
“A WRITER, SUCH AS I AM”

AN INTERVIEW WITH GERALD LYNCH



GERALD LYNCH is the author of *Exotic Dancers* (Cormorant Books, 2001), *Troutstream* (Random House, 1995) and two collections of short stories (*Kisbey*, 1992; *One's Company*, 1989), as well as several books of criticism. He has been the recipient of many awards for his writing, including the gold award for fiction in Canada's National Magazine Awards. *Exotic Dancers* was shortlisted for the 2003 Ottawa Book Award. Born in Ireland, Gerald Lynch moved to

Canada as a young child and grew up in Sarnia, Ontario. He lives in Ottawa with his wife and three children, where he teaches English literature at the University of Ottawa.

The Puritan: Would you consider yourself a teacher who writes creatively, a writer who teaches, or some combination of the two? How would you rank by priority your efforts as a writer, teacher, scholarly researcher, dungeon master, and literary critic?

Gerald Lynch: Mainly I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to teach English and write fiction, especially so at a university that values the fiction equal with the critical work. I do sometimes worry about being some schizoid combination of writer and teacher-critic, of trying to serve two masters and failing both. But writing fiction has always been the vocation, which is not to say that I don't take great pleasure in teaching at the university level and writing criticism. I do. Also, I'm pretty lazy, so if I'd not been a teacher I'm sure I'd never have read and thought about the books a writer needs to own. And there's nothing like a good class for literary stimulation.

The P: Being both a professor and a writer, how much does the world of academia influence you creatively? Would you ever, as Robertson Davies did, situate a major work of fiction in a campus setting?

GL: I actually try not to be influenced by the bigger thinkers of academia and beyond, especially as they have come to think in the past few decades. Readers of my writing might say that I've succeeded all too well, and not too well at all. But the truth is, I just can't read theoretical-philosophical writing; my gaze drifts to the window. As a result, I'm right out of touch with the pulse of my profession. But that's okay for the vocation: fiction thinks differently from the essay, much more through the things of the world, concretely, than abstractly about the things of the mind. In that at least I think Hemingway was bang on. I would probably never set fiction in a campus setting, but I'm sure I do write about my life, which is also university life, in a displaced way, and will again ... Say, a murder mystery involving a furniture-polish salesman who becomes convinced that, given the findings of quantum physics, there's really no furniture to polish. To my colleagues and students I say: look for yourselves in my fiction as provisional *objets d'art* and evanescent stools.

The P: Can you give us a breakdown of your writing process? Do you have a set schedule? When are you most productive? Is there a specific time in the day when you avoid writing outright?

GL: Well, first off, I make strong coffee ... Seriously, I'm no fan of writers musing on their pencil-sharpening techniques. (Do you know that Monty Python sketch where Hardy is shown beginning a new novel, with Eric Idle doing the earnest TV voice-over?) I do believe that, like a lot of people in mostly self-employed occupations, I deceive myself superstitiously about what gets me going and works best. But as Lennon sang, "Whatever gets you through the night." Or, as the case may be, the next paragraph. The morning is my time (see above: coffee), a belief that gets stronger as I get older (as does the coffee get stronger; with the rest of the day being increasingly for napping, *long* stretches staring out the window, and avoiding the hell of other people). But sometimes in the evening I'll tell myself I'm just sitting down to check the spelling of a word or something, and hours later I'll come up for air. Those are the times I remember my first love of writing, something like the way Klein writes of the discovery in "A Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."

The P: Who are your major literary influences?

GL: Definitely Superman comics, and I don't mean that facetiously; it's where I learned to read for pure pleasure, obsessively, and was exposed to the elementary difference between exposition and dialogue, and the like, and of course found my role model (okay, the last bit's facetious). Dickens, Joyce, Lawrence, Flannery O'Connor, Richler, Roth, Vonnegut, Munro, these and others were the writers who first stimulated a response of horripilating neck hairs. So I would guess that makes

them major influences. After the formative years, who knows? It seems to become more a matter of trying to avoid the influence of newly discovered, strong writers, such as Martin Amis and William Trevor.

The P: Your portrayal of hypocrisy in the 'suburban wasteland' mirrors Stephen Leacock's gentle satire of small-town boobery in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). Discuss how you take Leacock's premise of the literary *mise-en-scène* of one physical place and time, and make it your own?

GL: I like that "discuss." You've written an exam or two in your day, eh? ... Any Canadian who writes of the small town, which here includes suburban "Troutstream," writes in the long shadow of Leacock. I tried to pay homage with an intertextual nod here and there, while knowing at all times and points that my writer's job was radically different (and my talent radically inferior). One thing I learned from Leacock was that a writer could make a place—a town, a community—the hero of a book-length work of fiction and, perhaps more importantly, that the story cycle form was neatly suited to the fullest realization of the intention. But I don't think of Troutstream as a "suburban wasteland," or at least no more so than the Glebe or Sandy Hill are urban wastelands. I'm not that cynical, just comically-satirically bent.

The P: Hardy had Essex, Faulkner had Yoknapatawpha County, and Leacock had Mariposa. How and why did you decide to set your work in Troutstream, Ontario? What is Troutstream? Where do you draw the line between fiction and reality?

GL: Here I sing my *Sesame Street* song: "One of these things is not like the others ..." The *one* being I and Troutstream in the same breath as those great writers. With that shouted, and borrowing from Richler, I'd say that, for me, Troutstream is no more than that place and that time, a little world like the bigger world: characters on the make, looking for love, loving, some just trying to live decently, using other people, being used, learning to be fathers and mothers and children, etc. All of it taking place in our wired world of self-performance and celebrity. ... Gee, maybe it is a cultural wasteland.

Ah well, all may not be well but it ends well, with a big fish and a functioning family. Troutstream is based on the place where I've lived since 1987, Blackburn Hamlet, a lovely community ensconced in greenbelt, between Ottawa city centre and Orleans to the east of the city. I honestly don't know where I draw the line between fiction and reality. That seems impossible to me in fiction and in life, and I don't see others, writers and the less neurotic, succeeding any better than I. It's also kind of a spooky thing to think about. And as I said, thinking is not my forte, if I have a forte.

The P: You've mentioned that one of your purposes for using a murder as the central plot device in the novel *Troutstream* (1995) is "to show how we're all implicated in

these horrible events and to make humour part of the reaction to horror." Does your vision of what it means to be part of a "community" suggest holding the entire group responsible for the acts of few?

GL: I remember saying that, though for the life of me I can't remember to whom or where (this memory of mine). It sounds a bit suspect to me now, though I like the suggestion in your closing question. I read somewhere that in his new novel Yann Martel makes humour a part of the Holocaust, and I thought: 'You poor misguided lunatic.' I think something the same when I read Lynch's old pretentious proclamation. I am a writer, such as I am, who doesn't always present humanity in its better aspects, and I'm disposed to see things comically, satirically. Humour and satire in Canadian literature is currently my area of research. I'm coming to see humour as humanity's best way of both expressing and accommodating futility. Again, it was Leacock in his writings on humour who first impressed me with the nearness of laughter to tears; it's just taken me a long time to understand that and to see them both as responses to the futility of things. As your Aunt Martha says, a hand to her lilac-scented bosom, "Laughed? I cried." There now: I guess the pretentious proclamation is not a thing only of my past, nor the gendered sin, nor the dated reference.

The P: In your most recent novel, *Exotic Dancers* (2001), four central characters tell a story in alternating first-person monologues, along with the help of the occasional minor character's soliloquy. The omniscient narrator interjects to provide background and wry humour, but is careful not to change the course of the story. Why do you oscillate between characters?

GL: This was a novel form, the novel of voices, I first encountered in Julian Barnes' *Talking It Over* (1991) and wanted to try. Then Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996), in like form, won the Booker Prize, and Barnes wrote a sequel to his novel. It's a form at least as old as *The Canterbury Tales*, and is even something like Browning's book-length poem *The Ring and the Book* (1869). It also has affinities with the short story cycle. In *Exotic Dancers*, I didn't want the narrator to be *the* authority, but to be just another character/voice, and I wanted there to be interplay not only among the characters but with the narrator too. I would suspect that the whole question of any narrator's reliability had a lot to do with the creation of the novel of voices. The narrator of *ED* is reliable enough, in consideration of what can be known about his character. He strikes me as a fusty sort, his language as compared to the others, a bit of a stick firmly stuck in the mud.

The P: The characters in *Exotic Dancers* reach for what Paul Keen calls "the linguistic bottom rung"; they employ a pop-culture newspeak full of clichéd quips and empty phrases from the self-help movement. The characters know the difference between empty words and substantive communication, yet they often choose the safety and solitude of the former. What is it about contemporary cultural experience that makes

it so difficult to articulate emotions and desires?

GL: This is a very good question, touching a big idea, and I wish I had even a deceptive answer. In the first place, I very much appreciated Paul Keen's review of *Exotic Dancers*, as it's a rare experience for a relatively unimportant writer, a mid-list labourer, to get such attention and space in a journal such as *Books in Canada*. I think a short answer to your question involves both the extent to which everything, every human behaviour, thought and emotion, has become ironized everywhere, in literary fiction as well as on TV. Sometimes it seems that seriousness is the one thing that can never be taken seriously, and I'm as guilty of that attitude as Amis or the *Family Guy*. Then there's the challenge nowadays of finding a common language, a shared frame of reference.

I notice myself in retrospect, in all the fiction I've written, trying to involve a number of 'languages,' which is why the novel of voices appealed to me. I guess I was hoping that the truth about emotions and desires might get caught in the crossfire of the various points of view and discourses. Mainly though, with *Exotic Dancers* I wanted to write a love story true to that place and time, a sort of positive to *Troutstream's* negative.

The P: *Exotic Dancers* was published in 2001. Do you have any plans for another novel or collection of short stories? If not, what are you currently working on?

GL: I'm always writing, that's the only thing that makes one a writer (not taking writing courses, not sitting with the laptop in Starbucks, not doing interviews, etc.). No novel since 2001 seems a long time between fiction books, and time flies. In the past few years I've been focusing more on criticism. It's a case of deciding where my energies and time are most productively spent. But it would be misleading to present this as a decision I consciously made or even as a choice I think about much. I don't force fiction if nothing's eating at me (some metaphor!). I am working on a novel (and spent about a year on-and-off with the short story in this issue), but I'm one of those writers who believes it would be a jinx to talk about work-in-progress. I'm always self-conscious remembering Joyce's observation about the hundreds of novels that are 'written' in Dublin's pubs.

The P: Admirers of your fiction may be just as interested in your scholarly work, particularly your argument for the Canadian short story cycle as a distinct and unique genre. How did your seminal work on the short story cycle, *The One and the Many* (2001), come about? Do you have anything more to say on the subject now?

GL: I think this might have been a better answer to your first question: *The One and the Many* came about as a case of creative-critical synergy. My second book of fiction, *Kisbey* (1992), was a story cycle (so is *Troutstream* of course), and I had first published an article on the story cycle in 1991. But to me, the two events, the critical and the

creative, are inseparable, joined in my head. I am still very interested in Canadian story cycles, and since 2001 I've published articles on cycles by Haliburton, Gallant, and King, and I'm currently working on a forgotten story cycle by Norman Duncan, *The Soul of the Street: Correlated Stories of the New York Syrian Quarter*, published in 1900. Notice in his subtitle that Duncan already suggests another term for the story cycle!

The P: What is your involvement in Ottawa's literary scene? Do you ever attend events such as poetry readings, book launches, or the small press book fair?

GL: Sure I do. But as much as I admire and respect people who devote time and energy to literary events, I'm afraid such has never been my scene. This is a matter of personality (mine lacking), disposition (mine reclusive), and charity (mine wanting).

The P: You have published fiction in a variety of literary journals throughout your career, including *Matrix* and *The Malahat Review*. Which Canadian literary journals do you find most interesting or innovative? Which do you find to be lacking in content, direction, or relevance?

GL: I can't answer this usefully, as I've been out of the literary periodical scene for years now. Not to lay on the soft sawder, but I am a great admirer of those who devote their time to literary journals, and my kind of magazine is *The Puritan*, especially because it is exclusively prose fiction, which fills a much-needed gap, and is edited by energetic Young Turks who presume to edit their elder's fiction (and improve it).

The P: Your novel, *Troutstream* was published by Random House Canada. *Exotic Dancers* was published by Cormorant Press. How has your relationship with these publishing houses changed over the years? Which do you prefer?

GL: I have no preference, nor do I have much of what you could call a relationship with either. A publisher such as Random House will get a book more attention, but even that is less the case than it used to be. A publisher such as Cormorant has a different kind of cachet, more literary. Me, I just write and write, and only about the things I care about (not about what I know or want to know about). I've never been in a rush to publish (a big mistake for a writer).

Like the writer-character Zuckerman in Roth's recent *Exit Ghost*, I've often thought about not even bothering to submit (it would hardly matter, I don't kid myself: no one's clamouring for Lynch's next work). But I have an agent now, precisely because I don't want to think about the business end of writing. And having this agent at one of the large NY agencies signals a 'professionalism' and interest in publishing to the widest possible readership, ambition that I'd obviously prefer to keep hidden.

I'm vain about sounding humble here, and I also must control the appearance of hypocrisy.

The P: Bourbon or Sour Mash?

GL: Harp Lager only: one is too many and ten's not enough.

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