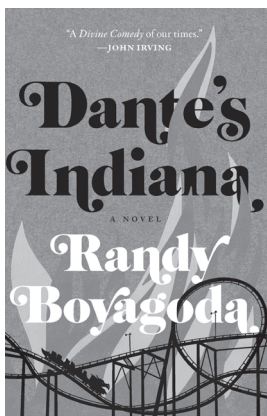


HAIL, THE INVISIBLE
WATCHMAN
Alexandra Oliver

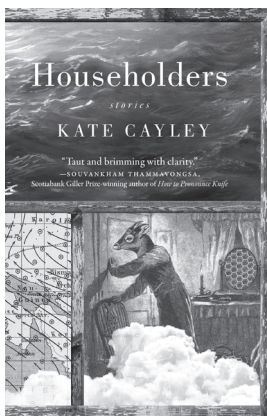
The first cycle, “The Haunting of Sherbet Lake” describes the undercurrents of life in a nondescript Southern Ontario suburb. The second cycle “The Blood of the Jagers” shows an upper-middle-class family in free-fall, as shown from different viewpoints. The third cycle “Clever Little Dragon” is a retelling (in sonnet cycle form) of a Canadian novella, where a young girl’s clarity of perspective is affected by familial and societal prejudices. What links these three cycles, I suppose, is the idea that everyday life is haunted by something, contaminated, as it were by historical baggage or personal obsessions or systemic prejudices. There is always some force in the background unpicking the seams of our identities and intentions.

ALEXANDRA OLIVER ON THE STRUCTURE
OF HAIL, THE INVISIBLE WATCHMAN

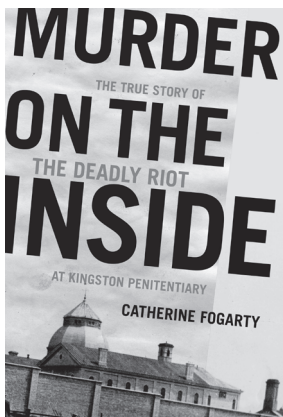
AWARDS & ACCOLADES



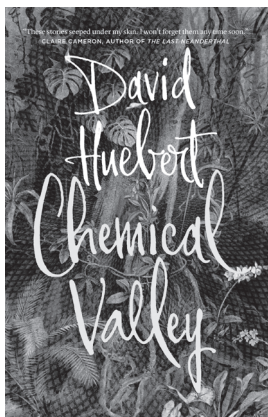
Dante's Indiana, the second novel in RANDY BOYAGODA's Prin trilogy, is a finalist for the 2022 ReLit Novel Award. Awarded annually to the best in poetry, short fiction, and the novel, the ReLit Awards honour the best Canadian books published by independent presses.



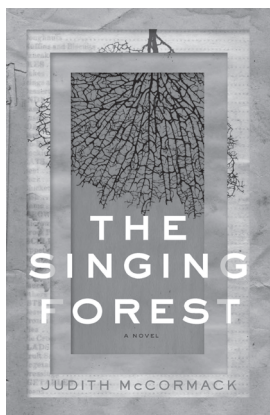
KATE CAYLEY's short story collection *Householders* is a finalist for the CLMP Firecracker Award for Fiction. The Firecracker Awards for Independently Published Literature are given annually to celebrate significant contribution to literary culture. The winner will be announced June 23.



Murder on the Inside: The True Story of the Deadly Riot at Kingston Penitentiary by CATHERINE FOGARTY is a finalist for the Crime Writers of Canada's Brass Knuckle Award for Best Nonfiction Crime Book. The winner will be announced May 26. *Murder on the Inside* has also been nominated for the Forest of Reading's 2022 Evergreen Award.



DAVID HUEBERT's *Chemical Valley* has been shortlisted for two Atlantic Book Awards: the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award and the Alistair MacLeod Prize for Short Fiction. Winners will be announced on June 9. *Chemical Valley* is also a semi-finalist for the Siskiyau Prize for New Environmental Literature, given to a work that redefines our notions of environmentalism and sustainability, and the ReLit Award for Short Fiction.



JUDITH MCCORMACK's *The Singing Forest* was named a *New York Times* Best of the Year in Historical Fiction. Reviewer Alida Becker writes, “*The Singing Forest* blends thought-provoking reflections on the moral reckoning of war crimes with a warm, wry, almost Anne Tyler-esque depiction of a young woman’s attempts to decode her eccentric professional and personal families.”



Among numerous other accolades, including year-end recognition by the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Globe and Mail*, *Book Riot*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, and *Lit Hub*, *A Ghost in the Throat* by DOIREANN NÍ GHRÍOFA was named a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award.

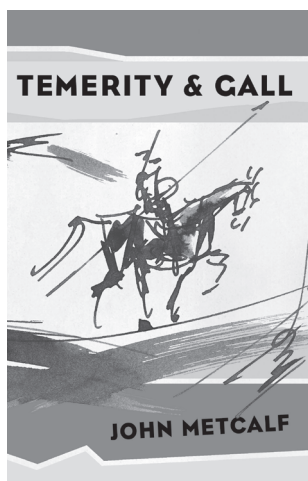
RECENT RELEASES



Shimmer Alex Pugsley

"[Pugsley's] ability to show the twists and turns of our constant, anxious questioning of ourselves makes each story revelatory in a different way. A truly impressive collection."

OTTAWA REVIEW OF BOOKS

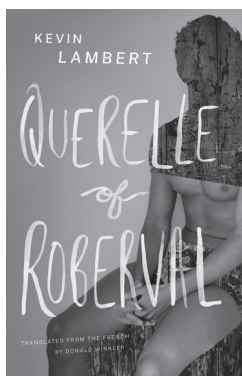


Temerity & Gall: *A Memoir* John Metcalf

"While it's amusing to wrestle with the temerity and gall of Metcalf's settled esthetic standards . . . his achievement in translating this approach into practice as mentor and guiding light is invaluable and we are all in his debt."

STEVEN BEATTIE, TORONTO STAR

FORTHCOMING FROM BIBLIOASIS



Querelle of Roberval

Kevin Lambert

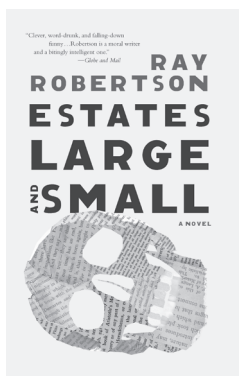
Translated by Donald Winkler

Homage to Jean Genet's antihero and a brilliant reimaging of the ancient form of tragedy, *Querelle of Roberval*, winner of the Marquis de Sade Prize, is a wildly imaginative story of justice, passion, and murderous revenge.

Estates Large and Small

Ray Robertson

Profound, perceptive, and wryly observed, *Estates Large and Small* is the story of one man's reckoning and an ardent defense of the shape books make in a life.



You Are Here: Selected Stories

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Cynthia Flood

Gathering the best twenty stories from Cynthia Flood's career, these spare, stylistically inventive stories explore subjects ranging from the domestic to the political.

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