

## Confessions of a writer Where opportunism and creativity meet

By Musings  
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There are advantages to being a writer. For example, if something terrible happens, one of my first thoughts after the initial sinking feeling is “Hmm... I wonder if I could incorporate this into a story...”

The writer’s mind is both opportunistic and creative. Merge the two and you get great art.

At the Blue Rodeo concert at Stanley Park’s Malkin Bowl last weekend, co-frontman Greg Keelor related a story of a love triangle he was once a part of that led to the writing of English Bay, one of my favourite songs.

His love was 1,500 miles away with another man, sharing his bed, but telling him over the phone that she’d rather be with him. The other man was an artist and as it happened had a show in Gastown. They were all nudes of his girl.

“It was one of those torturous nights,” he says. “Thank God I’m a songwriter.”

Writing can take the edge off of horrible moments, and inadvertently, even make you a positive person without trying. No sinking into the depths of despair; you’re already working out how, for example, when he leaves you waiting in the car as he trots around outside assuring and advising another girl on the phone (Wait a minute! Am I in a love triangle?), that awful, punched in the gut feeling of being second gets woven into, say, a short story. For a, um, hypothetical example, of course.

So that’s the practical (and artistic) advantage of writing. But there are many challenges and sacrifices as well.

Take Vancouver writer June Hutton, 51. She quit her job and sold her house to write her first novel *Underground*, which traces the story of a Canadian who volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

“It was one of the greatest rallying cries of that generation—the fight against fascism. So why do so few of us know anything about it?”

Hutton, a former journalist, felt so strongly about the importance of this story, she “was willing to risk it all to tell it. Rash acts? Perhaps. But if *Underground* is published the story will finally be given a voice.” Her book is now making the rounds

with publishers.

Then there's Jen Sookfong Lee, 29, who slaved away at her first novel for six years—much to the disappointment of her friends.

"My friends were mad at me for not being available," recalls Lee over coffee. "But then I explained to them, if you had one thing you've always wanted to do and it was just a matter of hard work to make it a reality, wouldn't you do it?"

End of East will be published by Knopf Canada this spring.

Or Mary Novik, 61, who took several leaves of absence from work before finally taking early retirement to work on her tome.

"Even when I was a little kid, I loved to open a book and go into another world," says Novik. "When *Conceit* is published next year, readers will be able to enter the seventeenth-century world I've created. I would love to think that someone will be enjoying Pegge Donne, my quirky main character, long after I'm dead."

The trio met four years ago at an online writer's workshop at UBC and have been encouraging, inspiring and critiquing each other ever since. I've invited them to be guest speakers for a new writer's workshop that I will be leading at Langara College through the Continuing Studies Creative and Applied Arts department in October.

It's called Truly, Madly, Deeply... The Writer's Group. (See [www.langara.bc.ca/cs/programs/INTE.html](http://www.langara.bc.ca/cs/programs/INTE.html)). It's a 10-week workshop for aspiring writers to work on a major project—be it a memoir, novel, a collection of short stories, or a book of creative non-fiction. I'll likely bring in a literary agent and publisher as well.

If you think you might be truly, madly, deeply committed to telling an important story like Hutton, or are addicted to the "flush of creative energy" like Lee, or want your words to come alive for another like Novik, come join us.

Heck, you don't even have to sell your house or alienate your friends. At least not just yet.

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