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MANY MEDICAL TESTS

CRISIS INSIDE THE WORLD  
ANTI-DOPING AGENCY

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DECEMBER 2019 • THEWALRUS.CA

## *The Making of* **MARGARET ATWOOD**

*From student poet  
to cultural prophet*

...

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# THE WALRUS

VOLUME 16 • NUMBER 10  
DECEMBER 2019

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*Illustration by Lauren Tamaki*

Lauren Tamaki is an illustrator who has produced work for the *New York Times*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and *Bust* magazine.

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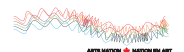
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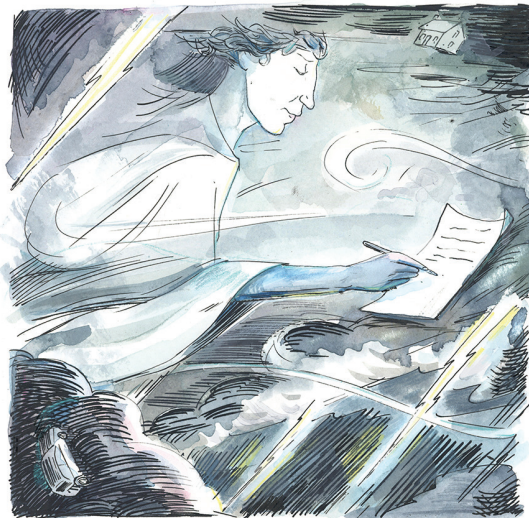
# Editor's Letter

**M**Y EMAIL INBOX at The Walrus is sorted into folders including “Politics,” “AI,” and — as with many Canadian editors, I suspect — one marked “Atwood.” The latter is devoted to our country’s best-known writer and includes news of her latest ventures and ideas for stories about her. The folder also contains correspondence with the author herself on a surprising range of issues, from civil rights to mythology; often, her emails draw attention to the work of lesser-known artists or community organizations.

Inevitably, she also points out mistakes she thinks we’ve made. Simply put: to her, it all matters.

It’s amazing that Margaret Atwood finds the time to write emails, what with a new novel, a hit TV show, nearly 2 million Twitter followers, and initiatives like the Pelee Island Bird Observatory—the conservation organization she founded with the late writer Graeme Gibson, her partner of almost fifty years. Being the cofounder of the Writers’ Trust of Canada and with her heavy involvement in the Canadian chapter of PEN, the international human rights organization, Atwood also takes an ongoing interest in Canadian publications. I’ve come to see her personal outreach as coming from the same source that fuels her writing—what led her, over thirty years after publishing the dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, to follow it up with a sequel, *The Testaments*. In Atwood’s universe, one’s roles as a writer, as an activist, and as a citizen are interchangeable—and the work is never complete.

For Atwood’s eightieth birthday this November, editors Tajja Isen and Daniel Viola spoke to some of her contemporaries



about their encounters with a figure, though ubiquitous in our national culture, few of us really know as a person. The resulting oral history (“The Making of Margaret Atwood”), with contributions from George Saunders, Thomas King, Adrienne Clarkson, Charles Pachter, Eleanor Wachtel, and more, is not just the portrait of an artist at the height of her career; it also offers rare insight into one highly successful creative person’s strategies—for everything from dealing with critics to curing a hangover.

Atwood’s new Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Testaments*, reflects her lifelong interest in social change and storytelling. The book is written as the fictional history of a future state, and with its emphasis on authoritarianism, xenophobia, and misogyny, it’s hard not to see it as a metaphor for what gave rise to Trump’s America and similar movements worldwide. One of the book’s main characters is Aunt Lydia, whose deadpan delivery (to me, anyway) is a close fictional approximation of the author’s own voice. “I, too, was once like you: fatally hooked on life,” she quips, to a presumed future reader, about the risks of

attachment to earthly things. What emerges from the book’s theme of insurgency is the sense that an original doesn’t owe anyone anything.

A number of stories in this issue reflect Atwoodian themes of authority and ethics. For the visual feature “Who Owns Colombia’s Gold?” photographer Roger Lemoyne and writer Rémy Bourdillon documented the battle over land rights between Gran Colombia Gold, a Toronto-based mining company, and traditional miners who have worked in Colombia’s mountains for generations. In “WADA Mess,” Curtis Gillespie details

rising mistrust of the Montreal-based global anti-doping agency, which works closely with the International Olympic Committee. As he writes, when the highest authority on cheating is compromised, what recourse is there for athletes who play by the rules? And “Make the Verb Work,” Dale Hrabí’s profile of his late friend and mentor Elizabeth Smart—a poet and commercial writer best known for her 1945 book *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*—explores the costs and rewards of defying social convention.

One of the iconic contributions of *The Handmaid’s Tale*—repopularized by its TV adaptation, now three seasons in—is a message from one Handmaid as a form of support and inspiration to others: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (translated, roughly, from the Latin, as, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down”). That’s a fitting attitude when facing many of the challenges of this time on Earth—and a fine introduction to this issue. As Atwood has taught us, every act—whether reading or picking up a pen to create something new—is tied to bigger things. ✍

—Jessica Johnson

# Contributors' Notes



**ÉTIENNE LAJOIE**

*"Small Towns, Big Hopes," p. 17*

"A few months ago, I read a report from Quebec's minister of labour that said more than a million people would need to be hired to balance the province's labour shortage.

I thought that was a crazy number, and it led me to report this story on how one town in what's thought to be an anti-immigration region is relying on immigrant workers to survive. I think we're going to continue to see problems with immigration policies that prioritize bringing over individual workers at the expense of keeping families together. People tend to think of immigrants as numbers. It gets lost, sometimes, that we're talking about human beings."

*Étienne Lajoie has written for Maisonneuve and The Athletic Ink. He is the Chawkers Fellow at The Walrus.*



**SUSAN SWAN**

*"Three Short Poems," p. 42*

"We've created a digital world where we can be disembodied, where it feels as if we can escape our physical selves and become pure mind. But we can't escape our bodies for very long because we wear out like spindles. Sooner or later, our body is going to make its needs felt. A lot of the drive behind what we make and what we do is a flight from the body, and old age puts you right back inside it. For better or worse, our body is our home."

*Susan Swan is the author of eight books of fiction. Her latest novel, The Dead Celebrities Club, was published in April.*

*Susan Swan is the author of eight books of fiction. Her latest novel, The Dead Celebrities Club, was published in April.*



**KEVIN SYLVESTER**

*"Kernels of Truth," p. 66*

"Don't eat crap. Don't sell yourself short. If you take food for granted, you'll eat any slop, you'll salt the hell out of it, you'll mess it up, you'll do whatever. You've got a responsibility

to respect it. If you eat meat, there's an animal that died for you. Plants—even the corn in popcorn!—die so that you can eat them. We're all part of this giant, interconnected thing called existence, so you have a moral responsibility to honour that fact, even in cooking."

*Kevin Sylvester is an illustrator, broadcaster, and writer whose books include the Neil Flambé series and the MiNRS trilogy.*



**DALE HRABI**

*"Make the Verb Work," p. 62*

"I feel haunted by Elizabeth Smart. In the years after she died, there was a sense that she was always with me. I remember once turning the corner in a concrete stairwell and suddenly smelling her. She had this distinctive scent—a mix of musty books, cigarette smoke, and shampoo. In that moment, it was freakishly vivid."

*Dale Hrabi is the editor of the Off Duty section of the Wall Street Journal.*



**SARAH SCHULMAN**

*"The Right to Rest," p. 20*

"We can't just look at homelessness as a housing problem. Of course, housing is an important element of it. But focusing only on that leads to a narrow view of what folks who experience homelessness face. For example, one of their coping strategies is to find a street crew, and when we house people as individuals, we ignore the fact that that community has become such an important part of their survival."

*Sarah Schulman leads InWithForward, a social-research and design organization.*

# COMMUNITIES ARE CANADA'S STRENGTH

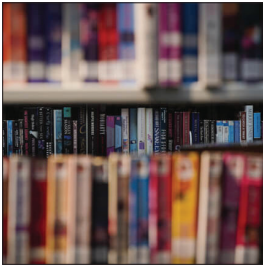
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# Letters



## UNLIKELY STORY

We were interested to read “The Return of Political Fiction” by André Forget (*thewalrus.ca*). As admirers of political fiction, we agree that commenting on society is a proper function of good writing. But Forget’s view of Canadian critic John Metcalf as an editorial fundamentalist is hard to reconcile with Metcalf’s more modest account of his own work. For example, the article accuses Metcalf of solipsism, but it is a strange kind of solipsist who writes, “All literary judgements are subjective and the best the anthologist can hope for is to have been right more often than wrong.” Forget asks why the Century List, Metcalf’s guide to the best Canadian short-story practitioners, consists almost entirely of white writers. It’s a good question, but the charge that Metcalf’s understanding of great writing is racially coded is as inaccurate as it is unfair. He has anthologized stories by writers of colour and was an early, outspoken champion of the once-controversial idea that immigrant writing is central to literature in Canada.

*Jeet Heer and Andy Lamey  
Regina, SK, and Poway, CA*

## MYTH BUSTED

The fact that “ethnic” groups do not vote in a bloc, as pointed out in Supriya Dwivedi’s essay (“The ‘Ethnic Vote’ is a Myth,” October), is not news to me. Having worked on voter-engagement campaigns over the years, I have never heard the term “ethnic vote” when working directly with newcomers and immigrants. The fact that reporters and political scientists use the term to describe voter behaviour is a glaring reminder of the homogeneity dominating political analysis in our country and the need to diversify the voices represented in politics and the media.

*Seher Shafiq  
Toronto, ON*

Racialized Canadians are disproportionately represented on the lower ends of health and economic outcomes, and research from the US has shown that the poor are less likely to vote. Instead of which party has the “ethnic vote,” we should be concerned about whether diverse communities are voting at all.

*Anjum Sultana  
Toronto, ON*

## BALANCE OF POWER

I disagree with Echo Hui’s observations about Xi Jinping’s war on corruption (“China’s False War on Corruption,” *thewalrus.ca*). It’s true that Xi’s anti-corruption campaigns consolidated his personal power by removing high-level officials from office, but they also curbed corruption. Xi’s administration is certainly less tolerant toward strikes and protests, such as those taking place in Hong Kong, but some sources suggest that political participation through official channels—local elections, government hotlines and mailboxes, and courts—has persisted and even increased.

*Juan Wang  
Montreal, QC*

## SECRET SOCIETY

Justin Ling’s article on Canada’s dysfunctional access-to-information regime (“Canada: Good at Bureaucracy, Bad at Transparency,” *thewalrus.ca*) is accurate and important. The system is fraught with delays, backlogs, and excessive redactions. While politicians proudly proclaim their commitments to open and accountable government, there is a gap between government transparency rhetoric and the layers of secrecy that shroud government activities. We need to treat access to information as a public-interest priority that is central to the functioning of democracy rather than a niche issue of concern to only investigative journalists and policy wonks.


*Mike Larsen  
Surrey, BC*

## TUSK, TUSK

In the October issue, the article “Margin of Error” stated that Mario Canseco was a former pollster for the Angus Reid Institute. In fact, he was a pollster for Angus Reid Public Opinion. The Walrus regrets the error.

“The time has come,” The Walrus said, “to talk of many things.” Send us a letter, email ([letters@thewalrus.ca](mailto:letters@thewalrus.ca)), or tweet, or post on our Facebook page. Comments may be published in any medium and edited for length, clarity, and accuracy.

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Will Wilson, *K'ómoks Imperial Stormtrooper*  
(Andy Everson), *Citizen of the K'ómoks First Nation*  
(detail), 2017. From the series *Critical Indigenous*  
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## POLITICS

# Small Towns, Big Hopes

*Rural Quebec looks to newcomers to extend the life of shrinking villages*

BY ÉTIENNE LAJOIE

ILLUSTRATION BY VIVIAN ROSAS



**T**HE MAJOR attractions of Saint-Gédéon-de-Beauce, an hour-and-a-half drive from Quebec City, could be toured in minutes. There's the spired church, built in 1911, and, next to it, the town hall, converted from a convent. A stone's throw away is the heart of the village: Groupe Canam, the largest builder of steel components in North America. Nearly all 2,200 residents of Saint-Gédéon have connections with Canam, and some likely still remember the moment the plant's foundations were poured in 1960. The owner of Rôtisserie Mom's, a restaurant located on Canam Boulevard, worked there, as did the husband of Margot Lachance, who runs Saint-Gédéon's only bed and breakfast. Affixed to the community arena's facade is the name of

Canam president Marcel Dutil; many of his roughly 800 local workers live in town.

Saint-Gédéon, despite its charms, is in decline. Young people are moving to urban centres to pursue their studies, new construction is practically nonexistent, and the only grocery store shuttered two years ago. But, as Saint-Gédéon shrinks, Canam is growing. Thanks to a booming Quebec economy, the company is in desperate need of welders. The labour shortage is also dire for other manufacturers in the surrounding region, a warren of thirty municipalities known as the Beauce. With the area unable to provide workers, companies have launched recruitment missions all over South America and Europe, offering stable incomes, paid vacations, and even free lodging to prospective hires. That's how

Canam, partnering with local professional schools, managed to convince about 100 Colombians to move to town.

But there's something else notable about Saint-Gédéon: it's in Maxime Bernier country. In 2015, the entire region, by a huge margin, picked the then Conservative MP—later the People's Party of Canada leader—who has since pledged to radically reduce the country's immigration levels. Three years later, the Beauce also voted overwhelmingly for François Legault's nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec, which vowed to cut back the number of immigrants accepted into the province. Like much of the Beauce, foreigners in Saint-Gédéon have been scarce—99 percent of residents speak French at home, and the majority of them are white. But the town is ready for a change, insists mayor Alain Quirion. "It's more people, more revenues," he says, referring to the newcomers from Colombia. "That's how we'll keep our villages alive."

**I**N A SERIES of tweets last August, Bernier alleged that excessive diversity would unravel the fabric of Canadian communities, bringing distrust, social conflict, and even violence. But shrinking populations in Atlantic Canada are increasingly seeing immigrants as a net gain, with employers meeting labour demands by recruiting from countries such as the Philippines, Tunisia, Morocco, and Sri Lanka. Towns like Chipman, New Brunswick, and Clare, Nova Scotia, are hoping that, once these foreign workers put down roots, their communities will flourish. Bill Reimer, a professor of sociology at Concordia University who studied rural Canada for thirty years, believes in this strategy. "Rather than circling the wagons and protecting yourself," he said in 2013, "it's, 'Okay, what kind of people do we want to live here? And how can we welcome them and make them want to live here?'"

In rural areas around the world, socioeconomic realities have started to test resurgent xenophobia. Goltzow was once a dying German community where one in four voters sided with the far-right. But the integration of Syrian migrants has staved off the town's likely extinction.

Italy has seen an escalation of intolerance toward migrants, yet the tiny southern village of Sant’Alessio has rebounded thanks to refugees from Senegal and Niger.

Some of the most dramatic examples of such rejuvenation come from the United States, now in the midst of an anti-immigration wave. Fargo, North Dakota, welcomed 350 refugees, in 2015, to help reverse its population drop and recharge the local economy. Or take Long Island’s Greenport, a town of 2,224 residents. In 2016, the *Houston Chronicle* noted how profoundly the town had transformed since immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador arrived in the 1990s. Working in landscaping, housekeeping, and construction, the newcomers “saved this town,” said former mayor Dave Kapell, by attracting young families, festivals, and businesses.

Hélène Latulippe, director general of the Beauce’s economic council, is betting on similarly dramatic results in towns like Saint-Gédéon. Latulippe and her team are trying to find enough workers to help the region’s manufacturers keep pace with a surging economy that, with the retreat of separatism, can now operate relatively free of political risk for the first time in decades. Emploi-Québec forecasts that, over the next four years, 39,200 people will need to enter the workforce in Chaudière-Appalaches—a wider administrative swath that includes the Beauce. Five thousand of those jobs, says Latulippe, will be filled in the Beauce alone. That’s a lot of newcomers settling across a rustic, largely depopulated territory in a short time.

For an idea of what that future could look like, there’s Sainte-Clotilde-de-Beauce, about an hour’s drive from Saint-Gédéon. In 2004, René Matériaux Composites, a local company that produces parts for large vehicles, convinced twenty-five South American families—many from Colombia—to move to the village of about 500 people. In the years that followed, Sainte-Clotilde was celebrated by Quebec media for integrating the newcomers and averting decline. The elementary school, on the brink of closing, was saved, and housing was revived. A headline in Colombian

newspaper *El Tiempo*, soon after the families arrived, summed up the mood: “Colombians Resurrected Sainte-Clotilde.”

But Éva Lopez, who shepherded the deal that brought the families to Sainte-Clotilde, urges caution. Lopez, a Colombian immigrant, directs the Intégration Communautaire Des Immigrants, an organization based in Thetford Mines, Quebec, that helps newcomers adapt. She says the belief that a group of workers will magically resolve an economic crisis is an expression of wishful thinking at best; at worst, it sets immigrants up to suffer the backlash if circumstances don’t improve. “When we label an immigrant as a saviour, we provide them with very tricky powers,” she says. The term itself—“saviour”—masks the reality that a newcomer’s relationship with their town is transactional: expertise is shared and money is exchanged. It’s also temporary, tied to a short-term work permit. Most workers leave after two years.

Last year, 1,365 Quebec workers transitioned from the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program to permanent residency, which allows someone to live, work, or study anywhere in the country. That represents only about 14 percent of the total number of temporary foreign workers who were in the province that year. According to a government spokesperson, most workers “do not apply for permanent residence and/or aren’t interested in becoming permanent residents.” Poor living conditions and not feeling welcomed might be reasons why. “People think they’re going to Canada for life, but that’s not the objective of the program,” Lopez says. Instead, she describes a system in which contracts are tied to a single employer—this leaves foreigners with few protections. In one case, reported by *Le Devoir* in 2018, a foreign worker recruited from abroad as a truck driver was instead given other tasks, including cleaning his employer’s barn. When the worker complained, he was dismissed. In another case, a Quebecois worker came to the aid of Latin American coworkers, who didn’t speak French, when their boss abruptly went on vacation, leaving them without food or a means of transportation.

For Latulippe, what Canam has done to attract help is incredible: “A company that starts buying homes for employees—can you believe it?” But the system puts the power almost entirely in the company’s hands. What if, as happened in another Beauce town, the newcomers are sacked a few months into their jobs?

Lopez is convinced that immigration can turn around many of Quebec’s struggling regions, but she argues it will require more than simply dropping foreigners into a town and assuming the story will end happily for all. The much-celebrated Sainte-Clotilde workers, Lopez claims, had been given apartments so mouldy that they found mushrooms growing out of walls. And, while towns are increasingly seeing the benefits of immigration, certain biases may be hard to leave behind.

A recent report by Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi de Beauce-Sud—the result of focus-group conversations with locals and newcomers—is blunt in its assessment of the region’s readiness to integrate foreigners. “Even if some tenants are open to cultural diversity, [landlords] are reluctant to rent to immigrants, fearing that they won’t pay their rent, or that they will get the apartment dirty or vandalize it,” it says.

It remains to be seen how well Saint-Gédéon is prepared. The newcomers have already started arriving and have been spotted at Sunday mass. Margot Lachance’s neighbour chauffeurs some of them to a grocery store out of town. Christian Mauricio Garcia Tejada said that, while he is adapting, he misses his family and resorts to using hand gestures to communicate. Convincing someone to cross the globe to greener pastures is, in some ways, the easy part. The bigger challenge is getting towns to see the importance of easing a newcomer’s transition—finding suitable housing, helping them learn French, making them feel at home. “I’m convinced regionalized immigration is an incredible development opportunity,” Lopez says. “But it can’t be done in any way. We’re talking about people, not livestock.” 🌍

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ÉTIENNE LAJOIE has written for *Maison-neuve* and *The Athletic Ink*. He is the Chawkers Fellow at The Walrus.



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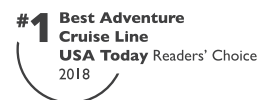
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## SOCIETY

# The Right to Rest

*Why better sleep could lift people out of homelessness*

BY SARAH SCHULMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHLEEN FU



AT 10:55 P.M. on a winter Wednesday night, a fifty-three-year-old woman named Debra shuffles into Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, the site of Edmonton’s only homeless shelter for adults south of the North Saskatchewan River. She has a routine: after signing in, she slips her tennis shoes and a mickey of Blackstone vodka into a garbage bag. Then she heads to the section of the church hall reserved for women, scooting past thirty men sprawled on

floor mats less than a metre apart. The garbage bag will soon double as a pillow.

Six hours and five minutes later, Debra receives her wake-up call. She’s not sure how long she actually slept; insomnia has been a companion since childhood. By 5:58 a.m., she and the other shelter goers are awake and scattering outside in the day’s minus-seven-degree weather. Banned from an A&W, public restrooms, and a bookstore because of public sleeping, Debra arrives at the local Tim Hortons and settles into

a chair. “Tim Hortons is a wonderful place,” Debra says. “You can put your head down.... They won’t move you until the [neighbourhood cops] come.” From her jacket, Debra pulls out two crumpled tickets for trespassing—sleeping in the wrong places at the wrong times keeps landing her into trouble. She’ll need to show up to court and pay a fine or a warrant could be issued for her arrest.

It’s February, and Debra has been on the streets for the past year and a half, since her apartment lease wasn’t renewed. Sleeplessness shapes her daily life. She says she has pneumonia, cancer, and arthritis, which cause her persistent pain. Vodka, B50 supplements, and “magic” blue pills—likely stimulants—provide relief. But drugs also interfere with the little sleep she sneaks in. Exhaustion, in turn, worsens her physical pain.

Bad sleep affects marginalized people disproportionately, says Aric Prather, a clinical health psychologist in California. A 2017 study from France found that people experiencing homelessness sleep significantly less than the general population; 41 percent report insomnia. Shelter operators witness first-hand the frustration and aggression caused by exhaustion. But few shelters have the capacity to accommodate flexible sleeping schedules. In public areas, municipalities are prone to installing “hostile” architectural elements, such as tilted benches and street spikes, which are intentionally designed to prevent people from lying down. Social stigma and aggression from passersby can worsen the situation for anyone trying to find an hour of rest in a bus shelter or at a public park.

But “napping is not people being lazy,” Prather says. “Sleep is just a biological imperative for survival.” Adults need at least seven hours of sleep a day. With less than six hours of sleep, our immunity weakens. Sleeplessness can put people at greater risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, and neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s. Insufficient sleep also impairs people’s minds, hampering decision making, memory, and mood. A recent study found that adults who stayed awake for just one twenty-four-hour period had

an anxiety response 30 percent stronger than others who were allowed to sleep.

Roughly 50 percent of adults experiencing homelessness also live with chronic pain—far higher than the nearly 20 percent of Canadians nationwide. Like Debra, many people in pain turn to substances to alleviate discomfort. But alcohol and drugs operate as a feedback loop: though they provide the illusion of inducing rest, they actually disturb sleep, leaving people more tired, more likely to feel pain, and more inclined to self-medicate.

The median annual cost to Canadian society for one person experiencing homelessness and mental illness was about \$53,000 in 2011; up to half of that money went toward health care. We know that sleeplessness contributes to poor health, yet public discourse about the 35,000 people in Canada experiencing homelessness focuses on food, clothing, and shelter; adequate rest is typically left out of the list of basic needs. Social norms around when people should sleep, where, and with whom—also spelled out in shelter rules, loitering regulations, and policing practice—leave individuals on the street with little capacity to healthily and productively function. It's easy to see, by applying research by scientists such as Prather, that sleeplessness exacerbates nearly every other challenge facing the homeless.

**F**OR SHELTERS, providing decent sleep at scale is a constant challenge. I work as an ethnographer, and over the past two winters, my colleague Natalie Napier and I have shadowed more than sixty people living on the streets. Every shelter we spoke with, in Edmonton, Calgary, Montreal, Toronto, and Surrey, BC, faced the same conundrum: how to maximize occupancy and provide enough comfort for shelter users to sleep. Many of the environmental conditions affecting sleep—hours, curfews, noise, light, and smells—can, in theory, be attenuated with thoughtful physical design. Universities and companies are increasingly investing in commercial nap pods, which offer quiet, enclosed spaces. But rarely do shelter operators have resources for these perceived “nice to haves.”

Across the river from the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church sits Hope Mission, Edmonton's largest shelter provider—it has 500 spots, including up to 180 squeezed into a cafeteria. The sheer number of people limits any chance of proper sleep, says Ryan Harding, Hope Mission's outreach manager. “It's hot, it's noisy.... This isn't designed at all to be a place where adequate rest happens.” Other cities face similar problems. In Toronto, there are seven twenty-four-hour respite centres where visitors can sleep during the day, but space and privacy remain at a premium.

Many have trouble sleeping in unfamiliar settings and among strangers. Shelters with the most space, such as Calgary's 1,000-bed Drop-In & Rehab Centre or Montreal's multistorey Old Brewery Mission, offer mats, single beds, or bunk beds but little choice of neighbour. Evolutionarily, humans are wired to stay alert, and hypervigilance is the most pernicious sleep disruptor, says Gilles Lavigne, Canada Research Chair in pain, sleep, and head injury at the University of Montreal. “People who live in shelters, in nonquiet and nonsafe environments, these people cannot go into deepness of sleep,” he says. Their brains are frequently scanning their surroundings for threats.

Johnny Lee, a fifty-three-year-old social-justice advocate who has lived on and off the streets for the last thirty years, says sleeping in a shelter comes with a sense of powerlessness. Staff decide whom to admit and control the environment of the shelter. He is a guest in someone else's house—or, rather, a client in someone else's system. “Seeing how the staff can treat us, before waking us up, setting up tables, putting mats away, getting ready to kick everyone out, they make a lot of noise,” he says. That sense of diminished agency follows Lee throughout his day. Security guards and cops will ask him to move on if he stays in one place too long or nods off. Strangers walking by might jolt him awake.

“If someone wakes you every time you sleep deeply,” Prather says, “that fragmentation... is going to result in just feeling bad and not rested.”

Neighbourhood police receive no training in how to wake people up, says Dan Jones, who oversees Edmonton's downtown police division. Officers are expected to balance a duty to protect private property with community well-being. Public institutions including the Edmonton Public Library prohibit sleeping because, they say, it's a health-and-safety risk—it potentially masks a fatal drug overdose. But banning homeless individuals from public and commercial places and then ticketing them when they break the ban is not an effective solution. It costs the government thousands of dollars, Jones says, to process a ticket, assign a Crown prosecutor, issue a warrant, arrest someone, and potentially house them in custody. “For what purpose?”

Many shelter managers across Canada argue for more affordable permanent housing. But the ethnographic research my colleagues and I have conducted suggests there is no universal recipe for healthy sleep. Private accommodation is not a panacea, and though it can provide comfort and safety for some, it won't always address people's psychological need for belonging and safety. In Edmonton, thanks to the help of a nonprofit organization, Debra received the keys to an apartment soon after that February morning. But the building is a bus ride away from the camaraderie and protection of her street crew. She worries she won't be able to sleep on her own. “What am I going to do in a lonely apartment all by myself?” she says.

Given how critical sleep is to our health and well being, scientists like Prather have started framing sleep as the next frontier of social justice. Seeing sleep as a human right could change attitudes about public sleeping—normalizing the idea that proper rest, however and wherever it happens, is crucial for good health. For the average commuter, that new perspective means becoming comfortable with someone sleeping on a public bench or at the local library, without interruption. ❧

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SARAH SCHULMAN leads a social-research and -design organization.

## HEALTH

# Not What the Doctor Ordered

*The hidden costs of medical testing*

BY CARINE ABOUSEIF

ILLUSTRATION BY KATIE CAREY



**A** PATIENT BURSTS into the hospital, upset, convinced she has ovarian cancer. She says she has proof: a blood test, ordered by her family doctor, shows elevated amounts of CA125, a protein sometimes found on cancerous cells. But the emergency doctors learn that neither the patient nor her immediate family members have histories of ovarian cancer, which means she should never have undergone the test in the first place: it is not designed for the general population. The patient had heard about the test and asked her own physician to perform it, just in case, setting off a chain of events that led her to the hospital.

Raj Waghmare, an emergency-room doctor in Newmarket, Ontario, says he has repeatedly seen situations like this

one—patients rushing to the ER after receiving unnecessary lab results. CA125 testing is most often recommended for women who have or are suspected to have ovarian cancer: it can help determine whether a treatment is working or the cancer has reappeared. But, when used to screen patients who don't have that history, it can deliver false positives, leading to unwarranted panic and interventions. After conducting a pelvic ultrasound, hospital staff assured the patient that she was fine and sent her home.

Lab tests like the one for CA125, which typically involve drawing blood and examining it for clues about a patient's health, are vital tools when it comes to monitoring and diagnosing patients. However, a growing body of research, having as far back as the 1970s, suggests

that these tests are regularly ordered without cause, which can lead to more harm than good. Today, organizations such as Choosing Wisely—a US-based health-advocacy initiative—have sprung up to educate patients and doctors about the problem. But, in Canada, unnecessary and “inappropriate” tests are on the rise, says Christopher Naugler, a University of Calgary researcher and pathologist. According to a February report Naugler co-authored for the C.D. Howe Institute, an estimated \$5.9 billion is spent annually on lab tests, and that cost is rising steadily. A meta-analysis in 2017 found that up to 56 percent of tests each year are ordered against medical guidelines.

Medical advancements have led to a growing number of available procedures. One reason for the increase in testing is simply that patients have more options, says Naugler. Another factor could be the increased burden of disease as demographics shift in Canada: older people are more likely to get sick, and doctors may order more tests to figure out what is ailing them. Yet another cause, Naugler says, is the changing relationship between patients and their health care providers. As the internet has opened up a trove of accessible (if questionable) information, the average person has taken more ownership of their health care. Patients have greater awareness of the existence and uses of certain tests, and they are increasingly asking their doctors to order them. Physicians, meanwhile, might acquiesce when guidelines don't explicitly recommend against doing so, or because they want to please a nervous patient.

In Canada, there has been an exponential increase in patient requests for vitamin D testing, for example. Talk-show hosts and internet personalities—including Dr. Oz and Gwyneth Paltrow—have started to preach the vitamin's benefits to followers, who then might decide to get checked by a doctor. But recent research suggests that few people with low vitamin D levels are in need of medical attention. A bit more sun and a few more servings of salmon are simpler—and cheaper—fixes. Choosing Wisely Canada, which is organized by a team from the University of Toronto, St. Michael's

Hospital, and the Canadian Medical Association, says vitamin D tests are unlikely to change a doctor's advice. They could also lead to needless or harmful treatments. (Overdiagnosis can lead to overtreatment, and too much vitamin D from supplements or injections could damage kidneys and other organs.)

Research has shown that “defensive” health care approaches, which involve the excessive ordering of diagnostic tests, don't necessarily increase the chances that rare conditions will be caught. They do, however, increase the likelihood of overdiagnosis. False positives are unavoidable: “That's just the way lab testing works,” Naugler says. A 2018 study, co-published by the Calgary-based doctor, found that, of all the worrisome (or “abnormal”) results from lab tests ordered by family physicians, more than half could be false positives. A patient may undergo a test, Naugler explains, “and it leads to something else, which leads to something else—and the initial test should never have been done.” This process can be costly and cause the patient serious anxiety. It can also lead to further health problems—or, in the most extreme cases, death.

Based on health data from hospitals and physicians, it's estimated that, each year, patients collectively undergo more than a million tests or treatments that don't help or may be harmful—from X-rays and MRIs to blood transfusions. Lab tests are arguably the most dangerous of the bunch: nearly three-quarters of medical decisions are made based on their results, making the overall downstream effects of their overuse immeasurable.

**I**T MAY SOUND counterintuitive to complain about medical tests. Any fan of *House* or *Grey's Anatomy* is familiar with the romantic narrative of the physician who orders slate upon slate of tests to pin down an elusive diagnosis. The implication is that doctors who order more tests are being more attentive—that the more tests are done, the less likely the medical team is missing something crucial. The reality of lab testing, however, is much more complex: in medicine, context can be everything,

and results mean little without the relevant patient history.

Waghmare offers an example: a seventy-six-year-old in the ER, complaining of shortness of breath, was diagnosed with emphysema. He was given an X-ray, which revealed a shadow in his chest. Results from a blood test led to a colonoscopy, during which the man went into cardiac arrest. During his extended stay at the hospital, the patient caught a superbug that eventually killed him.

While the initial X-ray and blood work had not been “inappropriate”—there are no guidelines against ordering these tests under such circumstances—Waghmare says the case demonstrates that ordering more procedures is not necessarily best when one considers the risks. Longer hospital stays can increase a patient's chance of infection: every year, about 220,000 Canadians contract infections at hospitals, and 8,000 more die because of them. “I wonder what might have happened if I'd just listened to his lungs, presumed he had pneumonia, and given him a course of antibiotics,” Waghmare later wrote about the case.

Most patient harm caused by over-testing is not so severe, but follow-up tests can be painful and invasive. For instance, patients who receive routine pap tests when they are below the recommended minimum age (twenty-one to twenty-five, depending on the jurisdiction) are increasing their statistical likelihood of encountering false positives—including having their noncancerous HPV confused with the cancerous kind. This could lead to repeated biopsies of the cervix, Naugler says, and even the removal of the top of the cervix, which can affect subsequent pregnancies. There's also the anxiety that comes with waiting for unnecessary lab results: patients might spend weeks or months in anguish over the results of tests they were never supposed to take. That anxiety might lead to loss of sleep, changes in diet, and other behaviours that could affect their health.

As provincial governments across the country scramble to tighten their health care budgets, the rising costs of lab testing are gaining awareness. In August, in an effort to save \$120 million annually,

the Ontario government delisted from its health care coverage several tests—including MRIs and CT scans for joint pain—that were considered outdated or unnecessary. Attempts at scaling back, however, are sure to be challenged: it's hard to convince the public that less health care can be a positive change.

**T**O START tackling the problem of inappropriate testing, the C.D. Howe report recommends introducing the concept in medical schools. Physicians should have their ordering practices compared to those of their peers to identify any outliers.

Another solution involves technology, such as digital request forms, that requires doctors to submit reasons for ordering tests. According to a 2017 study on vitamin D testing by Naugler and his team, when physicians are obliged to justify ordering a particular test, they are much less likely to order it unnecessarily.

Meanwhile, initiatives like Choosing Wisely are working to raise awareness among doctors and patients. One of several pamphlets it offers outlines which surgeries require lab tests in advance and which usually do not (typically low-risk surgeries, such as eye, skin, or hernia operations). Choosing Wisely advises patients to always ask their doctors questions about procedures: Do I need this test or treatment? What are the downsides? Are there simpler, safer options? And what happens if I wait or do nothing?

It's in this conversation that Wendy Levinson, who chairs Choosing Wisely Canada, sees the greatest opportunity for change. “People think that, if they went to the doctor and didn't leave with a prescription, they didn't get care,” she says. But prescriptions and procedures are just two pieces of patient care. Physicians need to foster healthier conversational relationships with patients so that patients can fully understand the risks and make more informed decisions about their own health. Only then, she says, can patient care really improve. ▮

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**CARINE ABOUSEIF** has written for the *Globe and Mail*, *Maisonneuve*, and *This* magazine.

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ARTS

# The Making of MARGARET ATWOOD

BY TAJJA ISEN AND DANIEL VIOLA  
ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN TAMAKI

**F**AME IS not new to Margaret Atwood—it's a by-product of life as a perennially prizewinning, bestselling author. But in September, *The Testaments*, her long-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, was released, and she became something else entirely: a worldwide cultural phenomenon. The novel, set in a not-so-distant United States where fundamentalist fascists have gained power and stripped away women's rights, sold more than 300,000 copies across the US, the UK, and Canada within the first two weeks alone. Atwood appeared on cover after cover leading up to the launch—*Time*, *The Sunday Times Style*—and her release-day interview, onstage at London's National Theatre, was broadcast to 1,000 cinemas around the world. Before *The Testaments* hit stores, it had already been nominated for both the Giller and Booker prizes (it made the longlist for the former and would go on to win the latter), and a television show—building on the wildly popular series *The Handmaid's Tale*—had been announced.

It's remarkable that Atwood, who turned eighty in November, has reached this crest after spending six decades writing into an ever-shifting cultural landscape. When she was starting out, writers, for the most part, didn't get published in Canada. Canadian literature as a concept didn't even exist. To understand how Atwood grew into the literary celebrity she is today, we reached out to some of the writers, publishers, and friends who know her, and her words, best.

**Charles Pachter:** They called her “Peggy Nature,” and she looked like a young Jane Goodall. She had a little kerchief and was wearing rubber boots and sensible jungle wear. We were working at Camp White Pine. I was sixteen; she was eighteen going on nineteen. She had what was called a nature hut, full of toads and newts and snakes. The kids were sitting, squirming, at her feet, and she sort of motioned me over and said, “I want you to stroke a toad to prove

*Charles Pachter is an award-winning contemporary artist whose work has been exhibited in the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Royal Ontario Museum, and across Europe and Asia.*

to the kids that you won't get warts.” We were friends from that day on.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** It was 1958, a Sunday afternoon. I remember it very clearly because I often spent Sunday afternoons in the library of St. Hilda's College, where I was in residence, at the University of Toronto. A group of us were gathered there for the first time. We all seemed to have been wearing black turtle-necks, unduly influenced by Jack Kerouac. That was when I first met Margaret Atwood.

*Adrienne Clarkson served as the Governor General of Canada from 1999 to 2005 and was a long-time broadcaster with the CBC.*

**Rosemary Sullivan:** At Victoria College, she became a friend of Northrop Frye and the wonderful poet Jay Macpherson. She started reading Grimms' fairy tales in the bush when she was six, and then, later, she was reading mythology. You can see the slow accumulation of this intelligence.

*Rosemary Sullivan is the author of fourteen books, including [The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out and Stalin's Daughter](#).*

**Adrienne Clarkson:** I think she was already publishing in all kinds of little magazines—everybody got published in little magazines then. What I remember

from that first day is that she read a poem. I don't remember what poem it was, but she read it in her inimitable voice. It was a true poem.

**Charles Pachter:** We were constantly writing to each other. So many letters—over 300. These were the days of those little Olivetti typewriters. She was interested in me as an artist, and whatever misgivings I had, whatever was on my mind, I would write to her because she always had an answer. I remember when a high-school teacher gave me a D-minus in art, and she said, “Never mind, someday you'll be writing God's murals in the sky and she'll be roasting in hell.”

**Adrienne Clarkson:** None of us, at that time, aspired to the heady heights of being world-famous writers. We thought that if we just got our writing down and somebody could publish it, that would be enough.

*In those early days, Atwood set her mind to poetry. In 1961, while still a student, she published her first collection, Double Persephone. Only 220 copies were made. Three years later, she released The Circle Game. The volume began as a collaboration with Charles Pachter, who created fifteen handmade books as part of a university assignment. When it received a wider release, in 1966, it won her the Governor General's Literary Award. Atwood was twenty-seven at the time, making her the youngest winner in the prize's history.*

**Eleanor Wachtel:** I was an undergraduate at McGill University and a book-review editor at the *McGill Daily* when *The Circle Game* arrived. This was in the late sixties, and Atwood was one of the first Canadian poets—one of the first living poets—I had occasion to encounter. I remember the first poem in the book, “This Is a Photograph of Me.” It's an evocative image of the poet or an alter ego disappearing into the landscape, drowned in a lake, but has this line at the

end: “but if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me.” I just fell in love with the book and with her. To my surprise, Atwood was teaching at the other English university in Montreal, now known as Concordia, and so I called her up and we met at a small Greek restaurant on Parc Avenue. She was the very first interview I ever did. We drank cups of tea, she talked about writing poetry. And then she became famous.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** I always love it when she puts out a volume of poems. It's as if something just *happened*.

**Charles Pachter:** I truly believe that her poetry will be her most enduring legacy. I've read through her more dystopian novels, but I don't remember them the way I remember the poetry. When she sent me the manuscript for *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, I was so floored by its beauty. She'd read the original Susanna Moodie book, *Roughing It in the Bush*, which is a quite florid, very Jane Austen-like account of a nineteenth-century British settler in Upper Canada, and she condensed each chapter into a poem. For example, her describing the cholera epidemic:

After we had crossed the long illness  
that was the ocean, we sailed up-river

On the first island  
the immigrants threw off their clothes  
and danced like sandflies

We left behind one by one  
the cities rotting with cholera,  
one by one our civilized  
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

**Eleanor Wachtel:** Some people argue that they like her poetry more than her fiction, but you don't have to choose. You can have it all.

*Between finishing graduate school at Harvard and teaching in Montreal and Vancouver, Atwood worked on her first novel. The Edible Woman, released in 1969, tells the story of Marian, a young woman, newly engaged, who gradually loses*

*her ability to eat. The book satirizes the consumerism and stifling gender roles of the sixties, anticipating the feminist movement that grew in the following decade. This kind of cultural foresight would continue throughout Atwood's work. Three years later, she published Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. It was one of the first attempts to categorize the country's nascent literary scene, and it set Canadian writing apart from that of the rest of the world. Survival soon became a staple in English-literature courses across the country.*

**Sarah MacLachlan:** One pivotal moment in the history of House of Anansi, and in her development as a writer, was when Dennis Lee, the press's cofounder, spoke with her about writing *Survival*. There had never been a book of literary criticism about Canadian writers, and for whatever insane reason, he thought it would be a big seller.

*Sarah MacLachlan is the president and publisher of House of Anansi Press.*

**Donna Bailey Nurse:** Of course, we all take it for granted now, but for a long time, there was no such thing as “Canadian literature.” With *Survival*, she begins to think about the themes that pre-occupy Canadian writers: feeling alien in a wild landscape, feeling powerless. She riffs on that to think about how they feel powerless next door to the US and how they feel powerless as a colonial country.

*Donna Bailey Nurse is the author of What's a Black Critic to Do? and the editor of Revival: An Anthology of Black Canadian Writing.*

**Esi Edugyan:** She's really somebody we're all inheriting from—her, Alice Munro, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Patrick Lane—these people who said, “We've got to create a home literature. We're not just a kind of satellite of American literature or British literature.”

*Esi Edugyan is a two-time winner of the Giller Prize, for her novels Half-Blood Blues and Washington Black.*

**Donna Bailey Nurse:** At that time, she got a lot of flak for it, I think partly because she's an ideas person and there were a lot of men who resented that: they were resisting everything she had to say.

**Rosemary Sullivan:** I'm a product of the sixties as well, and you have to remember, we were told that all genius in the arts was male, that the role of the woman was as the handmaid to the artist.

It used to be you'd set a novel in Paris because who knew Toronto; you had a male protagonist because who wanted a female protagonist. If you were a woman, you'd disguise your name as P. D. James or something. You didn't expect to have a career as a woman writer. Then, suddenly, all these writers came along: Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro. One became a Nobel Prize winner, and Atwood has had a cultural success that's been matched by only one other woman writer, the author of the *Harry Potter* series.

**Eleanor Wachtel:** She became extraordinarily well known in media circles in Canada—not just literary ones but as a phenomenon in the second-wave feminism of the early seventies. *Power Politics* came out in 1973, which I still quote: “You fit into me / like a hook into an eye / a fish hook / an open eye.”

**Charles Pachter:** She had what I would call positive ambition. Despite what many people saw as her shyness and awkwardness with people, she became more

polished in front of the camera. She became a media star and seemed to relish it.

**Eleanor Wachtel:** She did tons and tons of media, especially television. My pet theory is that it affected how she did subsequent interviews. Because she was interviewed by so many people who hadn't actually read anything she'd written, she was not exactly more guarded, but she knew what she wanted to say and would say it.



ABOVE Charles Pachter's *Handmaid of Honour* (2018)

Atwood's exposure continued to grow with each book, winning her admirers and detractors. In 1979, William French, writing in the *Globe and Mail*, said, “There's a strong feeling at the end of *Life Before Man* that after four novels, she still hasn't reached her potential.” His critique would prove prescient. Six years later, she released

The *Handmaid's Tale* and introduced readers to the theocratic state of Gilead, where reproductive slavery is rampant, public executions are the norm, and state surveillance is a constant threat. It became her most acclaimed book yet.

**Rosemary Sullivan:** I think Margaret Atwood has her finger on the cultural pulse, and she's usually six months ahead of the rest of us. Before breast cancer became a plague that everybody was talking

about in the eighties, she was writing a novel about it—*Bodily Harm*. Then she was living out behind the Berlin Wall, when East and West Germany were still divided, and began to think of America and its Puritan history and wanted to write a dystopia.

**George Saunders:** I'm a former engineer and I came to everybody late, so my first encounter with Margaret was through *The Handmaid's Tale*. I read it just after my daughters were born, in the early nineties, and it was a purposeful read for me to try to wake myself up about what it might mean to have these two young girls, and later women, that I would need to help through the world. When you're a white American male, there's

kind of a hedgerow between you and the actual experience of oppression: you can know it theoretically, but you haven't been on the receiving end. So to be inside that book was to be inside this ruthless system designed to oppress a class of people that I had just fallen newly in love with because I had two little examples around the house. Suddenly, it wasn't theoretical anymore. Oppression wasn't

merely a political idea; it was something that could adversely affect these people I loved and, if it did, would happen very much like it's described in the book. Sort of...benignly?

Reading it, you're like, "Oh, yeah, it's very possible that people can on the surface be extremely nice and kind of businesslike and yet be enacting a great evil."

**Adrienne Clarkson:** When *The Handmaid's Tale* came out, I think a lot of people felt that it was a diversion for her. I found it deeply, deeply disturbing, and I remember thinking, "Why has she done this?" And now we know—what is it, thirty, thirty-five years later—that she understood there was something going on underground. It's like people looking at a body, looking at you, and thinking, "That's you." She looks at the nerves underneath and the veins and the arteries.

**Michele Landsberg:** As a print fanatic, I can't resist—when I see someone reading a book, I just have to know what it is. I'm always surreptitiously peering and bending over, pretending to tie a shoelace or something, so I can catch the title. I remember when I lived in New York in the eighties, I was so astonished when I saw that half the people reading books—on the subway, in Central Park, wherever I was—were reading Atwood. And not just *The Handmaid's Tale* but *Life Before Man*, other novels of hers.

**Esi Edugyan:** Coming to Atwood, you understood this was serious literature, but it was also something that spoke to you. I hesitate to use the word "accessible" because I don't mean to downgrade her work, but it certainly was something I could easily understand and even connect with as a teenager.

*George Saunders is the author of the Booker Prize-winning novel Lincoln in the Bardo and four short-story collections, including the New York Times Best Seller Tenth of December.*

**Rosemary Sullivan:** You don't feel the sky is falling until it falls on you, right? We're in a moment where it feels like the sky is falling. Things are happening now—children being separated from their parents, being held at the American border—that are just unacceptable, yet there's no way we can figure out how to react cohesively to stop them. You feel that this wave is taking over—of suspicion, of white supremacy, of racism—and this idea that we're somehow at risk. Atwood doesn't just listen to that, she actually writes about it and finds a way to warn us about it.

**"I don't think she likes boredom. You see that little ornery look in her eyes and it's like, 'Uh oh, this moment will not be allowed to be dull.'"**

She writes *The Handmaid's Tale* in '85; it takes over thirty years for the world to catch up with it. But how bizarre and how tragic that we seem to be catching up with it now. Most of us who were feminists—Atwood would accept being a feminist but only in a particular sense—thought, "Okay, we won something." We now stand here looking at the misogyny of the world—you've got Putin, you've got Trump, all these misogynistic leaders in power, and you've got to say, "How did that happen?" *The Handmaid's Tale* is as current as it needs to be now.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** We studied E.M. Forster in our fourth year—*Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. Forster said two things. One, at the front of *Howards End*, was, "Only connect." The other was that a true novel is prophetic. By that, he didn't just mean that it would tell the

truth about the future. What he meant was that there was the nature of prophecy in it. That's what we have with Margaret Atwood's work.

**Sarah MacLachlan:** She leads, you follow. When she was asked to be a Massey lecturer and she agreed, we thought her subject would be literary criticism. Then she told us it was going to be about debt. We all thought, "Oh, you've got to be kidding. What do you know about that?" It turns out that, when we published it as a book, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, in 2008, it was the beginning of the economic crisis, the meltdown on Wall Street. It was an instant bestseller. She's got an idea, you just go with her. She is a bit clairvoyant.

**Thomas King:** She always seems to be a little ahead of her time. It's scary.

*Thomas King is the author of The Inconvenient Indian and The Back of the Turtle, which won the 2014 Governor General's Award for Literature.*

Over the following decades, Atwood released a steady stream of novels. *Cat's Eye* explored the cruelties of adolescent friendships; *The Blind Assassin*, an intricate mystery about the fraught relationship between two sisters, won her the Booker Prize. After sixty years as a popular thinker, writer, and speaker, working across genres and formats, a mythology has grown around Atwood. She has been described as a trickster, a man hater, an oracle.

**George Saunders:** I knew she was at the Salisbury Literary Festival, and I was kind of nervous about meeting her, as a person tends to be. Then I found out that we were supposed to travel to another event together in a bus. And then I found out that the bus was just Margaret and her partner and me. And then I found out that I was hungover. And, I think, a little jet-lagged. I was really not feeling well. So I got situated in the front seat of this van, next to the driver, and Margaret and Graeme were in the back. My mission was twofold. One: don't

engage. And two: don't throw up. Those were my high-minded aspirations. And so I was sitting there, really feeling terrible, and the driver figured it out and had a bit of a mean streak, so he was kind of speeding and swerving and looking over at me kind of slyly. I was bearing down and trying not to disgrace myself. At some point, I felt this little tap on my shoulder, and I'm thinking, "Oh no, Margaret's going to yell at me for being hungover at a literary event." But she handed up this little pill, and I was in such a sorry state that I just took it. I thought, "That's Margaret Atwood. She wouldn't poison me. She wouldn't drug me—with anything too powerful." So I ate it. It was some kind of homeopathic hangover remedy, but it was a sequence of pills that made up this remedy.

**Charles Pachter:** I know she takes a lot of vitamins—I've seen her scarf down about twelve or fifteen vitamins a day. [Atwood later clarified that she takes closer to ten a day and that some of them are minerals.]

**George Saunders:** I just kept taking them, and every so often she would lean up and whisper, "Just focus your eyes on the horizon"—almost like philosophical advice. And it worked!

**Eleanor Wachtel:** She's what my high-school teacher would call a "good citizen." She engages with the community and the world. Whether it's street life in Toronto or the CBC lockout in 2005 or—on a whole other scale—environmental disaster.

**Michele Landsberg:** I once was asked to write a feature about her, I think it was for *Chatelaine*. She and Graeme were on a farm in the country, and I remember how delighted she was to show me around the things she was growing and talk about birds.

**The office of Jonathan Franzen:** While he was pleased to receive your invitation, he must decline due to the fact that, although he is aware of Ms. Atwood's love of birds, and he loves her

for it, he's never birded with her personally and can't speak to any specifics regarding her conservation work.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** She and her partner, Graeme Gibson, helped form The Writers' Union of Canada in 1973. Then, they breathed life into the moribund Canadian branch of PEN, the oldest civil-society organization dealing with human rights in the world.

**Eleanor Wachtel:** Atwood is out there. When there's an event to celebrate another writer, she's there. If there's a benefit for a noble cause, she's there. She shows up, she writes articles. And the thing is, for someone with her kind of career, she doesn't have to. She's already won all the prizes available, more or less, in Canada.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** The Giller, the Governor General's, the Commonwealth, the Trillium—and on and on.

**Thomas King:** I think she's gone out of her way for Native writers. She's not a rah-rah, wave-the-flag advocate, but she does it as part of her social conscience. With me, for instance: I got to Canada in 1980. I was out in the Prairies, Lethbridge, and I didn't know her, she didn't know me. I published a couple of short stories—this was very early on in my career—and she, out of the blue, wrote an article on them. I was sort of like, you know, "Oh boy!" It gave me a boost in my writing career that I hadn't expected to get. You can't get any better than that, having a major Canadian writer write a very nice article about your work.

**Eleanor Wachtel:** She says she does it because her character was ruined by the Brownies and the Girl Guides, and that she still has difficulty resisting "lend a hand" appeals. She can recite the Brownie Promise if you ask her to.

*Jonathan Franzen is the author of ten books, including Purity, Freedom, and The Corrections.*

**Sarah MacLachlan:** When we were on the road for the Massey Lectures, we used to go into the hall to do a sound check, and she would sing camp songs. Like, "They built the ship Titanic, to sail the ocean blue..." So she and I, we'd sing. People thought we were a little bit nuts.

**Karma Waltonen:** Years ago, Margaret and I happened to be at Comic-Con at the same time. I saw her across a crowded floor and ran over to say hi. I inserted myself among her companions and reintroduced myself—we'd met before, but that day I was in cosplay as Neil Gaiman's Death. When the people she was with heard me say I was the president of the Margaret Atwood Society, one of them said, "You have a society?" "Yes," Atwood replied. "And I'm not even dead."

*Karma Waltonen is a lecturer at the University of California, Davis and the president of the Margaret Atwood Society.*

*The release of The Testaments marks seventeen novels, seventeen volumes of poetry, ten books of nonfiction, eight short-story collections, eight children's books, and one graphic novel for Atwood. She's still writing today. In a recent interview, she didn't rule out returning to Gilead for another story.*

**Sarah MacLachlan:** I mean, this is *Harry Potter* territory, right? As I look at the sales numbers, it's something. It's something.

**Thomas King:** In many ways, she's much bigger than life. If you tried to create her character in fiction, you wouldn't be able to. Did you see those pictures in the *Times* that Tim Walker took of her? The ones with all the hair like *Bride of Frankenstein*? I said to myself, "Only Peggy would do something like that."

**Heather O'Neill:** There's this idea that women somehow become invisible after a certain age, and she so counters that. We're not used to it in our society,

the idea that a woman who's over a certain age can be culturally relevant. Are you crazy? Margaret Atwood walks into a room

and everybody stops. She's turning eighty and she's just put out the biggest book in the world. She's really annihilated that myth in such a wonderful way.

**George Saunders:** It's a real privilege to be on a stage with her. It's a little scary because she's so smart and she has such a low threshold for bullshit. You have to aspire to be like she is, which is 100 percent alert. I don't think she likes boredom, and she doesn't like phoning things in. You see that little ornery look in her eyes and it's like, "Uh oh, this moment will not be allowed to be dull." Most of us, I think, live another way, which is to say, "Please, God, help today be a succession of dull moments, moments when I don't shake anything up or risk making a fool of myself or risk making somebody uncomfortable." But, I think, with a few great ones in the world, they feel life so acutely that it offends them to allow a dull moment. My hunch is that she recognizes stasis and boredom and the status quo as enemies of intelligence.

*Heather O'Neill is the bestselling author of The Lonely Hearts Hotel, Lullabies for Little Criminals, and The Girl Who Was Saturday Night.*

**Rosemary Sullivan:** Margaret Atwood has always said, "I don't want to be a role model." Because what she's doing is not giving you prescriptions for living. That's really not, in her mind, her assigned role. Her assigned role is to be a writer.

**Heather O'Neill:** I think that she's such an incredible reader. She just reads everything, and you can feel the intertextual influences in her work. You realize how important reading is to writing and also how important reading is to having a good life. Why is she so alive? Because she reads constantly and has all these ideas bubbling in her head.

**Rosemary Sullivan:** When she's asked if it's time for the Nobel Prize, she says, "I don't want it because everybody who gets the Nobel Prize never writes another book."

**Thomas King:** If they were going to give the Nobel Prize to another Canadian writer, it certainly should go to her.

**Esi Edugyan:** I was in California, being interviewed onstage, and I was talking about how, when I was in graduate school, I asked my fellow students if they could name ten Canadian writers, period, in any genre. Many of them couldn't. So, onstage, I said, "Of course, everyone knows this particular set of writers now," and I mentioned Atwood. And then I was

interrupted by the interviewer, who said, "Well, she's a *world* writer."

**George Saunders:** Tolstoy says a real artist is someone who genuinely insists on getting themselves lost in the process and insists that the search be for something really big. I think that's what she's done. It feels to me that with each new project, she's a little kid again. She's an eighteen-year-old aspiring writer who's like, "Wow, writing! What can you do?" Every time you get done, you start over. That takes a real spiritual capaciousness, but if you can do it, that's a guarantee of a long career.

**Rosemary Sullivan:** I'm quite nervous—about climate degradation, about totalitarianism. In 100 years, there's two options: either her books will be burned or they will be seen as extraordinary explanations of what happened at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Charles Pachter:** I want to see what she's going to do when she's 100. 🍷

*These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.*

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# ~~THE~~ COMMON GROUND

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## SPORTS

# WADA Mess

*The World Anti-Doping Agency was created to fight against drugs in sports. But clean athletes say it is betraying them*

BY CURTIS GILLESPIE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL BYERS



**T**HE CANMORE Nordic Centre, 100 kilometres west of Calgary, was the site of the cross-country and biathlon events during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, and it remains the base for both Canadian national teams. It's also where Beckie Scott is based: she skis there and lives just down the hill with her husband and their two young children. Scott was the first Canadian to earn an Olympic medal in cross-country skiing, winning gold at the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games—though it took two years

of investigations and uncertainty before the two Russians who crossed the line ahead of her were stripped of their medals for doping.

Athletes around the world, competing and retired, have long admired Scott for standing up for fair play, both through her competitive record and her advocacy since retiring from competition. For these reasons, she was appointed to both the foundation board of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the athlete's commission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in 2005 and 2006, and to WADA's executive committee in 2012.

She was also, until 2018, a member of WADA's Compliance Review Committee, the oversight body that tracks compliance to the agency's anti-doping code. Scott is a rarity, having succeeded at the highest levels of sport as both a competitor and a policy maker.

But, in many ways, these experiences, which ought to have been purely rewarding, have been compromised by doping and the bodies set up to stop it. "I have seen the dark side of sport," Scott told me when we spoke at the Nordic Centre in late spring. "The corruption, the allegiances, and the power." Over the





last five years, details have been emerging about the Russian state-sponsored doping system that peaked at the 2014 Sochi Winter Games, where dirty urine was exchanged for clean urine through a “mouse hole” with lab techs on one side of the wall and Russian agents disguised as sewer engineers on the other. These revelations led to the closure of Russia’s national drug-testing laboratory, the suspension of its track federation, and the banning of Russia from the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, where its athletes were forced to compete as “Olympic athletes from Russia.”

Since 2016, Scott has become an increasingly vocal critic of WADA and the IOC as they sought to appease Russia, primarily by watering down the criteria for the country’s reentry into the international sporting community. This criticism did not go over well with the bureaucrats in either organization, and WADA members condemned Scott in ways that she has called bullying and that a recent report commissioned by the organization itself conceded “could be viewed as aggressive, harsh, or disrespectful.”

Scott’s tribulations demonstrate that fault for the crisis polarizing the

anti-doping community rests just as much with those who don’t play fair as with those dedicated to upholding fair play—bodies such as WADA, which was created expressly to bring a unified voice to the fight against chemical cheating in sport.

In November 2019, WADA will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of its founding. A lot has happened in the world of anti-doping in those two decades—much of it good. The Athlete Biological Passport, first launched in 2002, is now a central tool for tracking what athletes put in their bodies. Another positive

moment occurred when Interpol joined forces with WADA, in 2009, allowing for the criminal investigation of cheaters. In an age of escalating mistrust toward traditional touchstones (religion, business, politics), the idea of fair sporting contests holds a simple appeal in our complicated lives, a truth that ought to have cemented WADA's relevance and credibility.

Instead, opinions about WADA held by a growing contingent of competitors and national anti-doping organizations now range from unease to outright scorn. Why did this happen? Who let it happen? And what does it all mean? At the precise moment we need it most, WADA appears to be abandoning the very people it was founded to defend: clean athletes.

**I**N THE SUMMER of 1998, then IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch was watching the Tour de France in his home in Lausanne, Switzerland. A scandal was unfolding in which Festina—then one of the world's top cycling squads—was caught with a carload of blood-doping materials, evidence that led to the ultimate finding that the entire team was doping its riders through a supervised and regimented program. The sporting world was aghast, but not Samaranch. "This is ridiculous," he said to his television. "Anything that doesn't act against the athlete's health, for me that's not doping." Samaranch, I was told, had become so wrapped up in what he was watching that he'd forgotten a journalist from Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* was in the room. Samaranch's comments were picked up around the world: IOC leadership was recommending a permissive approach to performance-enhancing substances. Dick Pound, a Canadian lawyer, IOC doyen, and one-time Olympic swimmer, recounted this story in a phone interview from his Montreal office. "It was," he says, "a shitstorm."

Samaranch called a board meeting. The organization had never taken a particularly structured approach to doping in the past and typically handled doping matters by letting either individual countries or individual sporting federations rule on them (as in the case of the

Canada-led Dubin Inquiry, which dealt with the furor after sprinter Ben Johnson tested positive for anabolic steroids at the 1988 Seoul Olympics). The best way to save the IOC's credibility on doping, Pound suggested, was an international, independent organization that could police an aggressive anti-doping policy: those who cheat don't play. Samaranch gave his blessing and, in February 1999, deputized Pound to gather major players from sport administration, government, athlete groups, coaching, and even the pharmaceutical industry in one room, in Lausanne. After everyone agreed to Pound's opening suggestion about creating a shared agency across all fields, there was a problem. Governments complained that they were not being given as much power in the proposed organization as sporting bodies were. Pound called a timeout to consult with Samaranch. He then went back and told the governments that he was going to give them what they wanted: 50 percent of the voting rights. Of course, that meant paying half the cost of the new organization. They couldn't argue. WADA was formally created in November.

It took nearly four years for WADA to develop what it calls "the code"—the first universal set of anti-doping rules, which outlines violations, testing protocols, analysis methodology, sanctions, appeal processes, and much more. (The agency also publishes a list of prohibited substances and blood-doping methods.) In March 2003, in Copenhagen, Pound chaired the conference to finalize the code, painstakingly leading the same throng of players and parties through it, clause by clause. At the end, Pound told the group that it was decision time. "If you've been to these international meetings," he told me, "quite often, the way voting occurs is that everybody applauds. But I said to myself, 'No, no fucking way.' I mean, you've got cycling that doesn't want it, you've got soccer that doesn't want it, and so I said, 'Is there anybody in this room who does *not* think we should go ahead with this code?' I looked cycling in the eyes, looked soccer in the eyes. They all blinked, and I said, 'Okay, in that case, it's unanimous!'"

With the world's only globally agreed-upon anti-doping standards in place, WADA established its head office in Montreal. These were the days of Lance Armstrong (whose seven consecutive Tour de France wins would ultimately be wiped off the record books after his cheating was exposed), Barry Bonds (the baseball home-run king who, due to his doping, still has not been admitted to the Hall of Fame), the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative (which supplied pharmaceuticals to athletes far and wide), and Marion Jones (the Olympic track-and-field champion who confessed to doping after being caught). WADA was the new sheriff in town, and its presence did away with the patchwork system of poorly enforced and often confusing anti-doping policies, in which different sports had different lists of outlawed substances—a landscape Pound has called "anarchy."

Governments aligned their domestic policies with the code, thus harmonizing the rules governing anti-doping in all sports and all countries so that every athlete in the world could be held to the same standard. The number of drug tests being carried out increased substantially. As further pressure, WADA made code compliance mandatory for sports in the Olympic program, and the IOC decided to accept Olympic bids only from governments that ratified the code. Pound raised WADA's profile most noticeably through his spat with Armstrong, in which he publicly stated his belief, long before there was hard evidence, that Armstrong had been doping—a claim Armstrong took considerable objection to, calling Pound "a recidivist violator of ethical standards." Pound's reply? "Cheating is cheating." (Today, Pound says he was "pleased to see Lance had found a thesaurus.")

All in all, it was a good time for WADA, not least because, in an age when clean sport was under threat from money and drugs, the agency gave the world a reference point for fighting the good fight.

WADA's next president, John Fahey, was an Australian politician whose tenure, from 2008 to 2013, passed with relatively little controversy and generally positive growth. WADA's code was gaining respect and recognition. Its budget—half from

governments, half from sports bodies—was increasing. Athletes, Scott among them, were becoming more involved. In 2014, Scottish sports diplomat Craig Reddie took over from Fahey. This raised red flags in some quarters because Reddie was a long-time IOC executive committee member (a vice-president, in

its sanctioned events. The ban has remained in place even as recently as the IAAF World Championships in September 2019.

The day after Pound released his report, the head of the Moscow lab, Grigory Rodchenkov, resigned. Matters intensified when Vyacheslav Sinev, chair of RU-



fact) and did not resign from that position when he took over WADA.

It was about a year after Reddie started the job that a bomb landed on his desk. The German public broadcaster ARD aired a documentary, in December 2014, alleging that Russia was doping its track-and-field athletes and that even Moscow's main anti-doping laboratory was cooking up ways to beat the system. WADA asked Pound to conduct an independent report on the allegations. Pound delivered his report on November 9, 2015, stating that he found the whistle-blowers credible. WADA then suspended Russia's anti-doping agency (RUSADA), declaring it noncompliant. On the strength of the evidence Pound uncovered, the council of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), the organization that runs the world's track-and-field events, effectively banned Russian athletes from

RUSADA's executive board, and Nikita Kamaev, its former executive director, died abruptly and mysteriously in February 2016. Four months later, the *New York Times*, working with Rodchenkov as a source, published the first of three major articles that deepened the ARD allegations by claiming that Russia had been engaging in doping for years. WADA reacted to these stories—as well as a *60 Minutes* interview with

Rodchenkov—by engaging Richard McLaren, a respected Canadian sports-law professor, to investigate Rodchenkov's claims. With the 2016 Rio Olympics fast approaching (meaning Russia's status as a participant was at stake), McLaren produced a nearly 100-page report in just fifty-seven days. On July 18, 2016, he went to a podium to tell the world what he'd found.

McLaren stated unequivocally that one of the world's largest sporting powers had been revealed to have cheated regularly, in virtually all Olympic sports, for all athletes, in every major event, through a chain of command that led to the Russian minister of sport, who likely reported directly to Vladimir Putin. The serial cheating included, he said, the extraordinarily brazen urine-swapping caper at the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. It was incontrovertible, concluded McLaren, that “Russian officials knew that

Russian athletes competing at Sochi used doping substances.”

WADA, to its credit, did not soft-pedal the findings. Reddie released a statement recommending that the IOC and the International Paralympic Committee decline entries for every Russian athlete at Rio 2016, that all Russian officials be denied access to the Rio Games and other international competitions, that RUSADA continue to be deemed non-compliant, and that the Moscow lab's accreditation process be halted. Russia's conduct, Reddie wrote, “shows a total disregard for the international community” and involved a “modus operandi of serious manipulation,” including state oversight. “WADA,” he added, “is calling on the Sports Movement to impose the strongest possible measures to protect clean sport for Rio 2016 and beyond.”

The release of that statement was WADA's high-water mark of ethical leadership. It also marked the start of the disintegrating relationship between Beckie Scott and the organization she thought stood for fair play above all else.

**W**ADA's blunt statement and the authority of the McLaren report made it seem that the IOC's only credible move would be to ban Russia from Rio 2016. What happened next was the turning point in WADA's arc.

After WADA called for Russia to be banned, IOC president Thomas Bach turned black into white and blamed WADA for not doing its job properly. At an IOC session, just before the Rio Games, Bach trampled all over the agency. “Recent developments have shown that we need a full review of the WADA anti-doping system,” Bach said. “The IOC is calling for a more robust and efficient anti-doping system. This requires clear responsibilities, more transparency, more independence, and better worldwide harmonization.” He said the “nuclear option” of banning Russia was unacceptable and added that the result of such a move would be “death and devastation.” Other IOC board and committee members accused WADA of sullyng its own reputation and of attacking the “Olympic family.”

Astonished journalists' reports went out around the world. The *Times of London* called Bach's attack "cowardly." The German paper *Bild* ran a photo of Bach and Putin with the caption, "Putin's Poodle." "Far more damaging for Bach and the IOC's reputation," reported Olympic-news website *Inside the Games*, were "the jubilant reactions in Russia" after it escaped banishment from the Rio Games.

In the weeks following the IOC's decision, Reddie was quoted by multiple outlets expressing his disappointment. During the fray, there was perhaps a moment for him to challenge the IOC and push harder for the ban, but he remained silent, a signal to many that he was serving the IOC first and WADA second. Reddie remained on the IOC executive and was elected to another term as WADA president later that year. In response to the question of why he didn't resign from his role with the IOC when he took over WADA, a spokesperson from WADA pointed out to me that Reddie's situation was analogous to that of Pound, who held executive positions with both organizations when he founded the agency.

"We predicted it back in May of 2013," Travis Tygart told me in a phone interview. Tygart is head of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) and the man who brought down Lance Armstrong. The "it" he referred to was the tension that emerged from Reddie's appointment as WADA president. "We said then that WADA would drive all their good work in the past right off a cliff." And today, said Tygart, we can see the results. "Athletes have lost confidence in WADA, and WADA has been shaken to the core because of its conflicted governance, which reacted very suspiciously to the largest-scale state-sponsored doping the world has ever seen. WADA has unfortunately become just a lapdog of the IOC."

"The big question," Pound said to me, "is how could somebody who does care about sport, faced with the evidence of what the Russians were doing, not respond with a much more severe sanction?" If the IOC had truly wanted to bring about what Pound calls "conduct change" (meaning an end to doping), banning Russia from Rio would certainly have achieved it. "By the way," he added,

"one person you should talk to about all this is Beckie Scott."

**A**FTER THE DEBACLE of the Rio Olympics and Paralympics—during which the IOC banned no Russian athletes, but the IAAF and the International Paralympic Committee banned all Russian athletes—Beckie Scott found herself sitting in various WADA boardrooms, along with the rest of the Compliance Review Committee (CRC), trying to figure out how to square the circle of Russian cheating and IOC equivocation.

By the fall of 2017, RUSADA, Russia's anti-doping agency, remained suspended, preventing the country from competing in international competitions and from hosting major sporting events. It was clear, to Scott and others on the CRC, that the IOC was pressuring WADA's executive to find a way out of the crisis, in what Scott had called the "save Russia" movement. There are differing opinions as to why. They range from Bach's close friendship with Putin to allegations that some IOC members wanted to avoid

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endangering business interests in Russia to the reality that Russia is one of the few remaining countries likely to keep bidding on future Olympics. Whatever it was, it put WADA at odds with the IOC.

Many inside the organization continued to advocate for a continued suspension of RUSADA, but others with stronger IOC connections advocated for lesser punishment. Ultimately, the CRC, with Scott's support, put forward a Roadmap to Compliance Russia would have to follow in order to regain accreditation for its anti-doping authority. Among these criteria was that Russian authorities had to give WADA access to the urine samples from the Moscow lab tied to the Sochi cheating. Russia also had to accept, in full, the McLaren report.

To no one's surprise, Russian authorities strongly objected to the way McLaren's report linked the doping crimes to the Russian state apparatus. So the IOC commissioned its own report. Samuel Schmid, a Swiss member of the IOC ethics commission, delivered his version of events to the IOC executive on December 2, 2017. It was a virtual

retelling of McLaren's findings of rampant Russian cheating. There was, however, one crucial difference—the only difference that counted. Where McLaren's report had labelled the Russian doping program “state-sponsored,” Schmid concluded that he could not find any evidence “confirming the support or the knowledge of this system by the highest State authority.” In other words, don't blame Putin.

Because it did not contradict McLaren's primary findings, Schmid's report made it impossible for the IOC to avoid levelling sanctions against Russia without losing face. On December 5, 2017, it banned the country from the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. But it was only later we would learn that in the months that followed the Pyeongchang games, WADA negotiated with Russia to substitute the Schmid report for the McLaren report in its Roadmap criteria, effectively appeasing Russia's dislike of McLaren's implications.

When I spoke with WADA director general Olivier Niggli about it, he told me that the Schmid report's use of the

term “institutionalized doping” instead of “state doping” was significant for Russia. “One actually means that the head of the country would be involved, as opposed to, yes, there was some part of the administration that might have been involved.” RUSADA and the Russian Ministry of Sport were therefore more prepared to accept the Schmid report.

The full implications of that substitution wouldn't become evident until September 20, 2018, at a meeting in Seychelles, when WADA debated reinstating RUSADA. The problem was that Russia had now accepted the Schmid report but had yet to meet the other important criterion laid out in the Roadmap: access to the lab. According to the minutes of that meeting, Beckie Scott said that she had heard from athletes around the world and that they had spoken, almost as if with one voice: deny Russia reinstatement. “I urge you to make a decision based on who your constituents are, who you are serving and who you are accountable to,” she said, “because I do believe this is a defining moment for WADA.”

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Her message was ignored. The meeting became even more heated when Scott expressed frustration at how the WADA Athlete Committee, created to champion clean athletes, was under constant scrutiny from the IOC, which, at every turn, seemed to impede the committee's aims. Some members called her integrity into question, suggesting she was grandstanding for her own issues. Her attitude was called "victimistic," and she was told that athletes, while playing an important role, needed to know "their place." Ultimately, the CRC disregarded her counsel—according to Scott she was actually laughed at—and recommended reinstatement for RUSADA on the condition that Russia allow WADA access to the Moscow lab by the end of 2018. The executive swiftly ratified it. WADA released a statement later that day announcing the decision, though its executive likely sensed how the reinstatement would be received. In the press release, Reddie wrote, "WADA understands that this decision will not please everybody."

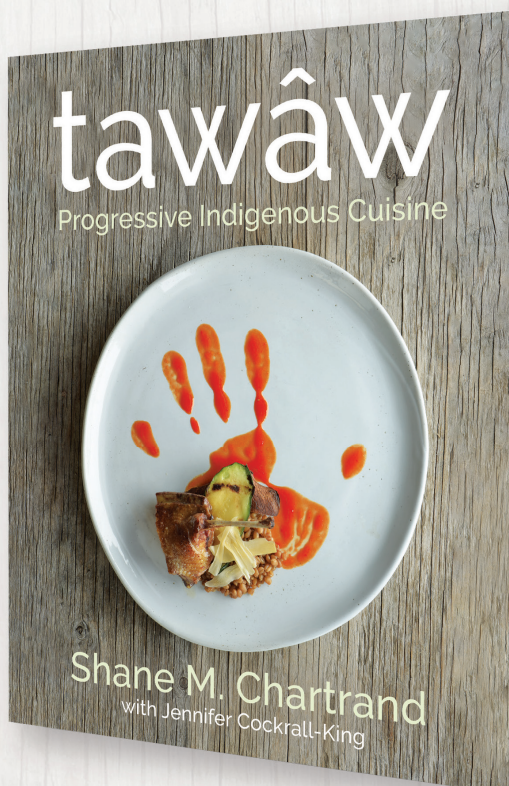
Everybody? How about nobody.

The worldwide response was scathing, immediate, and contemptuous. "WADA's move to reinstate Russia's anti-doping body is a farce," wrote the *Economist*. If this is WADA's response, ran a headline in the *National Post*, "Why Would Russia Hesitate about Cheating All Over Again?" Thirteen of the world's most respected national anti-doping organizations—those of Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the UK, and the US—released a joint statement expressing shock that "WADA's leading compliance body is recommending the reinstatement of a country that perpetrated the worst doping system ever seen in international sport." Even WADA vice-president Linda Helleland said, "We failed the clean athletes of the world." Beekie Scott released a statement saying that she was "profoundly disappointed" and that WADA had "dealt a devastating blow to clean sport."

Just over two weeks later, on October 8, 2018, Scott sent a letter to Reddie and Niggli in which she outlined the "derisive and inappropriate" treatment

she'd been subjected to at the Seychelles meeting. WADA responded with a perfunctory internal investigation, which Scott deemed invalid.

The agency now found itself pitted against the personification of what it had been created to defend. Scott pursued her athletic and policy career with such an exemplary record that she had come to symbolize everything clean sport was about: clear rules, tough questions, and transparency around punishing cheaters. WADA not only emptied these things of meaning, it also made her the antagonist. It hired an international legal firm, Covington, to conduct a second investigation. Scott and USADA chair Edwin Moses, who had also filed a harassment complaint against WADA, made it clear that they would not participate in the investigation due to a perceived conflict of interest: Covington had previously advised WADA on legal issues, specifically privacy and data protection. WADA dismissed these concerns. Covington claimed that it was never presented with evidence of a conflict and forged ahead with its investigation.



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Meanwhile, WADA continued to draw savage criticism over its handling of the Russia affair. When Russia missed the Roadmap deadline to allow WADA investigators access to its lab, WADA gave Russia more time. The international community was again outraged. “It’s time for WADA to stop being played by the Russians and immediately declare them non-compliant,” said Tygart in a statement.

That did not happen. It wasn’t until January 17, 2019, that WADA announced they had “successfully retrieved” data from the lab. This was followed by another announcement, five months later, that WADA had gathered a further 2,262 samples. In simpler times, these actions would have been celebrated by clean athletes and their advocates around the globe. But skepticism toward WADA was so high that many questioned the value of the exercise simply because WADA was running it. When, in late September 2019, the agency announced that data from the lab samples appeared to have been tampered with—these being the very samples Russia had agreed to turn over in exchange for being reinstated—that skepticism was seen as warranted.

I met with Scott in Canmore, in early May, just as Covington was wrapping up its investigation. I asked her why any of it even mattered, why clean athletes deserved protection in an era when sport is so often equated with vast professional contracts, televised entertainment, and corrupt governance. “It matters,” she said, “because sport is one of the few things left in our world that holds the power for good. It really does transcend barriers. It really does unite. It really tells stories of human spirit.” And sure, she added, “you could just make the whole thing a contest to see who has the best pharmacist, but that doesn’t reflect what society in general ought to aspire to. We can say, ‘Let it be a free-for-all,’ but often the athletes are trapped, they’re manipulated, they’re used, like with the Russian situation. We have a moral obligation to look out for vulnerable people at a vulnerable time in their life, who are often young and easily influenced and may not

always make the right decision or have perfect judgment.”

A week after Scott and I spoke at the Nordic Centre, the Covington report was made public. It exonerated WADA and the IOC, declaring Scott’s claims of “unprofessional behaviour” directed toward her unfounded. A few days later, an analysis of the report by the *Sports Integrity Initiative*, an independent online publication, concluded that “pressure was undoubtedly put on Scott by members of the Olympic Movement,” which was unhappy with the WADA Athlete Committee’s stance. The *Initiative* continued: “WADA has shown its true colours. It prioritises politics and the views of the IOC over the views of athletes.”

The IOC, for its part, will hear none of it. I spoke by phone with the IOC’s director general, Christophe de Kepper, in early May. I asked him how the IOC responded to the notion that WADA suffers from too much IOC interference, especially around the Russia affair. “I think it’s an unfair criticism,” he said. “The IOC has nothing to do with the Russian affair. It’s absolutely pointless to try to point fingers at some of the entities.”

If that was the case, then why were so many critical of the IOC? “You have to ask them,” he said. “It’s actually not very constructive, putting into doubt WADA’s governance by accusing some of its stakeholders and principally the IOC.”

The day after the release of the Covington report, I emailed Scott, and she told me that parts of the report “were complete fiction, and parts designed to portray me as the perpetrator” and that the entire affair was “brutal and utterly demoralizing.” She continued: “I don’t think I could have imagined that level of viciousness from them.”

Rob Koehler is an Olympic gold medalist and the former deputy director general of WADA. After resigning, in August 2018, partly in protest over WADA’s handling of the Russia affair, Koehler founded an advocacy group, called Global Athlete, designed to give athletes a stronger voice in the fight against doping. WADA’s actions on the Scott file, Koehler told me, were “more shameful” than its Russia decision.

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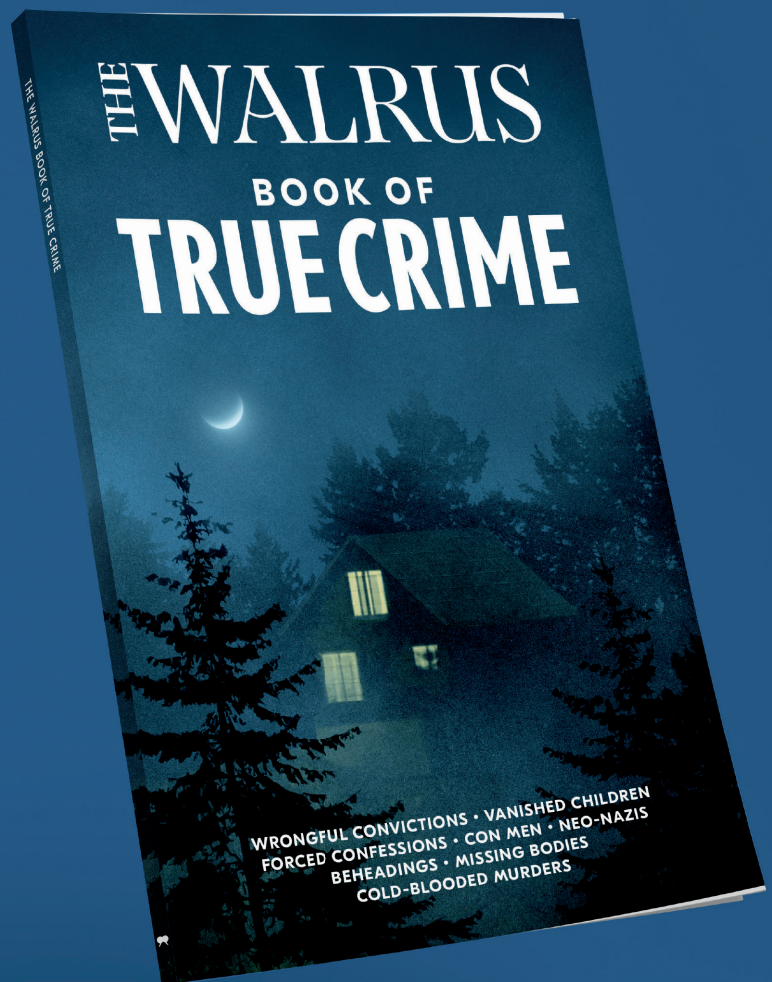
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CANADA'S  
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OUTSIDE THE IOC palace, WADA’s many critics and even its allies remain divided about its future and utility. “People forget,” said Niggli, “that, without WADA, there would have been no Russian scandal, in that we paid for the investigations to take place, Pound’s and McLaren’s. We published them. We’ve been totally transparent.” McLaren, whose rigorous investigation advanced the Russia crisis into the realm of indisputable fact, reminded me that we should never forget that the formation of WADA was a tremendous achievement. “And it happened so quickly,” he said. “For it go from 1999 to 2004 and be fully operational is incredible. And its original goal of having a harmonized system to make sport cleaner and fairer remains laudable. Still, it needs a vigorous rethink.”


The man who started WADA also appears to have a sense of what’s needed. “Structurally, WADA is pretty well everything that we hoped it would be when we were putting it together,” said Pound. “But it’s hampered by weak leadership.” Tygart would not disagree but believes that, if WADA folds, “at least we’ll know what not to do next time around.”

The world needs WADA, or at least what WADA purports to stand for. Even its fiercest critics don’t dispute that. But many of those same people are wondering if WADA can be saved and whose hands would be clean enough to save it. Perhaps the only group that can now be trusted to overhaul WADA is the very group that WADA is struggling to protect—clean athletes. Which also happens to be the group the IOC takes for granted. Pound was quoted, in 2018, saying that the only thing that “scares IOC old farts” is the athletes themselves.

Koehler told me that some athletes’ unions are in early discussions to set up strike funds so that, should clean athletes decide no one is going to protect their rights and livelihood except themselves, they will have a financial cushion when they refuse to compete. Athleten Deutschland, for example, is a powerful new collective of German athletes formed as a result of the ongoing Russia debacle. Shortly after its creation, in 2017, Athleten Deutschland released a statement

entitled, “Anti-Doping and Governance: Time for Athletes to Take Destiny into their Own Hands.” It outlined the athletes’ disappointment with the IOC and suggested that, if the IOC and WADA couldn’t get their acts together, perhaps it was time for those organizations to disband. They closed by saying, “We want no decision without the athlete!” And then, for their work and inspiration, they added thanks to Richard McLaren and Beckie Scott.

Scott’s term with WADA, which she vowed to see out, ends in January 2020. I asked her, in Canmore, if she could imagine one day returning to an official role in the world of sports policy and administration. She laughed ruefully.

“I’m not naive about what exists out there and where sport may go eventually. It’s just difficult to see how real change will happen. Sport at its most fundamental should be a contest of best efforts with standards that should be universal. There should be rules everybody has to play by.” She paused and looked out the window, the hills full of mountain bikers enjoying the simple pleasure of athletic activity. “But I think, inherently, we know that’s not the case.” 

.....  
**CURTIS GILLESPIE** has won seven National Magazine Awards and is the editor and cofounder of *Eighteen Bridges* magazine. He lives in Edmonton.



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# Somewhere?

BY SUSAN SWAN

Calling back my body, where has it gone? Is it in the kitchen closet, next to the broom?  
Or hiding in the stone chimney where so many winters have seen me drawing from its warmth?

## A Last Proud Sighting

My body was here last year.  
I saw it every day.  
Once, long ago, I saw it coming out of the Mediterranean Sea.  
Greek soldiers lounging on their beach towels stood up and saluted its dripping torso.  
That must be where I mislaid it.  
A last proud sighting before it ran off and left something else in its place.

## My Body Is the Roman Coliseum

I can't help seeing my body the way tourists look at the Roman Coliseum,  
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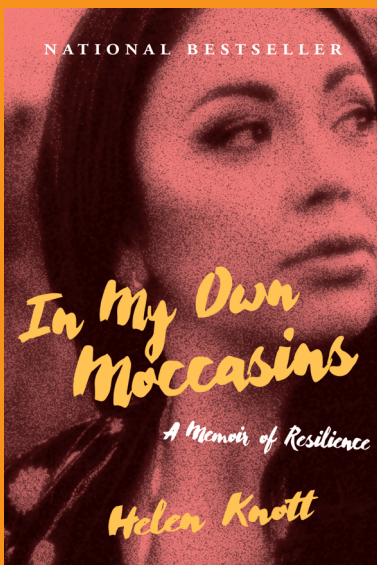
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FICTION

# The Sail and Scupper

BY GEORGIA OHM

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL DEFORGE

*PLYMPTON, N.S. — Massive numbers of dead starfish, clams, lobsters, and mussels have washed up on a western Nova Scotia beach, compounding the mysterious deaths of tens of thousands of herring in the area.*

The Canadian Press. December 28, 2016.

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**A** LOBSTER entered through the side door. He paused for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Aside from the furniture, the place was mostly empty. He made his way past the tables, finding support along the backs of empty chairs, and took his regular stool at the counter.

A bar clam shuffled over, turning a towel in a glass. “You’re late,” he said.

“I missed happy hour, did I?”

The clam grinned as he poured a drink. When he set it down in front of the lobster, he said, “It’s good to see you, Homer.”

Homer noted his friend’s swollen foot, the chips along his shell. “We keep coming back, don’t we, Lew?”

“You keep coming back,” Lewis corrected. “And someone’s got to pour your Scotch.”

Homer’s bent antennae still rose and bobbed when he chuckled.

Lewis shuffled off to serve a crust of barnacles, and Homer slumped over his glass. He sat like that for several minutes, braced against the counter with his claw and first legs. He gazed past his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Beyond his own battered rostrum, there were few signs of life. A clutch of mussels conferred quietly in one of the booths. A blue crab sipped gin with stoic concentration. There were no fish.

Last summer, the bar had brimmed with herring. They slapped fins on tables and filled the water with silver flashes and the burbling din of chatter. Lewis struggled to keep drinks balanced on trays as they arced and dipped across the room. A few of the fish became frequent guests among the group of hardened reporters that gathered at the far end of the bar, beneath the vintage movie poster of a giant squid. Although they tried to disguise it, the herring were clearly hoping for scraps of insider information from the journalists. And, although Homer and his colleagues tried to disguise it, they grew fond of the young fish. Or, at least, of the attention.

Homer remembered with regret the afternoon he opened the side door to find two of his young friends crowding the alcove, passing out leaflets that urged Direct Action.

“Homer, are you in?” they asked.

“Almost,” he replied, stepping around them to take his seat at the bar.

Now, the room was eerily quiet.

Lewis returned, stood across the counter, and sighed. “Let’s hear it, then,” he said. “You were at the front from the beginning, eh?”

“Yeah, late November. I made it to the beach while the herring were still schooled at the tide’s edge. When they mobilized, there wasn’t any signal I could see. They all just knew it was time, didn’t hesitate, didn’t blink.”

“Herring,” said Lewis, shaking his head. “It’s like they share one brain—a small one.”

Homer cocked an antenna. “Don’t pretend you didn’t join them.”

The bar clam smiled grimly. “I never expected to. At the end, it seemed like everyone was signing up. I figured

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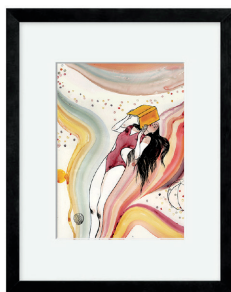
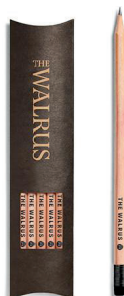
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I couldn't stay behind while others were up there fighting for our home."

"You're solid, Lew." Homer paused. "Besides, we both know self-preservation is a moot point these days."

Lewis grunted affirmatively. "I read your article after that first attack. Stood right on this spot and read how the herring rode the rising tide—how the ones who got pulled back into the water fought their way back onto the land—to meet the enemy on its own turf. And how all those fish ended up draped across the rocks and eelgrass, drying out in the sun. I couldn't get that image out of my head. That was just before my sister's babies died. Malformed shells..."

Homer regarded his friend carefully. "Shit...I'm sorry."

"There were a lot of bivalves saying we should just pack up and move deeper, abandon the shallows for less troubled waters. You know me, Homer—all I ever wanted was to work my bar and lay low."

"But you still signed up?"

Lewis shrugged. "I couldn't face going down without a fight, I guess." He stood straighter, scanned the room, and shuffled off again. Homer eyed the green glass bottles arranged along the lintels, all still in place. Nothing had changed apart from the sense of vacancy, which had settled in the bar like silt.

The side door opened, letting in a momentary burst of light. Homer didn't need to turn around to know that it was Astrid; the water that flowed past her reached his remaining antennae. In the mirror, he saw her five-pointed silhouette, then she was beside him at the bar.

"Hello, lobster." It was the way she'd always greeted him.

Of the two of them, Astrid had been more sympathetic to the cause. Homer recalled how, after their editor-in-chief had died of a ruptured statocyst, she paced the newsroom floor, spewing torrents of sorrow and rage: the six-pack rings, the oil slicks, the stifling warmth, and the maddening, constant roar. Few other starfish spoke about it, electing instead to keep their faces pressed to stone, but as long as Homer had known her, Astrid had been railing against it. She had a fierce love for the rocks and

the tides, and she believed the rocks and the tides loved her too.

Homer had lived longer. He knew there was nothing in the world to which one could cling. Conditions changed, and though the struggle to hold on might be noble, it was primarily in vain. The last time Homer had seen Astrid, the two of them were preparing to leave for the front. As reporters, they were officially noncombatants, but Homer knew that she had gone in armed.

In the bar, Homer turned to look directly at the red starfish. She met his gaze for a moment, then looked away. He noticed a patch on her right arm where some feet had been torn off and infection had set in. Absentmindedly, her pedicellariae worked the area.

Lewis appeared at the other side of the counter. "Welcome back, my dear," he said, placing a vodka soda in front of her.

"Lew, I knew you'd make it back." She reached across the counter to give the bar clam's mantle a gentle squeeze. "How are you?"

"Oh, I always manage. You look fresh as the spring jet stream, my dear." Before Astrid could argue, Lewis shuffled off. She picked up her drink.

"That was a good story you had in the *Post*," Homer said, "about the humpback."

"Thank you," said Astrid. "They never would have expected that, the herring." She was looking at the empty bar reflected in the mirror. "I wrote it hoping there would be a survivor somewhere. But, of course, by the time it came out, they were all dead on the rocks."

Someone behind them laughed too loudly. Astrid turned to glare at a trio of green crabs.

"They thought they were invincible," said Homer. "I think they truly believed that they would make it back. Maybe, someday, they will." He finished his Scotch and added sadly, "I love the herring."

"You've been drinking," said Astrid. "You only use that word when you've been drinking."

"I always use that word," said Homer. He tried to meet her eyes in the mirror, but she was looking down. "I love them for the same reason I used to mock them: they think they can change the world."

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# THE WALRUS

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by Lauren McKeon

♦ ♦ ♦

The January/February issue  
 On newsstands December 9

CANADA'S CONVERSATION

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“Maybe they can. Who else has the numbers? Who else can replace themselves so quickly?” Astrid’s pedicellariae paused as she explored the idea. “Despite everything, despite the rest of us getting worn down and tired, they stayed so full of life. Maybe they’ll come back. Even if they can’t change the world, maybe they can survive it.”

She sipped her drink and winced. The vodka had settled on top.

“So how did you get the story?” Homer finally asked.

“The whale? A gull told me.” Astrid looked over at Homer with an ironic smile. “Actually, I was hardly listening to the story when I first heard it. I was at the high-tide line with this young crab, this kid who was barely hanging on. A gull landed too close and cocked her head, sizing him up. I called out to her, real casual, and asked if she had ever seen anything like it, all this death on the beach. And she just started laughing. ‘You, you, you,’ she wheezed, ‘you have no idea what you’re up against.’ She told me she had seen more dead fish piled on a single barge in the harbour than on this nothing little beach. She said even the whales were powerless to stop it—that, in fact, a whale had just washed into our cove that morning. She clearly enjoyed bearing bad news, so I just kept asking questions.”

“Did it work? Did the crab make it?”

“He did. His leg was badly crushed, but he slipped back into the water while she was gabbing at me. They’ve always liked to talk, the gulls.”

Homer reached out to clink her glass, and they each took a sip.

“The whale and his mother had travelled up from the gulf,” Astrid continued. “Somewhere along the way, they ran into a wall of noise, something massive, and got split up. She panicked, tried to make it over to him, swam too close to a propeller. He floated by her side until she died.”

“God,” said Homer.

Astrid nodded slowly. “She couldn’t breathe, her blowholes were so mangled. Doesn’t that make you sick? It makes me feel that way.”

“If I think about it, yes.”

“Anyway, the story goes that a pod of humpbacks eventually came across

the son. They sang to him, but he wouldn’t sing back. When the herring showed up, he didn’t even try to eat them. Instead, he listened. They were bubbling with all that talk of rebellion. I think they gave him a reason to return to life, if only for a bit.”

“By the time he washed in with the last of the fish, everyone was either dead or exhausted,” said Homer. “We took the whale’s arrival as a kind of signal, the definitive end, so few of us to see it...”

A cool current drifted through the open windows, carrying oxygen and the mineral smell of the deep. In happier times, it would have been energizing. Homer looked at the empty stage where the fiddler crabs used to play. Maybe someday they, too, would return.

**A**FTER EACH customer had paid and departed, and after more than an hour had passed with no further visitors, Lewis closed up early. He flipped the sign and tallied the day’s meagre earnings. As he dragged a mop across the floor, around the legs of tables stacked with upside-down chairs, the bar clam considered the future. Business was unlikely to pick up anytime soon, if ever. Supply had grown more expensive, and the ranks of his customers were severely depleted. Perhaps it would be best to cut his losses. Maybe he could sell the bar, move deeper, and start again.

The chores were done. There hadn’t been much to clean up. Lewis crossed the floor, climbed the stairs to the alcove, and hit the lights. What daylight remained lay draped across the booths, gently undulating. It reflected into the lintels and rafters, illuminating the objects arranged there: a postcard from a mackerel, coloured glass floats, a ukulele the mollusk had been given on his birthday.

Motes of phytoplankton floated in the light. “Alright,” the bar clam muttered, “alright.” Then he shuffled out the door and locked it behind him. ☞

.....  
**GEORGIA OHM** lives on the West Coast, where she works with museums, writes, and spends as much time as possible outdoors.

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**THE WALRUS** | CANADA'S CONVERSATION





VISUAL ESSAY

# Who Owns Colombia's Gold?

*Mining operations have pitted a Canadian company against  
locals who have worked the mountains for generations*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER LEMOYNE

TEXT BY RÉMY BOURDILLON





**D**AY AFTER DAY, in the mountains around Segovia, Colombia, men emerge from mine shafts bearing picks and hauling bags of ore. Here, gold mining is a way of life, predating the arrival of the Spanish in 1499. Fernando Gómez, Segovia's municipal mining secretary, says that 80 percent of the city's 42,500 residents are employed through the industry: in addition to the miners, there are the women—*chatarreras*—who sort through low-quality ore, as well as the mule drivers who carry rock to the city's sixty-plus refineries, all of which are filled with labourers who extract the gold. These are the self-described “traditional miners”: members of a local, low-tech tradition that goes back generations.

Gran Colombia Gold (GCG), a Canadian company newly active in the region, has a different name for these workers: they are “illegal miners” stealing gold ore from inside the company's mining title. The Toronto-based firm, which arrived in Colombia not long after the 2008 Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement opened



**OPPOSITE** Deep underground in Marmato, a miner drinks water from a small plastic bag.

**TOP** A miner speeds through an intersection near the central plaza of Segovia.

**BOTTOM** *Chatarreras* are women who sift through low-grade ore to find any salvageable bits.









**ABOVE** An ore refinery sits on a mountainside in Marmato.

up the country to development, is now involved in a lawsuit accusing the Colombian government of failing to protect the company's investment and seeking at least \$250 million (US) in damages.

The conflict dates back to 2010, when GCG acquired the mining title from Frontino Gold Mines for approximately \$205 million (US). The former owner had tolerated traditional miners. "Frontino worked on the motherlode while the traditional miners were exploiting secondary veins," Eliober Castañeda recalls. Castañeda is the former leader of Mesa Minera, an organization created to defend Segovia's small-scale miners. As he explains, when GCG took over, it made the locals an offer: become subcontractors of GCG and deliver all mined ore to the company, or stop mining entirely.

According to GCG, there were 196 "illegal" mines located within its title in 2012—as of today, only forty-two have signed one of the company's contracts. Gómez defends these ongoing "illegal" operations and describes GCG's offer as "a form of modern slavery": "They use the natives' workforce, but they decide the compensation

without any consideration for if you were here before their arrival." The traditional miners now live under threat, as GCG regularly demands that the authorities expel any uncontracted workers, using force if necessary. In its lawsuit, GCG states: "The State has effectively stripped the exclusive rights held by GCG...by failing to evict illegal miners as promised and required by law, thus leaving GCG no choice but to engage in negotiations with illegal miners."

To date, the government has not intervened, likely because doing so in Segovia, where most rely on traditional mining, could set the region ablaze. But the ad hoc truce may not hold: in the last several years, the government has made regulating mining one of its priorities. As of 2017, approximately 80 percent of Colombia's gold was mined without a government-sanctioned title, by everyone from the traditional miners of Segovia to criminal organizations. This is a status quo that the government seeks to end.

More regulation could, in theory, lead to certain positive changes. In Segovia, for example, many traditional miners still use mercury to refine



their gold despite this being prohibited by law in July 2018. A study that year found that more than 11 percent of women in the area had mercury in their breast milk (according to the World Health Organization, even minor exposure to mercury can lead to serious health problems, particularly for young children and those still in utero). Still, traditional miners blame the government for not helping them transition to safer practices. According to Duglas Ramos, one of the shareholders of Las Brisas mines—which, with more than 100 workers, is one of the larger traditional mining operations in the area—“We know we must stop using mercury. But the state doesn’t help us to find an alternative.”

It will take the ruling international tribunal at least two years to reach a decision in the GCG lawsuit. Meanwhile, fighting on the ground continues. Residents of Marmato, a sixteenth-century mountaintop town of about 8,500 that’s a seven-hour drive from Segovia, is facing its own problems with the company. GCG arrived there in 2011 and began buying titles from local miners. Soon, it became clear that its plan was

to dig a massive open-pit mine—one that would require the town be razed.

The citizens fought back, and in February 2017, Colombia’s Constitutional Court stated that Marmato’s Afro-descendant population (which, as of 2005, was 55 percent of the town) and Indigenous residents (16 percent) had to be consulted before the village was destroyed. This caused GCG to alter its plans for the mine, and the company has included this setback in its lawsuit. It says that, by requiring that locals be consulted before mining operations get underway, the government has been giving preference to their “alleged constitutional rights.”

Marmato residents are now on the offensive: Rubén Darío Rotavista, former president of the Marmato Traditional Miners Association, says that GCG left its mines inactive for more than six months due to the dispute and that, according to the country’s mining code, this means the company has lost its titles to the land. (GCG disagrees with this reading.) Traditional miners have since resumed their operations in the area, but because they don’t have titles, their work

**ABOVE** La Palma refinery, in Segovia, still uses mercury to separate gold, a practice that can cause serious health problems.



**ABOVE** A worker uses a blowtorch to purify gold near the end of the refining process.

**RIGHT** A member of a family-owned refinery in Marmato holds a gold ingot.



remains technically illegal. Rotavista says that they are now lobbying the government to receive the proper permissions. In the interim, they have been selling some of their gold through the black market. Rotavista says that the situation remains far from ideal, as the miners must price their gold at 30 percent less than its international market value.

The future for the miners is uncertain. On October 7, GCG released a letter of intent to sell its Marmato operation to another company. Yamíl Amar, a local refinery owner, feels confident that the traditional miners will eventually win. “They hurt us a lot, but we didn’t lose the battle,” he said. “We managed to survive.” 🐾

.....  
**RÉMY BOURDILLON** is a freelance journalist in Quebec.

**ROGER LEMOYNE** has photographed social issues, natural disasters, and conflict in over fifty countries around the world.

*This project was made possible by the Michener-Deacon Fellowship for Investigative Journalism.*



**ABOVE** Young people on motorbikes cruise the streets of Segovia on a Friday night.

**LEFT** An artificial maple tree adorns Marmato's town square. "If we had known it was the symbol of Canada, we would not have put it up," one resident joked.



**I**F YOU'VE HEARD of Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart, it's likely because of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, her thin but thunderous book of prose poetry first published, in England, in 1945. Based loosely on Smart's obsessive pursuit of married British poet George Barker during her mid-twenties and the doomed chaos that ensued when they passionately collided, the book slowly gained an international cult following after its initial print run of just 2,000 and was eventually hailed as a masterpiece of rhapsodic fictionalized memoir. "Like *Madame Bovary* blasted by lightning," was how novelist Angela Carter described it in the sixties. Gloomy British singer-songwriter Morrissey plucked lines from it in the eighties to coopt as lyrics, including the novella's final sentence, "Do you hear me where you sleep?" The BBC recently adapted it as a radio play, and on YouTube today, viewers can hear Smart's lines tremulously intoned over shaky hand-held footage of the titular New York station.

PROFILE

## Make the Verb Work

*Before Elizabeth Smart's poetry found its audience, the writer made her way by crafting the era's most eloquent ads*

BY DALE HRABI

Densely metaphorical, seemingly written at a fever pitch, and—as Smart herself freely admitted—only grudgingly plotted, the book has the richness and cadence of scripture. "There are no problems, no sorrows or errors: they join us in the urging song that everything sings," she writes of angels and the transformative effects of love. "Just to lie savoring is enough life. Is enough." Though Smart published a few other books later in life, and even her gardening notes have been immortalized in print, it is *By Grand Central Station* that anchors her literary reputation.

What far fewer people know about Elizabeth Smart—and what she declined to mention during the years I knew her in the 1980s—is that she spent much of her working life in London selling carpets, tiaras, and transistor radios as a witty fashion and advertising copywriter. She was reputed, at one point, to be the highest-paid commercial writer in England.

Smart's romance with Barker didn't go according to plan and, to support the four children she determinedly conceived out of wedlock and raised on her own, she suppressed her literary ambitions and

channelled her poetic talent into slogans and captions. Her copywriting defied the trite, formulaic conventions of the 1950s and early '60s. The cut of a cocktail dress was, in one of her ads, "as precise as a crocus." In what almost seems a bitter-sweet parody of the ecstatic language in *By Grand Central Station*, Smart once wrote of terrycloth: "O the rapture of no-nonsense unruffleable toweling that doesn't care two hoots how you abuse it."

Her commercial-writing peers revered her efforts. In 1959, the writer Fay Weldon, then a fledgling copywriter, shared a workroom with Smart at Crawford's Advertising Agency. "She would fall into the office from time to time," Weldon wrote in her 2002 memoir, *Auto Da Fay*, "disheveled and beautiful and infinitely romantic, with her quivering eyes and distracted mouth, and teach me how to write fashion copy: all adjectives and no verbs." Weldon told

**OPPOSITE**  
Elizabeth Smart  
in 1982

me that she and the other Crawford's staffers regarded Smart, who by that

point had started to drink heavily, with a "mixture of awe and fear. Fear in case she was too drunk and awe because what she did was so good." But copywriting wasn't what Smart felt she had been put on earth to do.

**E**LIZABETH SMART was born into wealth in 1913, an initially obedient member of the Ottawa establishment. A funny schoolgirl hiding an eccentric intelligence. A debutante, gorgeous and blonde. A compulsive reader, diarist, and memorizer of Shakespeare sonnets. A scrapbooker who squirreled away couture clippings from *Vogue*, like one that pronounced: "It was black lace this winter. It's to be white lace from now on." A privileged, restless young woman, she sailed across the Atlantic at least twenty-two times, haunting London bookshops. That was where, in 1937, she first came upon the poetry of George Barker, then the wunderkind protege of T.S. Eliot. Upon reading Barker poems like "Daedalus" ("The moist palm of my hand like handled fear / Like fear cramping my hand"), she experienced

a mental orgasm of sorts, later summing up her reaction as, "It is the complete juicy *sound* that runs bubbles over, that intoxicates til I can hardly follow... OO the a—a—a—!" She determined to marry him.

Over the next few years, she searched for Barker at parties, eventually tracking him to Japan, where he was teaching English. In 1940, she paid to bring him—and, inconveniently, his wife—to Big Sur, California, where Smart's peregrination had led her. She soon found herself with child, alone, and the obscure author of the quasi memoir *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, which the world would ignore for years. Though Smart's relationship with Barker continued off and on for decades, he never divorced his wife. By 1947, Smart was in Ireland, now with four young children all fathered by Barker. She was estranged from her appalled society mother and largely cut off from the family funds. Virtually penniless, she fed her children boiled nettles.

Something had to be done. Smart hauled her herd back to England and, setting aside her unremunerative desire to pursue her hybrid of poetry and prose, began her career in magazines and advertising. "She kind of crawled her way up from the very bottom," her son Christopher Barker, now seventy-six, told me over the phone from his Norfolk home. He describes his mother's mindset at the time as "desperate." Smart walked into the offices of slick London publications, he adds, and conned her way into writing jobs: "She said she could do something that she didn't know she could do." For *House & Garden*, she wrote of children, party-giving, and the publication's wine guide: "If your wine-love is true-love, mad infatuation, or tentative attraction," she ventured, "you'll need House & Garden Wine Book. Sold out in a few weeks, but now being reprinted for your delectation."

Presumably, advertising copy yielded bigger paycheques than magazine work, because she soon focused much of her energy there. In the early days, she dashed back and forth between London and the isolated country house where the

children were tended by a witty, fractious pair of homosexual painters she'd befriended. She gave her brood little indication of what she did all week for money, or that Barker, who contributed nothing to their upkeep but appeared now and then, wasn't her legal husband. "She was very secretive," says Christopher. "She always talked about her masked heart, and this was certainly the case, not telling us really what had happened or what went on."

Smart's early advertising efforts, for companies such as Tootal Fabrics, seem constrained, as if she were trying to placate unimaginative clients. "If you sew," she writes flatly and, I imagine, a bit miserably, "you deserve Tootal fabrics." But she sneaks in bits of delectation here and there. She calls a little dress "as adaptable as a diplomat." A swimsuit is "stitched to make the least of your figure." Of a piece of outerwear, she deadpans: "Not just a coat—an accomplice to a busy life."

As the 1950s went on and Smart entered her forties, she found her way into Soho's bohemian scene, drinking and witticizing in private clubs with the likes of Dylan Thomas, Francis Bacon, and other "rogues and rascals," as she called them. Lucian Freud painted her portrait, she once told me, starting at the top of her head and working downward, "but only got as far as the eyebrows." As a rare member of the circle who was gainfully employed—though in an unspeakably pedestrian way—she often footed the bill. "Advertising was seen as a great shame and disgrace," Weldon recalls, "because you had opted out for the sake of money."

Determined to educate all four children in premium boarding schools, Smart worked and worked, freelancing for multiple ad agencies, penning a column called "Shop Hound" for *British Vogue*, and gradually committing to a more defiantly idiosyncratic voice. Of some "tough and indefatigable little chairs" from T.S. Donne & Sons, she quips that they "are unmoved by the most reckless sitters-down." Like the poet she was at heart, she always read her work aloud to evaluate its quality. A contemporary remembered that Smart

occasionally began her work day by sniffing Cow Gum glue, a layout paste, perhaps to jolt herself to write faster. When deadlines forced her to craft copy into the wee hours, she sometimes sent her eldest daughter, Georgina, out to Selfridge's department store, where a friend who sold lamps in the basement could supply a couple of amphetamines. "I would get purple hearts for her," Georgina, now seventy-eight, told me in her Kentish Town *pied-à-terre*, "so that she could stay up all night."

Her children's recollections differ on whether Smart took pride in churning out such clever copy, even if the work was only a financial means to an end. "I think she was proud of it, yes," says Christopher. "I absolutely never heard her belittle it. I mean, she counted too much on it."

Georgina is emphatic: "She just tossed it off without much effort. For her, if it didn't cause her agony and torture and wrenching of soul, it wasn't worth much. She did get drunk a lot and say, 'I have a gift and I'm not pursuing it.'"

Though Smart remained largely unrecognized—the "real" writers she socialized with mainly knew her as Barker's lover, and her sole published book was still an underground success at best—her reputation as a copywriter grew. In 1964, at fifty, she was asked to join the full-time staff of *Queen*, a brash fashion-and-society magazine (now known as *Harper's Bazaar*). Writing nearly every word of its unsigned fashion copy, she pushed the limits, taking the sort of *sui generis* liberties with language that distinguish *By Grand Central Station*. For a feature on vacation clothes, she appeals to women who've grown lazy and disenchanted at the office: "Shirkers arise! Time for a paean of praise to fantasies and *folies de grandeur* before the workers lay you low." She even asserted her literary authority, writing the magazine's influential book-criticism column for two years.

Then, fate intervened when she was fifty-two: a power struggle of sorts pushed her out of *Queen*; *By Grand Central Station* was republished with fanfare; and she purchased a Suffolk cottage called "The

Dell" that would, in time, become her permanent home, the place from which she attempted to reconstruct her identity as a real writer. She later referred to the purgatory she had occupied as a commercial writer as her "silent years." They were, Christopher says, "her way of putting bread on the table for us. The price was, I think she felt, her dream of a place in the pantheon of lionized and acclaimed poets and authors." Perhaps it wasn't too late.

**I**FIRST MET Elizabeth Smart in 1982, when she came into my staid, shallow world at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, as the English department's writer-in-residence. Though she'd had other, minor literary successes since her retreat to The Dell—a few volumes of poems, a jaded sequel of sorts to *By Grand Central Station*—I knew only that she was a sixty-eight-year-old Canadian who'd lived mostly in England and had written a book with a ballsy, indelible title. As a fiction-writing student, I was naturally immersed in words too, but I had mongrel tastes, being equally obsessed with Jane Austen and vintage fashion magazines featuring cover lines like "Pour on the Pretty Power."

I was suitably reserved when I first walked into her office, Room 3-29, thinking her a writer with a purebred pedigree. She was seated behind a desk, and I was struck by her hair, a sort of wild, leonine bob—nothing like the clenched perms of the senior citizens I knew—and her smile, disarmingly dazzling. Pinned to the bulletin board behind her was an index card on which she'd printed "Make the Verb Work." It was her sole addition to the barren space.

This exhortation, she explained, meant: seek out strong verbs that don't need administrative support from adverbs. *Pontificate*, say, rather than *hold forth pompously*. (Not that she was even slightly pompous: she spoke as someone whose essential shyness warred with an irrepressible charisma.) Despite this reverence for verbs, she told me, her favourite word was an adjective, *obstreperous*. I had to look it up: "wild, turbulent, unmanageable, difficult, rebellious."

I should have seen this as a warning: over the next four years, as Elizabeth welcomed me into her stormy, intoxicating world, she would both catalyze my ambition to be someone worthy of her friendship and painfully expose my inadequacies. A kindred spirit can turn out to be treacherous, both charming and overwhelming. It was years after her death in 1986 before I had any real understanding of the depths I'd been messing with.

Key revelations came when I read *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart, A Life*, an ambitious 1991 biography by Rosemary Sullivan, and first learned of Elizabeth's conflicted forays into fashion and advertising. By then, I'd found my way into the commercial-writing world myself, and discovering this unexpected overlap in our fates intensified my sense of being haunted by my late mentor.

I soon made a hobby of excavating her past, and exhaustive Google Image queries eventually escalated into pilgrimages to London. By 2016, after I'd become the editor of the lifestyle section at the *Wall Street Journal*, it occurred to me that I could simply buy an old copy of *Queen* on eBay and pore over it in the tub. One issue soon became six, and for around \$50 a pop, I studied Elizabethisms like "A Change for the Sweater," the sort of punny headline I was cooking up for fashion stories myself.

I wanted more. In early 2018, I planned a two-day research trip to Library and Archives Canada, in Ottawa, where eighty-eight boxes of Elizabeth Smart materials are held, including scrapbooks of ads she penned, legions of her notebooks, and—I was startled to learn—three years of long-forgotten letters I wrote her, the first as a smitten and rather scarily unhinged nineteen-year-old.

That initial letter, sent in October 1982 soon after our first meeting, was housed in box thirty-four, alongside crisp correspondence from novelist Christopher Isherwood. Describing my reaction to reading *By Grand Central Station*, it begins: "I will write, I said, because I can't speak—can't speak the right words in the right order yet. Someday, I hope to.... Cut off my hands. Then I will speak." Unamputated, I went on to detail my thoughts,



as a theretofore sheltered suburban teen, on her book: “I felt like I was, comparatively, dead—had never really been alive... I wanted to strap you on my wrist to carry around like an extra heartbeat—an authentic one.” The letter ends, fatalistically: “You are becoming important [to me]. If you do not want this, take measures, take measures. Swat me away.”

Elizabeth was feeling bored and unappreciated by the English faculty in Edmonton. “To think!” she’d written in her journal, earlier that September, of the Edmontonians she’d met, “I was going to enrich their lives! And I find myself poverty-stricken...Needing *them*—if only they’d take pity on. Where can I find it, where is it hiding—the passion and the life?” It’s possible she saw passable passion in my nutso letter and, thinking it better than nothing, did not swat me away.

A friendship between us developed, its intensity fuelled by vodka, wordplay games, and what seemed, to my adolescent mind steeped in *The Shining*, evidence of a psychic bond: one night, in our respective beds on either side of the North Saskatchewan River, we both dreamed that we were sitting on straight-backed wooden chairs with paper bags on our heads. Elizabeth bought me books by highly stylized British writers, including Ronald Firbank, Saki, and Dame Ivy, intuiting that I was gay. Still, she gave me no indication of the years she’d spent writing fashion copy, though she must have known I would have eaten up such lore. Perhaps she felt it would mar her literary persona, newly restored. The paper-bag dream might have been telling.

She finished off her year in Edmonton and moved on to Toronto, where I stayed with her for a week. More vodka. More wordplay. An outing on the subway to see Woody Allen’s *Zelig*, about a nondescript person who takes on the qualities of strong personalities he encounters. I remember helping her walk home from parties as she weaved and slumped against hedgerows. I remember accusations that I’d been trying to read her secret notebooks.

Creatively blocked and unable to write anything of consequence, Elizabeth decided to return to her cottage in Suffolk, to

her family and her real friends. Our correspondence began to dry up. In another mortifying letter of mine, this one circa 1984, I lash out at her, evidently feeling stranded in Edmonton and bored by anyone who wasn’t Elizabeth: “I miss you so much sometimes and other times you’re just sort of mythical and dim and like a medal—I lived through Elizabeth Smart. And now I’m supposed to be content with the common fellow and the common gal? Well, that’s just stupid. So fuck you for appearing and then disappearing and for being wonderful. *Fuck you.*”

“Oh, she would have loved that,” Georgina said fondly when I mentioned this old outburst of mine, “because she got nothing but ego stroking from nearly everybody.” In any case, Elizabeth must have responded encouragingly, because I went to visit her in her English cottage for two weeks the following summer. That’s when it became clear that I was too young and conventional to survive Elizabeth Smart at such proximity for long. On that trip, I met George Barker, who, by way of greeting, barked, “*Are you a homosexual?*” In a haze of sunshine, alcohol, and vintage Citroëns, I met Elizabeth’s brilliant adult children and her intimidating friends (“Oh, you’re the Canadian”). If Elizabeth had felt rather insecure among her “real” writer friends in ’50s Soho, I felt intensely so in her circle: uncredentialed, dull, overwhelmed, jealous. I finally fled after one too many drinking sessions with old, extremely witty people who had a rich shared history and zero interest in me. I ran out at 1 a.m. without even saying goodbye—first to a hotel, then to Edmonton.

Elizabeth and I didn’t speak for months. Later, in a letter, I blamed my exit on a “distrust of ripeness.... You must understand that this is why I ran away a year ago to Canada. I had forgotten, in two weeks, how stilted and pallid, how harsh and prim and relentless it was. But it was Home.”

In box thirty-four, I found one more letter I’d sent Elizabeth some months before she died. It describes a phone call, a final attempt to reconnect and rekindle our friendship: “I am sorry to have telephoned you when I was so blue and stupid. Not even as an opportunity to

watch something die,” I added, in reference to our fraying bond, was the call “worth our whiles.”

As I sat reading my own words in the Ottawa archives, wearing the requisite white cotton gloves, I realized that that something hadn’t died at all: her possession of me had only grown more entrenched over the years. Like her, I am someone who despairs of boring sentences, who disdains hackery and compromise, though we both made considerable compromises. Reading her copy, I noticed that she characterizes certain pieces of clothing as “extroverts,” anthropomorphizes sunglasses or plums or Venice, and, unconsciously or not, strings words together because they sound alike. All things I do too. Like her, possibly because of her, I write with my ear.

She does it all better, of course. In the era of Instagram ads, it is exceedingly rare to find copy that has anything resembling the curious lyricism and metaphorical resonance that Elizabeth achieved—or, as Georgina put it, “tossed off”—before she aged out of the fashion game (despite getting more than one career-extending facelift, according to her daughter). “When the towel got emancipated,” she wrote, for *Queen*, in 1966, “a whole series of compatible holiday clothes emerged, in all shapes and moods. And they all mop up the sea. They all suck up the suntan oil. They need no care or attention. They loll and wallow with you with an unstrict chic, careless as in their old bathtime days. And they look even better when they’re battered.”

This is craft that blurs with art. Elizabeth’s “real” writing has arguably eclipsed George Barker’s (*By Grand Central Station* is still in print; most of his poems are not), but the hard work of her so-called silent years speaks compellingly too. Even when the going got tedious, Elizabeth did not give in to hackery. When I’m tempted to do so myself, I feel her rueful disapproval through the decades. *Never compromise*, I hear her say. And I redouble my efforts to make the verb work, still trying to be someone worthy of her notice. ✍

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DALE HRABI is the editor of the Off Duty section of the *Wall Street Journal*.

## FIRST PERSON

# Kernels of Truth

*I have spent my life seeking the best way to pop corn*

BY KEVIN SYLVESTER

POPCORN IS tied to the deepest recesses of my memory. But not the popcorn you probably just thought of. Movie popcorn with a golden shower of fake butter? You might as well lick a wet, salty sponge. Bagged Smartfood from the dollar store? Please. Oh, you microwave your popcorn? Stop reading now; never speak to me again.

My popcorn memories go back to when I was ten years old, excavating the depths of a giant metal bowl in small-town New York state. Each Sunday, with *Godzilla* or James Bond blowing things up on TV, my dad filled this bowl with popcorn. My brothers and I passed it around like an enormous communion chalice. The only things we fought over were the slightly popped kernels at the bottom. We knew better than to ignore them as “failed popcorn.” These were nuggets of pure flavour.

Think of the difference between boiled and fire-roasted corn on the cob. Boiled is still corn...but is it the best corn it can be? No. It’s secretly ashamed of itself. The popcorn I’m talking about—the Platonic ideal of popped corn—is nutty, browned, toasted, and crunchy, with a sliver of kernel breaking through the crust.

But the half-popped kernels of my youth were tooth-chipping land mines, and I’m not a ten-year-old watching *Godzilla* anymore. (I’m a fifty-two-year-old watching *Godzilla*.) My entire life, I have searched for a way to get that amazing taste in a more dental-friendly form. Along the way, I chipped two teeth and almost burned down an apartment with oil. Now that I’ve found a combination of the right process and the right kernels, I eat popcorn at least four nights a week—sometimes for dinner.



Ignore the first thing that pops into your head when you think of popcorn (likely Orville Redenbacher). The kernels used by such commercial brands are too big. The moisture inside a kernel is what makes it pop, and these have way too much moisture: the popped kernels end up like Styrofoam. After years of trial and error, I’m convinced the best variety of corn is Amish Country Lady Finger hullless. Each kernel, if handled well, turns into a tiny, almost perfect explosion of taste. A wave of melted butter enhances the flavour. Hell, you don’t even *need* butter.

Using the proper popping technique is key. Microwave is out of the question. Oil (in a pot or pan on the stove) is fine, but it leaves an oily taste that masks the corn flavour. There’s only one way to release the kernels’ hidden treasures: pre-pop them, then air-pop them.

I discovered this technique thanks to a happy accident. About ten years ago, I was preparing some hullless with one of my three vintage air poppers and had to step away. The partially popped kernels sat in the hot metal chamber for about ten minutes. When I returned and finished the job, the corn came out smaller, drier, nuttier. I had unwittingly eliminated some of the moisture. Like Proust’s

*petites madeleines*, one nibble of the result transported me back in time. Now, I refuse to eat corn that isn’t cooked twice.

There are risks to the first method I discovered. The double air-pop leaves dry kernels in a burning hot chamber: Fire hazard, anyone? It also wears heavily on the popper because the electrical cord heats up as it sits, as does the plastic lid. I’m down to just one cracked and partially melted lid for my poppers.

I tried Option B next, spreading the kernels out flat on a baking sheet and slowly drying them in a warm oven. There’s no fire risk here—but no way to know how long is just right. I’ve kept the kernels in for forty-five minutes and had them come out too dry: a waste of precious kernels. I’ve put the same amount in for an hour and had them come out with too much moisture: a waste of precious time.

Eventually, I hit on my go-to method. I pre-pop the kernels in a heavy, metal-bottomed skillet on medium-high heat, shaking the pan constantly until they turn a slightly darker shade of yellow-brown and start to shrink. Then, I put those kernels in a metal bowl to cool while I repeat the process with a new layer of kernels. It takes about an hour to prep five pounds. For me, that’s about two weeks of supply.

The end result is a flavour that explodes and sends me sailing back to my parents’ green plush couch and a Sunday-night movie. I’ve passed the technique on to my kids—more precious, in my view, than any heirloom trinket. If you’re tired of the flat taste of commercial popcorn, you’re welcome to join us. ☺

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**KEVIN SYLVESTER** is an award-winning author, illustrator, and broadcaster.



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