

WRITE

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**Writing for
the Reluctant
Reader**

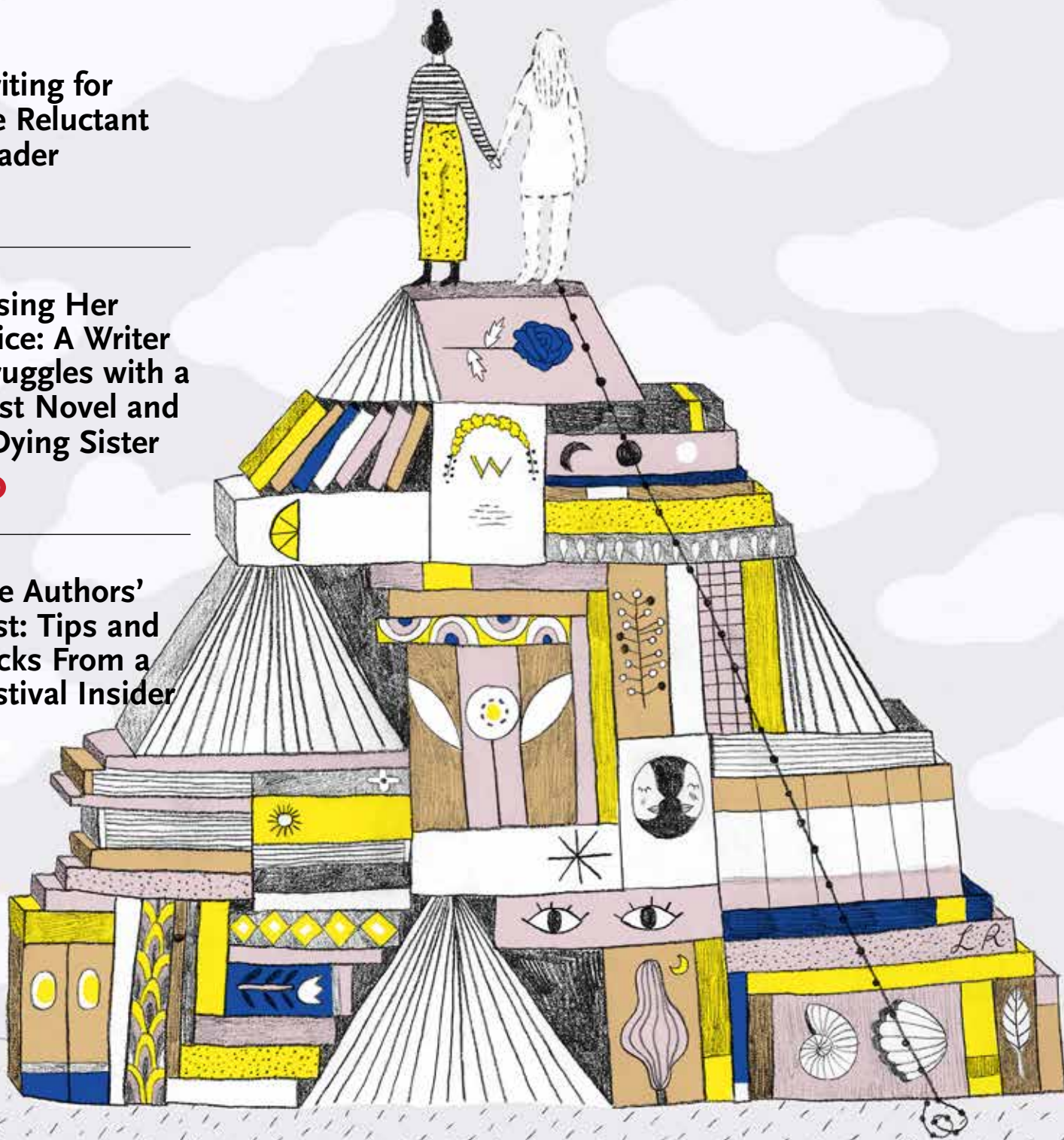
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We acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario, which last year funded 1,681 individual artists in 216 communities across Ontario for a total of \$52.8 million.



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Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

MEMOIR /

Losing Her Voice: When Loss and Success Coincide, a New Novelist Stumbles Through Conflicting Realities

BY KRISTA FOSS



Sometimes the most wonderful things happen at the same time as the very worst. My sister's diagnosis of late-stage cancer came within a few months of my getting a first book deal. She died six months to the day of my novel's publication date. She was my very best friend.

It felt surreal to be living through a painful experience at the same time as an exciting one. My coping strategy was similarly surreal. I lived as in two separate realities, movies screening at the same time in different theatres, my sister and I starring in both. And, for a while, that seemed to work.

One movie was the feel-good type: I took the starring role as a late-blooming wannabe writer who finally scored the championing agent, the enviable book deal, the thoughtful editor, the first few fist-pumping reviews. The pivotal supporting character was my sister, a warm, self-effacing woman who'd already spent years cheering me on through the frustrations and trade-offs of parenting, divorce, earning a living and making art. She was the voice of reason when the tricky selfs, everything from self-doubt to self-promotion, started to mess with my head.

The second movie was more difficult, not an obvious crowd pleaser, possibly Danish. My sister was its reluctant lead — a

fit alternative health guru and artist with a scrupulously clean lifestyle, a strong marriage, and two kids. When she was diagnosed with an advanced cancer that surgery and treatment couldn't eradicate, I was just one of many who felt betrayed. We were let down by our own wishful causality — the feeling that who gets sick and who doesn't should surely have something to do with supplements, sunny dispositions, and all the rest of the choices we make. But my sister refused to get stuck there. She took on the disease, the fear of her own death, like it was a cosmic assignment — some impenetrable algebra she'd untangle through meditation, faith, and confronting the darkest of her emotions. In this movie, I was the supposedly supportive sidekick; except that I wasn't able to really play my role. Instead, I was worried, hopeful, alternatively panicked, and occasionally filled with rage. In one scene, I throw my very expensive bicycle at a tree. Which is asinine. But that's what fear does.

Still, I managed to keep the two movies separate, unspooling apace. In cinema one, I reveled in the process of working with a caring, precise editor, and a tireless, encouraging agent. My book launch party was crowded, raucous, fun, and included my sister floating among the guests, serene and beautiful. Early readings went well. The reviews were vindicating. I felt coolly professional, largely because I couldn't fully feel anything — not even the disappointments, the things that didn't go my way.

Things took a turn in the second movie, when more than a year after her diagnosis, my sister's energy plummeted and her

symptoms spiked. Suddenly, she needed even more of what she'd needed all along: she needed me to stop offering advice, stop demanding explanations, stop playing that other film's character, the one that interpreted experiences and got hung up on meanings in the process. She just needed me to listen.

And I did. She spoke about her regrets, the sleepless hours of the night she fretted about her husband and children, the incredulity at losing her vigor, the short-lived sense that God had rejected her. She cried a lot. I could feel her big sister eyes watching me, making sure I didn't crumple under the weight of so much candour, so much letting go. We took out old pictures. We read through old letters. We talked about small things which I can't remember and big things which I can: life, death, love, the possibility of joy.

Inevitably, my two-movie conceit began to collapse, let down by the same magical thinking that had me hoping she'd get better, could get better, was hustling a miracle out of the tight-fisted, humourless cosmos. I showed up to do a few readings hungover with pre-emptive grief. At one event, I read for 20 minutes, got interviewed on stage and walked around dazed, none the wiser that I was wearing my top inside out. (This, at least, made my

sister laugh.)

One day I came into her hospital room and found a nurse named Nancy kissing my sister's sleeping face and smoothing her hair. The tenderness, the intimacy, was startling. It snapped me out of my trance, made me realize how living in two different realities, two movies, meant I was missing the point of both. There was no worse experience. There was no wonderful experience. There was just what was happening. A novel was finished, published, and out there. A sister and friend fell ill, and was dying. And the merged reality of pain, excitement, loss, and beauty, had to be lived as one experience.

So I stopped writing, I stopped trying to find meaning. I shut up and attended to the moment. I loved more deeply than I felt I could risk. I floundered, fucked-up and hurt.

Now, I'm waiting for the words to come back. They are, ever so slowly.

Krista Foss is a Hamilton-based writer. Her debut novel Smoke River was published by McClelland & Stewart in May 2014. Her short fiction has twice been a finalist for the Journey Prize.

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WRITING IN CANADA TODAY: A Conversation with Emma Donoghue, Vincent Lam, and Emily Pohl-Weary

The following is a condensed version of a panel discussion moderated by Mark Medley and presented by The Writers' Union of Canada on October 1, 2014 as part of the the International Festival of Authors weekly series in Toronto.

MARK MEDLEY: So I ask you all the same question. What is the greatest challenge facing Canadian writers today?

VINCENT LAM: Well, in my opinion the biggest challenge facing Canadian writers today is getting paid — very simple.

The business model is changing radically. And the power dynamics between the publishers and retailers and authors and so forth are changing.

But there's a very real sense, I think, in which lots of authors would actually like not to think about any of that. And they basically just want to write, which is very reductionistic. And maybe you can't quite do that as a modern writer.

But the fact remains that you have to pay for the rent and food and having necessities. And the truth is that most writers cannot do so on what they're paid for their writing. So I think that's a real impediment to the work.

MARK MEDLEY: Emily, as somebody who throughout the course of your career has done various things — you know, magazine editor, arts educator, writer — what would you identify as the biggest challenge facing yourself?

EMILY POHL-WEARY: I think my answer would be similar to Vincent's in that it is difficult to be paid — to get paid to work full-time as a writer. But we're really lucky in Canada to have the kinds of supports we have like grants and encouragement for other kinds of community activities that relate to the arts.

If you think of writing as something bigger than just sitting around a computer and typing, it can be — you can be creative and figure out ways to make a living.

But yeah, definitely letting people know that there are local authors who work and who make their living that way seems to be a challenge. Especially when competing with names from the U.S.



Emma Donoghue. Photo Credit: Andrew Bainbridge



Emily Pohl-Weary. Photo Credit: Derek Wuenschirs



Vincent Lam. Photo Credit: Barbara Stoneham

MARK MEDLEY: Is this something that's noticeably worse throughout the courses of your respective careers?

EMILY POHL-WEARY: I think for me definitely when I started writing, there were more paid writing gigs if you were a journalist or an arts reporter or writing feature articles. It seems like a lot of the writing jobs that pay well have shifted to different kinds of media like film or television or video games or things that actually are more commercialized or more openly commercialized.

MARK MEDLEY: I remember years ago I sat down with Guy Vanderhaeghe. And he was telling me when he published his first collection of short stories in, I think, 1984 with McClelland & Stewart, which at that time was, you know, *the* Canadian publisher, he got an advance of, I think, \$400 he said. And so it seems to me that writers have always felt that things are dire.

VINCENT LAM: I have heard a lot of people say that it used to be that you would expect that your publishing house would stick with you.

And you would have three, four, five, six books, which were not commercially successful. But if they were judged to be good books within the eyes of the house, then you would assume correctly that your next book would be published, and you would continue to have a chance to, you know, to get up to bat as it were.

And more and more what I've heard from people who have published that number of books, and who haven't broken through commercially, is they're being dumped. That they're not getting their books published again.

And, you know, there was a time in which you could go for a

while producing good work that just didn't happen to sell in big numbers and remain supported. And that may not be the case anymore.

MARK MEDLEY: Well did you ever find yourself in that position?

EMMA DONOGHUE: Of being dumped?

MARK MEDLEY: Of being dumped.

EMMA DONOGHUE: Personal question — but yes of course.

MARK MEDLEY: So, I mean, had you gone through multiple publishers before you found success?

EMMA DONOGHUE: I've had a number of serially monogamous publishing relationships, yes. But, you know, you start with a publisher and you're both in love. And then they slowly go off you as your sales decline. And then you crawl away. And then you — fall in love again. And it's good again. And then it declines. It's a kind of a rollercoaster effect.

But I've heard of the same things from other writers that there's no safety anymore, if there ever was, to that writer/publisher relationship.

However, I don't think young writers today, I don't think we should be telling them to concentrate on the money issues. I wish for them that they were paid better.

But I think when they sit down to write, the last thing they should be thinking about is what will sell, because then that would be a fatal kind of — an enclosing of the creative process.

My British publisher was both aghast and disappointed when they couldn't put me up for a literary prize for which you had to have an Asian citizenship. Because they just assumed that they had bought some guy, you know, who was a citizen of some sort of Asian country.

— Vincent Lam

I think it's appalling when every time you have a successful vampire novel you then see 20 more of them the following year. And you know that hundreds more are being written. So in a way I would prefer writers not to have to think about money.

MARK MEDLEY: I want to ask a question that's kind of on the flip side of my last question then, and I ask all three of you. Do you identify as a writer or a Canadian writer?

EMILY POHL-WEARY: I've never been much of a nationalist. But, you know, I am proud of the fact that we do support the arts in Canada. You know, more than many countries and encourage that kind of diversity of more and more of voices. But I'd probably say I'm a writer.

MARK MEDLEY: Emma?

EMMA DONOGHUE: I say writer. And what I hate is when people call me a local writer. But I've no objection once they start applying the big labels of Irish Canadian, woman writer, gay writer, you know. I'm fine with all of those. But I would probably just say writer.

MARK MEDLEY: Well does this kind of same kind of labelling exist in the U.K. for example? In Canada I have the sense that if you are a Canadian writer that label is often affixed to you in the media. Whereas I don't think it is applied the same way if you are in America or in the U.K. You know, is Martin Amis always referred to as a British writer in the British press or is he just a writer?

EMMA DONOGHUE: I think Ireland and Canada would both have

a certain self-consciousness about being small but very literary cultures, small in the sense of population.

And what's really nice is that Irish readers seek out Irish writers and same here in Canada. So I like that. I like the way readers are looking to us for something specific.

And there's a certain loyalty there. But yeah I think in either Britain or America, because they see themselves as culturally bigger, they would probably not have the same labelling.

MARK MEDLEY: Vincent, Canadian writer or just writer?

VINCENT LAM: I would definitely say that I'm a Canadian writer. And I say that more from the perspective of how I think about my writing than how I think about my branding.

I think, you know, because I am a member of a visible minority, I get branded in all kinds of ways. And I've certainly been in situations where people are surprised that I'm Canadian because that's not what a certain book is about.

MARK MEDLEY: Well how do you get branded?

VINCENT LAM: As an Asian writer. And, you know, in fact my British publisher was both aghast and disappointed when they couldn't put me up for a literary prize for which you had to have an Asian citizenship. Because they just assumed that they had bought some guy, you know, who was a citizen of some sort of Asian country.

So, you know, you can't be in the Man Asian Literary Prize if you actually were born and grew up in Canada.

But I say Canadian writer because I realize that when I'm writing and when I realize all the invisible things that I have

to struggle against as a writer, like in my recent novel *The Headmaster's Wager*, set in Vietnam. You have this character who is — he's bigoted. He's misogynistic. You know, he's offensive in many sort-of-Canadian ways of looking at things. And so, I realized how uncomfortable I was writing to that time and to that story, because I was dealing with the discomfort of being a Canadian and looking at things a certain way. So it's kind of when I come up against these unconscious barriers. But I think yeah, yeah I guess I'm a Canadian writer.

EMMA DONOGHUE: And something that gave me a bit of international perspective on being a Canadian writer was this morning when I was filling in an online survey I was sent from PEN. It was asking about state surveillance of the Internet and so on. And it included questions like: do you fear that if you write about a certain subject you will have your work banned? Or will you be, you know, arrested, shot? And I'm thinking wow, I don't fear any of these things. So I suddenly had this sense of writing in a very privileged space where we can literally tweet what we like and nobody's going to come to our house with guns, you know.

MARK MEDLEY: All three of you, I'm sure, have been kind of branded with CanLit at one point in your careers as writers (or perhaps not). Do you think that term should be retired? I mean, does it do more harm than good?

VINCENT LAM: No, I think it's a very good thing. I think that it should be an expected part of what a country does to think about its vision of itself, and to think about the stories that it wants to tell.

And if anything I think that we are too shy of that as Canadians in general, you know, in many fields not just in writing. We sort of have this aspirational sense that, "Oh well if I really make it big then I'll end up in America or in the U.K.?"

And we're actually not ashamed or sheepish about that attitude at all. It seems somehow natural to us. But I don't think that that's helpful in terms of national vision.

I think that we should be intensely interested in the stories we're telling each other, and a prime medium for that needs to be Canadian literature.

MARK MEDLEY: Emily?

EMILY POHL-WEARY: Yeah, for me, I don't mind — I like to see local writer in someone's bio because I want to read about my community and my city. And I grew up here. I grew up in Parkdale. And so rarely do I get to see my neighbourhood, you know, as my neighbourhood.

MARK MEDLEY: Well as somebody who's been adopted by the

CanLit community and kind of claimed as one of our own —

EMMA DONOGHUE: I was delighted, yes. I mean I'd been here about 10 years before anybody bothered adopting me. But you know I was happy to get into the party at last.

And no, I think CanLit is a personally neutral label. And as long as nobody assumes that you're writing a novel about an epic struggle in the far north, you know, as long as nobody tells you what to write.

One thing I loved as soon as I noticed it on arrival is that Canadian literature absolutely includes and sees as central its immigrant writers. In Ireland there's a sense that there's the Irish and then there are a few colourful outsiders who have been let in.

Whereas I got to Canada and it seemed to me the people like Ondaatje and Mistry, they were bang in the middle representing Canada — often through stories about their homelands and journeys to and from Canada.

[Conversation shifts to influences, discussing how writers are influencing pop culture and how a work might influence pop culture in particular]

MARK MEDLEY: Emma, I think if I was going to ask this question to you I'd kind of reverse it. Have you seen writers following in your footsteps, in the sense that *Room* came out and it was a huge international bestseller?

Have you noticed any kind of knockoffs or books that you would say probably wouldn't have been published without *Room*?

EMMA DONOGHUE: So it's just bizarre. I open my post every day and there's either a martyred mother figure or there's a girl locked up in a bunker, you know. So yeah, I currently feel a bit nauseous. Oh not another girl in a bunker story. But you know, I don't kid myself about my huge effect on the culture. I'm sure they were published before *Room* too. It's just now they're all sent to me.

MARK MEDLEY: Well are they asking you to blurb them or —

EMMA DONOGHUE: To blurb them —

MARK MEDLEY: Or are they just making sure they're not too close.

EMMA DONOGHUE: No, no, a publisher would never worry that their book was too close to a bestselling book. Not a bit. No, they want you to blurb it. And I think publishers should never go for the obvious and blurb it, you know? I mean [to Vincent] do you get sent a series of medical based books?

VINCENT LAM: I have. Stacks and stacks — it's so true, you know.

Now accepting applications for the 2015-16 funding year.

NATIONAL PUBLIC READINGS PROGRAM

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts

- This program is open to all TWUC members for public readings taking place across Canada.
- 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

NATIONAL PUBLIC READINGS NORTHERN PROGRAM

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts

- This program promotes author tours to remote Northern communities within Canada.
- In order to be eligible for this program, a host must organize an author tour in their remote, Northern community for three full readings or six half readings. Readings can take place in different venues within the same community.
- The Union will pay the author a \$250 honorarium per full reading (for a total of \$750) and up to \$1800 in transportation expenses.
- A limited amount of funding has been allocated for this program. Applications must be submitted at least 4 weeks in advance of tour, and the tour must take place between April 1, 2015 - March 31, 2016. This program will close on August 31, 2015.

WRITERS-IN-THE-SCHOOL PROGRAM

Funded by the Ontario Arts Council

- Applications are now being accepted for readings taking place between **April 1, 2015 - August 31, 2015**. This program is open to all TWUC members for visits taking place in Ontario-based schools.
- 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.

For more information about all Reading Programs, please visit: <http://www.writersunion.ca/content/programs>

Doctors write, you know — a doctor writes a novel or someone writes a novel set in a hospital where there's a patient — yeah, we should trade sometimes.

EMMA DONOGHUE: Sure. Let's do it. I'd love to read your doctor books —

VINCENT LAM: I can have your girls in bunkers.

MARK MEDLEY: I was wondering what books you have read lately that point to an interesting new direction in Canadian writing?

VINCENT LAM: Well I think the book that comes immediately to mind is Rawi Hage's *Carnival*, which is his most recent. And I think the reason this springs to mind is because it's an immigrant story. But the immigrant is rather angry and vindictive and sometimes spiteful. He masturbates quite a bit, and also flies around on a magic carpet. And so it's very counter to the form of what you expect of the Canadian immigrant story — noble, hardworking, long suffering, yadda yadda yadda, all these very virtuous things.

EMILY POHL-WEARY: I'm always looking for different models of femininity, different angles on what it means to be young, to be female, to be empowered or sexual. So I was thinking actually — Tamara Faith Berger is there in the audience, and her writing, which, you know, explores the fine line between erotica and porn. Or Doretta Lau's *How Does a Blade of Grass Thank the Sun?* I'm so excited to see different kinds of female voices coming into the arena that aren't kind of, you know, the things that I grew up reading.

Emma Donoghue is a writer of contemporary and historical fiction whose eight novels include the international bestseller Room. Her most recent novel is Frog Music.

Vincent Lam is from the expatriate Chinese community of Vietnam. He is an emergency physician. His first collection of short stories, Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures won the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize and his novel The Headmaster's Wager was shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction.

Mark Medley is the books editor at the Globe and Mail and former books editor for the National Post.

Emily Pohl-Weary is an award winning author, editor, and arts educator. Her previous books include a Hugo Award-winning biography, a female superhero anthology, a series of girl pirate comics and a young adult novel, Not Your Ordinary Wolf Girl. She's currently the 2014 Toronto Public Library eWriter in residence for Young Voices.

Access Copyright Report

Michael Elcock, Liaison

INTRODUCTORY

TWUC members will be aware of the diminishing revenues they are receiving through Payback and/or other income they might receive for the licensed use of their works. It should go without saying that the reduction in these payments is a direct result of the fact that many of Canada's educational institutions and organisations have taken decisions not to renew licenses with Access Copyright — Canada's copyright licensing agency. As well, Access Copyright has had to place a sizeable amount of funds in trust pending the results of Copyright Board decisions, and pending the outcome of litigation. (See the news section in this issue for details on this year's payout to writers). In this report, I will focus on some of the initiatives that Access Copyright is taking to deal with the challenges that we are all facing in this area.

STAFF/PERSONNEL

Access Copyright has now reduced its personnel complement by 40 per cent since Roanie Levy was appointed Executive Director nearly two years ago.

OVERVIEW

With support from a Board which fully understands the difficulties faced by Canada's creative and publishing sectors, Roanie Levy and her staff have promulgated an imaginative and pragmatic blueprint for the organisation to follow into the future. To quote from her most recent report to Access Copyright's Board — "...we have devised a clear vision towards transforming Access Copyright so that it remains in the service of creators and publishers by better serving the needs of educators, learners, researchers, and readers."

That suggests a very different approach to the way I for one, viewed the organisation in the past. It is an approach that recognises that Access Copyright must transform itself from a 'rights protective' organisation into one that provides content and services that are relevant to today's marketplace. That sounds straightforward and relatively easy, but it is a radical shift from the organisation that existed a couple of years ago. Most of all it is a huge transformation in the culture of the organisation, and that will be reflected as much as anywhere in the shape, style, and make-up of Access Copyright's Board of Directors. In the past AC's Board has been made up of representatives from the Creator and Publishing constituencies — basically writers and publishers. Over the next two years — with 2015 as a 'transition' year — that Board will change entirely to a competency-based model. It will include representatives from our client base — our marketplace. It will include people who are knowledgeable about creating new value chains in creative industries, individuals who understand change management and the demands of systems in transition.

Despite, or because of, the challenges that we all face, it is an intensely exciting time to be involved with these changes.

EDUCATION SECTOR

In its efforts to redefine its relationships with the key sectors in its marketplace Access Copyright has undertaken a number of important initiatives. For the first time ever (as I understand it), senior personnel from Access Copyright have held meetings with senior representatives from Canada's post-secondary sector in order to better assess their needs with regard to copyright and content access. This has resulted in the development of creative and cooperative trial programmes — relatively small at present, but filled with future potential. Similar steps have been taken in the K-12 sector. As a result 2015 will see some interesting pilot partnerships with educators.

GOVERNANCE

As mentioned above, and reported before, Access Copyright has radically redesigned the way in which the organisation is governed. The organisation has had to design a structure appropriate to survival in today's marketplace — in the face of changed laws and 21st century technological realities. Although election and appointment to future Boards of Directors will be based on competency rather than constituency, the constituents who created AC in the first place — creators and publishers — will retain a strong advisory role; a role guaranteed through AC's constitution and bylaws.

PARTNERSHIPS

There is much more — international joint ventures and cooperative initiatives with domestic organisations, partnerships into the tech sector, and so on. A number of these will be revealed in the coming months. But the point of all of it is to ensure that we are able to unite those sectors that have obvious common interests — creators, publishers, educators, librarians, learners, researchers, and readers. That is the only way we can hope to have sustainable creator and publisher industries into the future — and an educational sector with a strong, vibrant and intelligent core of Canadian content.

Access Copyright has extended its multinational agreement with the UK's Copyright Licensing Agency. The agreement will allow Access Copyright to license UK subsidiaries of Canadian head-office corporations (and vice-versa) with our combined repertory. AC has similar agreements with the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Finland.

ACCESS COPYRIGHT'S THREE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

Without going into details here, I can say that this is the most thorough and practical such plan I have seen at any Board I have ever been privileged to serve on. The Plan stems directly from the 2012 AGM where the following — among other things — was agreed. "The Board of Directors of Access Copyright directs the organization to transform by expanding its existing mission with new services, business models, and brand identity that are inclusive of all those who use and value content."

In the view of this somewhat sceptical and distrustful observer who was asked 18 months ago to allow his name to go forward as the TWUC representative on Access Copyright's Board we could not be in smarter, more hard working hands.