



Fall 2011 vol13 no4

INSIDE:

## LEARNING TO WRITE



- A) CAN WRITING BE TAUGHT?
- B) DO YOU NEED A CLASSROOM, OR WILL A WALK IN THE WOODS DO?
- C) IS WRITING SIMPLY A SERIES OF SKILLS AND DECISIONS?
- D) ALL OF THE ABOVE



BY MELANIE GRONDIN

# YOU HAVE ONE RESPONSIBILITY.

TO WRITE.

RETREAT  
FROM THE  
CLASSROOM

“Genius,” Thomas Edison said, “is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.” The same can be said of writing. Sure, you need that initial spark, that overwhelming idea that grabs you and doesn’t let you go, but for the rest you have to read, learn the trade, and write, write, write (then reread, rewrite, and edit). But who has the time to do that? How can we find the time to stop, breathe, and let that one percent of inspiration sweep through our busy bodies? The answer: writing retreats.

For the first time this spring—and in response to the survey carried out in 2009—QWF offered a three-day-long writing retreat. Over the Victoria Day weekend, ten eager and aspiring writers (yours truly included) gathered at the Manoir d’Youville—a former Grey Nuns convent on Saint-

QWF PRESIDENT

*Elise Moser*

Recently, I was shocked to realize how many writing workshops I've taken. I started in 2004 with one fiction workshop taught by David Homel and one poetry workshop taught by Carolyn Marie Souaid. Since then I have taken workshops on the short story, historical fiction, non-fiction, on how to approach a publisher and how to work with an agent. I've also taken a fiction master class. My workshop leaders have included much of the cream of the Quebec English literary crop – Susan Gillis, Jon Paul Fiorentino, Carmine Starnino, Elaine Kalman Naves, Tess Fragoulis, Josip Novakovich – as well as experts brought in by QWF from the literary world outside, such as award-winning Manitoba poet Di Brandt and Knopf Canada super-editor Louise Denny.

The wide range of capacities and interests among the students in any given group can be frustrating—who wants to spend their precious writing time fixing someone else's grammar?—but also a wonderful source of stimulation, support, and sometimes unexpected insight. The generosity it takes to open up to another's creative efforts is a gift in itself, whether you find it in your own heart or see it blossom in someone else. I've met poets in their eighties and CEGEP students working on their first fantasy stories, closet novelists chronicling their Laurentian communities and Argentine immigrants struggling to shape their thoughts in English. My friend Aly Musyryfa shared his gorgeous poems, originally written in Indonesian and unlike anything I'd ever read before. I helped him edit his English translations, and as a gift he gave me two stunning pieces of silk he had batiked himself, as that was his trade at home in Indonesia.

There is some debate about whether writing can be taught. You can't teach inspiration—but you can teach students how to



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produce the perspiration required to create art. You can also help people find tools: grammar, vocabulary, critical judgment, the confidence to stick with their artistic choices, and the humility to accept criticism. And a bit of wisdom, borne of experience, won't go astray; David Homel told us, "Revising is writing." Simple as it seems, I hadn't understood that before. It's an invaluable insight.

It may surprise you that along with absolute beginners and aspiring writers at all levels, many established writers attend QWF's workshops. I've been in groups with novelists, published poets, and professional print, radio, and TV journalists. They attend workshops led by their peers for the same reasons the rest of us do: to get the benefit of the accumulated experience, knowledge, and unique creativity of an admired master of one's craft.

But more than any technical or artistic benefit, what you get from a workshop that you don't get working in your garret all alone is a sense of community and an affirmation of your desire to express yourself in words. Whatever else you may have learned, that is priceless. ¶

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# Vive le Québec Livre!

A QUEBEC BOOK WORTH A SECOND LOOK

THIS ISSUE:

**ALICE ZORN**

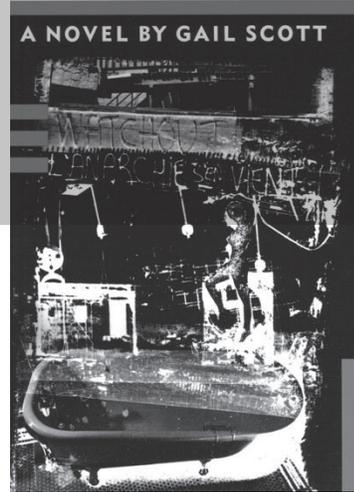
PAYS ATTENTION TO WHAT DOESN'T COME NATURALLY

**HEROINE**

BY GAIL SCOTT

## HEROINE

A NOVEL BY GAIL SCOTT



# I began

writing fiction in the late eighties. I didn't take workshops or courses. For better or for worse, I decided to trust my instincts. Though I noticed I read differently once I started writing: I paid more attention to structure, how character was revealed, plot, and language. I read to understand how fiction worked.

One book by a Quebec author stands out from that time: Gail Scott's *Heroine* (Coach House Press, 1987). The novel is a painful love story set against the years of upheaval in Quebec following the October Crisis. A woman lies in her bathtub reliving the romance and sundering of her relationship with a leftist politico, her own engagement with politics, her growing commitment to feminism. We feel her doubts and her longing, her confidence and indecision. She remembers a trip to Vancouver, scenes with her mother, being in love in Morocco, working in a woman's shelter, spying on her lover. She imagines a better outcome for the heroine of the novel she wants to write. "NO. I can't let her disintegrate like this. Racing towards the final humiliation (the reconciliation) as if she can't resist the blackness in her. It would be better if that dark smudge of desperate need for love [...] hid something more essential. More socially progressive."

The narrative threads loop around the woman in the tub. The past breathes through the present. Events don't progress. They accumulate like layers linked through emotion and memory.

Setting and description are vivid and exact. "...I entered the Cracow Café. And looked around at the intense faces, the dark shirts, the wire-rimmed glasses. Behind me in the entrance a blond hooker with dark circles under her eyes nervously dialed the phone. She looked so desperate and her knees kept sagging as if, unless she got an answer, she was going to sink down."

The writing is sensual without being wordy. "There's a blizzard. Snow swirling like ice angels between the steeples. Depositing

its lode in long stains on the bar and restaurant windows that line the sloping sidewalk." Each sentence has been weighed for its musicality, the rhythm of the paragraph. Dialogue is always dead-on. Often the writing is funny. " 'Androgyny is beautiful,' she whispers to herself. 'A hairless chest. But not hair around a breast.' "

There's a constant pull between emotional longing and rationalized political ideals. Irony is rife. The character wants to be free and independent and in love, but all too often she's left waiting—on the living room floor, wearing her sexiest clothes—for a lover who doesn't come.

Here's what might surprise you. I write realistic fiction—not at all like Gail Scott's innovative explorations of prose. But I tell you, this novel opened doors for me. Gail Scott showed me that the heart of a story doesn't have to follow the chronology of events. That real characters on the page are as confused as people in life. How to see the gritty urban texture of Montreal. That writing can be sensual, yet simple. The importance of each word in the sentence. How prose can be poetic.

Not always, but sometimes—and I'm never sure how—I can learn more from a writer who uses an approach that doesn't come naturally to me. The differences startle, prompt me to reassess, and question what else fiction can do. ¶

*Alice Zorn has just published a novel, Arrhythmia, with NeWest Press.*

# HE WROTE / SHE WROTE

## CAN WRITING BE TAUGHT? CAN WRITING BE TAUGHT?

BY JEFFERSON LEWIS

BY ILONA MARTONFI



I was a terrible liar as a boy. Hungry for attention, I'd change my name, make sisters disappear and invent a whole new identity as a way to make myself more interesting. Years later,

I discovered that this could be called "fiction"—a much gentler description than lying, but basically the same impulse—and that if you wrote it down you could make a living at it.

I came to writing fiction screenplays relatively late, via a long apprenticeship writing for newspapers, magazines, radio, documentary scripts, and a non-fiction book. Though I learned from editors, I have been, by and large, my own teacher. So why do I teach, and what do I think I can teach apprentice writers?

I teach because I wish I had had a great teacher whose wise advice would have steered me away from some of the mistakes I have made, and who would have made my writing life less lonely. I find it thrilling to come across the sparks of raw talent and to help coax them into a creative bonfire. It doesn't happen often, but often enough.

What can I teach? Well, I can't teach people why to write, but I can teach how to write, if they really want to learn. I can't teach empathy, or curiosity—can these things be taught?—but I can encourage and focus those qualities if they are already present. I can teach some fundamental principles of dramatic writing, which mostly boil down to keeping the audience guessing. If the audience is gripped by the question "What's going to happen next?" the rest is details and a satisfactory, if unexpected, conclusion.

I can encourage writers to find their own original voice and to not be afraid of it. And I can tell them repeatedly, drawing from my own experience and that of others, that a writer's worst enemy is self-doubt. I can tell them to accept that every writer worth her salt feels the same when confronted with a blank page or screen. I can tell them: take a deep breath, think loving thoughts about yourself, and get to work. Write. ¶

*Jefferson Lewis is the award-winning author of more than 60 screenplays in both English and French. He currently works throughout Canada, the U.S., and Europe as a screenwriter, story editor, and script doctor. He was Writer in Residence at the Canadian Film Centre, hosted the Banff Festival Screenwriting Seminars, and taught screenwriting workshops in Norway.*

Learning to write. Can writing be taught? Or is the better question "Can writing be learnt?" Writing is an art. Art cannot be taught. As a writer, I

am required to write alone. The spark, the life, the essence...can this be taught? The uncertainty, the not knowing, learning to recognize that the best learning comes from the experience of making and doing. In fact, all I need to know is one word—*write*.

Students either hear the music of words and language or are tone-deaf to it. Writing is an art. Writing rules can be taught. The elements of writing can be taught. The words are the voice that captures my imagination.

If you want to succeed as a writer, you must be prepared to read, you must be prepared to think imaginatively; you must be prepared to take time practising, experimenting, revising. You must be prepared to listen to criticism. As if mother was angry. Feeling homesick can make you obsessed. Then be obsessed. Writing is a good obsession. I must be prepared for the "muse." If it's there, it has to be appeased. If I ignore it, I will only succeed in replacing it with a feeling of restlessness.

I started writing when I was six by the river marsh. That is my home. I write my persona. I use my house as a place to birth, to cook, to weave, to sing and dance in winter. Corral sheep and goats. Foraging and farming. Velvet skirt reaching to my ankles. Turquoise, red coral jewelry. I love to dance the bachata. Jasmine. Feeding my child. Unborn at that time. Paralyzed. Speechless. First pregnant woman. When will I be free?

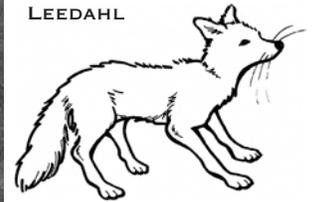
I love writing. ¶

*Ilona Martonfi's first book of poems, Blue Poppy, was published with Coracle Press in 2009. She has also published a chapbook with Coracle, Visiting the Ridge (2004). Ilona's poems have appeared in Vallum, Accenti, The Fiddlehead, Serai. Poet, editor, teacher, founder and producer/host of The Yellow Door and Visual Arts Centre Poetry and Prose Readings, co-founder of Lovers and Others, Ilona won the QWF 2010 Community Award.*





NOT THE GREY NUNS:  
THE RETREAT GROUP,  
TOP (LEFT TO RIGHT):  
BASSEL ATALLAH,  
ANNE STRATFORD,  
NAME WITHHELD,  
MÉLANIE GRONDIN,  
TIFFANY CROTOGINO,  
RHONDA WELSH.  
BOTTOM (LEFT TO  
RIGHT): MILENA  
KATZ, LAURA  
TEASDALE, MARCIA  
GOLDBERG, JULIE  
MOONEY, SHELLEY A.  
LEEDAHL



## A RETREAT FROM THE CLASSROOM, CONT.

Bernard Island in Châteauguay converted into a hotel—to learn from Edmonton poet, novelist, walker and all-around inspiring teacher Shelley A. Leedah. Leedah showed participants how to draw inspiration from walking and nature (her main muses). She taught the basic “rules” of poetry too, some of which you can never hear too often.

One of the best-kept secrets of the Greater Montreal Area, Manoir d’Youville is ensconced in breathtaking grounds surrounded by the St. Lawrence River at its most bejewelled, with friendly welcoming willows, flower-heavy apple trees and craved-for quiet. The rest of the island, which takes two and a half hours to circumvent, is a dense wildlife sanctuary.

How’s that for one percent inspiration? We crammed our notebooks with lines and thoughts to fuel future poems. We watched sunsets unhindered by skyscrapers, saw a family of deer in a cemetery, walked blindfolded in spider-web-like grass, and hiked at night in the forest, only turning back when a yipping fox warned us to stay away.

What differentiates even a short writing retreat from a workshop or course is the intensity of the creative moment, the eagerness springing from every participant as they immerse themselves in complete creation. We longed for inspiration, and opened ourselves to nature to find poetry in the smallest thing.

That’s where retreats differ from any other writing class. You learn the same tips and rules in a three-day writing retreat that you learn in a course. Granted, you don’t see the long-term development you would with an eight-week workshop. But the purpose of a retreat is unique. You don’t review and correct materials that already exist, but instead get the time you otherwise lack to escape and let ideas infuse you. While after a workshop you go home

and prepare dinner, care for the children and talk with your better half, in a writing retreat you have one responsibility: to write. You escape into a quiet corner and immediately play with and practise what you learned. The sheer intensity of this creative flow is strong enough to unlock—if not open, even just a little—the floodgate that once hindered your work.

This focus in writing retreats offers another benefit. Though usually solitary work, writing gains when shared. Long-term workshops offer the same opportunity, but because of what seems like unlimited time available during retreats, there is precious one-on-one time with the retreat leader, and the opportunity to bond with the other participants, whether you sing Simon & Garfunkel accompanied by a banjoline (I’d never heard of it before either) or tell each other true ghost stories in the middle of the night.

Time and invaluable feedback from participants will determine whether QWF will repeat this experience—to my mind a truly successful one. QWF’s 2011 writing retreat gave me enough inspiration to last a while, as well as the means to find more inspiration when needed. I also found the motivation to hone my skills for the other ninety-nine percent of the time. ¶

*Mélanie Grondin is treasurer of the QWF, editor for the Montreal Review of Books and The Rover, and a translator. Her poems and short stories have appeared in Room, carte blanche, Soliloquies, Headlight Anthology and The Nashwaak Review.*

**[QWF is indeed planning to repeat the writing retreat with Shelley A. Leedah in May 2012. Details to follow.]**

# Member News

Send your news to [info@qwf.org](mailto:info@qwf.org) (please keep to a 60-word limit) with “Member News” in the subject line—and you’ll be entered in a draw to win a beautiful book!

This issue:

*Authentic Wine:*

*Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking*

by Jamie Goode and Sam Harrop,

published by University of California Press

This issue’s winner is:

**Pascale Duguay**

*Members of the Qwrite Editorial Board and staff are not eligible for the quarterly prizes.*



**Joel Fishbane**’s latest piece of flash fiction can be read in Carousel #27. Visit [www.carouselmagazine.ca](http://www.carouselmagazine.ca).

The world premiere of **Colleen Curran**’s play *True Nature* will launch the Centaur Theatre 2011-2012 season.

**Beverly Akerman** won the Professional Writers Association of Canada’s Second Annual Short Article Award for her *Toronto Star* piece “Woman’s murder exposes need to raise age for gun ownership” (available at <http://tinyurl.com/y4utcpq>). She was also an Honourable Mention in the Features category for her essay “Six Pixels of Separation,” published in *Grain* magazine. Beverly is the author of the fiction collection, *The Meaning of Children* (Exile Editions), released this spring, and winner of the 2010 David Adams Richards Prize.

**Jeffrey Moore**’s latest novel, *The Extinction Club* (nominated for the QWF’s Hugh MacLennan Prize) was recently shortlisted for the 2011 Arthur Ellis Award (Best Crime Novel). Translation rights have now been sold to 14 countries. Jeff is currently residing in London, England as the Conseil des Arts’ Artist-in-Residence.

**Frank Babics**’s short story “Ecliptic” appears in *Riddle Fence #8*. His story “Gently, Gently Down the Stream” received an honourable mention in the 2010 Canadian Tales of the Fantastic Competition, and will be included in the forthcoming anthology, *Canadian Tales of the Fantastic* (Red Tuque Books, September 2011).

**Pascale Duguay** is very happy to announce the June release of her first novel *Twice Ruined*, a historical romance filled with humour and adventure. Please visit [www.auroraregency.com](http://www.auroraregency.com) to find out more. Two of her children’s magazine pieces were also published this summer: “Adventure Seeker” in *Zamoof* and “Made You Smile” in *Fun For Kidz*.

**Michelle Franklin** tours two of her books this fall: *Tales from Frewyn* toured in August (<http://blbbooktours.com/2011/07/2571>) and *The Commander and the Den Asaan Rautu* will tour in September ([http://bewitchingbooktours.blogspot.com/2011/07/now-scheduling-1-month-tour-for\\_27.html](http://bewitchingbooktours.blogspot.com/2011/07/now-scheduling-1-month-tour-for_27.html)). These are “virtual book tours,” with the author stopping in various blogs and websites over the month, conducting giveaways, interviews, excerpts and live Q&A. ¶

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THERE’S NO BETTER WAY TO BE READ BY ALL THE WRITE PEOPLE.

# TOMBER AMOUREUX WITH QUEBEC BOOKS

## QWF

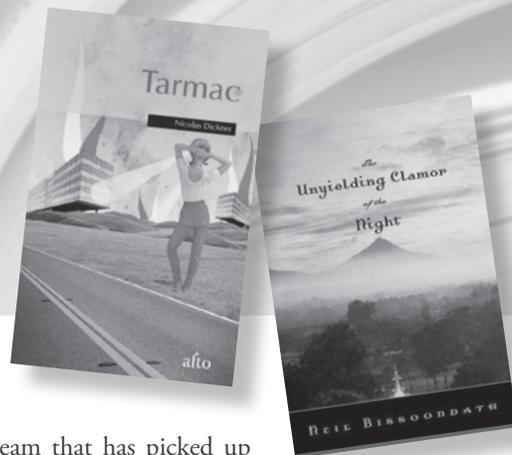
presents “Fait au Québec / Made in Quebec,” the second annual edition of “Reading: Un acte d’amour /

Lire: An Act of Love,” this September 19 at 7:30 p.m., along with the Union des écrivaines et des écrivains québécois (UNEQ) and the Literary Translators’ Association of Canada (LTAC). The event will be part of the Festival international de la littérature (FIL) this year.

The idea was born in 2010 when QWF and UNEQ joined forces to give their members an opportunity to discover and celebrate some true gems of Quebec’s literature, in both French and English, regardless of the language in which they were originally written. The inaugural event featured four writers talking about four books, and while it was generally considered a success, the organizers discovered that there was a great interest in hearing from the translators of the books as well. They invited the LTAC to join the team, and this year’s event began to take shape.

Quebec writers Mary Soderstrom and François Barcelo have each chosen another Quebec writer’s book—written in the author’s first language but available in translation—that they love. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, they will work their own magic with words to persuade the audience that it’s worth their while to pick up a copy and delve in. And this year, the translators who are essential to the sharing process will also share the stage.

Soderstrom picked Neil Bissoondath’s *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night*, an unsettling exploration of how a person can come to see violence as a solution. Lori Saint-Martin and Paul Gagné,



the team that has picked up the QWF Translation Prize an unprecedented three times in a row, created the French version, *La Clameur des ténèbres*. They will join the conversation.

Barcelo’s pick is *Tarmac*, which won Canada Reads for author Nicolas Dickner in its English-language version, *Apocalypse for Beginners*. Sharing the spotlight will be Lazer Lederhendler, who translated this charming and eccentric romantic comedy into English. Lederhendler’s translation of Dickner’s *Nikolski* won the 2009 QWF Prize for Translation.

Librairie Olivieri will be on site selling the featured books. ¶

**When:** Monday, September 19, 2011 at 7:30 p.m.

**Where:** Sala Rossa, 4848 St. Laurent Blvd., Montreal

**How much:** \$3 for members of any of the sponsoring organizations, \$5 for the general public

“I think of myself as an illuminator,” says poet Sina Queyras.

Once a student in Concordia University’s Creative Writing program, she’s now a teacher there. “I attempt to shine light on what students are already doing in their work and then help them develop and add new skills to make the work more thoughtful, more elegant, more consciously crafted.”



That’s becoming vital for new graduates. More students than ever now face the wonderful and terrifying prospect that they’re not tethered to their degree, and may find work in an unexpected field. Skills, contacts and chance will help you advance, but perhaps more than ever, graduates’ futures are determined by a desire and continued willingness to learn.

Students who are passionate about their craft find there’s a lot to learn in Queyras’ class. They sharpen their writing, reading, and creative problem-solving skills, all of which are essential in any profession. Plus they get to feed off the energy and insight of creative people participating in the program.

“My favourite aspect... is the mix of people one encounters,” says Queyras, “people coming to writing from diverse backgrounds at different times in their lives. This makes for exciting workshops, very unique trajectories and often, fascinating discussions.

“My job is to show students the decisions they are making,” she says. “In this way they gain control of their craft. So, if every student came away understanding that writing is a process, a series of skills and decisions that can be targeted, polished, changed and/ or strengthened, that would be fabulous.”

Creative writing programs don’t depend on a specific body

of knowledge. There is no series of facts or canonical texts. While writing requires technical skill, it is also a slow and arduous process that requires a good deal of endurance. But, Queyras says, it can be taught.

“We are all taught to write somehow. We teach people how to write a poem, fiction, a screenplay, just as we teach a person to write an essay or a piece of journalism. What’s more difficult to teach is insight, instinct, or that mysterious ingredient we call talent. This is why I focus on skills, with the emphasis on process and discipline as much as developing creative thinking muscles.”

Many students (myself included) have gone into the program eager to publish, win accolades, and live that glorious writer’s life everyone keeps talking about. I’ve since learned it doesn’t work that way, that good writing requires patience and respect for the craft.

“If you get a pat now and then, great,” Queyras says, “but your time is better spent gaining control of the nuts and bolts of your craft. Building specific muscles and discipline so you can achieve consistently good work over time. I think one of the best things about the Concordia CW program is its close relationship to the English Department. Programs that seek to overly specialize, to ‘save’ their students the bother of academic training, for example, are less attractive to me. I know of programs that have made models based on production, say, ten pages of prose a week, and sending it out on a regular basis, scattershot, always having something of yours on everyone’s desk at all times...okay, that’s one way, and the odds are you’ll get published, but I’m more interested in entrenching skills that are going to serve a writer their whole lifetime. Slower, more thoughtful and nuanced work combined with a disciplined writing life, making people aware of their strengths and showing them potential ways to make use of them.”

The true test of a writing program doesn’t come at the end of term. It comes when you’re at your desk alone and face an empty page. Or maybe it’s not empty, maybe you are producing, but not yet at the level that teachers like Queyras taught you to demand. It’s a test that comes long after the program ends, and it keeps coming.

“Despite the social world of a creative writing program—and that social aspect is important—writing is still a very solitary act,” Queyras reflects. “It’s what a writer does with that alone time that pays off in the end, not about how good you are socially. Even writers such as Johanna Skibsrud who strike it big with a novel had a long stretch to manage between a workshop and recognition—for most it’s longer. So handling the long silent stretches is a good thing to learn. You have to ingest your workshop as much as you need to learn your craft: you need to figure out how to sustain a writing life in the face of terrible odds. That’s what a program helps one figure out.” ¶

*Kasper Hartman works as a writer and editor in the videogame industry. He graduated from the Concordia Creative Writing Program in 2009.*