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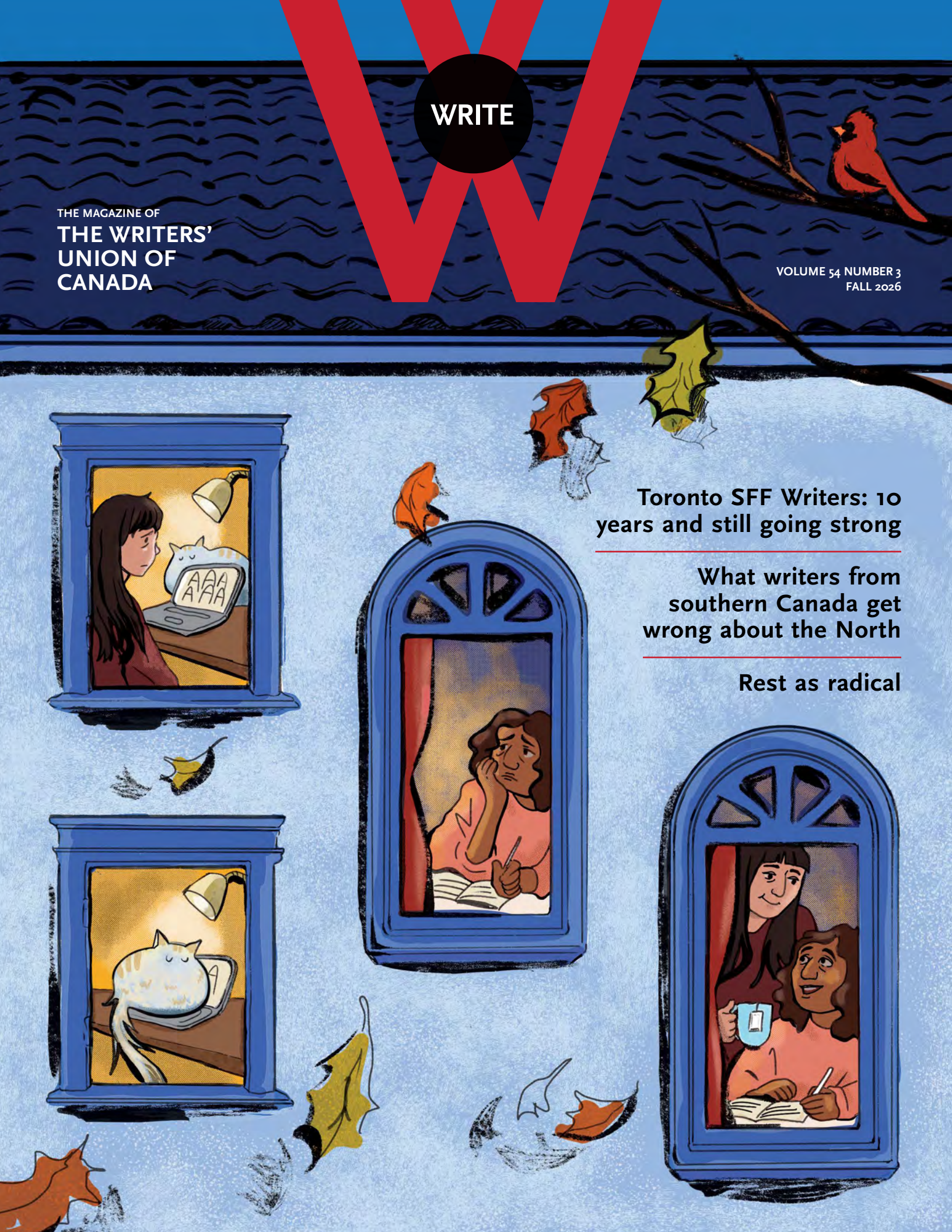

Toronto SFF Writers: 10 years and still going strong

What writers from southern Canada get wrong about the North

Rest as radical

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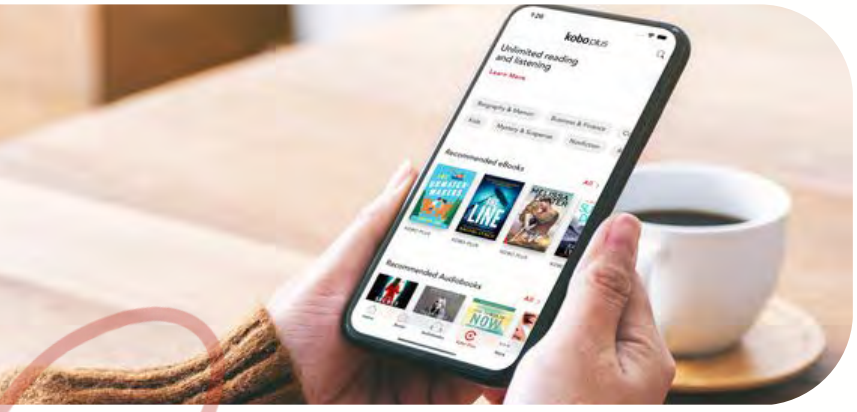

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From the Editor

"I do not text": on firewood delivery and the need to take a few breaths

BY PHILIP MOSCOVITCH



PHOTO: NIKI DAVISON

I SPENT part of early September on the West Coast, and made my first visit to the Gulf Islands. My partner had work meetings on Saturna Island, and I went along. While she was busy, I got a bit of work done at the Saturna Lodge, went down to the tip of the island to take photos (no luck seeing any orcas that day, but it was still gorgeous), and had a frustrating time chasing around a less-than-half bar of signal to try and call Miles, our firewood delivery guy. He had failed to show up twice already, so I was making a third attempt. Maybe he could drop off our wood while we were away. The housesitters could pay him. The money was on the fridge.

Because making calls was nearly impossible (I had watched my partner's American colleagues pacing around in frustration, looking for a signal), I texted Miles, explained the situation, and asked him when he could deliver. I missed his call in reply, but when I listened to the voicemail, it said, "Philip, this is Miles. I do not text. If you want your wood, call me."

I texted again and explained why I couldn't call. Then I called anyway, and listened as Miles went, "Hello? Hello? Hello!" as I replied with ever-increasing volume, but to no avail. He just couldn't hear me.

Editing a magazine like *Write* is interesting, in that it offers some insight into the writer zeitgeist. There was a recent period during which I received many pitches about scams targeting writers. (We ran a story on the subject a couple of issues ago.)

Recently, though, I've been hearing a lot more about the need to unplug, questioning the utility of social media, and just needing to step back from it all. It's like a chorus of people who want to say, "I do not text or use social media." Who want to pause and take a few breaths.

That's reflected in the general tone of many pitches I've received lately. This issue of *Write* does not have a formal theme, but outgoing editorial board member Molly Cross-Blanchard pointed out to me that there is a thread connecting most of the stories, and it has to do with in-person experiences, and taking the time to go beyond the superficial.

"I've been hearing a lot more about the need to unplug, questioning the utility of social media, and just needing to step back from it all."

Writers' Union Chair Kim Fahner talks about going analogue and how everything feels so noisy online right now. Meanwhile, our feature article is Miguel Fenrich's meditation on the pressure young writers feel to build their careers while effecting social change — and how sometimes the best thing you can do is step back and take care of yourself. That doesn't mean ignoring your community or communities, but it does mean being more careful and intentional.

Mary Rykov writes about AI and how "no shortcut can accelerate the writing process of connecting disparate thoughts to discover what I didn't even know I wanted to say." Hélèna Katz discusses the perils of writing about the North without taking the time to truly understand it, nor taking community and culture into account. Lawrence Scanlan introduces us to a decidedly analogue and wildly successful community program to get books into the hands of children in Prince Edward County, Ontario. Marie Powell argues that, despite a plethora of online resources, for historical novelists, nothing compares to visiting sites in person.

We also have K.M. McKenzie on the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers group and what makes it so special. And Matt Beam writes about how his cancer diagnosis made him realize just how fundamental writing — which not that long ago, he had considered quitting — is to his being. Finally, our crossword constructor, Ada Nicolle, provides a very entertaining and illuminating look at what goes into making crosswords, and talks about her particular delight in wordplay. (I won't give away the theme of the crossword itself, but it complements the column perfectly.)

As for me, I'm writing this on a sunny September day while my dog lies at my side, patiently waiting for his walk. Once I'm done writing, I'll head off into the woods with him, leaving my phone on my desk. I'm waiting to hear back from a few people. If they contact me while I'm out, so be it. I'll get back to them.

Honestly, I understand Miles the firewood guy's refusal to do business by text. I respect it. It's invasive. I'd still like my firewood, though.

From the Chair

Turning down the volume and reducing social media noise

BY KIM FAHNER



PHOTO: GERRY KINGSLEY

I WRITE this as I'm visiting friends on Manitoulin Island, swimming in the cold waters of Lake Huron's North Channel in the morning, and listening to the birds holding wild conferences in the trees.

Recently, I heard about a new fad called "going analogue" — a movement about nostalgia, slow living, and the search for meaningful moments in the face of too much screen time.

I get that.

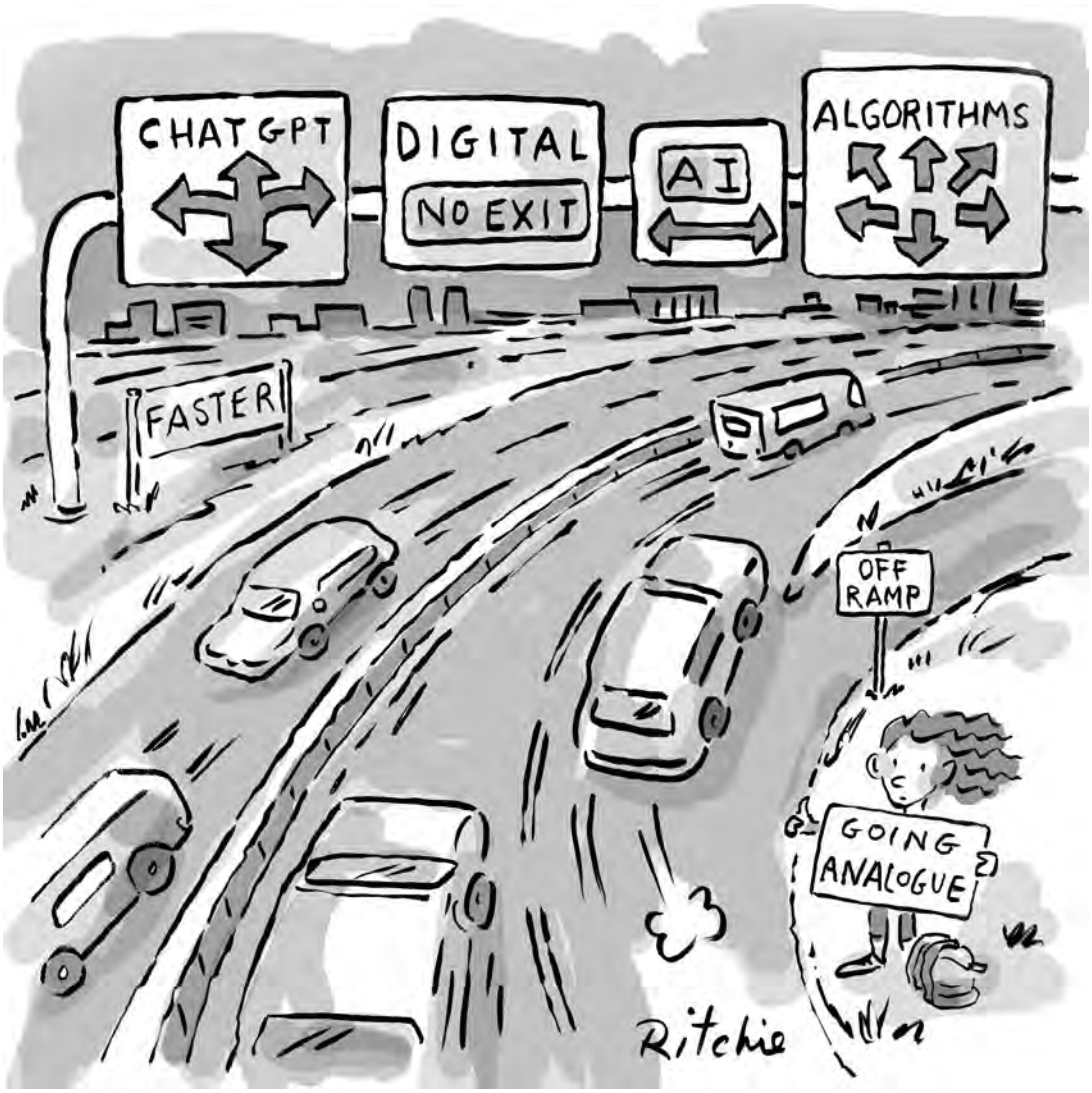
As someone who lives in Northern Ontario and has been dealing with health issues over the last few years, I found comfort in social media connections. But as I entered the hard work of hip-replacement-surgery rehab, I suddenly found the chatter of social media profoundly overwhelming.

While trying to focus on healing my body, I ended up feeling more isolated in the very same online spaces where I'd once felt connection and community. Everything online felt "noisy" to me. Could this be because the world is so wildly volatile and mercurial right now? How do we slow things down and focus on what's right in front of us?

In May, I decided to take a break from being online so much. What I had learned, from thoughtful journalling and observation of my daily routine, was that I needed to carve out space to be quieter inside, for my own well-being.

Where does a creative spark come from, and how do we ignite it when it's been dampened down because of a life challenge?

I understood how I had come to spend so much time on my phone — being increasingly immobile leading up to surgery, it became my link to the outside world — but I also understood that if I wanted to heal physically, I needed to clean up my mental health at the same time. And my phone was contributing to my sense of being overwhelmed.



COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE

I began by unsubscribing from the countless emails I was receiving from businesses. That immediately lessened the noise in my email inbox.

I also began to spend time thinking about scheduling. Physio and aquatherapy were my priorities, but I created space in the morning and evening to meditate, and once the weather shifted, I also carved out a half-hour in the morning for reading on the back deck. I soon found that I needed to spend less time attached to my phone. My whole body started to calm down, and my stress levels decreased.

Going analogue is also appealing to younger generations than Gen Xers like me. (See, for example, Miguel Fenrich's article in this issue of *Write*.) My kinesiologist tells me her daughter's circle of friends (in their early twenties) have decided to call one another rather than text. They're decreasing the digital noise, and they're also more mindful of work-life balance. As a high school teacher, I see this in my students as well.

In an article called "Is 2026 the year of analogue?" published in *Dazed Digital*, Emily Maskell writes that people are yearning to get back to tactile pastimes like knitting, cooking, gardening, and reading paperbooks — and getting away from being overstimulated by online algorithms.

I've watched as the literary world has embraced content creation and the drive to feed the machine delivering attention to potential consumers. While marketing a newly released book is key to what we do as writers, I'd rather read, go for a walk, or write something than worry about creating content.

Turning down the volume on the world at large has given me more space to read, think, write, research, and just heal more smoothly. I've learned to decrease my time on screens, despite the push from the outside world to increase it, and I'm learning more how best to spend my time online more intentionally.

Let me know how you're managing your creative energy. I'm always looking for more tips!

WRITE TO THE CHAIR
Kim Fahner, **chair@writersunion.ca**

WRITER'S BLOT

Fresh DespAIr

BY MARY RYKOV



PHOTO: DAHLIA KATZ

I AM NOT an early adopter. Of anything. Rather, I'm a second-generation Luddite. My mother, skeptical of everything new, derided anything mechanical or automatic.

I balk at new software. I tried speech recognition software Dragon Naturally Speaking when it was all the rage among writers, but it worked only for my voice, not research interviews with multiple voices, and training it wasn't fun. I find audio playback at slow speed, albeit time-consuming, enables nuance I might otherwise miss. Both software and slow playback produce text errors that need editing. I also dislike computer spellcheck and many auto-format functions because I want control of my words on the page.

So, as you can imagine, embedding AI, seemingly everywhere, irks me — as do known and unimagined environmental and other consequences caused by data centres. Some authors may disagree. Others may write with AI.

Complicating the freelance hustle

AI dominates conversations, including among my fellow Editors Canada members. The organization's 2026 conference — *Editing in the Age of Misinformation* — addressed AI detection and fact-checking. (AI-related webinar content is available from **editors.ca**.)

Writers and editors were already losing work before the onslaught of AI, which now complicates the freelance hustle. Editors Canada National Executive Council Member Leita Boucicaut discovered in a job interview with a bot that the purpose was to train the bot, not to hire her. Indeed, AI only enriches itself, not writers, editors, or readers.

An April 14, 2026, episode of CBC Radio's *The Current* addressed AI in creative writing. Tech journalist Vauhini Vara described AI text as produced by a "small number of companies that have their own agendas that are not invested in creating great literature... [but] ... advancing their own financial success." In the same episode, *New*

York Times bestselling author Andrea Bartz talked about AI ushering in an era of mistrust "between readers and authors and the publishing industry."

Canadian author Stephen Marche, expressing the only optimism about AI, praised it as "the microwave of language." Does Marche like its convenience? Its speed?

Subsequently, during conversations with Editors Toronto members about Marche's praise of AI, editor James Harbeck snidely remarked about the unpalatability of microwaved food. Touché, James.

While I see no shortcuts to good writing and editing, some editors use PerfectIt proofreading software, particularly when fatigued. A short nap under a warm cat refreshes me. Any typos that remain attest to my humanity.

I organize my writing manually, coding sections in MS Word. Sometimes I use newsprint on floors and walls as storyboards. But no shortcut can accelerate the writing process of connecting disparate thoughts to discover what I didn't even know I wanted to say.

Okay, fine, here are a couple of benefits

I do concede that AI provides justifiable benefits, sometimes, for some authors and for some specific writing purposes.

Paul Lima was a prolific business writer and trainer until multiple sclerosis forced his retirement. He says his judicious use of generative AI and voice-to-text software enable him to continue writing. Paul feeds a writing outline he creates into ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, compares the outputs, then sends his revised outline back to ChatGPT. He says he "collaborates rather than depends on AI" and discloses its use.

My experience as a PEN Canada volunteer editor with writer-refugees led me to translation. While rendering Arzu Yildiz's 30-chapter Turkish novel into a 30-chapter English manuscript, we devised a "co-translation" method: AI-assisted translation followed by time-intensive, collaborative editing. We found ChatGPT most helpful for Turkish cultural terms with no English equivalence.

However, illness and language issues excepted, I would argue AI doesn't serve writers.

Poetry best summarizes my feelings about AI. I think Mother and Dorothy Parker would agree that...

AI follows us everywhere —
unbidden — like dog pucky
stuck to the soles of shoes.

No, AI, don't bias
our essays — or
slop in our poems.

No, no, *no*, AI, don't conjure
our Zoom notes — or
schedule those calls.

Out, *out*, damned AI. Stay away
from our email. Get out of our lives —
Please. Just. Go.

(No bot was consulted while producing this writing.)

Puerto Rican Canadian **María Helena Auerbach Rykov** lives, writes, and edits in Tkaronto. **maryrykov.com**.





Toronto SFF Writers

A model for positive support, beyond critiques

BY K.M. McKENZIE

I FOUND my way to the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) Writers meetup the same way many do. A new year's resolution.

Mine? To get my novel published. In 2016, I googled local speculative communities. Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers came up on a platform I'd never heard of called Meetup.

I joined. Then I sat on it until spring. Then I summoned the courage to actually show up. It was a full room. Back then, sessions were monthly, and the group met on King Street West, at a pub that has since shut down.

I don't recall if I read anything my first time around. I like to imagine that my first few sessions were quiet, taking note of the vibes, worrying that it was intimidating, wondering if my writing was good enough.

Toronto SFF Writers is the biggest SFF writers' collective in the city, maybe the country, boasting over 500 members. But no matter how big it gets, supporting and nurturing new authors and hosting writing workshops and critique sessions are its priority.

"There's always something on" says the group's website: pub nights, movie nights, celebrations, the Wizards and Workouts series (which combines role-playing games with exercise), book launches for members, and more. Future plans include reading series to further promote authors and speculative fiction in the city.

Positivity, equality, and diversity

The group's three-point value system is positivity, equality, and diversity — which, yes, makes the acronym PED. The joke writes itself, but here, the performance-enhancing drug is the welcoming atmosphere the group offers, the positivity is about the constructive and nurturing feedback, and the equality means no one is above anyone else. Diversity means the group welcomes different writers, different backgrounds, and different ways of approaching speculative fiction.

The manuscript I first took to the group was *The Civilization*, which would become my debut fantasy novel, published in 2024. Most of the critiques said the first three chapters were slow and dragged. I would rewrite the first chapter alone eight times before settling on the published version.

"Like all proper recluses and introverts, I am usually not good with people, yet among the group I found like-minded individuals."

The critiques at Toronto SFF Writers never felt mean — a reviewer scratched out the word "civilization" from the title of my manuscript once, which annoyed me. But even when the discussions got contentious, the tension would self-deflate and we would go for beer afterwards.

Maybe that's the reason I stayed.

Like all proper recluses and introverts, I am usually not good with people, yet among the group I found like-minded individuals. I remember when most of my favourite writers joined the group.

The reading and critique formula is simple. Show up with something to read — and reading is on a first-come

"If I know there is a critique session coming up where I have to share my work, then that gives me a deadline. I need to finish up."

basis. If you have nothing to read, you give feedback. The sessions are run by different persons. I was one such person in the early days. These days, Justin Dill runs the in-person Saturday meetups, organizes pub nights, and updates the website, while others like Gillian Secord, Melissa Terry, and Jesse McMinn organize online sprints. There are also online critique sessions.

Prominent members of the group include Don Masiak, who published his SFF thriller, *Pale Grey Dot*, in 2024 and is gearing up for the sequel in 2027. Don and I co-edited the *Imps & Minions* anthology in 2020.

Brandon Butler, a Writers of the Future contest winner who edited the *Science Fiction Tarot* anthology (2023), does backup pub night organizing and has appeared in the group's *One-Shot* anthology four times.

A true community offering support beyond the page

For Butler, who is currently working on an epic novel series, the group is valuable because it brings in new people, with perspectives that strengthen both the community and its critiques. "You know, they're a geologist, or they work in finance, or whatever," he tells me.

Two-time Aurora Award-winning author Y.M. Pang shares that sentiment. "It's also just a great resource for sharing knowledge. So many of us have gone on different journeys with our writing work with different editors, gone through a traditional publishing or independent publishing," she says. "And in this community, we're able to share what we've learned and learned from other writers as well."

Pang is a highly gifted author, with publications in major SFF magazines like *Clarkesworld* and two successful self-published short story collections among her many accomplishments. Despite this, she finds time to run writing workshops and host group events, including organizing the group's 10-year celebrations in July 2025.

Over the last decade, one of the ways the organization has stepped up to meet the needs of its increasingly successful members is through group-based promotion events. Toronto SFF Writers is now a touring collective, complete with its own banner, doing collective signings at bookstores and other locations. Yes, there is a physical banner, and a proper website now too — not just a Meetup page.

Since the start of 2026, Toronto SFF Writers has been to Indigo stores in and around Toronto and to Word on the Street. We are also regulars at the popular annual CanCon science fiction convention, with group members including Pang, Butler, and David F. Shultz.

Group tours can ease financial burdens and the general nerves of authors who are naturally shy and don't know the rules of the road. We share approaches that work, share pens, carpool, and split the cost for tables at major book venues and events. The group has been so supportive that I was able to sell books at the 2025 edition of CanCon despite being unable to attend the event in Ottawa.

Pang says the community provides "what I call positive peer pressure. So for example, if I know there is a critique session coming up where I have to share my work, then that gives me a deadline. I need to finish up."

Yearly events like the TSFF *One-Shot* anthology that, to date, has published nine instalments, are a staple of the group. The brainchild of founder David F. Shultz, the *One-Shot* series' explicit goal is to give new and emerging writers a foot in the door — get them published, build them a resume, and make them eligible for awards and grants.

The *One-Shot* was my first publication (I appeared in the first three issues). I also got my short story "Consumption (Bought, Sold, Delivered)" published in the *Strange Economics* anthology via TdotSpec Publishing, an offshoot of Toronto SFF Writers.

I never thought of myself as a short story writer. But that's the great thing about Toronto SFF Writers. It pushes you to challenge yourself and has your back when you need support. And it's a model of what a supportive writing community can be.

K.M. McKenzie is the author of multiple short stories and self-published novels. *The Civilization* (2024) is published through Iskanchi Press. For more on her work, visit her website at **ebonscape.com**, or find her online via her profile handle **@kmmauthor**.



Placing Trust in Stillness

How losing my memory forced me to step back and ultimately move forward

BY MIGUEL FENRICH

THE SUMMER I was 13, Saskatchewan farmer Gerald Stanley shot and killed a young Indigenous man, Colten Boushie, near the family farm where I grew up. I remember that time in my life as a slurry of things: Taking "'Am I gay"' quizzes on *BuzzFeed*, cutting my home-schooled teeth on community old-time dances and coffee-table card games, not recognizing my own Black biracial face in the mirror.

Boushie's killing, in 2016, took a lot from me: a sense of identity, of community, but, most of all, this national tragedy took away a sense of blind safety. Stole from me the idea that the world was heading in the right direction. That same year, I sat on Skype with an old friend, horrified, and watched the U.S. election map on Google slowly turn red, as Donald Trump was elected and again, my distrust of the world was reaffirmed.

When I was 15, Stanley was acquitted by an all-white jury. At the time, media reported on white trucks circling the courthouse. I wonder still if those were cousins, great uncles, distant relatives. At 17, George Floyd's execution in Minneapolis led to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. At 19, *Roe v Wade* was overturned. At 21, Gaza was reduced to rubble in a UN-defined genocide.

Today, at 23, I'm watching AI data centres rise out of the dirt near my province's capital — Regina — with little meaningful community consultation. I scroll Instagram Reels, and see there's flash flooding in Nepal, humanitarian crisis in the Congo, ongoing economic attacks from the United States.

The world is broken. And, like many writers before me, for a decade I've felt an unyielding responsibility to help fix it.

In Canadian literature, Farley Mowat is often credited with changing the Canadian public's perspective on the North with *People of the Deer* and *Never Cry Wolf*. Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* drew attention to the injustice of the Japanese-Canadian Internment. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and *This Changes Everything* fiercely critiqued capitalism's impact on the environment in Canada. Today, whenever reproductive rights are under attack, women protest in red cloaks and white cowls, drawn neatly from the pages of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

We have a history of changing the world using our words. But in the face of mounting horror, where do we even begin?

Part 1: The Force of Creativity — Slowing Down

When I was younger, I read a sci-fi story on Reddit about a man who claims he lived another life in the brief moments post-head injury. Reddit user u/temptotasssoon, wrote on r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix in 2014 that he spent years depressed over this faux reality, his wife, and his son. He mourned this dream version of himself that only existed in his mind.

My brain was making me think that I was living this reality: constantly walking, eating, sleeping in this fake reality. And through subsequent panic attacks, combined with chronic stress, poor diet, and other factors, I was led to a two-week episode of amnesia at the end of April 2026. My family spent those two weeks watching me forget what province I was living in or who the prime minister was. I haven't discussed it much since.

You know that feeling when you're young, and you wake up in your bed after falling asleep on the couch watching TV? My amnesia felt like that, every 20 seconds or so. For two weeks. My hospital door at the Royal

PHOTO: ALI LAUREN CREATIVE SERVICES

"The change I can make is actually quite small, but it's not pointless change."

University Hospital in Saskatoon — where I stayed for nine days — had a piece of paper taped to it, reminding me that this was my room, and that I was having memory issues, because I kept forgetting. Everything. Every 20 seconds.

I was back to normal, as much as you can be after that experience — albeit the two weeks were fuzzy — by the second weekend in May. My undiagnosed amnesia was chalked up to "too much stress" and I was sent home with some anti-seizure drugs (just in case) and a suggestion to see a therapist and relax.

Relax?

With such incredible pressure mounting to change the world, and change it now — how could I rest? I'd been under the impression I've been relaxing every weekend, for the past seven years of my professional writing career. What would more relaxation do to my craft and the career I'd built on constant engagement on social media, growing pressure to change the world, and a contract balancing act in our gig economy?

One of the first people I talked to, as I returned to normal — and even responded to briefly via email in a moment of clarity in the hospital — was Dash Salt-Reimer. We met again, in sunny mid-August on his back porch.

Salt-Reimer does a bit of everything. He's a multidisciplinary spoken-word poet, hip-hop musician, and arts administrator. He works in theatre, visual arts, and cinematography, and, like me, lives in Saskatoon, albeit in his early thirties. (After interviewing him for this article, I wound up filming a promo with him for his debut album, *Everything That's Made Me*, which launched on September 30.)

He too recognized the fear I hold of trying to balance creative life in an unstable world.

"I'm never working one job. I'm always working five jobs, and then I'm also thinking about what five jobs I need to do next year," Salt-Reimer said. "Honestly, I get overwhelmed... constantly, and consistently. I find it hard to finish a workday and feel like I finish the workday."

Not only do we balance competing responsibilities, but the pressure also to change the world is strong.

"The change I can make is actually quite small, but it's not pointless change," he said. Salt-Reimer and his wife, Amy Salt-Reimer, a social worker, live in an area faced with a growing homelessness crisis, largely unaddressed by Saskatoon's systems of power. But, he said, they must try, against all odds, to slow down.

So, instead of facing overwhelm and burnout, Salt-Reimer focusses on justice-oriented living, something he describes as just growing good things where he can. Growing a garden is slow, he notes. We're not meant to have 100 close friends or save everyone. And, in this western, individualistic, self-flagellation-focussed society, we may feel we're expected to burn ourselves out to save society.

But burning ourselves out to save society can't possibly work in the long run, right?

"Martyrs never get to receive the medals... It is not my goal to put the world on my shoulders and change it all. The amount that I can affect is within the radius of my arms," Salt-Reimer added.

Well, maybe he's onto something.

Part 2: Creative Recovery — Placing Trust in Stillness

I started writing to express my feelings in 2018, not long after Gerald Stanley was acquitted. When George Floyd was killed, and I parted ways with a longtime friend over his disbelief of, and disavowal of systemic racism — I started writing professionally.

In summer 2022, at age 19, I self-published the angrily dystopian *Blue: A Novel. What Lies in the Valley*, a sadder paranormal thriller novel, was published in winter 2023. In the last three-and-a-half years since that publication, I've done more than I thought was possible.

I was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal, in recognition of my publishing company, Supernova Press. I've served as president of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and am currently a director for the Book and Periodical Council and a University of Saskatchewan senator. This spring, I was incredibly lucky to attend the Sage Hill Fiction Colloquium with Kevin Chong.

I've won a CBC Future 40 Award. Published national essays. Performed spoken-word poetry on stages across Saskatchewan. I've been awarded the 2025 Tony & Herb Rainbow Award through the Saskatchewan Foundation

for the Arts for my next novel-in-progress. Before turning 24 at the end of September, I became a member of The Writers' Union of Canada.

I'm incredibly grateful. Honestly. And I don't say any of this to brag, either.

But also, I'm sick to my stomach reading through my press kit — how do I keep levelling up? What's my next move? I feel as though people expect greatness, and I must give it to them every day. Currently, I'm booking work and programming into April 2027. I'm jealous of the younger version of myself who was willing to let himself play with writing a story and a novel.

One of my friends in Saskatoon, Peace Akintade-Oluwagbeye, is incredibly accomplished. Her latest full-length poetry collection, *The Goat's Tongue*, launched in September 2026. She served as poet laureate of Saskatchewan and has been awarded the International Metatron Poetry Prize. In October, she was in Mississauga, being recognized as one of the Top 100 Black Women to Watch in Canada.

She is also feeling burnt out. Sitting down to interview her for this article comes with the same exhaustion we've both built into our crafts: drinking coffee frantically between committee meetings, article deadlines, residency applications, board meetings, workshops, public-speaking gigs, and on, and on, and on.

No longer are we friends just catching up and drinking coffee; we've commodified this time and made useful every spare moment of our day. Every moment must be useful. Valuable. When I get back to the car post-coffee, I am late for my next meeting. And because I'm late, that will have me up late tonight writing emails. It's impossible to catch up.

This torrent of work is especially daunting on the heels of needing to rest for my health. Now there's the additional fear of not being healthy enough to even do the work that makes a difference, and so I push myself hard. The cycle repeats itself as soon as the next deadline approaches.

In addition to writing poetry, Akintade-Oluwagbeye works in theatre as an intimacy director. That role "was brought upon me [for] money," she said. Having an art career means taking on other forms of labour, but that also contributes to burnout.

"I like to think of it as a sinking ship… The ship is sinking, but at least I have a life jacket," she adds, meaning her poetry.

But she's right. It does feel like the ship is sinking. It's harder than ever to find the time to write now. I'm not just a writer, but an administrator. In my time, I've become public speaker, workshop facilitator, social media manager, cultural worker, small-business owner, and beyond — juggling grant deadlines, residency applications, and volunteering and mentorship.

This burnout is driven by a scarcity mindset that by late 2027, as an independent artist without a secretary and PR manager, I'll have no more opportunities. I'll end up working in a Tim Hortons somewhere, desperately trying to find my way back to my craft and my career — but that at 26 years old, I may be washed up. And I won't even have changed the world.

Just as Salt-Reimer is getting used to slowness, so is Akintade-Oluwagbeye. When she had a crisis in February, she went on a solo camping trip with a notebook and the stars. Now, when a friend phones her, she tries not to leap straight into consultant mode. Maybe people can call and talk on the phone, without it becoming another task in our already too-busy lives.

In a world pushing us to always act quickly, stillness is indeed, the antidote.

Part 3: Can Rest Change the World? I Hope So

Doing nothing. That's what I call it. Doing nothing.

It's not literally doing nothing, but it feels like it.

I've started reading for enjoyment again, turning back to the fantasy and softcore romance novels of my younger years. And instead of always trying to watch all the Oscar Best Picture nominees every year, I'm watching Marvel movies. Last week, on my phone, I learned a new card game. Spent time baking doughnuts for my family. I've picked up knitting and sewing.

The act of rest, for me, has been a slow detangling of a desire and need to be productive with my time. Unproductiveness. As a friend's mother used to say, "We're human beings, not human doings."

This work includes changing my metrics of success. If I write more again, after months of nothingness, great— but my gift to my body for real, restorative rest, is not more work and another deadline.

This summer, when healing, I watched a lot of *The Golden Girls*. Went to a new music festival. My new metric for success, is how much joy I have in my life. I'm in my community again, caring for people. I'm giving workshops. I'm working on interviews. I have passions again.

And hopefully, that means I'll still change the world. If not the world, my city, if not my city, maybe I'll just change me for the better.

Hopefully a better me is enough.

Miguel Fenrich (he/they) is a Queer, Black author, journalist, artist, and cultural worker living on Treaty 6 Territory in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. As a truthteller and future historian his work examines joy, connection, and community care in relationship with land and space. Fenrich is the author of *Blue: a Novel and What Lies in the Valley*, a CBC Saskatchewan Future 40 Winner, and the President of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild.



Writing as Fundamental

What my cancer diagnosis taught me about why I write

BY MATT BEAM

A **FEW YEARS AGO**, I seriously considered quitting writing.

I'm the author of five YA books and a couple of children's titles, but in addition to writing, I'm an elementary schoolteacher in Toronto, which was taking up most of my creative hours while co-parenting my child filled most of the other gaps. Plus, it had been 15 years since my last young adult novel was published. Sure, I had written a handful of novels over that period, but none of them had made it into print.

Even when my books were selling well, I considered writing to be more about process than product. By the time I considered quitting, that was less a philosophy and more a reality: There was apparently no saleable product to speak of.

But then things changed.

I got a break, and then I got news that would force me to think more deeply about why we write, and what writing meant to me.

First, the break. One of those unpublished novels, *Shoot the Moon*, finally got me a book contract. After it was published by Orca in spring 2025, I rededicated myself to consistent writing. On a spreadsheet, I tallied every minute I spent punching out words. By January, 2026, I had recorded over 100 hours, and completed 95 percent of my next novel. I promised myself I would take a six-month break and then edit with fresh eyes in the summer. I even opened an Instagram account and started doing some eager (and admittedly awkward) posting.

Then, the news.

During the periods when I was spending all that time writing, I noticed some strangeness in my gastrointestinal system. My doctor suggested a colonoscopy — just in case. I was 56, and had made sure to complete my home screening tests (called FIT tests) every two years. Still, with the incidence of colon cancer in people younger and younger increasing, a colonoscopy was in order.

Test results

In early March of this year, the test revealed a significant tumour in my colon. As my world came crashing down, my family had to cancel our long-awaited holiday in Mexico, and we pivoted to getting a CT scan as quickly as possible, and visiting family in Victoria, BC.

For the next 10 days, I was a zombie, staring blankly into the middle distance, several beats behind every conversation — at best. My mind constantly fixated on the worst possible scenarios, leaving me convinced I had only a few years to live and that they wouldn't be good ones. Feelings of fear, guilt, and grief made it hard for me to look at my child, and I could sense my wife searching my face fruitlessly for the person inside.

My only escape, my only salve, was my novel. Breaking my promise to let it sit for six months, I dove in. On the way to BC, I edited for five hours straight, from when the airplane left the gate to when it landed. In Victoria, while my family planned whale-watching trips and butterfly-garden visits, I hid in my paragraphs, fussing away at typos and narrative inconsistencies. By

the time we'd returned to Toronto, after some 25 hours of editing, I thought I might actually have a manuscript I could sell.

Back in the real world, there were test results. The cancer had not spread to my other organs, but a biopsy revealed it was in some of my lymph nodes. I had Stage 3 colorectal cancer and would need to have surgery followed by chemotherapy. While this news was difficult, it was much better than I had imagined.

I had a chance, a good chance. And instead of days filled with racing, panicky thoughts, I was able, while I waited for these hardships to begin, to look at my life, and death, with fresh eyes.

Why write?

Like with all clichés, the idea that life, in the end, is about love and family exists for a reason. After the diagnosis, the people that love me came rushing to my proverbial side, with concerned texts, calls, and yes, actual visits.

And yet the most notable, or perhaps most surprising realization I had, was how important the interiority of my mind was — and that writing, not only the act, but the thoughts that come with it, was fundamental to my being.

"The most surprising realization I had was that writing was fundamental to my being."

By contrast, at the start of my career, I felt I had only one reason to write: to have my novels produced by the best publishers in the country and read by as many people as possible. When I attained that (or at least the former), I realized it was not the mecca I had imagined. I found post-publication harder than the writing and editing process, what with challenging reviews, sales pressures, and next-work anxiety.

What I realized, thankfully, was how much I loved the process: the swirling, excited stomach of the first pages, the solidifying stage where I settled down into my story with confidence. And yes, the daily grind, versions of me — optimistic word producer, ruthless sentence slasher, big picture commander — battling the previous day's person for days on end.

And "person" is the operative word here; my unexpected post-diagnosis conclusion is neither about product, nor process, it is about person.

Me.

Yes, family and love are important, absolutely, but my mind and my creative ideas are a significant chunk of who I am and how I live in the world.

To parse further, as writers, in theory, we spend our time building worlds for our readership. But this experience with cancer has reinforced the fact that these worlds we build, with their many facets and intricacies, are places for us to live in for a time — affording us both a break from so-called real life, and in the process, creating a new and fundamentally internal one.

Speaking of the real world, there was, um, reality to face. Laparoscopic surgery and chemotherapy were not, to quote my affable oncologist, "a walk in the park." That said, once I recovered from surgery, most days I had friends and family to accompany me on my literal walk in the park.

But as spring turned to summer, when the walks diminished, and the comforting texts and calls were fewer, I was left with me.

"We spend our time building worlds for our readership. But these worlds we build, with their many facets and intricacies, are places for us to live in for a time."

And when left to my own devices, what I tend to do is conjure up ideas. For a novel, a short story, or a picture book.

Or, in this case, for an article about how one of the things I will miss maybe more than anything in this life is wrestling with its meaning, its joys and sorrows, and its inevitable end.

And I will do this, as time-and-space does its little dance, in my mind, with an end to having these internal thoughts eventually emerge as written words on the page.

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Matt Beam is an author living in Toronto with his wife and 13-year-old child in Toronto's West End. His most recent young adult novel, *Shoot the Moon*, a high-interest, low-language paperback, fits nicely with his work as a grade 8 teacher at a school for dyslexic students. The novel that helped carry him through the first stages of his cancer diagnosis is titled, *The River is My Alibi*, and it is currently looking for a home.



Writing About the North Authentically

Going beyond barrens, raging rivers, and dancing auroras to the heart of community

BY HÉLÈNA KATZ

AN OFFICIAL with the tourism marketing association Destination Canada once told delegates at a tourism conference that there's more to Canada than moose, mountains, and Mounties. Hearing that, I laughed at the moose stuffie dressed as a Mountie that was in my delegate bag before deciding that it was a reminder to trot past stereotypes in my travel writing.

Just as there's more to Canada than moose, mountains, and Mounties, so too, there's more to Northern Canada than dancing auroras, raging rivers, ice roads, and wilderness.

I fell in love with the North, and then a Northerner, during multiple trips to Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. In 2006, I traded the familiarity of my downtown Montreal neighbourhood for life on a small alpaca farm in Fort Smith, a predominantly Indigenous community of about 2,500 people in the Northwest Territories.

As a journalist, I wrote about new experiences that captivated me: travelling the ice road from Fort McMurray to Fort Smith; flying on a Buffalo Airways DC-3 of *Ice Pilots NWT* History Television fame; learning to run a dog team; and watching the aurora stretching across the sky above our backyard after my husband announced that "the lights are out."

Then culture shock set in. While my dogs saw the same medical team at each of their vet visits, I saw new faces I wanted to call "Dr. Locum" at mine. I missed having easy access to cafés and croissants and the camaraderie of my Montreal writing community. In Fort Smith, I was "the writer."

My husband called me out when I complained. "How hard have you really tried?" he asked. That's when I realized I was treating the North as a novelty and a sociological experiment. I was so busy having an adventure in someone else's home that I hadn't made it my own.

The importance of community

When writing about the North, writers living in the south tend to focus on the landscape. Books documenting river trips abound since people began writing about the Nahanni River more than a century ago. What's often missing is the sense of community that comes from living here.

Katłı̨ą, a Yellowknives Dene First Nation author of five books, including *This House is Not a Home*, *Firekeeper*, *Land-Water-Sky/Ndè-Tı-Yat'a*, and *Mother Earth Is Our Elder*, says this connection to daily life is one aspect that separates visiting writers from contemporary Northern writers: "Writers who come here are seeking inspiration, something unique and different. But you're only going to get a small taste of what it's like if you don't actually live here and if you don't experience the day-to-day lifestyle of the Northern person."

The connection to community also resonates with Richard Van Camp, who describes himself as "a proud Tłı̨chǫ Dene from Fort Smith, NWT." Van Camp is the author of 31 books in 31 years including novels, graphic novels, and books for children. "What I love about contemporary Northern writing is, often, you know the writer, and you know where they were born or where they've lived for decades, and you get to see their community through their lived experience."

Writing about the North was long done by people

who came for a visit or lived here for years but weren't born in the North. As Kat̨ı̨ą says, "For a long time folks would come here and get credit for telling our stories." That has shifted as the market for Northern stories written by Northerners has opened up.

My own ambivalence about writing about the North surfaced as I interviewed members of my community for magazine articles. I live in a place where I won't make it past the produce aisle at the grocery store if someone takes issue with something I wrote. My community holds me accountable for what I write. Fortunately, approaching stories with humility and respect has served me well.

Now, Northern Indigenous writers are sharing their own stories with authenticity and respect about the realities and complexities of a place that is home. "There are histories that need to be told and that are not always in favour of the white person," Kat̨ı̨ą says. "They weren't told for a long time because Indigenous people didn't have a place at the publishing table. Now we have a more honest interpretation of stories, our experiences as diverse marginalized people."

Northern Indigenous writers can also strengthen their own culture through their work Kat̨ı̨ą says. "We also have incredible teachings and stories, and some of our community members don't even have these stories." But recognizing the people who have shared the stories is critical. "Give credit where credit is due, like knowledge carriers and Elders who have carried these stories and protected these stories."

Van Camp has noticed that, increasingly, Indigenous and Northern writers are crediting the people who are sharing stories and knowledge with them. "They go to those who know, interview them, feast with them, pay them, honour them, and acknowledge them for their guidance and help in what is being researched," he says, "and this makes me so happy to see. You can see that things were done or are being done in a very respectful way."

Writing with authenticity and respect

While moving through the joys and challenges of culture shock, I gently let go of my superficial "Enchanted North" image of the region's unique aspects. I shifted from writing like an outsider to observing my new home with humility and respect.

I learned about the unbroken connection between the land, the people and the culture while working on a moosehide alongside a group of Dene women in Fort Simpson. Later, Inuvialuit colleagues taught me in Inuvik and Ivvavik National Park about their traditional connection to the caribou for food, clothing and shelter.

Getting lost in the bush taught me to respect the land instead of treating it as a challenge to overcome. A quote from an August 15, 1943, article in *Maclean's* magazine captures this shift: "As one old Northerner put it: You can't beat the North. You can't batter it down. You've got to study it and work in harmony with it. Then you'll find that it's friendly and will help you."

When my father read an early draft of my latest book, *Dispatches from Canada's North*, he particularly liked the stories that focussed on contemporary life in my community.

In Indigenous communities, Elders are served first at feasts and events. I became discombobulated when my father wasn't served first at a family celebration for his 95th birthday in Montreal.

It's encouraging to see some southern writers making an effort to be more inclusive. The second edition of *Kahaɔa Tuwé: Gateway to the Barren Lands* includes maps featuring Indigenous place names, a chapter that explores Thaidene Nëné National Park Reserve's creation in 2019 and a new foreword by respected Łutsël K'é Dene First Nation Elder Juni Gahdële.

A seat at the table

Northern writing has come a long way in the last 30 years, Van Camp says. "When Douglas & McIntyre published my first novel, *The Lesser Blessed*, I lone-wolfed it in terms of voice," he recalls. "Now, almost three decades later, when D&M published my second novel, *Beast*, I think what made it a more luxurious read was all of the help I received from Tlicho Elder Terri Naskan who taught me about the Yabati, the Tlicho protectors. I also had language help from Georgina Franki and Rosie Benning, my Tlicho 101 instructors. All of the Chipewyan you read is from Eileen Beaver. I feel that it was my Elders, my Knowledge Keepers and my editors and my fearless publisher, Anna Comfort O'Keefe, who really helped me reach a level of craft I never could have achieved alone."

Van Camp is excited about the future of Indigenous and Northern writing because publishers are actively looking to publish writers from or living in the North. "In 30 years, I went from placing my stories in Fort Simmer, NWT, an amalgamation of Fort Smith, Hay River, Pine Point, Behchoko, and Edzo, to having five of my graphic novels located in Fort Smith — where you can see our water tower, the (Roman Catholic) church, the museum. And I do this because I am so proud to be from Fort Smith, and I want to showcase the beauty of our community and everyone who lives there."

Hélèna Katz lives, works and learns in Thebacha/Fort Smith, within Treaty 8 territory, on the traditional homelands of the Salt River First Nation, Tthebatthie Denesųłiné Nation, and the Indigenous Métis people of Fort Smith. She is the author of five books, including *Dispatches from Canada's North*, which is a finalist for the 2026 Whistler Independent Book Awards.



Vibrating with History

Why on-location research is important for historical fiction

BY MARIE POWELL

I **FIRST** encountered the term "history shivers"— the feeling that a place is "vibrating with history"— in an article by Rebecca Mascull (who also writes as Molly Walton) on the *History Quill* blog. It's hard not to feel those shivers in Europe, with stone castles and roads stretching back to Roman times.

But there are places that seem to call to a particular writer's sensibility. The first time I encountered this was in 2006, at Dolwyddelan Castle in Wales. I stood on the castle's wall-walk, imagining thousands of heavily armed English soldiers swarming across the field below. Wondering what it would be like to lose a war, to lose your law, your country, and your way of life in the space of a few months led me to research and write my historical fantasy series, *Last of the Gifted*, set in Wales during Edward I's 1282-83 invasion.

The same shiver occurred on my first visit to Durham Cathedral in Northumberland — as I looked at the size and scope of the nave with its gorgeous rose window and later in the Galilee chapel, constructed in 1170 as a separate space for women, who were forbidden to even view the remains of the venerable saints Bede and Cuthbert for some 200 years.

Today, authors have access to an overwhelming amount of information for researching the past, including books, journal articles, podcasts, recreationist videos, databases, illustrations, expert scholars, online archives, and a myriad of other resources. Some argue they can filter that research well enough through their imagination to write stories rooted in accuracy. Besides, geographical details of landscape, climate, and customs change often significantly over time. Plus, not everyone can afford the money or time or ability it takes to travel to a location to add to their research in person.

But after that first flush sends us to the research, reasons to go back to a location, if feasible, are compelling. As several presenters (including me) proposed at the recent Historical Novel Society (HNS) conference in Ireland, travelling to the location of a historical event or movement, even one that's 800 years in the past, can deepen the writer's understanding and ultimately provide the telling details that will bring characters and events to life for readers.

By definition, historical fiction involves stories that include actual events, characters, or locations from the past. The time period, customs, and conditions give context to the story, making setting more important for historical fiction than most other genres.

On-location research can add details and depth to the setting, which makes the novel more three-dimensional. It allows writers to recreate a scene on the ground, and answer questions we may not realize we need to ask. What does it look like, smell like, sound like — and more importantly, how does it feel? Since everything is filtered through the minds and experiences of the characters, how would a particular character feel about this setting or event? What action(s) would they take next? The answers to those questions in turn influence the plot of the novel.

Having the opportunity to explore physical resources in person, in more detail, and on our own time, can bring deeper insight into events and circumstances. Such resources include museum displays, castles and heritage sites, ancient ruins, buildings, documents, and artifacts.

That opportunity can also lead to a new direction for a tricky scene or even overcome writer's block. BC author Carol Cram was a presenter at the HNS conference. Her award-winning novel *The Towers of Tuscany*, set in the14th century tells the tale of a woman painter in San Gimignano, Italy — a town that boasted more than 70 towers at that time.

By travelling to Italy, Cram was able to examine a scale model at the San Gimignano 1300 museum that showed the town as it might have appeared in 1300. Being there in person allowed Cram to examine period paintings that influenced her ideas about her character's artwork. She also had the chance to view a 13th-century

cellar in a hotel where she was staying.

"As I stood there and looked at those brick walls, I had an 'aha!' moment," she said, during a phone conversation. "It really helped me with a plot point I'd been stuck on."

As well as overcoming writer's block and illuminating characters' motivations, on-location research allows writers to observe and record cultural nuances and sensory details. The colour palette or the sounds and smells associated with a particular area or time of day can deepen atmosphere and mood. These sensory details can also become symbols or motifs, or be incorporated into the theme.

In the 2025 HNS blog article "Setting," Ottawa author Terrence Rundle West talks about the importance of "walking the ground" as he calls it, to prevent errors of "geographical scale" such as the time it takes to walk from one location to another. In *The Novelry*, British author Patrick Gale (author of *A Place Called Winter*, set in early 20th-century Saskatchewan) said he travels to his novels' locations to "walk the streets, smell the smells, listen to [their] soundscape and try to see the views my characters would have seen."

Vancouver's J.C. Corry also conducts on-location research for geographical and sensory details and to increase his understanding of events. For his 14th-century novel, *The Storyteller's War: Geoffrey Chaucer Reluctant Spy*, he followed his main character's footsteps to London, Bordeaux, Navarre, Rioja, and Castile, as he described in an article for *Travel and Culture*, a Substack publication I co-edit.

The trip gave Corry the chance to choreograph a battle scene in a specific location, view similar hanging gardens and tapestries to those that affected Chaucer in his day, and visit important locations in person. We served together on a panel at Calgary's When Words Collide festival in August, where he mentioned visiting a pilgrim's hostel that existed before Chaucer's time.

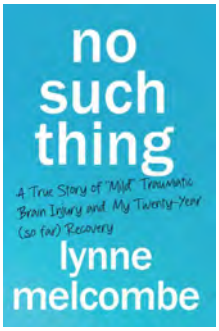
"As I walked into that ancient chapel, I heard a lone guitarist playing a medieval song. Nothing can beat that moment, that shiver of awe."

Such moments of synchronicity can deepen an on-location research experience for the writer and, in turn, benefit the reader.

Marie Powell's castle-hopping across North Wales sparked her award-winning medieval fantasy series *Last of the Gifted: Spirit Sight* (Book 1) and *Water Sight* (Book 2), set in 13th- century Wales. She's also the author of 40+ children's books, short fiction, poetry, and nonfiction; and she co-writes and edits *Travel and Culture* on Substack. Marie holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. She lives on Treaty 4 Territory, aka Regina, Saskatchewan.

Welcome to the Union

LIST CURRENT AS OF SEPTEMBER 3, 2026



Lynne Melcombe, *No Such Thing: A True Story of "Mild" Traumatic Brain Injury and My Twenty-Year (so far) Recovery*, Iguana Books, 2026.

Kerry Abel, *Changing Places: History, Community, and Identity in Northeastern Ontario*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.

Madi Haab, "The Wind-up Heart," *Clocks*, Little Key Press, 2026.

Abhimanyu Acharya, *Lagbhagpanun*, Divine Publications, 2024.

Mostafa Al-A'sar, *On State, Prison and Exile*, Josour, 2026.

Liv Albert, *The Odyssey: A Modern Retelling*, DK Books, 2026.

Ryan Alford, *By Authority of Parliament*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2026.

Maya Ameyaw, *When It All Syncs Up*, Annick Press, 2023.

Justin Ancheta, "The Emperor," *emerge 25: The Writers Studio Anthology*, Tidewater Press, 2025.



Alexandra Renwick, *HORN*, Disney Hyperion, May 2027 (forthcoming).

Odette Auger, *Eyebright*, Simon & Schuster, 2027 (forthcoming).

Daniel Bay, "With Church Change," *The New Quarterly*, 2025.

Heather Beaumont, *When We Go Home*, Kids Can Press, 2026.

Karisa Bili, *Supernova*, self-published, 2022.

Joanne Blain, "Navigating Norway — Made Easy with a Self-Guided Tour," *Vancouver Sun*, 2023.

Jarol Boan, *The Medicine Chest: A Physician's Journey Towards Reconciliation*, University of Regina Press, 2024.

Leslie Bradford-Scott, *The Liar's Playbook*, Simon & Schuster, 2026.

Brian Braganza, "Relics," *The Fiddlehead International*, Summer 2025.

melanie brannagan frederiksen, *the night, the knife, the river*, At Bay Press, March 2027 (forthcoming).

Harvey Brownstone, Without Prejudice: My Life as a Gay Judge, ECW Press, 2026.

Carmela Bruno, *Cake with Nonna*, self-published, 2025.

Ambreen Butt-Hussain, *The Unlovable Alina Butt*, Orca Book Publishers, 2023.

Anna Byrne, *The Last Caravan: The Power of Community at the End of Life*, Caitlin Press, 2026.

Maxwell Cameron, *Divided We Fall: How We Can Resist Polarizing Pressures and Strengthen Our Identity As Citizens*, James Lorimer, 2026.

Alicia Carbo-Guha, *The Curious Planet of Rules*, self-published, 2024.

Jay Manuel, *Attention, Belonging, and Care: The Communal Self in Education*, Vernon Press, 2027 (forthcoming).

Krista Carson, "plait & poem," *Motherlore's MAKE•SHIFT Zine, Vol. 2: Made with Care*, 2026.

Cecil Castellucci, *Shifting Earth*, Dark Horse Comics/ Berger Books, 2022

Cassandra Caverhill, *Mayflies*, Finishing Line Press, 2020.

Thomas Chamberlain, *Happenstance*, Galleon Books, 2025.

Rebekah Chan, "Conchology," *Blood Orange Review*, 2025.

Morgan Charles, "A Very Sick Girl," *Maisonneuve*, Spring 2026.

Young Choi, "The Millstone of Time," *Perched*, 2025.

Alison Colwell, "The Vocabulary of Violence," *Grist*, 2026.

Mary Elizabeth Cooper, *The Peter Robinson Experiment*, self-published, 2024.

Susan Cormier, *Dead Bees Still Sting*, Greystone Books, 2026.

Natasha Coulis, "Living My Life Backward," *Exponent II*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Spring 2015.

Nancy Jo Cullen, *The Western Alienation Merit Badge*, Wolsak & Wynn, 2019.

Kathleen Cummins, *Herstories on Screen: Feminist Subversions of Frontier Myths*, Columbia University Press, 2020.

Judy Darcy, *Leading from the Heart: The Battles of a Feminist, Union Leader and Politician*, Douglas & McIntyre, 2025.

Laura K. Davis, *Alice Munro and the Art of Time*, University of Alberta Press, 2025.

Dina Del Bucchia, *Tougher than the Rest*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2026.

Arundhati Dhara, "Mango Season," *The COVID Journals: Health Care Workers Write the Pandemic*, University of Alberta Press, 2023.

Justene Dion-Glowa, *Trailer Park Shakes*, Brick Books, 2022.

Marian Dodds, *Tizita: A Memoir of Perseverance and Enchantment*, self-published, 2025.

Suzanne Doerge, *Footfalls: Poems of the Camino*, Shanti Arts Publishing, 2022.

Sophie Donelson, *Uncommon Kitchens: A Revolutionary Approach to the Most Popular Room in the House*, Abrams, 2023.

Sara Donnelly, *Seagoing Women*, Harbour Publishing, 2026.

Rick Duchalski, *Something So Sweet*, self-published, 2020.

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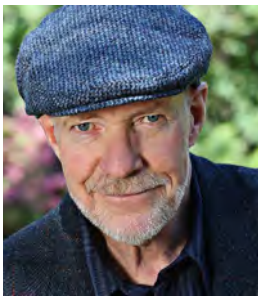


Books for Every Child

County Kids Read offers a primer on making it happen

BY LAWRENCE SCANLAN

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY, a little peninsula on the northeastern shores of Lake Ontario, is known for its sandy beaches, art galleries, craft breweries, and wineries. Almost two million tourists throng to "The County" every summer.

When Anne Preston, a Toronto District School Board literacy co-ordinator, retired there two decades ago, she started another life — as a literacy volunteer. She launched and managed County Reads modelled on CBC Radio's *Canada Reads*: Prominent citizens would annually champion their book of choice.

But then Preston noticed something amiss. Literacy scores among children in her adopted community were low. "Lower," she told me, "than in Toronto schools I had been working in where English was not a first language."

She wanted to do something, but what?

Preston came to understand that poverty, largely invisible on back roads, exacerbated the issue. Easy access to books offered one solution, but for busy low-income families struggling to put food on the table, it could be difficult to get to the library, and buying books in a bookstore was not an option.

So, in 2009 and armed with a $1,000 grant from a local social services agency, Anne Preston set out with one goal in mind: Every County kid would have access to good books. What she and others have accomplished in my community over the past 17 years is extraordinary and could serve as a template for small places all over Canada. County Kids Read (CKR), the organization Preston founded, is a nonprofit with an annual budget of $130,000, an enthusiastic board of directors (chaired by Preston), two accomplished part-time staff, 30 keen volunteers, and a steady record of giving out 7,000 new books a year.

Partnerships are key

In the beginning, there were false starts. Preston contemplated a bookmobile, but the cost was prohibitive. Then she began gathering used books, but results were unpredictable. "Some of these kids had nothing," she remembers thinking, "and we're giving them tattered and mildewy books? That's disrespectful." Along the way, she connected with the Children's Book Bank in Toronto (which has given out some two million books since its founding in 2008), and from those meetings emerged the small-town model that became County Kids Read.

"Home libraries positively impact children's educational success, future job prospects, and more — no matter the parents' education or income levels."

Today, CKR is linked to 16 community partners — food banks, the family health team, social service organizations — all of whom distribute their books. St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church in Picton houses the rent-free Book Room and its thousands of new titles. During the school year, entire classes of primary school children visit. Volunteers (I am one) read them a story

before each child selects a book; the first thing they do is put their name in it. Other volunteers go to rural schools and do the same, while community events in summer continue to see more books given away. Finally, a Book Buddies program (I'll be part of that, too, this winter) has adult volunteers working with pupils to lift their reading confidence and enjoyment.

Canadian publishers have been a huge help. HarperCollins Canada, Scholastic Canada, Orca, and Kids Can Press all typically offer at least 50 percent discounts and free shipping. At County Kids Read, priority is given to Canadian books and Canadian authors (visits from Kevin Sylvester and Wesley King were highlights in recent years), along with diversity and the classics. The kids themselves also help guide book selection. Fundraising and grant writing are a constant, but the rewards and impact offer just as constant fuel. Andrea Dawes, executive director of County Kids Read, regularly hears from visitors: "I wish we had this in our community."

The joke among CKR volunteers is that retirement age is 87. That's how much fun the work is, that's how pleased the children are, and that's how seriously we take it.

For writers inspired to kickstart something similar, Preston advises: "Articulate the need, and seek help in the community. Everything in the Book Room is donated. Bookshelves came from a local building supplies company. A local bookstore provided furniture. Start small, and see where it takes you."

"Our focus on book ownership," says Dawes, "is inspired by research showing that home libraries positively impact children's educational success, future job prospects, and more — no matter the parents' education or income levels."

This is the power of books in a child's hands.

Anne Preston has a vivid memory of a child in the Book Room clinging to her leg, clutching her book and saying over and over, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Preston knew that whatever upheavals this child would face in her life, the warmth of the Book Room and the comfort of the book would go with her.

Lawrence Scanlan lives near Picton in Southeastern Ontario. He has written 26 books, including *A Year of Living Generously: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Philanthropy*, and won four National Magazine Awards for his journalism. His current project is a play about the rich/poor divide called *Give or Take*.



Filling the Blanks

How this magazine's crossword gets made

BY ADA NICOLLE



FOR AS LONG as I can remember, I've been obsessed with the English language. All of its idiosyncrasies, the ways in which words can be bent into different shapes, and all the coincidences that come from playing with the same 26 letters.

For example: my name is "Ada Nicolle," and the letters in my name (A, D, N, I, C, O, L, E) are the same letters that comprise the phrase "local Icelandic-Canadian," something that describes both my cultural background and my proximity to the offices of the Writers' Union. To me, finding relationships between words is finding poetry hidden in plain sight. It's a hobby that lends itself well to making puzzles, where the goal is to give a larger audience that same satisfaction.

Pulling back the curtain on last issue's puzzle

Most of the crosswords I write for this magazine are themed, meaning they are built around multiple longer entries that share a wordplay element. I'll use my last *Write* crossword ("Generational Issues") as an example of how I go about making a puzzle.

When asked to write a crossword puzzle themed around the subject of AI, my immediate thought was to play with the letters A and I. I had noticed that the word "PLAGIARISM" without its consonants was "AI" repeated and sought out other AI-related phrases containing A's followed by I's. Not only is this thematically consistent, but the wordplay element makes the entire set feel satisfying and intentional.

This was the set I came up with:
PLAGIARISM: Method of generation for many [subject] programs
HALLUCINATIONS: Pieces of misinformation often confidently generated by [subject]
REPLACING ARTISTS: Primary purpose of [subject], seemingly
ANTICAPITALIST: Opposing a system that values [subject] profits over human creativity, etc.

And the revealer:
AI DETECTOR: Tool that has highlighted pairs of letters in this puzzle's theme answers?

The revealer is different from the rest of the themers, because its main goal is to serve as a satisfying explanation of a puzzle's theme.

When the theme entries are placed symmetrically in the grid, I place black squares around them in my crossword software (currently I use Crossfire) and start filling in the words that connect them. Ideally, these words are things you've encountered in your life before. I try to meet the audience where you're at and not the other way around.

After the words are filled in the grid, I start writing clues, making sure the clues and words match in terms of parts of speech, and trying to make each reference interesting and accessible.

The joy of wordplay

My job as a crossword writer is very similar to my job as a stand-up comedian. With both a crossword clue and an observational joke, my goal is to use our shared knowledge to lead us both to the same conclusion. In a joke, that conclusion makes you laugh. In a crossword, it helps you fill in boxes in a grid. How we get to that conclusion can be very similar in both forms, usually involving turns of phrase and references. In the end, everything should click.

One of my favourite clues I've ever written was for the crossword staple OREO, which appears in puzzles often for its useful vowels and broad name recognition. The clue was "Something demolished by a twister?" At first, you might picture a building being destroyed by a tornado, until realizing that "demolished" is meant as "eaten," and "twister" is meant as "person who is twisting an Oreo," a notably twistable cookie.

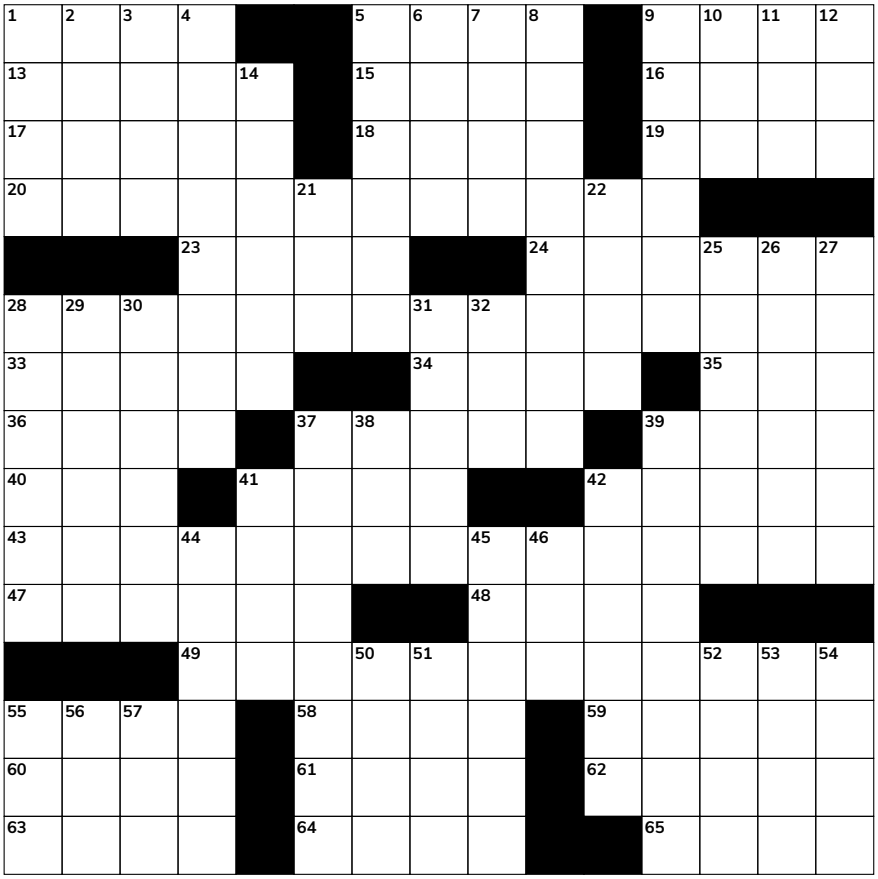
I think it's cool that language lends itself to this sort of playful ambiguity. In a world where the ambiguity of words can cause so much disorder, crosswords can feel like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, where broken pottery is repaired using gold, highlighting its imperfections to make something intentional and beautiful. Doubly fitting, as most of my job is discovering how things fit together.

Behind every good crossword puzzle is somebody who loved making it. I hope you also appreciate watching the English language fall into place.

Ada Nicolle (she/her) is a crossword writer and comedian based in Toronto. Her work has been published in *The Globe and Mail* and *The Walrus*, and she is the author of *A-to-Gen Z Crosswords: 72 Puzzles That Hit Different*.

Puzzle Pieces

BY ADA NICOLLE



ACROSS

1 Awesome, in '90s slang
5 Apple often found on a desk?
9 Burn a bit
13 Heading above a list of bad ideas
15 Screenwriter Ephron
16 Keep out of sight
17 The ___ is lava (childhood game)
18 Helpful tip, in modern slang
19 Theatre format that sounds like the plural of 5-Across
20 Got the inspiration to make a puzzle?
23 Rip a saxophone solo
24 Beethoven piece
28 Made a salary from puzzles?
33 April 1st baby, e.g.
34 Nose-powdering places
35 ___ spa
36 Part of a USB hub
37 Like a particularly round cat
39 Reason for an R rating
40 American food stamps abbr.
41 Union payments
42 "___ words were never spoken..."
43 Like the puzzle writer's noisy neighbour, when she's trying to get work done?
47 Braces
48 Resistance leader in *Star Wars*
49 Writer's block, to a puzzle writer?
55 Important note
58 "Nah, but thanks"
59 Canadian pop duo ___ and Sara
60 Part of 52-Down
61 Scrabble game piece
62 Pleasant scent
63 Chows (on), cutely
64 Male deer
65 Wheelchair-inaccessible feature

DOWN

1 Many crossword files
2 Something punched in the office
3 Unknown commenter, for short
4 Hozier hit with the lyric "I take my whiskey neat"
5 Split down the middle
6 Fixture that surrounds a castle
7 Put a curve in
8 Business that often caters to weddings
9 Comedian Ronny
10 That guy
11 Name hidden in "Canada"
12 *Toy Story* dinosaur
14 Tire features
21 God, in Genoa
22 Springfield watering hole
25 Knight's outfit
26 Having layers
27 Dangerous snakes
28 Where microphones may be clipped
29 Roomba company
30 Ice dancer Tessa
31 Not pale
32 Jerry's frenemy
37 Writing or sculpting, e.g.
38 "Who ___ this happen?"
39 Terrible puns
41 Laptop brand
42 Rapper who featured on Chance the Rapper's "Cocoa Butter Kisses"
44 Fake ducks, e.g.
45 Pub container
46 Classic video game console, for short
50 Broadcast, as a signal
51 "Messy" singer Young
52 Entertainment award achievement
53 "I completely relate"
54 Break, as a One Wish Willow
55 The M of *MIB*
56 ___ night (dive bar event)
57 "This is hitting the spot"

ANSWERS: portal.writersunion.ca/write-crossword-answers

Writing Rights

Doing the work

BY JOHN DEGEN



I HAVE OFTEN joked publicly that in my position at the Union, I'm trying to work myself out of a job.

Well, it's only halfway to a joke, really. What I mean is that I am trying to put the legal and economic conditions in place in Canada (and around the world) so that I can go back to doing what I set out to do at the start of my career... be a full-time author of books. As I write this column, I've just come off a Zoom interview with a CTV reporter in PEI who was wondering, "Why is it so hard to make a living as an author in Canada?"

My response: "How much time do we have?"

Union members may recall that our last pre-pandemic income survey came back with startlingly low average annual earnings for working authors. It may be weirdly comforting to know that the picture for authors is really no better in the rest of the world's advanced economies — after all, we are all battling the same digital disruption, the same competition for consumer attention, the same affordability crisis. So, there's nothing inherently wrong with Canada. Still, a low average is a low average, and we'd really like to see those earnings on an upward swing.

A few years back, I lost patience with the whole project of working myself out of a job. Enough waiting to restart my writing career, I decided. I began a new novel manuscript, squeezing in the work on my daily commutes (writing on my iPhone), during late evenings after the kids were in bed, and during what should have been vacations.

A DIY book tour (and writing shed)

That book was published this past May by a small independent Canadian house in Northern Ontario. Over the course of the spring and summer, I put thousands of kilometres on my hardy Subaru, crisscrossing the province, presenting and selling my little murder mystery in town halls, book clubs, public libraries, bookstores, and festivals. To make my personal promo budget more affordable, I often slept in provincial parks in the back of my car (no hardship, really, as I'm an enthusiastic car camper). And when I wasn't pushing books, I was banging nails into a hand-built writing shed behind my Northern home.

Along the way, I reconnected with old friends and writing colleagues, met a fabulous community of readers, and relearned a valuable lesson. Funny thing, it's a lesson I often repeated to my two kids when talking about success at school.

"It's not about the grades," I would say. "It's not about 'success' that can be so easily measured; it's about the work. Do the work! Learn to love doing the work, and success is guaranteed. Because that love of the work is success."

"When I look back at the frazzled commuter, squeezed into a corner of the Toronto subway, typing away with his thumbs, I see someone in love with the work."

When I look back at the frazzled commuter, squeezed into a corner of the Toronto subway, typing away with his thumbs, I see someone in love with the work. When I remember those delightful provincial park evenings, reading by lantern-light and planning out the next day's event, I see success. Even the old guy dangerously up a ladder, building his shed. That guy is loving the work... if not the next day's muscle aches.

How much money has the book made me? Too soon to tell, but I sure do know the often harsh reality of the book market in Canada, so I have my expectations properly calibrated. Obviously, I will sit down and run the numbers at some point, probably as I prepare my taxes. But in order to do that, I'll have to take a break from writing the next book out in my new shed. Success!

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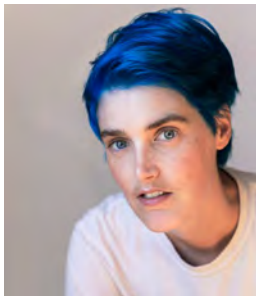

Kyle Vingoe-Cram is a cartoonist, artist and writer from Halifax/K'jipuktuk. They are the author of *Kettle Harbour* (Conundrum Press, 2023), named one of the Best Graphic Novels of 2023 by the CBC, and a "stunning debut" from author Kate Beaton. They are currently at work on a new graphic novel with frequent collaborator, artist GHY Cheung. They live in Ottawa with their family. **kylevc.com**

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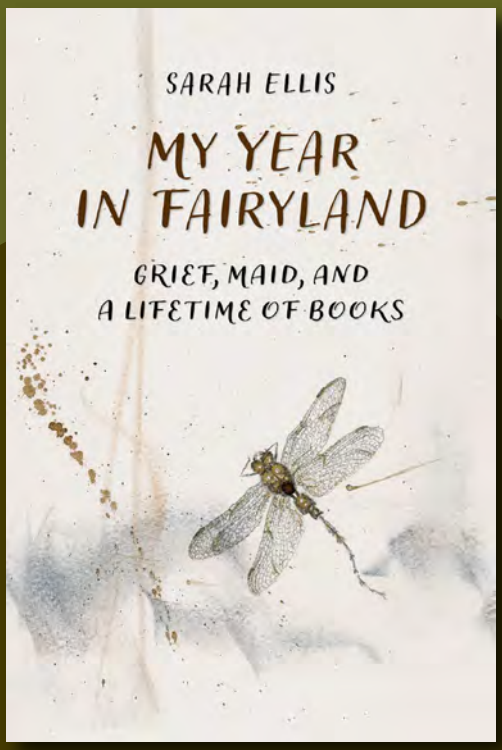

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