

# salon

## Language matters



**NANCY BAUER**  
state of the art

I recently experienced three more iconic cultural moments, two of them with my 12-year-old granddaughter.

An international moment came standing in line at the grand opening of the Swedish clothing store H&M along with hundreds of others. Some girls had been there for six hours. Unfortunately I didn't hold up well, so we had to leave and come back the next day. The security was more intense than I had ever seen in Fredericton – several guards in uniform, a roving man who either was a plain-clothes lookout or else a pervert, buzzers going off as people departed, presumably with stolen goods. Customers of both genders and all ages seemed to be wandering aimlessly. The catalogue we were given had haut couture fashions, but the store had none.

A double-whammy Canadian cultural event came for us at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, with a set of performances danced to the work of Leonard Cohen, including that most iconic of Canadian songs, "Hallelujah." Cohen and I should be simpatico because we are exactly the same age. He of course grew up Jewish in Montreal while I grew up Protestant in a Massachusetts village. About the time Cohen moved to the U.S., I moved to Canada. I haven't liked his poetry, his novel *Beautiful Losers*, or his songs. But the ballet performance was wonderful.

A great New Brunswick cultural occasion was the bilingual ceremony for the Lieutenant-Governor's Awards for High Achievement in the Arts. M.T. (Jean) Dohane, a writer and a former Newfoundlander, received the English language literary arts award. David Umholtz, a visual artist and former American, received the visual arts award. Edith Butler, a singer and songwriter from Paquetville, received the performing arts award. As Alden Nowlan once wrote, "We take Americans and turn them into New Brunswick writers." I can add that we turn Newfoundlanders and Americans into writers and artists and women from Paquetville into international performers. As you know, the Lieutenant-Governor is from the Tobique First Nation, making the moment thoroughly of New Brunswick.

The decision to restore Old Government House was, in hindsight, an excellent one. The restoration was done well, nothing kitschy or cutesy. The whole building lends gravity and class to any event held there, yet these events are

friendly, snob-proof. It makes me swell with pride. I congratulate artsNB for its excellent organizing.

I was there to celebrate my friend, Jean. She gave her acceptance speech after Edith Butler gave hers. Butler's was right from the heart, full of high spirits, going back and forth from English to French so naturally, exhibiting a most charming personality. I thought to myself (as did Jean, she later confessed), poor Jean having to follow such a lively performance. Oh ye of little faith. Jean's soul shone through her talk – warm, funny, from the heart, too. She has published six novels to much acclaim and a highly-praised journal, *When Things Get Back to Normal*, from the first year of her young widowhood. She taught writing for 20 years in high school and at UNB Fredericton.

Some time ago, she and I discovered we had similar upbringings in spite of the geographical distance – in rural villages with fathers and brothers who adored us and displayed not a shred of feeling that we were inferior because we were girls. Every year I live, I appreciate this more.

For the last two months I haven't read or watched American news. I now realize why – I was frightened. Oh ye of little faith. I don't think Mitt Romney is the yahoo his own people make him out to be. But that such anti-women words could still be used in 2012 by his compatriots made me afraid. I have three granddaughters, carriers of a kindly matriarchal tradition on both my own and my husband's sides.

Language matters, of that I'm posi-

**BEING BORN A NEWFOUNDLANDER, WITH ITS INCREDIBLE LIVELY LANGUAGE, M.T. (JEAN) DOHANEY HAD A HUGE ADVANTAGE OVER ME.**

tive. Whether you are for or against the Canadian Conservatives, you have to admit they don't make stupid remarks about women the way the Republicans do. Maureen Dowd had a great column about this in the *New York Times*. I should be confident that a writer as good as she is can out-duel ignorant men (or ignorant women, for that matter.) She quoted Bush's former aide Karen Hughes, "If another Republican man says anything about rape other than it is a horrific, violent crime, I want to personally cut out his tongue."

Yes, language matters. Being born a Newfoundlander, with its incredible lively language, Jean had a huge advantage over me. Like Wayne Johnston, her comic sense is absolutely natural. Wise, not smart-alecky: a great gift. If you haven't read her novels, go get one. And if you know a young widow, give her a copy of Jean's memoir. I've given away two. ☺

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## interview

# John Ross



## Former infectious diseases physician at the Saint John Regional Hospital releases new book, 'Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough'

**Age?**  
46.

### Provenance?

I was born and raised in Woodstock. I trained in internal medicine and infectious diseases in Boston and have lived there for the majority of two decades, aside from two years at the Saint John Regional Hospital, where I worked with many wonderful colleagues, including the late Mo Iype. I am now at Brigham and Women's Hospital, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

### Why did you start, and keep, writing?

I had an itch for it that I initially satisfied by writing for medical journals – low-level stuff, just case reports and review articles. It got me into the habit of writing regularly.

### What was your breakthrough moment?

A syphilis outbreak in Boston about 10 years ago. Syphilis has become a rare disease in North America, and many physicians have never seen a case. A number of these patients presented to the emergency room at the hospital where I then worked, and the diagnosis of syphilis was missed at first. I decided to do a medical grand rounds talk on syphilis, and thought to tart it up with some Shakespeare quotations. I had a vague memory from my years as an English undergraduate that Shakespeare was fond of jesting about the pox. I dusted off my old *Riverside Shakespeare* and started reading – and discovered a lot of stuff on syphilis. I wrote a paper connecting Shakespeare's venereal obsession, contemporary gossip about his health and sex life, the Elizabethan mercury treatment for syphilis, and Shakespeare's shaky handwriting. This appeared in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* in 2005. It attracted a lot of mainstream attention, and inspired a segment on *The Daily Show*. This got me thinking there might be an audience for a book about the medical and psychiatric history of great writers, which led to my book *Shakespeare's Tremor and Orwell's Cough*.

### What are you working on next?

A book about medical quackery in the modern era.

### What place on Earth inspires you?

Cape Cod, Mass., where the endless calculus of sea and sky puts one in mind of judgment and eternity.

### What place in New Brunswick inspires you?

The beautiful Main Southwest Miramichi River at Doaktown, where salmon fishing gives you an excuse to stand in water up to your waist for many hours a day and think about nothing in particular.



### Secret indulgence?

Craft beer. I am a big fan of Unibroue in Chambly, Que., makers of Fin du Monde and Trois Pistoles.

### Your favourite hero of fiction?

Binx Bolling, the seeker from Walker Percy's *The Movie-goer*. Captain Ahab, the original American fanatic. Jay Gatsby, dreamer and loser. Victor Frankenstein, a familiar medical type: long on knowledge and technical expertise, short on wisdom and empathy.

### What is your greatest extravagance?

Johnson & Murphy wingtip shoes.

### What is your greatest fear?

I have always hated flying, probably too many wintry flights around the Maritimes on Dash-8s. I like driving, but don't drive through the woods at night anymore, having once nearly been killed in a collision with a moose on I-95 outside of Kennebunkport, Maine. Health-wise, I have a terror of dementia.

### Greatest joy?

Watching my kids play sports, dinner with friends.

### Your favourite author or book ever?

For style, Robert Stone. It has been said that his sentences are inevitable, which seems to me the highest praise you can give to any writer. For laughter, Stephen Leacock's *Nonsense Novels* and Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*.

### Favourite New Brunswick writer?

Two wordsmiths from Woodstock, both sadly out of print. Dalton Camp wrote perhaps the finest memoir of Canadian politics, *Gentlemen, Players, and Politicians*. To read George Frederick Clarke's *The Song of the Reel* or *Six Salmon Rivers* and *Another* is to enter a lost world of bamboo fly rods, deep woods and dark waters teeming with monstrous Atlantic salmon.

### What are you reading?

*An Anatomy of Addiction*, by Howard Markel.

### What talent would you like to have?

Like most Canadian kids, I wanted to be a pro hockey player. I was held back by my inability to skate.

### What is the greatest public misconception about writing?

There is a strong element of innate talent to writing, but to a larger and more crucial degree, it is a learned skill requiring stubbornness and perseverance.

### Your most treasured possession?

An autographed photo of my wife and me with Gordie Howe.

### What is your motto?

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Words to live by from Samuel Beckett.

### Your favourite cultural venue?

Foufoune Electriques, a gloriously chaotic punk rock club in Montreal, where I saw Nirvana, Sonic Youth and the Cowboy Junkies back in the day. Also Harvard's vast subterranean Widener Library, which is sort of a cross between a medieval monastery and the Pentagon. ☺



**TOM SMART**  
the curator

This past May in Ottawa, a Canadian artist, Prince Edward Island-born Allan Harding Mackay, destroyed five of his original works of art depicting aspects of Canada's military heritage in Somalia and Afghanistan "to protest the Harper-led Conservative Government's abuse of power." Tearing up his paintings and drawings, he announced that his reasons for destroying art were to highlight the fact that "this particular government is suppressing traditions in Canada ... Canadians are fed up and want to know what our government is up to."

Over the past Remembrance Day

## The art of war, and its battle scars

weekend, I thought a great deal about this act of protest. It affected me more than I cared to admit when I first heard about it.

In mid October, Mackay sent pieces of his torn artwork, in a newly-created, limited edition work of art, "Conscience," to Conservative Party MPs to remind them of the "abysmal" manner in which the government is treating war veterans and their families in regards to their salaries in pensions, and the manner in which it will be deducted from their Earnings Loss or Canadian Forces Income Support benefits.

Yet beyond the deeply-felt intention behind the self-imposed destruction of his art and the re-integration of the fragments into a new expression, the act's drama, resonance and poignancy gave pause; the destruction of any work of art is a terrible assault on the very foundations of free society. That it was the artist who was the author of such a desperate measure speaks to the disability he must have felt and the strength of his conviction to match its rude expression in an equally affronting demonstration as to disincarnate a drawing. Making his act all the more meaningful is the fact Mackay has served as a

Canadian war artist. He is part of an esteemed tradition that includes Bruno and Molly Bobak, Miller Brittain, Aba Bayefsky, Alex Colville, David Milne and Frederick Varley, among many other courageous Canadian men and women whose art remains a vivid and living interpretation of war's wreckage and legacy. Mackay served in Somalia in 1993, where he was part of the Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program, and in Afghanistan in 2002.

Mackay produced work in a variety of media – videos, paintings, drawings and works on paper, photographs, theatre productions and, as is apparent in "Conscience," in performance-based expression – that have a sharply pointed political critique as part of their formal properties.

Although related to direct experience, Mackay's interpretations of the conflicts he witnessed are also retrospective. Echoing the effect of post-traumatic episodes, Mackay uses the drawing process as a form of memory. It allows him and his viewers to revisit the site of conflict, trauma and anxiety in a wartime theatre, and to express – perhaps even purge – the

debilitating shadows and horrors that were originally experienced. The artistic process provides a path to return to war-related experiences from a distance and lay them to rest.

In the quiet of an art gallery a decade ago, I watched Mackay trace one of these journeys through drawing. Asked to participate in an exhibition dealing with the artistic legacy of war in Canadian history, he took the unusual and inspired decision to draw an interpretation of a Canadian forward-position base in Somalia directly onto the gallery wall. In its scope and ambition, his project challenged a curatorial requirement that the work be safe and protected from gallery-goers; Mackay resisted anything that might prevent a direct confrontation with the work of art by the viewer.

Standing to the side, I watched him create his drawing in the gallery. Its aggressive marks were laid down deliberately and, incongruously to a curator's eye, slowly and exactly in order to engage an attentive viewer. When he had completed the drawing, he described the scene as the site of a notorious act of torture.

The primary sense the drawing stimulated was that of sound. In the charcoal I heard the sounds of terror – a prisoner's, an artist's and perhaps even my own – encapsulated in the ephemeral carbon dust on the smooth, white gypsum board.

Mackay instructed me to destroy the drawing when the exhibition was over. Killing the drawing was embedded in the very act of its creation. The startling nature of the instruction made all the more horrific the nature of what was interpreted, giving the work of art a profound, poetic dimension that spoke tragically and eloquently about the particular subject and, in its own way, war's mendacity.

I was reminded of this when I heard that Mackay had reincarnated his destroyed art as a new, provocative statement to remind politicians and the public of war's deadly harvest, and of our sacred responsibility not to break trust with our soldiers.

Mackay's disturbing creative violence tells us that memory and art endure war's trauma. Both are scarred in its aftermath. ☺

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