WRITE

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THE WRITERS' UNION OF CANADA

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FALL 2016

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Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

WRITING RETREATS /

In Defence of What We Do

BY DORA DUECK

In 2013, I attended a week-long writers' workshop at the Banff Centre. Every morning I woke up surprised to find myself still there, in that wondrous place, Mount Rundle and Cascade Mountain and other peaks looming in a magnificent circle, protecting me, but, also, challenging me to take their measure.

The weather was particularly fine that week, the days sunny, the nights a cool balm. But I was there to write, to learn, one of eight admitted for the short-fiction course, and soon after breakfast, we took our places at a large table with our instructor, Alexander MacLeod, author of the Giller-shortlisted collection *Light Lifting*. For the next three hours we workshopped story drafts submitted for the class. This turned out to be a vigorous process that demanded a careful reading of each story in advance, abundant marginalia if we wished, then a summary paragraph of response, and, distilled out of that paragraph, one sentence regarding strength and one of critique. These sentences were jotted on a white board and gathered into three points which became the outline for the workshop discussion. During that conversation, the story's author would listen in but was not allowed to speak.

Every piece got a strenuous workout. Issues that emerged were an opportunity for Alex to expound on matters such as point of view, structure, characterization, and style. Afternoons we might be booked for one-on-one consultations with him, but otherwise were free to write, hike, wander about the tourist shops of Banff, visit, or sleep. We also had to prepare our analysis of next day's texts and do rewrites for a second bout of workshopping. Evenings involved socializing or readings from participants in the literary programs running at the Centre that week.

None of this will be new, I imagine, to anyone who has done writing intensives. But this was my first such experience, though I had written for years and was published. I felt like a girl at Disney, inside a wonderful bubble. Words, writing, story took me over and nothing else seemed to exist. Our stories were handled so thoroughly I can recall details and the unique aura created by each one. The eight of us grew close in our shared quest to write better. I think we all fell a little in love, in fact, with one another and with our teacher. Paying attention and ingesting stories together fostered a powerful intimacy.

But the Disney analogy ends here: There was nothing Minnie Mouse about carefully, brutally workshopping others' writing (that is, learning to read), or being workshopped just as carefully and brutally. We all knew of course — and tried to remember — that this was where the benefit (aka love) lay.

I returned home and the Banff experience floated away from me like a pretty, magical hot air balloon.

Would anything stick with me from that thick week?

When I perused my class notes, they seemed vaguely aphoristic, lofty and judging. "Style is the miracle, not even close to being

exhausted," and "Style is difficult," that sort of thing, which I certainly believed but was not sure how to apply anew, except to keep slogging away at writing every day if I could. I would have to trust, as the program coordinator had promised, that the mass of stuff we talked about would inform my further work.

Something larger had become clear and unequivocal to me, however, a larger truth about story which motivates me still.

Our week in Banff, Alex informed us, would be about story itself, not about what happens to it in the world. In other words, we would spend every day thinking about writing completely detached from concerns related to publishing, promotion, or our individual position in author constellations.

It wasn't that the changing nature of publishing, the need to self-promote, the future of print, or possible markets was irrelevant, but all of it would be irrelevant for this entire week.

The point, he said, was to write stories worthy of the label, stories we would want to read even if our names weren't attached to them. "It's not about you," he reminded us.

"You chose the short story," he also said, "and I'm a great defender of it."

And then it was back again to how this story, or that one, could best become what it needed to be. Because, of course, it needed to be. Story matters.

Matters enormously.

To have for one solid week a convinced, persuasive, threading-through-everything defence of what we were trying to do as writers — in the story each of us had been given, as it were, and wanted to get right — while freed of those other nagging considerations, was life-giving. I had not realized until then how much I needed to revisit the why of what I do — to sink again into the foundation of vocation and call, which are the words I've claimed for my compulsion to write.

Concerns of publication and finding readers cannot be avoided, for they too are integral to writing. But they so quickly crowd in to plague my drafts and revisions with their inherent fear and uncertainty. Will this story ever find a home? And where? I know from conversations with other writers that most of us struggle with this. Unfortunately, we rarely have the time or setting to tend one another at the deeper level of purpose.

This is why mentors, retreats, workshops, and writing groups are important. An intensive writing workshop, I discovered, can be a kind of devastation (of story drafts brought along eagerly, hopefully) but mine was a devastation that took me into the heart of why I write. The story is the main thing. Its outcome is not. We serve the story, not the other way round. Which, as I look at it, is a truth as towering and wondrous as the mountains that surrounded me one week in Banff.

Dora Dueck's books include the novel This Hidden Thing *and the story collection* What You Get at Home. *"Mask," the story she workshopped at Banff, grew longer and was winner of The Malahat Review's 2014 novella contest.*

MOCKLER'S SHORT STORY WORKSHOP

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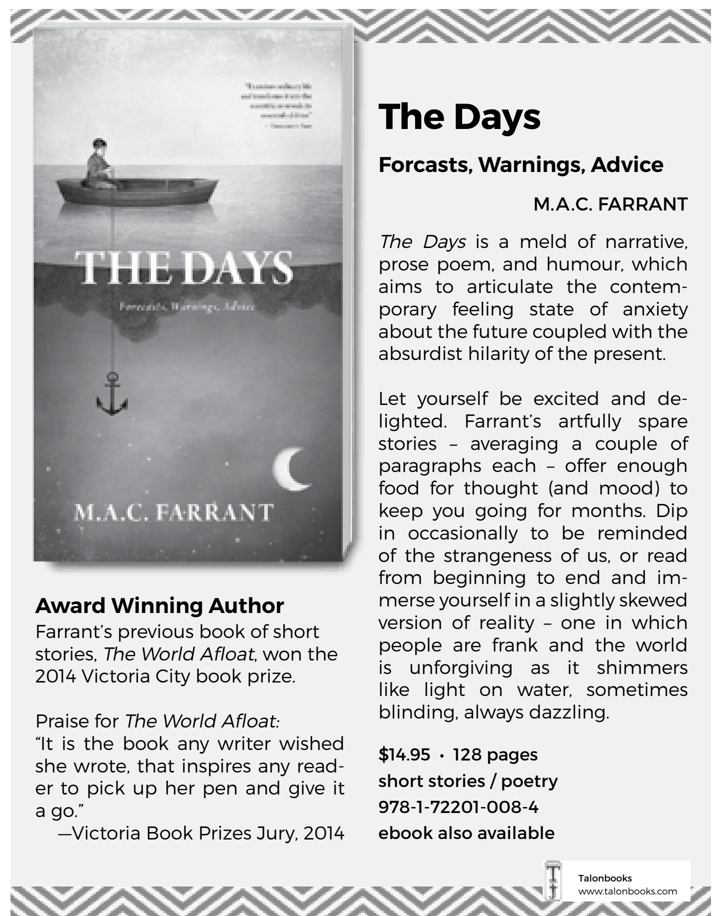


PSYCHOLOGY /

The Hardest Thing About Being a Writer

BY SACHIKO MURAKAMI

Before we get started, I'd like you to stop for a minute, open Facebook, and take a look around. Or, if you're one of those non-Facebook people (clever you), think back to the last literary event event you went to. How were all of your writer friends doing?

Chances are they were doing *great*. They may have regaled you with news of their daily word counts, or a new piece in a journal, or even a book deal. Hooray for them! Hooray for everyone! Did you like it? Did you like *everything*? How hard were you smiling? Did it hurt to smile so hard?

Here's the thing. We writers spend so much of our time promoting ourselves and our work — we have to, say our publishers; we have to, says the publishing climate. And it feels good to share in each other's writing joy, the papery fruits of our labour. We are told that in order to be more spiritually fit (and, well, likeable) we need to move towards gratitude. Count our #blessings.

Well I say, #goblessyourself. Life is hard all over, and the writing life is no exception. Over the years I have had hundreds of private conversations about the woes that come with the writing life. There are the challenges of the labour itself, trying to stay on the page when the mind is begging to crawl into a ball of cozy, Netflix-calmed failure. There's the limitations that full-time day jobs and family impose on the time and energy we have to put towards writing. There are the mental and physical health disruptions or chronic illnesses around which writing must be organized. Then there are the big problems of sexism, racism, and harassment. These things are happening. They are real. And when we don't talk about them and only talk about the best and shiniest parts of our writing lives, feelings of inferiority, isolation, shame, and self-doubt can encroach our already fragile writing spaces. Meanwhile, everyone else seems to be doing just great.

This is why I've created *The Hardest Thing About Being a Writer*, housed at writingsohard.com. Every week I post a conversation with a writer that begins with me asking them the question, "What's the hardest thing about being a writer?" and whatever happens, happens. Anita Anand, Montreal author of the award-winning *Swing in the House*, told me about how she has, like many writers, a sensitivity to the world which makes writing happen but also makes life occasionally unbearable. Daniel Zomparelli, Vancouver poet and editor (*Poetry Is Dead*), told me about the difficulty of the labour of writing. Montreal poet Laura Broadbent talked about the never-ending money hustle. Kingston children's author and poet Sarah Tsiang spoke about cultivating honesty in the writing community. Calgary poet Nikki Reimer was frank about the cost of keeping it real both online and offline.

I founded this project on the principle that bringing our struggles to light might help create a more honest writing community. Maybe by sharing our vulnerabilities and our problems, we might get some relief from them. Maybe we can even begin to overcome some of what plagues us. If that seems too overreaching or self-helpy, then at the very least we writers might see a little of our own struggle in someone else's. Sometimes that's what we need: a tiny bridge connecting us to others.

Sachiko Murakami is the author of the poetry collections The Invisibility Exhibit *(Talonbooks, 2008),* Rebuild *(Talonbooks, 2011), and* Get Me Out of Here *(Talonbooks, 2015). Visit* The Hardest Thing About Being a Writer *at writingsohard.com.*

Excerpts from *The Hardest Thing About Being a Writer*:

Anita Anand: One of the things that sucks about being a writer is that you have to make a living some other way. My job happens to be teaching English to military recruits. They are not bad people, but their interests are the opposite of mine. They have told me, for example, that they believe that empathy is a weakness, something they may have picked up in their basic training course; I don't know. They have other strengths, like courage, resilience, audacity, good team spirit, sportiness, you know, the stuff that writers don't have, or at least not in a way that is immediately obvious. (I just realized that there is a lot to argue with there, but that will have to be for another time.) In general, the people I work with have conservative political views which include a certain dismissiveness of mental health issues, a distrust of artists and their grants, as well as a distrust of any initiatives that seek to right societal wrongs. I have been having a hard time since my coming-out-as-a-writer pretending to be on their team.

Rob McLennan: There is ego, certainly: that tricky balance of having enough to manage years' worth of self-motivation before anything might actually be accomplished (the years of silence and apathy before a book might actually emerge in print) against getting a swelled head, which can often lead to interpersonal difficulties with other writers (and non-writers), and even bitterness down the road, when one doesn't achieve the attentions or accolades one expects.

Laura Broadbent: The hardest thing about writing, same with the hardest thing about living, is the mind (aka that self-sabotaging machine lodged in our skulls). I don't think I'm alone in loving to think about writing more than actually writing; like romance, the idea is so much more ideal than the clumsy, stinky, challenging, unromantic reality.

WRITERS IN EXILE /

Freedom from Machete

BY RAIHAN ABIR

It was May 12, 2015, early morning. Samia, then pregnant with our daughter Sophie, put on her bike helmet and went out of the house to check if anyone was lurking around to hack us with machetes.

"I think it's safe," she said, and we left for our workplaces taking different routes through the Bangladesh capital of Dhaka, the city of over 15 million where we lived. I was going to Dhaka University, where I was doing my PhD in biomedical engineering, and Samia was on her way to a bank where she worked as an architect.

We'd been living in fear for several months by then, ever since we found out that militants had been trying to kill me on account of my writings on atheism and freethinking, and for my active involvement in the secular and progressive movement. I was afraid to go to the police because it was hard to trust them; they could leak my information to the extremists. On advice from a doctor friend, Samia and I resorted to wearing bike helmets to guard against machete attacks.

In late February of 2015, Avijit Roy, the founder of the freethinking blog *Mukto-mona*, and his wife, Bonya Ahmed, a science writer, were visiting Dhaka to attend the Bangla Book Fair where two of Avijit's latest books were being featured. We wanted to share the news of Sophie's impending arrival with them and invited them for dinner at our house on February 27. I even told Avijit that we were going to have biryani since it was his favorite food. But the dinner was not to be. On the evening of February 26, while leaving the book fair, Al-Qaeda-backed Islamic extremists attacked both of them with machetes. Avijit lost his life; Bonya survived with four head injuries. Avijit never got to know about our little Sophie.

In 2011, Avijit and I co-wrote a book in Bengali on atheism titled *The Philosophy of Disbelief*. In the book, we argued that God, as defined by the major religions in the world, if examined logically and scientifically, could never exist. We showed that although religion naturally emerged as a result of our journey to find answers about our existence, its role is exhausted as we have developed rational and scientific methods to inquire about the universe and life within it. Our editor, Ananta Bijoy Das, was able to capture our motivation in writing the book. His comment on the flap of our book reads, "*The Philosophy of Disbelief*, written by Avijit Roy and Raihan Abir, is a must-read for Bengali-speaking skeptics, agnostics, atheists, humanists, and above all, for all the free thinkers. Filled with modern scientific discoveries and data, this book shows the hope of building a secular, humane Bangladesh free from blind faith, superstition, man-made class, race, and division."

On May 12, 2015, I arrived at my workplace at the university. As I took the sweat-soaked helmet off my head and stood in front of the air cooler, the phone rang. It was a call from Farzana Rupa, a senior journalist at Channel 71. "Raihan, Ananta Bijoy Das was murdered today on his way to office," she said. It was hard to believe our beloved Ananta Bijoy Das was gone just like that. I saw him last on February 28, standing in the lobby of Square Hospital where Bonya was fighting against death in the ICU. No visitors were allowed to see her, yet Ananta came running from the northeastern part of Bangladesh.

Still stunned by the phone call, I picked up the receiver again and dialled Bonya who was now living in the U.S. She answered and urged me to leave the country immediately. Despite the life risk, I never had the desire to leave the country. Just before the assassination of Avijit Roy, I had lost my younger sibling in an accident; my entire family was in shock and mourning. Besides, Samia was pregnant with our daughter. But on that day, I left home, took shelter at a friend's office, disengaged my regular telephone line, and stopped going to the university on my professor's recommendation.

At the time of his murder, Ananta had been trying to leave the country. The Swedish Embassy had only just declined a visa application to attend a conference in that country because they feared he would seek shelter in Sweden; he was murdered one week later. Learning from this, I was very careful when I applied to attend a conference in Toronto. I was careful not to show the Canadian Embassy my insecurity. The Canadian Embassy granted me a visa and I set out for Toronto on June 4, leaving behind my pregnant spouse, my folks, my family, my companions, and my motherland.

When I got to Canada, I saw the whole world in one country. The example of Canada shows that a multicultural society can be successful and peaceful. It is what all countries should be like: tolerant, inclusive, and respectful of people's rights. I felt accepted from the very first day. As I settled into my new life, I started to notice that public debates here — like the recent discussion on euthanasia — are based on facts and reasons. Religions coexist with a secular society. On paper, Bangladesh has these ideas, but, in fact, people's right to dissent, especially with respect to religion, is met with harsh penalties.

When I left Bangladesh I wasn't sure when I would be reunited with my family, but thanks to efforts of my many new friends, my wife was able to join me within two months. Sophie was born soon after in Toronto. She is now one-year old; her sweet and innocent smile fills our hearts with joy and helps us forget all the trials and tribulations that we faced. Both Samia and I have lost so much already. Samia lost her beloved father and I lost my precious younger brother in the mayhem of Bangladesh. We have lost our friends, the ones we worked with, talked with, and shared life with, because of meaningless murders. Even though we lost so much, we never felt hatred towards any group of people because of what we experienced. We are in a situation where the darkness of religion is shredding us, but please know that this darkness can only be won by shining the light of knowledge and reason. No matter how many hands pick up machetes, they won't be able to kill the light of knowledge.

Raihan Abir is a Bangladeshi writer and scholar in exile. He now lives in Toronto where he continues to edit Mukto-mona*, a bilingual English-Bengali website and blog dedicated to freethinking and science.*

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.

ADVICE /

Carry the Peace in Your Heart: A Writer Advises the Graduates of Northern Lights College

BY CAROLINE WOODWARD

On June 3, 2016, in Dawson Creek, BC, Northern Lights College conferred an honorary associate of arts degree on Caroline Woodward, who then gave the keynote address to the graduates of 2016. The College acknowledged Caroline, who was raised on a homestead in Cecil Lake, BC, for her "distinguished national and international reputation as a writer for adults and children." Below is an edited version of the speech she delivered.

Thank you, Northern Lights College, for this great personal and professional honour today where we have primarily gathered to commend and applaud the hard work and sacrifices of the graduates and their families. Thank you for the generosity and enduring patience of the Treaty 8 First Nations and the Kelly Lake Cree Nation on whose territory the beautiful buildings, the classrooms, labs, and workshops of this college are built in the key cities of the North and South Peace region.

When I attended the two- and later three-room Transpine School in Cecil Lake, I did not read about our own rivers, our lakes, or our own wide sky, or about the First Nations who have lived here for at least ten thousand years or the European immigrants, like my parents from Holland and Wales, who toiled as homesteaders on this northern prairie. I devoured the books that came in the bookmobile two or three times a year with pioneer librarian Howard Overend at the wheel of what was, to me, a truly Magic Bus, a bus that Mr. Overend named Parnassus, for the sacred mountain peak in Greece, the mythical home of poetry and literature.

I knew in my child's heart and mind that our rural lives were every bit as interesting, and as important to read about as the stories of children in England and America and, somewhere along the line, as I wrote songs and plays for my school friends and I to perform, I resolved to write books about our forgotten lives in this often-overlooked part of the world, then proudly claimed as Canada's most northerly agricultural breadbasket, and today treated as an industrial sacrifice zone for the rest of this province.

When I was a high school student I wrote a weekly news column for the *Alaska Highway News*. For two years, I learned the golden rules of journalism: spell everyone's name correctly, get the facts straight from the original source, find a second source with expertise in the subject to corroborate if my BS radar is waggling wildly, and always be inclusive and generous because every individual, every club and team, and every issue of concern in the community matters deeply to someone. Later still, at the University of British Columbia, far from home where I went for my post-secondary education long before these first-class facilities were built in the Peace, I learned not to be afraid to question authority or anyone else. And to back up my curiosity with solid research. In other words, do my homework and consult with others because, as the brilliant Joni Mitchell sings, "Two heads are better than one."

Writing as an occupation is as hard or worse than farming as our products are both subject to the vagaries of markets and world events beyond our control. Inexorable trends and technological changes inevitably mean that what may have worked once will not work as well ever again. So we must be humble and alert to the signs and change our ways. Adapt. Albert Einstein said, "The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know." Great science and great art spring from experiment, from trying the so-called impossible. His wise words can also be interpreted to mean: Listen, observe, ask questions, be open-minded and tolerant of other points of view en route to creating a better world together.

If we choose to work at what we love, we will love our work for

The Useful Book Reviewer: A Practical Guide to Writing Little Works of Art

BY GEORGE FETHERLING

When people write columns or give talks on the subject of literary journalism they like to quote the only known example of George Orwell's sense of humour, an essay called "Confessions of a Book Reviewer."

In it, Orwell draws a picture of a poor bedraggled and overworked freelance reviewer who trembles as he opens a parcel from one of his regular book-page editors. The package, writes Orwell, contains the following titles: "*Palestine at the Cross Roads, Scientific Dairy Farming,* A *Short History of European Democracy* (this one 680 pages and weighs four pounds), *Tribal Customs in Portuguese East Africa*, and a novel, *It's Nicer Lying Down*, probably included by mistake." An accompanying note states that the editor needs an 800-word roundup by tomorrow afternoon.

Over the course of many years I've been on both sides of this comedy. Sometimes I've been the weekly or monthly reviewer, in some cases for a decade or more at one publication or another. At other times I've performed as the crazed editor, hounding people to meet their deadlines so I could remediate their grammar while also phoning frantically all over town to wrangle the seven new books on René Lévesque (or whatever the topic du jour might have been). Here is some carefully distilled advice related to both functions.

The most useful reviewers, from the standpoints of both the editor and the audience, are those who have been lifelong readers of serious popular books: neither academic nor unintelligent. This is especially true of adult fiction, history, and biography. The editor who has two or three such desirable people in captivity is likely to use them often, so long as they produce fine prose.

The most common fault of amateur or apprentice reviewers is that they simply offer their personal opinions, as though taking part in Yelp! or Expedia. No one cares whether you "like" a book that is "good" or "dislike" one that is "bad." Such pronouncements aren't analytical. They're not even descriptive, but simply childish. You should exercise judgement by, for example, comparing the book to the author's other works or comparing the author to other writers on the subject — and, most of all, by writing about the book's ideas rather than simply synopsizing the plot or the thesis.

Using book reviews to provoke anger or settle old scores is contemptible. Some book-page editors, especially those who have been plucked off the news desk as a reward or a punishment,

encourage such behaviour. (A random example from my own past. Many years ago I wrote a short book comparing Taiwan under dictatorship to its new life under its own frenetic kind of democracy. The *Toronto Star* gave it to a staff member who had previously worked on the *China Daily*, the house organ of the Communist Party in Beijing.) Equally odious is the practice of repeatedly assigning reviews of a particular writer's work to one of his or her real or presumptive enemies, a baiting and bullying that sometimes goes on for years. I can think of one reviewer who reviews *only* books by a particular author he dislikes.

Both reviewers and their editors should avoid clichés the size of hailstones. One should never use the word *tome* unless one is writing in French about a work in more than one volume. One should never call a writer a wordsmith, a scribe, or a scribbler. One should never use *read* as a noun, as in "It's a good summer read." In fact, one should never give in to the notion, depressingly common among newspaper editors, that people read books only during the summer — as distinct from Christmas when we apparently do not read books, but merely buy them as gifts.

Perhaps most of all, a frequent reviewer should learn to be patient, a truth that I needed years to absorb. Here are some real-life examples of what one must put up with sometimes.

One Canadian editor ordered me not to review books by Black people. I know this is hard to believe, but it happened only twenty or so years ago. I immediately began collecting all the examples I could find of interesting new books by people of African heritage. I waited patiently for the bigot in question to be replaced (not long afterwards, thankfully) and reviewed them in bundles as soon as I could.

From the opposite point of view, there are contributors who drive their editors to madness by, for example, presuming that the deadlines they're given are somehow flexible. I had a prospective reviewer who begged to write about a new biography of an important nineteenth-century figure. I agreed that it deserved a significant amount of space on the page. He missed the deadline twice but finally turned in a drastically too long piece consisting of a single sentence of his own followed by a miles-long direct quotation from the text. When I turned it down, he complained to my employers, threatened to circulate a petition, and (fortunately) never spoke to me again. One could go on.

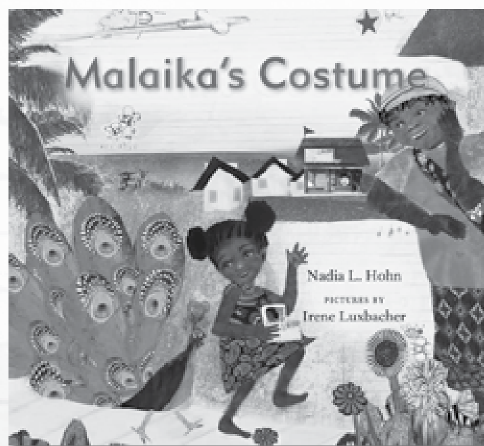
"A review is a little work of art in tribute to a larger work of art." The quotation is attributed to many people including Oscar Wilde. It sounds rather pompous, of course, but it brings up a useful point. Namely, that individuals who review well usually enjoy reading other people's reviews, new or old. What they're looking for is what members of the readership are seeking as well. Reviews are journalism of a sort in that they are topical and transient. Long ones should aspire to some of the qualities of an essay while shorter ones should be masterpieces of concision that nevertheless discuss the book's content and find its hidden ideas.

For what it's worth, here are some of the writers whose reviews I can always reread with pleasure, old age (the reviewers', not mine) be damned. Virginia Woolf's reviews, as collected in such volumes as *The Common Reader*, *The Second Common Reader*, *Books & Portraits*, and *Granite & Rainbow*, are timeless examples of how to proceed. The ambitious works of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, are a little creaky by now but excellent of their type, as are those of his contemporary J.C. (later Sir John) Squire. Two justifiably coveted collections of reviews are *The Coat of Many Colours* (1945) and *The Tenth Muse* (1957) by Sir Herbert Read, who was better known as a visual art explainer. If I had to name an American I would select Wilfrid Sheed, author of *The Morning After* and other works, who died in 2011. He was an expat Englishman (his parents owned the publishing house Sheed and Ward) who mastered the diction of American-style reviewing.

My favourite book about book-reviewing is *An Almost English Life* (2012) by Miriam Gross, who was at various times the literary editor of three British broadsheets, *The Observer*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Sunday Telegraph*. It reveals a great deal about a review editor's difficult professional life. A perfect companion volume to it is *The Rise & Fall of the Man of Letters* (1968) by her late husband, John Gross, who was the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*. I rang him up one day to ask if we might have a drink. The TLS office was in a slightly desolate area at the time, and as we stepped off the curb, obviously headed to the pub that stood all alone on the opposite side of the street, I attempted to make small talk. "Ah," I said, "so that must be the TLS local, eh." He glared at me for using such a working-class term. I could hear him thinking "bloody colonial." I think he was giving me a negative review.

George Fetherling is currently chair of The Writers' Union of Canada. His next novel, The Carpenter from Montreal, *will appear in 2017.*

IT'S CARNIVAL TIME



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