

WRITE

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Nurturing Our Youth: A Cross- Country Look at Literary Programs

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Nurturing Young Writers

A Cross-Country Roundup of Writing Programs for Youth

BY EMILY POHL-WEARY

Becoming a writer can be terrifying. It's hard to know where to start, who will care about the stories rattling around in our heads, and how we could possibly make a living by telling stories. When teens are told their voices don't count, it can feel nearly impossible. It's even more daunting when they have limited access to role models in the form of working writers.

Here are some youth-focused programs that are flourishing across the country. From coast to coast, these amazing writing groups, workshops, and conferences feed creative young minds and help kids and teens to build confidence and a sense of self by encouraging them to develop their unique writers' voices.

WRITING ON FIRE AND WORDPLAY
NORTH SHORE, NOVA SCOTIA
READBYTHESEA.CA

The organizers of the Read by the Sea Literary Festival, which takes place on Nova Scotia's North Shore (Pictou, Antigonish, Tatamagouche, Pugwash), realized that there were writing programs for adults in the region, but none for young people. So they started one. Each year, prominent Nova Scotian writers like Sue Goyette and Sheree Fitch visit schools and lead workshops for young writers on poetry, drama, and fiction. Writing on Fire is a day-long event that focusses bringing together young people who like to write. It's capped off with a Literary Café, a casual open mic for participants and mentor writers that is affirming and equalizing. The same folks also coordinate Wordplay, a festival for children, and run weekend retreats.

FRYE FESTIVAL YOUTH PROGRAMS
MONCTON, NEW BRUNSWICK
FRYE.CA

Moncton's extensive and bilingual Frye Festival (Atlantic Canada's largest literary fest) includes a host of programs for the very young through to high school seniors. Their wide-reaching Writers in the Schools program sends diverse authors into schools at all levels across the province — and to ensure it's accessible, it's free for schools to participate. They have two youth performance events, Budding Writers (for Grades 5 to 8) and Words on Stage (for Grades 9 to 12). So the young'uns don't feel left out, there's a display of writing by kids from Kindergarten to Grade 4 called Imagination at Work. During the lively Frye Academy debates, tweens read and argue in favour of selected books by anglophone and francophone Canadian authors. As if that's not enough, they have a free writing-contest with cash prizes.

QWF'S WRITERS IN THE COMMUNITY
MONTREAL, QUEBEC
QWF.ORG

The Quebec Writers' Federation (QWF) has several important programs for young writers, including Writers-in-the-Schools; Writers in CEGEPS, a Mentorship Program (which pairs up an author with a single young writer for 35 to 40 dedicated hours); and Writers-in-the-Community (WIC). Their groundbreaking WIC program connects small groups of young writers (ages 14 to 24) in the Montreal area with authors, storytellers, and performance poets for a series of weekly workshops. Many of the WIC participant writers are disenfranchised young people who have been detained under the Youth Protection Act or the Youth Criminal Justice Act are young, single mothers; have learning disabilities; and can't live at home on a regular basis. Over the years, facilitators like Métis spoken-word artist Moe Clark, poet Gillian Sze, and playwright Jesse Stong have been hired to motivate youth "to use language to express themselves in productive ways." Several groups have published zines at the end of their workshops, and QWF has uploaded them to their website.

REPUBLIC OF CHILDHOOD
OTTAWA, ONTARIO
WRITERSFESTIVAL.ORG/SCHOOLS

The Ottawa's Writers Festival has been running a writers-in-the-schools program for twenty years, but in November 2017 they launched innovative youth programming on the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These programs were a direct response to requests from Ottawa-area teachers, parents, librarians, and kids who wanted an intensive writing experience where kids were front and centre in the delivery of books, stories, and the writing life. Well-known authors like Charles de Lint, Cherie Dimaline, Amal El-Mohtar, and, well, me (!) have led workshops and events in schools and community spaces to encourage teens who might not otherwise have access to professional authors.

TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY'S YOUNG VOICES PROGRAM
TORONTO, ONTARIO
TORONTOPUBLICLIBRARY.CA/TEENS

For more than fifty years, TPL has been encouraging GTA's teen writers to share their voices, read as much as possible, and find like-minded writerly friends. One of their biggest endeavours is a beautiful annual anthology of writing and art, *Young Voices Magazine*, which is edited and curated by an editorial advisory group of teens. Thousands of copies are distributed for free through the largest library system in North America. There's also an annual teen writers' festival with panels, readings, and workshops facilitated by YA authors. They hire a writer-in-residence to work one-on-one with teen writers who submit manuscripts. They've even been known to run satellite workshops in high-needs communities (youth shelters, high-density neighbourhoods) that express the desire for a visiting writer.

FESTIVAL OF LITERARY DIVERSITY'S TEEN TRACK
BRAMPTON, ONTARIO
THEFOLDCANADA.ORG

This year, the amazing Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD) is launching the three-day FOLD kids' literary festival as well as Teen Track, a day of programming for young writers that will pair up four authors with Brampton-and-area teens. It's designed to provide practical training for young people who want to learn how to write great stories, give them a deeper understanding of the publishing industry, and show them a few different paths to becoming a writer. There's an emphasis on giving them a sense of some of jobs in the industry that writers do to supplement their writing. Organizer Jael Richardson notes, "I remember the first time I met a writer. It significantly shaped my life. At the time, I wasn't even thinking of writing as a career. But it inspired me anyway." She hopes that for young people who already know they have a passion for writing, meeting a group of writers of this calibre will help them move with greater confidence towards their dream.

#WRITESOFPASSAGE
EDMONTON, ALBERTA
WORKSHOPWEST.ORG/FOR-EDUCATORS

The #writessopassage program, run by Edmonton's Workshop West Playwrights' Theatre, is an opportunity for junior and senior high school students to work with a teaching artist who will work with the students over five workshops to write an original play. That play is then workshopped and read/performed by two professional actors. What a thrill it must be for teens to see their plays take shape and come alive! The program responds to the province's high-school English, Social Studies, and Drama curricula.

KAMLOOPS YOUNG AUTHORS CONFERENCE
KAMLOOPS, BRITISH COLUMBIA
SD73YOUNGAUTHORS.WEEBLY.COM

Young Authors Conference is a school-board initiative (School District 73) for students in Grades four to twelve. Approximately 150 students participate in the full-day event each year, and ten BC authors (plus one from away who visits the region thanks to TD Book Week) offer varied workshops and events. Prior to the conference day, students submit their writing to a contest, which is judged by teachers/librarians, and winners are announced at an hour-long event at the end of the day. At the celebration, guest writers read aloud from the winning pieces and honorable mentions before the names of the winners are announced.

VPL TEEN CREATIVE WRITING CLUB AND BOOTCAMP
VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA
VPL.CA/TEENS

Vancouver Public Library (VPL) has a range of programs for teen writers, such as Teen Creative Writing Club, writing workshops with local authors (I'm leading two this spring!), an annual publication called *Ink*, and a Teen Advisory Group. At the monthly writing club, young writers meet, discuss writing projects, and exchange ideas. Prompts and exercises are supplied to help get creative juices flowing, and the ultimate focus of the club is to build a group of passionate young writers. Their summer Writing and Book Camp for writers aged eleven to sixteen is a place for aspiring writers and book lovers to work with authors, sharpen their pencils, and stretch their typing fingers. VPL also provides writing workshops led by local authors throughout the year.

**POETRY IN VOICE/LES VOIX DE LA POÉSIE
ONLINE, ACROSS THE COUNTRY
POETRYINVOICE.COM**

Poetry in Voice/Les voix de la poésie encourages Canadian students to fall in love with reading, recitation, and writing. Founded in 2010 by Scott Griffin, it is now used as an essential resource in over 1000 schools across the country. They have downloadable (and free!) publications that include a bilingual anthology of classic and contemporary poems as well as comprehensive teaching materials. They run student poetry-recitation competitions that award over \$75,000 in travel and prizes each year. They have a wonderful free, online poetry-workshop created by poet Damian Rogers that teens can participate in every day for a month. And if they want even more poetry, they can sign up for The Daily Poet and receive a different poem from the anthology in their inbox every day, along with an exclusive writing exercise to get their creativity flowing.

**TD BOOK WEEK
ACROSS THE COUNTRY
BOOKWEEK.ca**

Perhaps the highest profile (and hugest) of these programs, TD Book Week, organized by the Canadian Children's Book Centre, brings a host of kidlit authors and illustrators to kids in even the most remote communities. Over the course of a week in May each year, thirty authors give over 400 readings to more than 28,000 children, teens, and adults in approximately 175 communities. They make every effort to reach children in remote regions and communities: As a result, hundreds of schools, public libraries, bookstores, and community centres host events. It has been running since 1976, and it's great for kids and teens, as well as for the authors and illustrators who participate and get to see different parts of the country and connect to new fan bases.

Emily Pohl-Weary is the author of seven books, including Ghost Sick: A Poetry of Witness and Not Your Ordinary Wolf Girl (a YA novel). For more than a decade, she ran writing workshops for teens. Now she teaches in UBC's Creative Writing Program.

OTHER PROGRAMS OF NOTE

- **Toronto, Ontario: WordPlay the 6**, facilitated by author Andrea Curtis, is a writing program for kids that takes place in the ever-fabulous Type Books (883 Queen Street West).
- **Toronto, Ontario:** Inspired by the 826 Valencia program in San Francisco, **StoryPlanet** runs workshops that combine art, writing, and digital media for kids out of their new space in the library's Parliament Street Branch (269 Gerrard Street East, 2nd Floor).
- **Edmonton, Alberta: YouthWrite®** has been offering multidisciplinary writing-focussed camps that promote "twenty-first-century multiple literacies" for over twenty years. They also publish a magazine!
- **Calgary, Alberta:** For \$100, young writers can buy an annual "Club Pass" and participate in all of the youth-writing clubs offered by the **Alexandra Writers' Centre**. These include: Reality Is Optional Writing Club (all ages); Novelmancers Novel Writing Club (all ages); Dungeons and Dragons Club (Grades 5-12); and Rogue Poets Poetry Club (middle/high school).
- **Vancouver, British Columbia: Writers Exchange Program** provides fun literacy programs for kids, and volunteer opportunities for literacy lovers. These programs include after-school, in-school, and summer-reading programs. Each year, kids who participate publish approximately fourteen chapbooks of their own writing, and you can check out these beautiful works online at vancouverwe.com.
- **Halifax, Nova Scotia:** From time to time, **Woozles Books** (1533 Birmingham Street), which is one of the best kids' bookstores around, offers kid-focussed workshops for young writers led by local luminaries. Learn more at woozles.com.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

SELF-CARE /

Finding Peace

BY RAYANNE HAINES



What is the saying? When you need something done, ask a busy person?

By October of 2017, I'd reached a defining point in my career — I'd become the quintessential busy person. I was executive director for one of Canada's largest and most diverse poetry festivals, my debut poetry manuscript was launching in the spring, and I was writing book two of my contracted four-book urban fantasy series.

Then the wheels fell off.

In late October, my seventeen-year-old son suffered from a mental-health crisis resulting in suicidal behavior and hospitalization. He'd sustained a severe concussion a year previous and though we saw the signs of a shifting personality, none of us realized the severity of his trauma.

The first month after, I could barely breathe, barely take my eyes off him. I "worked" from home, cut my hours back. Thankfully, my board and team members managed the day-to-day routine with little input from me. I ignored my writing.

By March, we sunk into a new normal. I returned to full-time work. Got back to editing. Jumped into my old life, thinking I hadn't been affected, that I wasn't the one who needed care. We set my son up with the right supports and necessary medication. Still, by May I'd nearly come undone — was nearing a mental break while wearing a happy face in public. My son had stabilized. I had not, and my career, my writing, my health, suffered for it.

My family and I decided a retreat in a remote setting would be the right approach for us to regain balance. We booked time away at a rustic cabin on Salt Spring Island. Then for seven weeks during the summer of 2018, I sat by the ocean and cried. I ran ten kilometres a day. I went blissful days without speaking or showering, letting the ocean salt coat my skin and hair.

Eventually, language found me again. I began writing about my own sense of loss and grief. And even finished one of those books I'd been contracted to write. I won't say the grief lessened, only that I found a new way of being in the world. After the first few

I made and make no apologies or justifications for my summer retreat. It saved my life.

weeks, though my family came and went (with daily updates from my now adult son), for the bulk of the time I was alone. I stopped worrying about missing literary functions. Recognized I didn't have to be everything to everyone, to be successful. My poetic voice improved. I dug deeper. Allowed my vulnerability to find its way onto the page. Accepted the healing that writing and isolation offered me.

A daily writing practice re-emerged. I started each day with an early morning run, then a walk with my dog, large coffee in hand, before a cool swim in the ocean. Afternoons were spent writing on the deck. Evenings involved more walking, a glass of wine, a good book. I made and make no apologies or justifications for my summer retreat. It saved my life.

By the end of August, my son and I made life-affirming decisions. He's working on a mountain for the winter, snowboarding across the sky, finding peace in solitude. I'm curating one final festival, with my successor, to keep the burnout at bay. Meanwhile, I'm finding my way through grief and hope with a new poetry manuscript and a renewed lust for life.

Rayanne Haines is an award-winning author, co-host of the poetry podcast Let's Get Lit, and the executive director of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. Her debut poetry collection, Stained with the Colours of Sunday Morning (Inanna Publications 2018) released to positive critical acclaim.

WRITERS IN EXILE /

Shiniest Day

BY SOLOMON HAILEMARIAM



I do agree with the saying that people don't notice whether it's winter or summer when they are happy. It was a rainy day but was the happiest and shiniest of my life.

I have few days I remember as being so beautiful: when I graduated from university for the first time; when my two sons were born; when my first article appeared in the national newspaper; when my first book was published; and the first award I won for one of my books. There could be a few more, but these are the landmarks of my life.

On that rainy day, I was extremely happy. I didn't take the day off as my wife and two sons were arriving after working hours. I bought red roses on King Street.

I was late by about two hours and was sure that my family was still inside Pearson International Airport. I stared at the arrival doors, holding a welcome balloon and the bunch of red roses. It was later that the idea of taking pictures of this historic day using my cell phone came to my mind. So, I put the balloon and roses on the floor and adjusted my cell phone to camera position. After forty-five minutes, I saw my wife pushing an airport cart with my four-year-old son on top of three bags, and my thirteen-year-old son pushing another cart. My wife was skinnier than when I last saw her. I knew her mother had had a stroke just a few weeks earlier and that my wife had spent most of her time at the hospital, bedside. But spending two years alone looking after our two sons hadn't been easy, either. My older son looked taller, skinnier, and more mature. I had mixed feelings: I was extremely excited, exhausted, and sad as well.

I was excited for obvious reasons, exhausted because I had had several sleepless nights thinking about the arrival of my family.

I had been thinking about the possible financial hardships upon the arrival of my family: rent, schooling, clothing, food, livelihood, etc. It wasn't easy at all. And I felt sad because we had had a good life back home. In fact, the phrase "good life" felt relative. I was lucky to get the opportunity to settle in Canada but also feel unlucky that I am not able to contribute to the society that I knew well and from which I earned fame and fortune.

There is a saying in my country that "a writer who lives out of their country is like a fish out of water." There is some grain of truth to this saying, but it is not totally true: A fish thrown from water wouldn't last long, but I am alive and, after everything, there are many mundane activities that keep me going. I must work and pay the bills. I must support my family. I am responsible for my two sons... The list goes on and on.

That day in the airport, so many things came to my mind. I had been thinking about my wife and sons day out and day in for two years. I had so many dreams. Some of the dreams were tantamount to nightmares.

All my worries, frustrations, and nightmares regarding my family are history now that I am reunited with them. But new frontiers, new challenges, and new frustrations have just been born: Will I get a decent job? Am I able to sustain my family? Will they be happy in this new country? Am I able to restore the type of life I — we — used to enjoy in the not-so-distant past?

Solomon Hailemariam is an Ethiopian writer, translator, journalist, academic, and the founder and president of PEN Ethiopia. Some of his notable works include: Love and Anxiety and The Young Crusader. The latter won the first Burt Award for African Literature.

This column is part of a series exploring the lives of writers in exile now living in Canada. It is a partnership between TWUC and PEN Canada.

Writing Blind

BY ROD MICHALKO



Writing about blindness is one thing, writing blind is another, and writing about blindness, blind, is something else entirely. This is what I do: I am blind, and I write about blindness, blind.

I'm intrigued by blindness, and sometimes even a little afraid of it, even though I have been blind and, I mean totally, for more than twenty years. And, before that through my teens, and into my mid forties, I was legally blind; weird way to be blind, I know — legally. But this simply means that if you see one tenth or less of what everyone else does, you're blind and you're legal.

I have spent most of my life not only blind, but also as an academic, and I am just as intrigued by and afraid of academia as I am of blindness. For the last twenty years of my academic career, I taught and published in the relatively new field of disability studies. And here is where it gets intriguing. Disability Studies has allowed me to write about disability in general, but more importantly to me, no surprise here, it gave me the freedom to write about blindness and so I did. Numerous articles and four books later, I'm still intrigued that academic writing has given me an opportunity to "look" at blindness — an academic one, but a look, nonetheless.

This is where the fear comes in. I was afraid that there was something about blindness, my life no less, that was somehow missing in my academic writing. It wasn't as though I didn't write about my life in blindness, since I did, and I even wrote two short stories in my first book. I also wrote of my experience with my guide dog, Smokie, in another book. But this writing was oriented toward developing a way to theorize blindness as it revealed the culture of sight, something we ordinarily take for granted and don't notice. Still, I was afraid; I was afraid that there was something I wasn't able to reveal about blindness, especially regarding how intimately it co-mingles with the culture of sight and perhaps how this may generate something new. I continued to explore this in my research and teaching. Still, I felt a sense of

Through the creation of blind characters in my short stories it felt as though I was discovering blindness for the first time.

disquiet, a sense that something was alluding me. What this was, I didn't know.

And then, retirement. Blindness became fascinating... in fiction. I was still intrigued and afraid, but blindness, my sense and experience of the world around me, took on an edginess as I wrote stories and created characters. I began to allow myself to ride the movement of blindness as it took me in and out of two worlds, the sighted one, and the one I live. I began to feel the presence of the intimacy and the alienation of my life lived within the two worlds, and I settled into this edgy but creative space and began to write. More fascinating, still, was that through the creation of blind characters in my short stories it felt as though I was discovering blindness for the first time. It felt, too, as though I was going blind again and again and becoming lost in the intrigue and mystery that blindness offers. Bringing this sense of blindness to life in fiction bears an uncanny resemblance to my life in blindness.

Blindness — its rhythms, its cadence — flows from speaking through to writing. I use a dictaphone, an old-fashioned, honest-to-goodness, microcassette dictaphone. I speak the stories of blindness, its dialogue through blind characters, and try as hard as I can to speak its pathos, its comedy, its life. Writing blindness, blind. This is the remarkable invitation and eerie responsibility that fiction has offered me.

Rod Michalko is a retired professor of disability studies. He has made the move from academic writing to writing fiction, a move that was both easy and scary. He lives with his partner and colleague, Tanya Titchkosky, in Toronto.