
“THIS COULD BE A VERY LONG ANSWER ... ”

AN INTERVIEW WITH **rob mclennan**

Born in Ottawa in 1970, rob mclennan currently lives in Ottawa. The author of over a dozen poetry collections in three countries, he recently published his first novel, *white* (The Mercury Press), his first collection of essays, *subverting the lyric: essays* (ECW Press) and his first travel book, *Ottawa: The Unknown City* (Arsenal Pulp Press). The editor/publisher of above/ground press, Chaudiere Books, Poetics.ca (with Stephen Brockwell) and ottawater (ottawater.com). He has also edited numerous anthologies and single-author collections for various publishers across Canada. He is currently spending



the 2007-8 academic year in Edmonton, as writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, and regularly posts reviews, essays and interviews at robmclennan.blogspot.com.

The Puritan: Describe your writing process. You're a writer known more widely for your poetry; is there a difference in the way in which you approach a poem, as opposed to fiction? Seeing as though you're new to novel writing, does this mean that poetry comes more naturally? Or do you find the writing of fiction and poetry equally challenging?

rob mclennan: Apart from whatever I was writing during my 1980s high school years, I've actually been attempting fiction seriously since the mid-1990s. Over the intervening years, I've managed to compile three abandoned novels, two more I'm trying to finish (and a further I've accidentally started), as well as *white*. Because my novels are difficult to excerpt, they've been difficult to arbitrarily carve up and send out to journals, which is why no one seems to be aware that these forays into fiction of mine are nowhere near new.

I think the challenge is equal; working your way in and through a particular form

in a way that becomes interesting to both writer and potential reader. I've always read a lot, taken in material from all kinds of strange corners, so what appeals to me is working to subvert any form from within; why do yet another version of what's already been done?

The P: You've been writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta since September 2007. What do you miss most about the Ottawa literary scene? What is the best part about being a writer in Ottawa? Conversely, what is the worst part?

rm: This could be a very long answer. There are a number of interesting ground-level activities that have been building in Ottawa over the past few years, including Stephen Brockwell running poetry workshops, The Dusty Owl Reading (and chapbook) Series, what Amanda Earl has been doing, both as author and with her husband Charles as *Bywords*, Max Middle's new A B Reading Series and his own publishing projects, *The Ottawa Arts Review* as well as *The Puritan*, and all sorts of other writers coming up such as Marcus McCann, Pearl Pirie, Nicholas Lea, Roland Prevost, Ian Roy, Michael Blouin, Rhonda Douglas and Emily Falvey.

I've long complained about the lack of infrastructure in Ottawa for the arts, including the fact that we're the only province without a provincial writers guild, have the worst per-capita city arts funding in the country, have no creative writing programs in either university, book publishers who pay very little attention to the local, and media who can't be bothered to talk about any of us until we've hit something outside the city's boundaries. People in other cities are genuinely surprised when you tell them even one or two of these things; how can we be the capital and treat ourselves so badly? This is not something done specifically to us, but something that we, as a population, have let continue; apparently most folk in the city are completely fine with this. Imagine that Guelph and Windsor have creative writing, when we don't. In Montreal, I know writers who would get half a page in a weekly for their first self-published poetry chapbook, where writers in Ottawa can't get copy for trade books. It's not only embarrassing, but disturbing. It does little to keep artists here, and even actively drives them away.

One of the best things to happen to Ottawa's literary activity has to be the Ottawa international writers festival, providing *essential* forums for local to be put beside some of the best writing from other parts of the country, as well as the world, and allowed to be judged on that criteria, as opposed to some outdated provincial standard. There are so many Ottawa writers that have achieved national and international attention without much support from anything local, whether Elizabeth Hay, Stephen Brockwell, Shane Rhodes, Elisabeth Harvor, Francis Itani, Mark Frutkin, jwcurry, the late John Newlove and John Metcalf. Just imagine what we could do with support? Stephanie Bolster even won a Governor-General's Award for her first book of poetry while she was here, but then had to move away to get a job; now she runs the Creative Writing Department at Concordia University. Is this the sort of

image we want to project, a city where artists are forced to either find government jobs (which predominantly kill creative time and energy) or leave?

Every few years, some Ottawa mayor gets up in front of a group and talks about potential new funding, or some other scheme that will “make Ottawa a world-class city” (how many of the tourists who helped spend a billion dollars in Ottawa in 2004, do you think, came to the city to look at Nortel?). It really gets ridiculous after a while; we’ve been world-class for years. I say give us the money and the attention to sustain it, instead of working against us, and trying to kill any momentum we’ve already created.

The P: Are you able to define what makes writing from Ottawa distinct? Is there a particular style or voice you recognize as native to the city?

rm: There’s nothing I’ve discerned yet, but I’ve not really looked for it, either; nothing I’ve specifically been able to distinguish. Are there categories that would contain the writing of folk like Norman Levine, Andre Alexis, Priscila Uppal, Amanda Earl, Rhonda Douglas, Geoffrey Brown, Michael Blouin, Ian Roy or Elizabeth Hay? I think for what most writers in town are doing, there are too few working in any one direction to really group. It might be different now, as opposed to five or ten years ago, but for the longest time, Ottawa writing used to feel like what Björk used to describe Icelandic music: if you wanted to hear live country music, or punk, heavy metal or folk, you had only one option each.

The P: Who are you currently reading? Which contemporary writers do you find most interesting or exciting?

rm: This is a list that could go on forever; there are authors I continually return to, and further authors I am continually discovering. Lately, I’ve been reading a lot of non-fiction, including that magnificent motorcycle book by Ted Bishop, and plenty of Myrna Kostash. Before that, I was rereading my Sheila Watson, Elizabeth Smart and early Michael Ondaatje. I very much get excited by new work, for example, by Paul Auster, Gil McElroy, Fred Wah, George Bowering, Milan Kundera, David McGimpsey, Margaret Christakos, Stephen Brockwell, Pattie McCarthy, Rachel Zucker, John Lavery, Cole Swensen, Dennis Cooley, Phil Hall, Kristjana Gunnars, Meredith Quartermain, Jon Paul Fiorentino, Rob Budde, Anne Stone, Victor Coleman, Barry McKinnon, Andy Weaver, Nathalie Stephens, Stan Dragland, Suzette Mayr, Dany Laferriere, Nicole Markotic, Joshua Marie Wilkinson, Erin Moure, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa and Sina Queyras. Lately I’ve been getting into the work of Sarah Lang, Christine Stewart, Thomas Wharton and Sarah Manguso.

The P: What is your vision for Chaudiere Books? Has being away in Alberta afforded you new opportunities to realize or implement your vision?

rm: Ottawa needs to have a local publisher willing to look around at who is writing and needs to be published; that being said, traditional narrative prose doesn't necessarily do it for me, and there are plenty of other publishers more willing and better suited for such works. The work I tend to like is usually the type of work that has a harder time getting published, so it really works out for everyone. The original idea for Chaudiere Books was to focus on the local, for poetry, fiction and non-fiction, with the occasional out-of-towner thrown in as well (the work gets considered, by the by, well before geography). I've been working on editing some interesting anthologies of non-fiction works for the press, on ideas of adoption, essays on Glengarry County, and essays on Ottawa neighbourhoods that are all shaping up nicely, with pieces by Henry Beissel, Patrick Leroux, Joan MacLeod, Don McKay, Royston Tester, Alison Gresik, Elyse Gasco, Janice Williamson, RM Vaughan, Mark Frutkin, Nicholas Lea and David Seymour. But why did it take so long for someone to look around Ottawa and see how much talent there is? There is quite a list of folk in town who would have had a book out moons ago, if there were better opportunities, including Wes Smiderle, Anita Dolman, Chris Turnbull, Pearl Pirie, Amanda Earl and Karen Massey.

What Alberta has helped with is internet access, which I don't have at home (internet café's). I've been able to set up readings easier in other parts of the country, promote our authors and titles easier, and, through Facebook as well as through the Chaudiere Books blog, really build up our presence on-line. Once I get home, I'm hoping that this is a foundation that will be maintainable with less internet. People are finding out about our books!

The P: Are there any trends in contemporary writing that Chaudiere avoids?

rm: I'm less interested in linear narrative. There are enough other opportunities. Ottawa, still, is a poetry town, so there are lots of opportunities to get manuscripts from local authors that I find interesting (but fewer than you might think). Trends? I don't really think a lot about trends; *trend* implies *fashion*. Art has to move, and move forward, certainly, but I'm not interested in strictly fashion; I'm not interested in publishing anything because it does or doesn't fit some outside notion of what might be interesting to someone else. Good writing is good writing.

The P: Was there a measure of trepidation in finally choosing to write a novel? You subvert the traditional form of the novel in *white* (2007) by employing a fragmentary, rather than linear, narrative pattern within each section. The narrative often drifts from the present into P's dreams, memories, and inner thoughts. What makes *white* a novel, rather than a novella or prose poem? Was *white* conceived from the get-go as a novel, or did it evolve at any time from another form?

rm: *white* was always a novel from the get-go, working to tell a story with a beginning and an ending. I think the difference between how I approach writing fiction and

how I approach writing poetry is that I'm not trying to tell a story with my poetry. That impulse drifted away some time ago, when I started moving further into fiction. But what do you mean by “traditional”? My fiction works very much in a Canadian tradition that includes Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down And Wept* (1945), Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959), Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988). Since when is there only one tradition? I find it enormously frustrating when the word tradition, through maintaining a single line, works to exclude. These are all works I read when I was still in high school and find I keep returning to, for whatever reason.

I mean, I very much like books I've read by David Adams Richards, Russell Smith, Margaret Laurence and Lynn Coady, but I certainly feel no need to write like any of them.

And trepidation? Not at all; fear is good. Fear is like fuel and can be used.

The P: Why the compulsion to write a novel set in suburbia? Did you have a definite place and time in mind for the setting, or is the landscape and environment of *white* representative of a more general locale or state of being? Why, also, does suburbia so fittingly suit associations with an Underworld?

rm: I think I have a poor opinion of the suburbs; it seems to carry the worst of the country (nothing to do) and the worst of the city (all those people around). It saddens me to think my child has been living there. Where else could I set any contemporary hell than the suburbs? Her suburb is a fictionalized mix between Nepean and Kanata, from what little I know of both. My ex-wife and I (back when she was pregnant) got lost in Kanata once, looking for her brother's house. We walked three and a half hours, even looked for neighbours with maps (their street was too new to be on a map; *are you sure you're looking for a street in Kanata?*); we finally had to call from a gas station, and he drove the three blocks to get us.

The P: Your novel is at times reminiscent of American writer Don DeLillo's vision of contemporary culture, as seen in works such as *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997). Did you have these works in mind while composing *white*?

rm: I have never read Don DeLillo, although I hear that Toronto writer Stan Rogal is quite a fan.

The P: At one point during *white*, P associates her surroundings with IKEA and Lego—what your narrator calls European suburban metaphors. Why is P unable to forge indigenous metaphors for her surroundings—especially considering the numerous references to Ontario cities and towns?

rm: Who can say, really? I think, in the end, you might have to ask her.

The P: The numerous references to classical myths and works of literature further enhance the element of cultural transplantation in *white*. Discuss the way in which you see cultural myth and personal memory commingle and interact. Do the mythic resonances of the novel usurp or serve to enhance P's own identity?

rm: I think that is up for the reader to decide, don't you think? It certainly spends a lot of time getting in the way, especially in the first section, when it becomes impossible to know if the myth is happening to her life or if it exists only in her head...

Memory is a tricky thing; one learns the difference, hopefully, between when to trust it and when not to.

The P: The apparent underlying structure of *white* is the aetiological myth of Persephone, Hades, and Demeter. This myth conjures tropes suggestive of descent, rebirth, and cyclical existence. The Greek narrative is universal, self-contained, and totalizing. However, *white* appears to resist complete coherence to a totalizing paradigm, both in structure and in the way the characters interact with one another and the world. Why is the suburban setting of the novel both universal and fragmentary?

rm: Oh, sure, give it away, why don't you. Why would it be so important to be fixed? Is it important for the story to get further detail of what the suburbs around her are like, or would they just distract, and detract from the story?

The P: *white* shares many features with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Not only is Eliot's poem referenced amongst other texts in the novel, but the multiple echoes and fragments of myth, literary text, and cultural ritual seem to strongly mirror Eliot's very Modern interpretation. Did you intend to situate the structure and theme within Eliot's framework? Does *white* actively resist that association? Or is *white* an evolutionary step forward?

rm: I've never actually read *The Waste Land*, although a number of people I quite admire have, and claim it's worth reading. John Newlove even wrote *The Green Plain* (1977) in response.

The P: There's a reference in *white* to the poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen. P imagines herself as a character in one of MacEwen's poems, "alive, and filled with magic". Considering MacEwen's belief in the transformative power of the imagination to reconcile oppositions, between daily life and mythic ritual and tradition, to what degree did her poetic sensibility inspire your novel?

rm: MacEwen's poetry is very important to the character P. I wanted P to be well-

read, well-thought, and MacEwen has that lovely blend of magical and the real. I think, once the book got going, it was only natural to gravitate toward the idea of MacEwen’s writing. I liked the idea of the character P having poetry, however obscure to some readers, as one of her points of reference from her own youth.

The P: In your opinion, how prevalent and/or successful is Canadian literature that incorporates, adapts, or reprises ancient myths for a contemporary audience? Did works such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) inspire you to make a similar foray into the world of myth?

rm: Actually, *white* predated the publication of Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* by a couple of years; I had no idea she was working on such. I admit, at first I was a bit disappointed (mainly that I hadn’t finished and placed my novel by the time hers appeared), but any good idea is bound to have more than one body catch it. Sometimes a thing is just in the air, and culture latches on all at once from so many different corners; why do you think there were three studios doing movie versions of *Beowulf* at the same time? Certainly not because each knew about the other two, before starting. I’ve been wanting to read *The Penelopiad* for some time, but simply haven’t had a chance to pick it up.

I won’t even say the title of the new novel; it will probably come out in some other corner of culture over the next year or three, so I won’t have to.

The P: Most of the dialogue in *white* is reported speech rather than live conversation. The lack of direct communication seems to reflect an absence of emotional intimacy between the characters. We come away from the novel feeling as though we hardly know P, H, and D, and that they know even less about each other. How do you account for this sense of disconnectedness, this sense of emotional vacuity?

rm: I wasn’t interested in writing dialogue; I wanted the action and movement of the book to all be internal. By having the action internalized, it becomes harder to tell just what is happening and isn’t; we have only our unreliable narrator to depend on.

The P: Considering the numerous literary and mythic allusions and references in *white*, would you say that the reader’s primary engagement with this novel is typically emotional, or intellectual?

rm: Hopefully both; I prefer novels that can provide equal pull.

The P: You’ve kindly given us a preview of your novel-in-progress, *Missing Persons*. How long have you been at work on this project? Has *white* laid any sort of solid foundation for your future fiction? Or will you try to disassociate your new work from its predecessor, instead venturing into new experimentation in narrative?

rm: The beginning of *Missing Persons* predates *white* by a while. I must have started *Missing Persons* around 2004 or so, I think, while working on another novel, *Signal Fires*, that I started working on back in 2001. *Signal Fires* included a whole slew of characters, and *Missing Persons* came out of my feeling that I didn't know one of the characters well enough; *Missing Persons* became her "prequel," except that it took over. A prequel to a story you will perhaps never read.

Getting *white* published certainly helped *Missing Persons* get moving, as did getting my University of Alberta stint; the whole hope was to get west and finish that book, the one I hadn't looked at in eighteen months before arriving, due to other projects. In the end, *Missing Persons* is certainly more narrative, if only that the small chunks of dense prose are extended as far as I can take them (which will still be relatively condensed). The book still exists in disassociated sections that accumulate instead of provide any single straight narrative line. Again, I write a female protagonist, but one who predominantly exists between the age of fourteen and sixteen, over the course of the book; a character who thinks she is incredibly aware and clever about her surroundings, but is so blinkered in her considerations of younger brother and mourning mother that the two views will finally have no choice but to collide.

The P: Boxers or briefs?

rm: I've never been a fan of boxers. They never keep me contained.

Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon, Tyler Willis, and Nicola Faieta

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[Photograph by Lainna El Labi]