



WRITE

VOLUME 46 NUMBER 3
FALL 2018

THE MAGAZINE OF
**THE WRITERS'
UNION OF
CANADA**

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**I VALUE
CANADIAN
STORIES**

My second book was a doorstopper, weighing in at 520 pages. The printing and distribution costs alone were likely a contributing factor to the bankruptcy of my publisher, Douglas & McIntyre.

Lest I contribute to the downfall of another Canadian publisher, I vowed that my next book would be much shorter with crisp, declarative sentences. I'd use adjectives sparingly. Taming my verbosity — as those who know me can attest — would be a heroic feat. I'd likely need some help.

That helper came in the form of P.J. Palmer — a screenwriter, producer, and director from Los Angeles. We had met while P.J. was shooting a documentary on Ed Ricketts, the legendary pioneering ecologist who was best friend and inspiration to John Steinbeck. I had written the first biography of Ricketts, and so P.J. wanted to interview me for his doc. We soon found ourselves deep in conversations and deep into a bottle of Jameson. One thing naturally led to another and P.J. soon proposed that we co-write a limited series dramatizing the life of Ed Ricketts, who was the heart and soul of Monterey's Cannery Row. I was about to learn screenwriting.

P.J. and I would fly to San Francisco, the mid-point between L.A. and Vancouver, to write. We'd rent a cheap hotel room, plastering Post-it notes and sheets of paper on the wall to plot out our epic. The camaraderie and creative energy was epic, too. In the evening, we'd drink at the Vesuvios Café, the favourite haunt of Jack Kerouac, which was just across the street from the legendary City Lights Bookstore. One night we even had a drink at a bar-bistro called Ricketts' Lab, named after our protagonist.

P.J. turned out to be an excellent instructor, and I was a keen student. "Come in late and leave early" was P.J.'s mantra on how to write a scene. I came to appreciate how economical screenwriting is — how you can say so much with so little prose.

I found it fascinating how my professional arc mirrored my writing on Ed Ricketts. I started my profession as a journalist, then became an author, and was now a budding screenwriter. My writing on Ed Ricketts, too, began as a journalistic feature for the *Georgia Straight* which morphed into a book and then a screenplay. It's a similar story for many other authors who initially hone their skills as journalists, short-story writers, playwrights, screenwriters, or poets. Publishing a book has traditionally been held up as a pinnacle of one's professional success.

That's not necessarily the case nowadays, as self-publishing has made it possible to move directly to book publication without the traditional middleman steps and expectations. As well, electronic publishing has dematerialized the book and enabled media to converge, as text, audio, images, video, and graphics come together in one creative work.

As creators, we've also found creative ways to market and monetize our works which is really about convergence, too. Take



Rupi Kaur, a young Canadian poet, Instagrammer, illustrator, performer, and, yes, author. Her success as the author of *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers* is inseparable from her other talents, having 3 million followers on Instagram.

Another example is Andy Weir, the author of *The Martian*. Unable to land a publisher or agent, Weir serialized the book on his blog. Readers requested him to publish it on Amazon Kindle where it soon became a bestseller and garnered the attention of traditional publishers. The book eventually became a blockbuster movie starring Matt Damon. While blogging your book may sound so twenty-first century, the Victorian novel has its roots in periodical serialization in the 1800s.

Despite the fact that writers often work across media and genres to earn a living, writers' organizations remain in silos. The Writers' Union, despite its name, doesn't have a mission to unite writers, but rather to divide professional book writers, as we define them, from the rest. Slowly, we've expanded that definition, which has been a good thing in my view.

There's a patchwork of sometimes-competing and overlapping professional organizations — TWUC, League of Canadian Poets, Writers Guild of Canada, Playwrights Guild of Canada, Journalism Association of Canada, Canadian Authors Association, and Professional Writers Association of Canada. Many offer professional development and do similar advocacy for copyright, fair compensation, arts funding, and so on.

The Canadian Writers' Summit has offered a good start in bringing writers together every second year in Toronto. However, I think it's time to begin a more serious conversation about truly uniting writers, especially given the collective challenges we all face as "content creators" in our new digital universe. The publishing landscape — from books and magazines to newspapers and film — has fundamentally changed. Perhaps Canada's professional organizations may, too, need to change with the times.

Could we create a stronger and more unified advocacy voice for writers in Canada? Would pooling resources increase the professional development services to writers? Or would bringing together diverse writing professions — authors, journalists, playwrights, screenwriters, poets, and technical writers — be too unwieldy?

The idea which I've dubbed Writers United, is worth discussing.

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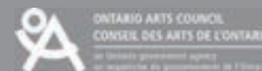
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Community Corner

As Poet-in-Residence at Sinai Health, member **Ronna Bloom** engages with staff, clinicians, patients, and visitors. Originally funded by an Artists in the Workplace/Community OAC grant in 2012, the program receives support and direction from the Office of Employee Engagement/Organizational Development and the visionary Dr. Allan Peterkin of the program in Health, Arts and Humanities at University of Toronto. Bloom has written or prescribed poems on the spot in the Brain Function Unit, Neonatal ICU, and others; led workshops in Sinai Health's Human Rights and Health Equity Office, for staff and clinicians in the Psychiatry Department, and in the Family Medicine Unit; and brought prescriptions to cafeterias after the Orlando massacre. Poetry's ability to convey abrupt change, express the ephemeral, and cut through lingo seems to suit a hospital environment that deals, every moment, with loss and arrival.

Bloom has been facilitating poetry events that engage people in hospitals and universities, at fundraisers, and for arts organizations. Between October 15 and 19, she prescribed poems at Mount Sinai Hospital and at Bridgepoint Health for Healthy Workplace Awareness Month. She will be prescribing poems at the biennial literary event Freedom: Not Just Another Word, a fundraiser for the Freedom from Torture organization in London, England, on November 15. For more information, visit: freedomfromtorture.org/literary_event_2018 or ronnabloom.com.

Northern Saskatchewan is a place full of stories. The oldest ones are written with red ochre on the rocks along the rivers — the ancient highway of the peoples who have lived here since times immemorial. It's the traditional homeland of the Cree, Dene, and Métis people, and also home to many non-Indigenous peoples, each of which have their own unique story to tell. How can sharing these stories contribute to the well-being of our community? Writer, children's book illustrator, and member **Miriam Körner**, Artist/Writer-in-Residence with La Ronge's Alex Robertson Public Library, has been exploring this question since January 2018.

Körner reflects on her residency experiences thus: "Initially I thought I'd be conducting writing and art workshops, give one-on-one feedback and help people to find their voices. Writing and visual art would be compiled in an anthology, titled Northern Voices, that reflects on sense of place and belonging to lead us to a better understanding of each other. I went regularly to long-term care to work with seniors and Elders, mentored youth, taught writing on and off-reserve, and invited Indigenous artist and writers to share their art-making and writing process. But as we shared stories, I became aware that we are on a journey

together, and the big question that guided this journey was: how can we move toward reconciliation? I believe it's one of the most important questions of our time, but I had no answers. That's where my Indigenous advisors and the voices of the participants came in. 'Reconciliation begins within us,' I was told. 'You have to take your discussion out on the land,' was another's advice. The moment we moved the tables in the library to make room for a sharing circle was the moment I wasn't a teacher anymore; I was a participant in a shared journey — a healing journey that was about the process and not the outcome."

Körner recalls how, as the residency went on, everyone sat in circles in various locations — in the library, on caribou skins, around a bonfire on an island amidst a frozen lake — and a dynamic developed within the community that led to new projects. One of the highlights of her experiences was a three-day canoe trip, searching out the ancient rock paintings along the Churchill River, talking to Elders about life on the river, following the route of ancestors — fur traders and Indigenous peoples who met along these waterways. Körner remembers, "At night around the fire, we talked about what reconciliation means to us, shared our pains and our visions, talked about personal barriers that stand in the way to reconciliation, and how we are affected by systemic barriers."

What has stuck with her is the importance of sharing. She notes that sharing is "a simple teaching, but a powerful one. The answer of how sharing stories can lead to building community lies in the questions itself — sharing builds community. Sharing stories, sharing meals, sharing our knowledge about the land."

On July 1, 2018, member **Steven Ross Smith** was appointed Banff Poet Laureate. His first activity was to curate a small exhibition centred on the poet Jon Whyte — a longtime resident of Banff until 1992 — in Whyte Museum. The exhibition features Jon Whyte's concrete poetry experimentations; original typed poetic texts; a handwritten piece; and scans from his published books, along with the books themselves. It also includes an audio recording of the poet reading.

In October, Smith presented at Saskatchewan Writers Guild's annual conference in Saskatoon and at University of Windsor, where he was writer-in-residence in late October and early November.

Smith's next activity will be the coordination of a launch for the anthology *Waiting* (University of Alberta Press) and the official launch of his laureateship on November 22, 2018, at the Whyte Museum. Local activities in Banff are also in the works and will likely include school visits and a writing workshop.

Writer's Blot

INDUSTRY Q+A /

“Language Is Our Strength”

Doyali Islam converses with Bengali Literary Resource Centre's Executive Director, Subrata Kumar Das.



When and why did Bengali Literary Resource Centre develop?

Since March 2015, the literary platform Bengali Literary Resource Centre (BLRC) Inc. has been a registered non-profit initiated by some literary activists, mostly of Toronto. We observed:

- There were many Canadian Bengalis whose writing was truly up to the mark but, for many different reasons, were unable to get published. BLRC wanted to create a platform to publish their creation in book-forms and magazines and exhibit their creation before the community.
- Bengali writers living in different Canadian cities didn't have any network to work together. So, we worked hard to connect the Bengali writers living from coast to coast to coast.
- Second-generation Bengalis didn't have sufficient knowledge about the treasure trove of Bengali language and literature. To minimize that gap, BLRC involved youth interested in literature in its team.
- Few Canadian Bengali writers had knowledge of our connections with Canadian writers. BLRC strongly believes that as we live in Canada, it is essential to know more about Canadian literature. We wanted to make a bridge between the Canadian literary community and the writers of the Bengali literati.
- Bengalis migrate to Canada from Bangladesh and many other parts of India. We observed that Bangladeshi Bengalis and Indian Bengalis had little communication and cooperation, especially with respect to literature and culture. Though back home these countries have been separated geographically for political reasons, both communities speak the same language. Both of them boast of the same literary inheritance and read many of the same writers/books. BLRC wanted to involve people from both the communities who could create an enriched collective literature.

Currently, BLRC has seven directors and fifteen members, headed by Dr. Rakhil Sarker, a Guelph University Bengali Professor, who plays a vital role in making decisions and executing many different projects.

How does BLRC connect Toronto's Bengali communities with communities of other cultures and languages?

Since 2016, BLRC has organized the Canadian Bengali Writers' Conference, held between October and December. The first conference, in December 2016, drew a huge number of established, published, and unpublished writers from the community, which included people from Mississauga, Guelph, Brampton, and Milton. Toronto Poet Laureate Anne Michaels attended and stated, "Literature is our hope. Language is our strength." Anne told the audience that "language and literature create the community, and they come out of community," adding that "we want the community to grow," and that "writers play an important role in it." Praising BLRC, she noted that it was a "wonderful initiative to make the society more vibrant."

BLRC held its second conference in October 2017. About fifteen mainstream Canadian writers attended, along with a huge number of Bengali writers cities including Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, and Vancouver. Anne Michaels, TWUC's Executive Director John Degen, and the Writers' Trust of Canada's Executive Director Mary Osborne all participated, as did noted Bengali poet Asad Chowdhury, poet Iqbal Hasan, and writer Dr. Dilip Chakraborty. Additionally, BLRC organized an International Mother Language Festival on February 19, 2017. Bengali, French, Guyanese, Mandarin, Russian, and Tamil youth, along with others, hosted and participated. And last March, with support from Toronto Arts Council, BLRC organized a World Poetry Day event, which former Parliamentary Poet Laureate George Elliott Clarke graced.

BLRC also publishes a literary journal whose first issue contained sixty-seven writers from Calgary to Ottawa to Montreal. It also initiated a year-long Reading Bengali Literature in English project, in which a Canadian writer is invited every month for a reading.

Furthermore, BLRC has published five manuscripts by people in the community who had literary talent but no book to their credit. To do so, we formed two panels of editors – one for the English manuscripts, and one for the Bengali ones. Upon publication, we held a public ceremony at Legion Hall on Dawes Road.

BLRC's website (blrc-org.ca) lists all our activities and contains literary bios of more than seventy Bengali writers who are living in Canada and who have at least one published book.

BODY AND MIND /

Callosum Like I Sees 'em: My MS and Writing Journey

BY KIM CLARK



Multiple Sclerosis is hard to enunciate and even harder to live with. But, hey, over twenty-plus years I've managed to recognize some of its perks — for one, an intense fascination with language.

I don't mean only reading. I'd always done that, with a book in every room while hectically raising four kids. I mean the manipulation of words and letters, their flexibility, their visual shapes, sounds and, yes, their power, that presented the act of writing to me as a joyful, challenging, and satisfying outlet for my obsession. Writing also gave me something creative to pursue as my physical abilities deteriorated. Nothing like thinking ahead!

Speaking of heads, I like to imagine that the MS lesions in the right side of my brain are a sparkly constellation rather than a clinically labelled distribution of black holes. I can only believe that this damage to my corpus callosum — the information pathway between hemispheres — triggered some new neural activity or pathway that affected the way I experienced words. I played around with vignettes, free verse, both form and concrete poems, and Oulipo: My body's all about restrictions, too. There had been no writing in me, but now there was!

The lesions in my spine are more difficult to optimistically rename or starrily reimagine. Still, I give these hyperintense elongated foci credit for influencing my writing in other ways. My goals expanded as more demyelination occurred and my mobility diminished, replacing physical activities with cerebral ones. I finished high school, joined a local writing group, and signed up for a creative writing course with Ryan Knighton, who's both brilliant and blind. As I lost the use of my dominant left hand, my typing — thank you, technology! — slowed to one-handed pecking. I had to shift my process from long messy free-writes to one organized edit-as-you-go paragraph/line after another.

Thinking/doing somehow began to adjust, so I signed up for a once-in-a-lifetime retreat at Victoria School of Writing with George Bowering, and then pursued a full degree in Creative Writing through several BC universities online and ultimately in-person at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo. I was lucky at every turn. I had a few poems accepted by lit mags; a short-story collection published, *Attemptations* (Caitlin Press, 2011); and then a book of poetry, *Sit You Waiting* (Caitlin Press, 2012).

There had been no writing in me, but now there was!

My MS may “decide” that voice recognition technology will be in my future, but I'm still too attached to the hand/eye act of word-craft typing. Those exquisite letters, symbols, and words may have to transition along with me. My body is already slow and uncooperative. So is my writing. But this just happened! My sparkly and darkly humorous book — *A One-Handed Novel* (Caitlin Press) — emerged this year. It's about sex, financial strain, tiny houses, and mostly, of course, about disability — writing what I know, however I can. A sequel is underway — an MS starring MS; lol. Wish me a symbiotic corpus collosum!

* *There is still no scientifically proven cause or cure for MS.*

** *There is still no scientifically proven cause or cure for creative writing.*

*** *I'm not sure I'd change either if there were.*

Kim Clark is an author, poet, playwright, and gimp. Her newest work, A One-Handed Novel (Caitlin Press, 2018) takes a humourous dive into disability and dollars, big libidos and tiny homes.

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