

east word

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015



Sylvia Gunnery says, "I'll just lie here and plan the next chapter ... but why is it snowing in every scene I write?"

Come on in! ... or not. Finding time to write

by Sylvia Gunnery

Kay Hill welcomed friends and neighbours and children of friends and neighbours to her home in Ketch Harbour where she wrote her stories of Joseph Howe or the Mi'kmaq legends, many adapted for children. But visits were not always welcomed. Whenever Kay was writing, she would hang a bright buoy on a hook outside her front door – a signal that she wasn't to be disturbed. No buoy? Then, go ahead and knock. Kay was ready to greet you.

Thomas Raddall's office in his Liverpool home had two doors. If both doors were left open, his family knew they could wander in at will, ask their questions, chat. If only one door was open, they needed to be cautious. Yes,

they could interrupt Raddall's work, but it must be for a very good reason. If both doors were closed ... well, you know what that meant. Recently, Raddall's son Tom told me he remembered waiting for the advantage of two doors being open before he went into his dad's office to ask for a new bicycle.

My own writing space has a window on a garden path with a clear view to my desk. It has no doors. More than once I've been startled out of my imaginary world by a friend knocking at the window and inviting me to go for a walk or by a neighbour just waving hello. Where's Kay Hill's buoy when I need it? Where are Raddall's doors to close?

continued on page 2



WRITERS' FEDERATION OF NOVA SCOTIA

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Between our solitary work as writers and our pull toward family, friends and the lives we need to live, how can we find the balance? I asked a few of our Writers' Council members to share their strategies for finding that separate space and time to write without interruptions.

George Borden (Dartmouth) writes poetry, journalism, children's stories, and gospel songs. He's been writing since high school in the 1950s and has continued writing through a long military career. We're probably all in dreamland when George finds his uninterrupted creative time.

George comments, "Few if any are as distracted by sound and movement as I am. Therefore, I must have a vacuum-like space in which to write. Regrettably, one cannot anticipate a muse coming on, which must be captured at the very moment of presence. So, it is in the wee hours of the night, when all is calm and all is right for undisturbed creative writing.

"PS – notepad and pen at the ready ... beside my bed!"



Shalan Joudry (Bear River First Nation) is a poet and a new member to our Writers' Council. Her first book, *Generations Re-merging*, was published in 2014 by Gaspereau Press. She reminds us of some of the ways we do the work of writers, even when we're not actually writing.

"As a mother and being busy with other contract work, most of my craft is done in imagination and memory in the short snippets of opportunities through the week. (Trained as an oral storyteller helps.) I might live with a poem or story running alongside my everyday life, such as while: in bed before sleep, in the shower, driving in the car, or during a walk. Then I do require more solitude in order to write it to paper/computer, which at this phase of my life is usually after my daughters are asleep. These moments (an hour or two) are enough to work on a poem or short story, however, not conducive for writing longer works. As the girls get older, I find they are more able to respect my need for quiet space as they busy themselves separately. I have a small room surrounded by books, sacred medicines and a window with forest on the other side, not too far from the wood stove and the kitchen where I break for tea."



William Kowalski

(Mahone Bay) is the 2014 winner of The Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award for his novel, *A Hundred Hearts*. His take on interruptions in his writing time turns things upside down.

"The phrase 'writing without interruptions' made me burst into laughter, of the ironic variety. I have a wife, two daughters, a dog, two cats, and six gerbils. I haven't written without interruptions in 15 years. I do have a studio that is detached from the main house, but the piddling 50 feet that separate me from the chaos and bliss of family life might as well not exist. I get emails, I get cell phone calls, and when those go unanswered there shortly comes a pounding on my door. It took some time to get over my resentment, but I've come to see that it's probably these interruptions that spur my focus now. Because I never know when the next one is coming, I am forced to exist in a timeless void of Buddhist non-anticipation. It works, sort of. Fact is, when these interruptions finally stop, I'll miss them horribly. And I've long since ceased to worry that anything can actually prevent me from writing, which was once a fear of mine."

Jill MacLean, (Halifax), is a three-time winner of the Ann Connor Brimer Award, including for *Nix Minus One* in 2014. Jill and I are long-time friends and, after receiving this note from her, I realize I must stop suggesting we get together for morning coffee ... except if it's a weekend.



"I'm writing this in haste precisely because of the balancing act: I'm eight days into a new book.

"I'm a morning person, so I write five mornings a week, and do my best to ignore telephone and Inbox until I've exited Word.

"I go for walks by myself with a notebook. Ideas come when I walk.

"I make a list of important tasks because if they're on a list, I don't feel so bad when they don't get done.

"Family and friends? Weekends and evenings.

"Ordinary stuff like housework, groceries, and bills don't rate a list. They're shoved to the back burner until the smoke starts to billow.

"I've learned to say no.

"I've also learned that when the story takes off, characters will be in my head 24/7 and balance expires on the study floor. Aren't we all a touch crazy to embrace the writing life?"

There are probably as many different approaches to finding writing time as there are members in our Writers' Fed. We do what must be done ... and we get to our writing. Sometimes, I find myself watering every plant in the house, cleaning out the fridge (how serious are they about expiry dates, anyway?), bringing in a couple of extra wheelbarrows of firewood, folding laundry – anything but sitting at my computer to face that place on the page where the writing has stopped. About an hour ago, I came in from the cold (three wheelbarrows of wood, this time) and sat to write. The scene that had started playing out in my head stayed there. So I decided I'd do some work on this article.

Now I will put my friends' wise words into action: I will listen for that pounding on my door, Bill, and I won't resent the interruption one bit. Shalan, I will live with that scene running alongside my everyday life for a just little bit longer. Jill, I will make my list of important things to do ... and then I'll ignore them while I write my novel. And, right this very minute, George, I will put a pen and notepad on my night table in case I'm inspired to write in the wee hours of the night. ■

Mentorship – truly terrific

by Glenna Jenkins

Becoming a writer of good fiction is a process, like learning a new language. Successful beginning writers are those who accept advice and gentle guidance from more sage and experienced ones. Preferably, these sages will already have been published; ideally, they will have won a number of awards. In the process of writing my first novel, *Somewhere I Belong*, I received a lot of assistance in the research and the development and writing of the plot, characters and story arc. The Alistair MacLeod Mentorship Program provided me with the instruction I needed to turn a real-life family story into compelling fiction.

I come from a family of storytellers. For decades, my family has gathered at our summer cottage on Prince Edward Island. Aunts, uncles and cousins drop over and share family stories. Some stories date back to the early 1800s. Others are of more modern events that took place after 1925, the year my father was born. One day, he recounted how his own father died in an oil refinery explosion in Everett, Massachusetts, where he had been living at the time. He slipped in the minor detail of Babe Ruth helping my newly widowed grandmother keep her family together. The year was 1928, the cusp of the Great Depression. This all made for a great story and I was determined to write it.

What followed were several years of research. I wanted to know more about my grandmother, about the kind of person she was, how she coped in her seemingly daunting situation, about her community and her support systems. I interviewed friends and relatives who remembered those early years. I read personal diaries, self-published accounts of life on the Island during the 1930s, histories of both Prince Edward Island and New England, the latter for the period during the Great Depression; and back issues of the *Charlottetown Guardian*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Everett Leader-Herald*, and *The New York Times*. Then I sat down to write what I thought was going to be a seamless rendition of my grandmother's life, from start to finish. To "flesh out" the story and provide a realistic backdrop, I included the whole family and the surrounding community. Somewhere in there, another voice took over – the voice of a 13-year-old boy. A battle ensued between a brash

adolescent, who was continually getting into trouble, and my gentle grandmother.

When I had completed what I thought was a publishable manuscript, I applied for and was granted a mentorship from the Writers Federation of Nova Scotia. The Fed matched me up with award-winning writer, William Kowalski.

Bill was a saviour. He looked at my "novel" and essentially told me no one outside my immediate and extended family would be able to follow the story. It turns out, I had included my grandmother, most of her 13 siblings, the neighbours, the love interests of the siblings and neighbours, the parish priest, the widowed farmer from across the road, the schoolteacher, the schoolyard bully and his family, the neighbourhood gossip, and the bootlegger and his wife. And as the story was, more or less, an awkward, chronological accounting of most of the anecdotes I had collected in my interviews, it was anything but seamless.

At that moment, I realized I was not Tolstoy, I didn't have the talent to craft a novel that included 137 characters and a multitude of plots and sub-plots – and I wasn't writing *War and Peace*.

I looked at Bill, and said, "You'd pretty much need a road map to navigate this, wouldn't you?"

He smiled and nodded, but he was kind about it.

Bill said to think about my reader. He noted that even though my novel was based on a true story, it had to follow the rules of good fiction. I needed to establish one main character, give him a problem and set him on a quest. He also suggested I acquiesce to the voice that was elbowing my grandmother aside.

"That's your character," he said. "That's your voice."

Bill also advised me that, to make the story work, I had to cut down on the number of characters and adjust their ages and the dates of major events. He also suggested I deal out pertinent information throughout the novel, as opposed to giving everything away in the first chapter, which, apparently, I had also done. So, instead of starting the story in 1928, the actual year of my grandfather's death, I moved it to 1936, the midst of the Great Depression. Then Bill suggested I start the story somewhere in the middle, such as on the train station

platform. This way, the novel will open with some action that will compel the reader to want to know more.

He also said I should put the characters in some of the more interesting and compelling events that directly impacted their lives, even though they had not actually been there in real life. "You're writing fiction," he said. "You're allowed to do that." In short, Bill taught me how to take a family story and mould real characters and real events into compelling fiction.

I followed Bill's advice and rewrote my outline. I eliminated characters and combined others. I opened the story at a point subsequent to the oil refinery explosion that had killed my grandfather. So, on the very first page, the reader sees the family in a sorry state, on the train station platform, discovers there has been a recent death, and is, hopefully, compelled to read on to find out more. Only after having read several chapters will the reader discover how the dad has died and what Ma needs to do to keep her family together.

I followed Bill's suggestions, often referring back to notes from our meetings or feedback he sent via email. In July 2012, I submitted a significantly revised manuscript to the only publishing company I was really interested in. As *Somewhere I Belong* is an Island story, I wanted Acorn Press Canada of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, to publish it. In the spring of 2013, Acorn Press sent the email I had been waiting for. On November 1, 2014, the book was launched at the Confederation Centre of the Arts Library, in Charlottetown.

Without the assistance of a mentorship and William Kowalski's skilful guidance, *Somewhere I Belong* would not be the same novel. In fact, I doubt it would ever have been considered for publication. I can't say enough about how terrific the program truly is. I cherish the time I spent under Bill's tutelage and consider him a dear friend. I encourage other developing writers to apply for the program. And when I send my annual membership fee in to the Writers Federation of Nova Scotia, I always include a small donation for the mentorship program. ■

Alistair MacLeod Mentorship Program – past participants and published books

The list of emerging writers who have participated in the program who have gone on to publish is both long and impressive:

Marilyn Iwama (2001-02 with Sue MacLeod): *Skin Whispers Down*, Thistledown Press, 2003.

Genevieve Lehr (2001-02 with Sue Goyette): *The Sorrowing House*, Brick Books, 2004.

Ami McKay (2002-02 with Richard Cumyn): *The Birth House*, Knopf, 2006.

Ryan Turner (2003-04 with Richard Cumyn): *What We're Made Of*, Oberon Press, 2009.

Emily Holton (2004-05 with Donna Morrissey): *Dear Canada Council & Our Starland*, Conundrum Press, 2008.

Amy Jones (2004-05 with Linda Little): *What Boys Like*, Biblioasis, 2009.

Shandi Mitchell (2004-05 with Sue Goyette): *Under This Unbroken Sky*, Penguin, 2009. Simultaneously published by Penguin Canada, Weidenfeld & Nicolson (UK) and Harper Collins (US) in August 2009.

Jacob Mooney (2004-05 with Lesley Choyce): *The New Layman's Almanac*, M&S, 2008.

Christine McRae (2006-07 with Marilyn Iwama), *Next to Nothing*, Wolsak and Wynn, 2009.

Keir Lowther (2006-07 with Bill Kowalski), *Dirty Bird*, Tightrope Press, 2012.

Jan Coates (2008-09 with Gary Blackwood), *The Hare in the Elephant's Trunk*, Red Deer Press, 2010.

Judy Dudar (2008-09 with Sylvia Gunnery), *I Spy a Bunny*, Nimbus, 2009.

Glenna Jenkins (with William Kowalski) *Somewhere I Belong*, Acorn Press Canada, 2014.

For information on the Alistair MacLeod Mentorship Program please visit the programs section of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia website.

Getting out of a spin and back on track

by Sandra Phinney

Coming into the spring of 2013, things were grim. Due to a combination of circumstances over three years – two hip replacements, too many trips, a prolonged bout of pneumonia, and a mountain of volunteer work – my income had taken a nose dive. I was derailed and in a terrible spin.

So I hired a business coach, Ella McQuinn (www.linkedin.com/pub/ella-mcquinn/2/361/1a0), to help me get back on track. In the first session, we met in person for two hours; subsequent sessions were by phone. Before the first meeting, Ella dished out some homework via email. She asked, “What do you want out of the coaching session – what would success look like? Imagine you at your greatest over the coming months. How would that look?” She asked me to write down my responses.

To get things started, Ella also mapped out some specifics, which included these prompts:

- ideal writing clients (existing and potential);
- ideal billing rates/revenue model, and target for each of the next three years;
- describe a “great” writing business for you, in detail;
- what are your strengths as a writer and a business owner;
- what are the major obstacles in front of you right now (when you describe them, try to get to the root cause, not just the surface manifestations);
- what habits do you have that support a calm, joyful, peaceful you;
- what habits hinder a calm, joyful, peaceful you;
- who are your allies in your professional and personal life. How do they support you now, how could they support you more in the future; and
- what are the other important pieces in your life that you want to balance with your professional role.



As I said, that was before we even met for the first session. Then, with the above in mind, she zeroed in on process. The focus was tight:

- 1) determine what you want;
- 2) create multiple action plans/maps to support where you want to be; and
- 3) celebrate what you have already, and continue to celebrate moving forward.

Sound easy? Not.

The mental workout's been tough.

Committing things to paper and being accountable to someone was a challenge. But it's paid off. My office went from being a pig pen to being a place where I want to work. (One of the many obstacles I listed was not being able to find anything in my office.) Bottom line? I feel 10 years younger *and* my bank account's fattened up threefold over the last two years.

The next challenge will be to stay with the process, as outlined above, on an ongoing basis. Much like the “revise and edit” stages of our writing. It's all part of doing our job.

By the way, Ella used some of David Allen's material from *Getting Things Done* (GTD), which you can download for free from his website: www.davidco.com/free_articles/download.

As procrastination had become *modus operandi* whenever I faced growing anxiety about both my financial state and my confidence as a writer, his GTD Weekly Review, as well as his Workflow Processing & Organizing chart, proved to be useful tools. Check 'em out.

Warning: Moving forward (and facing our fears) is not for sissies. ■

Sandra Phinney is a freelance writer/photographer from Yarmouth. She still spins merrily along but seems to be spinning in a direction that she chooses. Nice change! Her website is www.sandraphinney.com.

Who's doing what

■ Good news for readers and writers in the entire province. There will be a new bookstore in Lunenburg come May 1! That's when Lexicon Books will open its doors on Montague Street. The owners are **Alice Burdick**, Jo Treggiari, and Anne-Marie Sheppard. It will feature new books across all genres for both younger and older readers. And online orders will be available.

■ *Haunted Girl: Esther Cox and the Great Amherst Mystery* by **Laurie Glenn Norris** and Barbara Thompson has been optioned for film production. Larysa Kondracki (*Covert Affairs*, *The Walking Dead*, *Better Call Saul*) will direct the project. Published by Nimbus in 2012, *Haunted Girl* tells of events that occurred in 1878 in Amherst, Nova Scotia. After 18-year-old Esther Cox arrives to live with her sister's family, there is a plague of unexplained occurrences in the house, including fires. Esther herself was subject to mysterious fevers and, on one occasion, stabbing. Was Esther the victim of paranormal powers or the troubled mind behind a series of elaborate hoaxes? At the time of her alleged haunting, the plausibility of her claims were hotly debated in Nova Scotia newspapers.

■ **Mary Ellen Sullivan**, **Charlotte Mendel**, and **Penny L. Ferguson** are featured in the anthology *In the Company of Animals: Stories of Extraordinary Encounters*. Published by Nimbus and edited by Pam Chamberlain, the collection features 37 writers from across Canada.

■ **Penny L. Ferguson** had a poem, "Mamale," reprinted for the fifth time in *Stories Inked* (Hidden Brook Press), a collection of personal stories from Holocaust survivors who went on to receive ORT training. She recently finished the song and script writing for a Christmas cantata and is working on bringing it to print and production.

■ **Miki Fukuda's** booklet *Songs from the Twelve Moons of the Bear* is forthcoming from Leaf Press in the Leaflet Small Book Series (www.leafpress.ca). And "Birthday," previously published in *CV2*, was recently featured and archived in Leaf Press's Monday Poetry Series. Her poetry appeared in the anthologies *The Crooked Ledge of Another Day* (Ascent Aspirations Publishing, 2014) and in *Petal in the Pan* (Kind of Hurricane Press, US). Her work was also featured in several journals: *Prism international*; *Off the Coast* (US); *Vallum*; *Talking Writing* (US); and *Crannóg* (UK).

■ ECW Press will release **Bob Kroll's** latest crime novel in May. *The Drop Zone, A T.J. Peterson Mystery*, is described by the publisher as "A dark and suspenseful debut. A stylish and riveting exploration of both the consequences of depravity and the sometimes extraordinary resilience of the human spirit." It can be pre-ordered online from ECW (www.ecwpress.com).

■ *Eternal Haunted Summer Ezine* will publish **Heddy Johannesen's** poem "Spring Ritual." Also, her article about a Bast Meditation, (the Egyptian Cat Goddess Bast), will be published in a devotional anthology titled *The Queen of the Sky Who Rules Over All the Gods*. And one of her articles is included in the book *Healing Herbs: A Beginner's Guide to Identifying, Foraging, and Using Medicinal Plants / More than 100 Remedies from 20 of the Most Healing Plants* available on Amazon.com

■ **Jan Coates** will be touring the Vancouver/Surrey area for TD Canadian Children's Book Week in May. Her picture book, *The King Of Keji*, is due out this spring from Nimbus, hopefully in time to go on tour with her. Jan will be retreating to Fool's Paradise, former home of artist Doris McCarthy on the Scarborough Bluffs, for the month of August, courtesy of the Ontario Ministry of Culture & Heritage. (For information on the residency program at Fool's Paradise visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/Programs/Doris-McCarthy-Artist-in-Residence-program.aspx.)

■ **Jessica Scott Kerrin's** latest novel will be published this spring by Groundwood Books. *The Missing Dog is Spotted* is a standalone prequel to *The Spotted Dog Last Seen*, which was a finalist for the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year for Children Award and the John Spray Mystery Award. It was also selected as a New York Public Library Book for Reading and Sharing.

■ In May, HarperCollins Canada will release **Dean Jobb's** latest book, *Empire of Deception: From Chicago to Nova Scotia – The Incredible Story of a Master Swindler Who Seduced a City and Captivated the Nation*. It's the true tale of 1920s Chicago con man Leo Koretz, who ran an elaborate Ponzi scheme before escaping to a life of luxury and excess as a book dealer and literary critic in Halifax, Nova Scotia. New York-based Algonquin Books is publishing the U.S. edition. In a fascinating look at the methods of swindlers throughout history, Dean combines investigative journalism and storytelling to examine one of the greatest con men of the twentieth century.

■ **Alice Walsh** reports The Canadian Children's Book Centre listed her YA novel, *Buried Truths*, as a Recommended Reads for Family Literacy Day. Also recommended in the picture book category was *Fire Trout Pie* by **Melanie Mosher** (Fifth House Publishers), and in the junior and intermediate fiction category *The Stowaways* by **Meghan Marentette** (Pajama Press). The list can be found at the Canadian Children's Book Centre's website (www.bookcentre.ca).

■ **Julie Larade's** first novel was published last November. And *Laura's Story* appeared on Friesen Press Best Sellers List in December. *Laura's Story* features an Acadian woman struggling to survive in rural Nova Scotia from the 1930s through the following decades. The official launch will be held in the spring. It's available online at www.friesenpress.com/bookstore and on Amazon.ca. Julie lives and writes in St.-Joseph-Du-Moine, Cape Breton. You can visit her online at facebook.com/julielaradeauthor.

■ *If there are no limits ... A Guide to Living With Passion, Purpose and Possibilities* by **Dianne Gaudet** is available at www.friesenpress.com/bookstore and at Amazon.com. Dianne is a professional, bilingual coach who lives in Halifax.

■ This spring Nimbus will publish *A History of Nova Scotia in 50 Objects* by **Joan Dawson**; *In the Spirit: Reflections on Everyday Grace* by **Monica Graham**, a collection of the best of her newspaper columns exploring our relationship with spirituality and religion; and *Grand Pré – Landscape for the World* by **A.J.B. Johnston** and Ronnie-Gilles LeBlanc.

Remembering ours – Jim Lotz (1929 -2015)



Jim Lotz passed away January 2, 2015. He was writing until the end. His last piece appeared December 22 in *The Chronicle Herald*, on one of his passions – community development. It was in his typically direct style, a commentary on the Ivany Report entitled “Let's develop from within – and quit endless studies.” A long time Writers' Federation member, Jim was a former president of the association and one of the founders of *The Atlantic Provinces Book Review*, the forerunner to *Atlantic Books Today*. He wrote hundreds of articles, papers, reports, reviews, and essays – along with 30 books. Perhaps the book that meant the most to him was the one he wrote after the death of his beloved wife, Pat – *Pilgrim Souls: Caring for a Loved One with Dementia* (Formac, 2013). Jim said, “It shares what we learned as dementia eroded Pat's mind to give comfort and hope to others, as she would have wished.” His last book, *Sharing The Journey* (Pottersfield Press) – was at the printers when he died. The memoir tells of his travels from England to the far reaches of northern Canada to Lesotho in Southern Africa and from Slovakia to Alaska. Always an independent and mindful thinker, prepared to take the road that best suited his skills and beliefs, Jim shares what he learned during his years working at 25 different jobs from farmer to university professor. A celebration of Jim's life will be held in the spring.