

WRITE

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THE GENRE ISSUE

Queer romance

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Decolonizing fantasy

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# From the Editor

Celebrating genre... beyond gatekeeping

BY PHILIP MOSCOVITCH



**I AM BOTH EXCITED AND AMBIVALENT** about this issue of *Write*. Excited because we are celebrating genre writing, and ambivalent because I wonder about what the word “genre” even means at this point, and whether the distinction between “literary” and “genre” is in any way meaningful.

In his 1965 essay “Science Fiction,” Kurt Vonnegut famously wrote, “I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labelled ‘science fiction’... and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.” (He also argued that the line between “the mainstream” and SF was soon likely to start dissolving.)

Although I love SF, my particular genre of choice early in the pandemic was crime. Specifically, Robert Parker’s Spenser books. Before 2020, I had never read one. By the end of the year, I had read at least 20 of them. In the depths of the early pandemic, there was comfort in tucking into one book after another, knowing pretty much exactly what to expect.

I appreciated the comfort at the time, but I think part of the joy of genre writing is experimentation with form and tropes. In her superb essay, “Where do genres come from?” published last fall in *Reactor*, SF writer Charlie Jane Anders says the origin of genre lies in a simple formulation: “Basically, somebody reads a book and really likes it. And then they want to read more books like that one, so they go looking for books that are similar to the one they just enjoyed.”

Most genres have a foundational text or texts, and that’s what readers look to for their *more of the same*. But, Anders argues, a genre only really comes into its own and “becomes healthy when it outgrows its foundational text and starts appealing to the spirit, rather than the letter, of its influences... In other words, I think genre labels are immensely useful, but we should all remember they’re mostly vibes and feels, rather than a set of prescriptions.”

I recently published a story in an anthology billed as “crime/noir/pulp” and spent a bit too much time worrying about whether my submission truly fit those categories. Fortunately, the co-editors took a broad definition, which, I think, is the right approach (and not only because it meant my story made the cut).

We look at a few different aspects of genre writing in this issue of *Write* — and, as with most of our themed issues, we also have stories on other topics as well.

TWUC Chair Danny Ramadan makes the case for video-game writing as a genre. Romance writer Hudson Lin writes about the importance of diverse representation and the life-affirming notion that everyone deserves a happily ever after. Melissa Blair discusses subverting colonial and gender-essentialist tropes in fantasy, drawing on her own popular Halfling Saga series. And Jason Krawczyk, who mostly writes horror, speaks with other writers about whether they seek to maintain a consistent voice across different genres. (And what is voice? And what is genre?)

We’ve also got John Oughton on the state of book reviewing and whether reviews matter; a commentary from Myrna Kostash on Ukrainian writers reacting to calls to reconcile with their Russian peers; Roksana Bahramitash writing about her efforts to subvert polarization through storytelling. John Degen argues that Canadian publishers are missing a huge opportunity by ignoring the Americas south of the United States, and Chelene Knight takes us behind the scenes of her TWUC webinar, sharing her experience with preparing and delivering it.

Chelene’s column, by the way, is part of our new(ish) “Spotlight” feature, designed to give you a sense of goings-on at The Writers’ Union and its many and varied programs and initiatives. We launched this in response to our reader survey, and I hope you are enjoying it.

Finally, I hope you give Ada Nicolle’s genre-themed crossword a try! We have been experimenting with the clueing on the crosswords. Our aim is to provide a bit of a challenge without making them overly difficult for casual solvers. We have a small team of dedicated test solvers who go through the puzzle before it is finalized, and I am grateful to them for their efforts.

Enjoy the issue!



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# More Than a Love Story: What romance means to me

BY HUDSON LIN



**IMAGINE THIS...** You're a little weird, a little kooky, kind of a loner. You have hobbies that no one understands. You tend to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and end up making a fool of yourself. You've never fit in. You've never felt like you belonged.

Then the new neighbour's Uber Eats gets delivered to you by mistake. Or you're forced to work with a colleague you've never gotten along with. Or a stranger accidentally spills their coffee on you and offers to pay for dry cleaning. Suddenly, you're swept up in this unexpected relationship with someone who takes the time to get to know you. They see past your awkward exterior, and they seem to like the quirky, broken mess they find inside. You've found your person, and — together — you live happily ever after (HEA).

Boom. You've just lived a romance novel.

Is it formulaic? Perhaps. Is it predictable? Sure. But that's the beauty of capital-R Romance — no matter who the characters are, no matter where they've come from and what they've been through, they will always find their HEA. It wouldn't be a romance otherwise.

## Everyone Gets an HEA

It's this compelling promise that initially drew me to the romance genre, and it's what keeps me so firmly rooted here. This guarantee that even the most unlovable of us are worthy of love.

When I started reading romance novels as a pre-teen, I would put myself in the role of the heroine and imagine I was the one falling in love. I could have an evil stepmother who was robbing me of my inheritance. Or I could be the lone woman blazing a trail through a male-dominated industry. Or I could find myself unemployed without a roof over my head. As dire as these scenarios sound, they were always preferable to my reality, because in this fictional romance, I would have someone who loved and accepted me for who I was. As a kid who had no friends and who was bullied all the time, this was a lifeline I clung to.

It wasn't until I was a bit older when I discovered queer and POC romances. Where the plucky heroine is a person of colour. Where the rock star, Navy SEAL, vampire, werewolf, or duke is gay or lesbian or bisexual. Where the trans person is tall, dark, and handsome, and the disabled person is the knight in shining armour.

## Representation Matters

It was life-changing. Because it's one thing to imagine myself as the heroine, but it's something else entirely to see someone like myself actually *be* the heroine. A queer person, an Asian woman, someone who walks through life the same way I do, someone who sees the world through my own eyes. It brings the fantasy one step closer to reality.

That's the powerful thing about fiction: something changes inside of us when we see reflections of ourselves in the main character. And for those of us who are sidelined from mainstream culture — queer people, people of colour, people with disabilities — it's that much more meaningful. When society doesn't want us in real life, we can find characters who do in a romance novel.

## A Chance to be Loved

All of this informs who I am as an author. I write diverse romances because diversity is important, and the more of these stories there are in the world, the better. But on some level, I write romances with queer and POC characters because I want to give myself an HEA. I want that lonely kid — who was holed up in a corner with her nose stuck in a book — to see herself being loved for who she was, rather than in spite of it.

You can too. If you've ever felt lonely or struggled to belong, if you've ever felt like you're on the outside looking in, you can also pick up a romance novel and find your own HEA.

.....  
**Hudson Lin** was raised by conservative immigrant parents and grew up straddling two cultures. Instead of conforming to either, she has sought to find a third way that brings together the positive elements of both. Having spent much of her life on the outside looking in, Lin writes stories about outsiders who fight to carve out their place in society. Her books are heartfelt, gritty romances featuring queer people of colour.



# A Lonely Place to Be

An Indigenous perspective on writing in a genre underpinned by colonialism

BY MELISSA BLAIR

**WHEN I WAS BORN**, my parents and I lived in a trailer. Not one of those fancy ones with the glass door showers and siding to cover the wheels, but a rundown camper that was as old as my dad. My mother would swaddle me while making 10-cent pasta over the burner that eventually set the entire trailer aflame. We moved a lot in the years that followed. My mother would lace me into my tikinagan, bouncing me on her lap as we shifted from place to place. By the time I outgrew my cradle board, I had a little brother who slipped right in.

We got a house after that. It was small and paid for by my father's work in exchange for living in a tiny railway town. Though *town* isn't an accurate term; the correct word for a place where there were more dogs (16) than people (9) is a *hamlet*, but no one uses that word. The only time I said it in front of my grandmother she assumed I was talking about eggs with bologna mixed in, thinking it was some French I'd picked up at school.

Every time I tell people about the three years we lived in Auden, Ontario, they always ask the same question: "Weren't you lonely in a place that small?"

I never meet their expectations with my reply: a resounding no. I didn't need other children to play with; I had my baby brother. And the two kids who would come round in the summer to camp on a nearby lake. We didn't have to go to the grocery store because the one in Longlac would ship what we needed on the train, throwing it off in boxes as the rail cars slowly chugged by, and everything else my grandmother would bring with her when she visited. Perch, moose meat, geese, and if she really missed us, pickerel cheeks.

My mother filled that hamlet with so much love I never knew what loneliness was. Even when we moved back

to my hometown, with my new baby sister in tow. Even as we moved from house to house to house, each one getting bigger, we just seemed to fill it with more people and more love. The place we lived never mattered as long as it fit the community we had built.

## "A loneliness that curdled my insides"

When the global pandemic happened, I wasn't sharing a house or room with my siblings anymore. My family was far away, in Hornepayne, north of Wawa. I was in Ottawa, the largest place I had ever lived, in a two-bedroom apartment with a roommate who left in April 2020 and never came back. I was suddenly thrust into a loneliness that curdled my insides and left my pillows starched with the tears I cried in my sleep. For the first time, I was completely cut off from community and found that I was a hollow tree without it. I stood still, the masked strangers at the grocery store thinking I was strong on my feet as I pumped another handful of sanitizer into my palms, knowing they would be left dried and frostbitten from the lack of human warmth. But I knew the truth — all it would take was one flash of lightning, or a strong gust, or even a determined little ant burrowing through my thinning sense of self, and I would topple over, splintering into so many pieces even Creator couldn't put me back together.

I was desperate to escape that feeling. I tried to find it in the unread books sitting on my shelves, but their pages alone weren't enough. I needed people along with those characters, fellow readers who I could jump into stories with, all of us pretending to live in those worlds instead of ours.

### **Enter BookTok**

That's how I found BookTok. I was scrolling through Reddit and saw someone talking about the burgeoning book community on the TikTok app that teenagers liked to dance on. People were making skits, starting book clubs, and creating Zoom calls to host full-weekend readathons.

I jumped right in and never looked back.

In 2020, BookTok was booming. So many people were getting into reading for the first time or picking the habit back up after leaving it behind in high school. And all of us were vying for community and escape. It's no wonder that some of the most popular titles being discussed were fantasy books. Hundreds of thousands of people across Turtle Island — and the globe — dove into worlds that looked nothing like our own.

The most popular genre of fantasy on BookTok at that time was one I had very little experience with — fantasy romance. People devoured these books, reading 800-page tomes that spanned multiple series and interconnected universes or heart-rending standalones that were just as likely to make one cry as they were to deliver on the romance.

I couldn't resist. I dove into the series with gusto, sometimes finishing entire books in one day just so I could log onto the app, watch videos about people's thoughts, and leave comments discussing theories back and forth. In those moments, I wasn't alone in my dusty, cabin-fevered apartment, I had friends gabbing on the couch who had never heard about coronavirus before.

### **Mythical races and conquered people**

But like all communities not built with Indigenous people in mind, I was quickly pushed to the periphery of the fun, and that loneliness crept back in.

Soon, I found I couldn't watch videos about the determined, blade-wielding heroines without remembering that they were vying to reclaim a throne that their ancestors had gained by conquering other people. First Peoples. It happened again and again.

Sometimes the protagonist would make an offhand comment about the mythical races that first lived in the kingdom, hanging up a bauble of lore like a Christmas ornament that was meant to dazzle the reader momentarily and then be quickly packed away to never be seen again. Other times the underpinnings of colonization were much more apparent but still left unexplored.

My perfect escape soured. Like a boiling pot of potatoes, the first books to rise to attention on BookTok were very white and filled with bubbles that weren't meant to be devoured. Just superficial fluff that the authors had no intention to explore.

Such exploration wasn't necessary. It wasn't expected. Conquering and conquest are a foundational element to fantasy works. It's why any writings that go against this norm are given a qualifier — anti-colonial, diverse, Indigenous. Each one signifying that the story written across a book's pages is told from an unexpected point of view.

That's the thing about being an Indigenous writer: no one ever expects us. Readers forget about the realities of the first peoples in their books as easily as non-Indigenous people forget about us in the real world. We are pushed to the sidelines of what's expected in literary genres because they are glass mosaics framed by the colonizing class. Set to the margins, we are left to write our stories with cheeks pressed against the glass, nudging it with our elbows, grazing it with our pens until the glass shatters. The pieces fall to the ground, taking on a new shape and picture, until we are left with something the mosaic was never meant to capture.

This was my approach to writing *The Halfling Saga*. I loved fantasy romance as much as everyone else on BookTok, but I wanted to write one that didn't follow suit. That didn't assume the colonialization of a people was

**Conquering and conquest are a foundational element to fantasy works. It's why any writings that go against this norm are given a qualifier — anti-colonial, diverse, Indigenous.**

needed to deepen the lore of my world, but was ultimately unimportant. I wanted to tell a story that centered the colonization instead. That coaxed readers in with the familiar cover and tropes but focussed on a story from the margins.

The series follows one character, Keera, who is an assassin forced to kill her own kin in service to a conqueror. The story is not one about reclaiming a throne or power, but a people revitalizing the land together and working to reconnect to a culture that has been taken from them. A crown is not the goal, but communal liberation and cultural healing is. A story like that is not *expected* in the genre of fantasy romance, so readers and editors often attach one of those qualifiers to the books.

An anti-colonial fantasy romance. Even an Indigenous one, even though all my characters are Halfings or Elves and not the Anishinaabe I was raised with. They have to add a word so readers would know these books are not like the others.

## I loved fantasy romance as much as everyone else on BookTok, but I wanted to write one that didn't follow suit.

Indigenous storytellers have always pushed against these barriers of convention. It's not only a clash of perspective but a clash of culture. The culture that idolizes individualism over community roots for a single hero. The culture that steals land to call itself the rightful owner, will always be drawn to stories about the reclamation of property.

Waubgeshig Rice exemplifies this clash in his speculative fiction novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, which tells the story of life after an apocalyptic blackout. Yet, unlike many other dystopian novels, the story isn't told as a cautionary tale. It is about the First Nations characters who use the state of the world to rebuild something that was taken from them long before the blackout. It is a story of revitalization rather than reclamation and because of that, it stands apart for the rest of the stories in the genre. It's not solely dystopian or apocalyptic. It's Indigenous. It sets the conventions along a different path entirely.

Cherie Dimaline does this too in her novel *The Marrow Thieves*. It follows the journey of a young Métis man, evading government officers who want to capture him and use his bone marrow to heal the non-Indigenous population from their suffering of not being able to dream. Most of the young adult dystopian fiction at the time focussed on an ethical quandary, and in those authors' hands, perhaps the book would have posed the question of whether it was right to harm a few to save the many. Dimaline's book doesn't toy with that question at all. Her Indigenous characters already know right down to their bones that such acts are wrong, because their people have already survived the heinous acts of colonialism. Instead, the book is a coming-of-age tale set in the strength of that knowing, leaving the readers focussed on the importance of family and community to heal and renew.

To me the words like anti-colonial or Indigenous in front of a genre category are not qualifiers at all, but signifiers. They don't merely set that piece of fiction apart from the conventions of the genre, but set it anew. On different land, with a different kind of story. One that just might bloom into a future of community, renewal, and revitalization — if enough readers are willing to set aside convention and give these *unexpected* stories a try.

.....  
**Melissa Blair** (she/her) is an Anishinaabe-kwe of mixed ancestry living on Turtle Island. She writes stories across genres about Indigenous and queer characters, including her debut series *The Halfling Saga*. She splits her time between Treaty 9 in Northern Ontario and the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg in Ottawa, Canada.



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# Do Book Reviews Matter?

And what makes a good review, anyway?

BY JOHN OUGHTON

**A GOOD BOOK REVIEW** is a time-delayed conversation with writers. It allows them to see how a well-informed reader finds their writing technique, structure, style, suspense, and the overall effect of their work.

Worse than a one-star review on Goodreads, a negative review can greatly affect an author's psyche. Famously, John Bentley Mays' dismissive review in the magazine *Open Letter* of the work of poet Phyllis Webb made her stop writing for a few years. (She would later win the Governor General's Award.)

While a negative review may hurt us, I think most writers would agree there is a value to reviewing. Unfortunately, today, standard short-to-medium-length print reviews seem endangered. Major Canadian newspapers once ran reviews in arts or entertainment sections or in weekend book supplements. Now newspapers, with subscriptions and advertising shortfalls, are thinner and offer fewer reviews. Once-reliable periodicals like *Books in Canada* and *The Canadian Book Review Annual* have ceased publication. *The Pacific Rim Review's* last issue was in 2021. *Broken Pencil* (small-press and zine reviews) announced its final gasp in November 2024.

Publicist Heather Wood believes "the lack of good quality reviews is stifling the growth of our literary culture." She notes that the *Winnipeg Free Press* is the only major Canadian daily with a dedicated books editor.

However, some online review sources are filling the gap. There's the *Miramichi Reader* and the *Seaboard Review*, and, of course, informal responses from fans and readers on Goodreads, and at Amazon or Indigo play a role. The Amazon-free Goodreads alternative StoryGraph is growing more popular. And TikTok is driving book sales through BookTok.

These are my guidelines for good book reviewing, regardless of where the review appears:

- Describe the book's genre, theme(s), approach, and what makes it unique.
- Outline the writer's apparent intentions. State how this work compares with the writer's previous publications (if any).
- Highlight both good points and flaws. Quote examples from the book.
- Remember you're not reviewing the book *you'd* have written.
- Don't be too negative, because the writer may be on the next jury for your grant, award, or writer-in-residence application. (Joke.)

With these guidelines in mind, and given the changes to the reviewing landscape, I asked people in various roles in the Canadian book industry whether the traditional review still can sell books and whether new media help.

James Fisher founded the *Miramichi Reader*, which reviews Canadian books, in 2015 — at a time when many media were retreating from reviewing. "There is such a dearth of book reviews in mainstream media, such as newspapers. A website dedicated to a long-form review certainly fills that gap," he says. Fisher has moved on from the *Reader* and now runs another review publication, *The Seaboard Review*. While he understands that social media can raise awareness of books, he thinks nothing compares to a proper review: "Serious readers like to read a review, and the authors certainly appreciate it."

rob mclennan is a poet, publisher at above/ground press, and blogger. He is also very active on social media. "Occasionally a review or an interviewer might offer



something revelatory I hadn't quite seen prior, which is delightful," he says. As for social media, he notes, "I think those are no less or more important but differently important. Not everyone reads reviews. As an author and reader, I'd rather a formal, full-length review, but not everyone pays attention to those. To ignore Amazon and Goodreads, etc., would be rather limiting."

Publisher Noelle Allen, of Hamilton-based Wolsak & Wynn, believes reviews are particularly important for small presses and their authors. She says, "Not only are they vital on a critical front, but they increase the visibility of a book.

Those reviews reach people who are committed readers. They let them know the book is out there, people are talking about it, and it's something they might want to read."

**"Reviews reach people who are committed readers."**

**What about sales?**

Visibility and serious discussion are great, but do reviews help drive sales?

Poet and writing-workshop leader Stuart Ross thinks they play a role in "attracting people to my writing" but that the effect is "modest." He adds, "An enthusiastic mention on social media sites like Facebook and Instagram likely has more effect than a formal full-length review when it comes to sales."

However, reviews do help raise awareness of his work in circles that matter, serving as "promotional vehicles." He says, "I suspect that they might help library sales and maybe make some indie bookstores aware of my books."

Bookstore owners confirm that reviews do bring people in.

"We get dozens of people in every few weeks with newspaper clippings of reviews, or saying that they heard the author on the radio (usually CBC, but occasionally the college station CFRC) and asking if we have the book," says Nicola Malan, of Novel Idea, an independent bookstore, in Kingston, Ontario. "Most of our orders for new releases happen months before the books are available, and we get emails every week from book reps at different publishers sending us reviews."

Lynne Warnick of Entershine Books in Thunder Bay, Ontario, tells a similar story. She says, "We often get customers in asking for the books," local reviewer Michael Sobota recommends in the local paper, *The Chronicle Journal*, "We get asked for books reviewed in the major papers but not as frequently. Reviews... help

tremendously with our curation of titles."

Wood, the publicist, has a similar perspective: "Reviews, like other kinds of publicity, do not necessarily have any relation to sales. Some books that get a lot of good critical attention don't sell well at all and vice versa, but they do help get the attention of bookstores, librarians, and some dedicated readers."

Sometimes, reviews can be valuable in unexpected ways. Novelist Heather Babcock says she has never "had someone tell me that they bought a copy of my book based on a good review. However, someone once told

me that he bought my book based on a bad review!"

Reviews play another role too, beyond sales and awareness, Wood says, and it may be the most important one: "They encourage authors to keep

at it." Or, as mclennan puts it, "When I feel a reviewer 'gets it,' it is quite refreshing, a further push to keep going."

The consensus among those I interviewed seems to be that traditional reviews still help get books sold and so do online communities and book-related sites. I guess I'll keep writing and reading them. Will you?

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**John Oughton** lives in Toronto and is the author of six poetry collections, most recently *The Universe and All That* (Ekstasis Editions); the mystery novel *Death by Triangulation*; and *Higher Teaching: A Handbook for New Postsecondary Faculty*. A retired community college professor, he is the current treasurer of The Writers' Union of Canada. He is also a photographer, guitar player, and late-blooming pickleball player. Learn more here: [joughton.wixsite.com/author](http://joughton.wixsite.com/author).



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The reader who bought Heather Babcock's *Filthy Sugar* because of a bad review? That was me. The review, admittedly, on Goodreads, seemed so wrong-headed it made me more curious about the book — which I wound up enjoying very much. Has a bad review driven you to buy a book? Let us know at [write@writersunion.ca](mailto:write@writersunion.ca).

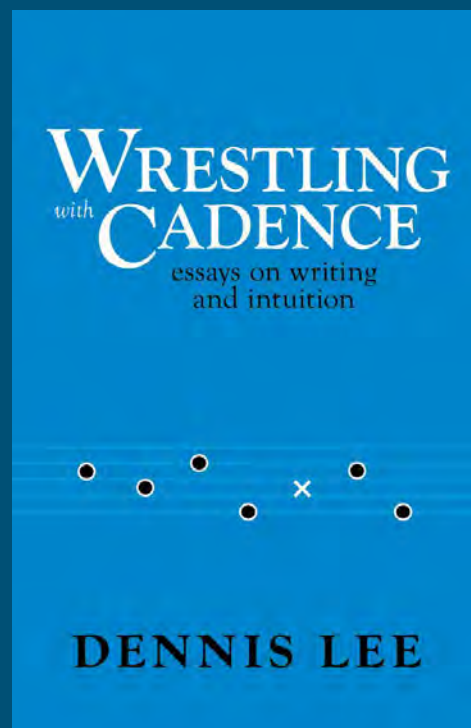
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# DENNIS LEE'S

## 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*.



## Do you have a story to tell? Pitch an article to *Write*

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