

WRITE

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

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SUMMER 2019

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SAVE
THE
DATE

AGM &
ONWORDS
2020

MONTREAL
MAY 28–30





The other night, in 20-plus degree temperatures, garbed in a parka and warmest woollies on the set of a Hallmark Christmas movie, I went through my rotary of life's big questions, as one does.

I am a writer! I silently screamed. What brought me to this moment, a sweat-soaked background performer surrounded by actors, technical and production crew, soapy fake snow, and hordes of biting mosquitoes? I also wondered about lunch.

A few hours earlier, I realized mid-bike ride I'd have to cut my usual circuit short in order to make my call time. I took a new path in the forest. A risk, as I'd left my smart phone at home and could not consult Google Maps, but I was fairly confident it would curve around in the right general direction. The path was rough, requiring a more fastidious grip on the handlebars as I rode out bumps and gullies, and I was thankful for the padding that years of sitting in a desk chair has provided me. Then lo, as expected, there it was: a converging of paths and a return to the familiar.

And I remembered a great truth. Somehow, in the end, we always end up where we are meant to be.

Our Union is like that. We remain (roughly) 2000 strong, united in purpose despite differing ideas and ideals, backgrounds, passions, experiences, etc. This is why our discussion during the AGM plenary sessions is often spirited. This year's AGM in Halifax was a little different, and not because of the fresh-from-the-Atlantic halibut and lobster (that was nice too). There was a gentleness to our plenary sessions, a feeling of connectedness unlike anything I've experienced during years previous.

Perhaps we were hopeful, as we've made positive gains on the copyright front (though the battle continues). It could have been the anticipated party, a celebration of 45 years with dancing, conversation, and cake. It may also have been the way we began, with a beautiful land acknowledgement — as is now our practice — and ended, with a Talking Circle led by National Council advocate from Alberta, Anna Marie Sewell. In the circle we passed around a talking stick (microphone) and held a heart-shaped stone

as we introduced ourselves and shared (succinctly) why we write. We passed around the stick once more to discuss the Union's direction on equity initiatives and ideas on how we might better meet our goals.

If you've not yet read the minutes of the AGM, please do. The PLR Task Force instigated at our 2018 AGM presented a thorough report with recommendations to be forwarded to the Public Lending Right Commission. These recommendations included an insistence that titles over twenty-five years old still in library use be reinstated for program eligibility as this holds to the principle that "all writers must be paid for public use of their work."

The motions put forward by the Membership Criteria Task Force had potential to be contentious; however, comments brought to the microphone were supportive. The new points-based system — which you will have opportunity to vote on — will allow (amongst other elements) membership to writers who are on the path to book publication, but do not yet have a book in hand. Review the points system closely with an open mind, and you will see the criteria is strict. We remain an organization of professional authors. As several speakers pointed out, this will provide TWUC support to authors at the beginning of their journey, when it is often most needed. The outcome of this vote will figure largely in the development of our new strategic plan, which we begin work on this fall. The last has served us well, but it is time to hear from you to ensure we continue to focus on what is most important to our membership.

A new path, then. Ours has always been a member-driven, democratic organization, and so whatever the bumps and gullies it is the right direction for our Union, right now. We will always land exactly where we are meant to, advocating for our members, and all Canadian writers.

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Writing Rights

Teaching, Learning, and Reading Canadian

By John Degen



New Canadian books have a painfully short life on bookstore shelves and struggle mightily to make it onto reading lists in the education system. In fact, *not* teaching Canadian books has become a lobbying point for some Canadian educators as they try to justify free copying. Earlier this year, a representative from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) proudly tweeted “university classes do not, by and large, read this year’s CBC Canada Reads books — curriculum is full of #publicdomain classics.”

A Canadian *teacher* representative, scoring points by insisting teachers do not teach contemporary Canadian books? Note that in order to be a public domain classic, a book’s author would have to be dead for more than fifty years. What that means, according to CAUT, is that no Canadian author who has drawn breath since 1969 has a reasonable shot at appearing in an official curriculum reading list. This is the current relationship between Canada’s education system and Canada’s books.

So much of the copyright fight of the last few years has been about protecting our right to a functioning marketplace for our work. The never-ending pressure on writers to provide work and labour for free and the drive to enshrine that pressure in copyright law through new loopholes has had a profoundly negative impact on the Canadian market for books and writing. Look at the stats from anywhere — Statistics Canada, BookNet, the More Canada report — and you see a market in decline. This at a time when Canadian publishing has turned its attention to diversity, and inclusion, and the spotlighting of Indigenous voices.

Canadian literature has never looked so new, and fresh, and exciting, and yet we as a society are actively arguing against the health and growth of that literature. At the most basic, economic level, if we’re not making the effort to teach Canadian stories by contemporary Canadian authors, we are not renewing the market with new generations of readers interested in Canadian stories. The future looks unsustainable.

Which is why, thanks to the focussed, insistent advocacy of TWUC’s Alberta/NWT/Nunavut Representative, Gail Sidonie Sobat, the Union recently launched a provincially targeted letter-writing campaign to urge provincial governments to consider legislative remedies to the Canadian books in Canadian schools problem. While we respect academic freedom, we note that curriculum imposes standards for all sorts of reasons, and we feel that learning the stories of one’s own nation is an important reason. If you have not yet sent a letter to your provincial member, please do so today. We’re asking for consideration of standards encouraging between 30 and 40 percent Canadian-authored works within provincial curricula.

A country full of dedicated and enthusiastic readers and a market for domestic books. These things do not happen by accident. They don’t grow without careful cultivation and effort. And so, while the copyright fight continues, we feel we can help the cause of protecting a functioning marketplace by encouraging new consumers for that marketplace.

Why don’t university classes teach the Canada Reads list? Shouldn’t they?

Editor’s Note

By Rhonda Kronyk



Soon after I began working on this, my first issue as editor of *Write*, Gregory Younging, member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, passed away. Greg was the publisher of Theytus Books, Canada’s first Indigenous publisher; Truth and Reconciliation Commission honorary witness; poet; professor; mentor to many; author of *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*; and a passionate advocate for Indigenous cultural rights (watch for a story about Greg in the fall issue of *Write*). Much of the work I do as a manuscript copyeditor and speaker is because of Greg and other faculty members who I was honoured to spend time with at the Indigenous Editors Circle in 2017. Greg’s influence on publishing

largely stemmed from his passion and commitment to amplifying Indigenous voices, and I hope to reflect that dedication in my work with *Write*. In an effort to make space for underrepresented voices, you’ll see a new section in this issue called Intersections, which complements the accessibility.doc column; the two columns show us how writing and writers can create spaces for inclusion by understanding what leads to exclusion. I hope you learn as much from the writers whose words will fill these pages as I have while learning about these topics. The Cree word wicihitowin can be translated as building relationships by helping each other. This was the crux of Greg Younging’s work and is a call I hope all Canadian publishing professionals can support.



A Writer's Life

BY OLIVE SENIOR

First, let me thank the Writers' Trust of Canada for inviting me to give the Margaret Laurence Lecture this year. I am honoured and humbled to speak to fellow members of the Writers' Union, especially knowing how revered Margaret Laurence is by her "tribe." I hope that I will do justice to her memory.

GROUNDINGS

Everything in my writing life I owe to my childhood: the place I was born, the ground on which I stood. The word "ground" has a great deal of resonance for me, and I will use it as the foundation of my talk, as it is the foundation of my life, the writer's life.

That life began in a small village in the mountains of Jamaica — a district of farmers with at most a few acres each from which they made a living. The houses were strung out for miles along a red-dirt country road, all surrounded by a small plot of land — referred to as

the "yard" — in which our mothers had a kitchen garden of useful herbs, medicinal plants, and fruit trees and a few predictable flowers. To the side was the family burial plot. "Yard" was regarded as the woman's domain, facing the road, often behind a thick hibiscus hedge.

The economic plot, worked mostly, but not exclusively, by men, was often some distance away in the backlands. Significantly, the men did not say they were going to their fields or the farm, they left each day for their "ground." Ground was where one planted starchy root crops for domestic use or sale, known in the market as "ground provisions."



Olive Senior delivers the Margaret Laurence Lecture at the Halifax Central Library.

GROUND-TRUTH

I only recently learnt the term “ground-truth.” It is a term used in various fields to refer to information provided and validated by direct observation as opposed to information obtained indirectly or by inference. In other words, to rely on ground-truth is to walk the walk, as some land surveyors do.

The idea of ground-truth made me reflect that, while I am shaped by book learning, the earliest, most significant knowledge came from my childhood practice of ground-truth, of my empirical observation of the world around me.

Without realizing it then, I was the village ethnographer. These enquiries of my early childhood became the inspiration for my *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* published several decades later — the result of my desire to record the truth of a world that was rapidly changing and pass it on to another generation.

Yet, there was far more to this world than what I then perceived. A great deal was hidden, underground and “subterranean” as the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite was later to label it. A world where History was a boundless sorrow that swirled about in fragments, in tattered bits and pieces like a revenant, the type of ghost that cries out for justice and cannot ever find rest until Truth is revealed.

This was the truth that the people around me never spoke, partly because they sensed more than they knew, about the events that had shaped our forefathers’ lives and thus their own lives down

the generations, a history of enslavement, indenture, and forced migration.

The oral tradition handed down the practice but not the story of origins. Investigating and writing about these would be left to people of my generation and those who came after. For there were no books available to me then that told me the truth about myself or the world I inhabited.

Our books, like everything else in colonial Jamaica, came from England — the “Mother Country” — and we learnt intuitively from an early age that only this Great European tradition mattered. So while we learnt the names of the kings and queens of England, about the wheat fields of Canada or the Steppes of Russia, we were told nothing about ourselves. But then, our selves could not fit easily into a mono-cultural European paradigm because by now we were also African, Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, Iberian, Jewish and — yes — we were to be told much later — Native American.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Intuition born of ground-truth alerted my senses; book learning moved me to consciousness. No matter how we perceive Truth, we need a language to speak it.

I knew that I needed to bring the two things together, but I didn’t have a model for life or labour, though I knew both were somehow bound up with words.

Place isn't fixed because the ground we stand on is not simply of our time; place is of all time, birthed by nature and burnished by the forging of our common humanity.

As I became more conscious of writing and of life, I felt increasingly inhibited both in respect of the language I wanted to use and what I wanted to write about. I needed to fuse two languages (English and Jamaican Creole) and two ways of seeing (the African-based rural self and the urban European).

My own sense of being a Caribbean writer did not come about through reading Caribbean literature — that was available to me later — but through reading academic and ethnographic research and the sense of subversion it gave to me as I struggled to find my voice. I came to consciousness at a time of the political awakening of the Caribbean colonies — from self-government to Independence. I became swept up in the self-examination of cultural and national identity. Who were we as a people, and what should we value?

I felt I had succeeded at something when my first work of fiction, *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the judges commented on my use of language. It had taken many years to get the book published, but the stories were begun in my late adolescence and continued during my time at Carleton University studying journalism. Time away from home in a place that seemed alien also proved best for providing the distance I needed to pull myself away from my ground and become a writer.

I've always felt at home writing both poetry and prose, and I found this division served me well in adulthood. Without really thinking about it, I now realize that I have been mainly using my poetry to explore ground-truth — the world of nature and history — and my stories to reflect the drama of everyday life.

In digging up dirt I use nature as metaphor, especially in poetry. Real gardening can expose not just dirt but secrets and memories. It is a way to explore the significance of ground as repository of those who came before us: whether European explorers, African gods in the new world, nature, or the Indigenous.

○ CANADA

I came to Canada because I thought it was a good place for writers, and I still think so. Good because I can put “writer” on my passport without feeling foolish; where telling people you are a writer is met with admiration and not indifference; good to be in a place that embraces a reading culture — bookshops, libraries,

literary events, a wide array of publishers that affirm our choice to be writers.

Grateful as I am though to both my birthplace of Jamaica and my adopted country of Canada, my debt is located in neither place, not to a geographic location. I am always grateful to whoever said it first: “The writer’s country is writing.”

Place isn't fixed because the ground we stand on is not simply of our time; place is of all time, birthed by nature and burnished by the forging of our common humanity.

Just one final reflection. . .

As a child, I had few children’s books. But I claimed three books as my own — one was a Bible, because everyone was supposed to have one, the other was an atlas that belonged to the household, and the third was my very own, the only book I remember owning as a child — *Alice in Wonderland*.

It’s interesting to me now to reflect that these three books are really about direction. The Bible vertical — Heaven or Hell, up and down; the atlas horizontal — across the world; and Alice. Alice underground.

It was not just the story of Alice that satisfied but the illustrations that have stayed in my mind forever. And the picture that always comes to mind first is the one of Alice standing in front of the bottle that says, “Drink me.”

I’m glad that I drank, went to ground, and came back up with a head bursting with words.

Thank you for listening to some of them.

Excerpted from the 2019 Writers’ Trust Margaret Laurence Lecture, which Olive Senior delivered on May 31, 2019 at the Halifax Central Library (recording available at soundcloud.com/writerstrust). The Margaret Laurence Lecture is a program of the Writers’ Trust of Canada and is delivered annually on the occasion of The Writers’ Union of Canada’s AGM and OnWords Conference.

Olive Senior is an award-winning writer of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and children’s books. Born and raised in Jamaica, she has lived in Toronto since 1993. She has taught and lectured on Caribbean literature and culture internationally and currently teaches at the Humber School of Writers. Senior has published sixteen works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and children’s literature. Her work has been adapted for radio and stage on both sides of the Atlantic and her work is widely taught in schools.

WELL-BEING /

Let Nature Nurture Your Creativity

BY TRACEY L. ANDERSON



The ever-dreaded writer's block. It can sneak up on us at any time. But even if we've never had full-on writer's block, most of us encounter occasional creativity slumps — I know I do, especially in the long winter months.

Potential causes of these slumps are many — stress, fatigue, time pressures — and so are the tips offered to help us pump up our creativity. But have you ever thought to immerse yourself in nature as a remedy? Nature breaks help me, so I did a little digging to find out why. Here's what I uncovered.

ART FOR CREATIVITY

Attention restoration theory (ART) suggests that time in nature can restore our attention after we've exerted mental energy. ART was first hypothesized and studied by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, as our world has become increasingly busy and the many facets of our modern lives — work, family, technology — have multiplied the demands on our attention, more scientists are studying the nature-attention connection.

David Strayer, PhD, is a cognitive neuroscientist and a University of Utah professor who has been studying the cognitive and psychological effects of nature. In one of his studies, conducted with graduate assistant Rachel Hopman, student participants repeated simple tasks, such as counting backwards by threes, once before and once after spending thirty minutes outdoors. Students wore caps with electrodes to measure and record brain activity. Results showed that after time outside, the participants performed memory tasks up to 20 percent better, and their creativity increased by up to 50 percent.

When we're busy buzzing about, the brain's prefrontal cortex, which controls high-level thinking skills such as creativity, gets overworked and fatigued. Mental fatigue makes it harder to think deeply, to focus, and to generate new ideas.

When we immerse ourselves in nature, the prefrontal cortex gets time to rest and restore, leaving more mental energy for high-level tasks. Strayer says, "Short nature walks will allow those neural regions to rejuvenate." The result is that "all of a sudden these flashes of insight come to you. It supports creativity, positive well-being, reductions in stress."

I have experienced those illuminating moments when a brilliant idea — for the title of a new poem or exactly the right wording for a sentence I've been struggling with — suddenly reveals itself while I'm lounging in bed in the morning or sipping a cup of tea by the window. I now understand that time outside has a similar effect on my brain.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Restoring attention can restore creativity. The more time you spend outdoors, the more your brain rests and the more that rest restores your attention. And you can harvest nature's benefits in a short time. As Strayer and Hopman's study showed, as little as thirty minutes can help. Here are some tips for a quick dip into the natural world, whether near home or further afield:

- Take a walk in a park.
- Exercise outside: play tennis, do yoga, paddle a canoe. The options are many.
- Sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Listen to the sounds around you: birds singing, wind whistling, leaves rustling.
- Bring your camera — preferably not the one on your cell phone because technology can tax your attention — and snap some photos to view later.

Want to increase the benefits of nature by extending your time in the fresh air? Take a long hike. Go camping. Or plan a solo or group writing retreat — and guide that boosted creativity directly into your writing project.

NATURE AS MUSE

For centuries, writers and artists — masters and amateurs — have discovered their muses in the beauty and bounty of nature. Our senses absorb the splendour of the natural environment. We see the deep rich colours. We hear the music of living things. We smell the earthy perfume of plant life. We feel the wind in our hair. We taste the salt spray from the sea. Outdoors, we're surrounded by elements that can stir and inspire. If we feel stuck creatively, we can open the door — and the mind — and step outside to explore new stimuli and the potential for new ideas.

Tracey L. Anderson is the sole proprietor of Ideas Into Words (ideasintowords.ca), a writing, editing, and instructional design company in Edmonton. Tracey seeks out projects that teach her new things, satisfy her curiosity, and engage her interests in education, health, professional development, leadership, and the finer things in life. When she's not working with words, Tracey enjoys travelling in books and on airplanes.

Minor to No One

BY JANET ROGERS



When I think of the word marginalized or minority in the context of Canlit, it might be safe to say that we all know who is meant by that term in so much as we all know who falls under the term “Canadian.”

I recall being on a Canada Council literary jury years ago and seeing many characters within the stories of the applicants being described as “Canadian.” I was the only jury member who questioned what was meant by Canadian. Of course, I knew who the writers meant, but I wanted to push the point that even as writers, producers of culture, it is a given that a character who falls under the moniker of Canadian is generally a white person. But writing in such broad terms is not only lazy, it’s indicative of the small scope the writer works from to not even consider any other racialized “Canadian-ness” of their characters. And this has been the root of most of the disconcerting issues within Canlit for years. But we won’t rehash that here, I only have 700 words.

As an Indigenous writer, I cannot afford the luxury of professional jealousies as the urgency to create a presence for Indigenous and People of Colour (IPOC) artists is in direct correlation to the new will to value our creative voices and that of all voices that don’t fall under the white Canadian label.

Our ability to produce exceptional creative expression was always there. It is unfortunate, however, that we had to wait for those who hold influence in the art worlds to see what we produce as valuable, powerful, and very profitable art. It became common practice for us to turn to non-Indigenous publishers, non-Indigenous producers, record labels, etc. because working with our people in these capacities simply wasn’t a choice. And during that time, many mistakes were made, many opportunities to build good, meaningful relations were ruined. Fast forward to today where we have some, not nearly enough, Indigenous and non-Indigenous publishers who support the onslaught of brilliant authentic writing from our communities and stories that provide a more well-rounded historical truth that contribute to the rich national fabric of quote-unquote Canadian culture.

For the most part, we’ve all come a long way. We have evolved in our understanding of each other and how important and valuable it is to have all voices represented at all times.

Back to Canada Council for the Arts who have, this year, published a context brief about cultural appropriation and their refusal to support artists, projects, publishers, and groups who knowingly or unknowingly participate in any form of cultural thievery for profit. This is huge. I look forward to the day, and perhaps it’s not that far off, where the tables will completely turn and those “Canadian” cultural influencers will have to make applications for the honour of working with us. The day when our cultural practices and protocols will become the standard by which “other” artists will strive to meet or get left behind. When we all learn the nuances within writing by IPOC authors, learn to listen and to learn that supporting appropriation of voice by allowing non-native and non-POC writers to tell our stories does a great disservice to their readers as well as insults entire Native nations by denying us agency over our own stories.

For the most part, we’ve all come a long way. We have evolved in our understanding of each other and how important and valuable it is to have all voices represented at all times. The landscape of cultural participation is vast and has room for all the categories and sub-categories we can think of. And that means I don’t have the luxury of professional jealousy as a native writer; we are in an extremely exciting movement where the cultural will to hear us is the best its ever been. The more voices represented on that landscape, the better. Even if those voices are inexperienced and culturally detached, it’s in the journey where the best learning is done.

We are living in this transitional time, and that is very exciting. That is why I will never assume the title nor allow the title “minority” to be placed upon me. When it comes to cultural excellence, IPOC are minor to no one. Without our voice, your story is incomplete.

*Janet Rogers is a Mohawk/Tuscarora poet, media, sound, and performance artist with six published books of poetry. Her current collection, *As Long As the Sun Shines* (Bookland Press), will be available as a Mohawk language edition in July 2019. She has relocated from living as a guest on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish (aka Victoria, BC) for twenty-five years, to her own territory of Six Nations.*