

WRITE

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**THE WRITERS'
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CANADA**

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**Toronto SFF Writers: 10
years and still going strong**

**What writers from
southern Canada get
wrong about the North**

Rest as radical



Contents

- 5 From the Editor
- 6 From the Chair

WRITER'S BLOT

- 7 Fresh Despair
by Mary Rykov

FEATURES

- 9 Toronto SFF Writers
by K.M. McKenzie
- 11 Placing Trust in Stillness
by Miguel Fenrich
- 14 Writing as Fundamental
by Matt Beam
- 16 Writing About the North Authentically
by Hélène Katz
- 18 Vibrating with History
by Marie Powell

NEW MEMBERS

- 19 Welcome!

DISPATCHES

- 22 Books for Every Child
by Lawrence Scanlan

SPOTLIGHT

- 24 Filling the Blanks
by Ada Nicolle

CROSSWORD

- 25 Puzzle Pieces
by Ada Nicolle

CEO'S REPORT

- 26 Writing Rights

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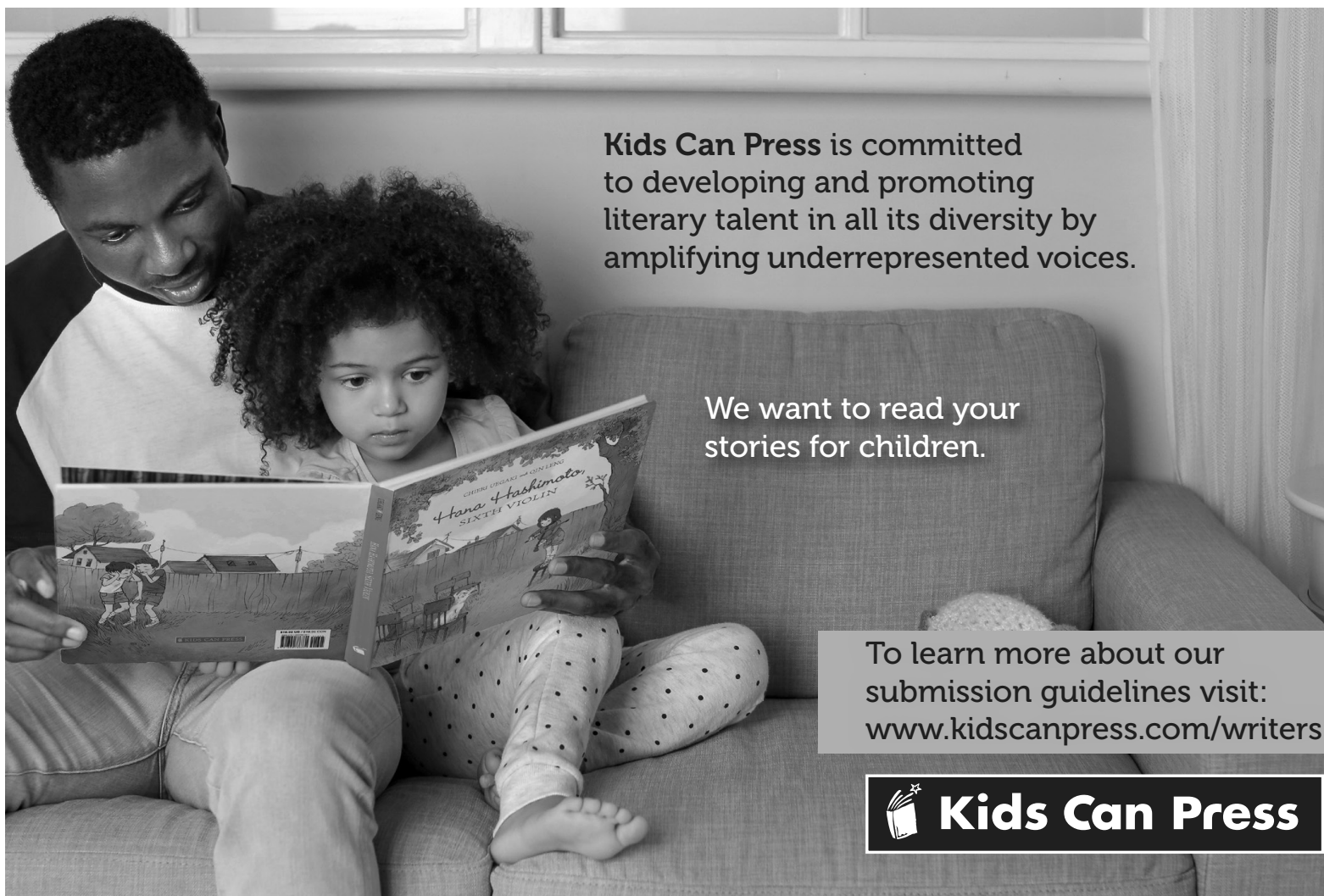
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Toronto SFF Writers

A model for positive support, beyond critiques

BY K.M. MCKENZIE

FOUND my way to the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) Writers meetup the same way many do. A new year's resolution.

Mine? To get my novel published. In 2016, I googled local speculative communities. Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers came up on a platform I'd never heard of called Meetup.

I joined. Then I sat on it until spring. Then I summoned the courage to actually show up. It was a full room. Back then, sessions were monthly, and the group met on King Street West, at a pub that has since shut down.

I don't recall if I read anything my first time around. I like to imagine that my first few sessions were quiet, taking note of the vibes, worrying that it was intimidating, wondering if my writing was good enough.

Toronto SFF Writers is the biggest SFF writers' collective in the city, maybe the country, boasting over 500 members. But no matter how big it gets, supporting and nurturing new authors and hosting writing workshops and critique sessions are its priority.

"There's always something on" says the group's website: pub nights, movie nights, celebrations, the Wizards and Workouts series (which combines role-playing games with exercise), book launches for members, and more. Future plans include reading series to further promote authors and speculative fiction in the city.

"Like all proper recluses and introverts, I am usually not good with people, yet among the group I found like-minded individuals."

Positivity, equality, and diversity

The group's three-point value system is positivity, equality, and diversity — which, yes, makes the acronym PED. The joke writes itself, but here, the performance-enhancing drug is the welcoming atmosphere the group offers, the positivity is about the constructive and nurturing feedback, and the equality means no one is above anyone else. Diversity means the group welcomes different writers, different backgrounds, and different ways of approaching speculative fiction.

The manuscript I first took to the group was *The Civilization*, which would become my debut fantasy novel, published in 2024. Most of the critiques said the first three chapters were slow and dragged. I would rewrite the first chapter alone eight times before settling on the published version.

The critiques at Toronto SFF Writers never felt mean — a reviewer scratched out the word "civilization" from the title of my manuscript once, which annoyed me. But even when the discussions got contentious, the tension would self-deflate and we would go for beer afterwards.

Maybe that's the reason I stayed.

Like all proper recluses and introverts, I am usually not good with people, yet among the group I found like-minded individuals. I remember when most of my favourite writers joined the group.

The reading and critique formula is simple. Show up with something to read — and reading is on a first-come

**“If I know there is a critique session coming up where
I have to share my work, then that gives me a deadline.
I need to finish up.”**

basis. If you have nothing to read, you give feedback. The sessions are run by different persons. I was one such person in the early days. These days, Justin Dill runs the in-person Saturday meetups, organizes pub nights, and updates the website, while others like Gillian Secord, Melissa Terry, and Jesse McMinn organize online sprints. There are also online critique sessions.

Prominent members of the group include Don Masiak, who published his SFF thriller, *Pale Grey Dot*, in 2024 and is gearing up for the sequel in 2027. Don and I co-edited the *Imps & Minions* anthology in 2020.

Brandon Butler, a Writers of the Future contest winner who edited the *Science Fiction Tarot* anthology (2023), does backup pub night organizing and has appeared in the group's *One-Shot* anthology four times.

A true community offering support beyond the page

For Butler, who is currently working on an epic novel series, the group is valuable because it brings in new people, with perspectives that strengthen both the community and its critiques. “You know, they’re a geologist, or they work in finance, or whatever,” he tells me.

Two-time Aurora Award-winning author Y.M. Pang shares that sentiment. “It’s also just a great resource for sharing knowledge. So many of us have gone on different journeys with our writing work with different editors, gone through a traditional publishing or independent publishing,” she says. “And in this community, we’re able to share what we’ve learned and learned from other writers as well.”

Pang is a highly gifted author, with publications in major SFF magazines like *Clarkesworld* and two successful self-published short story collections among her many accomplishments. Despite this, she finds time to run writing workshops and host group events, including organizing the group's 10-year celebrations in July 2025.

Over the last decade, one of the ways the organization has stepped up to meet the needs of its increasingly successful members is through group-based promotion events. Toronto SFF Writers is now a touring collective, complete with its own banner, doing collective signings at bookstores and other locations. Yes, there is a

physical banner, and a proper website now too — not just a Meetup page.

Since the start of 2026, Toronto SFF Writers has been to Indigo stores in and around Toronto and to Word on the Street. We are also regulars at the popular annual CanCon science fiction convention, with group members including Pang, Butler, and David F. Shultz.

Group tours can ease financial burdens and the general nerves of authors who are naturally shy and don't know the rules of the road. We share approaches that work, share pens, carpool, and split the cost for tables at major book venues and events. The group has been so supportive that I was able to sell books at the 2025 edition of CanCon despite being unable to attend the event in Ottawa.

Pang says the community provides “what I call positive peer pressure. So for example, if I know there is a critique session coming up where I have to share my work, then that gives me a deadline. I need to finish up.”

Yearly events like the TSFF *One-Shot* anthology that, to date, has published nine instalments, are a staple of the group. The brainchild of founder David F. Shultz, the *One-Shot* series' explicit goal is to give new and emerging writers a foot in the door — get them published, build them a resume, and make them eligible for awards and grants.

The *One-Shot* was my first publication (I appeared in the first three issues). I also got my short story “Consumption (Bought, Sold, Delivered)” published in the *Strange Economics* anthology via TdotSpec Publishing, an offshoot of Toronto SFF Writers.

I never thought of myself as a short story writer. But that's the great thing about Toronto SFF Writers. It pushes you to challenge yourself and has your back when you need support. And it's a model of what a supportive writing community can be.

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K.M. McKenzie is the author of multiple short stories and self-published novels. *The Civilization* (2024) is published through Iskanchi Press. For more on her work, visit her website at ebonscape.com, or find her online via her profile handle [@kmmauthor](https://twitter.com/kmmauthor).



Placing Trust in Stillness

How losing my memory forced me to step back and ultimately move forward

BY MIGUEL FENRICH

THE SUMMER I was 13, Saskatchewan farmer Gerald Stanley shot and killed a young Indigenous man, Colten Boushie, near the family farm where I grew up. I remember that time in my life as a slurry of things: Taking “Am I gay” quizzes on *BuzzFeed*, cutting my home-schooled teeth on community old-time dances and coffee-table card games, not recognizing my own Black biracial face in the mirror.

Boushie’s killing, in 2016, took a lot from me: a sense of identity, of community, but, most of all, this national tragedy took away a sense of blind safety. Stole from me the idea that the world was heading in the right direction. That same year, I sat on Skype with an old friend, horrified, and watched the U.S. election map on Google slowly turn red, as Donald Trump was elected and again, my distrust of the world was reaffirmed.

When I was 15, Stanley was acquitted by an all-white jury. At the time, media reported on white trucks circling the courthouse. I wonder still if those were cousins, great uncles, distant relatives. At 17, George Floyd’s execution in Minneapolis led to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. At 19, *Roe v Wade* was overturned. At 21, Gaza was reduced to rubble in a UN-defined genocide.

Today, at 23, I’m watching AI data centres rise out of the dirt near my province’s capital — Regina — with little meaningful community consultation. I scroll Instagram Reels, and see there’s flash flooding in Nepal, humanitarian crisis in the Congo, ongoing economic attacks from the United States.

The world is broken. And, like many writers before me, for a decade I’ve felt an unyielding responsibility to help fix it.

In Canadian literature, Farley Mowat is often credited with changing the Canadian public’s perspective on the North with *People of the Deer* and *Never Cry Wolf*. Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* drew attention to the injustice of the Japanese-Canadian Internment. Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* and *This Changes Everything* fiercely critiqued capitalism’s impact on the environment in Canada. Today, whenever reproductive rights are under attack, women protest in red cloaks and white cowls, drawn neatly from the pages of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

We have a history of changing the world using our words. But in the face of mounting horror, where do we even begin?

Part 1: The Force of Creativity — Slowing Down

When I was younger, I read a sci-fi story on Reddit about a man who claims he lived another life in the brief moments post-head injury. Reddit user u/temptotasssoon, wrote on r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix in 2014 that he spent years depressed over this faux reality, his wife, and his son. He mourned this dream version of himself that only existed in his mind.

My brain was making me think that I was living this reality: constantly walking, eating, sleeping in this fake reality. And through subsequent panic attacks, combined with chronic stress, poor diet, and other factors, I was led to a two-week episode of amnesia at the end of April 2026. My family spent those two weeks watching me forget what province I was living in or who the prime minister was. I haven’t discussed it much since.

You know that feeling when you’re young, and you wake up in your bed after falling asleep on the couch watching TV? My amnesia felt like that, every 20 seconds or so. For two weeks. My hospital door at the Royal

“The change I can make is actually quite small, but it’s not pointless change.”

University Hospital in Saskatoon — where I stayed for nine days — had a piece of paper taped to it, reminding me that this was my room, and that I was having memory issues, because I kept forgetting. Everything. Every 20 seconds.

I was back to normal, as much as you can be after that experience — albeit the two weeks were fuzzy — by the second weekend in May. My undiagnosed amnesia was chalked up to “too much stress” and I was sent home with some anti-seizure drugs (just in case) and a suggestion to see a therapist and relax.

Relax?

With such incredible pressure mounting to change the world, and change it now — how could I rest? I’d been under the impression I’ve been relaxing every weekend, for the past seven years of my professional writing career. What would more relaxation do to my craft and the career I’d built on constant engagement on social media, growing pressure to change the world, and a contract balancing act in our gig economy?

One of the first people I talked to, as I returned to normal — and even responded to briefly via email in a moment of clarity in the hospital — was Dash Salt-Reimer. We met again, in sunny mid-August on his back porch.

Salt-Reimer does a bit of everything. He’s a multidisciplinary spoken-word poet, hip-hop musician, and arts administrator. He works in theatre, visual arts, and cinematography, and, like me, lives in Saskatoon, albeit in his early thirties. (After interviewing him for this article, I wound up filming a promo with him for his debut album, *Everything That’s Made Me*, which launched on September 30.)

He too recognized the fear I hold of trying to balance creative life in an unstable world.

“I’m never working one job. I’m always working five jobs, and then I’m also thinking about what five jobs I need to do next year,” Salt-Reimer said. “Honestly, I get overwhelmed... constantly, and consistently. I find it hard to finish a workday and feel like I finish the workday.”

Not only do we balance competing responsibilities, but the pressure also to change the world is strong.

“The change I can make is actually quite small, but it’s not pointless change,” he said. Salt-Reimer and

his wife, Amy Salt-Reimer, a social worker, live in an area faced with a growing homelessness crisis, largely unaddressed by Saskatoon’s systems of power. But, he said, they must try, against all odds, to slow down.

So, instead of facing overwhelm and burnout, Salt-Reimer focusses on justice-oriented living, something he describes as just growing good things where he can. Growing a garden is slow, he notes. We’re not meant to have 100 close friends or save everyone. And, in this western, individualistic, self-flagellation-focussed society, we may feel we’re expected to burn ourselves out to save society.

But burning ourselves out to save society can’t possibly work in the long run, right?

“Martyrs never get to receive the medals... It is not my goal to put the world on my shoulders and change it all. The amount that I can affect is within the radius of my arms,” Salt-Reimer added.

Well, maybe he’s onto something.

Part 2: Creative Recovery — Placing Trust in Stillness

I started writing to express my feelings in 2018, not long after Gerald Stanley was acquitted. When George Floyd was killed, and I parted ways with a longtime friend over his disbelief of, and disavowal of systemic racism — I started writing professionally.

In summer 2022, at age 19, I self-published the angrily dystopian *Blue: A Novel. What Lies in the Valley*, a sadder paranormal thriller novel, was published in winter 2023. In the last three-and-a-half years since that publication, I’ve done more than I thought was possible.

I was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal, in recognition of my publishing company, Supernova Press. I’ve served as president of the Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild and am currently a director for the Book and Periodical Council and a University of Saskatchewan senator. This spring, I was incredibly lucky to attend the Sage Hill Fiction Colloquium with Kevin Chong.

I’ve won a CBC Future 40 Award. Published national essays. Performed spoken-word poetry on stages across Saskatchewan. I’ve been awarded the 2025 Tony & Herb Rainbow Award through the Saskatchewan Foundation

for the Arts for my next novel-in-progress. Before turning 24 at the end of September, I became a member of The Writers' Union of Canada.

I'm incredibly grateful. Honestly. And I don't say any of this to brag, either.

But also, I'm sick to my stomach reading through my press kit — how do I keep levelling up? What's my next move? I feel as though people expect greatness, and I must give it to them every day. Currently, I'm booking work and programming into April 2027. I'm jealous of the younger version of myself who was willing to let himself play with writing a story and a novel.

One of my friends in Saskatoon, Peace Akintade-Oluwagbeye, is incredibly accomplished. Her latest full-length poetry collection, *The Goat's Tongue*, launched in September 2026. She served as poet laureate of Saskatchewan and has been awarded the International Metatron Poetry Prize. In October, she was in Mississauga, being recognized as one of the Top 100 Black Women to Watch in Canada.

She is also feeling burnt out. Sitting down to interview her for this article comes with the same exhaustion we've both built into our crafts: drinking coffee frantically between committee meetings, article deadlines, residency applications, board meetings, workshops, public-speaking gigs, and on, and on, and on.

No longer are we friends just catching up and drinking coffee; we've commodified this time and made useful every spare moment of our day. Every moment must be useful. Valuable. When I get back to the car post-coffee, I am late for my next meeting. And because I'm late, that will have me up late tonight writing emails. It's impossible to catch up.

This torrent of work is especially daunting on the heels of needing to rest for my health. Now there's the additional fear of not being healthy enough to even do the work that makes a difference, and so I push myself hard. The cycle repeats itself as soon as the next deadline approaches.

In addition to writing poetry, Akintade-Oluwagbeye works in theatre as an intimacy director. That role "was brought upon me [for] money," she said. Having an art career means taking on other forms of labour, but that also contributes to burnout.

"I like to think of it as a sinking ship... The ship is sinking, but at least I have a life jacket," she adds, meaning her poetry.

But she's right. It does feel like the ship is sinking. It's harder than ever to find the time to write now. I'm not just a writer, but an administrator. In my time, I've become public speaker, workshop facilitator, social media manager, cultural worker, small-business owner, and beyond — juggling grant deadlines, residency applications, and volunteering and mentorship.

This burnout is driven by a scarcity mindset that by late 2027, as an independent artist without a secretary and PR manager, I'll have no more opportunities. I'll end up working in a Tim Hortons somewhere, desperately trying to find my way back to my craft and my career — but that at 26 years old, I may be washed up. And I won't even have changed the world.

Just as Salt-Reimer is getting used to slowness, so is Akintade-Oluwagbeye. When she had a crisis in February, she went on a solo camping trip with a notebook and the stars. Now, when a friend phones her, she tries not to leap straight into consultant mode. Maybe people can call and talk on the phone, without it becoming another task in our already too-busy lives.

In a world pushing us to always act quickly, stillness is indeed, the antidote.

Part 3: Can Rest Change the World? I Hope So

Doing nothing. That's what I call it. Doing nothing.

It's not literally doing nothing, but it feels like it.

I've started reading for enjoyment again, turning back to the fantasy and softcore romance novels of my younger years. And instead of always trying to watch all the Oscar Best Picture nominees every year, I'm watching Marvel movies. Last week, on my phone, I learned a new card game. Spent time baking doughnuts for my family. I've picked up knitting and sewing.

The act of rest, for me, has been a slow detangling of a desire and need to be productive with my time. Unproductiveness. As a friend's mother used to say, "We're human beings, not human doings."

This work includes changing my metrics of success. If I write more again, after months of nothingness, great—but my gift to my body for real, restorative rest, is not more work and another deadline.

This summer, when healing, I watched a lot of *The Golden Girls*. Went to a new music festival. My new metric for success, is how much joy I have in my life. I'm in my community again, caring for people. I'm giving workshops. I'm working on interviews. I have passions again.

And hopefully, that means I'll still change the world. If not the world, my city, if not my city, maybe I'll just change me for the better.

Hopefully a better me is enough.

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Miguel Fenrich (he/they) is a Queer, Black author, journalist, artist, and cultural worker living on Treaty 6 Territory in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. As a truth-teller and future historian his work examines joy, connection, and community care in relationship with land and space. Fenrich is the author of *Blue: a Novel and What Lies in the Valley*, a CBC Saskatchewan Future 40 Winner, and the President of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild.



Writing as Fundamental

What my cancer diagnosis taught me about why I write

BY MATT BEAM

A FEW YEARS AGO, I seriously considered quitting writing. I'm the author of five YA books and a couple of children's titles, but in addition to writing, I'm an elementary schoolteacher in Toronto, which was taking up most of my creative hours while co-parenting my child filled most of the other gaps. Plus, it had been 15 years since my last young adult novel was published. Sure, I had written a handful of novels over that period, but none of them had made it into print.

Even when my books were selling well, I considered writing to be more about process than product. By the time I considered quitting, that was less a philosophy and more a reality: There was apparently no saleable product to speak of.

But then things changed.

I got a break, and then I got news that would force me to think more deeply about why we write, and what writing meant to me.

First, the break. One of those unpublished novels, *Shoot the Moon*, finally got me a book contract. After it was published by Orca in spring 2025, I rededicated myself to consistent writing. On a spreadsheet, I tallied every minute I spent punching out words. By January, 2026, I had recorded over 100 hours, and completed 95 percent of my next novel. I promised myself I would take a six-month break and then edit with fresh eyes in the summer. I even opened an Instagram account and started doing some eager (and admittedly awkward) posting.

Then, the news.

During the periods when I was spending all that time writing, I noticed some strangeness in my gastrointestinal system. My doctor suggested a colonoscopy — just in case. I was 56, and had made sure to complete my home screening tests (called FIT tests) every two years. Still, with the incidence of colon cancer in people younger and younger increasing, a colonoscopy was in order.

Test results

In early March of this year, the test revealed a significant tumour in my colon. As my world came crashing down, my family had to cancel our long-awaited holiday in Mexico, and we pivoted to getting a CT scan as quickly as possible, and visiting family in Victoria, BC.

For the next 10 days, I was a zombie, staring blankly into the middle distance, several beats behind every conversation — at best. My mind constantly fixated on the worst possible scenarios, leaving me convinced I had only a few years to live and that they wouldn't be good ones. Feelings of fear, guilt, and grief made it hard for me to look at my child, and I could sense my wife searching my face fruitlessly for the person inside.

My only escape, my only salve, was my novel. Breaking my promise to let it sit for six months, I dove in. On the way to BC, I edited for five hours straight, from when the airplane left the gate to when it landed. In Victoria, while my family planned whale-watching trips and butterfly-garden visits, I hid in my paragraphs, fussing away at typos and narrative inconsistencies. By

the time we'd returned to Toronto, after some 25 hours of editing, I thought I might actually have a manuscript I could sell.

Back in the real world, there were test results. The cancer had not spread to my other organs, but a biopsy revealed it was in some of my lymph nodes. I had Stage 3 colorectal cancer and would need to have surgery followed

by chemotherapy.

While this news was difficult, it was much better than I had imagined.

I had a chance, a good chance. And instead of days filled with racing, panicky thoughts, I was able, while I waited for these hardships to begin, to look at my life, and death, with fresh eyes.

Why write?

Like with all clichés, the idea that life, in the end, is about love and family exists for a reason. After the diagnosis, the people that love me came rushing to my proverbial side, with concerned texts, calls, and yes, actual visits.

And yet the most notable, or perhaps most surprising realization I had, was how important the interiority of my mind was — and that writing, not only the act, but the thoughts that come with it, was fundamental to my being.

By contrast, at the start of my career, I felt I had only one reason to write: to have my novels produced by the best publishers in the country and read by as many people as possible. When I attained that (or at least the former), I realized it was not the mecca I had imagined. I found post-publication harder than the writing and editing process, what with challenging reviews, sales pressures, and next-work anxiety.

What I realized, thankfully, was how much I loved the process: the swirling, excited stomach of the first pages, the solidifying stage where I settled down into my story with confidence. And yes, the daily grind, versions of me — optimistic word producer, ruthless sentence slasher, big picture commander — battling the previous day's person for days on end.

And "person" is the operative word here; my unexpected post-diagnosis conclusion is neither about product, nor process, it is about person.

Me.

Yes, family and love are important, absolutely, but my mind and my creative ideas are a significant chunk of who I am and how I live in the world.

To parse further, as writers, in theory, we spend our time building worlds for our readership. But this experience with cancer has reinforced the fact that these worlds we build, with their many facets and intricacies,

are places for us to live in for a time — affording us both a break from so-called real life, and in the process, creating a new and fundamentally

internal one.

Speaking of the real world, there was, um, reality to face. Laparoscopic surgery and chemotherapy were not, to quote my affable oncologist, "a walk in the park." That said, once I recovered from surgery, most days I had friends and family to accompany me on my literal walk in the park.

But as spring turned to summer, when the walks diminished, and the comforting texts and calls were fewer, I was left with me.

And when left to my own devices, what I tend to do is conjure up ideas. For a novel, a short story, or a picture book.

Or, in this case, for an article about how one of the things I will miss maybe more than anything in this life is wrestling with its

meaning, its joys and sorrows, and its inevitable end.

And I will do this, as time-and-space does its little dance, in my mind, with an end to having these internal thoughts eventually emerge as written words on the page.

.....
Matt Beam is an author living in Toronto with his wife and 13-year-old child in Toronto's West End. His most recent young adult novel, *Shoot the Moon*, a high-interest, low-language paperback, fits nicely with his work as a grade 8 teacher at a school for dyslexic students. The novel that helped carry him through the first stages of his cancer diagnosis is titled, *The River is My Alibi*, and it is currently looking for a home.

"The most surprising realization I had was that writing was fundamental to my being."

"We spend our time building worlds for our readership. But these worlds we build, with their many facets and intricacies, are places for us to live in for a time."



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Kyle Vingoe-Cram is a cartoonist, artist and writer from Halifax/K'jipuktuk. They are the author of *Kettle Harbour* (Conundrum Press, 2023), named one of the Best Graphic Novels of 2023 by the CBC, and a "stunning debut" from author Kate Beaton. They are currently at work on a new graphic novel with frequent collaborator, artist GHY Cheung. They live in Ottawa with their family. kylevc.com



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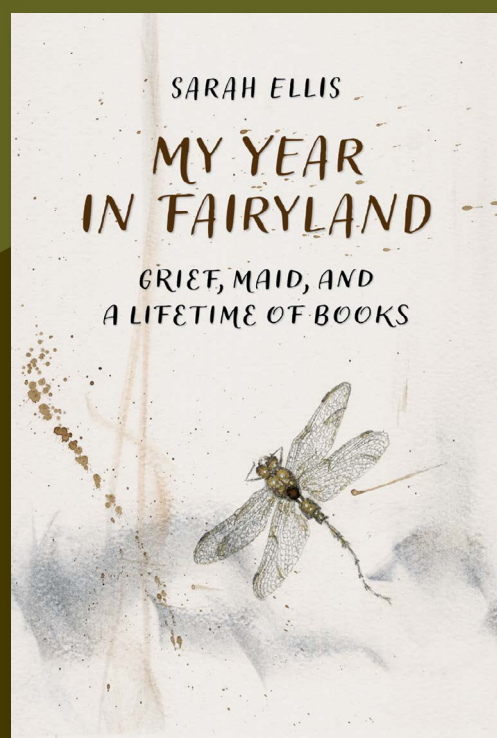
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