In-Depth

UNB's Writer-in-Residence: on feminism, literary zoos, and poetry's 700 Canadian fans

Ninety Minutes With Elisabeth Harvor

By Mary Rogal-Black

Elisabeth Harvor, UNB's current Writer-in-Residence, recently returned to the province after an absence of twenty-three years. In the interim she has lived in a number of cities — Montreal, Copenhagen, Ottawa and, most recently, Toronto, where for many years she was a sessional lecturer in Creative Writing with the Division of Humanities at York University.

Her story collections are *If Only We Could Drive Like This Forever*, (Penguin), and *Our Lady of All the Distances* (HarperCollins). Her poetry book, *Fortress of Chairs* (Signal Editions) won the Lampert Award for 1992.

I met with Elisabeth Harvor in her office on the third floor of Carleton Hall, and we talked about her own writing, the life of an artist in Canada, and about issues that effect writers today. I began by asking the author for her life story...

I was born in New Brunswick, in Saint John, and grew up on the Kingston Peninsula which at that time was quite a remote tongue of land lying between the Kennebecasis River and the Saint John River. I went to a one-room country school with eight grades, which was a good experience in many ways. It was a farming community but my parents, who were Danish immigrants, made pottery. They began as farmers, but they failed and so they began making pottery by hand.

The interesting thing about that as a life was that during the winter it was very remote, it was very private, we almost had no visitors, and then in the summer we were just overwhelmed by tourists. So that was kind of a strange existence in many ways. It was very beautiful there. In terms of actually watching the clay being put into a grapefruit-sized ball, thrown onto a wheel, made into a pot, put into a kiln, dipped into a glaze, fired, put away in the kiln and then the kiln is all sealed up like a tomb, then opened and it's almost like a music box because all the pottery when its cooling down is just tinkling and tinkling and tinkling. You've seen it all go in and it's all been gray or white, and when it comes out there's all these amazing colors. That sense of process I think is really interesting for a child to grow up and see something being made through a long series of stages.

Are there experiences in life that you consider necessary for the aspiring writer?

Life itself is probably...but I know what you mean. Well, some people think an unhappy childhood is a prerequisite. But I think there are writers who have had relatively happy childhoods who have been able to do very interesting work.

Speaking for myself, I would say that the experience of having had two separate families when I was very small was very central to me. And then I think the whole immigrant experience, just being from a different nationality, in a community that was mainly Irish, Welsh, English, and a farming community was an interesting experience because I think we always felt we were different. I think the whole pottery business, the business of going to a one-room school ... the whole juxtaposition of the country and the city. There were so many juxtapositions that were all leading me, as a child, to make comparisons, and I think it's when you start comparing things, you start thinking ironies, you start thinking of connections. So from that point of view it was good.

What does a Writer-in-Residence do?

A writer in residence is a sort of editor, or a first reader - or at times a second or third or fourth reader - of manuscripts that have gone through workshops. A writer in residence has more time to talk to people about their stories. I was very, very busy last year in Ottawa because almost everyone in Ottawa is writing a novel, including someone from Revenue Canada who left a message on my machine that said, "Call Revenue Canada," and I thought I was going to be audited. Then I called and it was a man who said he had a novel for me.

Have you seen any budding authors at UNB?

I haven't seen very many undergraduate students, but I've seen some very interesting graduate students, and I'm seeing someone who's doing a qualifying year, whose work is very promising.

What about making a living as a writer? For all those young people out there.

It's heartbreaking for them. And often it's heartbreaking for older writers too. Because unless you get taken up by the media when you're very young, it's virtually impossible to become self-supporting as a writer. Most writers support their writing addiction by teaching or by doing other more lucrative work.

I also feel sad for young writers when other young writers get unfairly lifted up above the crowd — not because of their qualities as writers but because they have media savvy or are photogenic, because they have what might be called extra-literary advantages.

Or because they fill some superficial void?

Yes. And then the media is more and more made up of conglomerates taking over newspapers and magazines and the consequence of this is that there are fewer and fewer book reviews, and fewer and fewer good critics. I feel that the situation in Canada is tragic at the moment because the media is always into star-making and to hell with everyone else.

Did you have formal training as a writer?

No. Well, I wrote my first book when I was in my late twenties and early thirties, and it came out when I was thirty-some, and I had never been to university at that point. But I sold a story to the New Yorker in 1979, or it came out in 1979, and then after they bought that story, which they raved about, and said, "of course this is just the beginning" and so on, then nothing that I sent them was ever quite right. I got so — I would like to advise all young writers never to do this — I got so if the New Yorker rejected a story, I never did anything else with it, I just put it away. I thought it must be bad, which was horrible, because I lost years and years that way.

I had always had a lot of contempt for writing workshops, never having taken one, but I began to think maybe I should just do that. Maybe I should just go to Concordia and take a workshop and just learn something about plot and structure because the whole first book was just kind of written, you know, feeling that I knew everything. I was in my twenties. I mean when I look back on myself, when I was in my twenties I just thought ... I was quite sort of arrogant in a way, I just thought I could do anything.

Oh, I wouldn't know anything about that!

Maybe you haven't reached that point yet. This was my late twenties, actually. Anyway, I did end up going there, which was a good idea actually and then I got a fellowship. I taught there a year until I graduated, and I applied for jobs in Ontario, and I got one at York. That was very fortunate because those jobs are very hard to get. In fact, when I was in the writing program they told me that I probably wouldn't be able to get work because I was too old. I was in my forties then. They also said if you were older than 26, you were too old to even do a PhD. I don't know whether people believe that any more, but that's what they believed there.

I would think that with creative writing ,up to a point, you have to sort of break away from the academic side of it.

Yeah, in that sense going to school was irritating for me, because professors would often say, you know, "a joy to read, but not very academic" about my papers. Which I attributed to, a joy to read *because* they're not very academic.

What was your goal?

Well, I was trying to write something that was lively and interesting and they wanted something a little more carefully supported by quotes and documents and so on. But it still wasn't a bad experience in the sense that, I mean, being in a workshop was a good experience because I learned how to teach one.

Did you like teaching?

Yes and no. I have occasionally liked it incredibly much. Sometimes, what I've found with teaching something in which people's large fragile egos are so heavily invested is that when you have a good dynamic in the class there's nothing like it in the world. It's thrilling to teach. You can see people really changing and you can see people really getting it. But sometimes it only takes one or two people in a class who are just really destructive or negative, and then you have a lot of infighting, a lot of back biting, a lot of people being very hurt. So it was sometimes dreadful and sometimes wonderful.

Let's talk a bit about your experiences getting published?

Well, it was a different scene then. In a sense I had a very



Elisabeth Harvor is UNB's writer-in-residence until the end of this term. She is the author of several fiction and poetry books, and is currently helping students here to improve their creative writing. Harvor will be giving a reading of her work at the upcoming Albert Ross Society Lit Mix.

I've lived the life of a feminist, but ... I resist being identified as a feminist writer because any word with "-ist" at the end, limits you: idealist, minimalist, nihilist, feminist ....