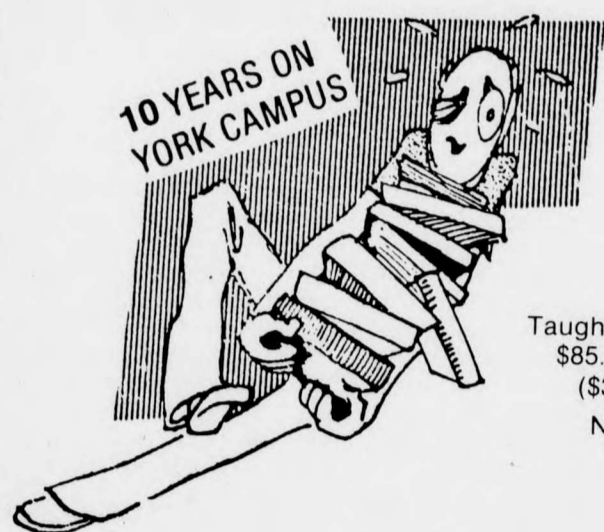


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# the writer's block

by Ira Nayman  
Great Musgrave  
Susan Musgrave  
Prentice Hall

I have a strange habit of loving the non-fiction of writers famous for fiction I hate. For instance, I had an unfortunate experience with Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* in high school — I read it — which thoroughly alienated me from her fiction. Yet, at the time of her death, some articles she wrote on her life and the world in general blew me away. Although I still refuse to read Laurence's fiction, I now have great respect for her.

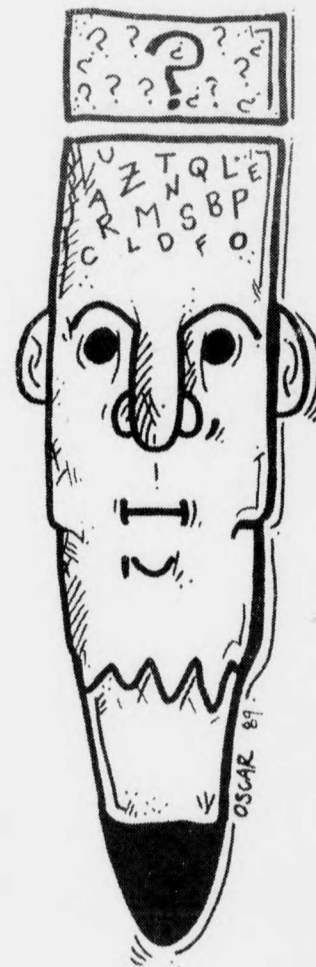
Susan Musgrave affects me the same way. Being a card-carrying philistine, I do not read poetry, so I have not been exposed to the major part of her work. But I have been an avid fan of her "Writer in Residence" column, which appears every other week in the *Saturday Magazine* section of the *Toronto Star*, since it first appeared. In fact it inspired me (or, if you're not in a generous mood, put the dang fool idea into my head) to write this column. Thus, when I heard about *Great Musgrave*, a collection of Musgrave's non-fiction writing, I jumped at the chance to review it.

Although regular readers of the column will find a lot of the material in the book familiar (although much of it comes from sources other than the *Star*), it nonetheless is delightful from beginning to end. Musgrave has a wonderfully funny turn of phrase, and an impressive eye for detail. Taken together, these traits make for easy, entertaining reading.

I can't resist a random example:

*"British Columbia is, for me, a whole lot of contradictions. It's taking a ferry to Vancouver and overhearing a mercenary talking about his RRSP. It's going through Cloverdale and seeing a sign outside the cemetery: ANOTHER PROJECT FOR GROWING B.C. It's going to a Jimmy Buffet concert on Grouse Mountain, where a provincial court judge is passing around joints from a silver cigarette case, while the 'freaked out hippy' on the bale of hay behind you reads Lineage Organization in South-eastern China — for pleasure."*

Musgrave is at her best when writing about her experiences as a writer; if nothing else, *Great Musgrave* should demystify the process and business of writing. When Musgrave tells of the difficulty she had writing when her newborn child demanded her attention, or when construction was going on next door, the general reader should realize that the details of a writer's life aren't that much different from anybody else's. When she writes about rejection, or having to read her poetry in obscure corners of the country, or attending literary dinners paid



for by businesspeople who were proud of the fact that they hadn't read her writing (or much of anything, really), the reader might realize that, unless you're Margaret Atwood or Mordecai Richler, being a writer in Canada is a hard life.

Musgrave also offers a lot of personal detail; her institutionalization at 16 after a suicide attempt, for example, or her marriage to Stephen Reid, whose novel *Jackrabbit Parole* she helped get published, who was serving 20 years for armed robbery in a maximum-security penitentiary at the time. I admire her courage for putting such stories on paper. I suppose most of these events were a matter of public record, and Musgrave was availing herself of an opportunity to tell her side of them; still I was impressed. And, to the extent that the events in her life contributed to her fiction, scholars should appreciate these stories (not to mention fans).

(Somebody wiser than me once said that normal people turn their pain into anger, but that writers turn their pain into art. I'm paraphrasing, of course. From the admittedly little I know about her fiction, it seems appropriate. And, while Musgrave sees writing non-fiction as a necessary evil, for making money so that she can concentrate on writing fiction, I suspect writing non-fiction offered her a similar catharsis.)

Oh, lest you get the wrong impression, *Great Musgrave* is a settlement in Cumbria, England, from where Susan Musgrave's ancestors sprang. Well, actually, it's a sign where the settlement once existed. There's a village called Lesser Musgrave, too, but discretion suggests we not mention it.

In any case, Great, Musgrave is.