Tribute to George McWhirter

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Luanne Armstrong is a novelist, freelance writer and editor. She completed a BFA in Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC in Vancouver and is presently completing a PhD, also at UBC. She has worked at a variety of jobs, including coordinating women's groups, teaching at a First Nations College, and in Indonesia with an environmental organization. She teaches Creative Writing at Langara College and has previously taught numerous workshops around British Columbia.

Poetry Class
Luanne Armstrong

We sat around the table in the small, grubby room full of mismatched and half dead chairs at the end of the hall. We stared nervously at George, the only man in a room full of women. We did the standard going around the table talking about our poetry, and one by one we each said something about not being very good at poetry or not being real poets or similar grubby things.

I said I was there because I loved poetry but I wasn’t very good at writing it. I didn’t say that I wasn’t hoping for much, that I had given up on writing poetry but I thought I might make one last feeble effort.

I had a manuscript of poems I had been working on for a while—I thought I would bring some of them in and see what happened. The first time I brought a poem to class, George looked at it and muttered something about the Book of Common Prayer. I was taken aback—yes, I had been taking my mother to church the last couple of years, and I had fallen in love with the sonorous intonations of the Anglican Service, which George spotted immediately.

The next time I went to drag out one of my old poems, something happened. Some words came into my head and I began to write. I worked hard and wrote hard and the next class, instead of the poem I had planned to present, I had new work. George looked at me, and I knew it was better than what I had done before. George never said anything like that to any of us, comparisons never arose in his class—he was always on the side of whatever work we chose to present, he was utterly even-handed and enthusiastic about all our work and yet somehow, because of that, we rose to great heights, and our poetry got better and better. At the end of two years, most of us were still sitting in that room, and most of us had written poetry manuscripts, most of which have, by now, been published.

George gave me many gifts, something which I am sure he was unaware of. He said, “A poem is anything you look at twice,” and now I look at things that capture my attention to see the poems in them. He was on the side of our work even when we had turned against it ourselves and so I learned to stop fighting the poems and let them breathe.
After a while, I began to realize that George’s muttered and sometimes nearly incomprehensible comments (because of his wonderful Belfast brogue) contained truly memorable gems of wisdom, for example: “The whole art of poetry relates to heart versus head, the debate between soft-hearted and hard-headed is really very important”; and “The hub of poetry is how to turn ideas with feeling into feelings with ideas”; and “A simile is like a pair of eyeglasses, one side sees this, one side sees that, the device brings them together.”

When I finally turned in a manuscript of poetry, he wrote on the front of it: Has the flow and stride of the vertical pilgrimage, out, up and away in the mountains and skyside of ourselves, angels and cloudfruit on the bough of the rainbow—book coming, big one—ps. even death appears as a foot, a step in the right direction—which, hands down, is pretty much the most amazing compliment I have ever received.

I had to wean myself off George’s class. I had to keep telling myself that I could write poetry without him, but I still miss that magic. Like poetry, I still don’t quite understand how it worked, only that it did work and that I have the evidence.

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Tammy Armstrong has published two collections of poetry and one novel. Her first collection of poetry, Bogman’s Music was nominated for a governor general's award. Her novel, Translations: Aistreann was recently adapted into an audio book for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. She now lives in Fredericton where she is completing a new novel and will have a new poetry collection published next fall.

Learning George
Tammy Armstrong

They used to make mead,
George began as we walked the draft-stretched hall
toward his office, the bookshelves
where I would badger him
for suggestions, poems of his own.
There was once mead strung from trees.

I’d forgotten the question I needed answered.
How do they keep it in trees?
The idea of alcohol strung like a laundry line of stockings
made the grey day less damp
the shuffling undergrads’ thoughts lighter.  
_In sheep’s stomachs_.

Full stop. George windmills explanation face a zigzag of contortions.  
Somewhere in Ireland they are again hauling bellies of mead into hazel trees shouting over the wind and agile landscape somewhere King Midas sighs with a full dram.

They are there because George conjured them and for a moment I can neglect thesis deadlines, escalating student loans. I can see George at the reading room smiling, waiting.  
_In sheep’s stomachs, the sunlight, the mead._

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**Stephanie Bolster** has published three collections: *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (Signal/Véhicule 1998), which won the Governor General's Award and the Gerald Lampert Award; *Two Bowls of Milk* (McClelland & Stewart 1999), which won the Archibald Lampman Award and was shortlisted for the Trillium Award; and *Pavilion* (M&S 2002). Raised in Burnaby, BC, she has a BFA and an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC and now teaches creative writing at Concordia University in Montreal. She recently edited *The Ishtar Gate: Last and Selected Poems* (McGill-Queen’s 2005) by the late Ottawa poet Diana Brebner and is working on a book of poems about zoos.

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**Crenellated Gesticulations; Or, How I Came to Know and Love George**  
Stephanie Bolster

George McWhirter knew me before I knew him, or at least he seemed to. I arrived at UBC in 1988, a timid undergraduate who found in the creative writing hallway—which, back then, reeked of mimeograph toner—an intimacy that the rest of the campus lacked, and a rumpled, red-haired man who grinned and greeted me each time we passed. I wasn’t in his class—it would be two years before I would work with him—but his warmth not only made a person of the knot of nerves I was but also assumed a future camaraderie.

If his influence extended back to several years before he first read my poems—and he did have the ability to make me feel as though he’d been waiting in that office all those years just for me to arrive—it has extended forward still farther, into the rest of my writing and teaching life and, beyond that, to my students who, without knowing it, are being taught not only by me but by George.
My first work with George was in a poetry tutorial. I met with him every two weeks for half an hour, and during that half hour he talked to me about the thin stack of poems I’d slipped hopefully or shamefully into his mailbox the previous week. Sometimes he elucidated a poem and its shortcomings instantly and memorably. Sometimes I had no clue what he was saying, though I nodded and took notes. Sometimes I was partway home on the bus, heading along Point Grey’s “green thumb” as he called it, before I figured out what he meant. Sometimes years passed and then, leafing through old notes as I was yesterday—this time heading along the white thumb that is the island of Montreal in winter—I suddenly understood what he meant, what he’d seen.

His written comments weren’t copious, and at first that disappointed me. Surely that meant that he’d read my poems just minutes before I walked in the door? Probably not, but even if he had, what George taught me—what I’m still learning as a teacher—is that it’s not quantity but quality that counts. George could nudge a poem just so, shifting the whole thing into alignment. A “Yes” at the foot of a poem might seem a meagre response until the next poem revealed a small “Okay” as the sole remark, and suddenly it was clear which poem was worth keeping, or worth pursuing. When the “Yes” was underlined once, or even twice, I felt as though I’d won a prize.

Reviewing his comments now—for of course I kept them all—George’s comments most impress me in their understanding of a poem’s movement: “There’s really 2 S bends—each contrary in the poem. Just negotiate the turn” or “Vary the angle of entry—disclosing backwards every so often. Unravelling is a form of perpetual revelation. We know the general posture, pose, situation, it is a dance of details thereafter” or “As usual, with your neat shoes, Stephanie, it’s to tie, or not to tie the laces—the connections.” Easier said than done, of course, but he showed me what had to be done, or, at least, how to think about what might be done.

He could trace a constellation in a scatter of poems that, to the poet, might seem unrelated, and he could divine which stars were missing. When he recommended I read the prose poems of Francis Ponge—I forget what sparked the recommendation—I found in there the genesis of a poem about blackberries which marked a new direction for me, and which I feel sure I’d never have written had it not been for one afternoon in the Main stacks, following up on George’s reading suggestion.

A friend, who had also studied with George, once mentioned that, midway through a meeting with him, she’d begun, inexplicably, to weep. I was young when she told me this; I both marvelled at her ability to feel so deeply and wondered what he could have said to prompt such a response. Now I know: he gives each poem and each poet with whom he works the gift of being seen.

In his A Staircase For All Souls: The British Columbia Suite (a book that still makes me marvel at that pungent, gorgeous place I came from, a place I didn’t fully see until he saw it), he wrote, “For Stephanie—Whose own lines lead / into the dark wood of looking / and out.” How did he know? With those words, written in his then-new book without a moment’s pondering, he gave me myself.

George-of-the-workshop offered still other gifts. Though I didn’t quite see it at the time, I now realize that by siding with the poem he not only showed the writer what he or she had done but he freed up the rest of us to scrutinize the poem more closely, because surely it couldn’t be as good as he claimed it was. Thanks to George’s diplomacy, never did we all gang up on a poem, nor did we all crowd around it in worship. Now that I’m a teacher, I see how wise, demanding, and generous his
stance was. No tough love for him; he nurtured. Listen to this response to a derivative poem that was nevertheless, for me at the time, a bold step into a new voice: “This is such a beaut of a poem. It just needs the right acknowledgement of its nature.”

Now that I teach creative writing full-time, I find still other reasons to admire George. He never showed stress, for one thing. So what if the sign-up sheet on his office door proclaimed the entire week scrawled with meetings except for the few hours he’d blocked off for swimming—he was always jovial, always present. He made the work he did—during this time he was not only teaching three classes but supervising multiple theses and tutorials, as well as doing that not-so-small job of being Head of the department—seem joyous and effortless; he made us feel welcome.

And he was funny, without fail. This, marked on one of my early prose poems: “This one is very pleasant indeed. I like the ‘echidna,’ whatever the ‘echidna.’ is.” In class, his verbal play was so compulsive that we found ourselves taking notes of George-isms in each class. Of a friend’s poem about trying on expensive shoes with a very helpful salesman: “The prepositions turn into propositions.” When his suggestions felt misguided, as they sometimes did, they never lacked the merit of hilarity; the words he suggested—“crepitation,” “crenellations,” “gesticulating” and, rather infamously, “wobble”—though usually far afield of the diction range in the poem in question, prompted smirks, guffaws, and wonder at this language of ours, especially as it sounded coming out of that mouth, in that voice. (Did George know that the poem, as if insulted at the intrusion of a wrong word into it, would show the poet the right one? I wouldn’t put it past him.)

When I began teaching at Concordia, I still suffered from—and still do suffer from—that self-consciousness that marked my early hallway meetings with George, and so I confessed to a friend that I feared the students would talk about me outside of class as we’d talked about George, quoting memorable lines and discussing tics. “Of course,” she responded, “because they’ll love you.” I can only hope that one day I’ll be as beloved by my students as George is by all of us.

Kate Braid worked for fifteen years as a construction carpenter before permanently exchanging a hammer for a pen. She has published six books of poetry and non-fiction. Her poetry has won the Pat Lowther Award and the Vancity Book Prize and has been nominated for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and the Milton Acorn People’s Poetry Prize. She now teaches creative writing at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, BC.

"George-isms"
Kate Braid

1. I spent the first twenty minutes of my first class with George, not understanding a word of his heavy Irish accent and wondering what the hell I'd got myself into. Then we started workshopping and someone complained about someone else's six syllable word as too long. George said, "A six
syllable word is like a pirate's plank. It's both very long and very short and every step is filled with rising anticipation." That's when I knew I'd found my teacher.

2. "It's all in the prepositions."

3. "Do it quick. Get right to the important bits and don't twiddle too much. You can spend too long on a poem."

4. "When you have problems of connection, use punctuation i.e. comma or semi-colon instead of period.

5. Called the semi-colon "a wee doubly-doubly."

6. "If you don't understand what they mean, look at what they're doing."

7. "If you stand at the point of contradiction, you can see both sides. This applies to electronics and physics as much as poetry. Poets stand on the physical side of the contradiction, looking through to the purely metaphysical, because the physical is something. We poets choose something over nothing. When the priests and rabbis say, "Choose!" we say, "OK. I'll choose the physical, thanks."

The physical and spiritual are two parts of the same paradox, the same contradiction.

8. When I went to him with a poem in which I worried that the metaphors were all over the place, unrelated, George said, "In cases like this you need to create a central stem, like a Maypole, to bounce off. Then you can use metaphors that are entirely unrelated and they will bounce back to the central Maypole." Then he fixed the poem by simply reordering it, establishing the Maypole at its centre, and letting the metaphors fly off that.

9. On line-breaks: "If a line is built properly, it can be stood on."

"The line is a stage. You can stop, do your thing, run up and down and then go on. The break then, is like a Shakespearian actor taking a bow."

10. "A lot of poets are mono-minded and tone deaf. But deaf people can write poetry if you give them a drum. The drum in poetry is metre. Above the drum is all the other music, the music of the syllable, of sibilance, fricatives, etc."

11. "Silence is the controlling element of sound, as shadow is of light."

12. "Ugly, beautiful, long and short wordsthey need each other very badly."

13. "Set the seen against the unseen."

14. How to write a metaphor: "Not just helicopter but helicopter of what? i.e. helicopter of her revolving anger...."

15. "When submitting poems for publication, send out five at a time: the first to catch their attention. The second to confirm the first one wasn't a fluke. The third, something different to show you can do other things. And the fourth and fifth to show you're solid."
16. "Poetry happens like candy, and I keep going back to the box."

17. "A modifier before the verb is like coitus interruptus. Put the adverb after the verb, so not, 'accidentally met' but 'met accidentally' or space them, 'accidentally the two birds met.'"

18. "I see what I hear. The Japanese language has words for the sound of a smile, the sound of a cat's ears rising, the sound of something small rolling, and the sound of something large."

19. Athena sprang from Zeus' forehead. For me, their daughters are Invention while their sons are Extension. When a man and woman marry, your invention meets my extension.

20. On translation: "Do," "can," and "might" are often neglected in translation. Use them. They will get you out of binds. When you're stuck for the right word, before you look at the thesaurus, look at the action!

21. "If you rhyme the first and last words, it makes a line seem much shorter. This is one way to get away with a very long line."

22. "Words like 'cozy' just sit there - they don't come out and grab you by the pants."

23. "Syllables are the small music inside a line."

24. "Democracy dictates. If one thing sticks out then it's at odds with the rest of your poem and should be changed."

25. "Don't mistake ticks and habits for style."

26. "We don't want to just reduce a poem to a littler, tighter thing. If you take away and get less, that's bad. You may have taken away the music and emphasis."

27. "Some lines are meant to be syntactically tricky - syntactic switchbacks."

28. "Sometimes a poem takes a hold on you not in a nice way, but as a crab takes a hold on you. You shake like hell but can't get rid of it."

29. On the lyric poem: "The lyric is a spontaneous outpouring, the bird on the branch." "The narrative is the figure in a painting. What is most basic is the journey. You can get lyric moments inside the narrative as it responds to its surround." "One aim of poetry is to make the intangible, tangible, to give the lyric object a shape." "Usually in poetry you're talking about two things at once. They must converge but if they merge too much one gets lost. People should always know where they are, what they're looking at. The more complicated a poet gets, the more important the locators are."

30. On voice and vision: "The talkie bit and the picture bit are eternally in balance."
31. "There is an element of the grotesque to anything we draw attention to."

32. On contradiction:
"God bless point of view and other rules of fiction. But in poetry if you pin something down like a butterfly, it dies."
"In poetry you can say the most contradictory things and have a perfectly consistent voice. Poetry doesn't reduce everything to one. It takes one and multiplies it to its opposites."
"This is the pleasure. Conscientious contradiction is your obligation as a poet."

33. "People try and apply models to poetry. A model is really a sphincter. It reduces truth to a utility."

34. "Gerard Manley Hopkins' sprung rhythm is like fiddle music, not a heart beat."

35. "An explanation repeated might be a song in the disguise of an explanation."

36. "A line is grammatical picture making."

37. "A poet's left and right hands are idiom and image."

38. "You've heard of the music of the spheres. You also have to pay attention to the small music of the syllables."

39. "If poets forget the object they're working with, they lose the reader."

40. "Large words are like boulders. You can walk around and hide on the other side."

41. "Every word can be acted out."

42. "Write metaphor like jazz. First give the melody line, then you can let an infinite number of lines lead away and come back. Like cops, the first thing they do is line up all the suspects in proximity."

43. "I could live on single syllable words."

44. "The prose poem is the illegitimate form in English. The difference between prose and a prose poem is the ripple at the end."

45. "A poem is a single statement. There is a singularity to it. Even a long poem keeps coming back to the same thing. The timing of the lines is important, like the choreography of a good joke."

46. "A short line can be long in effect."

47. On placement: "You can make many mediocre lines look good if the one strong line is well placed."

48. "You only need one person to look at another and you've got a fourteen part drama."
49. "Throw out all the 'the's' if you like. There's a whole pile of them outside every poetry workshop door."

50. "A good poem is more intelligent than we are."

51. "Light is the living message. Everything carries light."

52. "The truest things can often feel the most tenuous because the truth is that - tenuous."

53. "Stress is a glue. If you don't have it, things come apart."

54. "Language is a thing."

55. On students:
"There's what you can do for them, what you can never do and what they do that you will never in 25 lifetimes manage. So, if you can convert your neck into an owl's and rotate on the axis of those possible/impossibilities for vision, you should be all right. Or strangled. That's teaching."

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**An Orange is an Orange**
Veronica Gaylie

It took me almost eight years to learn the meaning of a Georgism.

It all started in George’s poetry class at UBC where I noticed that, when I read my poems aloud, George frequently responded positively to my most quirkiest verse. His eyes would light up when he heard lines about the sound of limes bouncing out of the fridge; one time he encouraged a “bowl full of Romans,” a description of my trip to the Roman arena in Arles. I trusted George because he always liked best what I (secretly) liked best. Even the language George taught in was poetic; he taught in rhythm and, with one small change from his pencil, he could turn a line around. He taught me that poetry tumbled out of poets, like limes.

I was sitting in his office one afternoon in the winter of 1995 and after reading through some of my work George made a memorable Georgism: “Don’t forget to put rocks in your socks.” He had been telling me that I was the sort of writer who needed to just stand in the scene and forget the rest.
I guessed that is what he meant by putting “rocks in your socks”; I understood it as stepping into the imagination, as if real rocks had a place in that world. But that was the explanation, “the rest,” and I needed to remember actual rocks.

I later entered graduate school in the Faculty of Education at UBC and started studying the connections between poetry and literacy. I worked with students in urban high schools, emphasizing the value of the vernacular word. In my PhD thesis I included a poem set in California about a giant billboard orange sliding off of the “orange bowl” stadium in the midst of an abandoned orange grove. (I lived in California and saw the orange often.) George was an examiner for my thesis and during the defense I planned to briefly mention the irony and inescapability of an abandoned fake orange in the midst of an abandoned fake orange grove.

On thesis defense day in 2003, after I made my presentation, George was the first one on the committee to ask questions. Sure enough, he inquired about the orange. I don’t recall the exact question he posed; in fact, it was not so much a question that demanded a response as it was a Gertrude Stein-like (rose is a rose) reminder of the orange itself that he brought into the room. For the rest of the defense, the orange became my centre piece. While the discussion turned to various critical, literacy and postmodern theories, I knew it was also about the undeniability of that big orange. It reminded me of his earlier writing advice: just put yourself in the scene. George’s appreciation of the orange (like his appreciation of the limes and the Romans) helped move forward the paradox that poetry brings an awareness of the concrete that is sometimes only describable in the language of poetry. But that is “the rest.”

As George said, it’s all about getting those rocks in your socks.

Zoya V. Harris is a graduate student in UBC’s Creative Writing program, and an Executive Editor for PRISM international. Her writing has appeared/is forthcoming in publications in Canada and Japan, including Gunmagazine, Fugue, Room of One’s Own and Event.

Passing the Gauze (or Sorry, George, but I Still Suck at Thinking Up Good Titles)

Zoya V. Harris

Today an ambulance was called to Annaka Daini Junior High School where I am teaching because a student was poked in the eye with a pencil. Apparently one student held the pencil and flicked it, inadvertently spinning it into the outer corner of another student’s eyeball, causing some liquid to squirt out. Luckily there is no permanent damage, only a black eye and a little soreness.

This is how I often feel about writing. Sometimes a piece is going so badly that it’s as if I have managed to poke myself in the eye, and am so completely absorbed by the pain and shock of what I’ve done that I am unable to remedy my situation. I have written a lot of crap in my time. Unfortunately I have also work-shopped it, letting the foul juices dribble over the pages in front of my classmates. Yet somehow George always managed to yank out the pencil, offer some gauze and
send me on my way.

I am writing this as I sit cross-legged on a cushion on my living room floor as I haven’t quite perfected the kneeling position. I have already been here three months, yet I am still not able to keep my legs folded under me for longer than five minutes without pins and needles attacking some part of my lower body. I guess I can’t really complain as it’s my fault for not having bought a kitchen table yet. Instead, my laptop computer is atop my kotatsu, a short heated table that has an electrical heater attached to its underside. When it is plugged in, you drape a quilt over the top to keep your legs warm underneath. I am told that I will sleep with this piece of furniture more often than a favourite lover during the cold Japanese winter I am about to experience. As much as many aspects of Japan are technologically advanced, in my area of the country they do not believe in insulation, double-glazed windows, or central heating.

Despite the oddities of this country, I know that I will never regret moving here. Even though I have, in a sense, abandoned my partner, my family, my friends, a good job, and my sweet little Border collie, I am also gaining strength, independence, new friends, and new skills and a language to add to my resume.

But this piece is not about me. It’s about George. Yet it all ties together, because had it not been for George, my decision to move to Japan and sacrifice the comforts of home (such as central heating) would have been harder.

Around the time that I was applying to both the MFA in writing at UBC, as well as applying for a job here in Japan, I asked George if he would write me reference letters for both, trying carefully to word my request so that I wouldn’t jeopardise my chances at either. I believe I said something along the lines of, “I’m applying to both to maximise my chances of doing something exciting next year, but my first choice is probably an MFA, if I get in of course.”

George replied in his soft and understated way, “Or, you could go to Japan, make some money, and then return to do the MFA.” Then he told me about when he went to Spain to work, and how significant that experience was for him. It was invaluable to me to hear someone I admired and respected offer the support and encouragement I needed to set off on this adventure.

I think for me the most amazing thing about George as a teacher is that even when I brought in a piece of festering refuse for a story, he somehow managed to find something good and promising about it. Likewise with other students’ work; pieces of writing that I thought should find a home at the bottom of the recycling bin were pieces he made sound like they could be the next bestseller, after a little tweaking of course. When I first encountered this aspect of George’s teaching, I thought maybe I just had absolutely no talent and wouldn’t be able to see a good piece of writing if I tripped and landed face down on it. But then I realised George just knew how to encourage us; he knew where to look for the quality amongst the dung, and then encouraged us to tug it out and transform it. I think he was also teaching us how to stay dedicated to a piece of writing, to stay faithful to an idea and see it through, even if it meant reconfiguring absolutely everything. Then again, maybe sometimes he was simply full of shit and didn’t want to break our hearts…. Somehow, I think George is too genuine for that.

Now, as I teach English to Japanese teenagers, I try to bring a bit of George to every class by encouraging them to see what they are doing right. Unlike creative writing classes where all the students choose to be there, most of my students here don’t want to be learning English. I try to point out the good in everything they do, even if it is just their effort or the way they write their name, because I remember the surprise, and then pride, that I felt when praised by George for something that my classmates might have just critiqued into the ground. George always made me want to keep trying, to keep writing, even as I stumbled around the classroom, pencil lodged firmly between lid and eyeball. I can only hope to do the same.
Karen Hakkarainen holds a BFA in Creative Writing from UBC. Though her writing time is now scheduled around Liam's naps, she continues to peck away at the keyboard, determined to take her writing to its fullest conclusion.

In all things, ratiocinate
Karen Hakkarainen

George McWhirter was the department undergrad advisor the first time I encountered him. I’d booked an appointment with him about some matter of administrivia, which, at the time, seemed desperately important to me. Prior to my appointment, I had learned from certain sources that following the fantastic jumps of George’s mind could be challenging, so I came prepared for the meeting with specific, direct questions. Questions designed to keep the conversation focused, on topic. Brief, even. Questions intended to keep me from falling into the morass of incomprehension that I’d heard so much about.

When the appointed time rolled around, and I took up my chair in George’s office, I couldn’t help but marvel at the array of books and papers filling the corners and flat surfaces of the small room. Through an accumulation of pulp products, George seemed to have reduced his actual work space to a scant four-foot by four-foot square, centred around this computer. How on earth could anyone function like this? Yet, there was George, happily ruminating over his computer screen, a look of deep satisfaction on his face.

He was working on a translation and before I could even begin to form my first question, George was off and running. I don’t recall the piece that he was working on, or the particular word for which a properly nuanced translation hovered just out of his reach, but my carefully planned objective was quickly abandoned. Within moments, I was struggling to leap-frog after George as an observation about the challenges of translation led to a commentary about the brilliance of first one student’s work and then another, each thread of George’s meanderings punctuated with a fit of delighted giggles. Eventually, though, my original purpose for seeing George struggled to the surface of our conversation, matters were dealt with, and I went on my way.

The following year, my relationship with George changed when I signed up for his non-fiction class. The course came highly recommended, but I worried that the year might be one protracted meeting of incomprehension, with George’s mind zipping along beyond the speed of my sluggish senses. The first few weeks seemed to prove my fears true, as the game of leap-frog began once again.

Our workshop met, discussions took place, and I took notes. Or rather, I wrote things down. My scratches were really too disjointed for the coherence-implying label “notes.” Every class, George had something new to say. He didn’t always speak at great length, but
his delivery of the words, with a confident nod of his head, suggested kernels of wisdom hidden amongst the syllables. So I wrote them down. Afterwards, I reviewed them. I considered the piece of work that we had been discussing when he made the comments. I read my notes again. And, vainly, I hoped for some spark of understanding, some way in which the comments would make sense in relationship to my own work.

Then, one day, George dropped a new word into our discussion that I had never before heard: ratiocination. By this time, I was used to feeling that a gulf of molasses lay between George’s intent and my comprehension, capturing crucial bits of meaning in its sticky depths. But at least George had previously spoken in words that, taken individually, I could identify and understand. But this was a new one. A quick glance around the table suggested that it was unknown to the rest of the workshop group as well.

George explained. Ratiocination: to take a thing to its fullest conclusion. In writing, to explore the full potential of all elements of the story, to bring them to their final, logical stand. And something about Poe and “The Fall of the House of Usher” and making implausible elements believable through an application of ratiocination.

Now, this interested me. Perhaps this idea of ratiocination was something concrete that I could apply to my own writing. George did, after all, seem to see things in our work of which we were unaware. Themes, recurring image systems, rhythms that seemed to flow spontaneously through our writing, as though our subconscious had something to say that our preoccupied, struggling writer-brains failed to notice. Maybe there was something to this idea of stepping back from the writing and looking to see what was really there, looking to see what the story was really all about. I went home and re-acquainted myself with Poe.

As the rest of the year passed, our workshop group engaged in many lively discussions and slowly, I began acquiring some of George’s language. I seemed to understand the odd phrase here and there and came to appreciate and marvel at George’s keen ear and eye, his ability to move a comma, add a period, reposition a clause and make a piece of writing sing while staying true to the author’s intention. But my mind returned frequently to the concept of ratiocination, and I now wonder if that wasn’t what George was driving at all the time.

On a smaller scale, he unfailingly encouraged us to mine each piece of our writing for the true gems he firmly believed buried within. And wasn’t that what he himself was doing the first time I met with him? Wasn’t he persevering with the translation until he found just the right word to convey the meaning of the text instead of stopping short with a reasonable facsimile? And on a grander scale, wasn’t he also encouraging us to pursue our writing goals to their full and logical conclusions? To believe in ourselves as writers?

Perhaps I am reading more into the concept of ratiocination than George intended, but now that I have left UBC, I find my thoughts drifting often to George and his workshop: his quirky twists of face, the sound-stumble of his mouth, his unabashed enthusiasm for all the work that crossed the table, and his immovable support and encouragement for each and every one of us fledgling writers. In all things, ratiocinate.

Joseph Hutchison is the author of 11 collections of poems, including The Rain At Midnight (2000), Bed of Coals (winner of the 1994 Colorado Poetry Award), House of Mirrors (1992), The Undersides of Leaves (1985), and the 1982 Colorado Governor’s Award volume, Shadow-Light. His poems and short stories have appeared in over 100 journals and in several anthologies.
Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, Joe graduated summa cum laude from the University of Northern Colorado (1972) and earned his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia (1974). He has taught elementary through high school age children for Poets in the Schools programs in Colorado and Oregon, graduate level students at the University of Denver’s University College, and adult learners online. Joe lives with his wife Melody in the mountains southwest of Denver and makes his living as a writer.

**Thread of the Real**
*(For George, who shared the path through the dark wood)*

Joseph Hutchison

Who’d have thought: setting out from a gap in the seam between foothills and plains, a pinch of cocoonish dust like me might take wing northwest and seaward, away from Nixon’s nightbound America and mine, to settle where vast sounds pour their profundities into the folds of B.C.?

Who’d have thought I’d sleepwalk into Canada’s wooded raininess, there to be startled awake by a stogie-puffing Irish Taoist?

Who was it who’d led me to believe there was no magic anymore?

* 

He’d tap my head like a top hat,
pull a poem
up from underneath
the false bottom—

all ears
and whiskery
trepidation,
a manic motor
for a heart—

and pronounce it
crafty as Bugs,
or mystical-whimsical
and soft-hearted
as Harvey.

The dark
and the spotlight
and the music, he’d say,

should amaze both
audience and illusionist,

surprise even jaded
backstage crews
and fellow tricksters

with realities
fresh and unforeseen.

*

The thread of the real
strings our words like beads
together, loops them
around our lover’s neck—
they kiss her when she walks.

Or say it’s a line of mindfulness
that curves between differently
grained materials, a strand
of cloudy glue squeezed clear
between inlays of rosewood
and blond bay laurel. . . .
Should the thread break,
our words will scatter, turn up
amidst ruins ages hence,
where some bemused digger
may take them for sacred—
and they were.

Hold tight, George said,
to that thread. Follow the ravel
wherever it leads. And if,
in the end, you find that it’s real
only for you . . . well, then:
let that be enough.

*

Everything we cherish—

Ovid’s *Tristia*, Skelton’s
“Night Poem, Vancouver Island,”

bursts of asters shadowed
by a horizontal thrust
of crannied arbutus trunk,

even your fearsome glimpse
of cormorant Death,
standing post above the tidal flats,
“drying its shadow on the rocks below”—

is salvage;
as when, reaching

back through calendars
unleaving like Goldengrove,

through moon-haunted mists,

through lamp-glow folding
around your writing desk,
lighting the padded yellow sheets
of paper your soft-spun voice
stitched itself across,

back through complexities
and perplexities, back
through silence,
back through gab,

I touch

a pattern
of unlooked-for
generosity,

long-gone and yet
there still, and always:

deep-hearted pagan spirit
who unbewildered
my tongue,

you taught me to live
on whatever this world
provides—no matter how
high or how low.

*The way up and the way down
are the same*, you said.

*Savor the journey.*

---

Desirée Jung was born in Brazil and has been living in Vancouver for the past five years. "*Imagens do Eu,*" a chapbook of her poetry, was published in Brazil in 1998. Her short story *Felizberto* was adapted into a short movie by Caverna Produções, 2002.

Notes from Translation classes
Desirée Jung

If I were to say that I owe George McWhiter for my staying four—almost five-years
at UBC as an undergraduate, and currently as a graduate student in the Creative Writing Department, I could be accused of being unfair to my other teachers.

Yes, I had classes with other genuine and vibrant professionals who have also taught me a lot--fiction, screenwriting, and radio drama--about the techniques and rules to become a successful writer. Regardless of their efforts, however, there was one main problem and it was not necessarily a problem, but a personal condition.

Overall, I guess I know about one thousand words in English. On the other hand, I know at least one million words in Portuguese (a bit of exaggeration here, just to make my point). So in order to become a published writer, I would have to learn how to express myself in English, and think in English—something that, five years in the past, I was unable to do.

It is not that I didn’t know the language. I did. Yet I was not confident, nor knowledgeable enough, to think and compose full phrases straight to English. First would come the Portuguese, then the English, and finally a mixed up version of what I was trying to say.

In my first individual hour meeting with George, he suggested that I ignore the dictionary just for a minute. I thought I had not understood. Excuse me? How do you expect me to learn English without a dictionary? I thought: I live with a dictionary, I struggle to memorize words, and that’s what you have to tell me?

George reminds me: “You cannot trust the dictionary only.”

Five years later, I don’t know how many times I did ignore this very dictionary—not because I didn’t trust it altogether, but because when it came down to what I was looking for, the dictionary wasn’t the right source.

First, because it had no idea of what I was looking for—the content, the meaning of the word, not individually but collectively, in a phrase that needs to be translated. So that’s when George’s voice popped into my mind.

“Draw it. Draw it. You have to see the image and draw the word.”

And I did just that. I drew the word in paper—its image—and I found what I was looking for—not a definition but its real meaning. The lessons stayed with me: Listen, listen to everything you see and don’t see, words, images, sounds. Learn to balance the fear of not knowing the meaning of a word with the beauty of discovering the sound of a new one.

Today I still thrive but thanks to you, George, I learned how not to fear the language and instead, confront it—its prepositions, its many phrasal verbs, adverbs, and the list goes on endlessly. But every time I look for a new word I try to guess it myself first, and only then search in the dictionary.

I cannot be more grateful to him, and his patience, when, many times, I was about to give up my attempt to write in a language which is not my own. His response? He’d just look at me, bite at his apple, and tell me: “It will come to you, don’t worry.”

And I guess he’s right, since I am writing this to you, to honor your excellence as a teacher but also as a wonderful and funny individual. Nowadays, I know I take him for granted, and at some point I even lost contact with my own language, as well as English, becoming a person without an official language, but georgeanisms instead.

“Do you know what degradante means?” I ask, in one of my latest meetings.

“Degrante is a Portuguese word, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say, “but I forgot the meaning. Do you happen to know what it means?”

“I guess it it’s the same as in Spanish, degradante, degrading, right?”

And I check.

“Yes, I say, you are right again.”
Chris Labonté's stories and articles have appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *Pagitica in Toronto*, *Quill & Quire*, and *Coming Attractions 02* (Oberon Press). He teaches creative writing at Langara College and the University of British Columbia, and works in publishing at Douglas & McIntyre. Currently at work on a novel, he lives in Vancouver.

George and dust. The only things certain in these halls.

Chris Labonte

It is nearly 6pm and the cleaning man sweeps past my open door and down the hallway, bits of hair and paper dancing in powdered clumps around his sneakers. He hums as he passes, broom in one hand, tinny music buzzing from massive headphones. Nobody else is in the creative writing department. It is summer, the fiction class long over, Pat gone for the day, the evening light just now cooling as it dips west. I pack up my books, Prism manuscripts and red pencils, shut down the computer and set the alarm. I’ve been here too long. All afternoon I’ve sorted through box upon box of ancient Prism volumes—yellowed and faded and coarse—archiving and labelling so that future editors will have an easier time finding what they need. *Marquez, Borges, Atwood, Ondaatje etc.* My nose tingles and burns. In all this shuffling and storing, it is as if I’ve carelessly loosed a million dusty words into the air, most of which have lodged themselves in the fine hairs and damp corners of my nostrils. I need fresh air. I need a moist handkerchief. I need to get out of here.

As I lock up, I hear a man singing. It is not the cleaning man—he has swung his broom and cleaning cart into Pat’s office, just across from where I stand, and is emptying Pat’s wastebasket. Down the hallway, at the far end, summer light stretches like a lazy lion cub outside George’s office. His door is open. *Elvis has not left the building.*

George. And dust.

I am tired and hungry, my sinuses ache, and I am late for home. “Do not be late!” I’ve been warned, and a wise person would heed those words, would steer wide or avoid entirely that swath of honey light pouring from George’s office. A wise person would take the other exit. But I drive hard for the one just beyond George’s office, certain that by dropping my head and muttering breathlessly I will present the convincing image of a Man in a Desperate Rush. *Sorry, George, gotta grab the bus.* Or, not looking up: ‘Night, George. Or, maybe, still muttering: *George, have a good one.*

“George,” I say, stopping just outside his door. And there he is, sitting at his computer, George the rusted-nail magus, the keeper of the house, the gentle ollamh in olive and brown. He smiles, says something mushed and low, and I take it that he wants me to come in, to witness some marvel on his computer. *Sorry, George, gotta grab the bus.* I leave my bag at the door, come around to where George is sitting, hunch down beside him. Really, who can resist a singing Irishman?

“Mexican,” George says, nodding at the computer screen. He laughs and says something I cannot quite understand, save for one word—*lovely*.

“Yes,” I say, though I am no poet and, aside from a handful of soccer terms and food items, cannot read Spanish at all. And then I see the English translation.

“Can’t quite get this right,” George says, laughing again.
A word, one single word. All day he has been hunting for the right English word, he tells me. One word. He has translated this poem of some dozen or so stanzas but cannot persuade this one word of Spanish to betray its English cousin, to sing its quality to Anglo ears. One word.

Dust. And George.

“I’ve tried this and that,” he tells me, and just laughs.

Books spill from shelves and hang from his desk and gather in corners in quiet congress, books jammed with words, lovely words, English words, but still George cannot find the right one.

“I’ve tried that and this.”

It turns out that he has tried Gaelic and Old English and Middle English, has hunted the obscure and dead and reborn. I listen carefully as motes of dust flash and flip in the evening light. There is something to be learned when a poet speaks, when George speaks. I must listen carefully, too, because George is never easy to understand, though not because of his accent—the brogue has indeed faded much from the rose—but because when he utters a single phrase, a single word, an entire world of utterances ring out, because when he speaks but one phrase, one word, he invokes all time and thought and song. Because when he speaks, to tell the truth, I get a little dizzy.

In the hall, perhaps outside Linda’s office, the cleaning man jangles his keys, scuffs his sneakers on the linoleum. Two more offices and his work is done for the day. If I was a wise person…

“How about this?” I say, suggesting a word. “Or that?”

George crosses his arms, rubs his beard. He nods, quickly slots my second suggestion into the puzzle, considers the new picture. He need not do this—the Poet taking advice from the Prosaist, the Master from his Student. He stares at the stanza, hums and finally smiles, and for a moment I am glorious with poetic victory. I am Poet, here me roar. I am Messiah and Milton, fast saviour and Shakespeare rolled into one. I can go home, blow my nose and hold my head high.

George shakes his head, deletes my word. “Close,” he says, but something in his voice, something honey-kind tells me that it was not close at all. Something in his voice tells me, too, that he and I are in it for the long haul, that we will not be set loose from the department until we’ve found this elusive word.

So, George talks and I listen, and all the while my head spins, my sinuses ache and burn. The cleaning man ploughs by George’s office, whipping up a plume of dust with his broom. I hold my breath as dust wafts into the room, and I am reminded of the First Immutable Law of the Conservation of Dust: Dust is never eradicated; it is only transferred from one corner to the next.

George slides a worn leather bound dictionary from a nearby shelf, careful to hold it firm lest it fall to the floor in a crush of powder. He pats the cover with great, gentle hands, and a puff of fine dust leaps from the leather and mingles with the other motes floating about us.

“How’s see,” he says, coaxing the dictionary open.

But I cannot. I cannot see. My eyes, clouded with dust, burn and water and grate. I try to listen to George, but my head swims. A cloud passes, and for a moment the room is dark. I smell sweet incense and hear a cricket calling in the corner. Pat will not be pleased. The papers strewn over George’s desk rustle, though the window is closed and there is no breeze, no air-conditioning, no fan in the office. The cloud passes, and in the pink summer light I see green leaves and fresh shoots stretching out beneath the papers. The cleaning man winks as he passes, puckish and coy, as he departs for the day. It occurs to me that I should go, too, but for some reason I cannot get up. I smell sweet incense again, but it is not incense but wild flowers—trefoil and seamrog and chamomile—sprouting from the mess of papers and books on desks and shelves. The sun sets behind us and the moon rises fat and milky. And still George has not found his word. Surely I should leave. The sun rises and sets, rises and sets—the moon shows her blonde face six times—and still George
hunts.

A star streaks across the ceiling and one of the plants sprouting from George’s desk begins to grow and grow, stretching and unfurling, the stem growing thicker than a fire hydrant, a single fat flower bud ballooning towards the ceiling. It fills the better half of the room, this plant, and continues to grow. A high, taut sound, like a screaming pressure cooker fills my ears, and I cover my head for fear that the bud will burst. And still, George talks. I try to listen to him, but my ears are ringing, my sinuses a molten mess, my eyes twitching and wet.

“Ah,” George says, suddenly turning to me, nodding as if he was expecting all of this to happen.

With a piercing shriek, the bud pops, and great billowy petals flutter against the ceiling, raining fine pollen everywhere. There is nothing I can do.

I sneeze.

I sneeze hard, because this is how I sneeze, how my grandfather and mother have always done it. I cover my nose and mouth in time to save George’s monitor from a barrage of fine spray and goo. My nose no longer burns, thank goodness, and my head feels clear and sharp. The great flower and the streaking star, the setting and rising of the sun and moon, all of this stops, returns to normal. But something isn’t quite right about my sinuses, my nostrils.

“Let me see,” George says, dabbing at my nose with his handkerchief. My nose leaves red blots on the handkerchief, but this is not what interests George. It isn’t my nose he wants to see.

“Open your hands.”

“Pardon me?”

“Your hands.”

What does he hope to see? A chunk of nostril? A mucchal sheen? Fine pixels of blood? And why should I show him? I should just get up and go home.

I open my hands, palms up.


I peer into my hands, half scared to find a bloody, snotty mess. But my hands are mostly clean. That is, save for an inky blotch that looks as though it has been stamped on my right palm by the bouncer at some night club.

“What the hell?” I say, for this strange tattoo, this single word had not been there before. George laughs, puts away his dictionary. He says something I cannot quite understand, but for one word—Eureka.

He pats my back, like a foreman to a new employee who has just put in a good day of hard labour.

“Go home,” he says, placing his fingers on the keyboard. “That’ll do.”

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**Carl Leggo** is a poet and professor who seeks to live poetically, hoping that others will hear the poetry in their hearts, and explore the possibilities of rhythms in juxtapositions and prepositions for knowing the world ecologically and algorithmically.

While he is still sorting out the difference between enjambment and being in a jam and partridgeberry jam, he is steadfastly committed to asking questions about the value of poetry,
and suggests that instead of asking,
Is this a good poem?, we could ask,
What is this poem good for?
Above all, he is convinced
that the world aches with wanting
poetry without knowing what it wants.

**Lines Amidst Tangles**
Carl Leggo

in the midst of composing a poem,
*I do not find it easy to be a human being,*
I lost both my composure and my words,
knew only I had much to say,
but no words for saying even a little

so in some despair, and much need of repair,
I asked George if I could visit his workshop
(I was in need of emergency care)
and there found the lost words, or other words,
through an autumn and winter into spring

with Luanne, Ellen, Ramona, Belinda, Andrea,
all enthused by George who heard the words
we didn’t write but intended or wanted to,
and reminded us how the teacher hears
with the eyes of the heart, speaks softly,

and scribbles copious notes in the margins,
because like reading a map, he sees the path
in tangled lines, knows the wholeness
in fragments that refract light with endless
fractal abandon beyond the alphabet

unlike the Spartan alphabet I learned to write
in school, pressed between parallel lines
eschewing swirls curls whirls, while George,
poet, translator, fiction-maker, knows
lived experience knows little of linearity

sentenced by the sentence to the lie of linearity
conjured in syntax and semantics, George instead
savour prepositions conjunctions transitions
to unite difference and multiplicity and so dwells
in the spaces between here and there, knows this place,

never consumed by past or future, knows
remembering includes forgetting and imagining:
George is a glossator who ventures into the dark
places like a tangle of possibilities, firm
in the confidence, at least hope, of the destination

Arthur M. Lipman was born and educated in England and lived for twelve years in Brazil. A variety of his poetry has been published in “little” literary magazines in England, Canada, Brazil, and the U.S. over the last sixty years. A collection of his sonnets on Brazil, Saudades was published in Brazil in 1939.

A Letter to George McWhirter
Arthur Lipman

Dear George,

Welcome to the Over-65-Club—to the wonderful world of geriatric freedom! From now on, unimpaired by academic responsibilities and an agenda carved in stone, you will be able to get up when you wake up, eat when you’re hungry, sleep when you’re tired and have all the time in the world to do the things you want to do rather than those you have to do (you will also get free parking at UBC now that you no longer need it). You are certainly not the typical retiree—I think you share my conviction that the word “retire” signifies exactly what it implies—to go backwards, to go early to bed or to retreat quietly into the aimless boredom of God’s waiting room. In your case I feel sure that forced retirement at the height of your intellectual maturity comes not as a trauma but as a relief from the unpoetic burden of a structured life—the gift of an endless sabbatical where (to quote one of your own poems) you will be free to spend your time “turning somersaults with dolphins.”

I’ve been a member of that same Over-65-Club for more years than I care to remember. At 75 I decided that if retirement really meant “to go back” then I would do just that—go back as an undergraduate to school. There I would test the truth of Will Durant’s dictum that education is a progressive discovery of one’s own ignorance. (It is!) It was at UBC where we first crossed paths, although it was several years later, after I had switched to a creative writing major, that I first came under your spell. In 1998 I had the privilege of working closely with you in the final year of my studies for a BFA degree and regarded you as my mentor—indeed, I still do. Every year since then I have spent each summer looking forward to being a participant in yet another of your stimulating translation or poetry seminars (enjoying every moment of our frequent squabbles over the choice of synonyms).

The gentle understanding you bring to teaching (and to your insightful translations of Mexican poetry) is shaped, I believe, by the polarity of the exotic ambience of the places where you have lived and worked (Spain, Mexico the South Seas and the rough interior of British Columbia) and the hard-edged, down-to-earth rationality of a young Irish lad growing up in the Shankill Road. This is what makes you a very special teacher, so different from the academic norm. You teach by example and suggestion rather than by diktat. You understand
instinctively that the art of creative writing is by its very nature neither black nor white, only shadows and shades of ever-changing colours. Your style is not that of a man with all the answers, feeding information to the uninformed. You have no truck with pomposity, rather you reflect a sense of humility, a modesty which hides the depth of your talents. Because of this your students are relaxed—they trust you, and with your good natured humour never feel intimidated, not even by the low-key Socratic irony you sometimes trot out to deal with hard-core cases. When you are gone the big losers will be a generation of students deprived of your empathetic encouragement, the fruits of your lifetime experience and the pleasure of your light-handed approach to intellectual rigour.

During all the years I have worked with you nothing has impressed me more than your insistence that poetry is music and should appeal to the ear as much as it does to the heart. This is exemplified in your translation classes to which you bring an innate ability to sense the wrong word, the wrong synonym, the wrong tone or the wrong phrasing in a translation from a language such as Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Urdu or Farsi, of which you know absolutely nothing, let alone the ability to read or write it. You listen to the rhythms, ask the student translator a few incisive questions as to the precise meaning of things that sound awkward in English, and somehow everything falls into place and a decent translation is created.

I will miss the barely restrained uproar that passes for a normal ambience in your classes, a roar which becomes absolute commotion when you suddenly decide (as you often do) to come up with some outrageous suggestion like substituting a perfectly appropriate word with an outlandish Irish idiom that nobody has ever heard of (probably neither have you). I used to wonder why you did this, especially since you invariably backed off, restoring the original word to its rightful place. Now I know better; as the class howls in protest I look for a twinkle in your eye and realize that you know exactly what you are doing and that this is just a purposeful ruse to encourage debate and promote vigorous discussion.

George Bernard Shaw, your namesake and fellow Irish man of letters, was a writer who shared your delight in playing with words. He merely wooed the English with his blarney while you have enriched generations of young Canadians with your talent. The other George, GBS, wrote that “He who can does. He who cannot, teaches.” Too bad he didn’t live long enough to join in the fun and commotion of one of your unforgettable classes. He would have changed his mind on both counts.

Thanks, George, for having helped enrich my life.

Erin Go Bragh.

June 2003

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Renee Norman, PhD, is an award-winning poet, a writer, and a teacher. She completed her doctorate at UBC in 1999 and received the outstanding dissertation award from the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies. Her dissertation, “House of Mirrors: Performing Autobiograph(ically) in Language/Education” focuses on women’s autobiographical writings, including her own, and on autobiography in language/literacy education, and was published as a book by Peter Lang Publishers, NY, in 2001.

Renee’s poetry, stories, and articles have been published widely in many literary and academic journals, such as Canadian Woman Studies, Prairie Journal, Freefall, and English Quarterly.
as well as in anthologies and newspapers. She has received poetry and nonfiction prizes for her work. Renee is one of twelve Canadian woman poets whose poetry is featured in The Missing Line, published by Inanna Publications in 2004. A book of poetry, “True Confessions,” is forthcoming with Inanna Publications.

Currently Renee teaches in a Fine Arts program in Vancouver School District. She lives in Coquitlam, BC, with her three daughters Sara, Rebecca, and Erin, and her husband Don.

Renee Norman

I first encountered George McWhirter in his office in the Creative Writing Department. I'd come to ask if he would work with me in an independent study, a slight rearrangement of some of the courses in which I had enrolled. I wasn't even a Creative Writing student. I was from the Language and Literacy Education Department, taking cross-disciplinary courses for my PhD. It was only later when I'd signed up for tutorials on George's office door timetable that I realized how very many people this man mentored, and what a gift of his time he'd given me. George asked that first meeting if I had written any poems, and I pulled some from my briefcase. He took me in on faith, and those poems, and it was the beginning of a several years journey during which time my poetry and I were generously "georged". I write that I, too, underwent transformation because no matter what I wrote, and my area is writing autobiographically, George understood me and what I was trying to say even when I did not.

George taught me how to turn words so they were more poetic, how to shape a poem more rhetorically, and how to cut and pare. But he also taught me how to look at what I was writing and where I was going with it. It was a bit like seeing a shrink, those one-on-one tutorials, and sometimes I felt I'd left parts of myself there in his office. I didn't always understand what the hell he was even saying, his red hair and leprechaun face aflame like his absolute inner brilliance. But I absorbed something, or so I hoped, and I'd read and reread those jewelled pencilled comments that I never completely figured out.

He wasn't always right, either. There were poems he told me to tuck away in my diary that were published in literary journals by some soul who saw something in them that George didn't. And there were poems he said to send to the New Yorker (my heart pounding from the understated praise) that took years to find homes.

Then George agreed to be on my doctoral committee, and in that role he offered support when I needed it most after a particularly tense committee meeting. He pushed and questioned me, too, so again I had to face myself and what my work was about. I remember what he asked at my oral examination, PhD almost in hand: How did I feel about others writing autobiographically about me? With three teenage daughters, I am still answering George's question.

In my book, House of Mirrors, which is my doctoral dissertation with a few cosmetic changes that George had earlier suggested (and I had resisted), I pay homage to George, as I do so again here. I also write about the writing journey with George in one section, and there I say: "‘You need a project,’ said George, and I thought I already had one. Was he tired of reading about my ordinary life? Couldn't be. He told me once that the strangest characters he had ever met—and he reads a lot of fiction and poetry—were the ones he'd met in my poetry, out of my ordinary life. Was he feeling my own indirection, my sense that I had no life anymore unless I had something in it to write about, my fear that each poem I write is my last, I have nothing more to say, that's it, I'm finished, empty, storyless, bottomed out?"
In my book, as in the *Book of George*, George McWhirter glows in and between the lines.

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gary william rasberry is an artist, educator and parent who lives in the Old Stone School House in Yarker, Ontario with his partner Rena, his two children Hayden and Zinta, as well as two cats, Buzz and Forbes, a dog named Magpie, and a pregnant guinea pig named September. He is currently in the studio recording a project entitled, The Half-way Around the World Waltz Collection. His children in the photo are Hayden and Zinta.

… that every feather is a pen, but living, flying …

—Don McKay[i]

[because George’s flight patterns are his own and because Activity #218a is a pedagogical impossibility in the world of McWhirter …]

Still Life with Workshop
Writing Pedagogy: Activity # 218a

Try this for fun: have everyone bring in their All-Time piece of Favourite fiction or poetry. Draw attention to how precise and beautiful and perfectly perfect these pieces of writing seem. Exult and give praise to all of this Beauty. Worship the writer(s). Commit literary idolatry: happily. Without shame or guilt. Notice how some of the turns of phrases could not possibly be constructed in any other way. Obsess over how long it must have taken these writers to get to this level of mastery. Supplement the discussion with particularly painful and poignant descriptions of how arduous and impossible writing is.

Once everyone is suitably subdued and numb, invite them to begin writing their own perfect poem or story. Add reminders that it is absolutely imperative to get the first line right. Remind them that this is no bird course. Encourage them to take flight.

[i] taken from Don McKay’s poem titled “Field Marks (2),” from a collection called *Birding, or desire*. (The citation is found on p. 75.) McKay, Don (1983). *Birding, or desire*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

black-letter stammer
(for a 1948 olivetti that lives in the forest)
(for night: black.) (for George …)
twenty-two frogs are fucking in the south swamp, i swear
it’s true as a metaphor for moonlight or

black as the paddle’s dip into midnight
where there’s no need for push or pull.

type-written and dead afraid of these metal signposts that point
to where i am not.

maybe to be lost first would suggest a way
out instead of worrying about where the keys are.

a confusion of night with sound
otherwise the gift is completely realized

when metal strikes a chord
to pattern the owl.

afraid of adjusting the ribbon,
touch without touching until

everyone guesses a winner—
under the O: autumn.

earth stone
naked jewellery, tab-keyed night noises,

the odd carriage return. hummous
and darker even,

poems that move downhill to fall below
sunset which has already kissed so many

full and hard and fleeting.
red and orange stains remember dying

and a locomotive waking up the forest,
metal-on-metal: a black-letter’d stammer

hammering the night colourless.
imagine being so awake

in the forgetting. i swear it’s all true
especially
Robert Stotesbury-Leeson has just recently graduated from UBC with a major in English Literature. His fiction, non-fiction and translation work has appeared in Space Ways, The Calgary Herald and The Book Of George.

The Music of Words
Rob Stotesbury-Leeson

In my first year at UBC, I had the opportunity to take George’s creative non-fiction course. I would watch spellbound when George’s expressive face danced as he played with a phrase here and tweaked a word there. I have to admit that I often left our Thursday class elated and stymied.

The confusion arose, I think, from a long atrophied muscle stirring back to life. Like many people, my ability to appreciate poetry had been hobbled by English classes more interested in pulling the wings off butterflies than appreciating what they were—beautiful butterflies.

I came to George one day with several poems a classmate had submitted. The poems frightened me—I had no idea what to do with them. George smiled warmly and replied with a gentle certainty, “You’ll know what to do with them.” I left his office elated and stymied. The poems had lost the boogey-man quality that I had assigned to them, but I couldn’t explain how. I think that’s George’s special gift; he teaches you without you realizing that you’re being taught.
I have started to hear the music of the words again.

Jenny Wagler is a Vancouver writer and linguist. She is currently finishing her B.A. in Chinese Language and Creative Writing at UBC. Translation is the natural meeting ground of her love of writing and her fascination with languages—besides Chinese, she speaks fluent French, a smattering of Italian, and is about to embark on a crash course in modern Greek.
George Watching

Jenny Wagler

It’s hard to take your eyes off George. I haven’t entirely figured out why that is. Perhaps it’s because you don’t want to miss his words. *Wheelie chairs. Goojies. Quasi-rhymie thingy-wingys.* Words to rankle stolid academia. Or perhaps it’s because, on a poet’s word-quest, he may start to move about or motion bizarrely with his hands, as he feels his way toward the right verb. Or perhaps it’s because you never know when he’ll start to laugh and you’ll be swept up into some gorgeous inside joke that you are a part of, even though you don’t quite get it. Mostly, though, it’s because, even across a full workshop, you’re certain he’s watching you, personally, right back.

My first sense of George filtered, via very slow internet connection, into a ramshackle hut on an island off the east coast of Malaysia. I was attempting to register at our illustrious institution of learning, and, intrigued by a certain course in creative non-fiction, I had fired off an e-mail to one George McWhirter. Considering I was island-bound and not in a position to throw together a proper manuscript, would he consider me for his course based on a dozen or so travel e-mails?

Send them in a.s.a.p. wrote George.

I was surprised. It had been a bit of a long shot, and I was expecting a flat refusal—a haven’t-you-read-our-requirements-and-do-you-really-think-we-care-if-you’re-stranded-on-an-island type response. When, several weeks later, I was notified that I could take the course—because of or despite my anecdotes of scorpion-slaying and the like—I was flabbergasted. That’s when I sensed it: somewhere, through the tangle of UBC and cyberspace, a real person was looking right back at me on my island.

Three years and three courses with George later, I am a long, long way from figuring him out. He is warm, smart, humble, insightful, ridiculous, entertaining, and frequently baffling. He knows more words than anyone I’ve ever met. Even if you don’t count the ones he makes up.

And so I continue to watch George, intrigued, inspired, amused, and slightly awed. And you know, I’m still convinced he’s watching me right back.