

JEAN BAIRD / Editing with George

In the sixth volume of his lifelong poem *The Martyrology*, the poet bpNichol included a piece entitled “Briefly.” It begins

the heart does break
the aching muscle in the chest
carries more than the weight hangs from the body
from the barely perceiving brain
buried under the weight of loss
of grief

Nichol is writing about his grief for his stillborn son and his fear that his wife will die from her grief. As a poet he is sensitive to the rhyme we feel in the words “brief” and “grief.” As a Canadian writer he created something rare in this country: a piece of literary writing about the experience of grieving.

In 2004 George Bowering and I moved from southern Ontario to Vancouver. My son came with us but my 21-year-old daughter had a job and boyfriend in St. Catharines, so she stayed in Ontario. During our phone conversation of March 2006, Bronwyn confessed that she had an eating disorder. The phone calls got longer. I read everything I could find and talked to experts and counsellors. I felt a parent’s long-distance powerlessness, frustration, and fear as my daughter’s life spiralled. There were many moments of hope, but the recovery path was difficult. She had to quit her job; she broke up with her boyfriend. The telephone woke us up early in the morning of October 3, 2006. The caller was my good friend and Bronwyn’s aunt with the news that Bronwyn had been killed in a single-car accident earlier that morning off a road near St. Catharines.

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An important part of my grieving process has been reading. In the months after Bronwyn’s death I read everything I could find on grief and mourning. People sent me titles from all over. Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* was the

most often recommended, and for good reason. C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* is a masterful study in the context of faith. Katherine Ashenburg's book *The Mourner's Dance: What We Do When People Die* confirmed my feeling that our society does not provide what it takes to handle grieving. Thomas Lynch's *The Undertaking* is a gutsy and powerful view of grief by a poet/funeral director. As the months went by and the books piled up on the bedside table, I began to realize that although the books by counsellors, psychologists, Buddhists, and self-help gurus were of interest and perhaps of some help, it was the work by creative writers that consistently reached me and provided some comfort.

George and I talked about this experience and noticed two patterns. The creative writers were generally from the UK or the US. Among the works of Canadian authors there are many elegies and tributes, but those tend to be about the persons who have died, not about the mourning of the person left to grieve. There are books such as Matt Cohen's mournful *Last Seen* (1997) in which real deaths are transformed into fiction. But to date there had been no collection of non-fiction pieces about the grieving process as told by Canadian literary writers. I wrote to Katherine Ashenburg and suggested a commissioned anthology by Canadian writers. She loved the idea but was deep into another project. Instead she suggested that George and I take on the anthology ourselves.¹ We decided to put out some feelers and see if there was any interest.

We weren't sure how writers would respond. After all, we'd be asking them to write about their hardest moments, to write about their grief. The majority we approached responded in the same fashion: a great idea for an anthology; I haven't written about that topic and I see why I should. Some tried to write an essay only to discover that what they had to say had already been written in a novel (Bernice Morgan, Anita Badami) or in poetry (Margaret Atwood, Stephen Scobie). Two writers declined. Even years afterward it is difficult to write about suicide and there are other people to consider. One writer's daughter was facing a court case for a hit and run accident that had killed her son—it was too soon to write about the family's grief.

The essays started arriving. Each time I would read a few pages and find myself in tears. I would make a cup of tea, take a small break, and tell myself to "Take off

1 *The Heart Does Break* (Toronto: Random House, 2009).

the mummy hat and put on the editor hat.” At some point in reading each essay I would have the reaction, “Yes, that’s exactly it.” Each writer had articulated some aspect of grief in a way that made sense to me. The anthology was taking shape. It was the book I had wanted. Bronwyn’s book.

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Working with George and the writers to edit the essays was a fascinating experience. George insists on absolute precision but he is gentle, encouraging, and playful when needed. Renee Rodin struggled to get the language absolutely right. It was a challenge since she was writing about a murder, and no charges had been laid. The essay had to go to the legal department.

We thought that one section of Steven Reid’s essay about the death of his mother and father while he was in prison went over the top. Steven said that it was hard for him to tell since he’d lived most of his life over the top. The revisions were clean and removed any sentimentality.

Discussions that George and I had during this stage were often about grammar, punctuation, and the accuracy of language. We would sometimes work for thirty minutes on one sentence. I was prepared to let it go—close enough, I see what he means. But, George would say, it isn’t what he says. And we could not leave that sentence until it had satisfactorily passed Bowering’s insistence on accuracy and respect for the language. Regardless of whether the writer was a long-time friend, an award-winning best selling author, or a writer we had met through this project, everyone received the same scrutiny.

Most of us make little leaps with language. George doesn’t. What I have learned is that it is not that he won’t but that he *can’t*. I spend a lot of time explaining signs and televisions commercials to George. Sometimes George’s response to signs has to do with his life-long role of class clown. We drive by a sign in the Okanagan that says “Fruit stands.” George remarks, “Some do; some don’t.” On highway 97 near the turnoff that heads toward Vancouver is a sign that reads, “Use both lanes.” If George is at the wheel, he always straddles both lanes. That one has been driving his daughter Thea nuts for years.

That constant awareness of and playfulness with language can mask those times when George is truly confused. This week he was puzzling over a photo caption in the *Globe and Mail*. It said that the couple in the photo had been married

under the shadow of Casa Loma. You can't be under a shadow, he complained. You can stand on a shadow. You can be under a cloud but you can't be under a shadow. What do they mean?

Not too long ago George got himself in a bit of a pickle on Facebook. A friend alerted me. I looked up the string and realized immediately what had happened. George had made a comment in his always-precise way. Others reading the comment had made that leap that George doesn't do and thought he was making a denigrating comment about a recently dead writer. Not so, he was only asking for clarification of the language in someone else's post. A long-time friend and fellow writer commented on the Facebook bashing, "But one thing about this Bowering George is that he has a heart better than generally realized, and a kind of idiot-savant simplicity of mind often obscured by his Derrida-esque contortions of thought."

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After the manuscript was submitted the dance with the publisher and editors began. Bill Whitehead's essay about life without Timothy Findley was written in a style that was, in part, an homage to Findley's style. The copy editor rearranged the paragraph structure to conform to the house style. Well, no, said George. You can't do that. Put it back the way it was. This anthology is not about conformity of style. He won that one. The publisher thought that Brian Fawcett's eloquent piece about his father was too long. But, said George, what could you possibly cut? Fawcett's essay remained long. Another debate was over Stephen Collis' essay about the death of his sister. Stephen doesn't use much punctuation. The publisher wanted every period and semi-colon. In the end George argued and won on a compromise position. That essay might have the least punctuation of any Random House publication in recent history. Then the designer got hold of the book. No, said George, you can't treat poetry as a design tool. The line breaks must remain true. And while you're at it, change the font.

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My daughter died less than two months after George and I were married. I am told that a death can be a real test of a relationship. During the early days and months

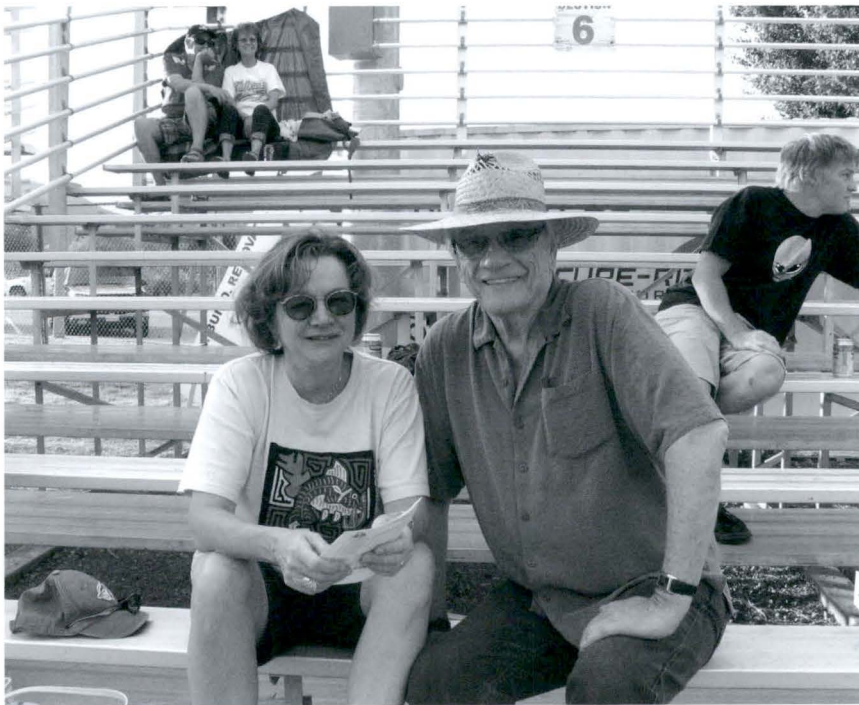
George was my rock. Working on the anthology forged an even deeper bond. George helped me turn my grief into something that helped me—and others.

When it comes to editing George is a real stickler. He won't order Caesar salad in a restaurant if it is misspelled on the menu. Nothing slips past him. It was an interesting process watching him, with great care and courtesy, work with the writers to improve each essay. It also made me realize that one of the many reasons why George is so prolific—there are nine manuscripts currently with publishers or in the works—is that he is so precise in the first draft. There's little need for editing of spelling or grammar with this guy.

Two mottos inform George's life:

Jokes to the end.

Always respect the language.



George and Jean at the Elks Stadium in Kelowna, 2014.

Photo credit: a Falcons fan