

WRITE

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

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FALL 2021

Understanding Audiovisual Performance Rights

8

Bringing Literature to People

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TWUC NATIONAL OFFICE

Executive Director
John Degen, ext. 221
jdegen@writersunion.ca
Associate Director
Siobhan O'Connor, ext. 222
soconnor@writersunion.ca
Fund Development & Projects Manager
Gaeby Abrahams
gabrahams@writersunion.ca
Office Administrator
Valerie Laws, ext. 224
info@writersunion.ca
Membership & Engagement Coordinator
Kristina Cuenca, ext. 226
kcuenca@writersunion.ca
Communications Coordinator
Zalina Alvi, ext. 223
zalvi@writersunion.ca

Editor Rhonda Kronyk write@writersunion.ca

Editorial Board Sally Ito, Janice MacDonald, Dwayne Morgan, Philip Moscovitch

Copyeditor Nancy MacLeod

Write Magazine Advertising Zalina Alvi ads@writersunion.ca

Design soapboxdesign.com

Layout Zalina Alvi

Cover Illustration Brooke Emily spreadthatink.com

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T 416.703.8982, F 416.504.9090, info@writersunion.ca, www.writersunion.ca.

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Letters to the Editor

Governors General and Canada's Premier Literary Awards

On January 21, 2021, Julie Payette, the 29th Governor General of Canada, resigned following a Privy Council investigation that determined she had “created a toxic, verbally abusive workplace” at the viceregal residence, Rideau Hall. The fact that she was the first Canadian Governor General who was forced to resign focussed public attention on the office of the GG and raised many questions. Is the role purely ceremonial or has it a political dimension? What is the relationship between The Writers Union of Canada and the office of the Governor General?

Historically, Governors General represented the British monarchy in the governing of colonial states; such governance entailed the establishment of British control of Indigenous Peoples and possession of their territories. This was justified on the spurious grounds that white races were inherently superior to the coloured races of the world (Kipling's “lesser breeds”), so colonial states had the Christian duty to convert and educate non-white people even if that meant subduing them by force of arms. That is why the Governor General's position is as much a military appointment as a civil one and why Julie Payette was also Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Colonization, in short, is state-sponsored and state-sanctioned; the key agents in implementing policies that caused millions of deaths and destroyed numerous Indigenous cultures were the Crown's Governors General.

Some examples. The ninth Earl of Dalhousie, Governor General of North America (1820–28), according to Dalhousie University's 2019 Report on Lord Dalhousie's History on Slavery and Race “...embarked on policies, laws, and regulations that marginalized the Black Refugee community for the next 200 years.” These policies included ordering the deportation of enslaved rebels to their former owners. The first Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, Governor General of Canada (1872–78), approved of the Canadian government's enacting of the *Indian Act* of 1876. The Act's purpose was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the settler population while suppressing Indigenous cultural and religious practices; he did the same thing when, as Viceroy of India, he “annexed” Burma in 1886 and exiled the Royal Family. The conduct that forced Julie Payette's resignation pales in comparison with such genocidal policies.

Other Governors General of Canada adopted a different tack better suited to a country that had gained dominion status in 1867. Governors General promoted cultural racism under the premise that British culture was inherently superior to other cultures. Even sports were weaponized by being associated with their names; for example, the Devonshire Cup (golf), the Grey Cup (football), the Minto Cup (lacrosse), the Lorne Cup and the Lansdowne Cup (yacht racing), and the Stanley Cup (ice hockey). Lord Stanley,

Governor General (1888–93), renamed land in Vancouver as Stanley Park, land already named by its Squamish inhabitants who were removed without compensation. Vere Ponsonby, 9th Earl of Bessborough and Governor General of Canada (1931–35), spearheaded the founding of the Dominion Drama Festival — its top award was (naturally) the Bessborough Trophy — whose adjudicators could be selected only from France or Britain (no Canadians were allowed to adjudicate until the 1960s) and whose “safe” theatrical repertoires mirrored French and British imperial values. Vincent Massey, the first Canadian to become Governor General (1952–59), fitted the role perfectly. More English than the English, he was anti-Semitic and misogynistic; when he founded and financed Hart House at the University of Toronto, he stipulated that women be barred.

I highlight these examples of British imperialism because while so many of Canada's Governors General have been associated with systemic racism and imperial colonial practices, their office is still associated with many of our Canadian institutions. A particularly egregious example is the coupling of the office with Canada's premier awards in the arts and sciences, including the Governor General's Literary Awards. This association is an enduring example of colonial cringe, a cultural form of the Stockholm Syndrome on a national scale.

I am certain that the Writers' Union would reject any notion of complicity with organizations that have racist associations, but it does cooperate in the administration of the GG Literary Awards by providing the services of its members as jurors; without our cooperation the GG Literary Awards as named would cease to exist. What to do? TWUC should cancel such cooperation and work to have the Governor General's Literary Award renamed; its administration can and should be continued under the auspices of the Canada Council which has always been responsible for its funding and promotion — not the Governor General's office.

To sum up: It is time to rename Canada's pre-eminent literary awards to recognize their Canadian provenance, time to mask up and observe a proper social distance from Rideau Hall. We have been warned by Madame Payette's resignation — Rideau Hall is in the red zone; the place is toxic.

— Eugene Benson

EDITOR'S NOTE

While some jurors for the Governor General's Literary Awards have been TWUC members, there is no arrangement between the Union and the Canada Council for the Arts (who administer the awards) regarding jury selection. TWUC is not involved in any way in selecting GG juries.



Democratizing Literature

BY JASON LEE NORMAN

“I love to give art for free to people.” – Francis Ford Coppola

Summer days in the time of COVID have been just like the days in all the other seasons. Waves, surges, and spikes come and go, and I stay in exactly the same place — my own house. August feels different though. It feels as though something has to give, so we manage to get out of town for a few days. We do it safely, and the change of scenery does wonders. When we return to our stuffy house and the modest pile of mail that awaits us, I notice right away the small pink envelope on the top that is addressed to me. It’s my first letter from the Dream Delivery Service (dreamdeliverservice.com). American writer Mathias Svalina writes dreams every day and delivers them to people who sign up for the service (nightmares cost extra). He spends time in different cities throughout the year, and if you live in the same city as he does, he will hand deliver the dreams to you every day via bicycle. You may not be reading the words from the Dream Delivery Service in the pages of *The New Yorker* any time soon, but the connection that has been made between myself and this wildly imaginative writer is now cemented forever. I get to read as much of his writing as I want, as long as I keep paying for it.

IT’S UP TO YOU

It was about ten years ago that I first read Mathias Svalina’s very short chapbook, *I Am a Very Productive Entrepreneur*. The “businesses” the narrator describes to the reader are very similar to the dreams that are now sent to me via mail each week. What Svalina’s book taught me all those years ago is that while we writers are all the beneficiaries of strong imaginations, it is also

a severe lack of imagination that is keeping us from getting our writing in front of more and more eager eyeballs each day.

My motivation for spearheading some of the projects that I have been involved in has revolved around the idea that writers need to work hard to create and support local literary communities, because nobody else is going to do that for us. If you are lucky enough to get a book published in the near future, you will most likely be asked by your publisher about what sorts of things you can bring to the table that can help that company market your book for them. What is your social media like? What about a virtual book tour? Do you have any connections in local media? How many Instagram Lives are you willing to do in a day, in a week? Don’t know what Instagram Live is? How about TikTok? Can you help us in that department? Writers are constantly being asked to do more with less when it comes to marketing their book projects, so why wait for a book to come out? Why not do more to help ourselves and our community of writers right now?

DON’T WAIT

You don’t have to come up with your own ideas from scratch. The best thing you can do if you want to empower creators is to support the things they are creating. Democratizing literature is about balancing the scales a little more for those creators who don’t have large marketing budgets or big publishing houses behind them. Support your local student-led journal, lit mag, or small press. These are usually run by dedicated groups of literature-loving volunteers scouring the earth for the next

big thing. Every writer gets started somewhere, and if you're supporting grassroots organizations like literary magazines and presses, you are helping support artists when they need it the most. If you're looking for great ideas, you don't need to reinvent the wheel, either. The small press Hingston and Olsen, out of Edmonton, took one look at advent calendars and said, if it works for beer and chocolate, it can work for literature. Their Short Story Advent Calendar shattered any preconceived ideas about how readers consume literature and showed that if you build it beautiful, readers will support it. It is that initial support of Hingston and Olsen's Short Story Advent Calendars that helped them expand into different projects that take books or stories and turn them into pieces of collectible art.

One example of using established projects: In the Edmonton International Airport, near Gate 64, there is a small machine that looks sort of like a skinny ATM. On the machine there are three buttons: 1, 3, and 5. Press any of those buttons and the machine will print out a little short story that will take you about 1, 3, or 5 minutes to read. It's free and features writers from all over the world, but most importantly, it features about 100 writers from the Edmonton area.

I helped the EIA bring this Short Story Dispenser, created by Short Edition (short-edition.com) in France, to Canada for the first time in 2017 because I wanted to get literature into people's hands as easily as possible. When I look back at interviews I have done over the past years, I see that I have been saying the same thing over and over for a decade now. When a painter sees a blank wall, they see a canvas. When a musician walks into a coffee shop and hears nothing but silence, do they not see an opportunity to have their music playing over the store's speakers? Where do writers see their readers? Is it only in bookstores and magazine racks and literary festivals? Do they look at that same coffee shop and see a room full of potential readers? Do they see that five-minute stretch of time when people are waiting in line to board the airplane and see 200 potential readers for a new short story? When they see someone cracking open a can of beer on a summer evening, do they see a potential reader? Well, they should.

DEMOCRATIZING YOUR WRITING

In 2014 the American fast food chain Chipotle published writing from well-known authors such as Jonathan Safran-Foer, Toni Morrison, and George Saunders on their packaging. The website for this new promotion/literary endeavour asked the question, "Must a cup, or bag, suffer an existence that is limited to just one humble purpose?" I wonder if we writers ask ourselves whether we are okay with limiting our writing to just being read in books or magazines, or if we are genuinely lucky, have Reese Witherspoon adapt our book into an eight-part limited series on HBO. My own thinking on the matter lines up pretty closely to what Malcom Gladwell (who also had his writing featured on Chipotle cups) said when he was interviewed about the Chipotle project. "The goal of storytelling should be to make storytelling as ubiquitous as music."

In 2007 I went to grad school in Manchester. Every day I walked from my student residence to the university and passed a massive poem painted on the side of a takeaway shop. The poem, suitably titled "Rain," was by the poet Lemn Sissay. Sissay's poems have been painted on walls and murals,

projected in light onto buildings, and even etched into sidewalk cement since 1994 in England. His first poem that was turned into a mural was painted on the side of the pub Hardy's Well (lemnissaylandmarks.com) in Manchester, where I spent many evenings with my fellow students. In the summer you could sit outside in the shadow of that massive poem. While Sissay was the trailblazer, there is nothing in the literary rule book that says a good idea can only be used by one writer at a time. In Boston in 2016, a group called Mass Poetry created a project that printed poetry on sidewalks with a special substance that only revealed the poem when the sidewalk was wet. The Calgary Public Library and WordFest tried the same thing with #YYCLiterarySidewalks. If you are reading this article and wondering, why doesn't my city do more things like painting poems in rain paint on the sidewalks and in murals on the sides of buildings, then you're asking the right question — and you might be the one person who can get these ideas off the ground in your community.

Edmonton has poetry and short fiction printed on coffee sleeves and beer cans and buses, but that should be just the beginning. If you are a writer looking for a captive audience, then you should think about where those spaces are that readers can find you. Let the Chipotles and the 300 short story machines across North America be your proof of concept. Writers, like most other artists, have to make these opportunities and projects happen. We can't always wait for our agents or publishers to do it for us. If our readers can be anywhere, then our writing has to be everywhere.

A LITERATURE TO THE PEOPLE TIMELINE:

1904: One of the earliest mobile libraries in the United States was a mule-drawn wagon carrying wooden boxes of books. Created by the People's Free Library of Chester County, South Carolina, it served rural areas.

2009: The first Little Free Library was built by Todd Bol in Hudson, Wisconsin. There are over 90,000 such structures all over the world today.

2013: Chipotle launches packaging featuring writing by prominent U.S. writers.

2013 (Edmonton): #yegwords coffee sleeves are introduced via local cafés. Cardboard coffee cup sleeves feature poetry and tiny short stories from local writers. Thousands are circulated each month. New writers are published two to three times per year. This program is still going strong in Edmonton.

2014 (Edmonton): The Zine Machine is a converted vintage snack machine filled with zines by local creators as well as publications from around the world.

2015 (France): the first Short Story Dispenser is unveiled in Grenoble. The creators, Short Edition, now have over 300 dispensers on five continents, delivering literature to people for free every day.

2016 (Italy): Italian winery Matteo Correggia teamed up with designer Reverse Innovation to bring short stories to wine packaging. The line of wine is called Librottiglia (librottiglia.com). Each bottle of wine in the collection is paired with a short story that is wrapped around the bottle as part of its label.

Jason Lee Norman is a writer and publisher living in Treaty 6 territory in Edmonton, Alberta. He edits Funicular Magazine and publishes Monto Books.

WRITER-IN-EXILE /

On the Wrong Side of Life

BY ASCHALEW KEBEDE ABEBE



*Have you ever felt to be on the wrong side of life?
I have.*

Ten years ago, when I turned 40, I examined those four decades. Besides the scratchy childhood I had, I felt that my young-hood was sublimated. So far my life, as I considered it, had no colours of the rainbow in its spectrum—it was gray and monotone.

I was born in Ethiopia, three years before rebel Ethiopian, communist-oriented soldiers overthrew the great emperor Haile Selassie I. The “Red Terror” began when I was a second-grade student. The term was coined by the revolutionary socialist government. It was a sceptre borrowed from Joseph Stalin to crush the opposition socialist parties.

I think my adulthood could be best described by Freud: “The child is the father of the man.” Fifty is considered a golden mark on life’s timeline. During the ten years since I had reflected on my first four decades, the grayness in my life hasn’t changed even its shades—despite crossing the Atlantic Ocean to change my location so I could get away from the upheaval in Ethiopia.

I remember the clinking sound of streetlamps hit by rocks thrown by slingshots by boys older than me, women crying for help to distract the revolutionary guards’ attention, and then the gunshots. Encountering dead bodies in the street was a common experience for school kids. In school, the pro-government teachers used to force us to sing songs. The song about how we were pleased to see anti-government rebels lying dead in the street is what I still hear in my mind every once in a while when I wake up in the morning.

My mother used to tell me, “Son, don’t be like other kids. Don’t see the dead bodies in the street, otherwise the demon coming to smell their fresh blood would put you in his possession.” Sometimes I say to myself that had I took my mom’s advice seriously, I could have seen life in colours.

At the age of 15, I had to register to join the National Military Service. It was a prerequisite for enrolling in universities or colleges. When I was a first- and third-year student at university, I had to hide for months to avoid going to the war. In the decade-and-half-long war, the government forcefully took young people from the streets and homes to the northern front to fight the Albanian communist’s followers and others.

Those days were nightmares for mothers. I remember my mother’s sleepless nights and her everyday prayer from the Book of Psalms. Her ears were on the stone-and-tin fence piercing into post-

midnight darkness. She was like a lioness defending her cubs from lurking predators.

Eventually, the rebel fighters won and took power. They retained communist elements and empowered Stalinist ethnocentric politics. The regime had no place for the middle stand; it prosecuted so many of its citizens with the motto “Be with us or you are the enemy.” So, many of us fought back; when others picked up the guns, I chose the mighty Pen. After being attacked mentally and physically for being critical of the government, I fled my country and came to Canada 6 years ago.

Canada is a sanctuary for someone like me. There are institutions that make sure that the system is working well. You meet people committed to their ideals. I would say the rule of law is on the top of the political pyramid. And investigative journalists are out there to crucify anyone who thinks they are above the law and that their crimes are invisible.

Despite all the good of living in Canada, the continuing war in my country, the politically motivated hatred among the Ethiopian diasporas that live in Canada and different parts of the world, the difficulty in learning new systems and customs, and even the uncertainty I encounter in my everyday life, I am kept locked in the psychological profile I developed over the years back home. What a gray! What an accomplice to underperformance!

The stanza in my poem that I performed on poetic jazz before I fled my country echoes in the back of my mind after my bedtime prayer:

Dwelling in the empty space, I live in the twilight.
My eyes are longing to see the morning light.
What you see in the horizon when the sun rises and sets,
That is the deepest depth of my sorrow,
the color of my eyes.

My name is Aschalew Kebede Abebe. By profession I was a math teacher back home. I have been a freelance writer and columnist for almost 3 decades and have written for different newspapers and magazines. Poetry is my passion. I am the author of a novel, Ezekiel-Catastrophic Eyed, and three nonfiction books including Ethiopia and heavenly power. My short stories are published in an anthology and an ebook. I won the 2012 Dede Korkut international short story award from PEN Turkey. Four of my short stories have been translated into Turkish from their English version by PEN Turkey.



The Window Pain

BY RANA BOSE

It is not a team game, this business of writing. It is a solitary exercise in self-confinement and isolation.

There are, however, periods of time when we pull the circuit breaker — we choose to be unfocussed, abandon the keyboard and *stare out through windows*. This is about that.

The source and the inspiration. Perhaps the first cry of fury at injustice, inspired by overhearing a casual exchange between parents about famines — or leapfrogging to adulthood — the realization, while watching a play, that the rabble in Paris, during *La semaine sanglante* (The Bloody Week), May 1871, had an idea after all? That they were simply asking for bread and equality and nothing more, and yet the Republic bulldozed them after two months of direct democracy and nearly 20,000 workers and soldiers, who had turned their guns around, lay dead! Then there is the hilarious experience of the way Einstein or Chaplin casually exposed the stupidity of dictators. And there could be the first stirrings of sensuality when one was only 10 years old and saw the teacher's inner thighs, accidentally of course. Such are the powers of the ingrained subconscious. The source and the inspiration!

When I was growing up in Calcutta, looking out through small-framed windows, dark monsoon clouds and thundershowers moved by. They did invoke sadness and the ineffaceable memory of Durga's plight — the thin and wiry older sister in Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali* — the sad but belligerent fight-back of young girls in a patriarchal hellhole.

That registered.

Montreal clouds are rarely monstrous. They disappear suddenly, chatting amongst themselves, a little flash here and there, and a timid growl follows from far away. Fall leaves scatter, winter comes and we see the military-style removal of ice and snow. Intimidating European-style sirens accompany advance scouts, marching down the centre of the street; powerful searchlights — like in a World War II movie set — terrorize the elderly as they scurry home. They must be hearing something else. The grim sounds of massive snowploughs, as they panzer down, the vacuuming blowers with precision manoeuvres heaving ice, rocks and debris against the walls on the side of the trucks.

The window that we sit behind could be in a plush setting on the 10th floor, at a rickety kitchen table on the ground floor, in a poorly insulated shared studio or in a languid country cottage, where the dark wood frames around windows make the landscape outside look like paintings hanging in a museum. Sometimes we come overground. We charge out of our hobbit-holes, walk up to a cliff, button up against the cold, and then run back. And what will then pour out of our minds and onto the file onscreen, could be an enigmatic smasher. There are times when we will look out from our windows, from a row-house district, and see or hear kids planning a bullying attack in a basketball court. Again, we will scurry back and write something up.

Those who assess must be prepared to do research and be open to assessment themselves.

Leaves rolling on the asphalt, the gashes in the icebound sidewalks, the rickety branches of November, the false summer for two days, the barn door that bangs with the wind on a hilltop far away, and the imaginary noir in a typical Montreal *ruelle* (alley) where nothing happens — no shadows cross — but there is terrifying intrigue building up, anyway!

We will come back to the house and maybe a panchromatic photo will be found, wedged in at the back of a desk drawer, belonging to a World-War-II-era aunt who looked at you strangely. Sometimes we will travel abroad and have an encounter. In Aix or Tuscany, or on the Inca trail, or on Lake Champlain — and out will come another chapter. As storytellers, we are up to our ears in lies, inspired by the truths that we see around us. Always, looking out through windows. Will it be accepted, understood?

This essay is really about the process of acceptance and assessment in Canada, a country of some 37 million people. Scenic emerald lakes, rocky mountains with trains winding through them, prairie flats, gentle people, mostly. And then stories will emerge of dark secrets, incest, pedophile uncles, gangster families, Nazi grandparents who hid away, suicides that were never recorded, murders that were hushed up, and plane-crash mysteries that went cold! Everything is fitted into genres.

For many of us who came from elsewhere, who have lived here for decades, who have had intense encounters of another kind, who have mixed myth with beliefs and beliefs with science and a fatalistic perspective associated with migration, tales of brutality, massacres or simple family feuds — we will colourize our world in another way. Or we will sell *dhup* (incense sticks) and yoga to the chronically gullible. We are conflicted about *other* things. So, when we sit down to write, it will be a massive mash-up of emotions. Local, international, straddling classes and playgrounds. Not always catering to the overwhelming familiarity of where we are now.

Which leads me on to the issue of “peer assessors.”

The folks who are actually outside, looking in through the window as we stare out. The folks who assess our sources of inspiration, our disturbed emotions and make it all palatable to their own minds. For sure, you do not have to be culturally tuned-up or aligned to pass verdict on poor writing. But the magic and difference of other experiences? What “peerage” can cover that territory? What is their pedigree?

Are the fictional works of the assessors adequate enough for them to be selected? Is it enough to have dark skin of any tone to be an auto-select? Is it ok to have written two short stories or one novel to be selected? Is it of consequence that a person who has taught creative writing for two decades, who has not produced a

significant body of fiction, be a best fit to be a juror on fiction?

Irrespective of the number of recognitions and awards an assessor may have, or the number of book reviews that one has cranked out, can one become comfortable in understanding the conflicts that are the engines that propel a novel forward? *And FFS*, this is not about diversity, but about studying the grains, the mud, the soil, the din, the skies that produce a separate reality. And selecting assessors or jury members to assess grant applications, never mind awards etc., could be an exercise in deeply internalizing the granularity of lives lived elsewhere. Is it an aroma or an odour?

Many Montreal cab drivers are engineers, doctors, technicians, and teachers. “But is hematology taught properly in Teheran? Have Ethiopian engineers had the exposure to finite element analysis?” It is that which is on the mind, undocumented, when making an assessment. It is the shadow of a systemic discomfort. So, what are the chances that a story about an Inuit woman, forced into sex work in Montreal and battered to death in a *ruelle*, be the focus of a story by a Punjabi writer who escaped the 1984 pogroms against Sikhs in India? Should the assessor be turned off by the context as addressed by the obscure pain in the writer’s mind?

The question is: How can someone who is singularly groomed in the contextual world of Atwood, Munro, Gallant, Joyce, Durras, Richler, or for that matter Baldwin, Coates, or Ondaatje be an automatic peer assessor for that particular emotion and the possible funding project? Those who assess must be prepared to do research and be open to assessment themselves. As in a jury trial, where both prosecution and defence interrogate the selected jurors, assessors must not be selected by friends of friends.

One clarification. I do differentiate jurors from radio and journal reviewers. Radio show hosts and a limited number of reviewers in Canada are exemplary. Some of the best radio shows on literature come out of this country — up-to-date, nuanced, and aware of others. Granularity is *de rigueur*.

That is what I mean, when I say that when each one of us stare out of our windows, to UNFOCUS, we see different things. If you do not see the UNFOCUS, you are not seeing the essence. And that is a pain.

Rana Bose has written three novels and twelve plays. His last novel, Fog, won the Miramichi Reader “Best work of fiction in Canada for 2019.” In 2016 he was awarded the Judy Mappin Community Award by the Quebec Writers’ Federation. He has been a professional engineer for over 35 years.