



November 2009 vol¹² no¹

Novels get graphic

BY LANCE JONES



BILLY MAVREAS, MY LIFE AS A FOOT, CONUNDRUM

Montreal is a hotbed of graphic novels. The two major English publishers in Canada, Drawn & Quarterly and Conundrum, started in Montreal. There are dozens of graphic novelists publishing here and hundreds waiting in the wings. Publisher Chris Oliveros (Drawn & Quarterly) explains, "Montreal is a very culturally vibrant city, so it's no surprise... Montreal is at the crossroads of both European and North American cultures." Sully, aka Sherwin Tjia (*The Hipless Boy*), one of Montreal's recently published graphic novelists adds, "It's cheap to live here. That allows an artist to work a little at a side job to support working a lot on his graphic novel."



MICHAEL HIND, THE UNDERTAKING, CONUNDRUM

Far from being the new kid on the block, the graphic novel is actually over 20 years old. Acceptance of the genre is growing every year with an expanding reader demographic. Billy Mavreas (*Inside Outside Overlap*, *The Overlords of Glee*, *Mutations*) stresses that, "It is not the adding of pictures that makes [graphic novels] what they are. It is another kind of literacy." Sully believes that graphic novels give readers a special way of absorbing a story: "If there is love in the drawing, you can feel it. Seeing the pictures is so rewarding. Every time you read, the pictures give you a break... it's sort of a gift. You stop and enjoy them." To Oliveros, both the stories and the medium are unique. "It's not meant as a 'replacement' for novels... Chester Brown's *Louis Riel*... would be completely different if it was... told strictly in text form."

More and more artists are moving to comics and from comics to graphic novels, and more graphic novels are being published than ever before. Publisher Andy Brown (Conundrum) gives credit to the hard work of that growing number of talented artists, and to "...people like Chris Oliveros at D&Q."

Today when a writer says he is putting pen to paper he usually means fingers to a keyboard. For the graphic novelist, "pen to paper" is an accurate description of what they do. Like a comic, a graphic novel contains panels with drawings and uses speech bubbles to deliver the characters' lines. In fact, all the text is within the panels, with most in those bubbles. Just like

Continued on page 7

QWF PRESIDENT

Elise Moser

When the QWF was founded a little over ten years ago, it was very much a grassroots organization, run by writers, for writers. It still is, although it has grown by leaps and bounds, steadily extending its programming and increasing its membership. Our current very healthy state is a testament to the devotion and diligent labour of many people, mostly volunteers. We are now at a point where our resources and our staff are stretched to the limit, even as the board and member volunteers plan new and improved programs and activities to meet the needs of both aspiring and professional writing members. We are at a tipping point. We must think about how QWF will grow.

You may have filled out our survey recently (thanks!); ably piloted by volunteer Mélanie Grondin, this initiative will help us focus our efforts where you need them. But it's not just about when to schedule that workshop or where to hold this event. We also need to take time to think more broadly about QWF's role in the community and what we hope to accomplish—in 2010, 2011, and beyond. There may be things we can do now to insure that QWF will continue to be stable, well-organized, democratic, and responsive.

To that end, your board took a Sunday in October to think about QWF. While you were having brunch, doing laundry, perhaps sneaking into the study to revise a chapter or two, we were retreating from the city for the length of a full workday to consider QWF's priorities, options, and commitments. Our responsibility is to the valuable legacy of the past and to the many possibilities of the future.

You know that Fatboy Slim song, "Praise You"?

"We've come a long, long way together, through the hard times and the good, I have to celebrate you, baby, I have to praise you like I should."



and *glamourously festive!*

It's a simple, happy, unabashed song of praise and it always makes me think of the QWF Gala—it just seems like a perfect anthem for the highlight of the QWF calendar. (Watch the video—search Youtube for "praise you fatboy slim official video"—it's a hoot.)

The Gala is the moment when, after a full year of hard work, we all get together in one room and celebrate our successes. We shine a light on the achievements of individual writers and translators, recognize the accomplishments of our Community Award winner, and make visible the support of the wider community for the work we do. The prizes awarded at the Gala by QWF, and by the CBC for the Quebec Writing Competition, not only glorify individual artists, they enhance the profile of our entire community. It's a celebration of the creative spirit we all share. Join us on November 17 at the Lion D'Or for a glamorous evening of literary festivity. If you don't know me yet, I hope you'll introduce yourself. I will certainly be there—because:

"I have to celebrate you, baby, I have to praise you like I should!"



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE QUEBEC WRITERS' FEDERATION

November 2009 vol¹² no¹



Editor in Chief: Byron Rempel

Issue Editors: Joanne Carnegie, Raquel Rivera

Qwrite Editorial Board: Kate Orland

Bere, Joanne Carnegie, Lance Jones,

Elise Moser, Raquel Rivera, Gina Roitman,

Lori Schubert

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www.qwf.org

(514) 933.0878 • admin@qwf.org

1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite 3

Westmount, Quebec H3Z 1X4

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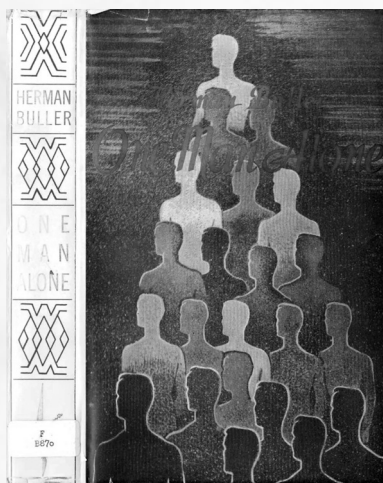
A Quebec book worth a second look



This issue: Gina Roitman reads

One Man Alone

by Herman Buller
Canada National Book Club, 1963



Memory, as we know, is a tricky thing. A book that leaves a lasting impression on a young mind may be less remarkable on second reading decades later. And yet, the ideas spawned or the phrases borrowed and repeated through a lifetime form a bond with the material that forgives the quality of writing. In a way, returning to an old read brings you back to a time of innocence.

At 16, I picked up *One Man Alone* by Herman Buller. The book was one of the winners of the 1963 Novel Contest staged by the Canada National Book Club. But what drew me to this book was the setting: my own city, Montreal. Not just Montreal, but my home town as told from a Jewish, pre-WWII perspective. It was a world I knew nothing about, having arrived as a baby with my refugee parents in 1949. It was a world I would not encounter until a few years later when I would read Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

Although on second reading, Buller's writing is at times painfully expository and often preachy, he was successful in re-creating a world

which until then, I had never imagined. Set in Montreal of the 30s and ending with the Asbestosville strike in 1949—one of the greatest events in contemporary Quebec history—*One Man Alone* fed the social consciousness I was beginning to grow from reading the likes of John Steinbeck and Dostoyevsky. It gave context to stories that had touched me but, I thought, had nothing to do with me. At sixteen, we imagine we are living a world newly minted, completely different from any other.

On the brink of the Quiet Revolution, *One Man Alone* introduced me to history not taught in the Protestant School Board of Montreal, stories about the backroom politics of the Duplessis years, the Padlock Law, and the crushing poverty that lived and breathed in what we now call the Plateau. The main character, Morrie Cohen, incubates his passion for socialism and the working man on familiar streets whose names have been forgotten... Craig, Dorchester, and City Hall.

Upon rereading, I recognized that my long aversion to being the beneficiary of a life insurance policy may have started with the description of the system "...as economic cannibalism where indirectly, man looks upon man as his food."

And for years, entertaining out-of-town friends, family and visiting travel media, I would repeat an apt metaphor Buller employed about how immigrants arriving in Montreal's port or Windsor Station moved up The Main until they got to the mountain, and then chased each other around it in a determined effort to reach the top one day.

One Man Alone left a lasting impression on me, proof of which is that in 30 years, I had never stopped searching for a copy (thank God for Abebooks). Ultimately, it altered my understanding of how I fit into the framework of Montreal's complex hive of cultures, each hoarding its own history. ∞



A Montreal writer and poet, Gina Roitman is the author of *Tell Me a Story*, *Tell Me the Truth*, a book of nine linked short stories released in fall 2008. Her work has aired on CBC Radio and appeared in *Ukula Magazine*, *Quills Poetry Magazine* and *carte blanche*. She is currently working on a novel.

Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-Fiction



YVES ENGLER



PATRICK
MCDONAGH



ERIC SIBLIN

The Black Book of Canadian Foreign Policy • [Fernwood Publishing]

Former vice president of the Concordia Student Union, **Yves Engler** is a Montreal activist and author. He is the author of three books: *The Black Book of Canadian Foreign Policy*; *Playing Left Wing: From Rink Rat to Student Radical*; and (with Anthony Fenton) *Canada in Haiti: Waging War on The Poor Majority*.

Idiocy: A Cultural History • [Liverpool University Press]

Patrick McDonagh is a Montreal-based writer & a part-time faculty member in the Department of English at Concordia University. He is currently refining a couple of new book proposals.

The Cello Suites • [House of Anansi Press]

Montreal writer **Eric Siblin** studied history at Concordia University before coming of age journalistically at the *Glengarry News* in Alexandria, Ontario, and the *Standard Freeholder*, in Cornwall, Ontario. He then worked as a reporter/editor at the Montreal bureau of the Canadian Press (CP) from 1989 to 1996, when he joined the *Montreal Gazette* as a staff reporter, including a stint as the newspaper's pop music critic. He has since directed the documentary films, *Word Slingers*, and *In Search of Sleep*, and has written for a wide variety of magazines. *The Cello Suites* is his first book.

McAuslan First Book Prize



ERIC SIBLIN



GILLIAN SZE



ALICE ZORN

The Cello Suites • [House of Anansi Press]

Eric Siblin - see above.

Fish Bones • [DC Books]

Gillian Sze's graduate thesis, a collection of poems based on visual art from a range of cultures, is the basis of *Fish Bones*. Her poetry has appeared in such venues as *CV2*, *Prairie Fire*, *Ricepaper*, *pax americana* (U.S.), *Crannóg* (Ireland), *Cha* (Hong Kong), and *Asia Literary Review*. She is also the author of two chapbooks, *This is the Colour I Love You Best* (2007) and *A Tender Invention* (2008), published by Withwords Press.

Ruins and Relics • [NeWest Press]

Originally from Ontario, **Alice Zorn** now lives in Montreal. She has published short fiction in several magazines and placed first in *Prairie Fire's* 2006 Fiction Contest. She participated in the Banff Writing Studio and the Quebec Writers' Federation Mentorship Program.

QWF AWARDS 2009

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Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction



JON PAUL
FIORENTINO



HAROLD
HOEFLE



COLIN
MCADAM

Stripmalling • [ECW Press]

Jon Paul Fiorentino has written the poetry books *The Theory of the Loser Class* and *Hello Serotonin*, and the humour book *Asthmatica*. He edited the anthologies *Career Suicide! Contemporary Literary Humour*, and *Post-Prairie*, a collaborative effort with Robert Kroetsch. He teaches writing at Concordia University and is the editor of *Matrix* magazine. *Stripmalling* is his first novel.

The Mountain Clinic • [Oberon Press]

Harold Hoefle's short fiction has been published in numerous journals, including *Exile*, *Grain*, *The Antigone Review*, and *Matrix*. He is also the author of *Spray Job*, a chapbook of four stories. He was a non-fiction finalist at the 2006 National Magazine Awards. A chapter of *The Mountain Clinic* was a finalist in last year's *Malabar Review* Novella Contest.

Fall • [Hamish Hamilton Canada / Penguin Group Canada]

Colin McAdam grew up in Hong Kong, Denmark, England, Barbados, and Canada. He received his PhD in English Literature from Cambridge University in England. His first novel, *Some Great Thing*, won the Books in Canada / Amazon.ca First Novel Award and was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Best First Book), and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in the United Kingdom.

HOSTED BY STANLEY PÉAN,
INDOMITABLE AUTHOR OF 22 BOOKS AND YA
NOVELS, LITERARY JOURNALIST, RADIO HOST
AND PRESIDENT OF UNEQ

MUSIC BY RIVERSIDE BLUES

CASH BAR

BOOK TABLE BY PARAGRAPH BOOKS

QWF gratefully acknowledges our prize sponsors:

Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-Fiction,
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A. M. Klein Prize for Poetry, sponsored by Jacques Nolin

QWF Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature,
sponsored by Babar Books

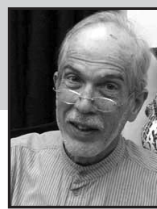
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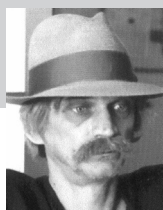
LAZER
LEDERHENDLER

Fences in Breathing • [Coach House Books] • from *La capture de sombre*, by Nicole Brossard
Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood is the author of *Re-belle et infidèle: la traduction comme pratique de ré-écriture au féminin / The Body Bilingual: translation as a rewriting in the feminine*, and of many texts about her practice of both literary and art text translation. She has co-authored numerous works of theory, translated fiction into English and into French, and has received awards in Canada and the U.S. In 2005, she was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award.

Wildlives • [Douglas & McIntyre] • from *Champagne*, by Monique Proulx
David Homel and Fred A. Reed: Novelist Homel and non-fiction author Reed, who specialize in translations of books by female authors, have been working together for ten years, bringing to their translations the skills and sensibilities on display in their own books. As *hommes de métier*, they suffer from no false modesty, while in their personal lives they are modest to a fault. David Homel's next novel, tentatively entitled "Midlife," will be published next year. Fred A. Reed is working on a memoir.

Nikolski • [Knopf Canada] • from *Nikolski*, by Nicolas Dickner
Lazer Lederhendler has been translating professionally for over 30 years. He was nominated for the 2006 Governor General's Literary Award for his translation of Gaétan Soucy's *The Immaculate Conception*, which was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and in 2007 won the QWF award for translation. The translation of *Nikolski* by Nicolas Dickner won the Governor General's Literary Award in 2008. Mr. Lederhendler's translation of Pascale Quiviger's novel *La Maison des temps rompus* is forthcoming from House of Anansi.

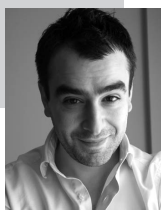
A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry



NORM SIBUM



MIKE SPRY



CARMINE
STARNINO

The Pangborn Defence • [Biblioasis]

Norm Sibus has been writing and publishing poetry for over forty years. He grew up in Germany, Alaska, Utah, and Washington before moving to Vancouver. He has lived in Montreal since 1994. Sibus has published several volumes of poetry in Canada and England, most recently *Smoke and Lilacs* with Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2009. In 2002 he received the A.M. Klein Award for *Girls and Handsome Dogs* (Porcupine's Quill). He has just finished writing a novel and a play.

Jack • [Snare Books]

Mike Spry was born in Ottawa, and has spent time living in Vancouver, Toronto and Costa Rica. He lives in Montreal where he is the co-coordinator of The Pilot Reading Series, a contributing editor for *Matrix* magazine, and the programs coordinator for Summer Literary Seminars.

This Way Out • [Gaspereau Press]

Carmine Starnino has published four books of poetry. *This Way Out* has been nominated for a Governor General's Award. He has won the Canadian Authors Association Poetry Award, the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry and the E.G. Bressani Literary Prize. He is the author of *A Lover's Quarrel*, a collection of essays on Canadian poetry, and the editor of *The New Canon: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*. He edits *Maisonneuve* magazine in Montreal.

QWF Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature



JANE
BARCLAY



MARIE-
LOUISE GAY



MONIQUE
POLAK

Proud as a Peacock, Brave as a Lion • [Tundra Books]

Award-winning author Jane Barclay is a tea-drinking, dog-walking, house-cleaning, lawn-cutting short-order cook and writer. Besides writing books for children, she also does freelance work and her articles have appeared in both the *Montreal Gazette* and the *National Post*. Jane lives with her husband in Pointe Claire, Quebec.

When Stella Was Very, Very Small • [Groundwood Books]

Marie-Louise Gay has written and/or illustrated over 60 books for children, and has been published in 20 languages. She has won two Governor General's Awards, Mr. Christie's Book Award, the Ruth Schwartz Award, the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, and the E.B. White Award. She has been nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2009.

What World is Left • [Orca Book Publishers]

Monique Polak is the author of 11 books for young adults. *What World Is Left* is based on her mother's experience as a teenager in a Nazi concentration camp. It was nominated for the American Library Association YA Fiction Prize. It is also up for the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award. Her two latest YA books, *The Middle of Everywhere* and *Junkyard Dog*, were just released.

Member News



Send your news to info@qwf.org, with "Member News" in the subject line—and you'll be entered in a draw to win a great book!

THIS ISSUE:

Mary Nobl, Inside & Outside

by Barbara Manger and Janine Smith

see the book at: <http://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/4491.htm>

This issue's draw winner is **Maxianne Berger**

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

Daniel Allen Cox's novel *Shuck* has been shortlisted for a 2009 ReLit Award, a literary prize recognizing independent Canadian presses.

The French rights for **Anne Renaud's** picture book *Missuk's Snow Geese* (Simply Read Books) have been sold to Dominique et Compagnie. *Missuk et les oies des neiges* is scheduled for publication in September.

Pat Camozzi's "Waters of My Life" short life story will be published in the Maple Tree Literary Supplement—an online journal of the Carleton University English Department.

Claude Lalumière's debut collection, *Objects of Worship*, is an October 2009 release from CZP. Recent and forthcoming short fiction: "Three Friends" appeared in July in *Clockwork Phoenix 2: More Tales of Beauty and Strangeness*, edited by Mike Allen (Norilana Books); "The Ethical Treatment of Meat" will be reprinted in December in *The Best of All Flesh*, edited by James Lowder (Elder Signs Press). Thanks to the people at the Canadian Embassy in Serbia, Claude was a guest at the 2009 Belgrade Book Fair (October 26 - November 1).

Iлона Martonfi's first poetry book, *Blue Poppy*, has been released by Coracle Press, and is available from the author. She is pleased to announce her full membership in the League of Canadian Poets.

Robyn Sarah's new poetry collection, *Pause for Breath*, is now out from Biblioasis Press. A launch was held November 3 at The Word Bookstore.

Monique Polak's YA novel *What World Is Left* was nominated for the American Library Association prize for YA fiction. The book is also up for the Manitoba Young Readers' Choice Award.

In October, Monique launched her two latest YA books, *The Middle of Everywhere* and *Junkyard Dog* (Orca) at Babar en Ville. *The Middle of Everywhere* is set in an Inuit community Monique visited in 2007 as part of Blue Metropolis's Quebec Roots project. *Junkyard Dog* was inspired by a guard dog who works at a depanneur near Monique's house in NDG. Monique has been invited back to Nunavik this winter for another launch of *The Middle of Everywhere*.

Mark Paterson's story, "Spring Training," won first prize in the 5th annual *Geist* Literal Literary Postcard Story Contest and appeared in issue #73 of *Geist*. Most recently, his short story, "Apocalypse, As Viewed from the Family Room," appeared in *Joyland: A Hub for Short Fiction*, located at joyland.ca.

Julie Mahfood has recently begun graduate studies in English and Creative Writing at Concordia; she has just had a poem in *The Caribbean Writer*, with more upcoming in *CV2* and *Room*.

Gina Roitman will be reading from her book, "Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth" at the Vancouver Jewish Book Festival on November 24 (www.jewishbookfestival.ca).

In March 2010, Gina will perform an original poem commissioned to accompany a new musical composition that will premiere at The Pink Triangle Project, a multi-faceted artistic endeavor to commemorate homosexual victims of the Holocaust.

Gina recently returned from an international convention of the Society of American Travel Writers of which she is member. At the closing dinner in Guadalajara, she was honoured with the President's Bowl in recognition for immeasurable contributions to the Society.

Carol Katz's original story, "The Storm in My Head" was published in the on-line Holocaust Edition of *Poetica Magazine*, August 2009.

Lori Weber was chosen to participate in this year's TD Canadian Children's Book Week Tour. The tour, organized by the Canadian Children's Book Centre, is designed to promote reading and love of books in young people across the country. Lori tours the great plains of Manitoba from November 14 to 21, presenting her new book, *If You Live Like Me*.

Barbara Florio Graham has updated and expanded the Book Publishing Options information on her website: www.SimonTeakettle.com/options.htm.

Mucho mas! Member News

Cinzia Russo's first children's book is called *Clumsy Monkey*, for ages zero to seven, written and illustrated by Cinzia. It's a wild jungle adventure for our lovable clumsiest monkey, Pablo. He and his friends must find a way to escape an evil madman, and save their home. This is a humorous adventure about friendship, overcoming obstacles, romance, and... clumsiness. For more information, visit www.cinziarusso.com. This book can be purchased online at amazon.com and trafford.com.

Philip Amsel has received a grant from the Institute for Manangement and Community Development, Concordia University, for his chapbooks.

Maxianne Berger received a travel grant from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec to attend the Camp littéraire de Baie-Comeau, where she gave an all-day workshop on tanka poetry. She was also among the poets invited to this year's Festival international de la poésie de Trois-Rivières.

Published by Shoreline Press, and launched from the Saul Bellow Library in Lachine (in September), **Sonya Kleinsteuber's** first novel, *Reaching for the Stars*, is a novel of love and war. During the Bosnian war a NATO pilot meets a dedicated young psychiatrist. Their lives together and apart are shaped by their strengths, weaknesses and circumstances of the war. Their love binds them through their adversities and gives Sylvia the strength she needs for what lies ahead. Royalties from the sale of *Reaching for the Stars* are donated to St. Mary's Hospital Centre. Sonya Kleinsteuber is an advocate for challenged individuals.

Erato Sahapoglu's memoir, *With Love as Guide*, has been published by Trafford.com. (Now also available at Amazon.)

Byron Rempel's award-winning biography of the Wurtele twins, *No Limits*, has been translated into French by Michelle Tisseyre as *Sans limites: La vie exceptionnelle des jumelles Rhona et Rhoda Wurtele, Olympiennes et pionnières du ski au Canada*. After a successful first run, the original English version has been updated and both versions have a full analytical index. Check out Twinski Publications' new website dedicated to the twins' story: www.twinski.com.

Aparna Sanyal is the new associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*. ☞

"My sorrow, when she's here with me, thinks these dark days of autumn rain are beautiful as days can be; she loves the bare, the withered tree; she walks the sodden pasture lane." - Robert Frost

Graphic Novels, continued from page 1



SULLY, THE HIPLESS BOY
CONUNDRUM

the comic artist, each graphic novelist approaches his work in a different way and produces the drawings with a different vision. "I do the writing first then the pictures," says Sully. "Sure, I might make notes or small sketches in the margins; I might even draw the backgrounds in the panels early; but I always draw the people last, so I know the dialogue will fit." Mavreas uses his own improvisational technique: "...drawing bits of sequences at a time and seeing what occurs. I also don't use words... I 'write' with pictures." He believes that the artist creates a world that can only exist as an illustrated story and that "technical chops are meaningless in the service of trite soap operas. But awkward line work can easily heighten heartfelt storytelling." To Sully, the graphic novelist who works alone rather than in a team is impressive. "There is something magical about a graphic novelist who can write and draw at the same time."

Brown regards everyone's work with a publisher's eye first. "The writing and drawing need to work together. Ultimately I'm not interested in just pretty drawings. I want there to be a narrative, but if I open a book and the artist can't draw I look no further." Oliveros looks for balance: "A cartoonist needs to have a sense of how to tell a story: when to use silent panels, when to have narration as opposed to dialogue."

While their approaches may be disparate, Sully and Mavreas agree that a unique vision is what makes a graphic novelist great.

So how do aspiring artist/writers find that vision and become great graphic novelists? Oliveros says you have to work at it: "Read a lot—both literature and graphic novels. Draw every day." Brown agrees that perseverance is the key. "Keep at it. Sometimes it takes a week to do a page. Do your story in sections. Make minis. Pass them out. Persist." Sully warns those whose strength is drawing to be careful: "The pictures can't do all the heavy lifting. So, learn the art of storytelling." Mavreas promotes immersion in the genre culture: "Go to conventions and book/zine fairs. Meet other artists and trade."

What does the future have in store for aspiring graphic novelists? Oliveros has a clearly optimistic view: "I believe graphic novels will continue to establish a beachhead in our culture. Most avid readers will be reading both 'regular books' [fiction & non-fiction] along with graphic novels." Brown agrees wholeheartedly. As he sees it, graphic novels have "unlimited potential." ☞

Lance Jones is a Montreal freelance writer. He has over 30 years experience in radio, video and TV production as a script writer and director, as well as five years as a website writer. He writes poetry in secret and songs that need a musician's talent to finish. He is currently looking for an agent/publisher for his first novel.

Blue Poppy, Yellow Door. Ilona Martonfi is a poet, educator, editor and activist.

Originally from Hungary, she is the founder, producer and host of two of Montreal's most lively literary series: The Yellow Door and the Visual Arts Poetry and Prose Reading Series. Her first book of poems, *Blue Poppy*, was recently published by Coracle Press.

This September, **FIONA O'CONNOR** had the opportunity to meet Ilona and learn what drives and sustains the poet in her multi-faceted contributions to Montreal's literary community. She found that while initially reserved, Ilona became both warm and generous when discussing her work and the reasons behind her strong commitment to it.

Fiona O'Connor: *Do you try to keep what you do in the public sphere separate from your personal writing practice?*

Ilona Martonfi: I don't think that's how it works. I try to be porous and see-through. This carries [through to] the way that I am with my students, it's what I like to establish. The group—it has to be compassion, a nurturing group. The side effects of writing are similar to the healing process...my writing is universal; archetypal images. My subjects: life, death, love and loss. The natural world. I am a witness poet. A realist. Minimalist.

FO: *What does being a "poet-activist" mean to you?*

IM: "Poet-activist": I work with social problems. My specialty is domestic violence. A feminist poet I wouldn't say—I don't like to be put in a box. I like "calling" much better. I've appreciated having a calling to motivate me and I had the message before I even started writing—with domestic violence, because I experienced it. Back then, the newspapers and TV weren't very strong about it. I find that it's isolation and secrecy that I'm putting on its head...In my case, I needed community and I didn't find that voice when I was living [through the violence].

FO: *What was the catalyst for you to go public as a writer and to seek and create a writing community?*

IM: I became a writer after I left my home. Before I left my house I promised myself I would be a voice for other women, and secondly, my grandchildren will not see [their] grandmother battered. To put it out in the public and speak about [domestic violence], is not the cure, but the solution to whatever keeps the secret. And that's why I wanted to be a voice. So I spoke to myself, my own persona, and everybody became my audience: "Out there, hello! Ring the bell! Real loud!" Stuff like that. That's one social problem, and then I discovered so many social problems attached to this social problem. Social problems are not alone—they all have tendrils.



ILONA MARTONFI

FO: *By establishing writing groups you discovered a practical application, a social purpose, for your writing. How did this happen?*

IM: I didn't think it out. I didn't get hired with a full time job, so I created my own work. I finally realized that there's a lot of need for writing. Now I have art therapy groups as well—that is great stuff, because I like psychology—but the writing for the last 10 years has been writing memoir, fiction, poetry.

FO: *Was the decision to start The Yellow Door Poetry and Prose Reading Series related to your own need for community as a poet?*

IM: Definitely. Working for 24 years full-time in our corporation—with my ex-husband with real estate properties, owners and managers, employees—I had knowledge and experience and wanted to bring my life experience and make it work. I bring expertise to my calling.

FO: *Creative expression is sometimes seen as a private and solitary practice. Does The Yellow Door Poetry and Prose Reading Series demonstrate the importance of a group dynamic for inspiring creativity?*

IM: Oh yes. It takes time to discover all this; that I needed to actually go out there and be more sociable. I also discovered I am a prima donna. The baggage I am carrying, the drama can be lived out. I have this huge need to connect. The Yellow Door series helps me to realize the Prima Donna and the calling together—they finally understand each other!

FO: *You recently had your first book of poems published in a collection: Blue Poppy. How does it feel?*

IM: Oh, it's a real high. It felt like a wedding day. If I can explain—my ex-husband and I, it's because we eloped, so this, finally, was like a real wedding day—I was that happy!

Fiona O'Connor is a freelance writer and photographer from Montreal. A graduate of Concordia's Graduate Diploma in Journalism, she interned at Kabnawake's The Eastern Door and has since contributed to various publications, including Momentum magazine and the Montreal Review of Books. Her blog, montreal-forinsiders.com, is a tourist's guide to local arts, culture and nightlife.