Editorial

When I was growing up I had no intention of becoming a writer. I lived surrounded by books, but I wasn't interested. Life was too full; there were already too many distractions, among which sports and television loomed largest. In winter I played stick hockey in the parking lot of the junior high school and in summer I joined a group of kids from nearby neighbourhoods on the baseball field across the street. I wasn't any good at either of these activities, but in the game itself there seemed to be a lively competitive spirit at work that I suppose I found engaging; that, and being part of a community of like-minded individuals. Perhaps to a degree greater than we might care to acknowledge, community is destiny.

In school I was drawn to the sciences. I imagined myself a mathematician, head in the clouds, worrying over sequences of cryptic symbols and concepts that existed only on paper. My father was a doctor, my mother a nurse, and my elder brother eventually took a degree in engineering. So in our household one learned to cultivate a healthy respect for the sciences. However, my father also played the violin and the piano, painted landscapes with oils, and, besides Latin and ancient Greek, spoke four or five foreign languages well enough to get along, and seemed to have memorized the entirety of Shakespeare's weighty output, along with large chunks of Tennyson and Marlowe. He came from a remote rural community and lived in a home where there was perhaps one book: the Bible. Through sheer gall and tenacity, he pulled himself up from humble origins and went on to obtain degrees in education and general medicine and, finally, a degree in Public Health from Harvard University. By contrast, my education seemed to be preparing me for nothing, and I graduated from high school never having read a single word by Shakespeare or Dickens, not even knowing a poet named John Milton had written a work called *Paradise Lost*, and hardly mastering English let alone a foreign language. My father was scandalized by the extent of my lack of knowledge, but all he could do was shake his head. Emboldened by ignorance, I went on to university and, intending to major in mathematics, enrolled in the faculty of Science.

We all make mistakes. Mine was in thinking I possessed the mind and the intellect of a scientist. After three years of study I received my Bachelor of Science degree, but by the end of this time my English courses vastly outnumbered my elective science courses. I went on from there to a Masters in English.

All this was many years ago and I've learned, along with everyone else, that one's real education takes place in the world that awaits us each morning when we get out of bed. Success and failure are relative and each encounter with the light of day is another link in that mysterious chain of eventualities that takes us from where we are to where we think we ought to be. In my case, the child who couldn't trouble himself to read anything became an adult who never stops reading. And since a significant proportion of art is imitation, I soon felt driven to add something to the accumulation of written matter that weighs down our library's shelves. I started writing.

Success and failure are relative. The man (or woman) who writes ten lines of poetry before abandoning the art forever has achieved more than the braggart who talks about writing but never seems to find the time to pick up his pen. The key to writing is to get on with it. In graduate school I started working on a novel. I had no idea what I was doing, but it was fun and periodically I would discover that something I'd written was, inadvertently or not, genuinely amusing. By the time I'd completed this novel to my satisfaction, I had been out of school and earning a regular paycheck for more than five years. Once I reached this stage I did some research to determine what one does with a novel manuscript. I began sending it out, and made a further discovery: that seeking a publisher was a vocation in itself. Of those publishers who troubled themselves to respond to my submission, most wanted a different novel altogether. Either the characters weren't sympathetic or the ending was wrong. Or they had other reasons: the novel didn't fit into their publishing plans for the foreseeable future or they had just moved offices and apologized for having to return my work unread or they liked it but didn't think it was right for their list. A few congratulated me on "the bleakness of [my] vision" (one added the dubious qualifier "unremitting"). And though the commentary my novel received was, without exception, respectful, I quickly realized I'd written something that was not likely to appeal to the mass audience that the majority of publishers seem to covet, and was, therefore, unpublishable.

Skip forward ten years. I've managed to write another novel and a good number of short stories, a few of which found their way into journals like this one. I've done some editing work and organized literary readings. I served as president of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. A couple of writing awards and a Journey Prize nomination have come my way. Not bad for someone who never cracked the spine of a serious book until he was almost out of his teens. I don't have a book of my own to show off to family and friends, but somehow this seems not to matter very much. I do have more confidence in what I write; I no longer approach the blank page as if it were a sheer wall that could do me in should I stumble while trying to scale it — or as if it posed the ultimate challenge to my abilities. These days a blank sheet of paper (or a new document on my computer screen) seems an invitation to explore worlds that have yet to be discovered, or invented.

The compulsion to invent fictional worlds, like a childhood enthusiasm or a chronic infirmity, never really goes away. We can try to suppress it when we go on vacation, or hide it when we have lunch with Aunt Martha, or switch it off while

attending the latest session on conflict resolution or a meeting with our corporate peers, but consciously or not, we're always drawing together the elements that go to make up a story. We're always conjuring characters and watching them interact. The paraphernalia of the fiction writer's trade — the head and the heart—cannot be unplugged or cut loose or left behind.

In my first novel, *Sloan's Way*, my main character — approaching a major crisis — muses as follows:

> Bizarre details and singular incongruities caught and arrested his attention: an elderly man staggering up the front walk of a picturesque little house, his car parked haphazardly, one wheel on the grass, his hat in his hand; a young woman furiously hustling two screaming toddlers down the sidewalk, dragging each by the arm, the lines of her careworn face hardened into a surly mask; some homeless person in rags asleep on a bus-stop bench; a ludicrously tall man walking a ludicrously tiny dog. Each of these, along with others he saw, provided the spontaneous seeds of a narrative or the opening scene of a drama. This morning, after having gone a whole day without sleep, he discovered his imagination to be perversely rich and fruitful. The man with the dog could be about to witness a brutal murder, but then nobody believes him when he tries to tell them who did it; no matter what he says he can't make them understand; and then the murderer goes after him to keep him quiet. Or maybe the woman is taking the children to her sister's house because she's fed up with her husband's relentless promiscuity. Or she's crazy and just imagines her husband is having affairs. Or it turns out that the man asleep on the bench is the last surviving member of a gang that robbed a bank years ago and since the money never turned up someone is following him around hoping he'll lead them to it, but he's so old now he can't remember where it is, can't even remember being involved in a bank heist. And maybe the old drunk is returning home after a night of bingeing, half out of his mind because he's been forced to retire after thirty years on the job (he's an insurance adjuster) and has no idea what he's going to do with the rest of his life.
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> It was so easy, he decided he should have been a writer.

The fact is that writing fiction is not easy. And because success and failure are relative, anyone who gives it a try deserves congratulation.

Ian Colford