# TALL TALES FROM A GENTEEL HOODLUM: THE ARTFUL EXAGGERATIONS OF BILL GASTON

## *SCL/ÉLC interview by Tony Tremblay*

*Bill Gaston grew up in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Deep Cove (near Vancouver), and has since lived in France, Pender Harbour, B.C., and Hatchett Lake, N.S. The holder of two Masters degrees from UBC, he is currently living with his wife and two children in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where he is writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick.*

*In addition to numerous poems and stories in literary journals in Canada and the U.S., Gaston's publishing credits include a book of short stories,* Deep Cove Stories *(Oolichan, 1989), a novel,* Tall Lives *(Macmillan, 1990), a play,* The Horton Syndrome, *and a volume of poetry,* Inviting Blindness, *soon to be released by Oolichan. His second novel,* The Cameraman, *set in the Canadian film industry, is scheduled for publication in the near future.*

*I first met Bill Gaston in September, 1990 on the steps of Memorial Hall, UNB, where he was waiting for the start of his first official reading as UNB's new writer-in-residence. He began his reading that day by citing the well-known writers-in-residence with whom he had had experience at UBC (Alice Munro and Tennessee Williams), and by congratulating UNB for its enlightened approach in giving lesser known writers (like him) a chance. Unlike others I've met in similar circumstances, he was without pretention, amazed and delighted that he was able to make a living from writing, his favourite thing to do.*

*I have since heard him read many times, and each time he has succeeded in winning over his audience with a wit and vision that is gentle, benevolent, and uproariously funny. He is a master of comic incongruity, able to translate the excesses of our culture into the exaggerated peculiarities of his characters–and all this without compromising the*

*basic humanity, frailty, and unfailing optimism central to each. Though much has been said of his writing, I think the most accurate is inscribed on the back cover of* Deep Cove Stories: *"with humour and insight, Bill Gaston seeks to discover a little madness in an otherwise too sane world. . . . He reaquaints us with magic."*

**TT:** The mystique of the Dollarton Beach area seems to have influenced at least the physical landscape of your first book of short stories. Is that where you spent your formative years?

**BG:** Before age 12 I lived in Winnipeg, but Dollarton is where I spent most of my adolescence; and, yes, my teenage years paralleled the kind of idyllic world that I presented in the stories—at least the physical, rabble-rousing world. Many of my friends were genteel hoodlums in a way; we liked to drink and have fun. Beyond our crowd, there was a strange mix of people: people from the Malcolm Lowry era, from the working classes (retired fishermen and the like), and the new suburbanites coming in from all over. Among this mix, there were a lot of eccentrics and misfit genius types. Our street was full of them. A friend of mine killed his father with a knife—self-defense—and another friend next door, after running on the Pyramid Power Magnetic North platform, became Student Union President of Simon Fraser University, which we could see on Burnaby Mountain from our kitchen window. There were strange people wandering Dollarton in those days, Marxist brawls in the pub, heady philosophy being argued nightly between hiccups at the bar—it was quite a time.

**TT:** Did you always want to be a writer; and, when did you start writing?

**BG:** Yes, I wanted to be a writer from way back, probably as a result of all the reading I did as a child during the long winters in Winnipeg. I remember making a decision to major in English literature because I figured it would help me learn to write—that was a big mistake. It was while I was doing my Master's degree that I did a couple of creative writing courses. These forced me to come up with a couple of stories, which I think succeeded.

**TT:** If the study of literature is not good training ground for a writer, what is?

**BG:** The study of a more selective literature; that is, reading one's contemporaries, those whom you wish to emulate. I'm not saying we scrap Chaucer or Shakespeare or Pope, but their work is not the kind of stuff written now. Instead, I think writers should read what's being written today.

**TT:** Besides your writing, have you had any other careers?

**BG:** Yes, but I hardly consider my writing a career, as a career is what you make a living at, and I've hardly made a living at writing. I'm primarily a teacher, though I also worked in group homes for about three years.

**TT:** Fraser, from *Tall Lives*, jumps to mind.

**BG:** Fraser is a real being. He's the one character I've written who's based as close as I could get him on a real person.

**TT:** I'm curious about your experience with semi-pro hockey, an item that seems to find its way onto dust jackets and the like.

**BG:** Yes, it keeps coming up, even though it's old and embarrassing. Some publishers still think that the Hemingway mystique works (or maybe it makes me sound more interesting). But, actually, hockey was my main passion until I was almost twenty. I was playing Junior at sixteen against guys like Denis Potvin and Bobby Clarke. After retiring from the sport in Canada, I went to Europe and played in the French League for a year. It was a pathetic league, close to our Junior B. They were weird, too. They all could skate like the wind, but had no hockey sense. They were all over the place; their hockey was anarchy, like their politics.

**TT:** Who were the important teachers of your youth?

**BG:** I had a good Grade 7 teacher, Mr. Grieve—people called him Mr. Grief. He made me feel that it was okay to be one of the boys and get good marks at the same time. And there was my Grade 11 English teacher, Amelia Humphreys, who had long braided gray hair and bare feet and wore a shawl or an Indian

robe. In her class, I carved a totem pole with three other guys, though we never finished it. She introduced me to art and ideas, and that's probably why I became artsy rather than science oriented. She's probably also why I almost failed math in Grade 11.

**TT:** What were the important books of your formative years?

**BG:** I read the usual—*Hardy Boys*, all the hockey books (like *Buck Martin, Take Centre Ice*), and the Scott Young books. I remember them well. When I was 12 or 13 I read all of Steinbeck. He was my first literary discovery. After that I had a Dostoevsky phase—in fact, when I think back, that classic idiot-saint character from *The Idiot* probably influenced some of my later characterization. After Dostoevsky, I was drawn to popular writers who had a definite literary edge—four other Johns, in fact, which is weird: John Fowles, John Gardner, John LeCarré, and John Irving, though I have a bit of a love/hate thing with Irving. I like his quirkiness, but he always writes basically the same book. I can see what he's doing very clearly. He's twisting the mundane, which isn't always that hard to do.

**TT:** Your character Wally, in *Tall Lives*, reminded me of the big football transvestite in *The World According to Garp*.

**BG:** It's an easy juxtaposition. You can see his (and for that matter, my) mind working. What's incongruous with a football player? Well, a drag queen. It's simple. He does that constantly.

**TT:** What Canadian writers do you enjoy?

**BG:** I like some new people and the tried and true. I like a dose of Robertson Davies for a good read, I admire Margaret Atwood's insight, I like Alice Munroe's quiet skill, and I think Michael Ondaatje is as brilliant as any writer in North America today. He has a kind of gentleness I admire, and I feel bowled over by his understatement, if that's not a contradiction. But I think I like the new people better, or at least I feel more in tune with them. I like Guy Vanderhague, Rita Donovan, Rick Hillis, Doug Glover. I've been reviewing for the *Daily News* in Halifax for the last three years. They send me mostly new Canadian material that I would normally not read, though very often it's

good. Rita Donovan's second book, *Daisy Circus*, is sometimes brilliant, as are some stories in Hillis's *Limbo River*.

**TT:** A character in your story "Gold" sees "the peculiar Canadian soul" as both "transparent as water yet opaque as snow" (*DCS* 91). Would you agree with him?

**BG:** If I was looking at us from outside, I would. What I'm suggesting is a phenomenon experienced by Americans when they meet Canadians. At first, they think we're polite bland little bores, but they soon realize after spending some time with us that they don't have a clue what we're thinking about. It's very British, our politeness, to the point that you rarely know when you've made an enemy in Canada because your enemy won't tell you—won't even be uncivilized. Either he's too polite or he's too chicken shit to make an unpleasantness in the room. I would agree that, on the surface, Canadians are boring, but that's because we have the grace to sit back and not be knee-jerk bellowers. Canadians do more looking than yapping. Barry Callaghan, in a funny essay, "Canadian Wry," likened Canada to a big window where we're all clinging to the bottom sill, peering over it and studying the U.S. We're pensive as a result.

**TT:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a writer in Canada today?

**BG:** I think the advantage is The Canada Council, which tries to distribute money fairly evenly and democratically. In the U.S., writers have to play the political game as they are mostly funded by private Foundations. Here, you can be a relatively unknown writer and still get a grant of sorts, though money is getting scarcer. In terms of the disadvantages, it's harder to get a book published here than in the U.S. There's more competition. There are more international books published in Canada per capita than any other country. All the U.S. and British books make it up here, whereas the American and British markets are not as open. Canadian writers are competing with all those titles, and making very little money as a result. And now, with the GST, the playing field is even more unequal. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* recently reported that about seven magazines went bankrupt each week last year because of mailing or GST costs. Really, it's a nightmare; publishing houses are folding.

**TT:** Which non-Canadian writers do you read?

**BG:** Writers from the American South. I love Thomas McGuane, for example. *The Bushwacked Piano* opened my eyes in a number of ways. It's flawed, but line-by-line full of all sorts of treats. I fear I could never match his insights or his way of rendering them with language. I also read Barry Hanna. My favorite of his is *Geronimo Rex*, which is like *The Bushwacked Piano* in that it's a great coming-of-age story. The perspectives are wonderfully skewed. I also like Walker Percy, Joan Chase, Martin Amis, and Paul Theroux.

**TT:** You've obviously also read Malcolm Lowry, the frontpiece for *Deep Cove Stories*. What do you really think of Lowry?

**BG:** Well, Dollarton, for him, was like a haven, a calm harbor after the tempest of the *Volcano* years. He was drinking less and, though not generally known, he actually had periods of sobriety in Dollarton. What do I really think of his fiction? In a way, he's celebrating his drunkenness by portraying a lot of psychic anxiety. I think he's a brilliant wordsmith at times, but I really don't trust him. I don't see what all the hubbub is about, and that's what I exaggerated in "The Forest Path to Malcolm's."

**TT:** I see similarities in your writing to the fictions of Jack Hodgins and Guy Vanderhague. What's your reaction to that?

**BG:** Well, I'm flattered. I think Jack Hodgins is a really good writer, and I especially like his early work. *The Invention of the World* and *Spit Delaney's Island* are my two favorites. I think I'm probably more similar to Vanderhague in terms of technique, though, as I see him as more of an exaggerator than a magic realist. His last book, *Homesick*, was pretty straight realism.

**TT:** What motivates *you* to write?

**BG:** First, it's very pleasurable. One of my favorite things is to come up with two words that sound really nice together, that make me see the world slightly differently. So I like the process. And, secondly, my ambition to write is probably dripping with some kind of pathetic ego. I think Marquez summed it up best when he said, "I want everybody in the world to love me." Why

I write is probably as pathetic as that. But the first part of my answer is most important because I realize now that probably more people end up not loving you than loving you when you write.

**TT:** For whom, then, do you write? Do you have an "ideal reader"?

**BG:** I think, ultimately, it's me. I write the book that I would most like to read. I keep the critic out of it at first because if I think about the critic, I'll get too paranoid and I'll write careful, anal, boring things. I just try to entertain myself—and whatever that means, whether it's philosophy, humor, slap-stick, scatology, that's what comes out. After that, I apply the critic.

**TT:** In a review of *Deep Cove Stories* by Terrence Craig, there is what I consider to be an important inference to the "West Coast Magic Realism" of Jack Hodgins. What is it about the west coast that contributes to the magic and wonderment of the Hodgins/Emily Carr/Bill Gaston landscapes?

**BG:** I've been called magic realist by some people, though perhaps only a quarter of my stories are of that sort. The rest have a distant similarity to magic realism, but are stylistically closer to what I've called in the past, artful exaggeration. I prefer to exaggerate selectively for effect at certain spots without challenging the threshold of possibility, which is certainly different than what magic realism does. In magic realism, you get flying carpets and blood that goes up the curbstone rather than down. But in my fiction, very rarely does anything impossible happen. Things are just slightly larger than life—the reds are a bit brighter, the greens are a bit greener, and people smile a bit more crazily. I see magic realism as a bit one-dimensional as a device.

**TT:** Is there something about the west coast that's conducive to exaggeration, then?

**BG:** It seems to me that the land itself is exaggerated—the trees and waves are so huge, and the weather is so big. The land doesn't have a sense of being settled at all yet. It still has a dangerous feel. Out west, people feel a bit puny and appear a bit absurd—especially self-important people. There's a contradiction between their self-importance and the huge world out there

which doesn't pay attention to them. It invites an absurd vision, an exaggerated vision . . .

**TT:** A vision perhaps related, in the end, to what Bob Horton seeks at the close of *Deep Cove Stories*, namely: "that transitory wakefulness gained only through the pursuit of extremes, psychological extremes, which often involve the testing of sanity itself" (195).

**BG:** Yes. It's a waking up. I like to show characters suffering a moment of wakefulness or awe or surprise—but surprise with a jangle to it. And I like to create that vicariously in the reader if possible.

**TT:** Is the "dog shit chorus" that Jhana Betts teaches Frank Village to appreciate in "The Blind Do It Better in the Dark" related to this?

**BG:** Yes, *Jhana* means *wisdom* in Sanskrit, by the way. The human condition consists of us walking around largely by rote, following our habitual patterns and listening to our never-ending internal monologue. Occasionally we can be jarred from that into a moment of what I would call wakefulness—*seeing*, perhaps for the first time. It's like if you're in a near car accident. There are several seconds when time slows right down, when you can hear, see, and remember everything very clearly. That sensation is a much sought-after state in eastern traditions.

**TT:** What role do fate and destiny play in that "waking up"? (And I ask the question from the perspective of your character Jimmy Mayer ["Gold"], whose life is "aided and doomed . . . by none other than what he had this day found at the bottom of his glass of milk" [*DCS* 86].)

**BG:** I don't think much of fate and destiny—I think they're romantic concepts that old-fashioned fiction writers like to play with largely because they give a story structure. I think they're bogus concepts that some writers use as a means of controlling chaos.

**TT:** You've written in "A Tibetan at Al's House," that "after ritual we celebrate *chaos!* . . . Chaos is the *great sea*, and ritual is only a *floating stick*" (*DCS* 179). By contrast, Del, in *Tall Lives*,

celebrates the rules: "In rules there was the chance, the slim chance, for purity" (*TL* 105). Are ritual and chaos just another paradigm, another script that we work from?

**BG:** That's an insightful juxtaposition. Ritual tries to gather and explain chaos, like religion uses ritual to explain the mysteries. My characters are bashing certain rules, because once ritual becomes rules, institutions are formed and ritual is no longer understood. At this point, it is a destructive force that my characters want to put the boots to. On the other hand, I don't see chaos in a negative way. I see it as non-malevolent.

**TT:** I would agree. Our culture, though, thinks chaos threatening and disruptive . . .

**BG:** Which is, in fact, positive in terms of the waking dream state I've been talking about. Chaos shocks you awake. Even if it's painful, chaos can be compassionate; but it's the ugliest thing in the world if you're fighting against it. It always does win, of course. Death is the prime chaotic event. We have no control over it; it always wins. It's probably the worst thing to happen to you if you are afraid and fight against it.

**TT:** Is the "child brat-god" of *Tall Lives*, who occasionally intervenes to "shake the paper bag of glass and spiders" (5, 224) and disrupt the twins' world, symbolic of the wrath of chaos on ritual's calm?

**BG:** Yes, the "child brat-god" is chaos personified. Personally, I think chaos is a deity. I don't believe chaos rules, quite, but I believe that chaos is, paradoxically, an order of its own. In fact, I like the old-fashioned way of looking at natural forces as deities. I mean, they don't have eyeballs, but they do behave like pure intentions. Chaos, too, is a kind of pure intention, and so is order; and they battle each other constantly.

**TT:** Well then, the name Baal stands out for me. Are Frank and Del contemporary Canaanite deities?

**BG:** No, they're not deities themselves, but they're contemporary idol worshippers. They both worship Baal, and they're both chasing false gods, like everybody else.

**TT:** One order and one chaos?

**BG:** Yes, probably. That sounds good; I like that.

**TT:** Still with chaos, I must ask you about the carnivalesque Felix d'Amboise, "a grotesque who paid other grotesques to relieve him" (*TL* 31). He is a particularly vile creation. What were you thinking about when you crafted him?

**BG:** I beg to differ about his vile nature. He, too, has a false god, a false god called intellect—pure rationality. He's sacrificed all to celebrate that rationality, which is a kind of grotesque thing, yes, because he's denying he has a body. His infrequent relieving of himself merely stands out because it's contrasted against the rarefied world of his noggin. As a result, I see him as neither vile nor, as William French suggested, symbolic of a stumbling, floundering Quebec. The reason he's French is I have a kind of bemused respect for the French penchant for philosophy and the arrogance that goes along with that. There's a lot of very self-certain philosophers over on the continent, and they all are convinced they're right. I come from that country, too, generations ago, so I felt I had some right to claim him as a comic character.

**TT:** Mary, daughter of the decoy Pope in *Tall Lives*, makes the statement that "religion just gets in the way . . . of truth" (124). She is speaking quite pointedly, though, of Western religion, namely Christianity. Was your intention with the Pope episode to satirize Christianity?

**BG:** Hopefully not in a mean-spirited way. I don't like to bash something that's been bashed since the turn of the century. But I think it comes back to chaos and ritual that religion stands in the way of truth. Religion puts chaotic reality into all these shapes that nobody understands or accepts anymore. It's a language that's dead.

**TT:** By contrast, there are often currents of eastern philosophy (frequently Buddhism) in your fiction. Would you elaborate?

**BG:** I am a practicing Buddhist myself. I've probably read more books on Buddhism than I have books of fiction in the last

ten years. Accordingly, it's a struggle for me to not proselytize, a struggle to keep Buddhism out of my fiction. The main influence Buddhism has had on my fiction—other than to question why one would write anyway; that is, why one would spend a lot of time constructing fantasies—is to make me mindful of not advertising harmful things or not glorifying styles or violence. I guess I'm always trying to be helpful, at least on some level. I could go on about esoteric Buddhism for pages and pages, but basically, as I said before, I think the human condition is one of somnambulism. We flounder about, pretending that our concerns matter, focused on little things which in the span of a life don't mean dick. On a deathbed, those little things we're freaking out about right now won't mean a thing.

**TT:** How do you remove yourself, though, from the busy work, from the detail?

**BG:** Well, you've got to do the detail to live. There's nothing wrong with the detail, just that we let ourselves sink to the level of detail: we go to sleep with detail. But I think there's a perspective one can gain. I'm not saying I'm a great master at this, but one can gain a more panoramic view. Our old, now dead, Buddhist teacher was really into earthiness and the immediacies that went along with that. He looked at us as being kind of timid, by contrast, pretending, among other things, that we don't crap—spraying aerosols to cover things up. To him, we didn't see reality very well. He liked to point out many of life's extremely *raw* qualities and the clarity of vision that goes along with recognizing those. I think, too, that's what life is for: to wake up in.

**TT:** Margaret Laurence often said she found it absolutely terrifying to start writing, that she put it off until it couldn't be put off any longer. Do you share this problem?

**BG:** I kind of got over that through a little trick—basically, not looking at my writing as a big deal. To keep me from being constipated, I treat it as play. I write to have fun. I'll often start a book without knowing it, just by jotting down an opening line or character in the bathroom or between classes. The terror sets in after I discover I'm committed to it. When I'm 30 pages into a book, then I say, "Oh no, I'm writing a book!" I wrote a first novel

that's long and unpublished. There was more terror there because I was trying to explain the universe to myself and to others. I had to be serious and smart all the time, but now I'm more of a smart-ass with a sense of play.

**TT:** Many book reviewers have referred to the breadth of your imagination—in fact, George Payerle went as far as implicating your "incredible life" in that realm. Given our shared interest in your "tall lives," would you explain how a story comes to you and how it develops?

**BG:** The main thrust of a story will come to me full-blown, usually arriving in the shape of a character or several characters in conflict over something stunning, something that excites me and makes me say, "Oh, this is worth playing with and making bigger." In "Maria's Older Brother," for example, I translated a Monty Pythonesque image of someone pitching lettuces or hams or rabbits over home plate into the ultimate: throwing a dead body over home plate. I thought that was a pretty wild combination of horror and humor. In terms of development, I would say that with some books and stories I know what's going to happen right up to the ending; but, with others, like the novel I'm writing now, *The Cameraman*, I don't have a clue about the ending. It's quite frightening, actually, spending a year or two of your life really involved in something that might not come together at the end.

**TT:** Do you spend much time revising and editing?

**BG:** No, I don't. Largely, my fiction is second draft. I'll write a paragraph in my head several times and then it'll go down on paper. So it's somewhat revised already. I hate rewriting because at that stage the play is largely gone.

**TT:** In a recent article, Michael Mirolla states that *Tall Lives*, unlike *Deep Cove Stories*, does not play as much with the nature of fiction writing. A new short story, "The Summing of the Parts," just out in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, foregrounds again the fiction writer's manipulation of narrative structure as a means of questioning fiction's truth. After reading that story, I felt I was back again in the experimental fictive world of "The Forest Path

to Malcolm's." Are you more eager to take chances—to experiment with narrative structure and voice—in short fiction?

**BG:** Yes, I think so. Experimental fiction is fun but it's also risky, and it wouldn't hold my interest through a whole book. It is not ultimately interesting in itself—devices rarely are. You can do something like "Gold," which is largely a tongue-in-cheek send-up full of literary puns, and that's fun for ten pages, but no more. Rather, to hold both the reader's attention and my own, I have to go back to the good old elements of storytelling. Something has to move; I have to be interested in the characters and see how their lives are going to turn out. I would disagree with Mirolla's assessment of *Tall Lives*, however, as it's certainly not straight realism by any means. The whole self-reflexive treatment of cliché and coincidence, the obvious manipulations—the five simultaneous pukes, for example—are all playing with fictional convention, drawing attention to artifice. So I guess I take chances with both forms, though more, as you suggest, with short fiction.

**TT:** What was the genesis of *Tall Lives*?

**BG:** I wanted to explore the most poignant love that humans were capable of. I thought of man-woman, mother-child, and siblings, and then I thought of twins, the obvious choice–a kind of cliché of psychic love. From there I thought, since it is a cliché, why not explode the cliché and make them Siamese? So that's how the notion of twins arrived. What gave the book its emotional impact for me was my relationship with my own brother. We're not twins but we're fourteen months apart, and because we moved around so much as kids, we were always, of necessity, each other's best friend. After leaving home, we virtually always lived together in the same house, had the same pack of friends, did the same brain damage, and played on the same hockey teams. We even played hockey in China together. And while our lives have grown apart, I still can't imagine anybody in my life closer. In our own silent, stumbling way, we acknowledged this to each other, which led to the idea of the stumbling kind of love that Del and Frank experience. It's an intensely powerful love but it's also intensely clumsy. It's completely unbreakable, no matter how hard you might try to break it and no

matter what happens. *Tall Lives*, for me, is about two characters who share a primal love but don't know what to do with it; I could write about that feeling from the gut.

**TT:** After hearing you talk about your brother and after puzzling over your narrative sleight-of-hand in "The Forest Path to Malcolm's," I must ask, even after Barthes, what the connection might be between memory and a writer's imaginative realm, between Bill Gaston and the rest of his fiction?

**BG:** In terms of the short story you mention, it's basically just a flight of fancy (which answers the question generally, as well). I grew up probably a hundred yards from where Lowry's shack stood and where he wrote *Under the Volcano*. I was completely immersed in the same sunrises and the same mists and the same sounds of the water. Coincidentally, my first drinking spot was right on the spot where his cabin was. Neither I nor my buddies had ever heard of Malcolm Lowry, the famous drunk; none of us cared. Years later when they named the path "Malcolm Lowry Walk" and I discovered who he was, I realized, that's our drinking spot! All our rusty bottle caps are pounded into the logs there. There's hundreds of them, thousands. So there's some kind of psychic link between us, I guess. After that, his life, probably more than his work, started to tease me, so I exaggerated the link that I felt with him. In some sense, then, being a literary descendent (a Dollarton writer), I *am* his illegitimate son.

**TT:** Your fiction mixes, for effect, the absurd with the comic, a formula that theorists would call "the carnivalesque." *Tall Lives* also employs a series of Russian Formalist devices for "making strange" what has become habitual. Do you read and are you influenced by contemporary literary theory?

**BG:** Margaret Atwood said this when a colleague asked her what she thought of deconstruction: "I just know it's bad news for you and me." I find myself agreeing with her. As a part-time academic, the application of theory sometimes interests me; but, as a writer, it doesn't whatsoever. I never launch a writing project from any theoretical springboard. That's like having a cage without the monkey when ultimately the monkey is the important thing—what people come to see. Nonetheless, I'm amazed that critical theories can be applied to my work. It makes

me feel that maybe I'm not completely nuts after all, that I might be coming out of a tradition . . .

**TT:** Albeit a very contemporary one.

**BG:** Sure, but the progression is both traceable and historical. Writers can all be traced to influences and roots, and I think there are really no visible gaps in the evolving literary tradition. So I guess I take some comfort in that sense of a literary lineage.

**TT:** How do you react, then, to the following lines from *Tall Lives*: "In this day and age no one knew anything anymore, and so he could do what he wanted. There were a thousand styles, a thousand ideas, and none of them was true" (174).

**BG:** That's Frank's comment on our contemporary age, an age of wild uncertainty. Styles, in the pejorative sense—whether dress, radical punk, sexual-political stances, ultra conservatism, or anything cutting edge or contemporary—are all attempts to harness chaos. But none of them see the total picture; they're just incomplete stabs at truth. Frank knew that and Del didn't. Frank hated anybody with a sense of political or contemporary style, especially if they wore that style with self-assurance or arrogance.

**TT:** As a writer, what do you feel is your role or responsibility?

**BG:** Partly to entertain, partly to attempt some record of truth (given that truth speaks in many tongues). Believe it or not, though, I consider myself foremost a moralist. I think it was Plato who said (and please pardon the gender-incorrect language), "A good writer is a good man writing." That's what a good writer is—a good person. Without being corny, I try and stick to that. I don't like to advertise negativity and crap, as I said before, which doesn't make me a happy-ending monger either. My version of truth just happens to be positive.

**TT:** Your response prompts me to ask a question about two words that have recurred often as we've spoken—truth and exaggeration. How do you reconcile those two?

**BG:** Yes, I knew you would ask that. Well, I think exaggeration can create the effect of truth (even though, as I said

before, truth is probably relative). Jokes, of course, are the best example: unless you recognize some little truth in the punchline, then the joke doesn't work. Exaggeration works the same way: everyone must recognize the kernel of truth in the exaggerated excess, otherwise it doesn't work.

**TT:** Where does comedy figure in the space between exaggeration and truth? Is your humor, as Marcus Waddington and other critics suggest, mordant and black?

**BG:** I think "black" rings true, because humor is so linked to violence. And, to answer the first part of your question, I would agree with Stephen Leacock, who recognized that good humor almost always comes out of its opposite: slapstick, for instance, is literally violent at times; the driest wit, when at the expense of someone else, is a gentler violence; and even laughter itself is somewhat violent—it's a spasm of the body. It's absurd, you sitting there, convulsing, and making all sorts of loud sounds—it's completely gross.

**TT:** That's almost a textbook definition of Bakhtinian low comedy—of carnival comedy, of scatology.

**BG:** Dirt—I'm certainly not above that, as some critics have pointed out. One headline in a review read, "*Tall Lives* Succeeds Despite Scatological Obsession," which was, I thought, a partly astute observation since the book dabbled in scatological excess. Basically, I wanted to exaggerate scatology. The five simultaneous pukes is an obvious example, but if you look closely you'll find blood or snot or urine or spit or shit on most pages. It was an attempt to de-Victorianize the body. As I've said before, I think it's very unhealthy not to acknowledge shit: to deny the smell of shit, I think, is an unhealthy psychological stance. I'm not saying we should revel in it or invite it, but we shouldn't deny it. Our society is timidly avoidant—it sanitizes death, hauls the clean corpse away. Everybody is afraid of dying, and I think denying shit is the same as denying death. The chapter in *Tall Lives* on Shiva deals with that. Frank appreciates the Hindu recognition that decomposition is the other side of the equation, and to deny it is to be insane.

**TT:** Your response reminds me again, and I keep coming back to this story, of "The Forest Path to Malcolm's," and the narrator's experience of Lowry, his father, drunk and exploding into diarrhea in front of him. Pretty bizarre stuff!

**BG:** That pushed my edge as well, writing that. It made me uncomfortable, and that was probably good. It's not like I am comfortable with this. I'm hoping that readers' responses will be roughly similar to mine. That's my only way of gauging whether the book might work or not. I write for myself, basically, and hope my reactions are typical.

**TT:** Can't that be limiting, though? How, for example, do you respond to the criticism that your female characters are, in Michael Kenyon's words, "the unknowable other "?

**BG:** Well, Margaret Atwood has been accused of the same sort of thing—of weak male characters—so I don't feel quite so bad. If someone with her insight can blow it, then maybe we're all doomed to blow it. Nevertheless, I do sense that I struggle with female characters, even though I think men and women are not as dissimilar as we've been led to believe—we all know pride, sadness, and fear; we all have basically the same emotions. *Tall Lives* has been called both feminist and misogynist, which is the kind of delightful contradiction that would normally please me if it weren't for the fact that being called a misogynist is like being called a racist. What I was trying to do in the novel was people it with stereotypes: Del and Frank, the good and bad twin; Felix, the philosophical Frenchman; Fraser, the idiot savant. From there I exploded those stereotypes into larger-than-life clichés. And Mary, among those, is the least simplistic. Together, the twins represent two different worlds; alone, Mary represents two—by far, she's the most complex character in the novel. She works with handicapped kids by day and strips by night. But she strips of her own freewill as an adventure in pain, to study the wildest, most perverse thing she could think of doing. It went totally against her nature, to a point that it excited her immensely to do something so abhorrent—which is not an uncommon thing.

**TT:** As you look back on your writing career, what do you recall most vividly?

**BG:** A wonderful coincidence! A friend of mine, François Bonneville, had just finished the book he'd been writing for ten years. Another writer-friend of mine, Joan MacLeod (who'd just made some money on one of her plays) flew me to Toronto so the three of us, old UBC buddies, could celebrate his achievement. I knew my book *Tall Lives* was being considered very seriously by Macmillan, so while I was in Toronto I called the editor there, and she said, "I have good news, we're going to publish your book." So we celebrated two things, drinking long into the night. That was on a Friday afternoon. When I went back to Halifax on Monday morning, Friday's mail revealed that *Deep Cove Stories* had also been accepted by Oolichan, and *Poetry Canada Review* wanted to do a feature on my work. So three of the biggest successes so far arrived on the same day. I'd been writing for eight years.

**TT:** What has your writer-in-residence role at UNB meant for you as a writer?

**BG:** I feel legitimate now, partly because of my position here. I feel that someone considers me a real writer. Also, the experience has given me lots of time to write. The big challenge for most writers in Canada is to find time to write, because their writing isn't supporting them. I've been very productive here, and very grateful for the opportunity. In two years, I'll have written a novel, a play, and finished a book of short stories. It has been great.

**TT:** What are you working on now?

**BG:** I'm finishing a novel, *The Cameraman,* which is set in the Canadian film industry; and, in a week or so, Theatre New Brunswick will be bringing in actors to workshop *The Horton Syndrome,* my first play. That informal airing should be helpful as it will give me the chance to hear if the lines and dynamics are working. If they like it at TNB, they might produce it in '92. Other than that, I always have one or two short stories on the go.

**TT:** I'm curious about the following lines from *Tall Lives*: "This tangled, lousy life—as his brother Frank described it—was like living inside a vast paper bag filled with spiders and broken glass. Every few days it gets grabbed and shaken stupidly by some child brat-god" (*TL* 5). Given that this image is repeated at

least three times in the novel, does it have any particular significance for you outside its narrative context?

**BG:** That's the sort of grandly bleak statement that I hope doesn't sum up my work. From the Buddhist point of view, the most important of the four noble truths is the acknowledgement of the existence of pain as universal and basically constant. And to accept that is to open your eyes. The child brat-god is Frank's attempt to identify poetically with that—with what seems to be the existence of order in the universe (nature's symmetry, the seasons, the undeniable beauty of things) and the existence of incredible pain (babies dying of cancer, war, and all sorts of incredible suffering). So I thought that if there's a god, then it might be accurate to suggest that this god is a juvenile brat, which might sum up the disharmony of symmetry and chaos, beauty and pain. There's order but it's an insane order, operating with what seems like benevolence until it rears its insane side. It's another way of seeing god and satan, I guess, but in one figure—the child brat-god.