
“SPEAKING PERSONALLY”

AN INTERVIEW WITH GUY VANDERHAEGHE



GUY VANDERHAEGHE is the author of four novels, *My Present Age* (1984), *Homesick* (1989), *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996), and *The Last Crossing* (2001), three collections of short stories, *Man Descending* (1982), *The Trouble With Heroes* (1983), and *Things As They Are?* (1992). He has also written two plays, *I Had A Job I Liked. Once.* (1992), and *Dancock’s dance* (1996), and the screen adaptation of *The Englishman’s Boy* (2007). He is a two time winner of the Governor’s-General Award for English language fiction. In 2008, he was appointed a Fellow of the Trudeau Foundation.

The Puritan: A condensed list of some of the awards you’ve received over the course of your career—the City of Toronto Book Award, the Governor General’s Award for Fiction, the Saskatchewan Book Award for Fiction and for Book of the Year, the Saskatoon Book Award, the Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Award for Fiction Book of the Year, the Canadian Authors Association Award for Drama, the UK’s Faber Prize—reads like the ambitious wish list of almost any aspiring Canadian writer.

What do awards do for you? How are you affected by an award now, as compared to when you first began to receive them? Do they provide you with a sense of validation or authenticity as an artist? What are the drawbacks (if any) of high profile, national or international awards? How are they productive—or counterproductive—to the composition of subsequent works?

Guy Vanderhaeghe: Some awards are obviously very important to the “business” of writing and publishing. For example, a Giller Prize has almost always had an enormous influence on book sales. To a lesser extent this has also been true of the Governor General’s award. For a young, or beginning writer, any prize is a boost

to confidence. It suggests that someone has taken notice and approved of what you have done. However, any self-aware writer has got to know that winning any award is a crapshoot. It's true that a certain standard has to be met to merit consideration, but after that, change the jury and you're going to change the result. For that reason, I've never permitted myself to be either unduly puffed up or deflated by winning or losing a prize. As Cyril Connolly remarked, for a writer's books to be still in print after ten years is the real success. In the end, time is the final arbiter of reputation. Contemplating a list of Pulitzer Prize or Nobel Prize winners is a sobering experience when you remark how many of the winners have dropped from sight.

That said, I see no drawbacks to receiving an award. They don't necessarily "authenticate" one as an artist, but it's impolite to look any gift horse in the mouth. They have never influenced my decision on what to write, or how to write it. It's far better to write whatever interests you and hope it will find an audience. Calculation is self-defeating.

The P: You serve on the advisory board for the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library. What is the most rewarding aspect of this position? The most demanding? What role do you feel selection committees of this type play in determining the Canadian 'canon'?

GV: The most rewarding part of being a member of the advisory board has been being introduced to works of Canadian literature that I wouldn't likely have read if it wasn't part of the job description. There have been many delightful surprises. The most demanding aspect is the flip side of that coin, having to wade through works you would have never picked up and now wish you hadn't had to.

When Canadian publishing was in its infancy, the New Canadian Library exerted a great influence on the canon simply because its catalogue was the only cheap source of editions for university and high school Canadian literature classes. That has obviously changed because other publishers now offer paperback editions of Canadian works. Teachers and professors are the final arbiters of what gets taught. In any case, for most of contemporary academia the idea of a canon is verboten anyway.

The P: Much of your fiction describes the Canadian prairie landscape with a passionate, vivid attention to detail, leaving the reader with a powerful impression of the fine line between savage inhospitality and soft, sensual beauty. How much does the geography of the prairies influence your work? To what degree does the very structure and form of your prose share a kinship or likeness to the land?

GV: The prairie landscape has had a great influence on my work because I have spent my entire life experiencing it, and inhabiting it. It's second nature to me (no pun intended). Like any other writer, I write what I know. That said, my representation of it is instinctive and largely unconscious. Familiar images invest my mind and

I struggle to render them in words. This, of course, has an influence on the prose because the prose has to attempt a verbal representation of the visual. But the prose has to be flexible—eliciting starkness demands a spare prose, a more elaborate and ornate image summons up something more baroque.

The P: What contemporary Canadian fiction appeals to you? What movements most excite you? Are there any movements in Canadian literature that you feel are underdeveloped or underappreciated?

GV: I suppose that I am most drawn to the Canadian the writers I turned to when I was first learning to write. The ones that I regarded as models of excellence and mentors on the page: Alice Munro, Alistair MacLeod, Mavis Gallant, Clark Blaise, David Adams Richards, and Mordecai Richler among them. The list could be considerably longer, but those are the ones whom I "studied," trying to figure out how they did what they did.

The idea of a movement doesn't excite me, if by movement you're talking about one school of writers christening itself the wave of the future, or defining itself in opposition to another tendency: Postmodernism vs. Modernism, Magic Realism vs. Dirty Realism, the Urban Novel vs. the Regional Novel, etc. In that sense, I'm anti-movement. Literature is a big circus tent that encompasses a lot more than just one ring or even three.

I would hazard to say that we don't have a strong tradition of the novel of ideas in Canada. This aspect of our literature might be described as "underdeveloped."

The P: What role do you feel literary journals play in the development or showcasing of Canadian literature? What has your relationship with journals been like both early in your career, and now that you have become an established writer?

GV: Literary journals are of absolute importance in the development and showcasing of Canadian literature. Virtually every Canadian writer has got his or her start in a literary magazine. I cut my teeth in them and most of the stories published in my first book, *Man Descending* (1982), had been previously published in places like the *Malahat Review*, *The Journal of Canadian Fiction*, and *Prism International*. I'm enormously grateful to such magazines because they provided me with a place to publish and a reason to keep writing. Of course, like any beginning writer I suffered rejections and rebuffs, but that was helpful too. It spurred me on to improve and also helped me grow a thicker skin. I remember one editor informing me that writing in a second language was a difficult proposition and maybe I should rethink attempting to do it. He found my language too "Germanic." I assume that had something to do with my last name.

Now, my relationship with the journals is more distant. It may sound presumptuous of me to say it, but I no longer submit work to them because I believe newer, less

well-known writers should occupy their pages. Also, I write fewer short stories and excerpts from novels don't often work as stand-alones.

The P: In your last two works of fiction, *The Last Crossing* (2002) and *The Englishman's Boy* (1996), the characters Ed Grace and Jerry Potts occupy spaces between fixed binaries. Whether by race, as in the case of the half-breed Potts, or by cultural upbringing, as in Grace, who straddles the line between wilderness and civilization, characters find themselves torn between opposed paradigms. This abject position (perhaps most acutely identified with Potts) breeds a tangible feeling of *unbelonging* or homelessness. What relationship do you see between the abject and our sense of identity as twenty-first century Canadians? How much of this unbelonging do you feel is native to Canada's national historical identity?

GV: First of all, I believe a sense of unbelonging is above all a *human* condition. In acute situations it becomes more acute. Canada may be one of those cases. The indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their land and stripped of their language and culture by Europeans. This had to have engendered a powerful feeling of unbelonging. On the other hand, every other Canadian is, by definition, an immigrant. At one time or another every generation of newcomers has had to ask the question, Where is here? The accommodation to new circumstances surely induced nostalgia for a former life, produced disorientation, a sense of unbelonging. Wave after wave of immigrants have struggled with these feelings. Unbelonging may be bred in our bones, woven into the fabric of national identity. Whether you are a recent arrival from Somalia or, like my grandfather at the turn of the century, fresh off the boat from Antwerp, this place has to be figured out.

The P: Why do you think historical fiction is so popular a genre among contemporary Canadian audiences and judging committees?

GV: I think the popularity of historical fiction relates to the previous question. Historical identity has always been an issue with Canadians and fictional examinations of it are always going to have some appeal. The history of European literature in the 19th century, when "the national question" dominated political and cultural debates in virtually every country led to a similar popularity for the historical novel. Walter Scott in Scotland, Manzoni in Italy, Tolstoy in Russia, Sienkiwicz in Poland, etc. all examined what it meant to be Scottish, Italian, Russian, or Polish. Put another way, to understand where you are you have to ask where you came from.

I don't think it's true that judging committees have shown a preference for historical fiction. This has been frequently asserted, but I see little real evidence that that's the case. True, some historical novels have won some prizes, but when accomplished writers with strong and individual voices adopt a form, it should come as no great surprise that they write books that attract attention. Did *Alias Grace* (1996) win a Giller Prize because it was a historical novel or because it was an artful one? My guess is that it's the latter.

The P: Describe the origin and development of your particular fascination with the frontier experience of the Canadian and American West, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century.

GV: The origin of it is a book I read when I was about ten years old, Paul Sharp's *Whoop-Up Country* (1960), which dwelled on the links between Fort Benton, Montana, and southern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan. The story of the Cypress Hills Massacre really interested me. Sharp's description of the porous nature of the then almost non-existent Canadian-American border also intrigued me. What was known as Whoop-Up country almost existed as a Grand Duchy. All this fascinated as a kid me and I recovered that fascination in my twenties when I began research for the novel that became *The Englishman's Boy*.

The P: Any author of historical fiction infuses his or her re-imaginings of the past with the concerns, attitudes, and prejudices of the present. As a writer of historical fiction, do you strive to re-examine the past in an attempt to focus on the plight of subjugated or marginalized discourses? Because marginalized groups are often effectively silenced by the dominant discourse, how much of their stories must you invent for the sake of narrative plausibility?

GV: In writing a novel, I don't promulgate a "message," aim to redress wrongs or give voice to the marginalized. That would be presumptuous. My first goal is to tell a story, but that story is naturally going to bear witness to some of my own attitudes about the present, and the forces that directed us down the path we find ourselves on. As a former student of history, long ago I had to make a decision about how to approach the historical novel, should the emphasis lie on the adjective or the noun? In the end, I opted for the noun. I write novels, not history or manifestoes.

Naturally, groups who have left few written records present a problem for the historical novelist, as well as an opportunity. The gaps in the story are greater and give freer play to invention and imagination.

The P: How much research went in to your re-imagining of 1920s Hollywood in *The Englishman's Boy*? Which real life Hollywood moguls served as models for characters such as Denis Fitzsimmons and Damon Ira Chance?

GV: It's difficult to say with precision how much time I spent researching Hollywood in the 1920s, but it was considerable. There was a lot of stopping and starting as I wrote the book. I would arrive at a point where I needed to know something and had to pause to collect information. I would estimate that in total it was at least six months, maybe more.

Fitzsimmons is pure invention. Damon Ira Chance is mostly an imagined character, although he bears a passing resemblance to William Randolph Hearst, one of the few

Gentile Hollywood studio heads.

The P: What works of fiction informed your descriptions of this decadent era? There seem to be strong similarities between *The Englishman's Boy* and Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939). To what degree was West's novel informative or inspirational?

GV: You're dead right about *The Day of the Locust*. It was both informative and inspirational, although it deals with a slightly later Hollywood period than *The Englishman's Boy*. The premiere scene in my novel winks at West's horrific depiction of a premiere gone amok. An early chapter of *The Englishman's Boy* describing extras filing home at the end of the day references a scene in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Both pay indirect homage to great novels about Hollywood and the movie industry.

The P: In *The Englishman's Boy*, Chance insists that "no man can deny the spirit of his age". In what ways does the contemporary Canadian experience translate into fictional works set in the irretrievable past? Conversely, what elements of the contemporary Canadian experience are denied?

GV: Writers are, with qualifications, products of their age. Imaginatively, they can step outside it, but even imaginatively they can only go so far because our assumptions are so different from those of our ancestors. Speaking personally, living in Saskatchewan, which has a large aboriginal population that bears the scars of a tragic history, it is only natural that I attempt to reflect upon this in my historical fiction. Which is to say that historical fiction always bears the mark of contemporary concerns. We make a stab at recovering the "irretrievable past" to illuminate the present.

Obviously, many elements of contemporary experience are denied or, rather, overlooked. We can't see what we are incapable of seeing. Succeeding generations will certainly take us to task for our shortsightedness, our easy assumptions, and a host of other failings.

The P: What were the reasons behind turning *The Englishman's Boy* into a CBC miniseries? The final version of the television series differs widely from the original text: some characters meet radically different ends, as with Shorty McAdoo, while others disappear entirely, as with Rachel Gold. Are these deviations attempts to correct aspects of the novel that you found troubling? What were the main challenges of converting the novel to a made-for-TV screenplay?

GV: The reasons for turning *The Englishman's Boy* into a miniseries had to do with my life long interest in the movies. I wanted a crack at writing a screenplay and this provided that opportunity. I also wanted to see how my story would be transformed when interpreted by a director, actors, set designers, costumers, etc.

The miniseries differs from the novel because any film based on a work of fiction has to be altered to conform to the demands of the medium of cinema. For example, a novel can access characters' thoughts; they can explain themselves. In a film, you can't run continuous voice-over or have characters soliloquizing; motivations have to be dramatically rendered.

The second problem concerns broadcast time. The miniseries ran (minus commercials) for precisely three hours. As a rule of thumb, one page of screenplay is equal to a minute and a half of film. My screenplay was 120 pages. The novel is over 300 pages. To cover the novel in a miniseries format would have demanded nine hours, which would be a non-starter with any broadcaster. That meant things had to be altered and condensed. To portray Rachel Gold, a very complex character, it would have been necessary to strip the double narrative in a way that would have robbed the story of any sense. As much as I regretted doing it, Rachel had to be jettisoned. The director and I also agreed that it was necessary to focus Shorty's story and to dramatize how the Cypress Hills Massacre had deeply traumatized him. That's why he pays the price for killing Damon Ira Chance in the miniseries, while in the novel he simply disappears.

The screenplay wasn't an attempt to correct the novel. In my mind, each had its own integrity and had to answer the demands inherent in two very different art forms. The one thing I was adamant about was that even though a literal transposition from print to film was impossible, the miniseries had to remain faithful to the spirit of the book. I believe it did. I always regarded the novel as template for the miniseries, which could be added to, or subtracted from, and shaped as required.

The most difficult problem in converting the novel to screen was telling two distinct stories over the course of three hours. The time constraints were very difficult to deal with. Writing a screenplay differs from writing a novel because it is highly technical. You even have to anticipate commercial placement, construct the narrative so that such interruptions will have a minimal impact on the flow of the story. For a rookie screenwriter there were a lot of things to consider and juggle.

The P: How much time did you spend on the set, meeting and interacting with the actors? Which performances did you find particularly pleasing? Which performances best captured what you had cultivated through text?

GV: I spent a fair amount of time on set. Before shooting began a "cowboy camp" was held for the actors in the 1873 section of the miniseries. They were taught to ride in the mornings and rehearsed in the afternoons. I was there for the read-throughs so I could see where the dialogue was flat or unwieldy. At one time or another, I met all the actors. The director gave them free rein to talk to me about their characters, what the meanings of various scenes were, etc. Actors have very different ways of working; some wish to "own" the character and don't want to be influenced by

the writer's conception, and others want as much background information and assistance as they can get. About half of the actors wanted to use me as a resource, the other half didn't.

I also played a tiny role as a bartender. Shooting that scene gave me an enormous amount of respect for the hard work actors do and the physical demands it often entails. What ended up as three minutes on screen took about eleven hours to shoot. We were on set an entire night and headed back to the hotel just as the sun was rising. I was also present for the massacre scene, the premiere, and on several other occasions.

I thought all the performances very fine. Nicholas Campbell as Shorty was particularly riveting. He captured the toughness, single-mindedness, and torment that I always believed was the heart of the character. Many reviewers regarded Nick's performance the best of his life. R.H. Thompson who played Hardwick, the leader of the wolfers, embodied a character who might have been stereotypically portrayed as nothing more than a black hat villain with a subtle and seductive charisma. R.H. has usually played "nice guys," maybe because he really is a nice guy, and he found the Hardwick character psychologically taxing to live with. Perhaps for that reason he made Hardwick, as horrible as he is, recognizably human. Michael Eisner, who was still in drama school when he was hired, and had never appeared in film, gave the Englishman's Boy a wonderful toughness and vulnerability. There are several scenes with him that are raw and wrenching. I could go on and on praising various performances but I'll stop. Readers have only so much patience.

The P: If given another opportunity, which of your other works would you most like to see translated from novel to film? Are there any other works by Canadian authors that you feel would make particularly good films?

GV: I think *The Last Crossing* would make a good miniseries. *My Present Age* (1984) has been almost continually optioned since it was published, but no one has been able to get it made. A good "slacker" comedy might be made from it.

In general, producers don't give enough attention to short stories. It's easier for screenwriters adapting to add flesh than carve it off. Sarah Polley's film *Away From Her* (2006) based on an Alice Munro short story demonstrates the potential of the form. Alistair MacLeod's short stories would make good source material, particularly since they are also highly dramatic.

The P: In *The Englishman's Boy*, we get a glimpse of a young McAdoo's past—his employment in the brothel in Iowa, and his sexual relationship with the deaf girl Selena—very late in the book. This revelation humanizes the taciturn, guarded boy. Why did you withhold this information from the reader until the end of the novel? And why was the information stricken entirely from the miniseries?

GV: This material was withheld to colour his reaction to the rape of the young Indian girl. I also wanted to twist readers' response to him; to show that much of what we are as human beings has its source in what is hidden from others' view. As Madame de Stael said, "To understand all is to forgive all." As I said before, much of what is in the novel couldn't be presented for purely practical reasons. No time, no room.

The P: In *The Englishman's Boy*, Harry Vincent says that "Canada isn't a country at all, it's simply geography". He goes on to suggest that due to a lack of indigenous national identity, English-speaking Canadians always long to be part of a different cultural group, namely British or American. Is there a Canadian consciousness, apart from cross-cultural longing? How much of this is your character, and how much is your own personal opinion?

GV: What Vincent says is truer of the moment in which he says it than it is now. It's my opinion that that's the way many Canadians thought in the 1950s, and so it is the opinion Harry expresses. There is a Canadian consciousness apart from cross-cultural longing; most of us sense it, even though we struggle to articulate it. It might be the will to distinguish ourselves from the more dominant Anglo cultures. After all, that was the aim of the Canadian cultural nationalists who began that work in the 1960s. The work isn't done and never will be done but the attempt to define ourselves is, in fact, a feature that distinguishes us from many nations that never think critically about their founding assumptions. They assume the absolute correctness of their visions.

The P: Vincent also compares Canadian consciousness with the Saskatoon practice of observing the great springtime tumult of ice cracking and grinding down the Saskatchewan River. If Canada "cheers as the world sweeps by", as Vincent believes, associating "the world" with noisy, violent activity, what is the role of the Canadian storyteller, who simply observes the process of history, and does not take an active part in determining its course?

GV: The role of the storyteller, who observes history, is to nudge people out of the same uncritical assumptions I alluded to in the previous question. You think this is who we are? Are you sure? One of the least attractive aspects of the Canadian mentality is self-righteousness, a pathetic smugness about our assumed virtue. We like to parade our clean hands. Unfortunately, we don't often see the dirt under our fingernails.

The P: In terms of popularity and accessibility, film has obviously eclipsed literature as the dominant artistic medium of our age. *The Englishman's Boy's* transformation from text to film demonstrates your willing participation in the evolution of visual storytelling. As a writer so interested in historical interpretation, what do you anticipate to be the next logical evolution in storytelling after film?

GV: I'm not a prophet and not familiar enough with current technology or practice

to make any informed guesses about an evolution that is going to be clearly tied to changes in the means of production. The novel needed the printing press. Film obviously required advances in the camera and audio equipment. People point to the Internet as the next breeding ground of creativity. We shall see. At present, signs of life are not promising.

The P: What are you currently working on?

GV: A third historical novel dealing with western Canada in the 1870s. Some time ago I shot my mouth off and said I intended to write a Whoop-up trilogy. This would be the third book in that series.

The P: Thomas Hardy or Henry James?

GV: Thomas Hardy.

Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon and Tyler Willis

June 1, 2008

[Photograph by Margaret Vanderhaeghe]