

the bibliophile

news
from the
manse

NUMBER FOUR

BIBLIOASIS

THE 4 BIBLIOPHILE

News from the Bibliomanse

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HOW TO BE AND WHAT TO DO



January–June 2023

RUMMAGING THROUGH MY INNER monologue in search of a subject for this, the publisher's introduction to the fourth iteration of *The Bibliophile*, I kept coming back to baseball: it's hard, in this business, not to love any activity in which a 30 percent rate of success is considered outstanding. Too, we've just launched Heidi LM Jacobs' lovingly researched and beautifully written *1934: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars' Barrier-Breaking Year*, the true story of the first Black baseball team to win an Ontario Baseball Amateur Association championship—you can read about the book, and enjoy some historic photographs of the championship team, on page 26. But Dan provided a definitive account of failure in publishing in the last issue, so I'll leave my sports metaphors aside for a second, though not without identifying myself as the pinch-hitter who, at least momentarily last Monday, seemed less busy than the indomitable Mr Wells and volunteered to—yes, I am so sorry—step up to the plate.

What's a day in the life of the managing editor look like? I can't top the Twitter job description of one member of our US sales and distribution team: "I seem to crunch a lot of numbers in order to sell you the alphabet." I seem to encourage a lot of people to let me know if they have any questions or concerns in order to

let you disappear into a well-made book—hence I do my best to field (zing!) a lot of questions and concerns. These range from “Is my book good?” to “Do we have a first aid kit?” (Probably, if we are publishing it, and yes, we do, it’s in the kitchen, on top of the refrigerator.) You might say I am a utility infielder, except on days when I am sweeping up popcorn in the upper deck.

The majority of my time is spent turning a Word document into the printed and bound object you happen upon in your favourite independent bookstore. This transmogrification entails the coordination of many busy professionals, all of whom have copious amounts of other work to do, beginning with the author and editor, then moving on to the designers and copyeditors; then the typesetters, indexers, proofers, sometimes mapmakers, occasionally cartoonists, now and again photogs; then the sales teams, the buyers, the booksellers, the distributors, and the inventory specialists; and, along the way, the printer reps, their pre-flight team and press operators, even the freight companies that deliver pallets of finished copies to three different warehouses. There are many hands involved in every book, and most of them belong to people who endeavour to leave as little evidence as possible, from your perspective as the reader, that they were there. As Beatrice Warde famously argued about typography in “The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible”: “everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain.” Nothing about a book should interfere with what, on my more stark-raving days, also known as Monday through Friday and most weekends, I will call your sacred communion with one of our books.

I may have the sacrosanct in mind due to another spring title: Jeannie Marshall’s *All Things Move: Learning to Look in the Sistine Chapel*. A full-colour hardcover, brilliantly designed by Natalie Olsen and including Douglas Anthony Cooper’s stunning photographs of Rome, this digital document-to-beautiful object process was more complex than most. Usually we are primarily concerned with making sure we have all the best words in the best order, not with how best to visually represent five hundred years’ worth of thinking and feeling about a seminal work of Western

FROM VANESSA'S NOTEBOOK

RECENT PUBLISHING MEMOIR TITLES

The Words Are Good

At a Very Distant Distance

The Range of Accidents That Kept Me Here

I Love You, But Not Enough

Seasonal Cheesecake

art. I think, though, that everyone who was involved in making this book was surprised by how easily it came together. Sometimes everything just clicks. I take no credit. Whatever ability I have as acting art director is best described as “pick the right people and get out of their way.” We are blessed with some of the best book designers in the country: it would be foolish of me to do much more.

Is this mere delinquency, or another incarnation of Warde's crystal goblet? In an essay for the *Globe and Mail*, reprinted here on page 5, Marshall makes a similar observation about getting out of the way: “Michelangelo's masterpiece doesn't tell you how to be, or what to do . . . Instead [the frescoes] tell an old human story of struggle and uncertainty. They tell you to consider your solitary life and think about what it means to be a human being in the world.” No solitary life in independent publishing, at least not the way we do it, but all of us here at the Manse seem to send a lot of email in order that you might disappear from yours, if only for the space of a chapter, a story, a poem—and not one of us would have it any other way.

VANESSA STAUFFER, MANAGING EDITOR

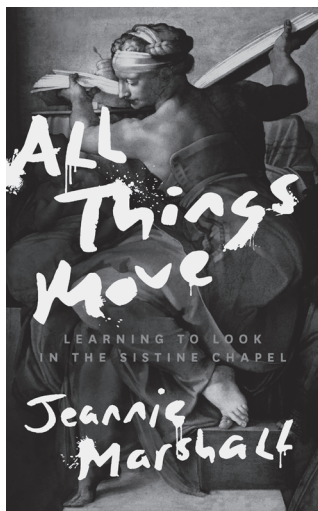
Windsor, Ontario

June 13, 2023



WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT THE SISTINE CHAPEL?

by Jeannie Marshall



VISITING THE SISTINE CHAPEL is uncomfortable. It's always crowded, and you have to walk through the vast collections of the Vatican Museums before you even get there. And when you finally reach this famous room, you have to look up at images that are difficult to see from the ground. Every time I've been, I can sense a current of irritation running through the room. Even if you do have the place to yourself, these frescoes will not yield themselves easily. Many people experience it as more of a duty than a pleasure and others admit they find the whole thing boring. So what can be gained by spending our precious time contemplating a half-millennium-old religious view of the world painted by a deeply Catholic artist?

It's useful to consider the person who is uninterested in this artwork because this might be the most honest approach that a contemporary visitor can take. To approach it with unexamined reverence is to risk missing it completely. Perhaps the person who

ABOVE LEFT: Jeannie Marshall at the Rome launch of *All Things Move* (Douglas Anthony Cooper). ABOVE RIGHT: Book design by Natalie Olsen.



Inside Bus 280, Rome (DA Cooper).

is willing to court ridicule by asking what's so great about it is the person who might find an answer.

Art is a difficult pleasure, and this art does not offer easy platitudes. Michelangelo's masterpiece doesn't tell you how to be, or what to do. It isn't practical or useful, and it doesn't even show you an easy path to heavenly eternity. Although the ceiling is an illustration of the Old Testament, and the altar wall is of the Last Judgment, these frescoes are not instructive. Instead they tell an old human story of struggle and uncertainty. They tell you to consider your solitary life and think about what it means to be a human being in the world. These questions are not so unlike the ones we all have today, but we usually leave them unaddressed under loads of laundry and piles of unfinished work and the other pressing obligations of daily life.

On the surface the frescoes would seem to be about Catholic doctrine, but instead they show you that Catholicism in the early 16th-century was quite different from what it is today. The frescoes are not simply illustrations of biblical stories, but instead look at the deep questions those stories bring up. They acknowledge that the Bible itself is an artful text, a mysterious collection of verse and prophecy that comes out of a human past that we don't know so much about.



Michelangelo's arch on Via Giulia, Rome (DA Cooper).

Each part of the ceiling is a fresh look at an old story. God in the Separation of Light from Darkness is a vigorous old man pulling the universe into being with only his hands and out of nothing, which is an image that raises questions such as “what comes before existence?” and “who created God?” The sibyls are enormous masculine women who prophesied the birth of a saviour, but they existed before Christianity and are not in the Old Testament.

In the Deluge, Michelangelo doesn't tell the familiar tale of Noah's ark and the animals going aboard two by two. We see the ark in the distance, but the attention is focused on the grey sky meeting a rising body of water and on the people struggling out of it to survive a flood, which we know they will not survive. The artist makes us stay with the condemned while the ark floats away.

The Deluge is the first of the panels that pulled me in at a point where I was almost ready to give up. The story in Genesis says that God intends to flood the Earth, wipe it clean and start again. It's hard not to think about climate change and rising sea levels when contemplating the fate of God's flawed creatures who have seemingly brought this upon themselves. But there's no trace of moral superiority in this depiction, or righteous pleasure to be had from looking at the victims of God's displeasure. By making the viewer confront those who have been left behind, Michelangelo



Statue of Giordano Bruno in Campo de' Fiori, Rome (DA Cooper).

raises questions about fairness and mortality and even about what kind of god would be so harsh.

On a recent visit I looked again at this panel and thought about Michelangelo portraying these people as wanting to live and to go on, as we would want to go on. He doesn't portray the woman carrying her children or the men in the sinking boat as deserving of their fate.

Michelangelo isn't an apologist for this terrifying Old Testament God. And we know, though Michelangelo would not have, that this story is older than the one told in Genesis. We know that such tales were also told in ancient Mesopotamia centuries earlier; like the story of Atrahasis where a cranky god, finding humans to be irritating and noisy, tries to silence them with a flood while a kinder god tries to save them.

We only know these older stories because of excavations in the nineteenth century. But the artist sensed something about God's victims, a trace left from the original story, and when I think about that for a moment, time doesn't seem so linear. Yes, it is about birth, then life, then death, but in art time flows backward and forward and we as viewers are caught in these strong currents, making meaning out of what we can see, what we know. We might stand there looking outwardly passive while inwardly experiencing a connection through the art to an unknowable past that runs through us and on into the future.

We keep it going by looking and wrestling with the images made by a man who is long dead in the hope that someone else will stand where we are and think about this artwork in the future.

While looking at the Sistine Chapel frescoes isn't going to make you a better person (or help you out from under your chores, either), it will make your inner life richer. Any piece of art that can sustain long, slow scrutiny will reward the person who looks at it with an expanded sense of wonder at the long history of art made by people communicating something that feels essential, urgent, and relevant through time. To feel connected to it, all you have to do is look.



DAN WELLS INTERVIEWS STEPHEN MARCHE AT BIBLIOASIS BOOKSHOP

IN MARCH, STEPHEN MARCHE joined us for the Windsor launch of his Field Note, *On Writing and Failure*, and his conversation with Dan was voted Most Hilarious Book Event, Like, Ever, by the Biblioasis staff. So we're delighted to bring it to you here, faithfully transcribed and edited by EMILY MERNIN.

DAN WELLS: So, we'll be sharing a mic. First things first, how many books have you actually written?

STEPHEN MARCHE: Woo, okay let me count them. Depends if you count the one I wrote that was a hyperlink for *The Walrus*, which was novel length, but it was published online.

DW: I would count that. It's not on your Wikipedia page.

SM: So maybe ten? Somewhere around there.

DW: That's a pretty good number. Are there any—

SM: I'm gonna handle the mic, since you're technologically challenged.

DW: This is actually the first time that our mic hasn't conked out by this point in the proceedings. So I already consider this evening a success. *On Writing and Failure* has been out for a month now. Has there been anything about its reception that has surprised you?

SM: It got a lot more attention than I thought it would get, for sure, for what is ultimately a twenty thousand word essay. What I didn't expect was the number of writers who I would undoubtedly qualify as a success writing to me and saying things like, you got it, thank you so much, this is absolutely right. That is definitely something that has been happening, where I'm like, "Didn't you win the Pulitzer, like, twice?" and they're like, "Yeah, this book really resonated with me." One of the major points of the book is that when you know some really successful writers, they are often the ones that are most contorted with anxiety and with feelings of failure. That's what the book is about, so it makes sense. But I guess I still didn't expect it.

DW: I've been greatly relieved to see that people have taken it in the spirit in which you've offered it.

SM: Well, how did you think it was going to be taken? You thought they would see through this piece of shit right away?

dw: No no no! But failure usually has an air of anxiety around it. People usually think of failure as something they should avoid. This seems to have been an opportunity for people to open up about their own.

sm: It is true that writers really don't talk about their rejections very much even though that is most of your life. It is most of everyone's life. One of the stories that I didn't put in the book but I think about all the time is about Steven Spielberg. He had a show that he wanted to produce. It was like a backroom drama of Broadway musicals, a behind-the-scenes kind of show, and he just couldn't sell it. And I just kept thinking, like, imagine you are Steven Spielberg and you are going into these meetings like "Hi, my name is Steven, I invented the 1980s, if you remember your childhood, I did that, that was me," and the producers are just like, "Yeah, this isn't really for us." It's amazing to think that even Spielberg is out there hustling and failing.

dw: And chancing.

sm. And chancing, taking his shot. I mean, that show probably shouldn't have been made, it turned out to be really bad.

dw: So, let's step back for a bit and talk about you as a young writer. What do you wish you had known back then?

sm: I think it's actually better not to know when you are first starting out. I think it's better to think that it is all sensible, and rational adults are making decisions. It's probably not good to know how random and irrational the market is. I guess what I wished I'd known is that it's never going away. That's what I wanted to communicate to kid writers in this book. These feelings you have of struggle, well, there is never going to be a point where you are going to feel like: I graduated, I'm done, and I don't need to worry about this anymore. Struggle is what it takes to do this, and it's what is required of you if you want to try to make things that are meaningful. You just have to accept that as the price of doing business.



The microphone battle begins...

dw: How did you expect your literary life to look when you were a young writer?

sm: I really love this whole me controlling the mic as the interview subject. I should've thought of this years ago. I can talk for as long as I like, it's beautiful. Um, you know, I thought I was going to be Michael Ondaatje.

dw: Well, you have time.

sm: Well actually I don't. One of the things I've realized is that there are no Michael Ondaatje's anymore. That's gone. I was trying to get to a flight and the plane had already left. One thing I think about writing during this time is that it is very chaotic. I was a tenure-track Shakespeare professor writing weird avant-garde novels when I was thirty. That was my life, and I thought that was going to be my life. I thought I would just get a little more attention for every weird novel as it went. We had a kid, my wife got offered a big job, so we had to move back from New York to Toronto. Suddenly, I found myself in Toronto thinking, literally, if I don't make two thousand dollars this month I'll have to start taking care of my son. I needed to make money. So, I started freelancing and working on nonfiction. Then a couple years later, randomly



...and comes to an expedient end (Photos courtesy of Emily Stephenson-Bowes).

and out of the blue, *Esquire* calls me up and says, “Do you want a column?” So then I was an *Esquire* columnist for eight years. That’s a world that has passed. That is *Gone with the Wind* territory. I wrote a single column, once a month, that an editor would edit six times. They would put a maximum amount of effort into it. I had access to a zeitgeist list, they would fly me anywhere I wanted to go to write these columns. That is all gone now.

dw: Well, we put you on a train.

sm: Ha, yes, I got the train to Windsor. I’m not complaining, it was very nice, and this is wonderful. The point is that the very foundational ground from which people are writing keeps changing. Not only has it changed—I’ve probably had three different careers at this point, and there’s probably a few more to go—but it’s going to keep changing. There’s a lot of rolling with the punches.

dw: One of the things you talk about in this book is rejection, and your history with rejection, and how at one point you fanatically kept track of rejection letters. You stopped counting after two thousand. You think you are roughly at four and a half thousand?

sm: Now? Oh, now. Hm. I would guess I’m somewhere around

ten thousand. I mean, I don't know if that's true, but definitely over five thousand.

DW: Seems like a good number.

SM: I mean, so many.

DW: I have a hard time with one. Every writer loves to hear stories about other writers' rejections. Is there any that linger with you more than others?

SM: I kind of forget the rejections. Because they are all the same. It's always, "Dear Stephen, thank you so much for sending this to us. It does not fit with our current plans." Now, I just check the first line and throw it out. I can't believe I forgot his name but, um, the guy who used to own Porcupine's Quill...

DW: John Metcalf.

SM: Yes, John Metcalf once sent me a very nice handwritten rejection letter, in which he said, if you want to continue in this profession, you should probably try writing more regular books.

DW: Do you still have it? I would love a copy for the archive.

SM: I almost had it framed, but didn't. I'll send you a photograph, I know exactly where it is.

DW: We tell these stories about rejection all the time. What do you think is most problematic about how writers—and society in general—talk about rejection and failure?

SM: Well, they don't really talk about it. We don't talk about it with ourselves. Writers love to tell stories about how editors fuck them over. But that's a different thing than being rejected. If they screw us out of things, that's a shareable story. But the ordinary process of rejection is humiliating. Except it isn't, because it's

the most normal thing. One thing you realize pretty quickly if you are in this business is that you want to be rejected more. You can't control how much you are accepted, but you can control how much you are rejected. It's sort of like baseball. You want more at-bats. You don't need to hit every time. You just need to hit one out of ten times.

In baseball, three out of ten. But in writing, if you are hitting one out of ten you are doing great.

dw: Three out of ten ...

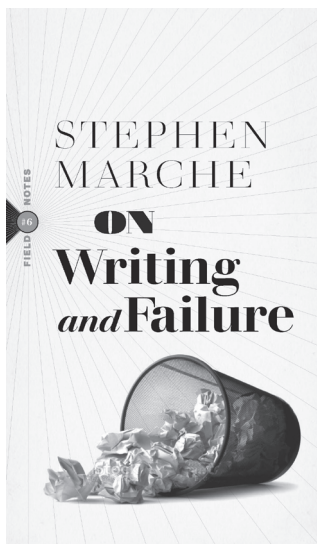
sm: In baseball, three out of ten. But in writing, if you are hitting one out of ten you are doing great. People don't talk about it and I think it is kind of bad. It tends to make you think that you are the only one getting rejected. When in reality every single person who is trying anything slightly different is getting rejected everyday, all the time.

dw: There's something about the digital age that has increased the likelihood of getting rejected, you talk about that as well. You had two thousand rejections in the print era?

sm: I was sort of in between. They weren't all self addressed envelopes, but I was halfway between analog and digital. I remember the day in university when they said no handwritten essays anymore. I remember the day that email arrived. I was eighteen. The reason I get rejected so much now is because I can send so much stuff out. I can send stuff to the *New Yorker*. Thirty years ago, I wouldn't. I would just be writing in Toronto. The internet has made it possible to get rejected by countries all over the world. You decide you want to get rejected by Singapore, you can!

dw: But it's also increased the opportunity for success, by the same measure. Or at least for acceptance?

sm: Yeah, the range of places you can go is so much bigger, and



L: Stephen Marche. R: Series design by Ingrid Paulson.

I think that is great. All of these rejections are really just a mark of increased opportunity. I have a really dumb approach to these things. I write the best thing I can. I send it to the place I most want it to go. When they turn it down I go to the next place. I'm really crude and I don't have a strategy. Sometimes kid writers come to me and ask me what my strategy is and how I do this. I really just send it to the top place and when they don't want it I send it to the next place. I don't even really think about it. Going to parties does nothing for me. Meeting people has never done anything for me. The rejections are a sign of opportunity. That's another thing I hope a kid writer can take away from this book.

DW: Rejection aside, you do seem to be one of those rarest of all things, a professional writer. You make a living writing. Must that not be considered at some level, a success?

SM: I think some people would consider me a success and some people wouldn't. That's just the way of the world. As I am aging, it just means less and less. Success on what terms? By whose standards? By what metric? In writing, I don't think there are a lot of sensible metrics. You know, I go to my Amazon rating, and

then look at the books that are below it, that are so much better than mine. There are a lot of classics out there that are unbelievable books that never sold any copies. Everything can be put into numbers. But the actual value of those numbers is unclear at any given moment. So, I don't know. When I say in the book that success seems to me, increasingly, a meaningless term, that's not a lie. It's not something that makes a lot of sense to me one way or another anymore.

dw: That makes a lot of sense to me.

sm: The success that I have is that I write exactly what I want, and publish exactly what I want. And it reaches an audience. That fills me with joy. That is definitely what I have, and that is a lot, and I don't feel entitled to ask for anything more.

dw: Good writers, you have argued, offer advice. Great writers offer condolences. Can you unpack that for us?

sm: Well, there is this mania for writerly advice. Some of it is pretty good. Elmore Leonard says only ever use dialogue with he said or she said. That is correct. That is very good advice. Others get pretty vague. You hear things like "invest in your heart." Meaningless. That's not how this process works at all. Or, it may for some people, but it certainly doesn't for everyone. The advice that I thought was the best advice, particularly from James Baldwin and George Orwell, was that they didn't offer any advice. They were just like, if you are gonna do this, you are gonna do it, good luck. And, if you can talk yourself out of doing it, don't do it, and that is also fine.

dw: Or even better.

sm: Yes, even better, good for you, you got out, and congratulations. It seemed to me that there were two tiers of advice. One was like, some is good, some is bad, the other is just: good luck.

dw: One of the things that has been clear to all of us who have

worked on this book, is how incredibly hard you work. We've seen how rarely you say no to anything.

sm: I don't say no.

dw: Can you give us a sense, as a freelance working writer, of what your day-to-day life is like at the present moment, and how this has changed over the course of those three or four career alterations.

sm: Like, now? Well, it is really weird. I am going through a weird period after covid. We all are. Suddenly things seem very distorted and strange. For the past month, I have had to basically cut off my family because I was working on an AI-generated novel for Pushkin, where they wanted it in a month. I wrote the novel in between the time of the proposal and when the contract was signed. So that was frantic, outright frantic. Plus, I am promoting this book. As you know, anytime anyone says, hey I have a podcast with twenty people, come talk, I do it. I say yes to everything. Meanwhile I was also in the middle of revisions for this novel I am doing with Andrew Yang, the former presidential candidate. I mean it is February in Canada, so there is nothing to do but work. Now, the *Guardian* wants me to go to the coronation. I am going to England, so I was writing notes about that on the train here. I don't think they are going to let me actually go to the coronation. Although, maybe? It would be pretty cool. If somebody calls me up and says they want a piece I write it. Maybe that's not a really helpful answer to your question.

dw: I think it is, though. What I have been impressed by, because I've been paying much more attention over the past few months, is that you are just everywhere. You are writing a piece for *Lit Hub*, you are writing a piece for us, you are doing an excerpt here or there. You are writing all the time. I mean, there was a point when you got a call for a piece while your supper was simmering and you had it finished by the time you turned the oven off.

sm: Yes, that was when I was writing blog posts for *Esquire*. I

remember once I was out rock climbing with my son and my phone was in a locker for like half an hour. When I came back, somebody had died. There were all these frantic phone calls, then messages saying we already found somebody else to write the piece. Because it needed to be written in an hour. This is the kind of world I have

*Every project I just described to you is awesome.
How could I say no to any of that? It's all dreamy
work to be doing, including this book.*

been writing in, a world of constant adaptation. Every project I just described to you is awesome. How could I say no to any of that? It's all dreamy work to be doing, including this book. I love this book. It's all fabulous, it's just frantic.

dw: How do you move from one project to another? How do you keep it all straight? How do you shift from coronation to AI to writing about failure?

sm: I do one thing at a time until it is done.

dw: So, you were an English professor. Have you ever taught creative writing?

sm: I've never taught creative writing.

dw: How would you teach it, if you were given the opportunity? What lessons would you most hope to impart?

sm: I don't think I would teach creative writing. I would never be interested in that. If I were ever given young writers to teach, I would do minute analysis of individual artworks. If I were going to teach about the short story, I would take ten stories and break them down bit by bit. It is different the way you would do that than when you are a scholar. If you wanna figure out how Flaubert wrote *A Simple Life*, that's very hard to do. Figuring out how he made it function in terms of sentences, paragraphs, sections, and arcs,

is very different from analyzing it as a literary artifact. The way I learned to write was reading things that way. Breaking them down, seeing how their mechanisms worked. If I were to teach creative writing, I would just do that.

Really, I believe you should be tested in the marketplace. Going in front of a room full of people and showing them a story, that's one thing. What you really want is someone to buy it. It's like playing poker with money, instead of matchsticks. When you play poker for money, it is a very different activity. I would never have faith in myself that I would know what is good or bad in someone else's story.

dw: Do you wish some of the subjects you cover in *On Writing and Failure* were more prominent in creative writing discussions? Do you think they should prepare young writers for the reality of the marketplace? I've been invited to the odd class here and there to talk about the realities of publishing your first book. I remember this one class in particular, telling them that the average collection of short stories in Canada is going to sell three to five hundred copies.

sm: Right, and they were shocked.

dw: They weren't shocked. Actually, they thought I was an idiot. It was like a wave washing over them, where they collectively, minus maybe one person who realized I was speaking the truth, decided that they would be the exception to the rule. Where you are here to say, there are exceptions to the rule, stop fucking whining.

sm: You know what I tell every kid writer that has come to me for advice, in all honesty? I say write nonfiction. The essay is the form of the moment. I have a friend, Michael Lista. He was a poet, published in poetry magazines. In another era, he would've immediately gone into a novel—great poesis, great sense of metaphor. I said to him, just do true crime. He is now the best true crime writer in Canada. It turns out that he became a savage reporter. If Michael Lista comes to your house and starts asking questions,

do not answer. Walk away. He will get the real truth out of things. To me, that world, the reported essay is the form of the moment. You'll find a much larger audience, with real resonance, that ordinary people read. That's my advice, write essays. You can actually make a living doing it, sometimes.

dw: In one way, obviously, this book is about failure. But it is also about succeeding. It seems to me, in part, to be about recalibrating our ideas of what failure and success mean. You are introducing maybe a necessary antidote of humility into the equation. You are helping keep things real. Artistic creation has always been a minority sport. Why should it be any different for any of us?

sm: My father-in-law, Bob Fulford the literary critic, once said, more people care about lacrosse than literature.

dw: So I mean, in this way, perseverance is central to the subtitle book. Isn't perseverance for decades a form of success? The fact that you've been throwing yourself against the wall repeatedly and you are still able to do it. Isn't that a measure of success?

sm: That is the most Canadian thing you've ever said. I mean, they should put that over the border. Like, aren't the friends we made along the way enough to sustain us? Haha, but I take your point. What I hope the thing that comes out of this book is, because it is a very hard headed and in some sense cynical book, but I think the thing is there is something really valid in this pursuit. Partly the pursuit of meaning, yes, but it's also the perseverance, the capacity to keep going no matter what. Those are the heroes of the story. The heroes of the story are writers like Sima Qian, who was castrated but didn't commit suicide, even though that was the total norm, just so that he could finish writing the history of the Han. He endured. And because of that the whole world has benefitted. Because of that, there are six hundred years of Chinese history that we know about, that we would not have known about otherwise. If he had not decided to endure. That's definitely the heroism of this book.

DW: There's heroism, but the other thing that comes through when you are reading this book is how much pleasure you take in the daily life of writing. That is also I think central to the stories you tell. You love playing with language.

SM: Yeah, I mean I do think I write compulsively. I was talking to a friend of mine who is a gambling addict. During covid, he lost his way, he lost his house, it all fell apart. He's a tremendous writer. One of the greatest writers of dialogue this country has ever produced. He was asking me, what's your thing? What's your vice? And I don't really have a lot of vices. Except for the wine I'm drinking now. Despite that, writing is my compulsion. It is what I do as a compulsive behavior. I've come to accept that about myself. In a way, it's unhealthy. But it is what I have been given, it is what I am supposed to do, and it is what I am going to do.



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ON NEW-CAREER DEBUTS

THIS SPRING WE HAD the pleasure of welcoming to the press two authors who brought not only their debut books, but a wealth of experience in existing careers. Lucian Childs, a graphic designer and author of the novel *Dreaming Home*, and Deborah Dundas, well known to the publishing world as Books Editor at the *Toronto Star* and author of *On Class*, shared a June 6 pub date. Here they talk about the paths they took to publishing their first books.

Lucian Childs

I DON'T HAVE ANY formal or academic training as a writer. I thought, you know, let me see if I can hone these stories before I start schlepping them around. So, I enrolled at the Banff Centre's literary program's five-week residency. I got in but immediately, of course, covid shut it down. It worked out anyway because I emailed Caroline Adderson, who was the director. I had read about all of the instructors and really wanted to work with her, and she said she would love to work with me. So, we spent nine months on the manuscript. For someone who doesn't have an MFA, to have that experience was amazing. One of the first suggestions she made was linking the stories. And I was like, "what?" They were written ten, eleven, twelve years apart. How could they be linked?

My process is to balk first, then think "hmm, maybe" and then I go "definitely!" So, the more I thought about it, the twelve stories



L: Book design by Ingrid Paulson. R: Lucian, right, enjoys a packed house at his launch at Queen Books in Toronto.

did seem to arrange themselves into two groups, each of which with its own implied narrative arc. I wholeheartedly signed on to the project and was able to plug in some of my dissatisfactions with the short story. I feel that I am a short story writer, for ten years it's practically all I read, but I became frustrated because they seemed like these little walled gardens. As lovely as they were, you didn't really get a sense of who the characters were. They just existed under the microscope, within the confines of the walls of that garden. It excited me to be able to look at a group of characters over time. But I wanted to be true to the original shape of the stories and improve upon them. So, we let the original POVs stand, stripped the stories to the bone, and I essentially wrote new stories on top of them.

And then John got a hold of it, and said that he'd publish it if I made some changes. I'd balked with Caroline but, when John Metcalf comes knocking on your door, you just don't hesitate. Just say yes. Between nine months with Caroline, and nine months with John, that's my MFA right there.

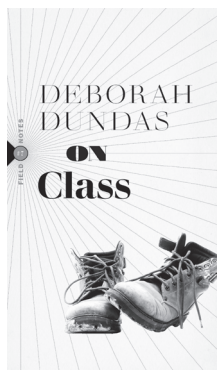
Deborah Dundas

I AM A WRITER. While some days it feels as if I have no idea how I got here, other days it seems as if I made all the right choices (hindsight is a wonderful thing). I've always believed in a two-year plan: the time span it generally takes, in my experience, to transform a life change from idea to realization.

Two years ago, I began my MFA in Creative Nonfiction at the University of King's College; just months before, when I first applied, I was uncertain I would even be accepted into the program. I had never finished my undergrad degree—a double-major in English and Political Science that I left a few courses short of a 4-year degree because I got a job—but I thought it would help with another unfinished goal: I wanted to write a book.

Both were, for me, things I've been wanting to do for half a lifetime.

That April two years ago, my writing life quickly changed: fast on the heels of being accepted to the MFA program to write a family memoir, I was commissioned to write a book for Biblioasis' Field Notes series, with my contribution being *On Class*.



l: Series design by Ingrid Paulson. r: Deborah in conversation at her Halifax launch, hosted by King's Co-op Bookstore.

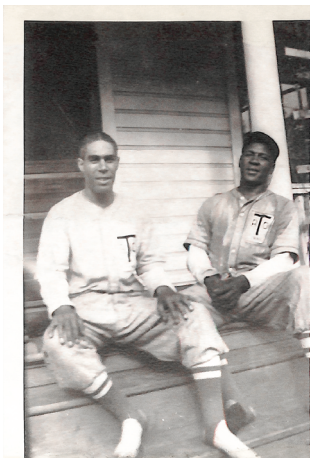
My declaring that I'm a writer might seem disingenuous from the outside looking in; I'm a journalist by profession, the books editor at the *Toronto Star*, and writing is part of my daily routine. But while I sit down at my work computer to write work things—even stories that require attention to thought and craftsmanship—it is different from writing my own projects. For that, I have to sit down at another desk, or on a sofa or in a corner of the house, with my personal computer or a notepad and a very specific kind of 0.5m felt-tip black pen from Muji. The stories that come out are different.

From the inside looking out, suddenly my writing practice looked quite different. Whereas, in my other writing, I could take a step back and remove myself, here I had to lean into my writing. Part of *On Class* is very personal; I was exploring and explaining experiences I hadn't written about before, at least not publicly. The MFA program gave me a safe place to do that: it wasn't public; it was filled with supportive mentors and fellow students (some also journalists wanting to write *differently*). When I gave it to my editor, who inevitably had changes, I had an armour of confidence nurtured by that encouragement.

When I sit with my computer or notebook in my not-work space, now, two years later, I am a different kind of writer. The sentence construction has changed: I write books.



1934



The Star Sports

WINDSOR, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1935

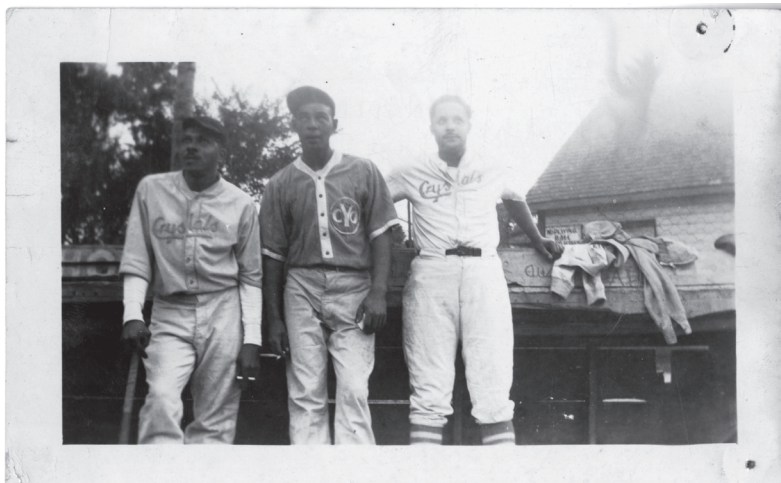
Chatham's Colorful Contenders for O.B.A.A. Honors



PROUD POSSESSORS of the Intermediate B championship of the province, Chatham Colored All-Stars are the only colored club ever to participate in Ontario Amateur Baseball Association competition. They won the title for the first time last year and this season are making a strong bid to retain it. Regarded as an outstanding drawing card in O.B.A.A. ranks,

the club comprises, left to right, back row: Flat Chase, Don Washington (captain); Goy Ladd, Willie Shagonosh, Wilf (Boomer) Harding and Les Hyatt (manager); front row: Stan Robbins, Len Harding, Fen Jenkins, Jack Robinson (bat-boy), Don Tabron and King Terrell. Percy Parker and Louis Pryor, coaches, are missing from the picture.

THE CHATHAM COLOURED **ALL-STARS'** BARRIER-BREAKING YEAR



AS A KID GROWING up in the city of Chatham, Dan Wells knew two of the Chatham All-Stars: Andy Harding and Ferguson Jenkins Sr. were regulars at his grandmother's table. But he didn't know then that they were members of a minor league team that had made a splash in a white-dominated sport. In 1934, more than a decade before Jackie Robinson played Major League Baseball, the All-Stars became the first Black team to win a provincial pennant race.

Drawing on oral histories and family scrapbooks, Heidi LM Jacobs tells the story of the All-Stars' record-breaking year. As her research shows, the story of Negro League Baseball didn't end at the US border, and 1934 documents not only how the All-Stars regularly beat their white opponents, but how they challenged discriminatory ideas and practices in Canada, including segregationist policies in hotels and restaurants, off the field. Following the thrilling trajectory of their winning season, 1934 is an essential piece of Black history and a baseball story that will captivate readers and fans on both sides of the border.

ABOVE: Fergie Jenkins, Sr. (Father of Hall of Famer Fergie Jenkins, Jr), Andy Harding, Ross Talbot. Courtesy of the University of Windsor, Archives and Special Collections.

FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: Boomer Harding, nd. Courtesy of the Milburn family.

TOP RIGHT: King Terrell and Flat Chase. Courtesy of the Chase family.

BOTTOM: Coverage of the team in the Windsor Star (1935).

BOOK DESIGN by Michel Vrana

“SMOKING RUINS WERE ALL AROUND ME”:
ON EXPERIENCING PSYCHOSIS
FOR THE FIRST TIME

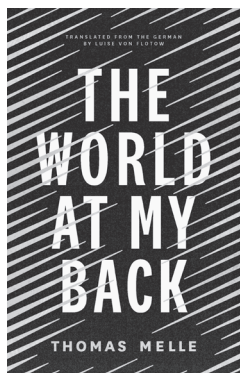
by Thomas Melle

THE DRAMA THAT A first psychosis unleashes is considerable. It is an unimaginable, all-encompassing blow that flings you into outrageous orbits; for your friends and family it is a total tragedy. Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone they know goes crazy, literally crazy, and in a far more precise, more real, and more embarrassing way than is ever shown in books or films, goes crazy like one of those wild-eyed derelicts who yell at the traffic, and turns stupid, foolish, weird. Out of nowhere a friend becomes a stranger.

Out of nowhere?

Manic-depressive illness is usually assigned five different causes: genetics, changes in neurons, life circumstances, the already described basic condition of vulnerability, and finally, personality. These categories merge and blur. But they offer a sort of direction, a way to understand; even if only one of them fits, and never completely, it still affords a hypothetical template with which to compare the chaos via four or five structural parallels drawn from other cases, and so to extrapolate explanations. I remember the long-distance phone call my friend Cord made, completely dismayed by my new condition, and how he regained a bit of his composure after the doctor told him it's all a question of neurons. That was something he could live with; it turned the change in personality into something objective and physical. The reasons were physical; the doctor had shifted them into the realm of bones and nerves, basically like a broken leg, and, as a person, I did not yet have to be given up for lost.

THE GENE FOR BIPOLAR disorder has not yet been discovered, if it even exists, nor is there any genetically determined pattern, as in Gregor Mendel's work, that might help you predict who will fall ill and with what degree of likelihood. But both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia have some genetic causes, and the symptoms often overlap and occur in the same family. Even more frequently, those



L: Cover design by Natalie Olsen. R: Thomas Melle (Dagmar Morath)

who have bipolar tendencies will find unipolar depression—pure depression, in other words—in their family tree. That is my case.

My family is no stranger to psychic frailty. My mother's father, they say, suffered from phases of depression that were never clinically treated. It was not done at the time and would have run counter to his military discipline. Although, from a child's perspective, he seemed to swallow a large number of pills every week, there were probably no antidepressants among them. Officially, he had heart and blood pressure problems. He died "upon retirement." And only offhand remarks were ever made about his dejection and melancholy; they were nodded into non-existence.

My mother has a long, and very clinical history of depression, one of my aunts as well, but milder. So there is something about the genetic material, at least on my mother's side.

As far as I know, my father's side has no history of psychological anomalies. As far as I know—since that side has hardly been present.

THE WHOLE WORLD WAS gone. Everything was being dragged away. No earthquake could have done more damage. It's just that this earthquake was different: it was taking place inside me, and the destruction, all-encompassing as it was, was silent. Nothing stayed the way it was, and yet from the outside everything seemed the same. Language no longer had an anchor but people continued to talk, quite normally, though they were strange, completely distant. I would have had to learn this new language, but how

could I, without a grammar book or a dictionary, and so I was left to myself, to my weird self, that was in the process of dissolution. Layers of stories and counterstories monstrously coated my thinking, no sentence told the truth, everything twitched and flickered. Smoking ruins were all around me, yet, at the same time, in me alone. It was pure horror.

The days flew off in all directions. Paranoíá blossomed, proliferated in every corner, became omnipresent, and I eventually settled into it. What else could I do? Every now and then panic would turn into a defiance I had to shout out, then into a euphoria that carried me to the highest heights. For a short time it was cool to be the messiah. I no longer felt my body; I had magic powers, was in tune with the laws of nature, heard the rings of Saturn hissing round and the musical cadence of the spheres. I reckoned I had now intuitively understood mathematics and saw myself cosmically connected to everything. Then again, the greatest terror: although I was standing there, naked and exposed to the chilly breeze of the universe, nothing changed, and I, the chosen, broken creature, simply did not know what to do. Again and again I had to break through the centuries-old prison of time, history, and teleology where I believed I was, break out verbally or with a quick twist of my body, or with another mad dash through the city, or with strange emails sent to foreign institutions, in which I tried to present things from a funny, satirical angle, but was really only greedy for new signs about what in heaven to do. The tv ran non-stop in the background as it had throughout my childhood, and when I took a close look, almost sinking into the screen so that my hair crackled against the glass, I could see how sorely the souls of the speakers and news anchors were thirsting for attention, how horny they were, their souls more so than their bodies. Late-night host Harald Schmidt, on the other hand, was a step ahead. He had installed an invisible friend at his side, whom he mocked mercilessly, and to whom, in a mean twist, he had assigned the moniker Horst. Asshole! I laughed, but I knew I was constantly turning myself into this fictional friend, this Horst. How could I help it? If I did nothing, everything around me, right down to the Gaza Strip, would only get worse; if I played the fool, I was at least still present, working on a solution. This unbelievably

dreadful fate, its dreadfulness not yet fully realized, justified any kind of behaviour. In fact, it was appropriate to display a radically different behaviour than before, what with this new awareness of my capacities and the responsibilities now burdening me. At the same time, I wanted to shake off these responsibilities and regularly held my own private carnival in order to get free. I drifted through

*Time was out of joint, and I had fallen out of it,
out of time, and landed in the cracks. Did that
happen to everyone who wrote?*

the city, made inappropriate jokes, posted something somewhere, and no longer slept. At home I ran endless loops of the recent and paranoid-plot films *The Game*, *The Truman Show*, and 23, hec- tically read books in no chronological order: Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* by Novalis, Augustine's *Confessions*, *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, and Goethe's *Elective Affinities* as well as Plato's *Phaedrus* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Time was out of joint, and I had fallen out of it, out of time, and landed in the cracks. Did that hap- pen to everyone who wrote? If I considered some of the biographies of crazy people, then clearly yes, it did. If I let myself think in this way I could see that the mould I was now being fitted into had been created long before my time. The early Romantics were murmuring in my ears about their despairing search for the god to come, and Goethe, too, was responding in sonorous and compassionate tones about some kind of world citizenship. How could I have missed all this before? Kafka addressed me directly, in his god-fearing and at the same time bureaucratic manner, really spoke directly to me. I was the Steppenwolf, I was V, I was Oskar Matzerath and Godot. And the dead dictators in history were beginning to yell in my direction too.

Newspapers, which I bought in huge quantities, fell to pieces be- fore my eyes. Then I would storm off again and party, greedily and without inhibitions. I had to forget myself and all the rest, if only for a few crazy minutes. Actually, I only wanted my old life back.

It was true: something was wrong. Quite seriously wrong. My

friends worked on me, sometimes as a gang, sometimes one by one, taking turns, they conferred, came to decisions, devised strategies. After I had doggedly resisted all their efforts for three or four weeks, they finally managed to persuade me to go to the Charité hospital. The Charité was a piece of history and carried a certain status. Charité was Rudolf Virchow, Ferdinand Sauerbruch and the anatomical freak show with the crippled *Tin Drum* fetuses, that I'd already found fascinating.

As I said, I saw it as research.

Excerpted from The World at My Back (Biblioasis, 2023).



PORTRAIT OF AN EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

ASHLEY VAN ELSWYK is a queer writer of fiction and poetry, and editorial assistant at Biblioasis. Her work appears in various publications including *Plenitude*, *Not Deer Magazine*, and the anthologies *Chlorophobia* (Ghost Orchid Press, 2021) and *Kaleidoscope* (Cloaked Press, 2022).

EMILY MERNIN lives in Windsor, Ontario.

EMILY MERNIN: You've been at Biblioasis longer than most of us, and, correct me if I'm wrong, started back when you were in university as a volunteer. I'd love to hear you talk a bit about your background, and how you ended up in indie publishing.

ASHLEY VAN ELSWYK: Yes, that's right! When I was an undergraduate at the University of Windsor, a friend who was working at Biblioasis at the time let me know that the press was looking for a volunteer. Writing had been a passion of mine since childhood—and still is, of course—but once I started university the idea of working in publishing, with an eye for editing in particular, and contributing to the process of bringing books into the world really



*Ashley Van Elswyk,
editorial assistant—
and wrangler of
Canadian Notes &
Queries, vanquisher
of metadata demons,
stalwart keeper of the
Best Canadian series,
and general guardian of
editorial sanity.*

struck me as something I could seriously work towards. So, this sounded like the perfect opportunity to get my foot in the door. I actually didn't get the position the first time I applied but, happily, my luck turned the next year and I found myself in the backroom office of a bookstore with this lovely group of people. Since then I've gone from a volunteer to intern to editorial assistant—it's certainly been a journey!

EM: A journey indeed, and many seasons of books under your belt. As an editorial assistant, you help usher books through many stages—from manuscript to finished copy. Is there anything about this process that surprised you? Or, perhaps surprises you still? Has it changed the way you think about your own writing?

AVE: Initially, what surprised me was how little I knew about the process in general. I mean, going in, you would think it's fairly straightforward: get a manuscript, edit it, print it, find some reviewers, sell it. Done, next. That is a very simplified view of a process that is more complex and difficult to stick to than expected. It's so

interesting to experience just how much a book can change throughout the publishing life cycle, from the copy and contents to the way it's marketed and how on top of every opportunity to pitch a book to the world we need to be. I didn't expect to like updating metadata so much, for example, but it's cool how even those smaller tasks taken to make improvements can mean so much and have an impact.

Schedules fluctuate, titles change, and you need to always keep an eye out for new ways to give a book the best possible chance it

Schedules fluctuate, titles change, and you need to always keep an eye out for new ways to give a book the best possible chance it can have.

can have in an increasingly crowded and less publicised world. It can be frustrating at times, but that also makes the good surprises and successes all the more satisfying. It certainly makes me further appreciate the hard work of not only my colleagues here but of those in other branches of the industry who support indie presses and our authors.

In terms of whether it's changed anything about my writing, I would say only that working in publishing has given me a fuller idea of what to expect and what not to when I do eventually throw a finished work out there—it actually makes things less scary knowing exactly the kind of chaos that goes on behind the scenes!

EM: You are so right to point out how unexpectedly impactful the details are, and how fruitful it can be to focus on the minutiae when it comes to sharing a book with the world. Can you tell me a little bit about your life outside of the press?

AVE: Yes, those little details can truly make some of the most crucial developments! I try to recognize them in many aspects of life both in and outside of work. As I mentioned, I am a writer myself so that takes up quite a bit of my time. I did my BA and MA in creative writing at the University of Windsor. I've got a few short story projects floating around, but most recently I've been working on a collection of poetry, of all things. It isn't something

I ever thought I would seriously write, and I fully credit working here for igniting that interest—particularly books like Michael Fraser’s *The Day-Breakers* and various recommendations from our in-office poets. If you had told me, say, five years ago that I would be this taken with poetry, and nonfiction as well, I think it would have been a shock. I used to be solely focused on genre fiction, primarily fantasy. I still love it of course, but it says a lot about how I’ve grown as a reader and writer since then, and the ways I’ve opened up to a greater range of works—they’re incredible wells of creativity and inspiration.

Outside of that, I come from a farming family and that continues to influence me even after I moved to Windsor, although you would never guess by the desolate state of the poor plants on my balcony. My interest in nature and landscape photography, for example, comes from a deep appreciation of nature born from that kind of relatively quiet rural upbringing. I owe the development of most of my creative interests to that.

What else? I frequent antique stores, and have a particular fascination with vintage postcards. They might not seem like anything special, but there’s just something about these tiny snippets of people’s lives in the past; filling in the gaps by building up stories about them, imagining the places, the people writing and being written to, their lives before and after. I expect that comes from the writer in me, again—it’s hard to get away from.

EM: What advice would you give to a writer looking for a publisher?

AVE: Simply, persist. One of the toughest things about looking to get your work published is that it can be easy to feel discouraged in the face of silence and rejection. Do your research to give your work the best chance possible, and prepare to beat back the little voice telling you to give up, because it will be well worth it when the acceptance finally comes.

EM: And, not to exploit all of your wisdom, but what tips would you give someone looking to work in the publishing industry? Anything you wish you knew when you first started?

AVE: Don't be afraid to think creatively—the best ideas don't just come from outside the box, they can come from reworking what you already have on-hand. In that same vein, flexibility is massively important too. I entered publishing assuming each position was rigidly separate from each other, but they're very much interconnected. Production feeds into publicity feeds back into production, etc. Learn and develop skills in as many areas as possible, because you can utilize them in your primary position in unexpectedly helpful ways.

EM: Very true, the interconnectedness, especially when working at a small press. What are some of the benefits and challenges of working at an indie press?

AVE: I considered myself to be a fairly wide reader, but I hadn't heard of Biblioasis before working here, and it's not exactly an obscure press. Indie publishers don't receive that same level of attention as the Big Five, which means we need to put in a lot more effort to get our books recognized both by readers and the media—in addition to fighting Amazon for one reason or another on a monthly basis—and it can be discouraging when our efforts don't pan out as well as we hoped. On the other hand, it means we cultivate a lot of great connections with the community through our (persistent) outreach. I also appreciate the relationships we're able to develop with our authors, and the joy that comes from helping bring their books into the world. Everything feels a little more personal, and that's pretty satisfying.

EM: Desert Island Books, Biblioasis edition?

AVE: Backlist pick is *The Year of No Summer* by Rachel Lebowitz, no question. This is probably my favourite Biblioasis book: the prose really sticks in my mind, Lebowitz's voice is haunting and she has a way of making terrible things beautiful. I first read it during the pandemic, which I feel was in a way the most ideal moment for this particular book, and finished it in a day. Most recent book is a little tougher—I'll go with *Pascal's Fire* by Kristina Bresnen. Got to

have a little poetry on my desert island. The forthcoming book I'd love to get a hold of is *Love Novel* by Ivana Sajko (trans. by Mima Simić). I've only read the first two chapters but I'm very interested to see where the story goes.

EM: What are you reading right now?

AVE: I've been trying to read more translations lately, and just started *It's the End of the World, My Love* by Alla Gorbunova (trans. by Elina Alter).



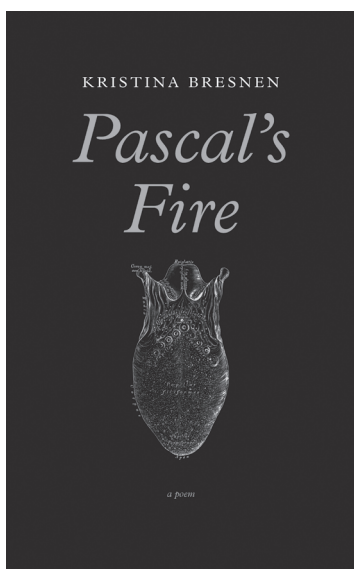
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spring



DRIVEN BY SOUND, HEARTBREAK, and the baffling limits and possibilities of language, a nameless speaker sets out into a dream-like wilderness where lyric and narrative meet, time dissolves, and figures as various as Moses, the apostle Paul, Virginia Woolf, Blaise Pascal, and Zora Neale Hurston gather in a colloquy. Born from a region of preachers and stuttering prophets, from the gift of tongues and psalms of lament and praise, *Pascal's Fire* negotiates the wonder of the unknown and the tension of belief and confronts the vulnerability of speech where it brushes up against death and grief, wind and desert heat, unquenchable thirst and the steady sound of an iv drip.

poetry

from “Speaking in Tongues”

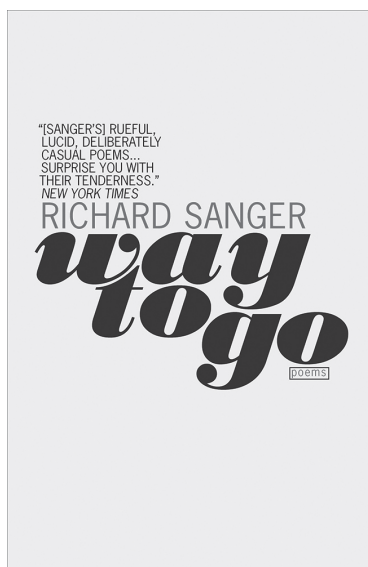
In one dream—aslant on the splintered timber of my raft, head against the bedrail—Félicité digs through a wide arc of land strewn with red dust, bones, and shells. As in Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings, some bones are outsized, dwarfing the hills. The hills are painted ochre, glacier-blue and purply-red, like the blisters on Hestia’s back; their slopes resemble folds of skin. Félicité walks up and down the slopes, her body all eye, feet treading the blue, blue grass, the desert marigold. Dust, dust, dust. She brings back fossils: brachiopods, corals. She brings bones: skulls, pelvis, rib. They feel endless, those bones. She spreads them across the grass, sun-bleached and tinted rust. She holds one up like a viewfinder and peers through its hole to a sky that looks back, empty, pacific. “That blue that will always be there,” O’Keeffe says in my dream, a voice out of nowhere, speaking like God. And in my dream, the bones hear her too, those bones that hope for nothing.

§

“The whole creation groans,” writes Paul.

What is this utterance?

Excerpted from Pascal’s Fire (Biblioasis, 2023) by Kristina Bresnen



FOLLOWING HIS *NEW YORK TIMES* Best of the Year *Dark Woods*, Richard Sanger's fourth and final book is a clear-eyed and big-hearted inventory of the passions of a life well lived. Understated, tender, archly funny and achingly generous, *Way to Go* is a joyful catalog of Sanger's loves and a last gift from an irrepressibly jubilant poet.

Into the Park

Into the park in late summer on your bike,
the sudden chill of trees and shade, the breeze
down the front of your shirt
cool against your chest, linen rippling
a frisson tingling your nipples,
as the afternoon heat
lingering
on the grass starts to retreat,
the bike whirrs and into the park you go,
deeper, this is your park, you know
its groves, its benches, its three-storey trees,
depressions where rain gathers, puddles freeze,
and it changes every time—
that's why you come, the anticipation,
you don't know what you'll find here,
as the shadows grow in the bushes, or who
you'll meet at the bench
someone you know,
or someone new,
or someone you knew
a long time ago
now with eyes that have seen so much more
and lines in his face, or hers,
and deeper you go and further back
no idea what you'll say when you meet, or do,
what new arrangements or conspiracies you'll fall into,
what raw truths,
what entanglements, what dangers.

Excerpted from Way to Go (Biblioasis, 2023) by Richard Sanger

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE DROWNING

by Steven Heighon

RAY'S FATHER ONCE TOLD him that if you ever jumped into the water to help a drowning man, he would try to pull you down with him and there was only one way to save yourself and him as well. Drowning men were men possessed and they were supernaturally strong. But they were also as weak as babies, seeing as they had lost all self-control.

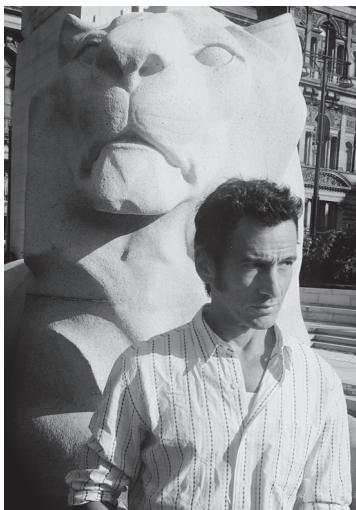
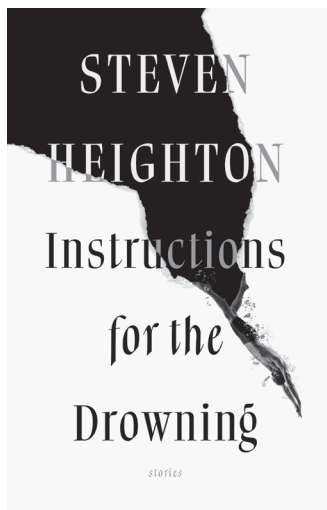
His father shook his head, his lips clamped thin, as if such a loss were the most pitiful any man might suffer. You could neither wrestle nor reason with a man in that condition, he explained. In a sense, he was hardly human anymore.

Ray—ten or eleven years old—had pictured the victim metamorphosing into a kind of ghoul, sinewy and slippery as the Gollum he had been imagining while reading *The Lord of the Rings*.

So you would have no choice, his father concluded, his eyes narrowing and hardening behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, a gaze that always preceded a briefing on some unfortunate but unavoidable masculine duty. A drowning man would have to be knocked out cold. For his own good. A short, clean punch to the side of the jaw—that would be the preferred blow. After which you could easily complete the rescue, towing the victim in to shore. (In the boy's adaptation, the victim was tamed from raving fiend to serenely compliant human, slightly smiling, eyes closed, like those cartoon characters who always looked so gratified to have been knocked out.)

How rescuers who were not world-class water polo players were to find the leverage and stability to land a decisive blow while being dragged underwater by a panicking man was not a question the boy could have formed or would have posed. If his father said the operation worked—and he made it sound like one performed routinely in the summer lakes of Canada and the northern states—then it must.

Over the years Ray would hear other men, usually older, mention the technique often enough to gather that it had once been endorsed, if not actually practised, by a whole generation. Now it



L: Book design by Ingrid Paulson. R: Steven Heighton, 1961–2022 (Ginger Pharand)

seems as dubious and dated as the quaint medical certainties of another age. Yet this afternoon, as Ray’s wife, Inge, floating near the end of the dock, cries out and begins splashing and coughing, it’s not the sensible modern rules of aquatic rescue that first leap to mind but his old man’s advice. Then comes the thought that he’s not even sure what the modern rules are. He springs up out of the fold-out recliner and pulls off his sunglasses, his latest can of IPA tipping and rolling off the dock. The blood drains from his head—he is almost drunk, he was almost asleep—and the glasses slip from his hand as he stands swaying. His sight returns. There’s Inge, treading water effortfully, using just one arm. Her sunlit face is strained. Another cough hacks out of her, but then she calls hoarsely, “It’s OK—OK!”

“What? You sure?”

“Just a cramp. My leg. But I think it’s . . .”

“Inge?”

She winces, her teeth white in the sun. From the other direction, behind Ray, a jocular voice calls down, “Hey, you two lovebirds all right down there?”

“OK!” he shouts back automatically toward the cottage, where their hosts, Hugh and Alison, have retired for a little nap, as Hugh always puts it. Hugh and Alie enjoy a spirited, irreverent rapport, playfully and publicly physical. In the penumbra around them,

other couples in their circle are never quite free of a sense of deficiency and demotion.

With a choked groan Inge vanishes as if something has yanked her feet from below. She flails back up, arms flapping and reaching. She could be a woman playing the victim during a lifeguard training session or someone just gauchely fooling around. No. She is a decent swimmer and she is no joker; she laughs readily enough with her friends and with Ray, even these days, but she

BOOKSELLER BUZZ

Instructions for the Drowning by Steven Heighton

"In this engrossing collection of stories, Heighton examines how humans grapple with fear and unease. A man struggles to recall his father's advice on saving a drowning person when faced with the situation in real life. An act of kindness backfires on a couple who are on the brink of having a child. A gay man and his conservative father have difficulty comprehending each other's grief. From recluses in suburban homes to soldiers in war zones, to a speculative tale about the man who killed Houdini, Heighton surgically dissects the depths of his characters' psyches, making us care about every one of them."

Grace Harper, Mac's Backs (Cleveland, OH)

"[Heighton] had a way of revealing the inner truths in people's lives; the thoughts, fears and rainbow of human emotions that we are all subject to experiencing. He will be missed, but part of him will live on in his work. This is his last collection of short stories and it is stunning!"

Linda Bond, Auntie's Bookstore (Spokane, WA)

"Beautifully written and full of emotion; these detailed stories remind us that deep down what we may not want to face is what makes us truly human."

Shannon Alden, Literati Bookstore (Ann Arbor, MI)

dislikes physical comedy and April Fool's pranks of the kind that Hugh loves to devise.

Ray charges down the dock and jumps off the end where a half-empty wineglass perches as if on the edge of a bar. The water here is deep, but he dives flatly, smacking his paunch and his groin and surfacing fast. He is an ugly swimmer, a heaver and splasher, his head always turtled above the water—he hates submerging his face—but he is strong, and padded enough that he floats.

All that's visible of Inge is her face tipped sunward like a tiny, shrinking island. He calls, "Hang on!" and she stammers back, "Help, help, help me now, Ray!" It's a shock to hear *help* used right on cue and exactly as it should be. And her accent—for as long as they have known each other it has been faint, but for rare spasms of anger or passion. Now it's thickly Dutch. Her face dips under, comes back up, her mouth gawping, hands flogging the water. "I'm here," he says, and extends his left hand. "Inge?" She launches toward him. Her facial muscles flex and contort and he gets a flashback of that gurning creature conjured up by his father's words some thirty years ago. Her eyes—pure blue, no pupil—do seem half-alien, perceiving but not knowing him.

She hugs and envelops him, the way she might an exciting new man, as perhaps she already has, who can say? They've been sleeping separately for almost a year, although not on this visit, and the bed sharing up here is not merely for show or to pre-empt gossip—and Hugh and Alie are gossips—no, they really are trying to give it one more shot, and the sex last night was good, partly because it had been a while and partly because of the fresh setting and the voluptuous breezes floating in, and also, sure, because they both knew without saying a word that they would team up and show Hugh and Alie, ostentatiously coupling in the next room, that they too had a marriage.

Her skin last night was hot as always, much hotter than his. Her crushing embrace now is icy. She's all over him, clinging to him like the one thing afloat on an empty sea. *Grasping at straws*. Now he gets it. It's not about drawing lots but about grabbing handfuls of the useless stuff floating up from the hold of a sinking ship.

She's pulling him down. Grappling—*Inge, don't!*—an arm, trying

to wrench free. Impossible, just like his father said. His eyes are above the water, then below: a glimpse of locked, thrashing forms, bubbles swarming, her skinny white legs hooked around his waist.

They surface. He inhales a breath, she choking and gasping. Somehow he's facing the shore. Hugh and Alie, in the matching aqua sarongs from their March holiday in Goa, are running down the flagstone steps from the cottage. Inge is climbing Ray as if he's a dockside ladder—his knees, his thighs, his shoulders the rungs. Kicking her way up, she forces him down. Water floods his

*Kicking her way up, she forces him down.
Water floods his yelling mouth and he gags, digs
her clawing grip off his shoulder, fends her off
with both hands*

yelling mouth and he gags, digs her clawing grip off his shoulder, fends her off with both hands, flattening her breasts under the one-piece she always wears up here because of Alie, who makes her untypically shy. *Nice*, she says, *I get the pot-belly but not the baby*, though it's not really much of a belly, not compared with his. She surges toward him again. He parries her arms, but her legs pincer around his hips with fantastic strength and she pulls him back down. *You're going to kill us both! Inge!* Her face underwater is deathly pale and yet frantically alive, wild eyes unseeing, hair billowing. He grabs at the surface, the light, somehow drags them both back up. He spews out water and gasps. Without thinking or revisiting his father's crazy advice, he hits her.

The blow misses the jaw—the *jaw*, as if it's any old jaw, not Inge's jaw—and grazes her cheek. Her eyes open even wider. He has never hit her—though a few times recently her charged silence made him wonder if he would have to duck a punch of hers. He has never punched anyone, not since grade school. He forgets whatever technical instruction his father once gave him. Her legs pincer tighter. Feet scrabbling for traction, he swings again. At the same time, she jerks her head sideways, toward the blow, reinforcing it. Fist and jaw meet with a crack and her eyes roll upward.

Her leg-grip slackens, her whole body sags. Panting, spitting, he half turns and cradles her torso with his left arm, scooping at the water with his right. "It's OK. I'll get us back. I'm sorry. Hang on." He frog-kicks, hindered by her dragging legs, aiming for the dock where Hugh and Alie now loom, leaning forward, hollering like swim coaches exhorting their athletes on the home stretch.

Inge tenses, twitches as if snapping out of a doze. He looks at her face on his shoulder. Her reopened eyes focus. Her fist leaps out of the water like a fish and she clouts him square in the nose, slipping under after she connects. "Jesus, Inge!" His eyes, already blurred, tear up from the punch. He twists free of her. Hugh and Alie stand staring, hands lax at their sides, as if it's occurring to them that maybe no one is drowning here, maybe Ray and Inge are just having a fight—a real, physical fight, not like a professional couple on a long-weekend getaway but like a pair of locals, those trailer park townies whose bonfire parties at the public beach down the shore so obviously test Hugh and Alie's liberal tolerance . . . All of this he absorbs in a moment as he opens his mouth to call out—but then Inge jumps him from behind and hauls him back under. He tears at the pale, magnified hands clamping his rib cage, the rigid fingers with their bitten nails. Around them the water grows darker, colder. Bubbles boil upward in silence, lighting a route back to the surface. Suddenly, already, it looks too far. He could surrender, he could just inhale, it would be less painful, painless, he has heard, but he rips himself free as if from a jammed seat belt in a sinking car and shoots upward.

Sunlight detonates. His lungs erupt, shooting out water, blood as well, his nostrils hot with blood, his eyes half-blind. She pops up beside him, gagging and coughing. She throws another, limper punch but misses. He is breathing ammonia, briny mucus. She rears toward him again as if to attack, but no, she is churning, sputtering past him on the right, toward the dock, seemingly restored by her rage. He's furious himself now. Alie is calling in a thick and breaking voice, "It's all right, you two. Don't worry. Come on. Just come in!"

Ray keeps coughing, though weakly. He's still in trouble, in fact, and could probably do with a little help himself. Hugh is tearing off his sarong, crouching, flicking it out so that one end trails in the

water like a rope, a few strokes short of Inge's reach as she labours toward the dock. Hugh should be naked now but isn't. (Is that underwear?) Beside his splayed feet, Inge's wineglass still stands. Alie is poised to dive in, but Hugh cups a hand over her kneecap; Inge is managing just enough not to need rescuing. "It's OK, girl!" Alie says, kneeling down beside Hugh, her voice throbbing. "You're there!"

Ray's legs feel heavy as anchors and his pummelling heart skips beats as he side-strokes toward the dock, toward Inge, who now grabs the floating end of the sarong with both hands. Hugh stands up—he actually is wearing underwear, baggy white boxers—and tows her in. She glances back at Ray. Her stricken gaze might be fixed on a dangerous pursuer or, yearningly, a loved one falling behind in the course of some desperate escape. One of her hands releases the taut sarong as if she means to point, wave, beckon. Alie grabs the free hand and tugs upward; Hugh reaches down as well; Inge is suspended off the end of the dock, continuing to gaze back at him.

It occurred to him later that the crisis, from the moment he realized she was in trouble until he himself was dragged up onto the dock, could not have taken more than three minutes. A few hundred heartbeats. It felt interminable, of course. His memories—resolving into vivid fragments, like violent few-second cell-phone videos posted on a news site—felt hyper-real and indelibly stable, as if exempt from memory's normal fading and smudging.

But he could not test their accuracy by discussing them with Inge. Her refusal to revisit the crisis—their near deaths, their mutual violence, her once-in-a-lifetime relinquishing of all self-control—was hardly surprising, especially given what they learned soon afterward. Still, in spite of everything, she surprised him the following year by wanting to return to the lake for their customary long-weekend stay. Hugh, he warned her, would certainly try to discuss the incident and his and Alie's own roles in it. But Inge was adamant. She seemed to view the return not so much as a form of trauma exorcism but rather as a way of salvaging an important tradition, in a matured, familial form. She meant to swim as much as ever (though in the end, as it turned out, she chose not to go back in at all). As for Hugh and Alie, she realized they could be

annoyingly self-satisfied, but they were true friends and that mattered more than ever now.

For the first five years of their marriage, Inge and Ray had tried to have a baby, suffered miscarriages, consulted specialists, and in due course accepted that there would be no children. No way to know if children would have prevented or accelerated the fraying of their marriage over the following three years, leading up to that struggle in the lake. But a few weeks after it, trying to work out the details of a separation, they discovered Inge was pregnant. At first, pending the re-test, she was tense, touchy, guarded, as if she dreaded either outcome; with the second positive, an unqualified joy overcame her, an *exultancy* that seemed to astonish her as much as her condition. Ray, his two black eyes now faded to yellow, felt himself bumped into the role of designated worrier, the sober, tentative one, although he too felt more pleased by the surprise than he would have predicted. That the summer's lone interlude of carnality, however mutually satisfying, had resulted in conception—a result supposedly impossible—made him wonder, ever so slightly, if Hugh could have been responsible.

The boy was born in April. He could not have looked more like Ray. At the cottage in August, their first afternoon, after Hugh and Alie had retired for their nap, Inge, on the dock, unwrapped Isaac and handed him down to Ray, who was standing in the shallows by the tiny beach.

“Inge, are you sure?”

“Don’t be silly, Ray. Go on, let him get the feel of it.”

Ray held his naked son so that the boy faced away from him, out over the lake, Ray’s hands all but encircling the rib cage and feeling the thudding of the tiny heart. He dunked him to his navel. Isaac’s pale legs began frogging promisingly, his whole body writhing as if longing to be released.

Excerpted from Instructions for the Drowning (Biblioasis, 2023)



presenting! the south detroit bookstore crawl

We're looking forward to seeing members of the Great Lakes and Midwest Independent Booksellers Associations at October's Heartland Fall Forum in Detroit and thought we'd welcome them—and all our interested readers, near and far—to the Windsor-Detroit region with a tour of some of our favourite sights.

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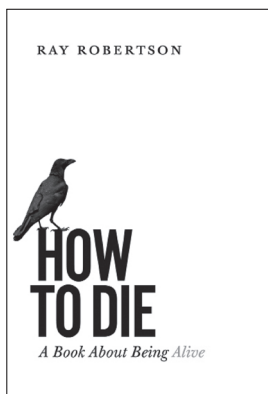
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BACKLIST SPOTLIGHT

How to Die by Ray Robertson



In *How to Die: A Book About Being Alive*, Ray Robertson meets Montaigne's challenge, arguing with characteristic candour and wit that if we gain a clearer understanding of death, we'll also better understand life. Contending that human beings tend to prefer illusion to reality—and so readily flock to the consoling myths of philosophy, religion, and society—Robertson echoes Publius Syrus, the first-century Roman who claimed, “They live ill who expect to live always.”

An absorbing excursion through some of Western literature's most compelling works on the subject of mortality, *How to Die: A Book About Being Alive* is an anecdotally-laden appeal for cultivating an honest relationship with death in the belief that, if we do so, we'll know more about what gives meaning to our lives.

WRITING AND MORTALITY

A word from Ray Robertson

Writers are often the least likely to know what their own books are about. Or, if they've written a bunch of them, what the relationship between them is. That's not their job—their job is to create worlds, not to analyze or explain them. It was during a conversation with Dan Wells, Biblioasis' publisher, that I came to appreciate the elemental role mortality has played in my last several books. We

were discussing my novel *Estates Large and Small*, which came out last year and a couple of years after *How to Die: A Book About Being Alive*, and Dan said something I hadn't thought of before: among other things, *Estates Large and Small* was a fictional continuation of the exploration of death I'd embarked upon in the previous, non-fiction book. Basically, I wasn't done with the topic, even though I thought I was.

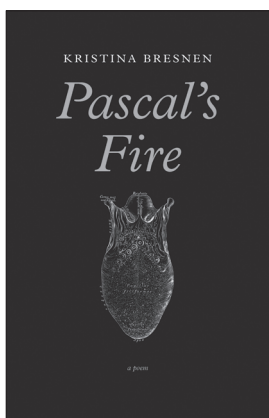
I've never chosen a subject for a nonfiction book or a theme for a novel—writers don't pick their obsessions, they pick them—and I'm always pleased when the book I'm working on insists upon going this way or that. I trust my books more than I do me. *Estates Large and Small* is about a second-hand bookseller who's forced to shut down his brick-and-mortar bookstore and adapt to a brave new world of e-commerce, but it's also about death: the death of a way of life, yes, but also about the ephemerality of all things, including ourselves and those we love. As in *How to Die: A Book About Being Alive*, I believe that contemplating death isn't morbid or empty navel-gazing, but is a way to reflect upon life, and what death can teach us about living a better, more fulfilled existence. One of the two epigraphs I used for *How to Die: A Book About Being Alive* is an excerpt from Philip Larkin's poem "Days," and, as poets often do, Larkin encapsulates this big idea in the shortest of spaces:

What are days for?
Day are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

This year Biblioasis will publish *All the Years Combine: The Grateful Dead in Fifty Shows*, another nonfiction book. It's about a rock and roll band and what makes their music, and particularly their concerts, so unique. A rock and roll band called the Grateful Dead. I wouldn't be surprised if it's about more than that.



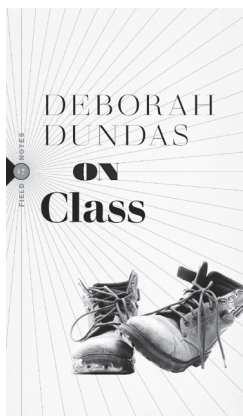
AWARDS AND ACCOLADES



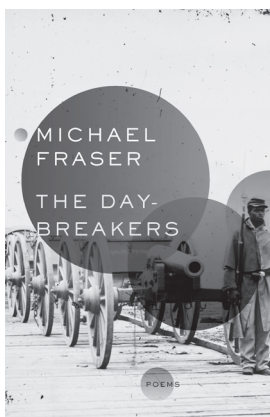
KRISTINA BRESNEN's debut collection of poetry *Pascal's Fire* was reviewed in *The BC Review*. Critic Linda Rogers writes, "Bresnen has found a metaphor for the human condition." *Pascal's Fire* was also reviewed in *The Miramichi Reader*.



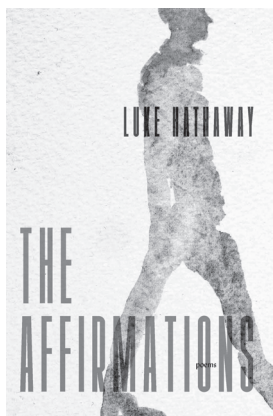
Dreaming Home by LUCIAN CHILDS was named one of Lambda Literary Review's Most Anticipated LGBTQ+ Books of June 2023 and a *Globe and Mail* Best Spring Book, and received praise from the *Globe and Mail*, *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *The Miramichi Reader*.



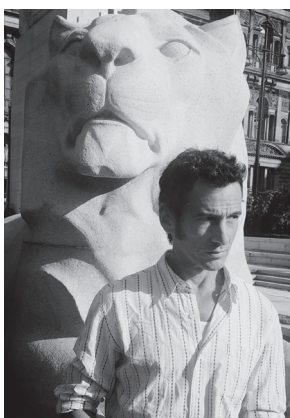
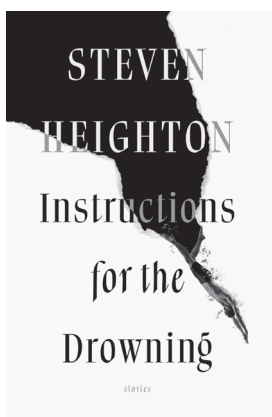
On Class by DEBORAH DUNDAS has been excerpted in *The Walrus* and the *Toronto Star*. In addition to receiving praise in *Zoomer* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, she was interviewed by CBC's *The Sunday Magazine*, *TVO's The Agenda*, and *Open Book*.



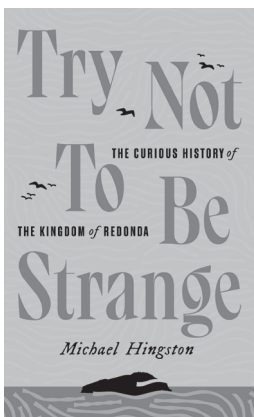
The Day-Breakers by MICHAEL FRASER was longlisted for the 2023 Raymond Souster Award, given for a book of poetry by a League of Canadian Poets member. *The Day-Breakers* also made the poetry longlist for the 2023 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, an annual award for literary books by writers of Caribbean birth or citizenship.



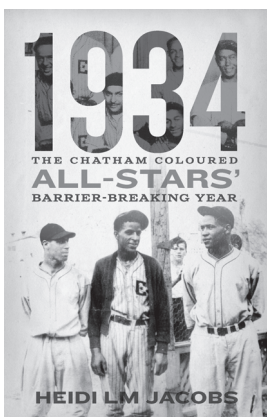
The Affirmations by LUKE HATHAWAY was shortlisted for the 2023 J.M. Abraham Atlantic Poetry Award. Created by the writing community in the late 1990s, the award honours the best book of poetry by an Atlantic Canadian.



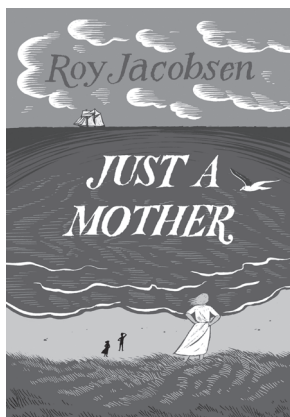
STEVEN HEIGHTON's posthumous short story collection *Instructions for the Drowning* was described in the *New York Times* as having "pacing that thrills; fragile love and blind hate; descriptions you can smell and taste and hear," and has received glowing reviews in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *The Walrus*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*.



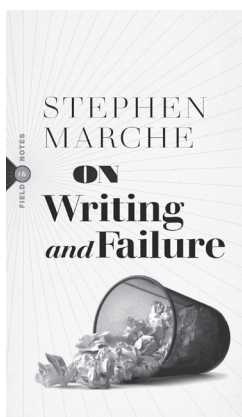
Try Not to Be Strange: The Curious History of the Kingdom of Redonda by MICHAEL HINGSTON was shortlisted for the 2023 Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize. The prize recognizes Edmonton writers based on a book that was published in the past year.



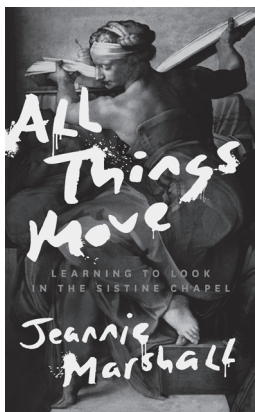
HEIDI LM JACOBS's nonfiction title *1934: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars' Barrier-Breaking Year* has been featured by CBC's *The Current*, CTV Windsor, *Windsor Star*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Chatham Daily News*, and elsewhere. Reviewer Ryan Percy puts it perfectly in *Windsor Life*: "Reading through the book...it feels almost mythical, like an urban legend made manifest in your hands, bringing to life a story that would make you think you were watching a baseball movie. But this actually happened."



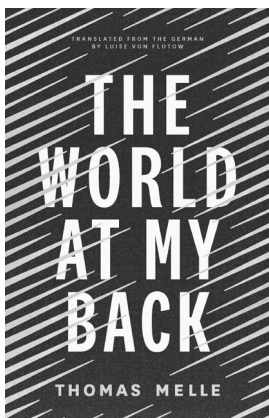
ROY JACOBSEN's *Just a Mother* (translated by Donald Bartlett and Donald Shaw) was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Reviewer Adam Sutcliffe calls it "the longest and most engrossing" of the acclaimed Barry Chronicles.



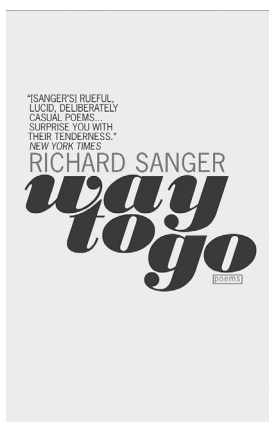
STEPHEN MARCHE's *On Writing and Failure: Or, On the Peculiar Perseverance Required to Endure the Life of a Writer* has been widely praised by booksellers and reviewers alike; the *Washington Post* admires the book's "attempts to reset the way we talk about such struggles. [...] Marche's book isn't a pep talk, but it's not intended to cut you off at the knees. His sole prescription is stubbornness. 'You have to write,'" and it has been reviewed in the *Globe and Mail*, NPR, Policy Magazine, and excerpted in *The Atlantic* and the *New York Times*.



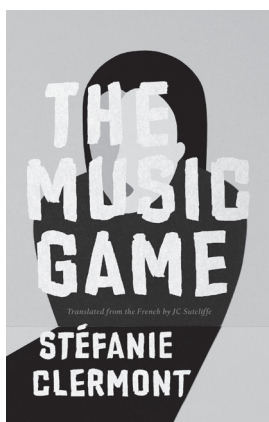
All Things Move by JEANNIE MARSHALL is an impassioned defence of the role of art in a fractured age which was highly praised in the *Washington Post*, *Globe and Mail*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Ploughshares*, CBC's *Ideas*, CBC's *The Next Chapter*, and featured in the *New York Times*.



The World at My Back by THOMAS MELLE (trans. By LUISE VON FLOTOW), a finalist for the German Book Prize, received a rave review in the *New York Times* noting Melle's awareness "of how blackly funny the intimate details of psychotic breakdown can be. His narrative skill, in Luise von Flotow's translation, had me laughing out loud without my losing sight of the sorrow and loneliness behind the succession of outrageous incidents," and has also been reviewed in the *Globe and Mail*, *Literary Review of Canada*, and *Words Without Borders*.

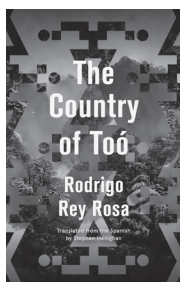


RICHARD SANGER's posthumous collection *Way To Go* was reviewed in the *Toronto Star*. Reviewer Barb Carey writes, "'Sanger wields the traditional tools of the poet [...] brilliantly, and inhabits a range of speakers and situations. [...] The collection is more a celebration of life than a lament.'" It has also been excerpted in the *Literary Review of Canada* and *The Walrus*.



JC SUTCLIFFE, translator of *The Music Game* by STÉFANIE CLERMONT, has won the 2023 French-American Translation Prize for Fiction. Since 1986, the French-American Foundation has awarded an annual prize for exceptional translations from French to English in both fiction and nonfiction.

FORTHCOMING FROM BIBLIOASIS



The Country of Toó

Rodrigo Rey Rosa

Translated by Stephen Henighan

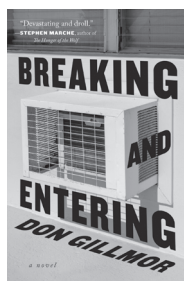
This sumptuously written thriller asks probing questions about how we live with each other and with our planet.



The Full-Moon Whaling Chronicles

Jason Guriel

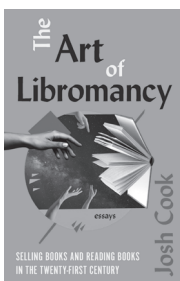
The follow-up to Guriel's *NYT* New & Noteworthy *Forgotten Work* is a mashup of *Moby-Dick*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Byron, cyberpunk, *Swamp Thing*, *Teen Wolf* . . . and more.



Breaking and Entering: a novel

Don Gillmor

During the hottest summer on record, Bea's dangerous new hobby puts everyone's sense of security to the test.



The Art of Libromancy

Josh Cook

Bookseller Josh Cook's essays explore the politics, philosophies, technologies, emotional experience, and craft of selling books in the twenty-first century.

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