WRITE

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Beyond plagiarism: a novel critique of AI

Micro-nonfiction: the future is small

Who is a Canadian writer?

Crossword, **"Themeless #2."** See page 23.

ABOUT THE COVER ILLUSTRATOR

Sunny Singh is a cartoonist and illustrator based out of Hamilton, Ontario.

The cartoons he creates look to offer a fun, thoughtful, and sometimes strange commentary on everything from the metaphysical to the mundane. Learn more: sunnysingh.ink.

PHOTO: MONOGRAPHY

ABOUT THE CROSSWORD CONSTRUCTOR

Ada Nicolle (she/her) is a trans woman and crossword constructor based in Toronto. Her puzzles have been published in outlets such as *Xtra* and *The Walrus*, and her puzzle book, *A-to-Gen Z Crosswords: 72 Puzzles That Hit Different*, is available in bookstores. Learn more: luckyxwords.com.

Contents

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What It Means to Be a Canadian Writer

BY ANGEL DI ZHANG

I'VE BEEN THINKING a great deal about what it means to be a Canadian writer. Why is it that despite living here for more years of my life than in any other country, when I get an idea for a story, it is often set abroad? Is it the Canadian reticence to extol our virtues, the fact I have ties to other homelands, or the marketplace realities of the cultural behemoth on our southern border?

Canadian Publishing History

I've learned much about the history of Canadian publishing by reading the texts of the Writers' Trust of Canada's Margaret Laurence lecture series — talks given by esteemed writers since 1987. You may have heard the story about Margaret Atwood attending a party where a brain surgeon said he was going to write novels in retirement. She said, "What a coincidence, when I retire from writing I intend to take up brain surgery." This is widely attributed to Margaret Atwood, but it was said by Margaret Laurence.

Margaret Laurence, a founding member of The Writers' Union, called her fellow Canadian writers "the tribe." It may not be the term we'd choose today, but to Laurence and her peers, it felt both familial and political, a found family of common interests. The annual Margaret Laurence lectures were to be on the topic of "A Writer's Life," and many of the lecturers focussed on what it meant to be a Canadian writer and to have a national literature.

In 1961, five novels were published in English by Canadian publishers. The fact that you're reading this in the magazine of The Writers' Union, and there are over 3,000 of us members, is a testament to the success of Canadian publishing.

Our Canadian Reticence

As a country we are many things. It is difficult to define something that is many things, but our diversity is our strength, not a weakness. We are decent, modest, and kind. Our modesty makes it so that we don't extol our virtues as loudly as the citizens of some other countries. For many, the idea of nationhood is even a little embarrassing. I've personally been wary of nationalism because historically it has led to terrible outcomes, yet lately I find myself thinking that nationalism is good if the nation has good characteristics. We are not without problems in Canada, but when I look at other countries, I am grateful for the things that we are doing right. We have virtues that we should proselytize.

Our Southern Neighbour

For much of our history as Canadians, we've defined ourselves not by what we are but rather by what we are not. The most often proffered definition is that we are not American. It's rather like how fiction is, while nonfiction is everything that is not fiction. The U.S. recognized the importance of cultural industries, and after Wolrd War II tied some aid to Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere with the demand that they allow American media imports. This curved the culture of the world toward America. It is not only American economic strength but also its cultural dominance that shapes their idea of nationhood.

With every novel set in NYC or LA, the myth and mythos of the American empire are built and maintained. With every story about the American dream, they lure people from outside their borders to identify with their worldview. I spoke to numerous writers who write drafts

set in a Canadian city then change it to New York or Chicago before going on submitting to publishers.

Ties to Other Homelands

I was born in China and grew up in China, the U.K., Canada, and the U.S. My debut novel, *The Light of Eternal Spring*, was set in New York City in 1999 and China in the 1970s. It was published in neither the U.S. or China but by Random House Canada.

It's not that I didn't seek a U.S. publisher, but my agent and I split the rights by country, so I would have a Canadian publisher at home and foreign publishers abroad. Despite being set in the U.S. and China, a core theme of my novel is that reconciliation between cultures is possible — a deeply Canadian idea. Thus, while my book was not set in Canada, who I am as a Canadian person and writer is intrinsic in my storytelling.

My current work in progress is a novel set in Toronto. I delight in the specificity of street names, architectural details, weather. I am spelling it "colour" and not "color."

An Indigenous Perspective

Naturally, my view of what it means to be a Canadian writer would be different from that of an Indigenous writer, which is why I spoke to Waubgeshig Rice. He is an award-winning Anishinaabe journalist and author whose books include the acclaimed *Moon of the Turning Leaves* and *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. He grew up in Wasauksing First Nation on Georgian Bay.

Waubgeshig said everything he writes is from his perspective of having an Anishinaabe background. He doesn't ascribe to Canadian values or blueprint or mythology. His writing seeks to humanize the Anishinaabe people as fully formed — healthy, positive representations that contain some hope. He doesn't reject Canadians or Canadian identity. The core of Anishinaabe culture, he said, is building community, welcoming people, treaty making. He would rather that Canada remain Canada and not become a part of the U.S., and like many of us in recent months, he has been doing more to buy Canadian.

Call to Action

A nation is built on ideas, and it's an important time to write Canadian stories and publish at home. It is time to define ourselves not by being not-American, but by being Canadian — Indigenous, settlers, and immigrants. Write stories set abroad, stories set on other planets, stories set in fantasy lands; they are all Canadian stories because you are a Canadian writer. But let me gently suggest that you think about writing stories set here, in this land.

I'm proud there is no homogeneous Canadian identity. But to discover the multitude of who we are as individuals and as a people, we need to write stories set in Canada.

Angel Di Zhang is a Canadian author. She was educated in the joint BA-MIA program at Columbia University and is a painter and internationally exhibited fine art photographer. Her debut novel, *The Light of Eternal Spring*, published with Random House Canada in 2023. Angel is the founder and host of the Angel Reading Series held at the Arts and Letters Club of Toronto, which showcases writers who have a recent or forthcoming book.

Stop Jumping Off the Cliff

A different kind of argument against AI

BY MOLLY CROSS-BLANCHARD

I AM NOT, by nature, a fearmonger. On the contrary, I'm a fierce optimist, often infuriating the pragmatists in my life. Lately, though, I haven't been able to shake my fear of the way our communities have accepted and become so dependent on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), without pause or scrutiny. My students use it to write papers free of grammatical errors or original thought. My landlord uses it to diagnose household problems, ignoring the detailed descriptions and close-up shots of clogged dryer filters I text him. One friend even had ChatGPT write the eulogy for her grandmother's funeral service. GenAI is a cliff we keep jumping off in succession because we've been told this kind of death is inevitable.

I blame Indigenous Studies for my disillusionment with AI. I've been teaching the subject at Kwantlen Polytechnic University for two years, with lived experience but without a formal degree, so I do a lot of learning alongside my students. What's gradually emerged as the foundation of our work together is critical comparison of Indigenous worldviews (holism, collectivism, harmony), and the colonial worldviews (reductionism, individualism, conquering) that functionally cement power and resources in the hands of the elite, neglecting the non-elite.

COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE

Because of the nature of being a post-secondary student at the height of capitalism, especially for students with visas and funding to maintain, I spend a lot of time talking to them about AI technology as a function of colonialism and all but begging them not to use it. I even assign a project meant to ease academic pressure: a combination research-and-creation project in which they relate a personal interest to Indigeneity, contextualizing that topic through a creative piece like a collage or song. Still, about 40 percent of what's submitted each term is AI-generated: poems that lump different cultures' symbols into one unidentifiable mass, distorted digital paintings appropriating Māori patterns, personal essays featuring detailed accounts of family members attending residential schools that never existed.

Embedding colonialism deeper into daily life

All technologies reflect the societies that built them, and GenAI offers an extremely clear picture of our society. It consumes what's already available — academic papers about Indigenous peoples that don't consult actual Indigenous people, sensationalism from across the political spectrum, medical studies that exclude female and non-white subjects, even *satire* — and regurgitates it as undeniable fact. (Google's Gemini recently referred to Cape Breton's separate 12-minutes-ahead time zone, seeming to draw the information from a satirical *Beaverton* article by writer and comedian Janel Comeau.)

What terrifies me, and should terrify you too, is that the more we depend on AI, the tighter we weave it into the fabric of daily life, the deeper colonialism becomes embedded.

AI enthusiasts claim the technology will eventually have a net-positive gain. But there are no guarantees, especially not when operators of these systems are driven by greed.

However, we *do* know some things for certain:

1. AI data centres consume astronomical amounts of non-renewable energy and generate so much heat that they evaporate two cups of potable water for every user request. Most of these centres are built near rural municipalities, where the price is right and whose power grids and water tables are unprepared for the strain.
2. A swath of self-published books claiming to be written by Indigenous authors teaching readers how to speak Anishinaabemowin, Inuktitut, nēhiyawēwin, and more are being sold to aspiring language learners. These books are written by AI and brimming with inaccuracies.
3. Many researchers are now studying the effect on the brain of offloading mental functions to our technologies. These studies consistently anticipate a decline in memory retention, problem solving, and critical thinking due to lack of mental exercise, some even projecting a significant spike in Alzheimer's Disease by 2060.

I need to make one thing clear: AI itself is not the problem. There will be more ethical, decolonial AI models to emerge, trained with Seven Generations wisdom (check out Abundant Intelligences, for one). But those are years, even decades away. Why? A harmony-based model — one that doesn't aim to recklessly conquer regardless of impact — takes time to create. It's the opposite of "bull in a china shop." Salmon swimming upstream, maybe? A worthwhile grind?

All this to say: we *cannot* naively accept that the models currently on offer will have net-positive impacts. There's simply too much evidence telling us otherwise.

Let's tell a different story

This is a magazine for writers, from an organization that advocates for the rights of writers, so I imagine some readers will be wondering where literature comes in. You've likely read arguments about AI making real writers obsolete or the exploitative nature of AI training deals (especially the recent HarperCollins agreement that seems to be feeding Microsoft's new nonfiction imprint), but I've aimed to present a more holistic case to our community in hopes you might equally value arguments that reach beyond publishing.

I don't believe it's responsible to reduce our art practice to the act of writing. Art, especially literature, is a space to scrutinize the illnesses of society, and the way we're using GenAI is decidedly ill. If you value individuality, information accuracy, human connection, and safeguarding those who don't receive systemic protection, and if those values influence your writing, then you must understand: Using this technology is antithetical to your creative practice. We can't ethically or logically divorce our advocacy for writers from our advocacy for humanity, non-human kin, and our collective future.

What I feel when I think about AI and what it's doing to us is grief. I'm grieving our collective grip on the conditions that allow us to live a good life. Or perhaps we can still recognize the conditions, and the real problem is that we feel so at the mercy of the holders-of-purse-strings that this infuriating apathy has become our default survival mechanism.

But I'm still a fierce optimist, and I blame Indigenous studies for that, too. The other day, I attended a former student's convocation, which he thoughtfully invited me to and that I wouldn't have missed. In a sea of harmful AI-generated colonial bullshit, many formidable research-and-creation projects rise up as beacons of hope, and this student's assignment had beautifully reimagined a day in the life of a residential school student if the education had been safe and culturally supportive. It still brings me to tears when I think of it.

As storytellers, we know how much power narrative has to change hearts and minds. So let's stop telling the collective story that destruction-by-ChatGPT is inevitable, and start *living* stories we can be proud of.

Molly Cross-Blanchard is a white and Métis writer and educator living on Treaty 1 territory (Winnipeg, Manitoba). Her collection of poetry is *Exhibitionist* (Coach House, 2021). Molly is the outgoing TWUC National Council Indigenous Advocate.

Micro-Nonfiction

Why it works now

BY VERONICA GAYLIE

MICRO-NONFICTION (micro-NF) is a short form genre that bridges the brevity of poetry with the clarity of creative nonfiction. In a loud and lengthy world of trouble, I've also found it to be an authentic way to write that lets the true story, below the big story, shine through.

The form takes many shapes, but you could describe it as a report on everyday life meets literary craft — compressed, and elevated. It can be a line of poetry, unfurled.

An early example might be these famous lines, written in 8th century China by Li Bai (701–762):

> **We sit together, the mountain and me,**
> **until only the mountain remains.**

Centuries later, this is still a good example of single-scene environmental writing that shows more than it tells and invites the reader into the sky and the mountain, until you disappear inside the vapour. Without the line break, it becomes a bright one-liner from a writer's journal: "We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains."

Where Form Meets Nature

> **"Nature writing is a most welcoming form, a patchwork, a crazy quilt of ideas and observation."**
> — Harry Thurston, *Writing About the Natural World*, University of King's College MFA Tip Sheet, Fall 2020

If the best writing comes from what we know, then we don't need to make it bigger to make it impressive. I recently wrote a piece about a solo hike in Ireland where I sank deep into the peat and lost my shoe. As I thought about what to do, a small flock of sheep quietly surrounded me, perhaps because this very thing happens to them all the time. I structured the piece around that one true nature moment. I could have made it longer, or traditionally cinematic, but nature said it more boldly, and economically. The story now has a place in my book, a collage of short and micro-nonfiction pieces about the way nature and community are there for us in times of loss. Staying true to the nature story also meant staying true to the actual size of it.

If the best writing comes from what we know, then we don't need to make it bigger to make it impressive.

As a compact form, micro-NF has the capability to describe real life, as it unfolds. As Nova Scotia editor and writer AnnMarie MacKinnon says: "From a philosophical perspective, micro-nonfiction is the ultimate case of verisimilitude — it most mirrors how things play out in the real world. One small moment follows the next, and then the next, and so on."

This helps explain why the form works well for environmental writing. Real life is shown as it happens: A bird disappears into the sky, or the mist into the mountain, without analysis of bird, sky, mountain, or mist. Because you're sharing a picture with readers, they can decide for themselves what they see.

In short forms, you can climb a mountain and write a story about it, without the story having to be bigger than the mountain. In our times of climate change, I keep

returning to this idea: The Earth needs small stories too. Oftentimes that's just how nature reaches us: through a bee on a flower, or the feel of tree bark on your hand. Now is a good time to ponder our relationship with nature, and the world off-screen because even though the Earth is changing, it's still there, and it still has things to teach us about how to live in it.

I recently taught a nature writing workshop in Burnaby, BC, that helped me see how this works in real time. A student in the class, from Japan, read aloud Bashō's most famous haiku. First, she read the poem in English translation, then in Japanese, and then we all had tears in our eyes. The student said: "I'm sorry... this poem is just... about everything."

"The Old Pond"
By Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)

An old silent pond
A frog jumps into the pond —
Splash! Silence again.

Nature speaks through the silent pond and tells every story: nothing happens. Something happens. And then again, nothing happens. The silent part of ourselves meets the silence in nature. It is a line of text lifted from life, and hundreds of years later, we still feel it.

Definition(ish) and Origins

I found micro nonfiction by chance when I submitted a poem to *Geist* magazine, and editor Mary Schendlinger suggested an experiment: Keep all the words, and change the format to creative nonfiction (CNF). I removed the ragged right-hand column, turned it into a postcard, and the piece appeared in the magazine. After that, I started writing more micro pieces, about everyday life growing up in Vancouver — which included a mix of gas stations, hockey, birds, and mountains. In micro-NF, I found room for it all.

I sometimes think of micro-NF as a viewfinder, where the scene itself tells the story. In *Melon Balls in Space*, I describe an ominous job interview, and zero in on the fruit plate: "The questions. The tongs. The fruit plate. The melon balls from Mexico served since the '50s. Faded orange and green. Always the last to go. Long after the end of the world, someone in space will still be finding melon balls no one ate." In *The Guy Upstairs*, I sit on an airplane across the aisle from a Vancouver Canucks player and find out why he's a star: "Everything Trevor Linden says on an airplane is important. When he says *Wow*, we look. When he says *Oh*, we learn. When he says *Yep*, we affirm. Trevor is the centre. When he turns, we turn."

Even as a practitioner of the form, I still find myself thinking, "So, what *is* micro-NF?" It turns out the genre is a bit hard to define. It's compact, mercurial, seems easy (though it isn't), turns fast, and tends to linger in the mind like a good bear story. It's just sort of, *there*. And, it's been there for a while.

The history and even the name of the genre tends to shift, but in its current iteration it goes back to the creative nonfiction movement of the late '90s, when a group of writers decided they wanted to write short form nonfiction with classic story techniques like narration, description, and dialogue. The group found a home with editor Lee Gutkind, founder of *Creative Nonfiction Magazine*, with the tag line: "True Stories. Well Told."

The (Canadian) Creative Nonfiction Collective uses CNF as the umbrella term for narrative, or literary nonfiction, and publishers also use these terms interchangeably. The collective defines the genre for what it isn't. It's not "technical or instructional works, conventional newspaper reportage, and nonfiction work characterized by a neutral (so-called objective) third-person perspective."

In other words, CNF does not tell you what to think, or how, but you still know who's telling the story.

I sometimes think of micro-NF as a viewfinder, where the scene itself tells the story.

Micro-NF often shows the unposed snapshots of life around us. It is the story from the laundromat or the glimpse of nature as you travel on horseback through ancient China. There is an urgency to get the story down, as you witnessed it. The pieces also tend to be well edited. AnnMarie MacKinnon says: "The thing about micro forms, and micro-nonfiction in particular, I think, is that we have to find ways to convey a truth (as opposed to the truth) in a small way. It forces the writer to be both precise and economical, and to eschew intellectual squidginess. There are no shortcuts here. From a craft perspective, the micro forms are an excellent drill to hone your vocabulary and your skill at creating sentences that move."

A Book, in Pieces

Short-form nonfiction also works its magic within book-length stories, including memoir. Lorri Neilsen Glenn's book *The Old Moon in Her Arms: Women I Have Known and Been*, is written as a series of pieces, of various

lengths and fragments, that describe the pivotal eras in the writer's life. The narrative layers about family, relationships, work, loss, and environment illuminate the variety of roles, and moments, that shape a lifetime. Just as the author is shaped by the rhythms of the natural world, so the author shapes the book into a work of art that is nature-like in its form.

The stories are arranged in sections, intentionally placed outside of the usual linear timeframe (beginning, middle, end), and follow a moon-like arc: *Origin Stories*, *Orbits*, *Grace House*, *If a Woman*, and *Waning Crescent*. Glenn has explored her Indigenous roots in previous writing, and in this book, the stories are guided by the Cree concept of *wahkohtowin*, which refers to our interrelationship with all creation, including the Earth. As the author says in the prologue: "Over time and circumstance, haven't we all been various?"

Here, unplanned experiences and story fragments dance around life's larger turning points. Together, the pieces show how real life, and writing, is shaped by surroundings, conversations, and glimpses of what is seen, heard, believed or beloved. The short nonfiction form steers through the tense changes of memoir, that can combine the past (lived in the heat of the moment) now looked upon from the present, with the knowledge of hindsight and years of experience.

Glenn suggests that Plato's idea of *kairos*, or the opportune moment, also speaks to writers; when we write in an open way, we can find that turning point, and the story we didn't expect. In Glenn's story "Carrots," the narrator stops on the highway and buys a 50-lb bag of carrots for six dollars; then she wonders what to do with way too many carrots. The story turns into a meditation on the disconnect between an idea and the energy to make it happen, with a question that comes up with age: Why am I doing this? The narrator says: "... I've lost my mojo; I'm a slacker who can't even keep a promise to vegetables."

But then, carrot distribution happens. Along the way, a trail of carrots gets mysteriously left, and it all leads to the best story ending: an unexpected bridge between dreams and reality. And it all unfolds true to size.

The Future is Small

Micro-nonfiction is rebellious. Its very existence is a question that challenges what we think writing, or life, should look like. In this period of time fraught with climate change, political strongmen, and bulk disinformation, maybe this is the moment for micro alternatives in storytelling.

True stories, well told, help us know what being human is about; not the glossy advertised version, just the real one. A common theme of great short and micro-NF pieces, either on their own, or layered into a book, is that they're real, and they make it look easy. You don't just read them, they happen to you — like the carrot story, or the fish in the pond. These are stories you go back and look for, like something you forgot, and need. There are many, many more stories like this waiting to be written, just outside the door.

The future is small. And a literary world filled with more short forms, fragments and flash ensures the big story doesn't get the last word.

Veronica Gaylie is a writer from Vancouver. Her first literary book, *Sword Dance: A Celtic Poem* was published by *Exile*. She's written two books of environmental writing, and her poems and creative nonfiction have appeared in many Canadian and international journals. In Spring 2025, she was writer in residence at Deer Lake in the City of Burnaby. Veronica lives in Vancouver, where she writes and teaches writing.

MARKETS

100 Word Magazine asks for just that. It might sound daunting, but the results of such strict writing parameters can be quietly astonishing, like the 100-word laundromat love story "When Jimmy Leaves Me Again" by Francine Witte. It begins, "I throw his orphaned clothes into the washer's gaping mouthhole..." and ends: "I could swear I hear it promise it will try to forget Jimmy's name." Submissions are open the first week of every month. 100worystory.org.

Geist magazine's Annual Postcard Story Contest calls for 500 words maximum, or a story that fits on a postcard (if you write small). The archive provides a rabbit hole of excellent examples, including Barbara Baydala's "No Time to Write." The black and white postcard shows a guy in a cowboy hat on the edge a rodeo ground. The story opens, "Hectic here. This town is friendly but not rich." And ends: "Hope you can visit some time, one time, next time you are through." In between, an emotional undercurrent sizzles like bacon in the background. www.geist.com.

THE WRITERS' UNION OF CANADA

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***Write* welcomes pitches from TWUC members and non-members alike who are Canadian citizens, newcomers, or permanent residents.**

Visit the Union's website for pitch guidelines.

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Writers' Trust of Canada is accepting applications for the DC Reid Poets' Grant, which delivers grants of $5,000 to working Canadian poets of modest means.

Apply for the DC Reid Poets' Grant Monday, October 6, 2025

DC Reid has established a permanent home for the DC Reid Poets' Grant at Writers' Trust of Canada by investing $1.5 million to support and encourage Canadian poets.

Inspired by his own career, this newly created endowment fund will annually deliver $5,000 grants to eight poets selected by an anonymous jury.

A long-time member of The Writers' Union of Canada, Reid has published 18 books and has won more than 20 awards for his work. His poems and stories have been published in magazines around the world and his articles on fly fishing have been published in magazines, newspapers, and on websites across North America.

Read the complete guidelines at writerstrust.com/poets

To be eligible, an applicant must be:

- a professional writer engaged in the traditional production of literary poems, who has published a minimum of two books.
- of modest means, having earned less than $30,000 from all income sources in the previous tax year.
- a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, living in Canada.
- actively working on a literary project of poetry.

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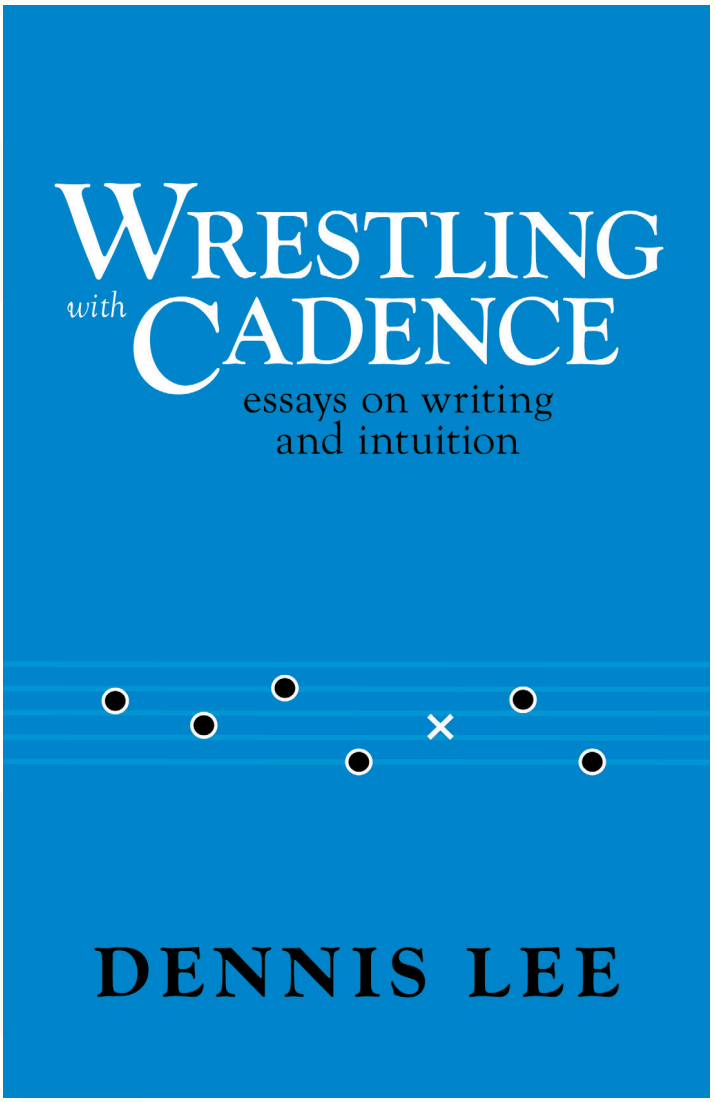

DENNIS LEE'S

WRESTLING WITH CADENCE

Essays on Writing and Intuition

Lee is the beloved author of *Alligator Pie* and *Civil Elegies*, the song lyrics of *Fraggle Rock* and the erotic lyrics of *Riffs*. Now he looks back on what has driven him as a poet — the mysterious germinating force he calls *cadence*.

STONEHEWER BOOKS