

Interview

The first season of Lesley Choyce

So, you're from the States?

Yeah. New Jersey

How did you end up in Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia?

Well, I'd been here before, actually. I came up here as a teenager, on a surfing trip with a buddy, travelling around in a van, looking for places to surf, great waves, and it stuck in my mind that Nova Scotia would be a great place to live.

It ended up I was teaching in New York City and commuting from the hills of New Jersey and living up here in the summers, and I decided the time had come. Oh, it was also partly because I'd reached a point where I'd actually have to start paying income tax. Well, real income tax, which means so much of it would be going to the military that I'd either have to refuse to pay the taxes and go through a bunch of court things for years or go to jail, or leave the country. So between the desire to live in Nova Scotia and the desire to not pay taxes to the military . . .

I think, too, just trying to find a place where everything looked the way it was supposed to look — that is, a nice open coastline with really unpolluted ocean, lots of elbow room, some trees and farms and rocks and all that that's not developed or owned by wealthy people. You can't find that on the east coast of the USA; you can't find it on the west coast, either. So you either go someplace far far away or you move to Nova Scotia.



Way back you said that you freelanced for a while. Can one make a living being a freelance writer?

You really have to bust your ass, you have to be very competitive, very aggressive and reasonably good. I did some work for MacLean's. I

did a story on boxing. I submitted 20 ideas for interesting articles but they wanted something that people "understood about the maritimes", which meant writing about the fisheries or boxing. I was paid well, but the work was not rewarding.

To carve out a really healthy lifestyle as a writer you have to learn to live on a small amount of money so you don't have to write about things other people want you to write — for example, "business writing". I wanted to write poetry and fiction. So I don't make much of an income, but I write exactly the things I want to write, not for the markets. It's much more fun and much more rewarding.

In *An Avalanche of Ocean*, this is the part that really got torn apart by Will French of the *Globe*; I said that I was an anti-materialist, that I tried to avoid making money. In New York, it looked like I was headed for a high-paying job and responsibility and money, so I moved to Nova Scotia, where it's easy to avoid making money.

It's too easy to make money doing the things you don't want to do. Do for the love of doing, that's a more honest orientation. And money doesn't always come from the thing I'm doing, but falls out of the sky from the left hand.

I know you run *Pottersfield Press* and you're involved in the *Writers' Federation*. When do you find the time to write?

If I spent too much time writing I'd lose my marbles. You become too obsessed with your writing, too closed in a way. Not dealing with the rest of the world and too sensitive about your writing. Then editors will reject it and reviewers will trample on it and you think, "Oh, that is my life, I struggled years doing this and now I discover that it's a piece of shit!" That's too painful and I'm happier juggling, so you can always ignore one thing for a time — "Oh, that's up in the air now."

I've heard excerpts from *The Second Season* of Jonas MacPherson on *Morningside*. Do you feel like an up-and-coming Canadian writer, or is that an ignorant question?

No; I do. A lot of good things are coming out of this novel. It seems to be a little more than usual. Of course, the ideal in this career is to never be too successful early on in your life. It's not as extreme in books as it is in rock'n'roll, like Jimi Hendrix or Jim Morrison; they got too much all at once. The ideal is to have your greatest novel ready 15 minutes before you croak when you're 80 years old. The worst thing is to be like a high-school football hero, glory days early then from there on it's nothing but beer bellies and hangovers.

Who are your favourite Canadian writers?

W.P. Kinsella, the author of *Shoeless Joe*, and Alden Nowlan, a poet from New Brunswick. I have a wide range of . . . not influences, but ones I like to read, borrow . . . well, steal ideas, butts and pieces of ideas, like every writer. You read something and think, "Wow, that's really interesting the way they did that, now I'll borrow it, only I'll do it my way."

John Parr of the *Toronto Star* called you the "'80s Thoreau". How does that make you feel?

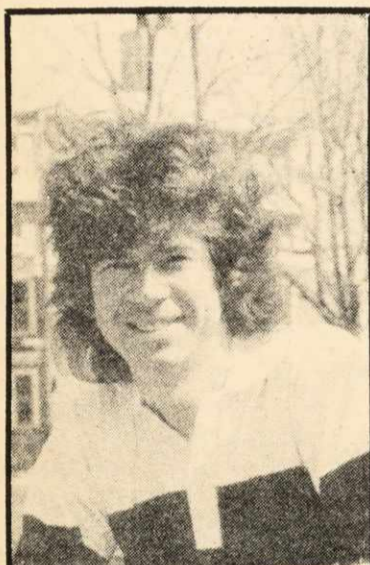
That's okay. They like to paint you into a niche. I'm pretty free-ranging.

Are you a "Canadian writer"?

There is no framework, no tradition. If you say "I rebel", "I am new and revolutionary", then they say therefore you are following in the tradition of Whitman and Ginsberg, and you can't ever escape. You will always fall back into a certain kind of tradition. I don't worry about that. I write what I write, then I go in search of a new publisher, every time.

Everybody in the business tells me I'm doing absolutely everything dead wrong — going about being a literary writer, that is. I was in Toronto and a friend of mine, a literary agent, said, "You should write one kind of book and develop a readership for that book."

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Lesley Choyce is a local writer, publisher, teacher and peace activist. He has recently received an award for his work with Channel 10 for the program *Choyce Words*.

Do you like living in Canada better than living in the States?

Oh, yeah. Growing up in the States, I always had a desire to live in a civilized country, so the opportunity was there . . .

You don't consider the USA a civilized country?

No, not really. It has a veneer of civilization, and there are some very wonderful people that I love dearly there, but the government is incapable of providing the most basic . . . the society is incapable of providing the most basic, fundamental human needs like medical care for people who need it.

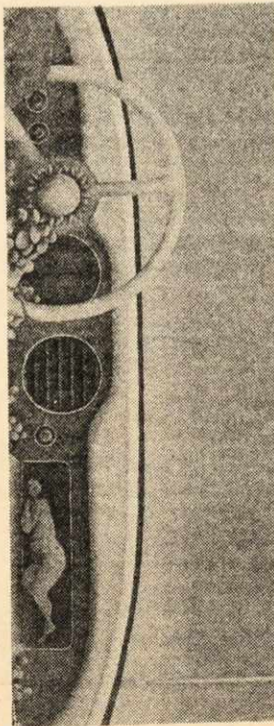
I'm a Canadian citizen. Canada's been such a good place to me and I felt pretty comfortable here, to be aligned with Canada, if you're going to be aligned with any single country.

How long have you been in Canada?

10 years, 11 years.

You came right to Nova Scotia from New Jersey? You started teaching at Dal then as well?

No, I had no jobs at all so I was going to write a little and scrounge around. I worked as an energy consultant in renewable energy resources, wind, and solar for a year, freelanced for *Barometer* weekly, alternative energy mags, taught part-time courses at St. Mary's, the Mount,



the Art College, Dalhousie, and they just couldn't figure out a way to get rid of me after I'd been here a number of years. They gave me a half-time job. I teach one course in the English department and a course in the Transition Year Program, so that's my Dal connection, those two.

What do you expect to come out of the report that's being released next week (the forum studying access to the TYP)?

The forum is very supportive of the Transition Year Program, but the problem is that we've been studied to death, and the studies have never resulted in better support. But there's no way the administration can cut the program.

What do you think of the state of the Arts in University? Are we losing ground to a business sector that wants trained people straight out of university?

Well, there is a majority of students who want to exercise the other part of their brain before they go out and get a real job. This is the last chance to get a real education, to learn the vastest possible amount in four years, and they need these years to learn so many things. I think the business world recognizes this: they don't want a bunch of people who all think the same, and often you learn on the job anyway.