

A WRITER'S LIFE

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BRYSON
BY JANE EATON HAMILTON

Michael Bryson is the author of *13 Shades of Black and White*. His second story collection, *Only a Lower Paradise*, will be published in September 2000. He publishes and edits the online magazine, *The Danforth Review* at: www.michaelbryson.com/danforth. He lives in Toronto.

Q: WHAT IS/ARE YOUR GENRES? WHY?

A: I started off as a poet, moved to short stories, and now I'm trying to figure out the novel. It's a common progression, I think. I once read some interviews with William Faulkner who said it was the route he took. He said he wrote novels because poetry required too much discipline, stories a little less discipline, and novels the least discipline of all. I write literary fiction, and I'd like to write a big sprawling novel, though I've discovered that writing poetry is a poor place to start if that's where you want to go!

Q: WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW? HOW IS IT GOING?

A: I have ideas for two different novels. One is a small local story, and the other is a big international story. I'm interested in polarities, so I think I'll keep working on both of these works together. They seem to inform each other, though they have very little in common.

Q: WHICH POEM/STORY/ARTICLE/BOOK OF YOURS IS A SPECIAL FAVORITE, AND WHY?

There's a story in my first book called, "Drew Barrymore's Breasts," which is a short story (about 500 words) but it packs a lot of material into that space. It's a favorite because it contains everything I like to see in a story, and does it in such a compressed form. I like the title too, because it leads people to think it's going to be a certain kind of story, but then the story leads them someplace different.

Q: WHAT IS THE BEST THING TO YOU ABOUT BEING A WRITER? THE WORST?

A: The best part is being engaged in a creative process. Making things up. It gives me a thrill. The worst part is anxieties about money.

Q: WHAT OTHER WELL-KNOWN AUTHORS CAN YOU RECOMMEND TO THE TWUCLIST? WHAT OTHER LESS-THAN-WELL-KNOWN AUTHORS CAN YOU RECOMMEND? TWUCAUTHORS?

A: One of my recent favorite books is *Broom of the System*, a novel by David Foster Wallace. I thought it was very funny, though loosely structured. Not a perfect book, but a good book. I also recently

enjoyed a short story collection called *Very Good Butter* by a new author named John Lavery. Lavery's stories were funny-strange and reminded me a little of Italo Calvino's work.

Q: WHAT OTHER CAREERS/PURSUIITS ARE YOU INVOLVED IN? WHICH OTHERS WOULD YOU PURSUE IF YOU WEREN'T WRITING?

A: My current job is editing content for web pages for the Ontario government. I also edit a little online literary magazine called *The Danforth Review* (www.michaelbryson.com/danforth). So I'm interested in the Internet as a medium for writers and writing. I'm not so interested in e-books, which seem to me to be more for trade publishing than literary publishing. But the Internet is a great tool for linking people, and sharing thoughts about what makes good writing.

Q: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU WISH YOU'D BEEN GIVEN WHEN YOU WERE STARTING OUT?

A: "To thine own self be true" (Shakespeare).

Q: WHAT SURPRISES/PLEASES/DISTRESSES YOU ABOUT BEING A WRITER?

A: It distresses me that writing receives so little attention from the popular press, and that the media anoint a few individuals to star status and never really try to understand the diversity of the literary economy. A lot of people write without any hope of getting paid. The little magazines struggle to find readers. Too many book reviews are short, dull and lack cultural context. I'd like to see a more vigorous literary culture. More arguments, basically. I think it would be good to make people think about why books matter, and which books matter.

Q: WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE OTHER WRITERS TO KNOW ABOUT YOU/YOUR WORK?

A: It's not autobiography!

Q: WHAT AUTHORS' RIGHTS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?

A: Getting paid.

Q: WHAT PARTICULAR AREA WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE TWUC FOCUS ON?

A: Well, I'm only a new member, so it would be presumptuous for me to say too much before I learn what's been going on. I'd like to see more Canadian literature introduced to a global audience. I'm not sure if TWUC is working on that or not.