

# A Conversation With Bill Gaston, UNB's Writer in Residence

Interview by Lise Elsliger

**L.E.** - Maybe you could start by telling me a bit about yourself. You've worked at St. Mary's University?...

*I was in Halifax for three years before this; I worked at St. Mary's and Mount St. Vincent - part time at both places - and before that I spent a year in Toronto at Seneca College; and before that I was in Vancouver and that's where I'm from, more or less.*

**L.E.** - What did you teach at St. Mary's?

*First year English. You get thirty commerce students hating your guts because you're making them write essays. Half the time you spend being a clown, trying to keep them awake.*

**L.E.** - So you've graduated from the University of British Columbia?

*Yes, I've got an M.A. in English and a Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing.*

**L.E.** - What kind of writer would you consider yourself to be?

*Some critics have called my work "magic realist"; and I have written some magic realist stories, some of which are in my collection, Deep Cove Stories. I'm sometimes likened to the West Coast magic realists like Jack Hodgins and Leon Rooke. But if anything I fall somewhere between realism and magic realism. I call it - I call myself - an exaggerator. That's what I do: I exaggerate things. So the events that I depict are unlikely to occur in real life but they're not impossible.*

**L.E.** - You have mentioned at one of your readings that one of the characters in your novel *Tall Lives* was modelled on someone you knew. Do you often do that?

*No, actually, I don't model characters on people I know. Sometimes they're a combination of people. But no, I never take one person and base a character on that person. I've never done that in my life half through fear and half because I've so far found "real" people I know inappropriate for my brand of fiction. But I might take Jim's quirky speech and add John's physical presence and add Alex's career and then twist it up further with my imagination.*

**L.E.** - Do you have a specific goal in mind when you are writing?

*Sometimes yes. It's getting less like that though. I used to be more preachy. I had ideas that I thought I might be important, a bit of a blabber-mouth preacher, but not nearly so much anymore. But I do think that there is good to be done*

*in the world and that maybe my little part might have something to do with writing and that I can maybe wake somebody up about something. It's not that I'm arrogant enough to think that I could teach everybody something but maybe there are a few people out there that I can make see something in a new way and it might spark something in them. I like to think that I'm doing a little more than just entertaining.*

**L.E.** - Could you explain to me how this works: being a writer in residence. How do you get to be chosen to be a writer in residence?

*One is chosen by invitation. I got a phone call last year saying that I was on a short list of five or ten and if chosen would I come? And I said: "Certainly, I'd love to". They called me some time later and said I'd been chosen. So that's it.*

*When I was at UBC we had writers in residence and one was Tennessee Williams and one was Alice Munro: both very famous people. But I'm not a big name at all. So the difference here is that - and I'm grateful for it - UNB wants to invite up-and-coming writers, people who actually need the time. Before, I had to work at all sorts of jobs and had very little time to write. So now I have all this time. It's great.*

**L.E.** - Do you write poetry?

*Yes, I've published a lot of it in literary magazines, the *Fiddlehead* for example. And I have a book of poems called *Inviting Blindness*, coming out this year. Let me also add that *Tall Lives* is now out in paperback. A number of people have complained that they can't afford the hardcover.*

**L.E.** - Do you have any pointers for writers who would like to get their work published?

*Sure. For people who are beginning to write and would like to do it: take risks, go way beyond their own life, go beyond themselves. To not necessarily write about "an English undergraduate."*

**L.E.** - So, in other words, one should not only "write about what one knows?"

*That's one of the worst rules ever invented, because we know a lot more than what's in our own skin. For instance, you can write about somebody lost at sea, because you know what fear is like. You know what rage is. You know what the whole range of emotions are. So it's possible to transplant one's experience into an imagined character. It's not that difficult, though there are certain points of view that I wouldn't attempt certainly.*

**L.E.** - What do you think a work of fiction needs to be publishable?

*Well, what I was just talking about I guess. There's a very elusive spark. It needs brilliance. I'm not saying that you have to have genius to be a good writer, that you have to be consistently brilliant, but you have to somehow - for a moment anyway - ascent to a little bit of brilliance. There has to be little bits of brilliance in the story or poem. And any little bits of brilliance I ever stumble on are purely accidental. The work has to have these little glimmers, and you can only get them by taking risks, I think.*

**L.E.** - Do you think anyone's capable of that or only certain people?

*I think more people are capable than they think.*

**L.E.** - Now, more technically, if someone were looking to get something published, how would that person go about getting a publisher?

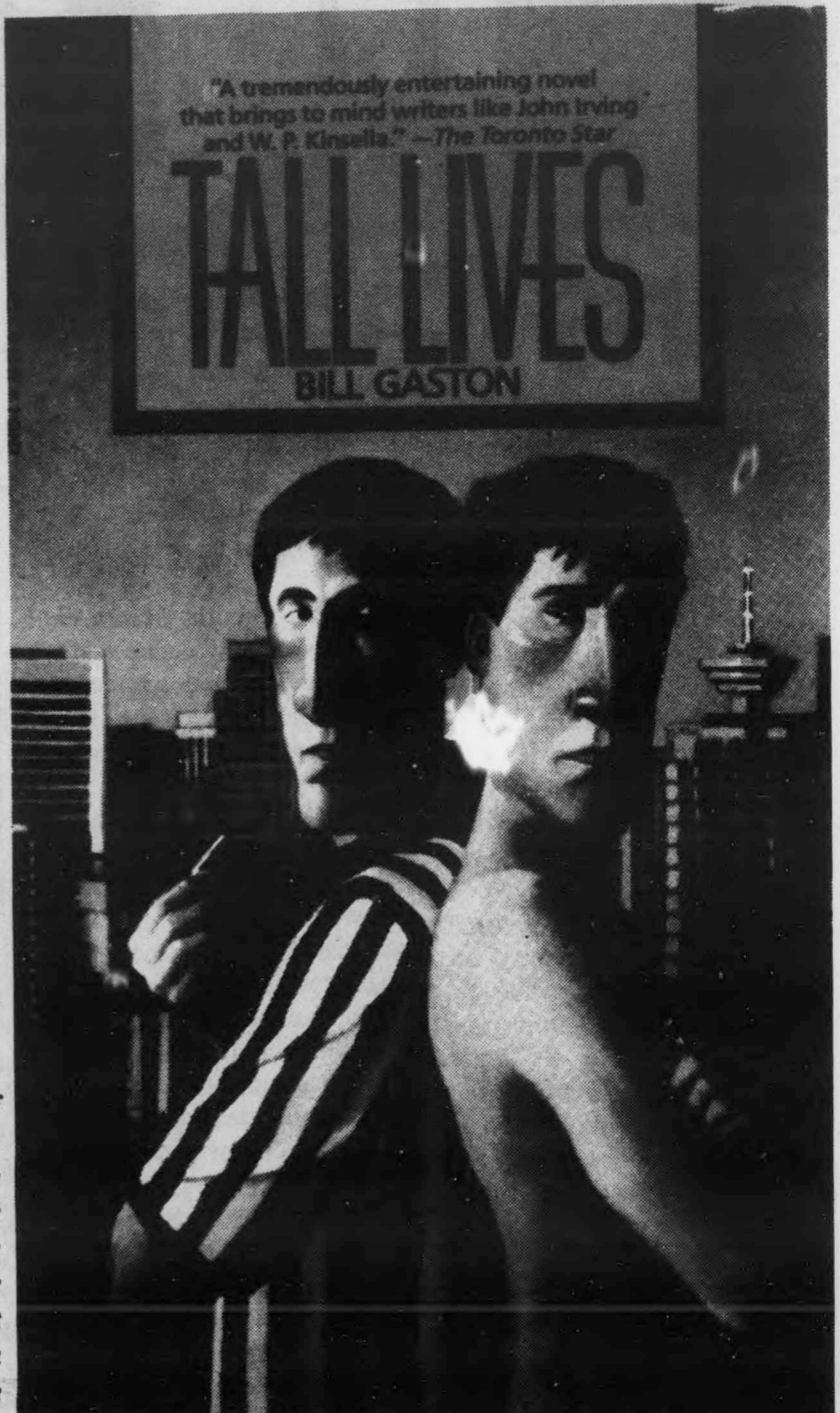
*It's getting harder and harder to get something published. First of all you would start with the journals. I'm talking about literary fiction here. If you have stories or poems kicking around and you're very serious about writing, that's the way most people do it. They get a certain number published, get a bit of a resume going, publish five stories or twenty poems and then start considering getting a book together and approaching publishers with a manuscript. Most people also go to the small presses first. Know who you're sending to. For instance, M & S very rarely publishes collections of stories, unless you're Alice Munro. Even if it's brilliant they'll rarely take an unpublished writer. You should know that beforehand. Read the publications which you send to, otherwise it's a complete shot in the dark and your chances are reduced.*

**L.E.** - Is there something else you'd like to say to people out there, something you think they should know?

*It's hard to discuss things that are so general, and yet apply to most people. Usually writing problems are specific to each person. Here's one: You never get rich. If you're thinking of money, forget it.*

**L.E.** - What are you working on now?

*A novel. Actually, a novel and a collection of stories. I'm about three quarters through the collection and I'm beginning the novel. I guess it'll be my Fredericton novel. It's partly based here.*



**L.E.** - Can you tell us anything about it?

*I don't want to say much but except that it's about Hollywood North - you know, the film industry in Canada - and it has a quirky love triangle. It's about a retired actress who's fed up with the gliitz who comes to live in Fredericton to raise her child because she finds it such a healthy place.*

**L.E.** - You say an actress. Do you find it hard writing from a woman's point of view?

*That's an interesting question. You know that it's a current one, right?*

**L.E.** - Yes, that's why I'm asking. You know the two points of view?

**L.E.** - No I'm not fully aware of them.

*Well, one is that a certain group in the Writer's Union is pushing for the idea that you shouldn't be allowed to write from somebody else's point of view, the reasons being that men have traditionally - writing from a woman's point of view - kept harmful stereotypes alive. And also, in writing from a native's point of view, have not only kept stereotypes alive but have made a lot of money off people who otherwise wouldn't want to tell their own story. I agree with the*

*general sense of the argument. If it has a harmful edge, it's wrong. But I don't agree that you should be restricted from writing from another point of view, per se.*

**L.E.** - Which becomes a form of censorship.

*Yes, very much so. I don't think that stereotypes should be propagated, but there are very sensitive people who write from other points of view who are aware of the stereotypes and don't want to promote them. Also I think it's difficult to write - for me to write - from a female point of view. I don't do it well, I don't think. Actually some critics say I do it very badly. But I think one should try. Trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes is interesting. And you certainly get more insight into what it might be like being a woman. In so far as I can experience a bit of that, it's good to try.*

**L.E.** - Is there anything else you'd like to add?

*Yes. A big part of my job here is to read people's work. So I'd like to formally invite people in the university community who do write to come in and show me their work and I can give them my two bits. That's why I'm here.*

# Go

By Paul Car

This is a Mozart love story. This is a special time of year, since Amadeus Mozart was born on January 27, 1756; tomorrow is the 200th anniversary of his birth. The light of his love of Mozart was a good idea about him.

It's several centuries of debated who the composer is or Mozart. My friends and I discussed our discussion very well. We were rather feelings for works... at which we know precious feelings.

In those days my favorite majesty of sense of splendour and grandeur through even the structuring.



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