

Smith breaks all the rules

lish language in Quebec. He shrugs, "Sure you hear it. It has its limits. I mean, I can't write a story about a depanneur and expect anyone outside of Montreal to know that I'm talking about a convenience store."

Glint in eye, he observes, "You know the great thing about a depanneur is that you can buy beer there." Smith laughs and not altogether facetiously.

Something connects and he's off again. "It's impossible to buy a drink for a French Canadian. I empathize with the Quebecois. There has been hostility towards French Canadians. I think that's terrible."

"They were beleaguered. The law was laid down limiting their right to a language. During the 60's, the Quiet Revolution, there was an explosion of energy. Unfortunately, it manifested itself through separatism. Politics are irritating."

Business at the writer-in-res office is slower than expected. "Last term 23 people dropped in; of those, two were students."

He shakes his head, "I imagined that I'd always have four or five people sitting around my desk arguing about whether D.H. Lawrence is a male chauvinist pig or not." Again that glint, "He is, you know, but he's easy to get themes out of so people like to teach him." Smith laughs again, not totally facetiously.

"I'm not intimidating, I'm cheerful and friendly," he smiles a cock-eyed smile. Smith understands that students might be intimidated, "If there had been a writer in residence around when I was in school, I probably wouldn't have gone around."

"I'm here so that students can see a 'living' writer. You know," he

pinches his arm, "pinch to see if I'm real." He swivels in his chair, "Books all look the same. They don't reflect the effort which goes into writing them."

Unrewarded effort is something Smith has seen. While his first works, *Cape Breton* is the Thought-Control Centre of Canada and *Lord Nelson Tavern*, were hailed as the mark of an established writer, Smith's next books met rejection after rejection. "I wrote a comic spy thriller in '81. I think it works." That rejection really set Smith back. He explained in an earlier interview, "It took two years to get over that, two very, very bad years."

The phone rings... a writer.

"Sure I can read something that is single-spaced."

"Oh, a novel, well bring over fifty pages. I'll see what I can get through. I will definitely read the first twenty pages and then take it from there. Sure, I'll see you then."

Smith hangs up, "I don't know if I can read fifty pages. I'm looking after the kid. My wife is an airline attendant who works out of Montreal. I look after the baby."

Given the demands on his time, discipline is integral to Smith's writing schedule. "I always thought of myself as lazy. Writing is a different discipline that way. Writers are completely independent. You can't blame anybody else for what you do. You do it yourself."

As Smith so aptly put it in *Three Propositions for Writing*, "When on the Day of Judgement, the Great critic comes to rate the great novels, the only ones under consideration will be the ones which have been written down."

"As for myself, I work early in the day. It's hard to work after getting elbowed in the Safeway," he shrugs. "You have to be brutal about time."

Time is a great consideration, "I'm a very slow writer. Only one story, and a very good one at that, came to me quickly... it took me three weeks to write it."

Others have it easier, "Marie Claire Blais writes brilliantly, the way the rest of us breathe. She had written her first novel at 18."

The word novel triggers another outpouring, "The novel is such a long form. You have to hold the whole thing in suspension, keep it balanced in air for so long. You don't need patience, you need to be dogged," Smith sighs.

Of the writers he sees, Smith says, "I'd never tell them they didn't have talent. I won't tell them it's garbage. First of all, unless you're Marie Claire Blais, you're going to make a lot of false starts. Writers have to learn to make their own judgements."

Smith shrugs, "They'll find out." And as an afterthought, "Who am I to judge?"

As for the truly brilliant students, "I see a lot of them getting into video. There is so much known skill involved in writing that it almost looks like the priesthood. People say 'sure, that's great, but your grammar

is bad'. You invent your own grammar in video."

"You know, I think Shakespeare invented drama right there. He made new rules. In one play he leaps 17 years and I can hear him saying 'Take that, Greeks, I don't need your three unities'."

Smith eyes his typewriter. Would he opt for a word processor? "Sure, but servicing it would be expensive. It's usually the printer which goes. Run off a couple of 350 page novels and it might burn out. I bought my computer 25 years ago, that's my capital investment."

Another discourse, "It's hard to explain the relationship between the words given the medium you use to put them down. Most people tell me that with word processors they become more efficient, but sloppier."

"I like to work on a typewriter. John Metcalfe does everything by hand, changing paper types and writing utensil. He starts on yellow legal pads with a pencil and finishes on fifty percent rag in fountain pen."

Smith reaches for his manuscript, "I like very good paper when I type; I had to order this from the stationery." He holds up a sheet of paper.

His eyes peruse the books on the shelf. "Jane Austen is just wonderful. *Tristram Shandy* was the most important piece I looked at in university. I didn't read it. I looked at it and realized that something was going on here."

Smith gets up and opens the book,

"Look at this," he opens the book to a chapter which is completely blank. "I found out that you could do anything you please... there are no rules... or different rules."

Story by
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Photo by
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