

THE JOURNEYS OF A WRITER

How two expatriate authors, Canada's Josip Novakovich and Peter Carey of the United States, discovered beauty, pleasure and the wonder of life on the printed page

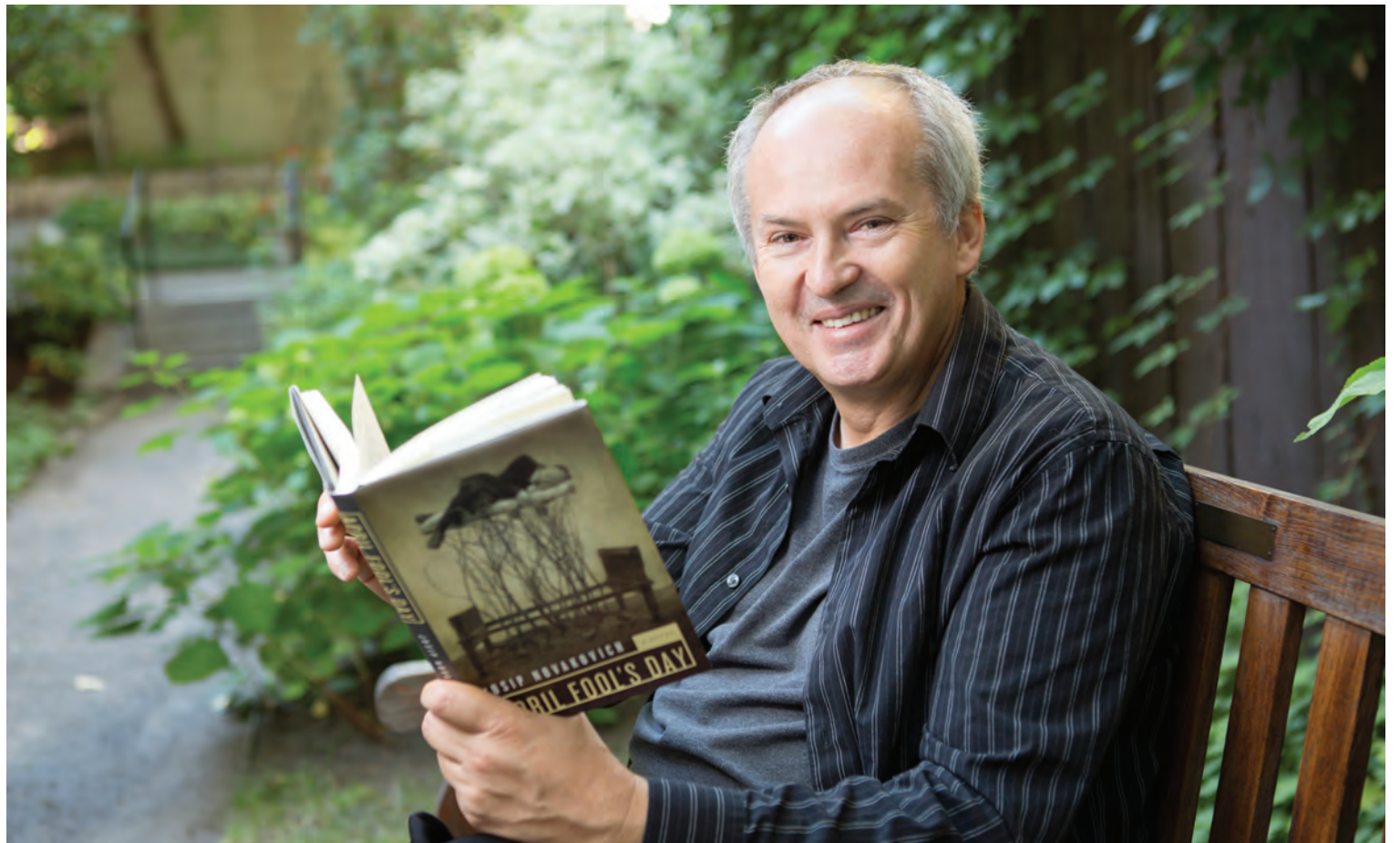
They are two novelists and short-story writers far from home, and for both of them the comedy of life, often dark, is at the heart of their work.

But Josip Novakovich, originally from Croatia, and now a Canadian citizen living in Montreal, and Peter Carey, an Australian who now makes his home in New York, found their inspiration as writers in different ways.

"I always wanted to be an entertainer but I was not good at telling jokes," says Professor Novakovich, who teaches English literature at Concordia University. "I really admired storytellers who could get attention and laughs. I realized I could do the same thing when I wrote. I could get the whole class to laugh at my sketches." Behind that impulse, he senses a deeper one. "Maybe it's an essential human need to communicate and understand."

Peter Carey began by looking for the sources of life's mysteries as a student of chemistry. "If one looks at the periodic table, you get that wonderful mixture of order and logic, and magic. A young man's romantic idea of chemistry might be to find and understand the order of things and its mystery." He went into advertising, where his fellow copywriters were literary types writing novels; they turned him on to William Faulkner and James Joyce. "I found a wild sort of beauty and wonder that I'd ever even known existed in the world. I thought: 'My God, I'd love to do this.' In a weird way, literature has provided many of the things that I mistakenly (for me) sought in chemistry."

The two authors will discuss writing and inspiration in the third evening of the Concordia University Thinking Out Loud conversation series on creati-



"I always wanted to be an entertainer but I was not good at telling jokes," says novelist Josip Novakovich, who has a penchant for absurdist comedy, and who teaches English literature at Concordia University in Montreal

ity, held in partnership with The Globe and Mail, on March 20. The two have an amazing amount in common. Both have adopted citizenship in their new homelands. Both teach creative writing (Professor Carey is the executive director of Hunter College's MFA program in creative writing.) Professor Novakovich has been nominated for a Man Booker International Prize for a body of fiction available in English. Professor Carey has twice won the Booker prize (predecessor of the Man Booker, for the best novel published in the Commonwealth), for novels *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). And as Professor Carey once studied chemistry, Professor Novakovich studied medicine.

Professor Novakovich, author of the novel *April Fool's Day*, and several books of short stories including *Salvation and Other Disasters*, and books of essays

including *Plum Brandy: Croatia Journeys*, offers three reasons why he writes.

"One is the pleasure of thinking on the page. Another one is the pleasure of making scenes and the third one is nostalgia for Yugoslavia and Croatia. I couldn't go back for a while so for me it was one way to go back in my mind. In my hometown all kinds of strange things were going on."

When did he feel the stirrings of an original voice? "I never worried about a voice. I always felt I was pretty peculiar anyway, so I just assumed my voice would be unusual if not original."

His inspirations among writers span many countries and centuries, and include "the usual Russian suspects: Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky showed me that maybe it is possible to write about things that seem mundane like a death in the family. And about religion. I used to be very religious. It was

very encouraging to know one didn't have to be an atheist to write. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were religious fanatics." He also mentions Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, George Orwell ("especially *Down and Out in Paris and London*"), Mark Twain, John Kennedy O'Toole, Heinrich von Kleist and Guy de Maupassant.

Although his homeland is the subject matter of much of his fiction, it is not a good place for him to write. "I'm always too restless in Croatia to just sit down." Besides, his writing requires geographical and emotional distance — in part, distance from the facts. "It's not something I can directly see and observe, so I can work from memory and imagination. For work, I think Canada is great."

Professor Carey began, like many writers, sticking closely to the greats. "When I was imitating Samuel Beckett, I thought I had an original voice." He

wrote "three or even four novels, which were my apprenticeship," all bearing the imprint of other writers. Finally, he grew "sick of spending a year or two years of building things that fell down," and began writing short stories, which though not entirely free of influence represented "the first time in my life that I really wrote work that was my mine."

Why do writers think they have something to say worth hearing?

"I'm always astonished that I was planning to walk out into the same arena as Proust and Joyce and Virginia Woolf," Professor Carey says. "How dare I? In my case, it was stupidity. I didn't even know they existed. We have to not really address that we're going to walk out on this tightrope — pretend it's not really a tightrope."

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To register for the talk by Josip Novakovich and Peter Carey, visit concordia.ca/talks. The event is free but spaces are limited.

JUST TALKING

"The magical glowing bit"

Novelists and teachers Josip Novakovich and Peter Carey riff on commitment to the craft, the benefits of creative writing schools and how to find what lives at the core of your own work

Q: How do you know if a student is committed to the craft?

Josip: I can actually tell how much time one spends writing by the way the sentences move — whether they move effortlessly, whether they connect upon another gracefully. That's not something that just happens by writing a sentence a month. It happens by moving your fingers and moving your mind while writing. That all can be worked on and yeah, coached. I don't know whether taught is the best word but coached, definitely.

Q: What should students know about entering a writing workshop?

Josip: The best preparation for being in the workshop is lots of careful reading, analytical reading, and having good paradigms and examples of a well-crafted sentence and paragraph. Analytical reading of admirable literature is the best preparation for a creative writing workshop, on many levels. The other preparation is to write and keep writing, and it doesn't have to be fancy writing. Keeping a journal of thoughts, images, impressions, events, sketches. To be constantly active as a writer.

Q: How much of writing fiction is craft, as opposed to inspiration?

Josip: Storymaking can be a very approachable craft that can be learned. It doesn't have to be mythologized in terms of divine inspiration, genius, a huge talent. All those things detract from writing. For instance, writer's block. I don't believe there is such a thing. I've never heard of a carpenter's block, or a carpenter saying 'I cannot put a nail in the wood today, I just can't.'



Q: How important is encouragement to an author?

Josip: If you don't get any encouragement for a long time, of course there are other things to do so you might not persevere. Some people will work for years in spite of a lack of encouragement and finally they make it. Even there I suspect they have some kind of encouragement: friends who really enjoy what they write. For me it was very important to take it seriously as a potential profession — to have encouragement. Without it I might have gone back to medical school or pursued psychiatry.

Q: How you do research your fiction?

Josip: Mostly travel. Talking to people. Reading newspapers. Sometimes history books. Somehow I never make it to any archives. It's too painful. I don't like the air in libraries. It makes me fall asleep. I don't write terribly accurate and detailed historical novels where I actually need a huge amount of research. I'm not aiming for an accurate historical book.

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Josip Novakovich is a professor in Concordia University's English department. A novelist, short-story writer and author of narrative essays, he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize last year for his body of work.

Q: What do you tell your students about finding their voice?

Peter: I don't worry about them finding their voice because that's for them. It often happens that you have a story that's sort of a mess but there's this magical glowing bit in the middle where the teacher recognizes that's what the writer wanted to write about, and all the rest was a mistaken idea of how to proceed with it.

Q: How useful are creative writing schools?

Peter: When I first arrived in the United States, I'd never taught creative writing but I needed a green card. At that stage I thought what a scam this is. None of my students got any better. I actually wasn't a very good teacher, and I always have to thank my first students for helping me to get better. In the end, I think they are really useful. If you're the student being workshoped, you're listening to how 11 other people read your work. They are really passionate, attentive readers. The teacher can help you. What do you say first? What do you say second? Where are we? Are we confused? The class is supportive. There's no blood on the wall.

Q: To what extent are your novels true to the original inspiration you sat down with?

Peter: I wouldn't expect them to be true to it. I begin with a site of inquiry. Is this an interesting place to be? Could I be interested in this for two years? What if this is true or possible, what follows from that? If you look at *The Chemistry of Tears* it begins with me thinking about the internal combustion engine.



Q: What writers have served as inspiration for you?

Peter: At the very beginning, Faulkner, Joyce, Beckett, but let me throw in Graham Greene and later, writers that we might not think were of huge importance, someone like J.P. Donleavy. And then later Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez and in the middle of all this Henry James and Joseph Conrad. I think we're awful thieves all the time and we're under the influence of others. That's very clear when we're young but we continue to feed on our forebears. By God, W.G. Sebald was one of the great writers in our time and reading him fills me with wonder. It makes me want to get out of bed in the morning.

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Peter Carey is one of just three novelists to have won the Booker Prize twice. He is the executive director of the MFA program in creative writing at Hunter College in New York.