

# WRITE

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# How Writers Can Deliver a Powerful, Shocking Blast of Reality

BY HAL NIEDZVIECKI

*Former MP Andrew Cash talks about the new Urban Workers Project*

## What is the Urban Workers Project?



It's a new national initiative to raise the issues and the voices of freelancers and self-employed workers; those that have no access to a workplace pension, no benefits, and no job security. We want to bring the issues of this "sector" of the workforce more urgently into the public debate around work, workers' rights, and precarious work. The Urban Worker Project (UWP) seeks to be a space, both virtual and real, for independent workers to gather and discuss their issues. And most importantly, we want to organize issue-based campaigns that can bring

political and policy changes that will improve the work lives of urban workers.

## How do book writers fit in to the organization?

Book writers are classic "urban workers" cobbling a living together doing a variety of things without the security of a pension, health and dental benefits, income security measures like EI, parental or compassionate leave, paid sick days, etc. So the voice of professional book writers could be a very key one for the project.

## What are some of the UWP proposals that might help writers?

Income averaging is a policy change that could be beneficial to many in the arts. We'll also be looking for ways to deliver programs like parental and compassionate leave to those who don't have traditional employee/employer relationships. We will be pushing to ensure that public policy, especially with respect to arts and cultural industries, is seen through the lens of precarious work

and how artists and creators actually make a living. Our first campaign puts the focus on fairness for freelance and contract workers.

## TWUC has been advocating for things like income averaging for a long time with little success. How will UWP get results?

My experience in Parliament is that you are most effective when you have a strong collective voice behind you. One of the key elements of the Urban Workers Project is bringing people from very wide and diverse groups of workers together and then building campaigns that can bring change. I believe this sector can be a powerful force, and UWP will help its voice be heard.

## What can the members of TWUC do?

Practically, Writers' Union members can join up with us on our website for starters. I would also urge writers to begin, if they haven't already, to consider their "workplace" issues in a broader context. Writers' pay has fallen over the last thirty years like most other workers and largely for the same reasons — globalization, the rapid growth of technology, and neoliberal ideology, which has massively shifted wealth to those who already have it while starving the public sector. Writers can play a significant role in raising the public awareness and understanding of these issues much like some doctors are doing. Notwithstanding the low pay, writers occupy an important, elevated place in the public arena. Writers, like all artists, have a lot of unspent political capital.

## We are Canada's storytellers. As such, I'm wondering how you see our role in telling the story of income disparity and precarious employment. Is Canada ready for novels and stories about the plight of the new urban worker?

Absolutely! In Shawn Micallef's book *The Trouble With Brunch*, he references Bob Cratchit, the hard done by employee of Scrooge, as being a "knowledge worker" of his time. It never occurred to me to make that link before, and I think it is in part because we have excluded certain kinds of work from our traditional and cultural conceptions of what work is. Most songs and stories about workers tend to focus on the factory worker, the farmer, the miner, the manual labourer, etc. But of course a writer is a worker. So is a bartender, a barber, a web designer, a bank teller, a singer, and so on. We need stories, songs, plays, and films about the struggle to survive today working three part-time jobs, having a university degree, and the "look" of middle-class stability, but being one bike crash away from the financial abyss. I think we need to tell the truth about how precarious so many of our lives are. And when we do — as Neal Gabler has in the most recent issue of *The Atlantic* under the headline "The Secret Shame of Middle-Class Americans" — it is a powerful and shocking blast of reality. We need more of this.

EDITING /

## Remembering Ellen Seligman

BY ELIZABETH HAY

*Ellen Seligman, the legendary editor and publisher at McClelland & Stewart, died in Toronto on March 25. Elizabeth Hay remembers her.*

I hear her unmistakable voice on the line, strong, weary, flat, relentless, ready for laughter, endlessly diagnosing, questioning, solving. Sometimes she would pause to chew almonds or salad and occasionally there were breaks, not for gossip exactly but for juicy talk. Since we both loved movies and detailed reports of illness, she often talked about both. Then it was back to the work at hand, how to make the manuscript better.

I once joked that she should get half my royalties, but she would have none of that. Similarly, she bridled when I said she was a wonderful teacher. She did not see herself that way at all. Teacher or not, this is what I learned from her.

I learned how infernally complicated it is to sustain for three hundred pages the story you've set in motion. "A novel is not a short story," she told me. "Think subplot." How important it is not to rush to the end and not to rush the end itself. Not to assume that I knew what she meant by those nearly illegible scribbles in the margin, but to ask her until I really understood; there was always some weakness,



inconsistency, missed opportunity that she had seen and I had not.

She protected me from myself and she protected my characters too. When a writer is cranky, tired, depressed, or lazy, it's easy to be impatient or flippant on the page. She would say when we were editing *Late Nights on Air*, for instance, that she didn't think Dido would say this, or Gwen would do this, or if she did, the ground needed to be better prepared. Look at what's there, she said of that draft, and see what doesn't lead anywhere. Set that aside and deepen the rest. Dialogue has to contribute to complication. Something has to happen to change the world for these characters. What happens will then set the ending in motion.

The telephone would ring, Mark would answer it. "It's your girlfriend," he would say, and I would break into a sweat. It's possible Ellen didn't know how intimidating she was, since the time I confessed I was quaking in my boots she thought I was joking. Usually three hours lay before me of holding the receiver to my aching ear. I know of others whose telephone marathons

with her went much longer, but I had my self-preserving limits.

My state of mind in her telephone presence was an intense combination of dread and exhilaration, dread that I would never be able to fix the problems she pointed out, and exhilaration at having the chance to revisit the manuscript, fuelled by her insights, and make it better.

She had enormous forbearance. About three months into the long editing of my first novel, *A Student of Weather*, we reached an impasse. None of my revisions of the final half satisfied her and I didn't know what to do, except to believe the book was better than she said it was. So I dug in my heels. I sat down and reread the manuscript from start to finish in a rebellious mood only to realize she was right: halfway through it stalled. The next time we spoke, she was briskly relieved and asked me how I felt, and I said sick with panic. "Good," she said. "It's the overconfident authors who are in real trouble."

Isaac Babel tells a story about the origin of badly made things in *You Must Know Everything*. No one, he says, starts out with the intention of doing a poor job, of making a bad lock, for instance, but people lose heart "and instead of overcoming some snag

or other (and all work consists in overcoming snags)," they decide that it will do as it is. This is the reason, he says, for "the preposterous, ugly, and stupid things, which make our lives a misery." Ellen was always working, working, working to prevent another ugly thing from going out into the world, and pushing, pushing, pushing her authors to do the same.

In my experience she was private, discreet, not out for praise but wounded if she was not appreciated, funny about her idiosyncrasies, always in charge. She had a staggering wardrobe, a *New Yorker's* stride, an aggressive hand on the steering wheel, a formidably indecisive-decisive way with a wine list or a menu, and stamina to burn.

She was more than hands on, she was elbows deep. A tireless editor, yes, but also a serious businesswoman, a publisher who was tremendously ambitious for her books and her authors and worked tenaciously to make those books known around the world. She was magnificent. There is no other word.

*Elizabeth Hay is the Giller Prize-winning author of books including Late Nights on Air and Alone in the Classroom.*

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# Diversity and Identity: A Panel Discussion on Race and Writing



Farzana Doctor



Carrienne Leung



Lee Maracle



Vivek Shraya

Held at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, this panel generated plenty of debate and opinion. Here are the highlights.

**JUDY REBICK:** All of you are what I would call politically active in one way or another. You're activists of some sort or another. Does it shape your voice? Does it affect your writing? And, if so, how?

**LEE MARACLE:** I think everything we do affects the writing. What you care about has to show up somehow. And you're active around things you care about. Nobody goes out, say for the environment, because they feel obligated — they go out because they care.

I was just reading the other day that Toronto had this massive funeral for the Don River in 1969. And the Don River is still such a polluted river. That's terrible. So I decided that's going to be part of this novel I'm working on.

And then my friend died. I'm sixty-five, the average Indian lives to be sixty-six, so don't get all upset that my friend's died — I've had lots of friends die this year. But anyway he was a tremendously tricky fellow and a storyteller and full of humour so I went, oh my God, I'm going to put you in this story, and then the story takes off.

And then I have this guy that's dead following me in my dreams. That was an invitation to weirdness that I probably will regret when I'm done, but there you go.

**FARZANA DOCTOR:** In terms of politics, I agree. We all care about something and it finds its way in. Our voices find their way into fiction. And it can feel sometimes like a constraint because you know your character might not have the same values as you and still you have to write that character from a really authentic place. So sometimes I do worry, like, oh, I'm going to write this character and they're going to do this terrible thing or behave in this terrible way, and those aren't my values — what's that going to be like?

On the other hand if you have an agenda, and I have had agendas with each of my books, it can sometimes be difficult to write in a non-didactic kind of way. So with *All Inclusive*, I wanted to talk a little bit about some of the realities of all-inclusive resorts and the inequalities and all of that, but I didn't want to tell that — I

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# “The more I make art the more I feel like my job as an artist is to constantly complicate the narrative.”

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wanted to show that and I wanted to show it as background, so that readers would get a sense of that without me putting it out there as a political agenda.

Now you all know that it's a political agenda.

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** I think just the fact that we are here and we are writers, writers of colour and Aboriginal writers, is itself political. And I think that shapes how we read, how we write. For me, when I released my novel, I felt very conscious of how I'd be taken up. Will I be called the Chinese Canadian writer, will I just be called a writer, and how will that voice come across?

It took me many years to come to a point where I'm doing what I always wanted to do, to be a writer. I had to really go through the ways in which my own experiences have been translated through racism and colonisation. And it took me having a PhD and studying race sociologically for a long time in order to ground myself into understanding what is the voice that resonates? What is the voice that I can feel is more real — for lack of a better word — than all these layers of translation that I've had in my life so that I'm readable?

So ultimately it is all political. The stories themselves, I mean. I want to be able to represent stories of people of colour in their complexities, in their fullness, as much as I can without creating the caricatures that I've seen shown to me.

**FARZANA DOCTOR:** How do you feel about being called a Chinese Canadian author versus just an author?

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** I understand when that is useful in the sense that there is a market for how my book gets sold. And I'm proud of the fact that I am a Chinese Canadian writer. But I also want to know what's behind that. Who is calling me that and when and how is that being positioned? Because that matters. It matters in how the story gets read, how I'm taken up. And so those are political positionings.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Similar to all of you, I can't separate the politics from the art, especially as a person of colour and being queer. And the more people are interested in my work, the more I feel a kind of responsibility, too, which sometimes does feel constraining because if I was white what could I write about? But at the same

time, the more I make art the more I feel like my job as an artist is to constantly complicate the narrative in whatever way. As a South-Asian, how do I complicate that narrative? As a queer person, how do I complicate what queer looks like? In terms of gender, how do I complicate what gender looks like?

**JUDY REBICK:** When you say complicate, you mean get away from the stereotypes?

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Yeah. How do I push what normative ideas of gender or sexuality or race or religion look like? You know my first book was called *God Loves Hair* and it was about a queer South-Asian boy that finds comfort in his religion. For me, it was about pushing that narrative and saying, actually, queerness and faith can coexist.

**JUDY REBICK:** So do you second-guess yourself once you've written something and then feel accountable to a community?

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** Oh yeah, constantly, constantly.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** This moment — right now.

**LEE MARACLE:** I think it gives us little neurotic ticks, like I carry a manuscript around for three to six months, depending on the neurosis, before I give it to anybody.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Why do you carry it around, if you don't mind me asking?

**LEE MARACLE:** Well it's the perfect baby, right?

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** You don't have to change its diapers?

**LEE MARACLE:** No, I don't have to change its diaper and everything it says is what I put there. So that's an easy baby, yeah. But the responsibility is the thing I think I actually manage to get away from. It's not that I feel responsible for my work. My nation, by the way, has honoured me several times for my good words but not in the beginning. There was a lot of resistance to it at first — “Why are you telling that about us? Everybody now thinks we're a bunch of sickos.”

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** When I'm writing, I try not to think of an audience at all. I just want to be in companionship with my characters and it's only after the book comes out, then it has a life of its own.

**JUDY REBICK:** Do you show your work to people as you're working on it?

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** It takes me a while before I feel like it's ready to show people. I do have a lot of anxiety about sharing it. One of the things that came up working with my editor for *The Wondrous Woo* was the translation of Cantonese words. That gave me a lot of heartache. I really didn't want to. I felt like it interrupted the flow.

**JUDY REBICK:** The editor wanted you to translate.

**LEE MARACLE:** That's right, they want you to translate. Nobody translated English for me, from my language. And I don't know about you, what school you went to, but I'm sure it was in English. We all have different languages and ours don't warrant any translation from theirs.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** I also think the translations fall short. I always think about Sanskrit words and how beautiful they are. I mean I like using English but there are words in Sanskrit that you can't translate — you can translate them but they just don't encompass the feeling, the heart in those words.

**JUDY REBICK:** So do you fight to keep the words and not translate them?


**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** Some of them I did fight for, some of them I translated. I still don't know how I feel about that. It sits uneasily with me.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** It really depends. One thing that I do take issue with is a glossary. I'm kind of just like, look it up on the internet. So for me it was about choosing the words where I felt I couldn't translate. *Sadana* is this beautiful Indian word that means discipline, but even discipline robs it of its emotion, so I just left it as *sadana* and I wouldn't translate it.

**LEE MARACLE:** It comes from the biblical disciple which is not a discipline.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Right. So it really depends on the context. Whereas there's another section where there's a song, a Hindu verse, and there I was like, I'm just going to include what it means.

**LEE MARACLE:** If it's a non-fiction, I'll write so that it's clear, but



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like the word is being set up, not like it's being translated. There's a word we have, *yo-ote*, and it means thought-feel. In *Memory Serves* I get into an explanation of how different we are in terms of presentation of an idea. We don't have a way to present an idea all by itself. It has to pass through your heart, and you have to think-feel it and you don't have a word in English like that. When we say *yo-ote* it means the word is felt right in the throat — there's a lump in my throat that the word brings up — and then we can go from there because then you have to consider the person who is doing the speaking when you're speaking about that, or the character in your story or whatever it is. But you don't have that in English so I have to write around that. It took me three pages to create the context for being able to see what that word means.

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** In *The Wondrous Woo* I play with ideas about madness and the cultural context of what madness is. I broke it down into the different words we have for madness in Cantonese because there are more ways than just saying you're crazy. There are all kinds of crazy, right?

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** One of the things I've really learned in my limited experience as a writer is not to underestimate the reader. I think sometimes we really want to hand-hold the reader, or the publisher feels like we need to hand-hold the reader, but there are so many texts that we come into as readers where we don't know what's happening and it's kind of exciting and it's nice thinking about what a reader might find in that. Don't underestimate the reader.

**LEE MARACLE:** There's a lot of stuff in my language you can't look up. It's just not on the net, we're not a big enough language. There are only 2700 of us so, you know, Google doesn't care. But everybody else has to earn the understanding from any story. It doesn't matter whether it's your language or someone else's, you have to earn an understanding from it. And people that go to read books don't go expecting the writer to carry a little daisy apron and serve the understanding. But they do when it comes to people of colour.

**JUDY REBICK:** So you think there's a double standard?

**LEE MARACLE:** I think so.

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** I'd agree with that.

**JUDY REBICK:** So does everybody agree that when it comes to fiction there's a double standard, that you're held to a higher standard as people of colour?

**LEE MARACLE:** It's not higher, it's actually lower in the end.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Not to belabour the point but I try to pay attention

to other writers of colour that are having a lot of success because it is still unusual in the literary world. So I look at someone like Junot Diaz and his work. It's really dense and there are so many footnotes and so many words that aren't translated and thousands of people are buying that book and getting into that book.

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** It's like if we're not readable enough then they're not going to read it, but that's underestimating who our readership is.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** Exactly.

**JUDY REBICK:** There are a lot of outside forces that are impacting on you. One of them is the publisher, and especially now because publishers are — in order to survive, I guess — getting more and more commercial. So how do you experience that?

**LEE MARACLE:** Editors and publishers are a part of the writing craft that is different from us. They're different, and they're educated differently. They're like the sidewalk, really, between us and the readership. What they've studied is how to manoeuvre through language so that the reader falls into the story and doesn't fall out of it. That's their job. Now some of them are good at it and some of them are not.

When George Elliott Clark was working on his book that won the GG, he said to me, "How do you convince your editor that it has to be said this way?" I said, "Well first of all, I try to say it his way, whatever that is." And he said, "You do?" And I said, "Yes, I do. Because he's an editor, he's a different part of the craft." It's sort of like the director as opposed to the writer in a play. You let the director direct. You let the editor edit. But if it can't be changed then you have to have ten pages of very persuasive text ready to arm yourself with.

**FARZANA DOCTOR:** I have had a really good experience and so I have felt comforted. There is so much that you can't notice on your own when you're working on your book for the number of years that I work on a book. You get a bit lost. And so when I have an editor saying oh, this structural thing might be better like this, I'm really relieved. I'm like, oh, you caught the thing that I couldn't see for years. But it is hard, and I do agree with you that there is a different skill set.

I was thinking a little bit about my agent who suggested that I get rid of the prologue I had to *All Inclusive*. She was like, "You've got to get rid of that. I can't sell the book if you keep that prologue," and she was really adamant about it. I loved the prologue but I had to think about what she was saying about how what my intention was may not be working, so I went with it. I just thought, okay, you know, she has an expertise in selling books and I'm going to give up my faith towards that and I will drop that one page.

## Applications for the FALL SESSIONS in the 2016/17 funding year open this summer

### NATIONAL PUBLIC READINGS PROGRAM

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts

- This program is open to eligible TWUC members for public readings taking place across Canada Sept. 1, 2016 – March 31, 2017. Applications must be submitted by the host.
- Through this program, authors are paid a \$250 reading fee and reimbursed up to \$300 in travel expenses for a full (solo) reading. Authors are paid half of the above for a half (joint) reading.
- Funding is limited and allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Applications must be received at least four weeks in advance of the reading date. Administrative fee of \$79.10 (full reading) or \$39.55 (half-reading) must be paid at time of application.



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### WRITERS-IN-THE-SCHOOL PROGRAM

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- This program is open to eligible TWUC members for visits taking place in Ontario-based schools Sept. 1, 2016 – March 31, 2017. Applications must be submitted by the host school.
- Through this program, the Union subsidizes a portion of the author's fee. Authors are paid \$150 for a full-day and \$100 for a half-day visit, and are reimbursed up to \$250 in travel expenses for a full-day and \$125 for a half-day.
- Ontario-based schools are eligible to receive funding for one funded visit per funding year (April 1 – March 31). Union members are eligible to receive funding for 6 full-day or 12 half-day visits per funding year.
- Applications must be received at least four weeks in advance of the visit date. Funding is limited and allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.



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For more information about the Union's granting programs,  
please visit [www.writersunion.ca/content/programs](http://www.writersunion.ca/content/programs)

**JUDY REBICK:** If you're working with an editor from a different culture, does that affect the way in which you feel they're editing your book?

**CARRIANNE LEUNG:** I think I've been kind of lucky that both my editors have had some kind of cultural confidence around South-Asian culture. I think that has helped a bit. Though there was this one really silly moment with my first book. There's a kind of pop in India called Thums Up — it's Thums, there's no B — and she kept wanting to add the B.

**FARZANA DOCTOR:** It's not so much culture per se as it is the experience of a history of marginalization and racism. It's just a painful thing to have to explain what this experience is. Whereas for maybe a white person that is an invisible experience. So my anxieties come from that in working with anybody on the manuscripts.

**VIVEK SHRAYA:** I feel like I'm pretty fortunate. My publisher is a person of colour which I think is really rare in the Canadian publishing industry. There have been issues that have come up but there's not the same kind of vulnerability I think I would have felt if he was white.

*The above conversation is excerpted from a panel recorded at Toronto's Harbourfront centre in the fall. The event was a collaboration between the International Festival of Authors, the Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), and TWUC.*

*Farzana Doctor is a novelist and registered social worker in private practice. All Inclusive (Dundurn Press) was released in Fall 2015.*

*Carrienne Leung is a fiction writer and educator who lives in Toronto. The Wondrous Woo was released by Inanna Publications in 2013 and was nominated for the Toronto Book Award in 2014.*

*Lee Maracle has been published in anthologies and scholarly journals worldwide, and is the author of a number of critically acclaimed novels and works of nonfiction. She was born in North Vancouver and is a member of the Stó:lō Nation.*

*Judy Rebick (moderator) is a well-known feminist, social justice activist, writer, educator, and speaker. Her books include Occupy This!; Transforming Power: From the Personal to the Political; Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution; and Imagine Democracy.*

*Vivek Shraya is a Toronto-based artist, musician, and writer. A three-time Lambda Literary Award finalist, Vivek's debut novel, She of the Mountains, was named one of The Globe and Mail's Best Books of 2014.*

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# Fiction

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## Great Nephew

BY DEVON CODE

Fritz, who owned the tanning salon, was the grandson of the half-brother of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, who was so famously misanthropic. His genealogical connection with the famous nihilist writer, however tenuous, was a source of tremendous pride for Fritz. This is why Fritz was always in such a good mood, so overwhelmingly cheerful, with never an unkind word to say about anyone.

## Gulag Causeways

BY DEVON CODE

Quentin's dissertation constituted what he would describe at parties as an extraordinarily intricate network of gulag causeways, the great Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* only being readily accessible, according to Quentin, if one could traverse, on dry land so to speak, from one island to another, these gulag causeways being no less controversial than the *Archipelago* itself, loathed as they were by what Quentin referred to as literary mariners, who alleged that the causeways proved an impediment to what the mariners referred to as waterbound navigation, not to mention the backlash he, Quentin, faced from the so-called cultural environmental protectionists, who tirelessly campaigned against what they understood as the threat the construction of the causeways served to the uniquely delicate archipelago ecosystem that Solzhenitsyn had created.

PHOTO: MIRIAM LOPEZ

## Preliminaries

BY DEVON CODE

She would begin, she announced in the introduction, by making some preliminary observations. She then proceeded at length until 437 pages had elapsed without her ever having posited her first formal point, which, in retrospect, her readers invariably realized, she had not only eluded to in her opening remarks, but had expounded upon at length, and even related to a number of subsequent points which were equally well developed and tied together in a conclusion, all of which she'd cleverly accomplished under the guise of her preliminaries.

*Devon Code is the author of In A Mist, a collection of stories. In 2010 he was the recipient of the Journey Prize. Involuntary Bliss, his debut novel, will be published by BookThug in fall 2016. Originally from Dartmouth, N.S., he lives in Peterborough, Ont.*