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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout Canada.



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We acknowledge funding support from the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



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Write is produced four times yearly by The Writers' Union of Canada, 460 Richmond Street West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1Y1 416.703.8982, info@writersunion.ca, www.writersunion.ca.

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Writer's Blot

RESEARCH /

Hitting the Thrift Shop... for ideas

BY KATHY-DIANE LEVEILLE

When my creative brain isn't sparking, it's usually because the inspiration well has run dry.

I'm forcing the words across the page when what I really need to do is stimulate my curiosity. In *A Writer's Diary*, Virginia Woolf noted, "It is a mistake to think that literature can be produced in the raw. One must get out in life..."

One place in my life that's guaranteed to stir up story questions — and the irresistible pull to pursue them — is the second-hand store. I live near Saint John, NB, Canada's first city to be incorporated by Royal Charter, in 1785. It has a rich history. The shop Loyalist City Coins, Books, and Collectibles is a fertile go-to. It displays an ever-changing array of vintage discards from auctions and estate sales. The bric-a-brac shelves at Value Village or the Salvation Army Thrift Store can also yield an unexpected gift.

It's best to head out with a large swathe of time to wander. The musty metallic scent hits on entering. A sweeping glance takes in the offerings tucked between the bookshelves: coins, silver spoons, vinyl albums, odd tools. I meander, pausing to investigate the thing that pulls. It could be an item that twigs a faint memory, particularly of my grandparents' farm, or taps into a childhood imaginary world.



A worn elm dining chair with a cane seat and turned spindles appears straight out of an 1890s Sears Catalogue. Why only one? Who did it once belong to? These questions inspired my short story "The Chair" (*Roads Unravelling*, Sumach Press), in which a character named Willa spots it on a visit to the farm's dump: "The legs had sunk deep down until they were anchored, appeared to be growing out of the earth... For the first time in her life, the farm had surprised her."

Willa becomes obsessed with discovering who put it there and why.

A pair of vintage, low-cut, black skates was the impetus for "Learning to Spin" from the same collection, later adapted into a CBC radio drama. The protagonist notices an old man passing her new home like clockwork. Suspicious, she tails him:

"I can't believe my eyes... the old man is, is — is he really? Flying like a bat out of hell. The side-to-side swoosh of his arms and legs is lithe and liquid. Abruptly he veers to the right, then left, manoeuvring a figure eight."

She eventually asks him to teach her how to skate too.



I have a fascination with teacups. Their fragility and intricate designs are hypnotic. I imagine a gold-trimmed Staffordshire being held by a farmer's calloused mitt, nails split, mooned with grease or dirt. Or the flowered bone china with the paper-thin handle the son is trying to fit a fat finger into. What significance would this elegance have? Is it the last tie to a discarded dream or a life abandoned? Does the unmarried daughter revisit the ghost of a lover every time she takes out the Wild Rose Limoges for Christmas? These are the questions that unlock my imagination and steer down the path to story. I view the discarded everyday items as the keepers of the memories of lives, through the passage of time. They begin the alchemy that awakens what author Elizabeth Gilbert calls the "Big Magic."

I can lose a day flipping through boxes of yellowed photographs or turn-of-the-century postcards (folk waving from the majestic CN hotels). There are worn pocket novels from a time when pulp fiction was a

lucrative income. I find eclectic reads like *Harness in the Parlour* by Audrey Armstrong: "When the dew is on the grass, rain will never come to pass." This began the stirring that would lead to my rural novel *Standing in the Whale's Jaw*, set in the 1930s (Tightrope Books).

I know the adage is "write what you know," but for me it's a case of "write what you *want* to know." I like Albert Einstein's observation that "Creativity is intelligence having fun." Sometimes it's good to step away from the desk and do just that.

Kathy-Diane Leveille's fiction first appeared in Grain, Room of One's Own, and The Oklahoma Review as well as the anthologies Water Studies (Pottersfield Press) and New Brunswick Short Stories (Neptune). She won the Short Grain Contest in 2002 and went on to publish a short story collection and two novels. Her work has been adapted for CBC radio drama and the stage. She is currently tailing "Big Magic" in a novel inspired by a teacup.



Going Farther, Doing Better: TWUC, disability, and diversity

BY CARLA HARRIS

By way of introduction

It was the summer of 2020 when I got a call from Bruce Rice, at the time, the TWUC representative for my region.

I had met Bruce years before through the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and poetry events around Regina. When Bruce asked if I'd considered joining The Writers' Union of Canada, I laughed out loud. As a proudly disabled neurodivergent queer enby interdisciplinary performing artist, I was sure this wasn't the place for people like me. I have a chapbook, sure, but no other published books and few literary publications.

But this was exactly why Bruce reached out. He said no writer should feel intimidated, TWUC isn't about being in some elite club, the organization respects spoken word writers, and that the Union wishes to better represent various storytellers, creative voices, and researchers who don't fall into traditional academic and elitist models. I knew of Bruce through his policy work with the City of Regina and his efforts at improving accessibility in our

city. I can tell you I never would have applied for TWUC membership if Bruce had not chased me to put my name in and offered to nominate me for the role of advocate on TWUC's National Council.

Which got me thinking: Why was it that I doubted I belonged in this Union? Was it that I needed a pep talk, or was this a form of self-protection?

The question took me back to the decade I spent as an employment facilitator at a university. I helped students build confidence and identify their top skills and interests, to build a career they would be well-suited to thrive in. And I repeatedly saw the impact intimidation can have on folks from non-dominant cultures. The vast majority of the people I worked with were international students, single parents, newcomers, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled students, and it was common for them to seem to need encouragement to set larger goals. Looking back on my life as a disabled, neurodivergent mad queer, I realized I

The international symbol of disability or accommodation is an image of a wheelchair, yet only eight percent of disabled persons use a wheelchair.

had lots of memories of times when it felt things weren't worth trying if I'd have to stand up for myself. I didn't doubt my personal value, but I felt too tired to be able to fight against people who'd suggest that I had been hired to fill a quota. I have always been more skilled at advocating for my community than for myself. Placing myself in fewer scenarios where misogyny and ableism are likely to impact me is how I care for my own mental health in the context of my career.

TWUC's diversity report and disability and internal ableism

Last year, TWUC released a report, co-authored by Kevin Chong and Rhea Tregebov, called *Diversity in Canadian Writing: A 2020-2021 snapshot*.

As a disabled person, one big eye-opener from the report was this: Of a total of 583 respondents, 455 people said they were not disabled, 69 people said they were disabled, and 59 people skipped the question. This question was skipped by more respondents than any other question on the survey. This could indicate a reluctance to "identify" as disabled.

Internal ableism is complex. I like to use the example of my incredibly feisty and determined grandmother who used to farm and garden, who worked as a nurse, was mean with a deck of cards, and participated in competitive square dancing. Over the last 10 years of her life, my grandma went through times when she needed more or fewer accommodations including being in and out of using a wheelchair. Many of us will require different types of assistance and levels of care during our lives, but our society does not actively help people come to terms with needing that assistance. My grandma was an incredible mother, nurse, and caregiver in general, but when she reached a point where she needed more help, instead of asking for accessibility assistance, she quietly withdrew. If you had asked her if she was disabled, I have no doubt she would have firmly denied it.

I myself had been diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome as a kid, but no one said, "You have a disability now." Then, during grad school, doctors discovered I also have epilepsy due to a brain injury at 14 months that caused a section of my brain to never fully form. My condition's severity heightened quickly, and I spent years in testing, not using knives or stoves — let alone driving — until my left temporal lobectomy in 2006.

Even with a health case so severe, needing such acute care and rolling in and out of hospitals for five years, no doctor ever said that big "D" word to me. It took me nine more years to really unpack my internal ableism — to even think about whether I might have a disability, let alone start identifying myself publicly.

The international symbol of disability or accommodation is an image of a wheelchair, yet only eight percent of disabled persons use a wheelchair. The vast majority of disabled folks are not born with their condition; they acquire it during the course of their lives. And the complex part? People often doubt whether or not their health condition would count as a "disability."

Is there something about your health that resulted in you being treated differently? Were you less able to take part in things you had participated in in the past? These are some things to consider when you think about whether or not you might identify as a disabled author.

Going back to the diversity study, seeing that the number of people who identified as disabled is almost the same as the number who skipped the question affects the accuracy of the data. The TWUC report says, "With regard to recognition at festivals, disabled respondents were better represented than non-disabled respondents. While only 36 percent of non-disabled respondents had participated in any literary festivals, 46 percent of disabled respondents had their work represented at festivals."

I would argue that if all people with health conditions who have experienced barriers and/or social exclusion in the publishing industry had clicked the disabled box, these results would not have looked so good.

In addition, one person I spoke to for this article, who asked to remain anonymous, said awards specifically created for non-dominant culture groups often lack the prestige, financial, and career-supporting benefits that accompany awards offered to dominant culture writers.

Looking for what you're not seeing

I've learned over the years that gathering broadly generalizing data fails to provide insights into the needs of non-dominant culture folks. While working on campus, I developed a friendship with another employment facilitator who worked with Indigenous students. Together, we created a target-focussed project, and I am grateful for how much that experience opened my eyes to hidden flaws in the programs I had been offering.

There is no checklist for identifying everything that might create an invisible wall that keeps one writer outside the club, out of the publishing industry, or off the book tour...

My colleague took me to the Indigenous students' lounge, and we held coffee time chats to hear directly from students about the real challenges they encountered. We needed to invest more time and conduct more qualitative research to finally understand what it was about our campus programming that failed to serve Indigenous students in an impactful way. The conversations were enlightening. They showed me why research needs to be developed by the very people you are attempting to conduct research on. Only those with lived experience will understand what issues have the most influence for their community, and without that intimate knowledge, the questions we ask would fail to gather data on the active indicators of cause and effect.

One of the things that surprised me most in those conversations with Indigenous students was how often they doubted whether they even belonged in the Indigenous students' centre. Many had grown up in urban settings or been adopted by white families. There were many different answers for why they shied away from identifying as Indigenous — not because they doubted their identity, but because it was not worth placing themselves in an environment where it could be questioned.

Reaching out

The TWUC report argues that the publishing industry needs to focus on hiring more diverse staff among people writers work with, such as editors. In part to talk about that, I reached out to S. Bear Bergman, whose publishing company, Flamingo Rampant (co-founded with j wallace skelton), is dedicated to “producing feminist, racially diverse, LGBTQ-positive children's books.”

“A Black literacy educator named Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop... introduced the idea that children's books were either a mirror or a window — that either they are reflecting to a child their own experience or they are allowing children to see a window into somebody else's experience,” Bergman told me. “They're a way that a kid sees what their experience could be.”

Flamingo Rampant makes a conscious effort to reach out to an array of writers, Bergman said. “Half of every season is written and/or illustrated by people of colour... It requires being part of an artistic community and reaching out to people and saying, ‘Have you ever thought

about writing a children's book?’” The press recognizes that some authors may not be familiar with the editing process, and Bergman says that's fine: “Okay, we can walk you through it.”

Amanda Leduc is an author and communications and development coordinator with the Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD). The FOLD is a literary festival dedicated to highlighting the voices of diverse authors and storytellers from underrepresented, non-dominant cultures. As a disabled author herself, Leduc said she had been a TWUC member, but after a couple of years she decided our organization did not seem to offer services that specifically assisted diverse voices. Maybe this should mean offering discounted rates to disabled writers. Or it could mean being more intentional about reaching out to underrepresented communities. “What is the Union doing specifically, in terms of outreach to these kinds of communities, that isn't being done anywhere else?”

One of her aims with the FOLD, she said, is to create “a space that feels safe and is actively cultivating resources for writers in a way that feels very valuable.”

I discussed the results of the TWUC diversity study with Iryn Tushabe and asked her if there might be any barriers we failed to consider. Coming from Nigeria, Tushabe mentioned that, in her experience, journals claiming they were seeking BIPOC writing seemed more interested in selecting stories that focussed on coming to Canada. “My short fiction was rejected by so many magazines, and I have a feeling it was due to it being set in the country of my birth. Perhaps literary magazines deemed my stories as not having a Canadian audience. When I rewrote a story that had been rejected so many times and set it partially in Canada, not only was it published, but it was also longlisted for some awards,” Tushabe said. “Was I glad for the recognition? Absolutely! But it proved that bias, reinforcing to me that as a BIPOC person, I would be published but only if I wrote what was expected of me.”

I also spoke with Jen Powley, TWUC's regional representative for Atlantic Canada, about barriers to serving the organization. Powley, who described herself as “legally blind and quadriplegic due to progressive multiple sclerosis,” talked about the importance of having disabled folks like us able to continue to serve on National Council, which would be impossible if travel was required.

“What I would like to see is more support for authors with disabilities,” Powley said. “I was really scared by the motion to have more things in person. I am happy with Zoom meetings.”

I absolutely agree. Many different barriers can be solved by the same accommodations. For example, people new to the country may choose not to drive; single parents may not be able to find childcare; and disabled folks like Powley and myself may be immunocompromised or otherwise unable to use mass transportation. For each of these groups, the issues fall under different categories, but together all of these non-dominant culture groups benefit from having our AGMs available online.

There is no checklist

There is no checklist for identifying everything that might create an invisible wall that keeps one writer outside the club, out of the publishing industry, or off the book tour, the library shelves, and the education curriculum. There will never be any accessibility or accommodation plan that will make everything equal, but we will all benefit from our industry becoming more equitable. I think the real barrier is that we are not using the lived experience and expertise of people from specific groups within publishing to help us identify new areas to research.

When I asked Bergman where he felt TWUC’s next diversity study should go from here, he said that it’s important for these kinds of studies to not “replicate all of the conditions of disenfranchisement in the research [by asking] people to talk about all the terrible things that they’ve experienced.” Instead, Bergman suggested the model proposed by Dr. Eve Tuck in *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*. Bergman describes it as “a sort of call to action, which I think is incredibly valuable. She says that instead of doing damage-centred research, let’s do strength-based research. Let’s find out what skills and abilities communities have that they are able to use in order to be successful, and if we ask people to imagine what would be perfect, let’s find out what they would say or want.”

By way of conclusion

We need to find ways to gather information specifically from people with lived experience as intersectional members of non-dominant culture groups — especially folks who are not members of our Union — to better understand what obstacles are at play. We also need to remember that inclusion is an ongoing process, with new barriers and better practices coming to light all the time. As much as general statistics and data gathering may help us understand some commonalities, without the involvement of people from non-dominant cultures, we will never be able to fully understand what makes us our best.

And in our attempts to fully support members from non-dominant cultures, we need to help diverse folks connect with writers like themselves. Consider the popularity of TWUC’s BIPOC Writers Connect program. I argue that disabled writers also need to have opportunities to connect, gain support from folks like themselves, and build pride in their voices. In those early years when I was diagnosed, I felt alone, ashamed, and burdened by my condition. When I finally decided to publicly identify as a disabled artist, I found myself having new, enlightening conversations with disabled musicians, crip playwrights, and mad storytellers. Crip culture has shown me the true meaning of self-kindness, the impact of empathy, and how valuable an interdependent lifestyle is; we all can resist trying to do everything by ourselves. Regardless of whether you are disabled or not, crip culture can teach you the invaluable lesson that failure does not correlate with personal worth. That when a plan fails, you can still be proud of your journey and acknowledge the things you have learned, even if the lesson comes from pain. Disabled culture teaches us both to ask for help and to offer what we can, even if what you have to offer seems small. The smallest acts of kindness that you provide can be meaningful and impactful for others. Discovering disabled culture has connected me with my most impactful found-family as a writer; it wasn’t until I found a way to connect with lived-experiences and neurodivergent voices like my own that my own work gained clarity and purpose.

Since dominant culture writers have historically been the vast majority of TWUC’s membership over the past 50 years, it is writers from the dominant culture who have put their heads together to discuss issues writers face and helped build a support network. I know that all members of our Union will benefit if we invest in the time for real conversations.

Gather minds with diverse experience, and dive deep into the qualitative discussions to discover positive directions that will benefit us all.

Carla Harris (they/she) is a disabled, mad queer enby writer, performer, and interdisciplinary artist from Treaty 4 territory, currently living in Regina, Saskatchewan. They have performed in Verses Festival in Vancouver (2016), the Saskatoon Poetic Arts Festival (2018), and at the Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan’s Annual Poetry Soirée of 2022. They released their first chapbook, Obtain No Proof, with Dis/Ability Series of Frog Hollow Press in 2020 and had publications appear in ANTILANG (2021), The Leslie Strutt Chapbook with League of Canadian Poets (2022), and the Humber Literary Review (coming in May 2023). Harris teaches creative improvisation and is working on their first play and their first book of creative nonfiction poetry in unconfined #CripTime.

PUBLISHING /

I Thought Publication Would Be the Easier Part

BY NANCY LAM



I always dreamed of writing a book that would sit prominently on the front shelf of the Jones Public Library I visited every week growing up in Toronto.

That dream was dashed by well-meaning naysayers, like my mother, who said the only well-known writers who earned a decent living were dead. After emigrating from China to Canada to give her future children a better life, she never wanted us to worry about unheated apartments or lack of food — things she and my father experienced. It was hard to ignore the logic (and the duty) in her statements. So, I went to law school.

As a lawyer, I tell my clients' life stories. When Mom died, nearly a decade ago now, I was overcome with the need to record her story. I wrote and rewrote until her teachings, stories, and my memories of her turned into *The Loyal Daughter*, a fictionalized account of her immigration journey to, and life in, Canada. When it was finished I was relieved to be moving on to what I thought would be the easier part: getting published.

I soon learned it was not so easy.

Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, and other big presses generally don't accept unsolicited manuscripts. The only way to them is through an agent. I had no idea that The Writers' Union existed, never mind the website included a list of literary agents and guides to publishing. And my Google searches often led me astray.

I finally picked my top 10 agents and presses and submitted my first query.

After submitting to one agent or press, I had to wait... and wait... for a response. The instructions and research said it was frowned upon to submit to more than one simultaneously. I didn't want to be frowned upon, so I impatiently waited as each carefully drafted pitch went out.

I'm used to judges taking their time to issue decisions, but there is comfort knowing there must be a decision rendered at some point and even a means to challenge the decision if needed. But there is absolutely no deadline for any publisher or agent to respond, if ever!

The most frustrating thing to do for a person who hates to sit by idly is to do nothing.

The first polite rejection was a form email that came through an assistant. Another was not interested in representing a person who only had one book to offer. (Was I to write several books before trying to get published? Given my track record, that would take a lifetime). Another agent said she didn't sufficiently connect with the characters to offer representation. (Ouch! Isn't that a polite way of saying I didn't like your book?) Mind you, this was better than the radio silence I received from others.

I also felt stupid asking questions of frontline people at the agencies or presses who were at least a decade or so younger than me:

"Please thank Ms. X for this reply. Can you or she tell me why she wasn't interested in reading my manuscript so I can better understand what to change for my future queries?"

"It's been five weeks since I submitted my manuscript; can you give me a rough idea as to how much longer before I may hear back?"

The bored, cynical responses made me think if I had pursued an MFA from Columbia or UBC, or if I was a seasoned journalist with hundreds of publications under my belt, or if this wasn't a second career, maybe these answers and rejections might sting less — or maybe they might be acceptances.



PHOTO: NANCY LAM'S NOVEL, *THE LOYAL DAUGHTER*, ON DISPLAY AT THE JONES PUBLIC LIBRARY

After lacklustre results, I was apathetic. This book, which I believed was a bigger contribution to the world than most other things I'd done in my life, was at risk of not seeing the light of day. All the time and energy, all the missed outings with friends and family, the pure anguish of writing, seemed wasted. And there were moments I felt it might be easier to give up the dream of being traditionally published or get a few copies printed for the family, as a few established authors suggested — that was hard to swallow. I was being told to go for consolation prizes.

I persevered. When a few smaller presses (finally) expressed their interest, I jumped and happily signed with At Bay Press.

And just like that, I was published.

Nancy Lam is a Toronto-based author and immigration lawyer. The Loyal Daughter (At Bay Press) is her debut novel. It has been recognized by CBC Books, the TIFA Holiday Gift Guide, and Toronto Lit Up, and reviewed positively in publications such as Canadian Immigrant, Asian Review of Books, and The Artisanal Writer. Nancy has also been interviewed by publications including Root & Seed, All About Canadian Books, and The Social.