

WRITE

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**The importance of
mentorship**

**Why kids should read
romance**

**What I learned organizing
my first literary conference**



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What I Learned Organizing My First Literary Conference

Stop trying to control the narrative

BY CHARLOTTE ASHLEY

“**HAVE** you ever run a conference before?” Nobody asked me this until May 2026, one week before the start of the first conference I had ever run. I was a full two years into planning and staging TriCon, the first writing conference focussed on “speculative fiction” — science fiction, fantasy, horror, and other “what if” genres — held in Atlantic Canada. A bit late in the day to consider my credentials.

“Well, no,” I said.

“What made you think you could do this?” the journalist replied, presumably taken aback.

The question stopped me in my tracks. I had no idea. It hadn’t occurred to me that I couldn’t. I had *imagined* it. All I had to do was make it happen, as if I were writing a story. Only instead of writing it down, I had to mobilize actual people and resources, but how much harder could that be?

I may not have had any conference-running experience, but here’s what I did have: two years as a small business owner, 10 years as a single mom, and 18 years as a professional writer. In the autumn of 2023, I had become the new owner of Trident Booksellers &

Cafe in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and recognized its capacity to incubate a wider arts and culture community. Trident had become a meeting place for writers looking for a cozy place to work, authors hosting book launches, and creatives of all types to simply be among their peers to share ideas. There was talent here hungering for community on a scale that my 25-person cafe could barely touch.

The jump from hosting a Q&A with an author to a three-day weekend filled with panels, workshops, and symposiums felt like a simple matter of math. I started quietly sending inquiries to venues, board members, and guests, just to see what they’d say. At some point, I reasoned, the difference between hosting a poetry reading and platforming several hundred storytellers would become evident.

In writing, we talk about “plotters” and “pantsers.” Plotters are mystical individuals who can see the entire structure of a story and plan for all outcomes, beginning to end. Pantsers, on the other hand, catapult characters into text by feel, trusting these barely formed people to execute a story by instinct alone.

I have always been a pantser, and TriCon was no



exception. I had a vision of what I wanted the conference to be: a space where writers of speculative fiction at all stages of their journeys could meet to discuss the issues that impact us all, workshop solutions to genre and publishing's biggest problems, and spend time in the company of people who would inspire and nurture us. *How* I would achieve this vision was much more vague, but I had faith in my characters. A lifetime of storytelling had taught me to recognize what was working and what wasn't as it unfolded.

By the time I was willing to say out loud to the world, "We are going to run a SpecFic writers' conference in Halifax this year," I had enlisted the help of a board of directors, which included award-winning

and commercially successful writers; career editors and administrators; and veterans of MFA programs, convention boards, and indie publishers. I had the support of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia (WFNS), the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (NSCAD), and Can*Con, a "periodic science fiction and fantasy convention" in Ottawa, Ontario.

I came to them asking to use their spaces, to pick their brains, and to borrow the policies and playbooks they already knew worked — and nobody turned me away. A lot of this unhesitating support was that I was assuming the whole risk: I did not ask for money or time commitments, and it was not their name on the masthead. They were thrilled to be able to help bring an

“I did not have to reinvent the whole wheel: Better people than I had set a standard that they were more than happy for me to maintain.”

exciting new project into being, and if it didn't quite work out, well, they were no worse off.

I did not have to reinvent the whole wheel: Better people than I had set a standard that they were more than happy for me to maintain. Good artists copy, but great artists go to their mentors and ask respectful permission to use their techniques in their own work. I made this up as I went along, I say, but dozens of people brought experience to this project. Jennifer Geisbrecht, Director of Programming and Trident barista, secured her own editor and agent as guests of honour. Mel Hattie, Director of Brand and Marketing, put together a visual playbook and brand identity that helped us swing way above our weight. Can*Con was delighted for us to take their best-in-class accessibility and behaviour codes of conduct. Everyone, from directors to sponsors to venues, contributed more than I could have hoped for.

How much harder can it be to actualize a project in real life, with real people and places, than in narrative?

It is easier. Much, much easier.

At the heart of a pantsner's technique is faith that everything will sort itself out in the end — a faith that you, the author, have to place in yourself, because you created all of these characters, places, and conflicts. But in the world, those “characters” are outside your control. They bring knowledge and ideas that you could never have imagined. You don't have to know it all, because they do. Ultimately, your role is to recognize good people, trust them, and empower them to bring their abilities to bear on a project which is not just yours. It is theirs.

This was the lesson I learned as I put TriCon together. TriCon was not just me. I was used to figuring the plot out as I went along. “Why aren't you delegating these tasks?” people asked me. I knew I should, but I did not know what I did not know, and I needed to learn by seeing what landed on my plate.

The result was some long, tar-thick months working 18-hour days, learning to use Canva for design, creating registration spreadsheets, and acting as a lawyer, accountant, and promoter. I had the talent and the expertise in my care but did not use them as well as I could have.

I had to learn who my characters were, what my themes were, and what made TriCon truly strong. It wasn't until just before the event that I clearly saw the path to the ending. Then, I leaned on those incredible people and their ocean of capacity to deliver something beyond what I could have done myself. Thank goodness they showed up when I asked.

Our first year felt like the crest of a wave, a moment of excitement created by more than 200 people flowing in the same direction, with the same hopes, excited to ride it out. It felt like an incredible

trust fall to me: all these people filling the space with their energy. Did they know that the story wasn't delivered to them, but that they were *part* of the story, each person an element of a plot that I was discovering at the same time they were?

I hope so: We've got revisions ahead of us. Next year's TriCon will be every bit as collaborative.

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Charlotte Ashley is the executive director of TriCon as well as a writer, book historian, and the owner of Trident Booksellers & Cafe in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her short fiction appears in a number of anthologies and magazines including *F&SF*, *Podcastle*, and *The Year's Best Canadian Fantasy & Science Fiction Vol. 1*, and she has been nominated for both the Aurora and Sunburst Awards. You can find more about her writing at once-and-future.com.



A Conversation About Mentorship

Whatever I was missing

BY ALISSA YORK, WITH LYNDA WILLIAMS

I'm a novelist, an art I practice alongside my work as program coordinator for the Humber Creative Writing graduate certificate program. I've been at Humber for nearly a decade, mentoring writers, teaching in class and online, developing the program, and acting as an administrative hub for students and mentors alike.

Over the years, it's become clear to me that any writer can reach a stage in their development where they could greatly benefit from working with a mentor — or indeed as a mentor. Humber alumna Lynda Williams is a perfect example: a talented writer who graduated from the program in the spring of 2022 and returned to take it a second time that same fall. I had the pleasure of working directly with Lynda in the 2023 Humber summer workshop, where I was again struck by the quality of her writing as well as her personal blend of dedication, moxie, and charm.

Lynda's on a roll, winning the 2024 Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Emerging Artist Award, placing her stories with respected journals, and publishing her first fiction collection, *The Beauty and the Hell of It & Other Stories*, with Guernica Editions in 2025. We caught up on June 17, 2026, me in Stratford and Lynda in Calgary. Our conversation has been lightly edited for concision and flow.

Alissa: Lynda, you've been a student in Humber's Creative Writing graduate certificate online mentorship program twice, both times working with Danila Botha as your mentor. I'm curious to know what drew you to seek mentorship in the first place.

Lynda: I'd hit a ceiling with my short stories — I'd actually stopped writing them for seven years. I was doomscrolling my way through the pandemic, seeing posts about people taking that extra time to write their

books. I thought, "This is something you've always wanted to do. Why aren't you doing this?" And then I thought, "What's going to be different this time?" I had practice giving and receiving feedback. I'd actually received so much feedback in the university environment — graduating from MacEwan in 2010 and Mount Royal in 2014 — it had made my head spin. Mentorship, on the other hand, was one-on-one, tailored to whatever I was missing. I decided it would be a great way to help me focus on my project and figure out what was holding me back.

Alissa: And why did you want to work with Danila?

Lynda: She has this dirty realism, and she works very well with compression — those were things I was reaching for. I'm thinking of her story "Valentine's Day" from the second collection, *For All the Men (and Some of the Women) I've Known*. One of the characters, Camille, has an eating disorder. There was just this moment, the way she describes the food, where all of a sudden, you knew. In the end, Scott gives her this chocolate heart — a sweet gift, but it means something so different to her. It was an ordinary moment, but Danila elevated it.

Alissa: You came back for a second round the following year. What made you want to keep going?

Lynda: I knew Danila could keep me working in fifth gear. We had a good rhythm going — after those first eight months I left with eight polished stories, which I felt was probably two-thirds of a collection. There was no way I wanted to risk losing momentum. In the second round, I started in September again, got the collection together by January and started submitting. Then I just kept working on more stories that I added to the collection after I signed with Guernica.

Alissa: So, how did you work together? What was the process?

Lynda: I would send material to Danila and wait to get it back, do some revisions, then submit again for a second round of feedback. By then I was ready to set the story aside, send it out to literary journals and call it done — as done as anything ever gets.

Alissa: Any particularly insightful feedback come to mind?

Lynda: Danila was great at pinpointing where I'd written too sparsely because revising for me is very much "What do I need to expand on to ground the reader?" A lot of her questions dug deeper into character motivation. I remember one story where she was interested in why the antagonist was angry. It was clear that the protagonist had a reason to be upset, but why was the antagonist coming back with all this snark? I love to be snarky and sarcastic myself, but sometimes your own voice can be overpowering, and you need to dial it back. Danila was very good at "Maybe this isn't in service of the whole. The line sounds good but, you know, kill a darling."

Alissa: Classic. Was there anything about the process that really challenged you?

Lynda: Honestly, I think the biggest challenge for me was getting out of my own way. Danila was generous and encouraging, and that was what I needed in the beginning — I was still tender in the ego department. But at some point, I toughened up and it was like, "OK, bring it on."

Alissa: What about surprises? Anything you didn't foresee?

Lynda: I wasn't expecting how much support I would receive beyond the feedback itself. I remember, once I'd started to send the work out, I got two rejections on the full manuscript *and* two rejections from journals on the same afternoon. It was like, "What am I *doing*?" Danila had said to keep her in the loop about submissions, so I sent her an email, and she gave me a call. We talked for an hour, and she pepped me right up. I always think of that call now when I get a rejection. It's like, "Yeah, I'm a real writer."

Alissa: I love that.

Lynda: Yeah, I think that was the biggest aspect of what was holding me back — publication, rejection. I wasn't putting on my big girl pants, and Danila just taught me how to do that in such a lovely way.

Alissa: (Laughs.) Had you published anything before entering the program?

Lynda: I had a story published on *Room Magazine's* website when I received an honourable mention in their 2012 contest. It's actually included in the collection, *Miles*

to *Inches*.

Alissa: Any other ways mentorship has changed how you work on a daily basis?

Lynda: I know lots of people who set word-count goals, but for me, if I don't make the count, I start to get discouraged and spiral. It's the timed writing sprint that gets me ahead — I actually took that from the Humber summer workshop with you in 2023. I'd never done them quite that way before: sprint, read back and highlight a bit, then bounce on that. That was a game changer. What about you? What have you learned about writing from mentoring other writers?

Alissa: Oh, wow, so many things. How to articulate the elements of craft in a way that's both meaningful and practicable. How to focus and be serious about what's working and what still needs work. How to be both clear and kind — a combination that has only helped me as a writer. And, yeah, how not to freak out. "Stay calm and stay at the desk" — I say that to developing writers all the time. And then I say it to myself: "OK, York, stay calm and stay at the desk."

Lynda: What happens when you're working with a writer and you realize they're not ready to implement some of the feedback you could offer?

Alissa: I think it's about determining where a writer is in their development and considering what will actually be helpful. For example, are they in a place to think deeply about this aspect of point of view, or will that just confuse matters? It's a balancing act between challenge and overload, but I've seen it many times: The right level of feedback at the right time can facilitate some beautiful leaps.

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Humber School for Writers professor **Alissa York** has been teaching and mentoring writers for two decades. Her internationally acclaimed novels include *Mercy*, *Effigy* (shortlisted for the Giller Prize), *Fauna*, *The Naturalist*, and *Far Cry*. Her stories have won the Journey Prize and the Bronwen Wallace Award; her essays and articles have appeared in the *Guardian*, *Brick* magazine, and elsewhere. In 2018, she won the Writers' Trust Engel Findley Award for a writer in mid-career.

Lynda Williams (she/her) is the author of *The Beauty and the Hell of It & Other Stories*. A recipient of the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Emerging Artist Award, her work has appeared in *Grain*, *The New Quarterly*, and *The Humber Literary Review*, among others. Her writing engages with themes of class, feminism, and mental illness, and she takes extreme pleasure in crafting unlikeable female characters.



Writing Romance for Young Readers

Emotional intelligence and interpersonal connections

BY FARAH HERON

PICTURE this... it's 2020, otherwise known as the most unprecedented of unprecedented times. I was a baby author, with one traditionally published adult romance, *The Chai Factor*. I was waiting for the 2021 publication date of my second novel, *Accidentally Engaged*, which was being released by a different publisher. And I had also already handed in my third book, set for release in 2022.

As a relatively fast writer, I had realized that the notoriously slow publishing process didn't match my workflow. And since the world was shut down due to the pandemic, I had free time. It didn't make logical sense to work on a new adult romance, since my contract stated I couldn't publish a romance with another publisher until after my two-book contract was complete.

So, I made the decision to try my hand at writing a young adult (YA) romance.

Although my dream had always been to be a successful *adult* romance writer, I was well suited to writing books for and about teenagers. My own two children were teens at the time, and since this was at the height of pandemic lockdowns, I was spending all day, every day with them. In my last job outside the home, I was a psychological counsellor working in a Toronto high school with at-risk teenagers. And, finally, I first fell in love with the romance genre when I practically inhaled teen romances as a nine or ten-year-old.

These books, published in the eighties, were short, extremely tropey, and featured first summer loves and idyllic high-school romances. They weren't teaching tools, or "issue" books in any way. They were fun, lighthearted, and romantic. I gobbled them up like candy.

When I decided to write my own YA romance, those

were the stories I used for inspiration. I wanted to write the fun, frothy, and addictive books that made me fall in love with the romance genre, except with one important difference — my stories would be diverse.

YA and adult romance writers: a small club

I approached this challenge like I approach every new challenge. I set out to do a ton of research and learn everything I could about writing for teens, knowing that my chance of success in this new age category would depend on my understanding the norms and expectations. But after two days of research, I gave up and dove into the deep end, starting to plot and draft my first young adult romance.

Now six years later, I have 11 published books, all released by large publishers. Five of those are YA romances, and the most recent one, *The Bad Boyfriend Curse*, just came out in July 2026.

One thing I learned very quickly is that writing for teenagers is an entirely different beast than writing for adults. Every step along the way — from brainstorming, to drafting, to releasing, and publicizing the book, is handled differently.

Once I was published in both adult and YA romance, I realized that, here in Canada, the club of authors who write both adult and young adult romance is quite small. I know a lot of Canadian romance writers, and within my circle of friends, I could only think of three other writers who belong to this small club with me.

I think there should be more of us! To learn more about navigating writing both adult and YA romance, I chatted with all three of them.

Lily Chu is the Toronto-based author of six adult

romantic comedies, including *The Stand-In* and *Rich Girl Summer*. She also writes women's fiction under the name L.C. Chu, and her first young adult novel, *The Vacation Shift*, was released in June 2026. Unlike me, Chu says she didn't consciously make a choice to write YA, but when a specific story came to her, she quickly realized it was better suited for young adult readers. The book was inspired by a family vacation to Japan, and Chu started plotting the story about Ivy, a young teen struggling with her parent's divorce and her mental health while on that trip.

This is a marked difference in approach from another Ontario writer, Roselle Lim, the author of romantic women's fiction and fantasy books including *Natalie Tan's Book of Luck and Fortune* and *Night for Day*. Lim's young adult fantasy debut, *Celestial Banquet*, was released in 2025. Lim told me she always intended to write both adult and young adult books and hopes to continue to publish in both age categories.

One similarity Chu, Lim, and I have in common is that we all have teenage daughters, and part of the reason we started writing for teens was because we wanted to write books for girls like our own.

Beyond the coming out story

Like me, Ottawa-based romance writer 'Nathan Burgoine didn't intend to write for teens when he started out. Burgoine writes queer romance, and when his publisher suggested he try writing a YA, he agreed to give it a shot.

A former bookseller, Burgoine had always been an avid reader of YA romance and understood the market well. But unlike the other authors I spoke to, he didn't have a convenient teenager at home for research. Instead, he reached out to schools in the area and spoke to as many queer teens as he could about what kind of books they wanted to read.

"One of the things I got over and over again," Burgoine told me, "is they didn't want a coming out story."

This surprised him, because most queer YA books he'd seen in bookstores included a coming out storyline. But the students he spoke to (who were all out) said coming out stories didn't feel like they were *for* them. They preferred stories about queer kids that aren't centred on coming out or even on discrimination. That led him to write his first YA, *Exit Plans for Teenage Freaks*, where 17-year-old Cole is out, has a supportive family, and is crushing on a classmate — while dealing with an unexpected inconvenience: Every door he opens teleports him to somewhere unexpected.

He has since written and published three more YA romances, two of which, *Dogs Don't Break Hearts* and *Stuck With You*, are Hi-Lo books. These are books with high-interest, but low reading level, for teen readers who

struggle with reading due to lower English literacy. One thing Burgoine loves about writing in the YA space is that genre definitions are looser. He can play a bit with genre and even structure because expectations aren't as rigid.

A major difference between writing for adult and writing for children (including teens) is that buying decisions are often made by gatekeepers — the teachers, librarians, and parents rather than by the teens the book is written for.

Obviously, I would like my books to sell well, so I try to craft books that will appeal to those who have the buying power to get the books in the hands of my teenage readers. But appealing to my teen readers is even more important to me. It's a fine balance, and it's something I spoke to Lim about. She sees authors approach this issue in different ways. "It's ultimately about how the author sees it — if they see it as a job, or they see it as the privilege of being able to write for kids," she says.

Why kids should be reading romance

The fact is, teenagers have so many options for entertainment, such as movies, video games, and social media. I want my books to hold their interest, but at the same time, I know many teens won't even have access to my books if they don't capture the interest of the adult gatekeepers, too. And many of those adults don't think romance novels are appropriate or beneficial for teens to read.

But I firmly believe teens *should* be reading romance. I spoke to Chu about the value of romance novels for teens. We both ensure *all* our books (adult and YA) display healthy and consensual love, but this is even more important and impactful for teenagers. Reading romance during the time when teens are experiencing their own first relationships and attraction can help them figure out what is and what is not okay in their own lives.

Romance is first and foremost a genre about

"I personally have had educators tell me that kids shouldn't be reading romance and that they should instead be reading books that teach them something."

emotional intelligence and interpersonal connections, which are essential skills for teens to learn. Yet the romance genre as a whole is often seen as less important or having less literary value than other genres. I personally have had educators tell me that kids shouldn't be reading romance and that they should instead read books that teach them something. But I feel strongly that the life

“I feel strongly that the life lessons kids can take away from reading about healthy romantic relationships are some of the most important they can acquire.”

lessons kids can take away from reading about healthy romantic relationships are some of the most important they can acquire.

Burgoine also agrees that romance is extremely valuable for teenagers who are figuring themselves out. His books show healthy relationships between 2SLGBTQIA+ kids, displaying respect and acceptance while showing the cultural norms of the community. As gender identity and sexuality are not familial traits, many of his intended readers don't have older role models from the same community who can model happy and healthy relationships for them.

As a South Asian writer, I also feel strongly that South Asian teens need to see healthy, respectful, and consensual relationship dynamics within their own community. Chu agrees. For her, it's important to write about biracial teenagers dealing with the same relationship issues and interpersonal problems as other teens. In her book *The Vacation Shift*, being biracial is part of who Ivy is, not the entirety of who she is.

Lim feels the same way. She says writing about Asian teenagers is important because she wants kids who have a similar background to see themselves. That can feel like a lot of responsibility, something Lim sometimes feels anxious about. She acknowledges that she worries about getting it right, despite the fact that she is writing about her own cultural background.

Adult voice vs teen voice

From a writing craft standpoint, there are marked differences for me between writing romance for teens and for adults. One strategy I use to differentiate between my adult writing voice and my teen one is that I write my adult books in third-person past tense, and my YA novels in first-person present tense. Burgoine does the same thing. He feels that first-person present is better suited for a younger protagonist because “It's when everything is so impactful and important. You're not sad; you're the saddest you've ever been. You're not angry; you're the maddest you've ever been. It's easier to do that in first person.”

Chu says the biggest difference for her when she's drafting a YA novel, is that she has to remind herself to focus on the intensity of teenage emotions. “It was putting my brain to remembering what those situations felt like. And the stuff that to an adult is no big deal, to a teenager, you're like, oh my God, this is the biggest thing that has ever happened.”

Of course, my author friends and I are all far removed from actually being teenagers ourselves. For me, getting into a teenage brain can't simply be about remembering my own teenage years, since the world now is nothing like it was when I was young. One major way the world has changed for teens is that social media is now a huge part of their lives. I made the choice to include a fair bit of social media in my young adult books because I want them to feel true for the modern age. And I enjoy the puzzle of figuring out how social media would complicate the conflicts I give my characters. That said, I am careful not to include many details or terms that could make the book feel dated, such as slang or specific websites. I made the mistake of including Twitter in a book that was released only months before the name of the platform changed!

Chu didn't want social media to be a big part of the story in *The Vacation Shift* because the focus needed to be on the Japanese bus tour the characters are experiencing. She also very consciously avoids slang despite acknowledging that teens do use it a lot in their communication. But trends change quickly — and she was concerned about her book feeling dated.

Above all else, we want our stories to ring true for

“Above all else, we want our stories to ring true for our teen readers.”

our teen readers. It may be an extra challenge to put ourselves into the minds of readers so much younger than we are, especially in the romance genre, as it's been many years since we've felt the intense rush of that first teenage love. But the opportunity to help shape young people's views on interpersonal relationships is worth it.

We all feel so privileged that we are able to write in the YA romance space.

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Farah Heron is a critically acclaimed author for adults and teens. Her books have been named as best books of the year by CBC Books, *USA Today*, and NPR. She writes rom-coms and romances full of South Asian families, delectable food, and most importantly, brown people falling stupidly in love. Farah's adult books include *A Little Holiday Fling* and *Accidentally Engaged*, and her young adult books include *Remember Me Tomorrow*, and *The Bad Boyfriend Curse*. She lives in Toronto with her family.

Drawing for *Write*

How this magazine's cartoon gets made

BY SCOT RITCHIE



WHEN I sat down to write this article, I was surprised to discover that I've been drawing the *Write* cartoon for 13 years. In 2013, I approached then editor Hal Niedzviecki, to see if he would be interested in having a cartoon in the magazine. It was partly self-serving, to get my own work seen — but I was also motivated by a desire to see illustrations in more places.

For me it's a simple question, doesn't an illustration help the written word?

First thought, best thought (sometimes)

Being an author and illustrator of children's books has obviously led me down this path so I may be beyond help. I've illustrated over 80 books and written 18 of those. I'm accustomed to connecting words to images.

Here's how I go about putting drawing the cartoon for each issue of *Write*. I start off by getting a list of articles that are going to appear in the next issue and then drafts of the stories the editor thinks are most promising for a cartoon.

Once I receive the articles, I'm off to a running start.

I begin by sketching ideas on scrap paper as I'm reading. (I have a special clipboard for this which has turned out to be one of my most useful artist tools. Having throwaway paper when creating is very freeing.)

Over the years, I've found that often my first idea is the best but, as with writing, I always walk away for a while so I can come back and see ideas with fresh eyes. Some rough sketches are then tossed while others are reworked. When I'm ready, I send two or three roughs in to *Write* to see what they think.

I usually have a favourite but it's not always the one that's chosen to run. That is the beauty of cartoons: If I'm aiming for humour and nobody is laughing, I've missed the mark.

It's also a reminder that I've inhabited my own little world while creating an image and nobody else knows the backstory. A cartoon may seem funny to me, but I'm hopefully aiming for a bigger audience. A fresh set of eyes can see things I don't. I am the first to champion the value of an editor or art director in the creative process. They're also running the ship and see things I'm not aware of.

Telling a story with two dots and a bump

My goal with the cartoons is to have a balance of humour and poignancy. I want a smile and an emotional reaction.

How I come up with ideas can vary. A title often sums up the essence of an article so I can "draw" on those words. When I first started with *Write*, I would only receive the title and a descriptive line or two. Now, with the full article, I scan for imagery — real things or people that I can draw. Putting Gertrude Stein in a modern-day book club has inherent humour. Some concepts require revising after the initial sketch, but I can tell early on which ones will work.

For the previous issue of *Write*, a few of the topics were a clear fit for me. Being a gay man, with a book of my own that was shadowbanned — meaning technically available, but the reader would have to know the title and request it, Robin Stevenson's article on the banning of her book *Pride Puppy!* struck a note. That led me to come up with the idea for the comic that ran in the magazine, showing a child in a library, asking for Robin's book while wearing a bag over their head; banned and shadowbanned books represented by safes chained shut.

I used to live in Toronto many years ago, where I owned a greeting card company. I wrote and illustrated ideas for hundreds of cards. So it's no surprise that I do cartoons now; both require engaging people quickly, even if the concept turns out to have a lot of depth.

For me, a cartoon is a little journey away from where we are. It's a distant, maybe not even conscious, reminder of reading the comics as a child.

Looking at the work of other illustrators has inspired me too. My cartoon/artist heroes include Sempé, Barsotti, and Hergé, whose dry and nuanced humour I like. I am also a fan of the Canadian cartoonist Len Norris. I grew up seeing his editorial cartoons in the *Vancouver Sun* and know he influenced me greatly.

Art really is a universal language. Unlike the written word, it doesn't need translation. Things like body language and expressions convey emotion. I've always been amazed that, even with my style, where I use two dots for the eyes and a bump for the nose, I can tell a story.

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Scot Ritchie's newest book is *Marian's Big Dig*, published by Groundwood Books. He enjoys showing his editorial cartoons here, cartoonmovement.com/cartoonist/34943.

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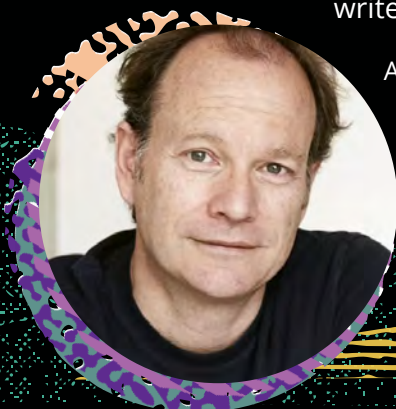
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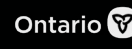


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