

*Susan Swan*

The John P. Robarts Professor  
of Canadian Studies

FOURTEENTH ANNUAL ROBARTS LECTURE  
21 MARCH 2000

*York University, Toronto, Ontario*

Millennial Robarts Chair, Susan Swan examined our irreconcilable pasts and why and how the past continues to haunt us as we move into the 21st Century. The Millennial Wisdom Symposium, was a series of public events and readings on "Making Up the Past: The Archeology of Fiction," where novelists, archeologists and historians examined the ways that the past is recreated by their disciplines and explored questions of who owns the past and where our sense of history is derived from.

## THE WRITER'S CONSCIENCE: (or why reports of the death of the author have been greatly exaggerated)

I stand before you as the author, that now familiar and no longer beloved ghost, the eternal copyist responsible for the tissue of quotations known as the text or novel. A being whose death, according to postmodern critics, is required for the good of literature, and whose novels and short stories were not created without any intention behind the words, and are just a farrago of current cultural ideologies, random drifting thoughts, a composite of speeches like this one, toasts, shaggy dog stories and great and bad works of literature.

Although I am but a ghost speaking I appear before you in my all too human and female body, smiling and nodding at you in a friendly fashion so I can start my talk about the role of the Canadian writer at the beginning of the new millennium and ask the question: Is the writer's conscience the imagination?

As those of you in the university English departments will know, I am referring to Roland Barthes essay, "The Death of the Author" (p.148, *Image Music Text* by Roland Barthes, The Noonday Press, 1977, 215 pages.). In which Barthes argued that it was necessary to emphasize the reader at the expense of the author because classical criticism refused to recognize the role of the reader in the creation of a literary work. And here I quote, "...we know

that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

Although I am an author, it seems to me, as a reader and a woman, that Barthes' idea about killing the author to bring the reader into the world of literature is a little like throwing, not the baby, but the mother out with the bath water.

Although it's true the author's role shrinks to that of privileged reader once a book is done, every novel or text remains connected to the embarrassingly real human person who made the literary work in the first place. For the purpose of my talk today, I am calling that person the writer whose lively self will not stay politely buried for our critical or professional comfort. The author may be dead, but the writer lives. And not only does the writer live, the writer dies outside the time frame of any of the books she has written. And she possesses important human attributes that go hand in hand with the act of making literature, an imagination and a conscience which I am defining as an instinctive sense of right and wrong, and which is expressed in unique ways in literary work and public life.

This year, in event after event, writers at the Millennial Wisdom Symposium at York, talked about the way we recreate the past in contemporary culture. Critic and novelist Alberto Manguel said the past is our true homeland, and that we can choose our cultural ancestors the way the Roman writer Seneca recommended in his theory of Cosmopolitanism in the First Century A.D. We are not bound by time and place but can enter the universe through the world of literature. The playwright Tomson Highway criticized Western culture for leaving out the feminine presence in its concept of the divine in both religion and literature. Poet Karen Connelly said not only is it the writer's job to imagine the other, "it is our duty". Historian Rosalind Miles reminded the symposium that most of what we know about history was written from the male point of view. Theologian Carol Christ spoke of nine touchstones for the new millennium, such as consider the impact of your action on seven generations. Novelist Anne Michaels spoke of learning to love one landscape as a way of learning to love all landscapes. Poet Dionne Brand said slaves under slavery were like travelers moving through history without their luggage. York archeologist Tim Kaiser warned that governments could use the past as an ideology to justify repression. And historian Marlene Shore predicted Canada, a nation founded on different versions of what it should be, will likely continue to be one long, on-going discussion about sharing power.

Nearly every one of these speakers is 'an author', but it was in their capacity as writers that they talked about the problems facing us in the twenty-first Century. In some ways, their role as public intellectuals at the symposium is a natural extension of everything I've learned about being a writer in Canada, where finding an audience to dialogue with has been a political act, but I'll get to that in a minute. I want to return to my point that writers, like most of us, possess an imagination and an instinctive sense of right and wrong, but the writer's conscience is the imagination.

What makes the writer different? Let's look first at the writer's conscience in her work. As Barthes and others have shown, the novel is a form of communication that belongs to cultural and cultural discourse. But that's not all a novel is. A novel is not just a dialogue, or a text handy for linguistic studies, nor a story or a best-selling page-turner but a visionary plunge into what can't be kept out of the mind. In other words, a novel is a vision of life which springs out

of the writer's imagination which I believe is a mental tool so tightly linked to the novelist's conscience as to be almost inseparable. In short, the literary imagination is the writer's conscience in action. Orùto put it another way, the literary imagination is an expression of moral agency on the part of the writer.

A writer is a creator of visions, someone who sees or dreams up a representation of life, 'a reproduction of a production', as French thinker Jean Paul Sartre put it. (*What is Literature*: Harvard University Press, 1998: 34.) I'd add that a writer is also someone who makes it their business to keep in touch with the viewpoint of the inner self which stands in dramatic counterpoint to the universe of human experience, like a lady bug trapped in rush hour on the Gardner Expressway. The tiny I of individual consciousness experiences life as a messy traffic jam of human relationships conflicted with all types of affiliations that include family and friends as well as membership in class, and gender and race. The inner self makes its way as best it can through the labyrinth of human life, that is to say, boldly, proudly, furtively, slyly, tenderly, tentatively, craftily, sometimes cruelly, coldly, bravely, selfishly, lovingly, and selflessly, it will etch its path through time.

Unlike most of us who are too busy to chart this experience, a writer is that creature compelled to describe the panic which consciousness can bring, ushering in its awareness of oneself in relationship to others, an awareness that involves choices and quickly becomes tangled up with responsibilities and obligations. Whether it is in the pages of a novel or the scrolled texts on a computer screen, a writer is that person who records and sometimes transforms the filibrations of what it's like to be in a human or non-human consciousness, facing the vast confusion of what can feel like an unkind universe.

I would also argue that writers are people powerfully attracted to imperfection and human suffering. Their response is a vision of life shown through the vehicle of the story, that record of human complexity and imperfection usually involving ethical situations that distill and define human dilemmas. A writer may or may not be consciously ideological, but she will usually find herself attracted to imperfection, and this attraction leads, even in the murkiest cases, to a moral position of some kind.

The truth is all writers are moralists, even though their moral position may be hard for their own society to recognize because it is not tied to prevailing notions of church or state, or the university in whose English departments writers are invisible except as a descriptive term for a text, or group of texts. This is true of political writers like Dionne Brand or less deliberately political writers like Michael Ondaatje. It is even true of writers like Brett Easton Ellis in his novel *American Psycho*, which describes a narrator so desensitized he thinks the taking of human life is a fiction. The work of the Marquis de Sade, which can be seen as an anti-Papal tract or in the novels of Henry Miller (kept out of American universities), who appears to be offering a Whitmanesque cry for joy in a capitalist culture like America.

Jean Paul Sartre explained it this way in his collection of essays, *What is Literature?* "...although literature is one thing and morality quite a different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative. For since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work

of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men." (*What is Literature and other essays*: Harvard University Press, 1998: 67)

Does this mean that literature must be political in an ideological sense, as some of my colleagues here believe? An ideology will certainly inform the writer's view of the world but it isn't the one element specific or intimate, and most important, complex and dramatic enough on which to base a story. There's no story in ideology except the profound, general truth that we should all be sensitive to injustice and our own role in it.

I sometimes argue with my friend, the theologian Carol Christ who spoke at the symposium over the literary worth of parables written by feminist goddess worshippers. She likes these parables because they enshrine a peaceful, industrious way of life based on early Minoan culture, but for me, the stories aren't subtle, or conflicted enough to be of literary interest. As a theologian, she wants stories to uphold her spiritual message; as a writer, I don't want to be given a definitive answer on faith and doubt, scepticism and passionate belief in a story because it will limit my freedom to make up my own mind about these issues.

In my experience, most writers of fiction are uncomfortable with ideologies, even inspiring ideologies that lead to a better way of doing things. Although they're influenced by them, writers can't make up stories about ideologies. But writers can be endlessly fascinated by the ethical choices involved in putting new spiritual and political views across to society. Is the leader of the largest feminist organization in the world more contemptuous of her female organizers than any patriarchal boss, as was the case with some of the radical groups in the 1960's? And if so, what happens to her and the people around her? There's a story there, and a writer will sniff it out. But they will get angry if they are told that their work should correspond to a laundry list of political do's and don'ts. Writers are moral beings more than they are ideological ones.

Ask any writer and they will tell you that no one individual is ideological in their innermost individual self, but most of us learn to be moral beings because we are forced to confront and make choices about all sort of relationships, including one with the family dog. I think that's why a writer's vision usually lays out a moral position, which often has nothing to sell other than a deepened understanding of a human dilemma.

Of course, I'm not talking about the old-fashioned moralizing you might find in nineteenth century temperance tracts, or the religious tracts of the current Christian right. These days, to admit to a didactic or proselytizing intent behind your own work is for the novelist like myself akin to admitting a lazy or misguided piece of craftsmanship, even a failure of the imagination.

As we start a new millennium, many writers and readers are wary of ideological preaching, which has become synonymous with intolerance, bigotry, zealotry and insensitivity. In my lifetime, many novelists have followed the model of Flaubert whom Alberto Manguel says "initiated the modern novel by establishing an 'objective' narrator, at the cost of remaining invisible, a narrator who because he refused to preach gave the illusion of telling a story that is true." (*The Blind Photographer, Into the Looking Glass Wood*, Knopf Canada, 1998: 109.)

This view of the invisible narrator is also described by James Joyce (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1914-1915*: Penguin 1992, p. 233), when his character Stephen

Dedalus comments, "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."

As critic Michael Wood argues in *The Magician's Doubts*, (Chatto & Windus, 1994: 12) both Flaubert and Joyce are considering ways for the author to seem, but not be, absent. Over time, I think the literary strategy of these two masters has led to the misguided notion popular outside the university, in my own literary circles, that the novelist should never be political in her work, or at least, not overtly political. And certainly not political and didactic as Emile Zola was in his novels of protest or George Orwell in his satire, *Animal Farm*.

Are there other ways a writer's conscience can operate in her work? One way is in the selection of stories the writer chooses to tell. However, as the postmodernists warn us, it's foolhardy to read a novel from the viewpoint of the author's intention. For one thing, many authors, and I include myself here, often change their intention in the middle of the book. And it won't make any difference what the writer intends if the writing is badly done.

In my own case, the first novel I wrote described the life of a giantess with the same last name as myself who exhibited with P.T. Barnum in the 1860's and 70's in the United States. She was born to a family of crofters in Nova Scotia and stood seven foot six in her stocking feet and weighed 413 lbs. As a child she had to sit on the floor so her head would be level with her siblings when they ate the family meals.

I saw in her life, which ended in 1888, after marriage to the Kentucky giant, who stood only 7'2, (and this is all true), a wedding blessed by Queen Victoria, two giant babies who died in infancy, and a giant farmhouse in Seville. I read into the life of the giantess Anna Swan, a search for belonging, for a home that fit. She'd gone from Nova Scotia to New York, from New York to Europe, after she was worn down by Barnum's museum fires, and then to a giant farmhouse in the American mid-west. Here she hoped to live out the rest of her life like a Victorian lady, even though her body in the elaborate dresses of the era, with the long hooped gowns and bustles, made a mockery of femininity as it was then known.

When I was writing this novel, I was aware I was critiquing the standard of femininity I'd been brought up with, namely that women should be small and supportive and their hard, unremunerated work, mostly invisible. I was also aware that Anna Swan's life, the story a giantess looking for a way to put her size to best use, could be a symbol for the story of my own country, the second largest nation in the world, next to Russia, not the United States because we're bigger than America.

Did I intend the vision expressed in my story to be read only in one or both of these two interpretations? I can't say that I did. I've often thought that most bestsellers are books that evoke the same response in each reader where a great work of literature because it deals with the complexities of human experience will inspire a thousand different readings. Most novelists I know want their work to reach as many readers as possible and are happiest when it has different meanings for each person who reads it.

However, I was conscious of my own intentions, but I allowed the story to form first without imposing my intentions on it. I sometimes think current academic criticism that demands a political solidarity from literary stories fails to understand the creative process of making something up. During this phase, the intentions are noted and the vision emerges, or sometimes the intentions are unconscious, and the vision emerges anyway. It's only when the writer's first

draft has been written that it's possible to shape more specifically certain aspects of characters, or developments of events.

Ideology informs literature, but it does not run it. I happen to believe that ideologies, like literature, spring out of ethical concerns. Ideologies offer an explanation of why things are the way they are and act as a formal description of a preferred human response to human problems. Ideologies, and we all have them, have their own value, but few contemporary novelists are ideologues who would put the demands of their political beliefs before the demands of the story they are telling. For a novelist like myself, what the story needs is the first law of literature.

That's why the writer's first obligation in literature is to write to the best of her abilities. If the literary imagination is the writer's moral agency in action, the writer must deliver her vision magnificently.

Let's look now at the writer's conscience in the public realm. What are the writer's obligations as a citizen? And what does the writer's conscience mean for Canadian writers? I was born in 1945; the year *Two Solitudes* was published in Canada. It was written by my former creative writing teacher, the late Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan several years after he was rejected by a U.S. publisher for an earlier novel. The U.S. publisher wrote about that early work of MacLennan..."There is something indefinably wrong in this book. We don't know who he is and the author's presence, at least invisibly, must be implicit in the book. He does not write like an American and he does not write like an Englishman. Who is he?" ('Appreciation of Hugh MacLennan: Those who can, also teach,' by Susan Swan, *The Globe and Mail*, November 10, 1990.)

It was then MacLennan said he realized that he was stuck with Canada, that "Canada was a country unknown even to itself, but as drama depends on recognition, it would be very necessary for a time to labour very hard to create an authentic background. The results were my first three novels," MacLennan writes.

"In my fourth novel, *Each Man's Son*, I thought such geographical and sociological underlining was no longer necessary, but again I was wrong. Little Brown of Boston required me to write some kind of preface to explain to an American audience the prevalence of Calvinism in the Nova Scotia of that period, which was immediately before World War I."

In *Two Solitudes*, MacLennan writes that a foreword is necessary because it is a novel of Canada. "This means that its scene is laid in a nation with two official languages, English and French. It means that some characters in the book are presumed to speak only English, others only French, while many are bilingual. No single word exists, within Canada itself, to designate with satisfaction to both races a native of the country. When those of the French language use the word *Canadien*, they nearly always refer to themselves. They know their English-speaking compatriots as *les Anglais*. English-speaking citizens act on the same principle. They call themselves Canadians; those of the French language French-Canadians." (*Two Solitudes*, by Hugh MacLennan, Collins, Toronto, 1945, 370 pages.)

So here you have a gallant author like Hugh MacLennan with his own large streak of Calvinist duty shouldering the job of conjuring up Canada for its citizens and the rest of the world. This is a very good example of a writer's conscience working over-time, in this case, taking on the responsibility of depicting a nation, no-one, not even its own peoples, recognizes or understands.

At the time of the publication of *Two Solitudes*, Canadian literature was split into writings by the English and the French. It hadn't exploded into the current stage of multiple perspectives and international success that we know today. And there was nobody writing First Nations literature for a wide public except perhaps for Brantford-born Pauline Johnson who recited her poems on stages across Canada and Britain during the early twentieth century.

During MacLennan's life, there were few definitions of Canadian time and place, and much of his work can be seen as an attempt to handle the series of Canadian paradoxes summed up by the late Northrop Frye in the question, "Where is here?" (*The Bush Garden*, House of Anansi, 1971: 220)

During this same time period, only a few Canadian writers like Emily Murphy and the poet and constitutional lawyer F.R. Scott had tackled political issues. Emily Murphy, whose pen name was Janey Canuck, became an Edmonton Judge in 1916. On her first day, a male lawyer objected to her authority because as a woman, she was not a "person" in law. Around that time, Murphy and others were lobbying to have a woman appointed to the Senate. They were told women were not considered qualified persons under the British North America Act. They lost their appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. Finally, they appealed the "Persons Case" to the Privy Council in England and, in a landmark 1929 ruling, it agreed women were in fact persons. (Canada Day 96, Southam New Media (c) Copyright 1996.)

Here's a second example. On December 4, 1946, the Quebec Liquor Commission told a Montreal restaurant owner, Frank Roncarelli, that his liquor license had been revoked forever. As everyone knew, Maurice Duplessis, the Premier of Quebec wanted to punish Roncarelli for his support of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a Protestant sect critical of the Catholic Church in Quebec. F. R. Scott, a Montreal poet, lawyer a co-founder of the old socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, took on Roncarelli's case and after a thirteen year legal battle, the Supreme Court of Canada finally ruled that the government of Quebec's treatment of Roncarelli had been arbitrary and illegal. (*Law, Politics and the Judicial Process in Canada*, edited by F.L. Morton, University of Calgary Press, 1992, page 1.) It was the first legal victory for minority religious rights under the repressive Duplessis regime.

A few years later, Scott successfully defended D.H. Lawrence's novel, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, against charges of obscenity in the Supreme Court of Canada. He then versified his experience in the Quebec Court of Appeal with typical wit: "I went to bat for my lady Chatte/Dressed in my bib and gown."(F.R. Scott by Sandra Djwa, *Canadian Poetry*, Volume 104, page 13.)

I could spend my lecture talking about Emily Murphy, or F.R. Scott. My point today is really this: both individuals were Canadian writers who followed their conscience in politics and art. Does political commitment make lousy writers? Not necessarily, nor will it ensure good writing, if craft and talent aren't there too. But political commitment, like good literature, can transform the way a society thinks about things. This was the case with Scott, whose poems are still anthologized in Canadian texts while Murphy's humorous and patriotic travel sketches are not widely read now.

By the time my first novel appeared in 1983, Canadian writers had gone on to form a national union and lobby for political issues that affected them as storytellers and citizens. I'm talking about The Writers' Union of Canada founded in 1970 after Ontario's Royal Commission

on Book Publishing didn't schedule any presentations by or on behalf of writers. Perceiving the injustice of the situation, Farley Mowat organized seven other writers to speak before the Commission. When one of the group said writers didn't want help from outside organizations, the others retired to the pub in frustration. Most of its group, which included Graeme Gibson, June Callwood, Margaret Atwood, Ian Adams, and Fred Bodsworth, had never met before. They decided they should meet more often and exchange ideas, and the nucleus of The Writers' Union was formed.

The Writers' Union went on to establish a tradition of literary activism in English Canada, winning contract standards with publishers in 1976. Under Matt Cohen's leadership, it won Public Lending Right from the federal government in 1986, which compensates authors for use of their books in public libraries. In 1988, the union lobbied and won copyright protection in 1988, which compensates writers for photocopying of their work. (The Writers' Union of Canada, Membership Information Brochure.)

Many of its members, writers like Jane Jacobs, Graeme Gibson, John Ralston Saul and the late William Kilbourne, have been involved in Toronto's civic politics. And many others such as Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Paul Quarrington, Susan Musgrave, Myrna Kostash lobby on arts issues as well as ecological crises like the preservation of Canadian parks and the deep cutting of timberlands. When I attended my first Writers' Union meeting in the early 1980's, it was made clear to me that I had duties as a writer, not only to the world around me, but to my own literary community. The writer as citizen was a busy cultural worker whose job was selling Canadian literature to Canadian citizens. In 1984, I wrote an essay for *The Globe and Mail* asking Canadian bookstores to stop selling Canadian books in a section called Canadiana. These sections usually stood at the back of the store, far away from the bestseller stands, suggesting that the homegrown product were nothing but manuals on how to strip pine furniture. (*The Globe and Mail* article, Feb. 11, 1984, editorial page) Under the headline "Putting Canadians in their Place," I criticized the policy of segregating Canadian books.

"Our writers are not a specialty taste like haggis or tripe which the dedicated buyer should be forced to find at the back of the store. Why can't we take it for granted that our works of fiction and biography are the artichokes, the sushi, the pistachio nuts of modern writing the world is waiting to enjoy?"

Although we were feisty, we also felt like a fragile entity, this group of English-Canadian writers with links to the community in Quebec. As a young writer, I believed that unless we worked together as a group, what the late Margaret Laurence once called 'the tribe', Canadian literature was in danger of disappearing. Was this really true? Or were we, as Mike Harris would have it, another pesky self-interest group lobbying the government?

I agree with Judy Rebick who has wisely written in her new book, *Imagine Democracy*, (Stoddart Publishing, 2000: 22) that it's a mistake to call groups whose work speaks to the public interest 'self-serving'. Today, Rebick says, only the corporate elite is allowed to speak for the public interest. She believes advocacy groups are being shut out of the political process while governments rely more and more on dubious opinion polls to decide their priorities. If it started up today, a group like The Writers' Union wouldn't have had the same success.



Of course, I had my grievances about literary activism. I sometimes felt as if I was sacrificing precious writing time to act like an appendage to Canadian cultural bureaucrats. Nevertheless, I also felt as if I was doing something valuable for my culture. I was helping to create an infrastructure that allowed good writing to be written and read. Because not all books are good books; great books grow out of a literary tradition that has been cultivated by a society, the way a crocus will flower in the midst of a compost heap. Michael Ondaatje and numerous others like Lyn Crosbie, Cordelia Strube and Andre Alexis sprung up from a small press now called Coach House Books. You need a community where writing matters, or there will be few good writers. So even though I sometimes felt rebellious, I also felt a sense of purpose beyond the demands of my own literary career with its pressures to sell enough copies of my next novel here and abroad in order to keep my various publishers interested. In those years, I accepted the fact that the writer's conscience was inextricably bound not only to literature but also to the duties of citizenship, and literary community.

Today I'd like to argue that it was not only Hugh MacLennan, but also all Canadian writers whose conscience has called Canada into being. Moving us through both their literature and their literary activism into a stage where the international success of authors like Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood have made it possible for writers here to write about anything they want, without the obligation to explain where they're coming from. In this new international phase of Canadian literary success, it's now possible to see stories not only from famous native playwrights like Tomson Highway who spoke at our Millennial Wisdom Symposium as well as work by writers from backgrounds from all over the world. I recently heard about a reading series that calls itself, *The New Internationalism: Canadian Writers from Everywhere!*

The vastly differing racial backgrounds of the students in my creative writing seminars at York are beginning to be reflected in spring and fall lists of Canadian publishers and it does seem as if the boast of this reading series is not an exaggeration. Canadian writers have traveled from a bi-polar tradition of Anglo and Francophone writers to an international tribe of multiple perspectives, and their stories have won foreign literary prizes and found readers all over the world. It is now acceptable for a Canadian writer to say: "I am part of the world wide Diaspora of ideas. I will write on any subject that interests me."

In a country like Canada, which has not had a long-standing traditional bourgeois society like France, writers and their imaginations have been a powerful creative force. Giving depth and breadth to a frontier, transforming itself into a post-industrial society with special features, a nation that York scholar Bruce Powe calls an anti-nation, a zen state whose primary role is "to communicate with the world rather than conquer it." (*A Canada of Light* by Bruce Powe, Somerville Press: 105)

What does this have to do with the writer's conscience? In the case of Canadian writers, novels and short stories have given us a vision of ourselves where no vision existed before. "The question of a national identity is not to be equated with simple national pride.... For Canadians, as for others, it is a question ...of feeling at home," wrote D.G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock*, (p. 5, University of Toronto Press, 1970, 184 pages)

Now as Canadian culture matures, the role of the writer may be different. Neither in her work nor in her lobbying is it essential for the Canadian writer to mid-wife a national identity and

find public spaces to discuss with the readers over the paradoxical problems of Canadian identity. What I've learned over these past eight months running the Millennial Wisdom Symposium is the value of the writer's conscience. I've come to see that in Canada, it has acted in unique ways, inspiring political and yes, even moral ways. It's safe to say that without the writer's conscience, Canada wouldn't exist; it would certainly be less Canadian.

And if for the past century, one of the large questions for Canadian writers has been Frye's question, where is here? I think the question for both the new century and the millennium will be, can here survive? In the November symposium event, novelist Ron Wright said we only have a window of time before we destroy our planet. "I believe that if we do not change our way, limit our numbers and demands, share what the earth can provide, the new century will not grow very old before we enter a period of collapse, misery, and mass starvation that will dwarf all such periods in our past. Archeology and history also tell us that such a reformation is unlikely. The typical response of the powerful is to go on building higher pyramids, like those long-dead Maya kings." (Wright, Nov. 8, 1999, York Bookstore.)

Is he right? We're living in a world where terrifying ecological concerns demand the rethinking of old strategies and values. It's also an age when many of our politicians are no better than liars or thugs in their refusal to be accountable to ordinary citizens, (I'm thinking of Mike Harris' dismissal of the need for a liberal arts education, and Jean Chretien's recent refusal to testify before the APEC commission.) It's an age dominated by technology and multinational corporations who appear more powerful than national governments, giving the impression that you can't find city hall. Will we be able to survive? And if we do, will it be a society where the next generation of young writers are allowed to have their voice?

I don't know the answer to the question, will here survive, but I believe Canadian writers who come from a country highly skilled in the field of communications, with a tradition of social compassion are ideally suited to be life giving voices for human freedom in the next millennium. A beautifully written description of a field or a city street is an important way to preserve that field or street, a way that can be more persuasive than any political lobby. Don't let anyone tell you there is only one path to literature. There are all kinds of ways to be a writer in the world, and often, the best writers are deeply involved in addressing the issues of their time, in public life and in their writing.

So I would urge young writers to write where your conscience leads you and to ignore the prescriptions from either the left or the right that say good art must be political or great art is not political enough. All writers have consciences. So use your conscience to the best of your ability, in as many ways as you have the energy and temperament and time to manage. And above all, write well.

To be without a conscience would put the writer in the realm of the sociopath. It may be the vision your conscience expresses is not one your society will immediately support or understand, but it's up to you to trust the creative process. Since the writer's conscience is the imagination, shower literature with all the passion and attention and honesty the finest writing can offer up. Write about justice if it suits you. If you are offended by the callous disregard humans show other groups and other species, write about the right of these groups as well as other species to fair treatment. If you are seeking a way to see through the prevailing nonsense that humans are only consumers and not citizens, write about the larger life of the spirit. If you are

frustrated with the media, write about why in an age that overwhelms us with information, we feel as if we are hearing nothing but lies.

Write first from the wisdom of your inner self, which is not prescribed wisdom but the unbounded wisdom of the artist interested in the complexities of human experience. The pressure of imperfection will always lead the writer to subjects others have neglected, or still others have refused to see. And if you have the energy, why not extend the work of the writer's conscience into the realm of politics and public life? I believe great writing often comes out of writers with large hearts and powerful consciences. I would suggest great literature is political in the most generous sense and it is largely on this that hope for the future rests.