

## Susan Crean / CAPILANO AT TWENTY

It's a sobering experience turning twenty, even if you happen to be a feisty Westcoast visual and literary review and even if you knew in 1972 when Series One Number One appeared that it was probably foolish to worry about surviving the decade — never mind making it through the next one. Beginning things always invites obsession. And those were the good years, sweet with the promise of an expanding future. Of course, reaching one's second decade no longer holds the mythic significance it once did now that 18-year olds can vote and drink as well as drive, but we celebrate it all the same and this has a purpose. For it's an occasion to stop to admire the view, to look back down the road we have come along and forward towards the yet-to-be-written.

The past two decades of Canadian writing have been decades of amazing growth; unprecedented and extraordinary in volume, diversity, and talent. In the distorted comfort of our fin-de-siècle we tend to forget that writing wasn't always a foregone conclusion in this country; for many years it was more like an aberration. In the sixties it was necessary for writers to start from scratch, to set up the presses which would publish their books because the branch plant operations which had absorbed all the lucrative parts of the Canadian industry had no interest in money losing ventures such as contemporary literature. (Today this small, Canadian owned sector still publishes seventy percent of all Canadian authored books.) Along with the little literary presses came the literary magazines: more windows of accessibility, places for readers to encounter writers and writers to encounter "feedback." But soon it became evident that a great deal more was needed. Infrastructure, to be precise, and infrastructure became the project of the seventies as writers formed unions and publishers trade associations, as editors, translators, and booksellers got organized or re-organized and collectively (through the Book and Periodical Development Council, for example) began to attack the problem of a dysfunctional system set up to serve foreign companies, books, and

writers. How were Canadians to get a word in edgewise? How were writers to survive to write another day if the revenues circulating through the market by-passed creators? Publishers needed decent distribution and authors needed a decent living.

On both scores, little changed in the eighties, although a lot happened. For one thing, Canadian writing achieved the improbable: the apotheosis of CanLit as signalled by its arrival in the media mainstream (which, for better or worse, proceeded to manufacture literary superstars), and by its adoption by academics (literary critics) as fresh fodder for their postmodern discourse. Meanwhile Canadian writing in all its genres became immensely popular and by the end of the decade it was no longer unusual but entirely *usual* to find Canadian titles on fiction and non-fiction bestsellers' lists. In this sense Canadian writing has been a national and international success. You would, in fact, be hard pressed to name another "industry" which has done nearly so well out there in the dog-eat-dog world of global economics, copping recognition, praise, and prestigious awards — the Booker (Britain), the Commonwealth Best Book award, the *pris Goncourt* and *pris du meilleur livre étranger* (France), the Edgar (USA) — and due mention in *Time* magazine articles about World Fiction. There are, in short, Canadian writers who write full time and make a tidy living; a handful could be described as wealthy and one or two, *mirabile dictu*, have become household names. The vast majority, however, regardless of their literary reputations, either spend their creative lives scraping along the poverty line or surrender to day jobs and write in between the cracks. It's a dilemma which prompted a painter friend of mine to grumble that most Canadians work in order to make a living while artists have to make a living in order to work.

From a social standpoint, I think you could say we have achieved the room to write, and some occasional lottery-like support in the form of grants. Nothing firm, or guaranteed, or magnificent. Just the possibility that if you do manage to complete the manuscript it might get published, and if you repeat this process often enough your royalties could exceed three digits and your PLR (Public Lending Right) cheque may pay the rent for three or four months. That'll be it for steady income. Two decades of cultural policy, you see, has failed utterly to improve the finances of writing. It remains axiomatic of the



Way the World Works that the closer you get to the creative act the slimmer the rewards, and the rewards of writing mean you can expect to clear \$11,000 (just) in income from all writing-related sources. As artist John Boyle used to say, no one in their right mind becomes an artist to make money. The 1982 Applebaum-Hébert Committee on federal cultural policy put it another way when it remarked that artists provide the largest subsidy to the arts in Canada — bar none — by virtue of their unpaid and underpaid labour. These words gave official recognition that the vast sums of money invested in the arts and cultural industries by Canadian governments serve individual artists last and least.

So here we are a decade later, still stuck at the bottom end of the income charts right next to pensioners on fixed incomes. And it's hard not to get cynical about statistics which show millions — no billions — of dollars circulating through the cultural industries watering the careers and savings accounts of executives and lawyers and administrators, supporting a healthy labour force of some 350,000 souls who can boast salaried and insured jobs replete with pensions and benefits. Something way beyond the reach of self-employed artists.

Has every generation of writers wondered if it will be the last? Or is this the result of our distempered times? It seems the past two decades have been spent shoving a boulder the size of the national debt up a hill, a boulder which has grown progressively heavier as the superstructure expanded. And now that the summit is within view, we turn sideways to discover that the trail-maker (the federal government) has abandoned the project and disappeared. If it's the unvarnished truth you want, federal contributions to the arts and culture have shrunk twenty-four percent since 1984, about a billion dollars in lost cultural resources. True to the preferred Tory method of making cultural policy — leaving it to the minister of finance — Don Mazankowski removed another ten percent from the arts and culture in his 1992 mini-budget. A misnomer if ever there was one, for the freezes at the Canada Council have already reduced the value of its funds by a third and there aren't any margins left. So the cut is hardly minor; it drives to the bone.

It was obvious a long time ago that writers individually and collectively needed to establish some independent sources of income: from

photocopying, for example, and from libraries where everyone — librarians, clerks, janitors — associated with the service was being paid save the writer of the books being borrowed. Public Lending Right was invented to redress that injustice and the first PLR cheques were paid out to Canadian authors in 1986. Last December the first cheques from CANCOPY, the recently established reprography (photocopying) collective, were distributed to English language creators and publishers representing revenues from singly transacted licences. I personally received \$2.42 for my share of CANCOPY's fee from a licensee somewhere who wanted to make photocopies of a piece I wrote called "Taking the Missionary Position" about the Into the Heart of Africa exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum. It may be the most valuable two bucks I ever earned considering the Herculean thirty year effort it took to get the Copyright Act reformed. Valuable and highly symbolic — of the long years of missed income as well as those lovely cheques to come.

Making money from what you do as an artist is a battle but only half of it. The other half is learning how to live on less, how to become a diffident and unreliable consumer in order to make it as profitable as possible to work for freelance rates. This is why I have Arthur. Once a year I spend a couple of hours with Arthur as he transplants my dishevelled sums and expense accounts from sheafs of square-ruled paper into his computer. It's reassuring to watch them reappear in neat columns, and hear Arthur purring calmly. "Nothing to worry about," he says. "You may even like this." Often I do, which is only to say, touching a large log of cedar, so far so good. Tax law, as we all know is not written with artists in mind, and generally we have had to masquerade as affluent self-employed middle class professionals — and pray not to be noticed. For every time we have been, there's been hell to pay. On the last occasion Revenue Canada took after freelance artists, Tony Onley took a bunch of his canvasses down to Wreck Beach and threatened to set them on fire. Smaller fry I knew at the time were harrassed into bankruptcy, despair or illness (one ended up in a psychiatric ward), and several simply gave up and went out of business, stopped creating so quietly hardly anyone, least of all Rev Can Boys, noticed.

The subtext here is significant, for it pertains to suspicion and



envy. Suspicion that people pursuing a line of work they have chosen and actually like and are proficient at are cheating; fear that given a chance the entire population of Canada would sign off as artists; and a lingering envy of the independence and non-conformity of the creative life.

Tax laws have an interesting way of telling you what a nation really thinks of its artists. In Ireland all artistic incomes are exempt from taxation; in the Netherlands artists are eligible for social security payments when their incomes fall below a certain minimum, money which is repayable if and when the income re-materializes. As of last year, Canada has had federal Status of the Artist legislation which speaks to the particular economic circumstances of creation. But, other than clearing a legal path so media artists can bargain collectively with federal agencies, it changes little. No bankruptcy protection, no access to unemployment insurance, or pension plans. The Act speaks but does not act and this, Department of Communications officials claim, was all they could wrest from the white-socks-and-pointy-pencil set at Treasury Board. The money men refused any measures which would incur any on-going financial obligation; so, after promising to entrench PLR, the government was reduced to noting its existence while making the stupid (and transparent) observation that authors find the idea desirable. Canada's tax laws speak eloquently alright, and what they say is this: "Make art if you want, but if you do you'll be poor and it will be your choice. We won't necessarily put you in jail for your anti-social behaviour, but we won't give you the same breaks we give other citizens either. Unless you win the Booker prize you are on your own."

This, I think, is where you and I and *The Capilano Review* came in twenty years ago. On our own. Writing then was a passionate occupation and a risky business. The quintessential free enterprise and vertically integrated activity in which the writer perforce acts as inventor, investor, and bank. It is still that way today, and just as precarious. Though magazines and cultural institutions are supported with annual subsidies, no writer is. Yet people begin to write and continue to write in defiance of the economic odds. They do this, I believe, because of something else we've achieved: a literary culture with roots in the community. Community, actually, is the one great change.

Communities of interest, for example, which have whetted the public's appetite for live authors' events, and helped create the network of authors' festivals, writers-in-residencies, and public readings. Cultural communities, sometimes sub-cultures themselves, have engaged their artists and worked with them to develop alternative ways of reaching audiences, substituting grass roots strategies for marketing campaigns.

Writing is a subversive act, an act which draws strength from the past, energy from the future and inspiration wherever it can. The contributors in this issue represent that spirit. They are the reason for celebration.