

Speech written and delivered by Colleen Murphy

Writer in Residence, U of G fall, 2011

For Author Appreciation reception

27th October 2011

Thank you Catherine Steves...and my thanks to Carol Perry for inviting me to speak at this important occasion, and since it's so important I've called upon authors, living and dead, to contribute. In 43 BC Cicero said, 'Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents and everyone is writing a book.'

Well almost everyone in this room has written a book so I guess some things never change. Let me, for a moment, talk for about the process of writing.

Alice Munro muses, 'The complexity of things - the things within things - just seems to be endless. I mean nothing is easy, nothing is simple.'

We know this. Whether fiction, non-fiction, poetry, scientific studies, plays...we know how complex the things within things are and how difficult it is sometimes to express those things to the reader.

William Styron says, 'The good writing of any age has always been the product of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.'

That is true, but I respectfully submit that one can substitute the word neurosis with the word curiosity or the word passion.

Winston Churchill says this about the process, 'Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster, and fling him to the public.'

But for Oscar Wilde, the process was less dramatic, 'I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning and took out a comma. In the afternoon, I put it back in.'

And Toni Morrison has the best perspective on rewriting. She says, 'Writing it all out for the first time is painful because so much of the writing isn't very good. I didn't know in the beginning that I could go back and make it better; so I minded very much writing badly. But now I don't mind at all because there's that wonderful time in the future when I will make it better, when I can see better what I should have said and how to change it. I love that part!'

Once the facts are gathered, the research complete, once we have finished crawling naked through the raw pits of our heart, written and re-written and re-written again...we hand the manuscript to the publishers.

Some publishers have strong views about writers. Here is Bennett Cerf, co-founder of Random House, quote, 'Coleridge was a drug addict. Poe was an alcoholic. Marlowe was stabbed by a man whom he was treacherously trying to stab. Pope took money to keep a woman's name out of a satire; then wrote a piece so that she could still be recognized anyhow. Chatterton killed himself. Byron was accused of incest. *Do you still want to be a writer - and if so, why?*'

Some writers have strong views about publishers. In the 60's Lawrence Ferlinghetti said, 'The future of publishing lies with the small and medium-sized presses, because the big publishers in New York are all part of huge conglomerates.' Now, Lawrence was man who saw the future.

And then there are ebooks. And the late Steve Jobs has a strong view on ebook readers. He says, 'It doesn't matter how good or bad the product is - the fact is that people don't read anymore. ... Forty per cent of the people in the US read one book or less last year. The whole conception is flawed at the top because people don't read anymore.'

Well, be that as it may there is no other feeling quite as giddy and sparkly like holding your book in your hands for the first time.

JM Barrie, author of Peter Pan said, 'For several days after my first book was published, I carried it about in my pocket and took surreptitious peeps at it to make sure the ink had not faded.'

So now it's in your hand...now what? It needs to be read, it demands to be read and you say, 'I don't care how many people are **not** reading, I want all the people who **are** reading to be reading **my** book.' Ah, books. Edward P. Morgan said, quote, 'A book is the only place in which you can examine a fragile thought without breaking it, or explore an explosive idea without fear it will go off in your face.... It is one of the few havens remaining where [your] mind can get both provocation and privacy.' One of the best images of a book comes from Ezra Pound. He said, 'The book should be a ball of light in one's hand.'

And so today we celebrate 85 balls of light, we celebrate anti-freeze proteins, the role of hormones in animal health, strategies for healing breast cancer, Medieval music in performance style, as well as Baroque, Classical, Romantic, the love letters of Edward Johnson, gardens of Eden, love in Texas, literary relations between Italy and England, the beautiful poetic narrative about Yasmine, a translation of Mihail Sabastian, a novel set in Franklin and another set in the months leading up to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, the sharing of traditional knowledge for Aboriginal women, readings on ethics and social and political philosophy, the biology of climate change, how environment influences humanity from pre-history to now, Ontario watersheds, an study of marijuana, treating non-suicidal self-injury, gender and class in rural places, tiny frantic poems, how to talk about economics while sipping a cocktail, how to retire, Free Mansonry in Port Dover, understanding bullies, a guitar named Story Teller, a snail named Sammy, Goodbye Ukulele, brutal conflicts in China over the last two centuries, cotton farming and poverty in Africa, Arctic communities under pressure from environmental change, essays on Doris Lessing's importance, a hands-on guide to toxicology and various poison treatments, how the Atlantic Ocean touched so many lives, cosmopolitan entrepreneurs from the former USSR who immigrated to other countries, immigrant children, three African solo plays, Hard Core Logo, books examining crime, wrongful convictions, the supernatural, Interstate 95, the Spitfire, theatre and interculturalism, a funny play about AIDS, breastfeeding, helping children develop

through art, the life of that great Scot, William Ramsay, the Scottish identity, a book questioning the corporate culture in universities, adoption, the relationship between American Blacks and White Churches in Upper Canada, essays on Asian Canadian theatre, poetry, Global business, a guide to term papers and book reviews – now that's handy – a Spanish text-book, economic growth and the environment, and a call to rebellion.

In writing a book, any kind of book, you have put your hand in the cement, your paint on a rock. You have created something for someone else to experience, to discover, to ponder, to learn, to analyze; something of yourself that will excite someone's intellectual curiosity, quicken their heart beat; you have offered up your hard earned expertise, your gift of being able to conjure up exquisite emotions in a reader, your talent to engage another person in your adventure, your urge to communicate intimately and uninterrupted with another person. What act is more intimate? Well, maybe there is one other act but sometimes even that act is not as close as what goes on between the reader and the writer.

You see you have left something over there on the table this is very important.

Today we are here to appreciate all of you authors and the best way to appreciate authors is to buy their books and, more importantly, to read them.

So I leave you with P.J. O'Rourke's advice to potential readers, 'Always read stuff that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it.'

Thank you