

SINGULARITIES



Edited by Geoff Hancock

Fragments, Parafictions,
Prose Poems – New Directions
in Fiction and Physics

Singularities



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Prose Poems – New Directions
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Black Moss Press



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Published by Black Moss Press,
1939 Alsace, Windsor,
Ontario, Canada N8W 1M5.

Black Moss Press books are distributed by Firefly Books,
250 Sparks Avenue, Willowdale, Ontario M2H 2S4

Financial assistance toward publication was gratefully received
from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council.

Cover design: Turkish folk artist

Printed and bound in Canada.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:
Singularities

ISBN 0-88753-203-9

1. Canadian prose literature (English) – 20th century.
 - I. Hancock, Geoff, 1946-

PS8329.S46 1990 C818'.540808 C90-090052-0
PR9194.9.S46 1990

I have the universe all to myself. The universe has me all to itself.

– Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*

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Acknowledgements

"You have to do it by yourself;
but you can't do it alone."

This powerful zen koan has much to do with the paradoxes of quantum mechanics. The paradoxes, and I hope essential truths of *Singularities*, could not have been articulated without the inspiration and support of many remarkable and enlightened men and women. To all of them I would like to express my love and gratitude. In particular I owe a special thank you to Taoist Master Mantak Chia; Enlightenment Master Stephen Isles; poet and publisher Marty Gervais for his unfailing support of a complex project; and Robert Kroetsch who let me know that theories could sizzle. Finally, I must thank my two bright and guiding lights, Gay Allison and Meagan Julia.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published and unpublished material:

jwcurry, to the author;

Dave Godfrey, from *I Ching Kanada*, Press Porcépic;

the estate of Gwendolyn MacEwen, from *Noman's Land*, Coach House Press;

Erin Mouré, to the author and Vehicule Press, from *West South West*;

Joe Rosenblatt, to the author and Oolichan Books, from *Brides of the Stream*;

Michael Dean, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *In Search of the Perfect Lawn*;

sean o huigin, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *The Nightmare Alphabet*;

Anne Szumigalski, to the author and Fifth House, from *Dogstones*;

Karl Jirgens, to the author and Coach House Press, from *Strappado*;

Lola LeMire Tostevin, to the author and Coach House Press, from *'sophie*;

Smaro Kambourelli, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*; from "Tessera" Feminist issue No. 57;

Michael Bullock, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*;

George McWhirter, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*;

Claire Harris, to the author and Fiddlehead Goose Lane Editions, from *Translation Into Fiction*;

Patrick Lane, to the author;

Gay Allison, to the author and Williams-Wallace Publishers, from *The Unravelling*;

Eugene McNamara, to the author and *The Ontario Review*;

to the estate of bpNichol and Black Moss Press, from *Selected Organs*;

Rod Willmot, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *In the Ribs of Dragonfly*;

Paul Dutton, to the author and Coach House Press, from *Right Hemisphere, Left Ear*;

Fred Wah, to the author and Turnstone Books, from *Waiting for Saskatchewan*;

Betsy Warland and Daphne Marlatt, to the authors and Gynergy Books, from *Double Negative*;

Michael Kenyon, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*;

C.H. Gervais, to the author and Penumbra Press, from *Letters to the Equator*;

Paul Savoie, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *The Meaning of Gardens*;

Leon Rooke, to the author and *Grain*;

David Halliday, to the author and Press Porcépic, from *Making Movies*;

Susan Musgrave, to the author and McClelland & Stewart, from *Cocktails at the Mausoleum*;

Martin Vaughn-James, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*; from *After "The Cage"*;

Christopher Dewdney, to the author, and House of Anansi, from *The Immaculate Perception*;

Robert Kroetsch, to the author and Oolichan Books, from *Excerpts from the Real World*;

David McFadden, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *Canadian Sunset*;

David Donnell, to the author and Coach House Press, from *The Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Race*;

John Newlove, to the author and ECW Press, from *The Night the Dog Smiled*;

Mary di Michele, to the author and *This Magazine*;

Kim Maltman, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*;

Judith Fitzgerald, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *Diary of Desire*;

Doug Glover, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *The Mad River*;

George Payerle, to the author;

Colleen Thibaudeau, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *the Martha Landscapes*;

Marlene Nourbese Philip, to the author and *Contemporary Verse*, "Tessera" issue and *Ragweed Press*

Crad Kilodney, to the author and Black Moss Press, from *Malignant Humors*;

Ron Smith, to the author and Sono Nis Press, from *A Buddha Named Baudelaire*;

Stan Dragland, to the author and Coach House Press, from *Journeys Through Bookland*;

Fraser Sutherland, to the author and Pottersfield Press, from *In The Village of Alias*;

John Riddell, to the author and Coach House Press, from *Criss-Cross*;

Geoff Hancock, to the author and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*.

island / Where sea-gulls fly over their nests / 'he combed the long hair that hung over her shoulders..., etc. – its mood of shattered expectation being another technique liberally employed, even to the point of irritation, in the bit of pocket-lint, locker-room fluff here under discussion. And that ends the discussion.]

Fred Wah

from *Waiting For Saskatchewan*

Elite

[pronounced ee-light]

Elite 1

Swift Current Saskatchewan is at the centre. I don't think you were a boy there. Probably what happened is your family moved there from Medicine Hat just before you were four, just before you and Ethel were sent to China. I know all these "facts" existed once, and I could check some of them out with Ethel, or your other sisters and brothers, Buster, Lil, Flo, Jimmy. But, like the information on distant relatives I lost just before going into China, somehow I don't want it or don't need it. The facts seem partially unreal. Anyway, you must have seen Swift Current just before Grampa put you on the train. About 1923. I was driving across the prairies on New Year's eve last year and we decided to stop for the night in Swift Current. It was close to midnight and so we thought we'd welcome in the New Year in a pub downtown. I hadn't been there for over thirty years but I felt natural in following Central Ave. to the old train station. As soon as I saw the station I knew exactly where I was. I stopped the car and pointed out to Pauline the exact spot I stood when the war was over and I met you at the station when you came home from training camp. From there the lay of the land was clear to me. There was Roy's shoe shop and just up the street across from Woolworth's was the Elite Cafe. You were always there, in the Elite, working. I remember the streets more on my own. Not just the photographs, but me walking, alone in the town. Touching a building, the flowerpots in Mother Trimble's windowsills, the cool shade under some outside stairway, etc. I never talked to you about these things, even when they weren't memories. They weren't really important at the time. Your memory of such particulars. Mine. Does it matter? The reason for the story is simply to count on it. What I remember or what you or anyone else connected remembers isn't the point. There isn't even any point. There is just this. You, before you had a car, on the street in an overcoat, winter, to work. Always alone. I mean I see only your singularity, you with hands in

your pockets, head down, going to work, with intention, in the cold winter dusk, to the Elite, your dad or Buster already has the big stainless coffee urn ready, what was it, twenty cups of ground in the cloth sack, and, what, the first few customers, not farmers, you can't even speak English at first, silence, from China too, sweep the floors, maybe do some cooking in the kitchen where you can talk to the cooks, Grampa out front flipping coins, the whole family around you there in Swift Current, your new old family, by then silence and anger hum, alone.

Elite 2

Do you remember how living on the prairies was like living in water, in an ocean or a large lake. Movements, decisions, fortunes were made by under-current, a sense of sliding along a large floor, in the night. The night I was with you on a trip, just before we moved out to B.C., it felt like that, the way we moved, probably by train, through unknown territory. Always you had an "intent." You were on business of some sort and the others we met were all Chinese. You could talk to them. They gave me candy and pinched me. You and they talked and talked. Chinese always sounds so serious, emotional, angry. I napped on a couch in some Chinese store in some Alberta town. The old men played dominoes and smoked and drank tea. In the window dusty plants in porcelain bowls and some goldfish. Does it seem strange to you now to see this in words? Do you remember the trip I'm talking about? Late at night somewhere you played Mah Jong. From outside the sound of the click-clack of the pieces being shuffled over the tabletop under the hum of the men's voices, a real music I felt comfortable with. Even though you stayed late you always came back, going somewhere. We moved that night through this subcontinent of prairie landscape, it was summer and the water was warm and hazy, the possible distances, distant.

Elite 3

I'm on the prairies this winter. I haven't been here in the winter since I was four years old. It's not Swift Current, or Speedy Creek as some here call it, but there are certain flavours which are unmistakeably part of us. The ethnicity here feels so direct. I mean the Chinese are still connected to China, the Ukrainians so Ukrainian, in the bar the Icelanders tell stories about Iceland, the Swede still has an accent, the French speak French. Here you're either a Wiebe or a Friesen, or not. What is a Metis, anyway? I know when you came back from China you must have felt more Chinese than anything else. But I remember you saying later that the Chinese didn't trust you and the English didn't trust you. You were a half-breed, Eurasian. I remember feeling the possibility of that word "Eurasian" for myself when I first read it in my own

troubled adolescence. I don't think you ever felt the relief of that exotic identity though. In North America white is still the standard and you were never white enough. But you weren't pure enough for the Chinese either. You never knew the full comradeship of an ethnic community. So you felt single, outside, though you played the game as we all must. To be a mix here on the prairies is still noticed. I remember going into Macleods in Swift Current a few years ago and sensing that most of the women in the store were just like Granny Erickson. I don't think you felt there was anyone else in the world like you.

Elite 4

You got us involved in the Salvation Army because that's what Granny Wah wanted. She had a bonnet. I can't recall ever seeing Grampa or you there. But I bet she had her go at you too. Didn't you ever play the big bass drum, or the cymbals? I played the E-flat horn later in Nelson. I think, like Grampa, you always thought the Salvation Army people outside yourself. That was the Chinese in you. You didn't outwardly really trust it. But you tried it. In some totally pure and personal way you prayed, alone. I know later when our family went to the United Church in Nelson and you sometimes got off work on Sunday morning to go to church with us you did sing the hymns but your brow furled as if you couldn't understand the words. You were proud, then, of the fact you were going to church and you made a point of telling some of the customers in the restaurant that you had to go to church. That was after you had stopped desiring China and the Chinese at work put up with but laughed at you going to church. I think the church thing was white respectability and you did it for that and a sense of our family in that community. Somehow in the face of all the Salvation Army, Granny, community, etc. I know you established some real spiritual communication, totally private, no drums.

Elite 5

There is no picture (or is there) of me leaning over the boards of the Swift Current arena with you there, on the ice in your big overcoat, suit and tie, spiffy, smiling at the camera, and the whole Swift Current Indians (they weren't real "Indians" – that was their name) hockey team working out, swirling big as life over the dark ice. There is a team picture I know. Like the Toronto Maple Leaf hockey calendars that used to hang in the barber shop, the team lined up on the real ice of the Gardens against the backboards. But in this one it's the Indians. I think you were the manager or something, you helped out. The brim of your hat is turned down, Chicago gangster style. The Indian on their sweaters is just like the Chicago Black Hawks. Strangely, Chicago figured in your life. You told us that you ran away from home when they brought you

back from China and got work on a boat in the Great Lakes. You jumped ship in Chicago and they picked you up for illegal entry. You were sent back to Swift Current and that was the end of that. I wish you had given us more details. Chicago has always been a mysterious place for me and someday I'll get there myself. Anyway, isn't it strange how that city is there in our lives, on the periphery. I've always been "proud" you were part of that team. The Swift Current Indians were my first hockey heroes and their movements over the ice instilled a sense of body and mind-set which I have carried with me all my life. Even though you never played hockey I know you had the invisible movement of the game inside you too. You said you played basketball on a winning team in China. But you liked hockey. There is no picture either of me and my first pair of skates, double-runners, with Mom (you were working), on a blustery day, natural ice, on a pond or creek. Or the skating rink you made for us in our back yard in Trail. Or the puck that caught me just above the eye, third row as you and I watched a game in the civic Centre, blood and stitches. The game on television now, you'd fall asleep before the end of the first period. Did you ever ride a horse?

Elite 6

Line going deep into the lake or flung out onto the surface glaze river current, layers of darkness, invisible fish. You would look at me with serious brown eyes sometimes like I was crazy when I caught a fish and then give your own mad laugh. Something got to you fishing in the Columbia River at Trail, after work, along the rocks, swift-flowing mind emptying, maybe. Or in a creek at Meadow on a Sunday afternoon picnic, cousins and uncles, a ball game. At Apex you driving the road in the turquoise Ford looking for us fishing along the slow meandering of Cottonwood Creek. You without me at Trout Lake. Me without you below the C.P.R. tracks below Granite Road on the way out of town or jigging for suckers near the boathouses with the old Chinaman. When I fish now sometimes I feel like I'm you, water, glassy gaze, vertical, invisible layers, the line, disappearing.

Elite 7

The dream "noises" of the early morning. You getting ready to go to work, still dark at 4:30, a light dust of snow maybe, the house warm, as you dress, the gabardine pants, shoes I shined for you last night, muffled voices of good-bye, the small change in your pocket, car keys, your pace on the varnished maple floor, alone, quickens with movement towards the door, out, dark grey mist-hackle across the lake on Elephant Mountain, you and the town get going for the day, I hear the blue 2-door Pontiac hum alive down on the street, and you're gone to work, and then our own half-awake silence and relaxation

back into the morning's warmth and sleep. Or me a couple times a year getting up for you, e.g. father's day, some Sunday morning, could you really sleep "in" thinking of me the kid making the big urn of coffee, turning the heat up, remembering to get the cream and a tray of butter out of the cooler, turn on the sign, the synchromesh of everything starting to work, darkness breaking on Baker Street, first customers and the regulars early morning old man risers C.P.R. night shift and a few foremen and loners first coffee and cigarettes, the new noises of the day picking up speed and humming along the counter and booths to the whack of the kitchen door kicked on stride and the "smells" then.

Elite 8

I try to "place" you and the hand or head can't, try to get you into my mountains for example but your China youth and the images of place for you before you were twenty are imbued with the green around Canton rice fields, humid Hong Kong masses – I can't imagine what your image of the world was, where you were in it (were you always going home to Swift Current, were you ever at home, anywhere). How much did you share of how small or large the world was after we left the prairies – Trail, Nelson, Cranbrook, Calgary, Vancouver? That "reward" of a real holiday down the Columbia and then up the coast to Vancouver when you sold a share in the Diamond Grill. A few trips to Spokane, hikes into the hills around Nelson for fishing, the gravelly drive to Trail and back. Did any shape of such places ever displace the distancing in your eyes? You looked out at it all but you never really cared if you were there or elsewhere. I think you were prepared to be anywhere. The sun, the warmth, was something you went outside for outside yourself, stretching and relaxing your working moving body, inside, inside, you never betrayed any imprint of a "world" other than your dark brown eyes.

Elite 9

When you returned from China via Victoria on Hong Kong Island and they put you in jail in Victoria on Vancouver Island because your birth certificate had been lost in the Medicine Hat City Hall fire and your parents couldn't prove you were born in Canada until they found your baptism records in the church or in the spring of 1948 when we moved to Nelson from Trail during the floods while Mao chased Chiang Kai-shek from the mainland to offshore Taiwan and the Generalissimo's picture hung in our house and on a wall above some plants and goldfish in the Chinese Nationalist League house down on Lake Street or when you arrived in China in 1916 only four years old unable to speak Chinese and later in the roaring twenties when each time Grampa gambled away your boat passage so you didn't get back to Canada

until 1930 languageless again with anger locked up in the immigration cells on Juan de Fuca Strait or when your heart crashed so young at 54 as you fell from mom's arms to the dance floor did you see islands?

Elite 10

Your father owned the Regal across from the railway station but you worked in the Elite on Central Avenue right next to the Venice and the Paris was the one on the corner all three across the street from Cooper's store where Connie worked in the dry goods department after school and then full time after graduation the year you took her to the final basketball game at Gull Lake and Mom says now you borrowed a car and drove to Moose Jaw for a honeymoon and bought your first house in Swift Current in the fall of 1939 for \$900 just after I was born and Connie's Dad fixed it up so you sold it and bought another stucco (I remember that one) in '41 then moved to Trail in the spring of '43 and bought the Expert Cleaners and sold it to Andy's brother Sam and his wife and bought a house there on a corner right across from the river near Butler ball park by the bridge and the next one where we had our first dog it was down closer to Sandy Beach where Granny and Grampa lived at the foot of Sandy Mountain and then Ernie's dog Mickey up in the house in the next block to the Dollar Cleaners all in East Trail while you and Grampa were in the Elite across the river downtown underneath the smelter hill and then in the spring of '48 floods when we moved to Nelson didn't you and Jimmy Gee Ethel's husband buy into the L.D. Café which you changed to the New Star just as Mao's victory north of the Yangtze became palpable and we lived in the duplex with the oil stove at 314 Carbonate before you got into your last restaurant (and mine) the Diamond Grill which even with the Standard down by Hipperson's Hardware times got good on Baker Street in the fifties and you got Grampa Erickson to build us our own house with maple floors at 724 Victoria you were so proud we had fireworks for the house warming and two sittings for the Chinese banquet in the basement and finally the Holmes Motel in Cranbrook in the early sixties where that was the end of the deals the cafes the houses the driving the building the running right through it, for you, that was it.

Biographical Notes

jwcurry lives in Toronto, where he publishes dozens of pamphlets and broadsides from his Curvd H&dz press.

Dave Godfrey is the publisher of Press Porcepic in Victoria, B.C. He won the Governor-General's Award for his novel, *The New Ancestors*. He is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Victoria, and a pioneer in computer literacy.

Gwendolyn MacEwen won the Governor-General's Poetry Award for *The Shadow-Maker*. Besides several volumes of poetry, her fiction includes two novels, and two story collections, *Noman* and *Noman's Land*. She died in 1987.

Erin Mouré won the Governor-General's Award for poetry in 1988 for *Furious*. She lives in Montreal, and works for the railroad. Her other titles include *Domestic Fuel*, *Wanted Alive*, *Whiskey Vigil*, and *Empire, York Street*.

Joe Rosenblatt won the Governor-General's Award for poetry in 1976 for his book, *Top Soil*. Along with several volumes of poetry, including *Brides of the Stream*, he has published prose poems, ink drawings, and two volumes of an autobiography, *Escape from the Glue Factory* and *The Kissing Goldfish of Siam*.

Michael Dean has been doing lawn research since 1976, for his book, *In Search of the Perfect Lawn*. He is a world renowned sound poet, and performance artist with the text / sound ensemble, Owen Sound, and a co-founder of Underwiche Editions.

sean o huigin, who lives in Ireland and Toronto and works as a highly successful children's writer, has written *The Nightmare Alphabet* and *The Granny Poems*. His most successful children's book is *Scary Poems for Rotten Kids*. He was winner of the Canada Council Children's Literature Award in 1983.

Anne Szumigalski was born in England and came to Canada in 1951. She now lives in Saskatoon. Her most recent books include *Doctrine of Signatures*, *Dogstones*, and *Journey / Journee*, co-authored with Terrence Heath. She has twice been nominated for the Governor-General's poetry award, in 1984, and 1986.

Karl Jirgens is editor-in-chief of the foot long post-modernist and pataphysical magazine, *Rampike*. His first story collection was *Strappado*.

Lola LeMire Tostevin is Director of the Creative Writing Program at York University in Toronto. Feminist critic, poet, and translator, her books include *Colour of Her Speech*, *Gyno-Text*, *Double Standards*, and *'sophie*.

Smaro Kambourelli was born in Greece, and came to live in Winnipeg in 1978. She now teaches at the University of Victoria, B.C. Her books include

in the second person, and *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, co-edited with Shirley Neuman.

George McWhirter is head of the Creative Writing Department at the University of British Columbia. Winner of the Commonwealth Prize for his poetry, his short fiction has been collected as *Bodyworks*, *Coming to Grips with Lucy*, and *God's Eye*. He has also published two novels, *Paula Lake* and *Cage*.

Michael Bullock is Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. Translator of over 150 books from French, German and Italian, he is best known as Canada's leading surrealist poet and fiction maker. Recent books include *Vancouver Moods*, *Poems on Green Paper*, and *Randolph Cranstone and the Veil of Maya*.

Claire Harris is a writer and teacher who has studied in Ireland, Jamaica, and Nigeria, and now lives in Calgary, Alberta. She won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for *Fables From The Women's Quarters*, and the Writers Guild of Alberta Award for her poetry collection, *Travelling to Find a Remedy*. Her most recent book of poetry is *The Conception of Winter*.

Patrick Lane lives in Saskatoon. Winner of the Governor-General's Award for poetry for *Poems: New and Selected* in 1979, he has since turned to fiction. In 1989-90, with his companion Lorna Crozier, he was writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto.

Gay Allison is a poet, editor, and English teacher who was born in Saskatchewan. Her recent books include *Life: Still*, *The Unravelling*, and *In the Valley of the Butterflies*.

Eugene McNamara lives in Windsor, Ontario, where he is a professor of English at the University of Windsor. His short fiction is collected in *Salt*, *The Search for Sarah Grace*, and *Spectral Evidence*.

bpNichol was one of Canada's most remarkable performance, sound and concrete poets. His prose, poems, and fictions appeared in dozens of booklets and pamphlets, as well as more formal book presentations, including his six volume *The Martrology*, *Craft Dinner*, *A Bunch of Proses*, *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* and the unfinished *Organ Music*. He won a Governor-General's Award in 1970. bp died in 1988.

Rod Willmot is poetry editor of Black Moss Press. His work includes *Ribs of the Dragonfly*.

Paul Dutton lives in Toronto where he works as a poet and editor at Underwich Editions. A member of the sound poetry ensemble, the Four Horsemen, he published many books, including *The Book of Numbers*.

Fred Wah has written several books of poetry including *Among*, *Loki is Buried at Smokey Creek*, *Breathin' My Name with A Sigh*, *Music is at the Heart of Thinking*, and *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, which won a Governor-General's Award in 1985. A founding editor of TISH and co-editor of the electronic journal *Swift Current*, he lives in B.C.

Daphne Marlatt has published over a dozen books of poetry and / or prose,

most recently *Touch to My Tongue*, *How to Hug a Stone*, *What Matters*, *Steveston*, and a novel, *Ana Historic*. She lives on one of B.C.'s Gulf Islands.

Betsy Warland is a writer and editor whose books include *A Gathering Instinct*, *open is broken*, *serpent (w)rite*, and with Daphne Marlatt, *double negative*. She most recently co-edited *(f.)lip*, a newsletter of feminist innovative writing. She lives on one of B.C.'s Gulf islands where she is writing a play.

Michael Kenyon lives in Victoria. A member of the editorial board of *The Malahat Review*, he is a frequent contributor to *Canadian Fiction Magazine* and other leading periodicals.

C.H. Gervais lives in Windsor, where he edits the book and religion pages of the *Windsor Star*, and publishes the prize-winning titles of Black Moss Press. His own book titles include *The Rumrunners*, *Into A Blue Morning*, *Letters from the Equator*, and *Autobiographies*.

Paul Savoie is a man of many talents, who writes in both French and English, and who is also a musician and lyricist. Some of his titles which have received high praise include *A la façon d'un charpentier*, *Acrobats*, and *Nahanni*. *The Meaning of Gardens* was his first book with Black Moss Press. He lives in Toronto.

Leon Rooke lives in Eden Mills, Ontario. He has published hundreds of short stories which have been collected as *Death Suite*, *Cry Evil*, *A Bolt of White Cloth*, *The Birth Control King of the Upper Volta*, and *The Magician in Love*. He won the Governor-General's award for fiction for *Shakespeare's Dog* in 1983.

David Halliday lives in Islington, Ontario, where he is a devotee of film. He has published four books, including *The Black Bird*, and *Making Movies: the Films of Samuel Bremmer*.

Susan Musgrave lives in Sydney, B.C. Author of nine books of poetry, and two novels, *The Charcoal Burners* and *The Dancing Chicken*, she is a literary columnist for the *Toronto Star*.

Martin Vaughn-James lives in Paris. His books include *The Park*, *The Cage*, and *After "The Cage,"* a special issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*.

Christopher Dewdney is from London, and lives in Toronto. His books include *Predators of the Adoration* and *The Immaculate Perception*. Dewdney's work closes the gap between literature and science, between reality and irreality.

Robert Kroetsch is a professor of English at the University of Victoria. Winner of the Governor-General's Award for fiction in 1969 for *The Studhorse Man*, he has become a major theorist of post-modernist fiction and poetry in such novels as *Badlands*, *What the Crow Said*, and *Alibi*, and poetry or prose in *The Stone Hammer Poems*, *The Ledger*, *Seed Catalogue*, *Field Notes*, *Advice to My Friends*, and *Excerpts from the Real World*.

David McFadden lives in Toronto. He has published more than twenty-five books of poetry and fiction. Among his fiction are the comic novels,

A Trip Around Lake Erie, A Trip Around Lake Huron, A Trip Around Lake Ontario, Canadian Sunset, and Animal Spirits: stories to live by. His most recent book is *Gypsy Guitar: one hundred love poems*.

David Donnell is from St. Mary's, Ontario. Winner of the Governor-General's Award for his poetry collection *Settlements* in 1983, he now lives in Toronto. His prose works include *Hemingway in Toronto, The Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Race, and Water Street Days*.

John Newlove lives in Ottawa. His poems and prose include *Grave sirs, Elephants, mothers, and others, Black Night Window, The Cave, The Fat-man, and The Night the Dog Smiled*.

Mary di Michele lives in Toronto. Her books include *Necessary Sugar, Immune From Gravity, and Bread and Chocolate*.

Kim Maltman was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta. He is currently a particle physicist. His books include *The Country of the Map Makers, The Sickness of Hats, Branch Lines, Softened Violence and The Transparency of November Snow* (with Roo Borson).

Judith Fitzgerald lives in Toronto. Author of thirteen books of poetry, she also edited two important poetry anthologies, *Undozen: Thirteen Canadian Poets*, and *Sp / elles: poetry by Canadian Women / Poesie de femmes canadiennes*. She is a prolific contributor to national and international publications, which won her the 1983 Fiona Mee Award for Outstanding Literary Journalism.

Douglas Glover lives on a tobacco farm in southern Ontario. His short fiction has been collected in *The Mad River* and *Dog Attempts to Drown Man in Saskatoon*. His novels include *Precious, The South Will Rise at Noon*, and in-progress, *The Life and Times of Captain N*.

George Payerle lives in Vancouver, where he works as poet, editor, and typographer. His fiction includes *The Afterpeople and Unknown Soldier*.

Colleen Thibaudeau was born in Toronto and is married to the playwright / poet James Reaney. Her publications include *Ten Letters, My Granddaughters are Combing Out Their Long Hair and The Martha Landscapes*.

Marlene Nourbese Philip is a "New World" writer who has lived in Canada since 1968. Her poetry includes *Thorns, Salmon Courage, and She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*, for which she won the prestigious Casa de las Americas Poetry Prize in 1988. She has also published a novel, *Harriet's Daughter*.

Crad Kilodney is a one man book operation, writing, editing and selling most of his books on Yonge Street, usually published by his own imprint, Charnel House. Other titles have appeared with other presses, most notable, *Lightning Struck My Dick, Malignant Humors and The Girl on the Subway*.

Ron Smith lives in Lantzville, B.C., where he teaches in the English Department at Malaspina College. He is a frequent contributor to Canada's finest literary magazines. His latest book is *A Buddha Named Baudelaire*.

Stan Dragland lives in London, Ontario. Founding publisher of Brick Books, his own titles include *Wilson MacDonald's Western Tour*, *Simon Jesse's Journey*, *Peckertracks*, and *Journeys Through Bookland*.

Fraser Sutherland lives in Nova Scotia. Founding editor of the poetry magazine *Northern Journey*, his most recent prose collection is *In the Village of Alias*.

John Riddell lives in Toronto. His first collection of stories was *Criss-Cross*. Long associated with the small press movement, he has published with grOnk, Aya, Phenomenon Press, and Konkakte.

Geoff Hancock lives in Stratford, Ontario. Editor-in-chief of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, he has edited several anthologies devoted to challenging traditional models of perception. Surrealism, magic realism, metafiction, scatology, quantum mechanics, cosmology, and new research in narratology has informed his unique vision of Canadian prose.

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ISBN 0-88753-203-9

