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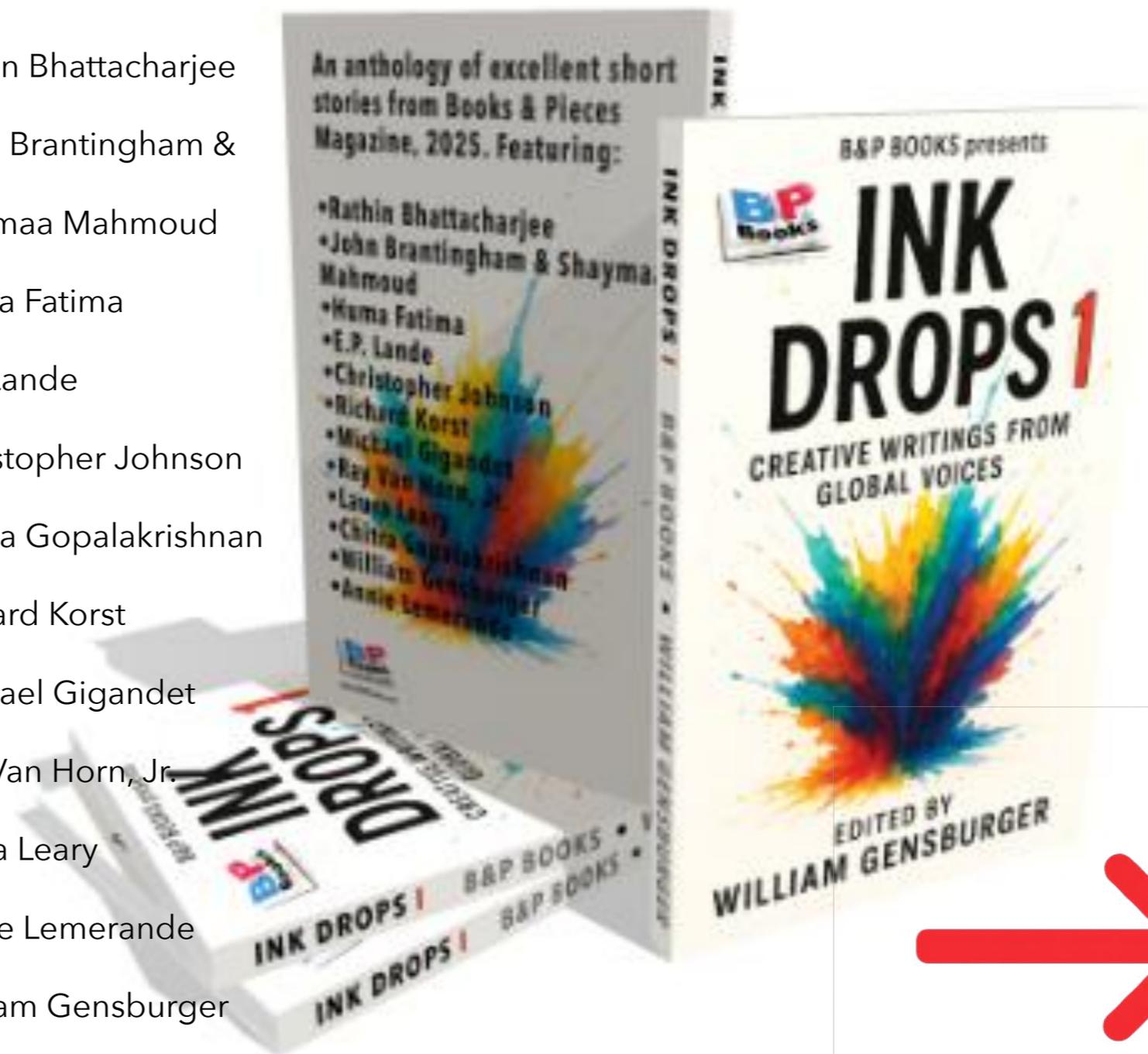
**DECEMBER 2025**



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And we just published our first ANTHOLOGY of stories from stories sent to us. Titled: INKDROPS I: Creative Writings from Global Voices, it is available everywhere, although discounted on our bookshop, featuring 11 of our author submissions, and one story I added. You can get it as a print or ebook, but if you want an audiobook and have Audible, you can get an audiobook copy there as well.

For 2026, we have even more plans. Starting in January, international bestselling author of over 35 books, JC Ryan, is teaming up with me to launch the first B&P 4-week-long intensive live, online short story class called The Art of the Short Story: From Spark to Submission.

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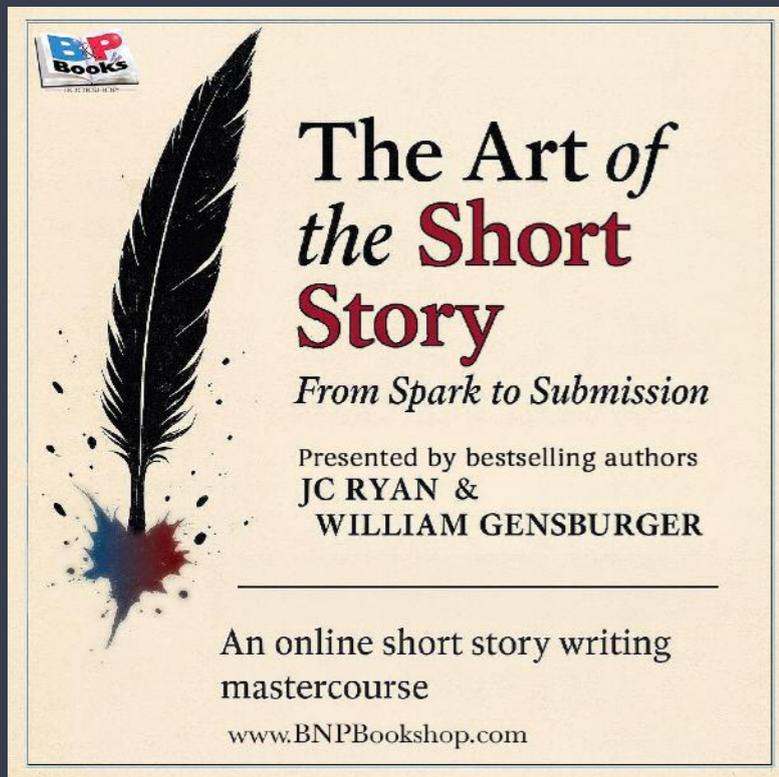
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# THE END OF A WONDERFUL DAY

## A STORY BY ALFRED GARROTTO



“So, Célèste,” Sr. Marie Therese said taking the lead, “where should we begin? And please, call me Tesse.”

Sister... Tesse and I settled into the same chairs we’d occupied earlier. I sensed a shared desire to wrap up the interview. With luck, I’d make it back to Brussels before dark. “Let’s start with the day you met Father Thomas Jensen. In Louvain.”

Tesse took a deep breath. “Timing. Isn’t timing so important in setting the course of our lives? My plan with Tom hinged on my catching the train here in Florenville. He would hop on at Louvain and from there

we’d head for Bruges. On the phone the day before, we agreed that if we missed each other, I would travel on to Ostende and spend a weekend with my brother and his family.”

“And how did that work out?”

“I spotted Tom from the coach window and waved my arms. His eyes darted from car to car in growing frustration. He spotted me just as the train began to pull out. He grabbed a handrail and swung aboard.”

“What did you talk about? After all, Tesse, you two hadn’t seen each

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other for— How long?”

Tesse thought for a moment. “About two-and-a-half years. We talked about the year we spent at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Things we did on weekends around the San Francisco Bay Area. That was my time in Camelot.... But Camelots are fleeting, aren’t they?”

“I guess,” I said. “No Camelot in my life story, at least not yet.”

“Yours will come. It’s important to know it when you see it. Receive it as a gift.”

“What’s it like, Tesse, not being married, having children?”

“Well, that’s quite a change of subject!”

“If you answer, it won’t be in my article.”

“Well,” Tesse’s gaze went to an open window and the convent lawns beyond. “An occasional twinge, but I’m happy. I’m committed to my Sisters. I’m where I belong. Doubts? Rarely. Regrets? None.”

“Did you speak to anyone on the train?”

“On leaving Louvain, Tom and I had a compartment to ourselves. Then a man entered and took a seat two rows behind. We paid him little attention. I do remember sensing he’d eavesdropped on our conversation. Though I wanted to know about Tom’s life, we became cautious, keeping to small talk and the weather. When we arrived in Bruges, the man exited with us.”

“Do you think he overheard enough to know Tom was a priest and you a nun?”

Tesse thought a moment then said, “I don’t think so.”

“Did he follow you off the train?”

“Not that Tom and I were aware. We arrived at eleven A.M. Tom suggested a taxi, but I said, ‘You have to see this magical place on foot. It’s only twenty minutes to Market Square. Are you too out of shape to walk that far?’ He got this offended-male look on his face, ‘Bring it on, Sister.’ The first thing Tom noticed was the Flemish atmosphere. ‘Every road is *somethingstraat*.’ As we walked, Tom’s head pivoted left, right, up, down. I asked, ‘Any particular site you want to see?’ He smiled and came back

with, ‘I’m in your hands, Tesse.’

“I checked my watch. We needed to catch the four o’clock train. Tom asked if we could do Bruges in five hours? When I said we’d need a weekend, Tom fluttered his eyebrows in comic fashion. ‘Now *that’s* a proposition to consider.’ I asked him what the eyebrows were all about? ‘Groucho Marx. Ever hear of him?’ I told him I hadn’t. ‘An old Hollywood comedian. Made goofy movies. The eyebrows were his signature.’ Then Tom grew quiet and serious. He assured me my reputation was safe with him. ‘I won’t tell a soul you begged me to spend the weekend with you.’

“That was Tom. Kidding around. Innocent banter veering slightly off-color. We Belgians are... well, you know. Our twenty-minute walk to Market Square took forty-five. Tom must have filled his backpack with disposable cameras. That July Saturday couldn’t have been more beautiful. Literally picture perfect. The main square pulsed with tourists speaking every language. I craned to take in the top of the bell tower. ‘I’m going to climb it,’ I said. ‘You can come with me or wait here.’

“Tom assessed the tower. ‘Elevator?’ I shook my head. He said, ‘You’re really going to do it?’ I nodded. It was a day to let one’s hair down... a bit. Tom found a way to save face. ‘I’d better go with you in case you faint and need someone to carry you back down.’

“‘Now there’s an image,’ I told him. ‘By the way, how’s your heart?’ He assured me he was a perfect specimen of priestly manhood. Just then the clock struck noon, sending carillon peals echoing across the square. We made our way to the arched entrance, paid a few francs and began our climb. Halfway up, Tom slowed. His breathing became heavy. He’d begun sweating profusely. ‘You don’t look so good,’ I said. ‘We’d better go down?’ But he assured me he’d be fine. ‘I just need... to get... second... wind.’

“After Tom rested a few minutes and filled his lungs with deep breaths, we started up the winding stairway again and made it to the top. Along the way, I put my arm around his waist. In case he needed support. I thought he would object. He didn’t. Bruges in summer... a place where intimacy is like the creation story in Genesis... able to make something out of nothing.”

Tesse paused. I wondered, had another memory of that day surfaced?

“It was there, high above the crowds... a thought flashed across my mind. *‘I could love a man like this... and be happy.’* I didn’t personalize the thought, *‘love Tom,’* rather *‘a man’* with whom I’d share a common ground of faith, values, and commitment to making a difference.” I observed that a look of surprise dominated Tesse’s features. She put her hand to her mouth. “Good Lord! Where did *that* come from?” I scribbled in my notebook, *Priests/nuns human!*

Tesse regained her poise and continued, “Through Tom’s wide eyes, I saw Market Square in all its Gothic splendor. He moved from one vista point to another. North *snap*. East *snap*. West *snap*—”

“I get the idea,” I said.

“Tom said, ‘It reminds me of Disneyland. Or the back lot of movie studio.’

“When I said, ‘Typical American,’ he countered with, ‘What makes you an expert on America?’ He said it in a joking manner but noticed a dip in my mood. ‘I’m sorry, Tesse, I didn’t intend that to come out the way it did.’ I suggested we go down. We still had so much more to see. Tom and I kept playing tourists for the next few hours. Everything was slow about Tom that day—from Market Square to the dock at Katelijnestraat. We paused at the Church of Our Lady, then moved on to the Memling Museum where we viewed Michelangelo’s *Madonna and Child*. With our time evaporating, I dragged Tom across to a boat landing. He hired an English-speaking boatman who referred to us as Monsieur and Madame. Tom was in awe of it all—the

trees, the parks, the quaint architecture.”

“I know the feeling.” I said.

“By then, it was past two. Tom and I were hungry. We found a restaurant with an outdoor patio that provided a view of Minnewater with its gorgeous gardens, stately swans, and canals. We ordered a five-cheese platter with bread and salad. Tom tried a bottle of beer, Trappist Bleuwe Chimay. I ordered sparkling water.”

“And?”

“After a couple of sips, he wiped the foam from his lips and gave a review. It went something like this... ‘Smooth. Different. I’d call the taste... complex. With just a hint of milkshake as it goes down.’

“I looked into his eyes and said, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. His response... Only a connoisseur would understand.’

“On the way back to the station, we ran into the other passenger who’d shared the train compartment with us on the way to Bruges. ‘Hello!’ he said. Quite friendly. ‘Seems we keep bumping into each other.’”

A mist descended upon Tesse’s eyes.

“I just remembered something. Since childhood I’ve had a habit of creating life stories for new people I meet. I sensed a deep sadness behind this man’s eyes. His smile seemed shallow. I imagined him living alone. Not much of a social life. His way of making contact was to strike up conversations with tourists he’d never see



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again. When he offered to treat us to an ice cream cone, I felt obliged. Tom and I weren't hungry. We just wanted to be polite. I caught Tom's eye and, before I could ask, he said, 'Sure.' The man led us to a nearby shop. 'I live in this neighborhood and come here often.'

"I asked if he had a family. 'I did,'" he said. 'We lost our only child—a son—ten years ago.' We both offered condolences. 'Since last November I've been alone. My wife didn't die,' he admitted. 'That might have been preferable. After twenty-five years of marriage, she just packed up and left. How insensitive of me to spoil your day with my problems.'

"When I said I would pray for him, I caught Tom's expression. It told me he didn't believe the man's story. All I wanted was to offer our sympathy and get on with our day. Tom and I found a table by a window while our host placed the order. I watched people passing by and thought, *Bruges is such a happy place. How can one be sad here?* A clerk brought our cones. The man came with three open bottles of mineral water. When we were saying our final goodbyes, I could see that Tom was feeling ill again. The blood had drained from his face. He muttered something like, *Can't... feet.*'

"Mentally retracing our steps that day, I hit on the triggering cause. Muscle fatigue from climbing the tower. But his eyes suddenly rolled upward. He muttered

something I couldn't understand.

"The man said, 'My home is nearby. He can rest there for a while before you catch the train.'

"Instinct told me to call an ambulance. Instead, I accepted his invitation, and the two of us helped him along the street. By the time we reached the man's front door, I too had a hard time walking. With fading consciousness, I berated myself for being so gullible. *I'm sorry, Tom. I was wrong.... So very... very....*"

Tesse paused her narrative for a moment and dabbed at a trickle of perspiration on her forehead.

"You can see, Célèste, why I don't want to tell this story more than once. It dredges memories I don't care to dwell on."

"I understand," I said.

"I woke up in a pitch-dark room, conscious but disoriented. My head throbbed. Where was I? Where was Tom? What had become of the man whose promise of help I had accepted? On hands and knees, I explored the darkness like a blind person, feeling my way inch by inch along a concrete floor. An odor of chlorine hovering in the stagnant air exacerbated the dryness in my throat.... I heard a groan. Tom. Not far to my left. Then his words, 'What... the... hell!... Bars?'"

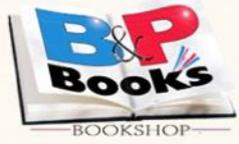
## **ABOUT THE**



## **AUTHOR**

Alfred J. Garrotto is the author of fifteen novels and nonfiction books, plus published poetry and flash fiction.

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# TWENTY-TWO

A STORY BY KENNETH M. KAPP

Harry glanced out the kitchen window. It was still raining and there wasn't any sign of the sun. He clenched his teeth and started muttering, "Son of a bitch. Didn't I tell you two minutes ago to show your ugly face. The moon smiles for me, doesn't it? And it's made of green cheese! You're probably just a rubbery Colby."

Looking up at the sky he added, "Damned winds ain't any better. Told them they should blow off those clouds. Still omnibos. Heard one of my bright kids use that word. 'Dad, you can't walk out in your shirt sleeves when the sky is so ominous.' Yeh, ominous, that's the word they used. No different. Not one of the winds

listened. I should put my butt out the window, show them how it's done!"

He growled. Taking four giant steps back to the kitchen table, he wrapped his hands around his coffee. *Well, at least the coffee's still hot, calloused hands are good for something.*

He released his left hand from the mug and gulped down the remains of the reheated coffee. The carton of old photos was sitting across from him, one discolored flap resting against the back of the chair.

*Twenty-two – skidoo! I'll try that next time I get up. It worked for granddad.*

He slammed the mug on the table and started drumming with the fingers, the beats as uneven of those of his heart before they put in

the pacemaker. "Woopie-do," he'd told his kids, "now my fingers have to go solo." It didn't help that they reminded him they loved him and just wanted to keep him alive. However, two months later, they'd started to nag. "Dad, you should start going through your things, clear things out. You know how difficult it is for the family when someone dies if things are messy. They can't grieve if they have to sort through a million and one things. It's good you've got a current will and all those Power of Attorneys in place, but what about the boxes in the attic? Maybe you can go through them now, see if there's anything important."

His youngest son, Tony said he'd come by Sundays with a ready-to-make pizza and a

six-pack. “I’ll bring the boxes down a couple at a time. We can sort through them together once the pizza’s in the oven, have a beer or two like we did thirty years ago.”

Harry got up, rinsed his mug and, returning, dumped the box of photos onto the table. He came around and sat down in his chair ignoring the window, telling himself he wouldn’t let the ugly weather spoil a perfectly rotten day.

He scooped a bunch of photos off the top and spread them out, tapped the first one with his finger. “Damned if that’s not me and Lenny.” He turned the picture over. No date. “At least I think

it’s Lenny and it looks like we’re horsing around at some party. Lost touch with Lenny 20, 30 years ago.” Then realizing he was talking to himself, decided to direct his remarks to the picture.

“Hey, Lenny. You got a minute?” Taking the silence for consent, he continued, “This kid of mine says he’s going to help me sort through things, come by with a pizza and beers so we can go through some of my crap. He came all of three times and then announced he can’t stay, just drops off the pie and beer, offering up some lamebrained excuse: ‘The missus wants me

home for Masterpiece Theater.’ Yeh, really – culture night all of a sudden.”

He waited. *Maybe Lenny needs to think; 20, 30 years is a long time.* A minute goes by, then another. “Hey, Lenny, you listening? Got nothing to say?” Harry raised his eyebrows. “Hmm. Nada? OK, you can be the first to start singing, ‘So long; it’s been good to know you.’” He waited for Lenny to sing and after a moment more of silence, stabbed the picture with his index finger and slid it off the table onto the floor. Three more pictures featuring Lenny met the same fate.



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Then half of a large formal photograph.  
“Damn! That’s me 60 years ago in some fancy restaurant – white tablecloth and crystal. Can’t remember the other half.” He laughed and shook an accusatory finger at the torn photo. “OK, Harry, fair is fair. You’ve got a minute to tell me what was in the rest of the picture, otherwise *sayonara* – goodbye, you can join the ever growing pile of history on the floor.”

Harry wanted to be fair. He coughed twice in case the Harry in the picture had fallen asleep. Then he got up to get a beer from the refrigerator. *Enough with the coffee. The sun’s over the yardarm somewhere.* On the way back to the kitchen table he decided to exercise his executive privilege. He would grant a temporary pardon to the picture Harry and rescue him from the dustbin of history. “After all, Harry, the other half of this picture may well have worked its way towards the bottom of the box.”

He surveyed the pictures spread across the table, deliberating on the perfect place for his bottle. “Ah, got it. Kind of figured there’d be one with a keg in it. Hell, I bet this box is just my college junk. Surprised it lasted this long. Harry, if it wasn’t for that half-picture, you could toss the lot. Be a good day’s work for anyone. Calls for a toast.” He chugged half the bottle, burping a couple of times before placing it carefully back on the keg.

He scratched his head, wondering if he wasn’t feeling a little bit woozy. “Maybe the sun didn’t get over that yardarm.” He lifted his hands down some of the photos stuck to his palms. “Damn!”

He recalled what his grandfather used to say when he was flustered. “Twenty-two skidoo works for floozies and bad boozies too.”

He scooped the pictures together looking for the other half of the torn photo. *Where’d I put that half a photo that started this all? Better get*

*another beer. Need more vitamin B for brain power.*

Harry stood up and turned in the general direction of the refrigerator, daring a glance out the window. Still no sun. At the refrigerator he spotted the missing photo on the counter. He took out a bottle and removed the crown with the magnetic church key on the door.

He brought the beer and the torn photo back to the table, sweeping the remaining photos onto the floor. *What a waste of a morning.* Then looking down at the photos on the floor, he thought they’d make a wonderful collage. “Next box, I put a piece of Masonite down first, kick things around with my toe, and pour over some liquid glue that dries clear. I’ll call it ‘Memories’ of Things Past.”

By chance he tipped the empty carton forward. In the bottom was half of a photograph. *It’s only half so I can’t tell if it’s the right size, but it’s close. Granny also said close was good if*

*you're playing horseshoes. Funny, we didn't have a horse. Maybe she was thinking about the old country. Old people's minds tend to wander.* He shook the box and the photo dropped onto the table.

He decided he to another beer and went back to the refrigerator. The other half photograph was still on the counter. *Maybe they're a match, may as well find out.*

He returned to the table and lined up the two halves. "Damn! A perfect match. I mean they're crinkled some, but if I ironed them out... and that Harry there is making eyes at that woman. I'm pretty sure I know her. OK, Harry, you fess up or I'll throw a horseshoe at you."

He sat there quietly for a minute. Thinking he heard the clock above the stove clicking, he checked to see if he had remembered to put in his hearing aids. *Maybe Harry's trying to tell me something and I can't hear him. Shitty being an old coot!* He cocked his head to one side; his left

ear was always sharper. That's what Laura had always said: "Harry, you're always turning your head when I'm talking to you. You better have your hearing checked. If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times."

*Damn, I know that woman! Skippie-doo and twenty-two. It's Laura. We were married. Why's the photo ripped.*

Harry sighed, took both halves into the living room, and put them on the coffee table. He went to the liquor cabinet and found an old bottle of gin in the back, Laura's drink. Taking a cutglass tumbler from the shelf, he sat down on the couch and poured a healthy amount. He stared at the picture and whispered, "I'm listening, Laura."

Laura replied, "I'm so glad you're finally cleaning up, Harry, and that we're back together. This was such a nice picture. It was our seventh anniversary and we went to a fancy restaurant. You arranged for that nice photographer to take

our picture as a surprise. I know you were heartbroken when I passed and told our children it was too painful to look at that picture from happier days and that's why you ripped it in half. I've been dead twenty-two years, Harry. It's like a day isn't it? But we'll soon be together. Skippie-doo, isn't it?"

Harry lifted the glass and replied, "Skippie-doo it is, Laura love. Skippie-doo." He gulped down the remainder of his gin and separated the halves of the picture, centering the glass between them. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kenneth M. Kapp lives with his wife in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, writing late at night in his man-cave. He enjoys chamber music and mysteries. Please visit [www.kmkbooks.com](http://www.kmkbooks.com). He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His stories have appeared in more than ninety publications worldwide including the Saturday Evening Post, October Hill Magazine, EgoPHobia in Romania, Lothlorien Poetry Journal in Ireland, and The Wise Owl in India.

# WHERE IN THE WORLD DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?

## AN ESSAY BY BOB BRILL

It is a question I'm often asked whether it's on a podcast or questions for an article. For each writer I think it's quite a different answer. For me it's quite simple. Everywhere, but usually I get my best ideas driving in my car.

Perhaps living in Los Angeles (the car capitol of the world) I'm fortunate in my unfortune. Unfortune in that we drive everywhere and judge distance by time not miles.

"It's going to take me an hour and fifty minutes to get to work today."

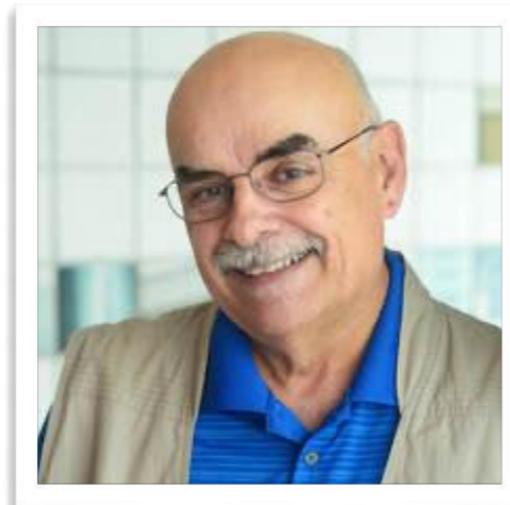
My actual distance to work is 37 miles. Since I usually go to work around 2 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon and must travel through Hollywood, the time does not correlate to the distance.

Driving through Hollywood on a weekend afternoon feels like every traffic light every two blocks is timed to make me stop and wait. Along with the tourists, the homeless who wander across streets without looking and just the overall jumble of people, it takes almost two hours to travel the 37 miles.

If I go to work during the week and work my usual overnight shift, the same 37 miles takes me about one hour and ten minutes. Light traffic and while the homeless are still there you must be more careful. It's dark, they usually wear dark clothing, and many are less than competent not to wander in front of your car. Especially when they are off their meds.

So basically, I'm saying I have a lot of time to think when I'm driving. And a lot of time to notice my surroundings and take it all in. This brings me to a story idea. It might be one of those homeless people attacking the little delivery cars with googly eyes and a flag on top. These deliver food without the aid of a human and travel the sidewalks of Hollywood waiting at traffic signals along the way.

Recently, I saw a homeless guy attack one with a stick, then kick it over. Most people would look at that with disdain. "How dare he?" I look at it as a story to be



written. Developing the rest of the story is easy. Who is this guy, where did he come from and was this googly eyed machine something relating to his past or just a nightmare?

I pull over, get out my iPhone and punch record. I take about 30 seconds to put the idea into a possible story and save it for later. I may or may not get to it but it's there.

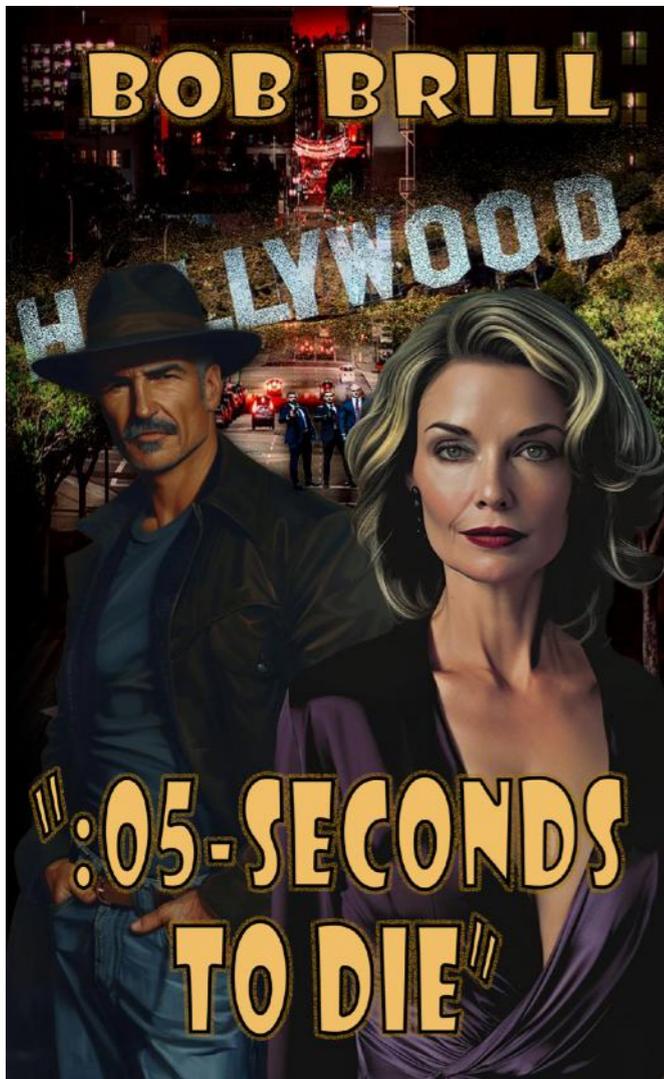
Often, I'm driving home late at night or more correctly early in the morning. I'll see a coyote running across the road. He stops and stares at me, then dashes off and up into the hills. This coyote has a personality. Suppose he ended up in the back yard ready to attack a small dog. The owner hears the dog barking and gets his rifle. He fires and kills the coyote. It may be illegal and now the

court battle begins. Or maybe he wounds the coyote and takes him in, saves him and raises him with his dog. Now that could be a great story.

Then there was the time a pretty young woman was jogging up the road past me. Ponytail swinging in the breeze with every stride. It's 5:00 A.M. Out for an early morning run. What's on her mind? What are the dangers she's facing. Why not run at night? Is there a stalker in her future up around the bend. You know, there is some guy who just had a fight with his girlfriend who is not happy with women at the moment. He is getting into his car to go to work when he sees the jogger. You can use your imagination to that the next step.

These are all easy scenarios but one of my favorites comes just by listening to the radio. Now, I've been in radio for over 50 years so it's in me. However, every song tells a story. Why not listen to those songs and get an idea for a story you want to tell. You don't need to steal the story the songwriter is telling. It is okay to get an idea and develop that idea yourself into something different.

There aren't that many story ideas in the world and as long as you don't take the song and make it into a really close story of your own, it's probably going to stand



the test of plagiarism. There is no totally new story under the sun. How many times has the Romeo and Juliette story been told? Where do you think Westside Story comes from? And there are so many more versions of it. William Shakespeare isn't going to sue you. He'd probably be happy you thought so highly of him. If you do want to "do the story in the song" you should seek permission of some kind. It shouldn't be expensive.

Remember most songs never go anywhere past the music and the people in control of the music mainly get a 50/50 split for licensing. For obscure songs or even minor hits, many will consider anything is better than nothing as the song sits on a shelf. You may get the rights for \$100.

So, the bottom line to finding what to write about doesn't often begin with your own imagination. It begins with an idea and that idea is usually right in front of you. Taking that idea and then using your own imagination to develop it is where you as a writer come in.

Life is full of stories. Every moment of every day brings a new one. You just need to be open to see it.

Oh, and a final note here; Never listen to anyone who says "oh that's been done." Everything has been done in

the past billion years of the earth. Yours is just a new or different twist.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A native of Pittsburgh, PA and a hardcore Pirates and Steelers fan, Bob began in radio career in 1972 and worked all over the western US, several times in the L-A market. He's currently a news anchor at the all-news radio station in Los Angeles, KNX News 97.1 FM

Bob has won multiple broadcast awards including an Edward R. Murrow Award (among others) for anchoring KNX's storm coverage in 2011.

Bob made his mark with the UPI Radio Network when a gunman went crazy in a San Diego fast food restaurant and Bob covered the story. It was his first big break. He later became a UPI National Correspondent and Bureau Chief. He has interviewed presidents, covered Super Bowl games and Hollywood as well as major news stories.

He lives in L-A. He has survived earthquakes and a beating during the 1992 L-A riots while covering the story, which was recorded on audio tape. More information about Bob can be found at: [BobBrill](http://BobBrill.com)

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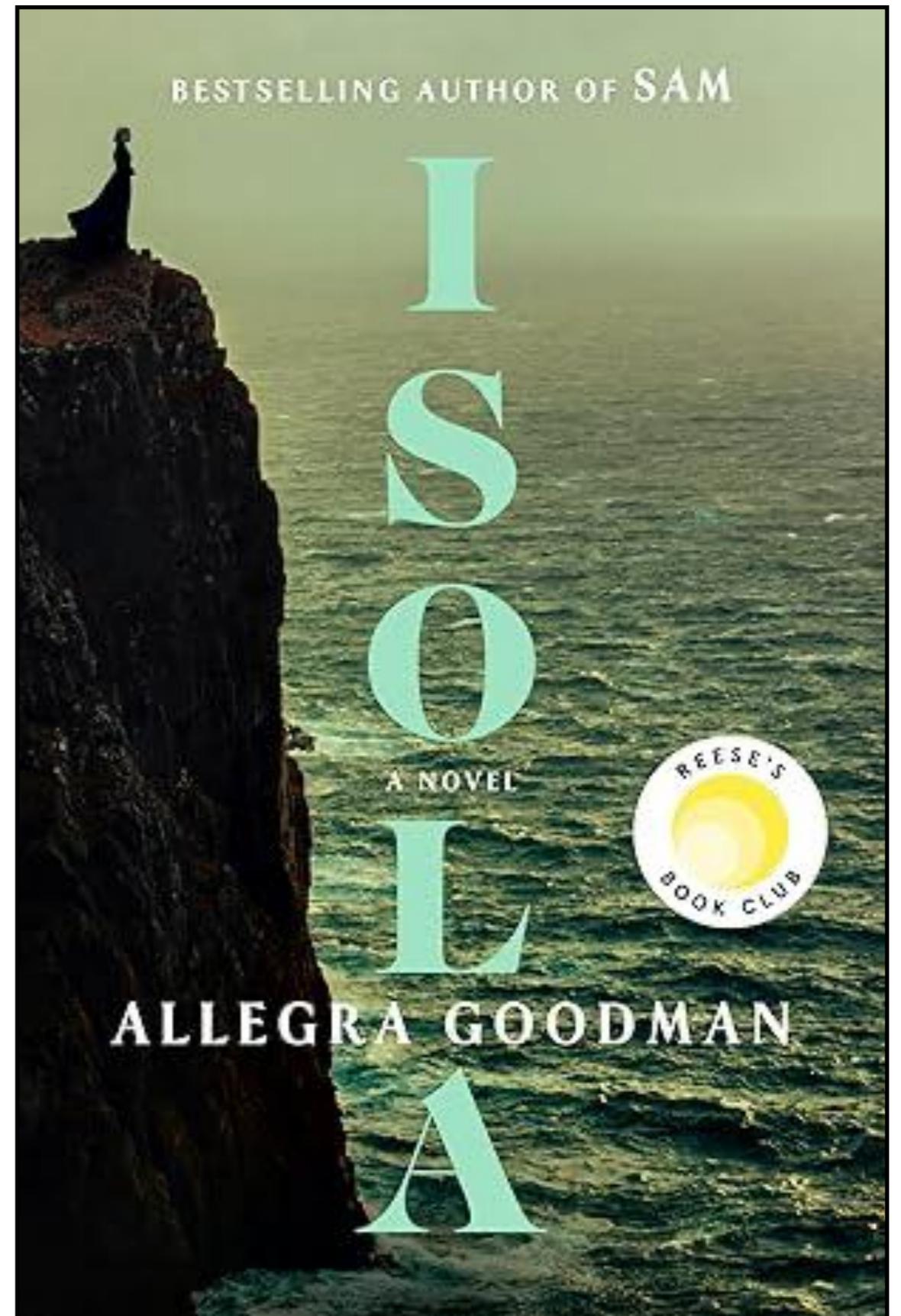
# THE ISLAND: ON ALLEGRA GOODMAN'S ISOLA

A BOOK REVIEW BY HUGH BLANTON

Allegra Miller | Isola | The Dial Press | February 2025 | 346 pages

ISBN: 978-0593730102

**On May 23, 1541 Jacques Cartier set sail on a voyage** with five ships from Saint-Malo France to establish a permanent French colony along the St. Lawrence river in New France (present day Canada). When they got there they created a fortified settlement at the site of what is now Cap-Rouge and named it Charlesbourg-Royal. The situation slowly deteriorated—the local Iroquoians stopped trading and making friendly visits and started prowling around outside apparently sizing up the settlement for an attack. That winter about thirty-five settlers were killed in raids by the Iroquois and in June 1542 after the ice melted, Cartier and most of the settlers had had enough and set sail back for



France. However, before they even got past the Newfoundland coast, they were stopped by Jean-Francois de Roberval and his fleet that was heading to New France itself.

Roberval told Cartier to turn around and get right back to the settlement (We've got diamonds and gold to dig!)—Cartier refused and continued on to France. Roberval and his fleet continued on up the St. Lawrence, but not before marooning a woman (and her servant) and a man who'd carried on an affair aboard Roberval's ship. He left them on an uninhabited island to their fate. The woman was his own cousin, Marguerite de la Rocque.

Allegra Goodman's latest novel *Isola* is a historical novel taking place in sixteenth-century France and New France. As is popular in publishing today, it has a feminist bent to it—you could even say it even goes as far as misogyny porn. When a little girl asks her nurse why her adult cousin might want to separate the two, the nurse answers the child, "Why do men like him do anything? Because they can." The little girl is our main character, Marguerite de la Rocque and her nurse is Damienne. Nine-year-old Marguerite is an orphan; her mother died giving birth to her and her father was killed in battle. The cousin, who Damienne fears may take Marguerite away from her, is adventurer and failed speculator Jean-François de la Rocque de Roberval. He became her legal guardian after her father was killed.

After the first few pages of *Isola* a reader might think they're reading a princess fairy tale,

Allegra Goodman's latest novel *Isola* is a historical novel taking place in sixteenth-century France and New France. As is popular in publishing today, it has a feminist bent to it—you could even say it even goes as far as misogyny porn.

but Goodman based *Isola* on actual historical events. Goodman came to Marguerite de la Rocque through a children's book she had been reading about French explorer Jacques Cartier—the book mentioned a French nobleman, Jean-François de Roberval, who had marooned his young ward on an island in the gulf of Saint Lawrence after she annoyed him by having an affair on his ship. There was no more discussion of Marguerite in the children's book, but Goodman's research turned up a couple of accounts of her ordeal: one written by a Basque queen and another by a French Franciscan priest. (The Basque queen makes an appearance in *Isola*.)

Nine-year-old Marguerite is the owner of an enormous chateau (and even the villages around it) after her parents have died, but it is being held in trust by her nearest relative, Roberval. Roberval's a connected man—he was a boyhood

friend of the king and along with his privilege comes exemption from the laws if it suits him. Roberval's most recent exploration endeavor has left him bankrupt, so he sells little Marguerite's chateau out from under her to use the money for further speculation. Like the bitcoin traders of today, Roberval is sure he'll make up his previous losses and restore the trust deed. And also like the bitcoin traders of today, he loses it all again. Little Marguerite knows nothing about it until the new tenants move into her home. They graciously allow her, and her nurse Damienne, to move into the servants' quarters in a cold and moldy corner of the chateau.

When Marguerite is seventeen, Roberval orders her to leave the chateau in Périgord and move in with him in La Rochelle. She's heartbroken and enraged over it—she'll have to leave her best friend Claire (Claire is the daughter of Marguerite's music teacher) behind. Marguerite

and Claire swap rings before Marguerite leaves, they fear they'll never see each other again. "Roberval had done this, denying me Claire. He had stolen our friendship, as he stole everything." When Marguerite arrives at Roberval's, she's surprised by two things: firstly, the castle is more like a giant damp dilapidated hovel, and secondly, Roberval isn't there. She soon finds out why he spends so little time in his castle—if his creditors become aware that he's home, they come and pound the doors demanding to be let in to collect their debts. Roberval doesn't tell Marguerite why he's summoned her there—Marguerite resorts to paying the servants for information. She's horrified to find out what he wants with her: He is taking her on his next voyage to New France. Each new section of *Isola* begins with an epigraph from *Lessons for my Daughter* by Anne of France. Anne was a duchess in the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries often referred to as "Madame la Grande." In *Lessons* she wrote: "The first point, above all others, is that earnestly and with all your faith and power, you guard against doing, saying, or thinking anything that will anger God." Anne's most important lessons, however, were grooming her daughter for possible ascension to the throne and how to deal with France's underhanded politics. Anne's daughter's health was frail and she died before Anne did. When Anne herself died a year after her daughter, her line became extinct. One epigraph Goodman included in *Isola* would most definitely not pass muster with today's feminists: "Because of their weak feminine nature, it is especially important for all gentlewomen desiring a good reputation to be so modest and afraid of error that they do not take a single step unless they must, and that compassed by reason, they behave with perfect delicacy."

Once at sea, Marguerite catches the eye of Roberval's trusted secretary Auguste. Standing out on deck as France disappears from view, Auguste asks her if she's afraid. She says she fears drowning, then after a pause adds, "And my guardian." Auguste, who knows Roberval better than anyone replies, "You have reason." Marguerite asks him what Roberval wants, Auguste simply tells her Roberval wants greatness. Marguerite thinks, "I was embarrassed because my question had been narrower. What did my guardian want from me? And yet I knew. He would have me as his mistress, but subtle as he was, he waited." That night after supper, Auguste impresses Marguerite with his cittern playing: *"The secretary fetched his instrument from his curtained bunk. Lightly, he played an air, but even as his music danced, he looked up, earnest, questioning. Then I wished we were alone, so we*

*could finish speaking. I wished he might confess again, even if I must berate him. This was how his words worked on me. I was awake and dreaming, confused and drawn to him. He had endangered and delighted me so that I could no longer choose when to consider or ignore him. He who had admired me from a distance now seized my imagination. His sound was silver. His eyes were fixed on me."*

As difficult as it would be to hide it on a ship at sea, Marguerite and Auguste begin an affair and are of course found out. Roberval contains his jealousy until the ship reaches the Gulf of St. Lawrence and announces he's marooning them on an island. An officer speaks up and asks what of food and drink for them. Roberval allows them all the provisions they can carry and whatever belongs to them—indicating Damienne, Marguerite's nurse. Marguerite is sickened when she realizes she's also exiled

Damienne and pleads with Roberval not to cast her off along with them. "I do not want her," Roberval says.

Marguerite, being a descendant of royalty, had never worked a day in her life and had always had her every need catered to, mostly by her nurse Damienne. Now, marooned in the wilderness, she prepares herself to contribute to their own "country" but Damienne forbids it. Auguste takes care of the hunting and fishing (they were allowed arquebuses and fish hooks before set ashore), and Damienne butchers the game and keeps their camp tidy. Finally, Marguerite convinces Damienne and Auguste to let her start a garden with the seeds they took from the ship. The soil is thin and rocky, but the plants sprout. And die within three weeks.

Goodman's a skilled scribe; the scenes of predators crossing the ice to get to the island are terrifying (Stephen King would do well to study Goodman on how to write genuine horror). She wrote (and illustrated!) her first novel at age seven, though it wasn't until she was thirty-one that she had a novel (*Kaaterskill Falls*) published. Part of her research into writing *Isola* was watching YouTube videos of gannets diving for fish, polar bears hunting, people writing with quills, and people loading muskets. She even took a tour of the replica of Sir Francis Drake's ship the *Golden Hind* in London and said

in an interview with Emma Donoghue in Lit Hub that it helped her understand how cramped voyages were at that time. Goodman spent about a year of imagining and reading before she sat down to write *Isola*.

Like her last novel *Sam*, we watch a young girl come of age, but in *Isola* Goodman rarely rises out of a gloomy stupor. *Isola* never blazes, but smolders continuously as Marguerite's life progresses under the control of other people. Whereas Dr. Watson was "a sack stuffed with straw" that served mostly to animate Holmes, the illiterate Damienne here is fully alive on the page, a real person with real thoughts and desires of her own, even if they are simple ones. Roberval's comeuppance is unexpected and delightful, were it that more Roberval's could get the same.

#### **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**



Hugh Blanton's latest book is *Kentucky Outlaw*. He can be reached on X @HughBlanton5



**This is the final book in the Realm Chronicles. What was the emotional journey like for you as a writer bringing Titania’s story—and the entire series—to a close?**

*My journey with Titania began with an image of a fairy hunched in grasses of a meadow. The fairy appeared anxious and I developed this story and world where she rises to be a queen, the first ever female monarch of her realm. To experience Titania’s frustration as an anxious teen princess, her angst as a hot-headed queen, and transformation to the determined and wise ruler she became is a skin-tingling experience. I’m so excited to share the resolution to this series with everyone.*

**Titania faces impossible choices between her people and the witches. How did you approach writing her internal conflict? Was she always meant to be this torn?**

*Titania’s internal conflict between aiding the witches and keeping her sole focus on her people mirrors struggles many rulers and countries experience. In the story we not only have the conflict between torn energy and time but that historically the fae considered vampires to be soulless creatures and therefore did not associate with them. The fact that the witches welcome vampire-witch hybrids into their group was initially a problem for the older members of the fae governments. In writing this series I wanted to show the many sides to choices between isolating from outside influences, welcoming aid and input, as well as dedicating energy and resources to helping others. In my mind Titania was always meant to be torn between honoring her ancestors and their histories and embracing her own beliefs and vision.*

**The book touches on the idea that “evil resides within everyone.” Can you talk about how that theme developed and what it means in the context of Titania’s world?**

*My fae believe they were created to safeguard the humans and human realm from evil spirits, especially those lurking below*

*them in Lower Earth. They hold this mission sacred and honor and find pride in their role. But they’ve sacrificed much and many fae lives to keep evil spirits and monsters from harming the humans over many centuries. A fae legend prophesies that there would be “one” to end all evil and therefore give the fae a sort of freedom that their people have never experienced. When we begin the series the fae are waiting for this one fae to appear and rise to the task. Typically, fae do not fight each other or crave power, but Titania experienced leaders within her own kingdom trying to take her crown and condemnation from other rulers when she tried to safeguard her realm by working with the witches. Titania experienced “evil” like jealousy, selfishness, and hatred within her own people, and sometimes within herself, and ponders whether “one” could really destroy all evil. She’s realistic enough to think that this could be an impossible, idealized goal perhaps perpetuated to give hope when the fae felt afraid and defeated.*

**The series blends fae mythology with original world-building. What sources—mythological, historical, or otherwise—inspired your take on fae and the structure of Middle and Upper Earth?**

*I love thinking that magic and magical beings exist in our world, perhaps just beyond our ability to identify and experience them. This idea initiated my Kingdom Journals series that aligns more with the urban fantasy genre. Set in contemporary time, the Kingdom Journals exposes a world where witches and vampires live side by side with humans who, for the most part, are oblivious. It was as I was finishing the finale to the Kingdom Journals series that I saw the image of the fairy hunched in a meadow. My witches needed an army and it occurred to me that I could use fae to help the witches. Having that realization catapulted Titania’s story and her relationship with these Upper Earth witches.*

*This triggered world building for Titania and her fae. I wanted to give them their own realm and the idea for a Middle Earth, the Fae Realm, that is sandwiched between the Human Realm, or Upper Earth, and Hell, or Lower Earth, formed. I admit that my research was limited. I truly wanted to make my fae unique, but not depart too from the idea of traditional fairies. I didn’t like the idea of the fae being tricky, but*

protectors of the Human realm.

**Your back cover hints at betrayal and shifting alliances. Were there any characters who surprised you as you were writing this final installment?**

*My characters constantly surprise me, even the main character, Titania. A few of the betrayals in this finale were set in motion early in the series and these climaxed in this last installment. But because I don't make detailed outlines when writing my book, there are some unknowns as to how characters will react. I don't always know which ones will rally around Titania, and which will dig their heels in and stay stuck in their path of unacceptance of the state of their realm. These unknowns make writing fun for me. I always know a beginning point and the end point but the drama in between is where the magic happens.*

**You've written across genres—from dystopian to romance to fantasy. What draws you back to fantasy, and how does *To Be a Fae* reflect your evolution as a writer?**

*Fantasy is my favorite genre and the easiest for me to write. I grew up reading fantasy books and still gravitate towards them. I love that we can explore ideas in a fantasy realm that may be applicable to our lives and our world, that a fantasy world creates a safe space to think about harder issues. *To be a Fae* is the conclusion of two series, the *Realm Chronicles* and the *Kingdom Journals*. Having character arcs, both the heroes and the enemies that span ten books creates the opportunity to show many nuances in characters. I began writing the first *Kingdom Journals* book in 2016 so being able to close this epic journey's story and give some happily-ever-afters to these characters feels momentous.*

**Magic plays a central role not just in your stories but in your worldview. How does your belief in everyday magic influence your storytelling, especially in darker or more complex scenes?**

*As hinted to before, I like to believe that magic is all around us. Magic can be an ah-ha moment in someone's understanding, a beautiful sunrise, or a sweet, unexpected interaction between people. This line of thinking requires my character to trust that they possess something uniquely special that gives*

*the ability to overcome whatever circumstance they find themselves in. So, even in the darkest of places, they have faith that a good outcome is possible. I believe each person has something special that sets them apart or makes them uniquely suited to belong in their niche. Many of my books showcase the idea of finding that spark within yourself and using that to find joy.*

**Many readers are fascinated by Titania's role as a queen and leader. Did you draw from any real-world leaders or experiences when shaping her character and decisions?**

*Titania really is a character created from my own imagination. She exemplifies overcoming personal challenges to solve problems for herself and others. Titania's story begins as a princess who has many anxieties. She experiences panic attacks and has largely been sequestered from the*

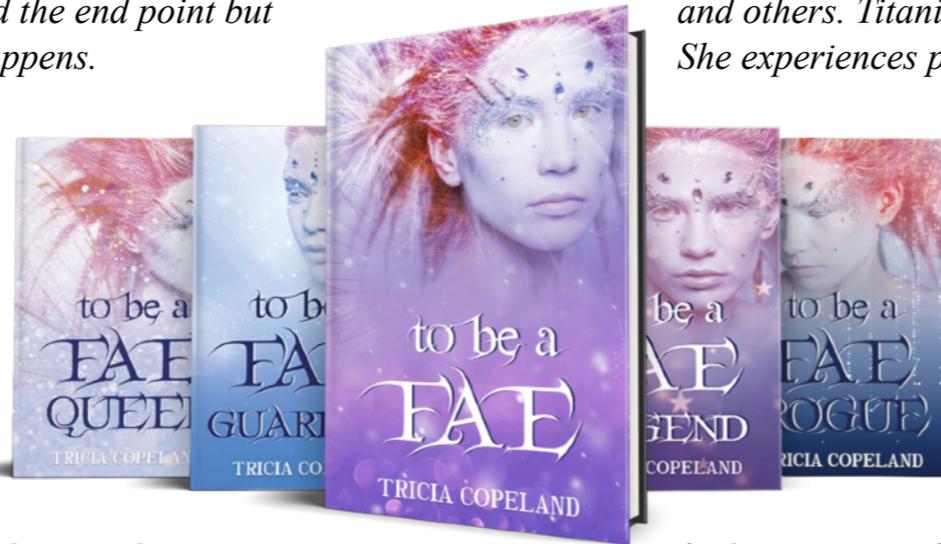
*public eye since the brutal killing of her four brothers, one right before her eyes. But with the same enemy reemerging, Titania can't sit idly by. She doesn't let her core belief, that she is meant to server her people, be squashed by her personal challenges.*

**What do you hope readers take away from this final chapter in the *Realm Chronicles*? Is there a core message you want to leave them with?**

*Many of the books in this series have themes like faith, trust, sacrifice, and resilience. *To be a Fae* is a bit unique, I don't want to give to much away, but I believe this finale gives a view of Titania's maturing character as she realizes it's okay to a bit more selfish in the direction she takes her life. She sees that she's given so much up for her people and that she deserves to make space for happiness for herself and be true to her heart.*

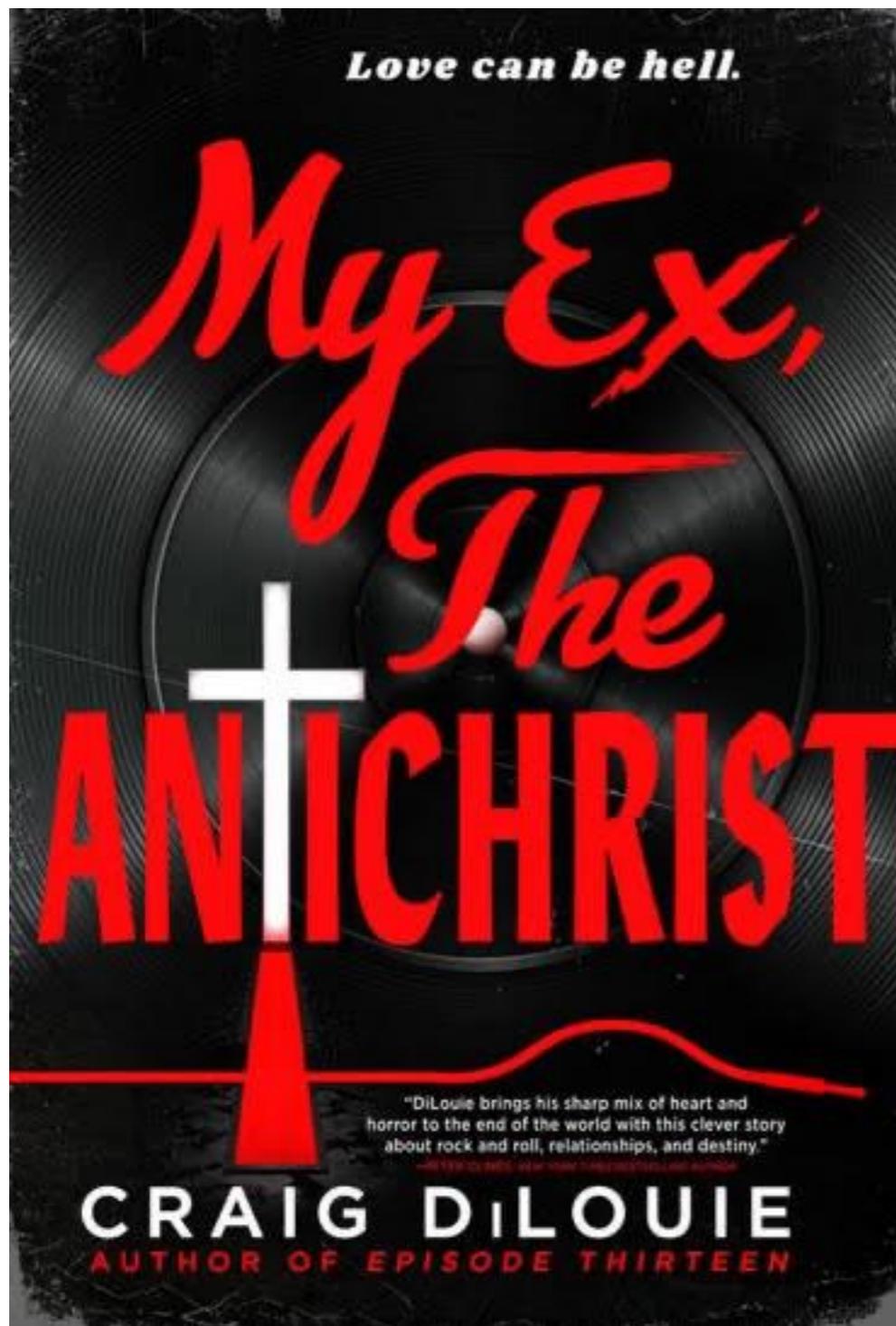
**Now that this world is complete, do you see yourself returning to the *Realm Chronicles* universe in another form—prequels, spin-offs, novellas—or is this truly goodbye?**

*As far as Titania's story arc at this time, I feel satisfied leaving her with her happily-ever-after. I can't imagine plunging her back into the throws of danger after she's experienced so much tragedy. I have toyed with the idea of a prequel for the villain's story which is somewhat captured in the *Kingdom Journals* prequel, *Kingdom of the Damned*. I'm also slowly forming ideas for spin-offs with some of the characters that make cameos in *To be a Fae*.*



# BEHIND THE BOOK

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG DILOUIE



Q: Craig would you please give a brief description of *My Ex, The Antichrist*?

A: *My Ex, The Antichrist* is a horror novel about a young musician who finds herself contending with an ex she learns is the Biblical Antichrist.

Written as an oral history reminiscent of VH1's *Behind the Music*, the novel is her and the other members of the Shivers finally telling all about how their pop punk band not only inspired a generation but might have saved the world.

Q: Where did the idea come from and how long did it take you to write it?

A: Every novel has its own genesis story, and this one's turned out to be fairly simple. The title popped into my head one day, and it really started there. The title instantly promised a fun read crossing *The Omen* with a very human story of a young woman struggling to find her own voice through music as well as her own identity by getting past her ex.

As far as how long it took to write it, we're talking a few months. I have a process down now where I pretty much have the story internalized before I start typing. By that point, it's must a matter of getting it down on paper.

Q: What are the themes and messages you hope readers pick up on, learn and feel once they finish reading the book?

A: *My Ex, The Antichrist* is primarily just a fun horror story, but thematically it's about loving people who aren't good for us, gaining faith in ourselves, predestination, the apocalypse, and of course music.

With music being so transformational, using a rock band as a lens for a young woman finding her voice was an ideal setup. Music has the power to inspire passion, change the world, and stick around in your brain. A good song always seems to come when it's needed, and it already knows you.

After pinning the premise and big themes, I had to set the story in time. The year 1999 proved perfect for an apocalypse. Nostradamus warned us a "King of Terror" would appear in that year, and then there were the fears of the Y2K bug. Setting the story in the past also worked as music has an uncanny ability to transport us back in time to past places and feelings. This was the pop-

punk era, with bands like The Offspring, Blink-182, Green Day, and many others defining the era for millions of young people. The songs were short and punchy, fast-paced, bursting with energy, and had lyrics that spoke directly to the young—the ideal kind of music one would want to play to challenge the Antichrist in a regional battle of the bands with the fate of the world as the stakes.

Q: If you were to write a sequel, what would the characters be doing right now?

A: I honestly haven't given it any thought as there is no sequel needed or planned, but my hope is they'd be rocking out and enjoying the time they have left on this earth.

Q: If *My Ex, The Antichrist* were to be made into a TV series or movie, who would be your dream cast?

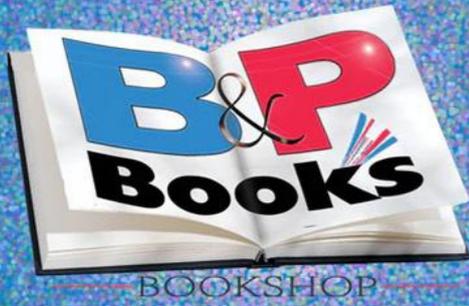
A: Interesting you should say that, as the novel was just optioned for possible TV adaptation by a producer with an exclusive relationship with a major studio. Unfortunately, I can't say more as studios generally like to do the announcing themselves, and they haven't gone public yet. Fingers crossed!

As far as who'd be a dream cast, I think a great actor to play Lily, our main protagonist, might be somebody like Sydney Sweeney (*Euphoria*). Youth and beauty are prerequisites as the character is barely 20, along with a range of character expression to show a transformation from a kitten to a tiger over the course of the story. I don't know if she can sing, but if she can, she or someone like her would be my top choice.

As for Drake, the Antichrist, I'm thinking Jack O'Connell would be a good fit. He was fantastic in *Sinners*, and he has both the devilish good looks and a charismatic, happy-go-lucky sense of menace to pull off playing the devil's son.



Craig DiLouie is an acclaimed American-Canadian author of literary dark fantasy and other fiction. Formerly a magazine editor and advertising executive, he also works as a journalist and educator covering the North American lighting industry. His fiction has been nominated for major awards, optioned for screen, and published in multiple languages. He is a member of the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association, International Thriller Writers, and the Horror Writers Association. He lives in Calgary, Canada with his two wonderful children.



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