

CANADIAN SCREENWRITER

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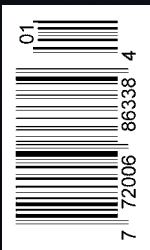
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Vampires Are
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The Problem

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Breathes New Life
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Contents

Cover 6

Series Begins With 'The End'

Mary Kills People's inspiration came with Tara Armstrong's
obsession: Death. "Why aren't we talking about this every
five seconds?" So she did.

By Matthew Hays

Features 10

Social Media And Screenwriters

Some seek out fame and others have fame thrust upon them.

Social media makes it easier than ever for screenwriters to
connect with the people who watch their shows. Some see it as a
passive medium and others as active. But all agree it's important.

By Katherine Brodsky

Something You Can Sink Your Teeth Into 14

Early on, they decided that vampires were only part of the
problem. After that, things really took on a life of their own and
many ideas saw the light of day for *Van Helsing* screenwriters.

By Diane Wild

Real Fake News In A Time Of Purported Fake News 18

How do you create a real fake news show when so many people
are calling real news fake news and how do you make that news
funnier than real life? These are weird times and *The Beaverton*
is reporting on them. In their way.

By Mark Dillon

W-Files 23

Matt Venables & Jeremy Smith — By Greg David

Sonja Bennett — By Cameron Archer

Columns 2

From the Editor/Contributors

Inside/Out — Jill Golick

One Last Thing — Jason Filiatrault

News 4

Beat Sheet

Spotlight

Money for Missing Writers

New Members





When real fake news has to compete with real news

When political leaders call real news, fake news, what happens to real fake news news shows?

Oh, there are the established real fake news news shows like *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, they sort of have a baked in audience. But how does a new fake news news show break in?

New news shows, sorry, new fake news news shows, like *The Beaverton*, how do they flourish in a day when the real news news shows are dealing material that sounds like it belongs on the real fake news news shows?

There's a lot to admire about the plucky show *The Beaverton*, and its writers, featured in this issue.

Comedy is hard. And it's even harder to make a profit by being funny.

More than that, though, a satiric show about current events not only has to be, well, current but it also has to walk a fine line.

If you don't go far enough, you will likely lose the joke. But stray too far and you could be in the territory of bad taste, which can lose you your audience, and eventually your broadcaster. Stray another way and you're into a legal swamp that can pull you down, deeper, deeper, freezing you in its icy depths, choking you with its mud and bitter liquid of defamation and damages and insurance, possibly losing you your production and your job and maybe giving you a permanent case of libel chill and bitterness.

But out there, on the edge where the laughs are, the screenwriters have no care for their own safety. It's the territory they need to tread. The laughs *live* on danger. Well, danger and a humorous premise.

The job of the writers and showrunners of shows like *The Beaverton* and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, is to guide the writing around all the obstacles while staying topical and inside the lines and funny.

The audiences for shows like this — those bright minds out there — love those danger-loving, outrageous, biting sketches. And these days, that kind of comedy is necessary. With an American president who rails at the media on a daily basis, calling any criticism of him or his administration “fake news,” and with more people becoming distrustful of the media, we need both the laughs and the critiques of the powerful and of ourselves.

So what's the difference between fake news and satire?

Some might say if you can't tell the difference, satire isn't for you.

Others might say, if you can't tell, it's not being done right.

So, these laugh wranglers (a.k.a. screenwriters) at *The Beaverton* deserve our nod of appreciation — for being funny while edging close to the line, but still making sure it's suitable for broadcast so we can all enjoy it.

They are managing to magnify the funny in the everyday news — the real news, on their real fake news show for real laughs. ■

— Tom Villemaire

Spring 2018

Cameron Archer runs the Canadian television/media website *Gloryosky* (gloryosky.ca), and is also a freelance arts and media writer. He lives in Eastern Ontario.

Katherine Brodsky is a Vancouver-based writer who has written for *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Variety*, *Esquire*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and even *Playboy Magazine*. She has interviewed a diverse range of intriguing personalities including Oscar, Emmy, Tony, Pulitzer, and Nobel prize winners. Sometimes she writes scripts, too. Find her on Twitter @mysteriouskat

For over 15 years, **Greg David** has been a television critic for *TV Guide Canada*, the country's most trusted source for TV news. A former member of the Television Critics Association, he is currently a partner at TV-Eh.com, a website devoted to covering the Canadian television industry.

Mark Dillon is a Toronto-based freelance journalist and former editor of *Playback* magazine. He is author of the award-winning *Fifty Sides of The Beach Boys*.

Jason Filiatrault is a slightly award-winning screenwriter whose credits include the feature *Entanglement*, the CBC series *Young Drunk Punk*, and this bio that you're reading. He lives in Calgary with a cat and a Zoey.

Matthew Hays is a Montreal-based writer, author, and university and college instructor. His articles have appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, *Maclean's*, *The Toronto Star* and many others. His book, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Arsenal Pulp), won a 2008 Lambda Literary Award.

Diane Wild is a Vancouver-based writer, editor and health care communicator who founded the *TV, eh?* website and gallivants to work on the Olympics every couple of years.



Developing Success

What kinds of TV shows should you develop for success in a marketplace that includes Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, Facebook and Apple? Bold, arced series powered by unique voices that take viewers to places they've never been before. Think outside the box.

What kinds of series should you develop if you're aiming for a commission for a Canadian broadcaster? Traditional episodic and procedural formats with minimal character arcing. Mine U.S. network television for inspiration.

Obviously, we have a serious disconnect. Broadcasters trigger funding. If you want to get paid, you have to make the kinds of shows they want. Not the series the new players want to buy. Not the shows that solidify Canada's reputation as a great content provider.

The content market is exploding. American production has skyrocketed to more than 4,000 episodes per year. It used to take five seasons, 65 episodes and a syndication deal to put an American television series into profit. These days, thanks to international sales, many series are in profit after a single season of just 10 episodes. This is a great business.

Canada is in a better position to succeed in it than many of our international friends. Our shows look fantastic, have a price advantage over U.S. production, are written in English, and are built on the showrunner model

that underlies most series that are successful in the new markets. Many of my writer friends in other countries complain that their producers are hapless when it comes to distribution, but Canada's producers have wisely built solid international distribution chains.

I would be incredibly optimistic about our future if it weren't for the fatal flaw: a Canadian broadcast partner is required to get anything off the ground.

At a time when our industry should be developing as many series as possible, our broadcasters are barely commissioning. Some aren't buying anything at all. Instead of looking for shows that are distinct and daring, they seek out the generic. While audiences (and writers) adore arcs, our networks discourage them. And when they do commission a series with guts and voice and international potential, they head on down to L.A. so American-resident writers can ensure it conforms to some U.S. entertainment standard, rather than cashing in on the unique voices and perspectives that Canadian writers can bring.

If we want to thrive in the same market as *Fleabag*, *Fauda*, *Insecure*, *Trapped*, *The End of the F*cking World* and *Catastrophe* we're going to have to take some risks. Calling Canadian broadcasters risk averse is a massive understatement.

Protection from competition has helped build behemoth broadcasting entities that have made their founders and shareholders rich. Despite that, they never were fully committed to the Canadian industry or to developing national talent. Now that it isn't quite as easy and lucrative for them, that commitment is diminishing to the point of nonexistence.

This could be Canada's time. We have the skills, talent, and ideas. But if we want the success that is just beyond our reach we must find new triggers for development funding. We have to make it possible for Canadian writers to create the kinds of shows that the new markets seek.

If we don't act, we will all be dragged into the death spiral that our broadcasters have fashioned for themselves. ■

— **Jill Golick**

The WGC Policy Decoder: Decoding the “Netflix tax”

The Backstory:

The idea of a “Netflix tax” began with the Conservative Party of Canada, when it helped kick off the 2015 federal election by claiming that the Liberals had such a tax in the works. In a country with high cable and Internet bills, and where Netflix is a popular service, the claim found some traction. Unfortunately, this partisan political framing ignored the cultural sovereignty issues at stake, as well as the tax fairness of Canadian companies having to collect HST while foreign companies do not. Since then the Liberals have seemingly adopted the “Netflix tax” logic, and have doubled down by claiming it would be a “tax on the middle class.” Meanwhile, many in Quebec, typically attuned to cultural issues, have emphasized the tax unfairness of *de facto* HST exemption, even though the HST wouldn’t directly boost the cultural sector.

Fast forward to September 2017, when Minister of Canadian Heritage Mélanie Joly announced her “Creative Canada” vision for the cultural sector in a digital age. At the centre of it was a commitment by Netflix to invest \$500 million in original production in Canada over the next five years. While this was good news for the industry, the announcement came without a longer-term plan to deal with “over-the-top” (OTT) services (such as Netflix) in Canada, and the threat they pose to a Canadian broadcasting system that depends on regulation to support Canadian programming. Some critics charged that this amounted to giving Netflix a pass on taxation or regulation in Canada, while others declared the end of the Netflix tax debate.

So, What IS a “Netflix Tax”?

Really, there’s no such thing. There never was. When people use the term, there are several different policy proposals they could be referring to, some of which aren’t even a tax, and none of which would apply to Netflix alone.

One policy proposal is a contribution to the production of Canadian programming. This could take the form of an expenditure requirement on Canadian content, similar to what Canadian broadcasters currently have in the form of spending requirements for “Canadian programming expenditure” (CPE) and “programs of national interest” (PNI). This would be a minimum amount of money that an OTT must spend on the production of Canadian programming, but that OTT would obtain the rights to the programming and get the benefit of having it in their catalogue. Alternatively, a contribution could be directed to a production fund like the Canada Media Fund (CMF), which others could apply to for production funding.

Another policy proposal is simply that foreign OTT’s like Netflix collect and remit the HST, as do virtually all Canadian businesses. Right now, foreign providers of digital products and services do not have to collect and remit sales tax if they are not “carrying on business” in Canada. This is an issue with Netflix, but also a slew of other digital services that don’t have a physical presence in Canada. Canada needs to update its tax approach more broadly, and there are international efforts underway to establish global standards for sales tax collection. In any event, HST payable on Netflix subscriptions wouldn’t be earmarked for Canadian programming — it would go to general government coffers — so it doesn’t really address Canadian programming.

What’s Next?

At time of writing it’s a bit of a mess, frankly, with little agreement on policy or nomenclature alike. Nevertheless, the WGC will keep talking to government, in hopes of convincing them that a clear public communications strategy about what’s really at stake is a better alternative to merely adopting Stephen Harper-era political language, or pinning the future of the “middle class” on this issue.

Writers Talking TV

The WGC’s ongoing series of on-stage writer-to-writer interviews, Writers Talking TV (WTTV), continued in February with the co-creator and co-showrunner of *Hard Rock Medical*, Smith Corindia, in a lively conversation with fellow screenwriter Patrick Tarr, showrunner of season three of *Cardinal*. Also on the WTTV beat, this past November, showrunner Brad Wright talked with host Sarah Dodd (*Cardinal* season two showrunner) about writing *Travelers*, to a very enthused audience in Vancouver. (A special thanks to WGC members Gemma Holdway and John Ward who helped make the Vancouver event possible.) At roughly the same time in Toronto the Guild presented WTTV, the *Frankie Drake Mysteries*’ edition, with Carol Hay and Cal Coons chatting with host James Hurst. Please note: all the aforementioned WTTV events are available as podcasts on the WGC website, wgc.ca. Finally, as well as taking to the stage for WTTV, members took part in Fan Expo Vancouver on a WGC panel called *Ghost Wars: Secrets from the Writers’ Room*, with David Elver (host), Daegan Fryklind (moderator), Damon Vignale, Gemma Holdway, Karen Lam, and Rachel Langer. Thanks to all!



*The members of the WGC Diversity Script of the Month committee (left to right top to bottom)
Penny Gummerson, Mark Ellis, Vivian Lin, Christin Simms, Marsha Greene, Morwyn Brebner,
Alejandro Alcoba, Jeremy Boxen, Nathalie Younglai, and Elan Mastai*

WGC Diversity Script of the Month

The Guild has begun an initiative called the WGC Diversity Script of the Month, intended to help emerging screenwriters from diverse backgrounds. Participants are encouraged to submit a script to the WGC Diversity Script of the Month, and scripts will be read and judged by the members of the WGC diversity committee. Each month, a selected script will be sent to a group of industry leaders with a view to giving diverse writers a chance to have their scripts read by someone with real decision-making power.

WGC harassment policy

The Writers Guild of Canada does not tolerate harassment of our members. It's more than sexual harassment alone — harassment includes discrimination, bullying, or violence. In order to formalize the Guild's position, the WGC

council officially adopted a procedural policy should an instance of harassment occur. If a WGC member experiences harassment and would like to report this experience they are encouraged to contact the Guild's Executive Director Maureen Parker. She will review options with the member, and should the member choose to take action the Guild will ensure that anonymity will be protected. A formal grievance may be filed against the harasser, but only with the member's consent. Any decisions regarding actions taken against a harasser will be made on a case-by-case basis. In tandem with the harassment policy, the Guild's president, Jill Golick, welcomes members to share their experiences of harassment by contacting her directly, and/or by filling out an online survey. It is the Guild's intention to ultimately share such stories, anonymously, with the membership, and for educational purposes within the industry. Screenwriters will find the relevant contact information on the WGC website.

WGC Writers' Room at Kidscreen

When it comes to kids' programming, Canada has a celebrated history of international success. It springs from Canadian screenwriters' terrific ability to create and write animated series that kids around the world like to watch. The WGC presence at the annual Kidscreen Summit is strong, not surprisingly, (around fifty WGC members attended the conference in Miami earlier this winter), so this year the Guild hosted a special Writers' Room. It brought screenwriters together with other industry professionals, the writers' generously sharing their take on creative elements that are the bedrock of a successful show. Our Writers' Room was a popular spot, with a full slate of producers and execs from around the world taking the opportunity to brainstorm ideas with talented WGC screenwriters. ■

TO DIE FOR

By Matthew Hays

Tara Armstrong and Tassie Cameron on their hit series about medically assisted suicide, *Mary Kills People*

As Tara Armstrong tells it, it all started with the end. “I was always death-obsessed,” confesses the creator and a writer of the hit series *Mary Kills People*, season two of which is now airing. “Ever since I was a kid. And I know that sounds crazy, but I always thought, ‘Why aren’t we talking about this every five seconds?’”

By the time Armstrong figured out she was a writer, she recalls, “everything I wrote about was about death.” She was also a student in UBC’s creative writing program, where she took a screenwriting course, followed by a directed study with Peggy Thompson, a prof who turned out to be especially influential.

“This creative nonfiction assignment I worked on required that I immerse myself in something in order to understand it more completely. I chose a hospice for people who were facing death. So I got to speak with the doctors, nurses and volunteers extensively. Death was part of their work, and that fascinated me, because we live in a death-denying society.”

Armstrong developed her research into *Mary Kills People*, a spec script about a doctor who covertly freelances in cases of physician-assisted euthanasia, acts she sees as ethical and moral despite their criminal status. And when Armstrong did a stint at the Canadian Film Centre, Entertainment One optioned the script. Then after some networking at the Banff TV Festival, Corus signed on. Armstrong was in the writers’ room for the series *Private Eyes*, and that’s when Tassie Cameron first read the script.

“I was doing more producing at that point,” Cameron recalls. “I remember thinking how incredibly entertaining the script was. Given the subject, it was unexpected. It was funny and dark, beautifully written, and so much shone through in that first script. Not only was it a great script on its own, but I could sense how many different places it could go. There was tons of potential for a limited series. I thought at the time, ‘I’d love to produce something like this.’”

Cameron says she was also drawn “to the complicated female lead. It was something I was trying to do when I was writing for *Rookie Blue*, to portray a young woman, flaws and all. That gave me a taste for really pushing an anti-heroine.”

Working with a producer, writer and showrunner with Cameron’s considerable track record was “incredible,” says Armstrong. “Tassie knows how to assemble a great team of people in the writers’ room. Having Holly Dale direct all of the first season also meant I had a female-led team of people with a considerable track record.”

But the process of writing the first season was “unconventional,” says Armstrong. “We had a very small writers’ room. A lot happens in the pilot. We had three weeks, which was crazy. We had to work extremely hard to break the episodes down. Much of it was intuitive; you know when the story is working and when it’s not. I love breaking the stories down, but it’s very challenging. It’s a heavily-plotted series. We had to figure out which scenes to explore and expand, and where the character arcs are.”



Tassie Cameron, left and Tara Armstrong.

“There’s something very sad about death, but there’s also something funny about it. We had to ask the question as we were writing: does it feel real, even if it’s entirely absurd?”

And it presented its challenges for Cameron, too: “Breaking the seasons for *Mary Kills People* has been quite a different experience for me. This was my first time working on a six-episode arc, which in some ways, requires a different set of story skills — it’s almost more like breaking a six-hour movie, than it is writing a traditional television series. It’s also been interesting to work on a show that doesn’t have a conventional mystery to “solve” by the end of each episode or season. Mary herself is the mystery of this show, and it’s her interactions with the other characters — the good guys and the bad guys, and everyone in between — that really drives the narrative forward. The “cat and mouse” of it all has been very interesting to write and get right.”

Cameron also opted to produce and showrun, only writing half of a single episode. “Putting a team together, figuring out how to put a season together, getting creative approval and giving notes. I didn’t want to overload,” she says. “I knew I’d have my hands full.”

And she adds, “Tara is very much a perfectionist. I share that. We were pushing those scripts to make them as entertaining as we possibly could.”

Approaching this subject, Cameron knew one thing for sure: “I would never have come on board if it were an issue piece. I’m not into preaching to people about issues, and it was never a goal to shove it down people’s throats. I’m not an earnest person. The question must linger, is she doing the right thing or is she a monster? And the questions that come up shift with each particular case that she’s handling.”

“We wanted to explore the issue, but through the character of Mary,” Armstrong adds. “It was important to recognize what a complex issue this is. We’re not ever going to come to a consensus about it. So much of what she’s doing is illegal, and to some people, deeply immoral.”

“I think if you watch the show, you can see where we’re coming from,” says Cameron. “We have to share some of Mary’s beliefs. But we’re always trying to look at it from different angles, to acknowledge that many see it from a range of different perspectives.”

In the timing-is-everything department, things couldn’t have been stranger for the team behind *Mary Kills People*. As the show was airing, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was acting on a campaign promise, to legalize doctor-assisted suicide. “I was very keen to see that stalled,” says Cameron. “I’m kidding, I didn’t really want to see it stalled. But I did want it to be illegal for our purposes. Obviously it makes the show more compelling if Mary is doing something illegal. It just meant we invented a city, Anytown, North America. So we came up with “Port Denver,” where doctor-assisted suicide is still illegal.”

Cameron was always struck by the tone of Armstrong’s spec script. A big part of the challenge was arriving and staying in that distinctive, complex place, where humour meets death meets possible pathos. “That tone was amazing. We wanted to maintain a balance during the incredibly emotional moments, especially the deaths themselves. There are moments of absurdity, humanity, friendship and romance. The writers in that room were so talented in the way they brought all of those things together simultaneously. There’s a scene where a teen pulls out a gun and holds it at Mary, forcing her to help a woman die at gunpoint. As that happens, a schmaltzy song begins playing. It makes it all feel entirely absurd.”

“We talked a lot about that in the writers’ room,” Cameron says. “It was about trying to reflect reality. There’s something very sad about death, but there’s also something funny about it. We had to ask the question as we were writing: does it feel real, even if it’s entirely absurd?”

In the first season, we were dealing with a lot of unknowns. The real energy of the first season is that you still don't know what you have, and are showing parts of the character to the audience.

Perfectly reflecting the show's blunt-yet-nuanced tone is the show's title, evoking the existential, in-your-face, ostensibly simple style of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (another work mired in death obsession). "When I was first writing the script," Armstrong recalls, "the opening line was 'Mary kills people for a living.' It just leapt out at me. Oh my God, that's the title! I texted it to a friend immediately. Everyone from that friend to the writers to the producers to the network has been entirely down with that title."

Handing the show a lifeline was the response to season one, which was tremendous, both in terms of audience callout and critical raves, as well as nine Canadian Screen Award nominations. *Variety* critic Maureen Ryan led the charge, citing the show as one of the best of 2017. "*Mary Kills People* is a smart, entertaining series that understands, on a core level, that nobody really wants to watch a TV show about medically assisted suicide," Ryan gushed, adding, it's "an energetic, savvy program that combines elements of crime thrillers, medical soaps, and propulsive character drama, employing all of those recognizable forms to illuminate the complexity of the knotty issues at its core."

In other words, the first season got the kind of reviews writers dream of. And Cameron and Armstrong concede the reviews were gratifying and gave them more momentum. "That *Variety* review really understood what it was we were working to get at," Armstrong says.

Penning a second season is an odd mix of confidence and challenge, Armstrong reports. "In the first season, we were dealing with a lot of unknowns. The real energy of the first season is that you still don't know what you have, and are showing parts of the character to the audience. With the second season, there are expectations about what made the show

successful. What worked for season one? What characters did we love from the first season? How can we push them into new territory, into new situations?"

Season two meant upping the ante, Cameron says. "What if Mary is asked to help a healthy man die? What if a very young person wants to die? What if a woman wants to die with her husband when he is dying of a terminal illness, but she is perfectly healthy? It's dilemmas like these that keep the show fresh and intriguing, and it's part of what made that initial script so inspiring, because I could see possibilities like this from the start."

Armstrong says that having a central character who is actually euthanizing people means audience identification is a strong point of consideration: "We spent a lot of time talking about whether or not people will go along with this character. Will people root for her? I think for me, the most engaging characters I see on TV are the ones I'm constantly wondering about. The ones who are enigmatic, the ones who are compelling precisely because I don't know everything about them. This is what I was aiming for with Mary."

Armstrong says season two was also easier because now they were writing the characters with actors in mind. "Caroline Dhavernas is phenomenal, as is our entire cast."

But for Cameron, the ongoing dark territory of *Mary Kills People* has been a crucial part of the fun. "It's also a wonderful tonal challenge. We have to strike a delicate balance between the deep emotion of the patient stories — the absurd humour that we explore with Des — the romance and the police work with Ben — the dark and violent nature of Mary's criminal antagonists — and Mary's familial relationship with her daughters and sister.

"We try to keep it real, honest, dark and light, emotional and funny... Like life and death, I suppose." ■

THRUST INTO THE PUBLIC

The impact of social media on writers

By Katherine Brodsky

Not too long ago, you'd be hard-pressed to find a TV fan who actually knew the names of any of the writers behind their favourite shows. But in this era of the rise of the showrunner and social media, things are rapidly changing. These days, writers are increasingly thrust into the spotlight and social media has become not merely a way to promote a show, but to influence and shape it as well.

Rachel Langer, a writer for SyFy/Netflix's *Ghost Wars*, jumped on the social media bandwagon in 2008, as a relatively early adopter. She likens her interactions via the various platforms as an "open source conversation." Initially, social media was a way for her to meet showrunners and other writers. It was a place to connect.

On the other hand, Sarah Glinski, a writer on *Degrassi*, would classify herself more as an observer of sorts than an active participant. "I really just love seeing what people write, I think it's such an interesting character study. To be aware of what's happening in the world and what different people are saying about different things. There's people from all different groups, cultures, and socioeconomics — just a lot of different opinions. That's truly how I use social media."

But why the influx of interest from fans towards writers, who, until now, have mostly stayed in the shadows? What's propelled them to Comic-Con stages and thousands of followers on platforms like Twitter? The answer may lie within the increased transparency of the process. "I remember when I grew up watching and living vicariously through all my favourite shows as a teenager, I didn't know there were showrunners, I didn't know how shows were made but everyone's just that much more aware right now," says Glinski, "They know that there's someone who is controlling the stories and they know that that person is called the showrunner and they want to hear from that person because those are the

people that control the destinies of their favourite characters. I just think that they want to get inside their heads."

There may have been a time when fans thought actors just made up the lines, but nowadays showrunners and screenwriters are truly being recognized in television in a way that's unprecedented. That also means that there's pressure on the writers and showrunners alike to be the voice of the show on social media, and to have a relationship with the fans.

So how much influence do fans really have on their favourite shows?

Peter Mitchell is the showrunner for *Murdoch Mysteries*, one of the longest running series in Canadian TV history. The show's Facebook page has over 130,000 members, who aren't afraid to share their detailed critiques of each episode. "So we have a general sense of what turns the fans on and what turns them off. We kind of monitor it more towards what we're going to do in the future," says Mitchell. But, he's quick to add, "Just because the fans didn't like it doesn't mean we're not going to do it again." Fan feedback can, however, occasionally have some influence on what historical events and characters *Murdoch Mysteries* explores, as well as the mystery-romance equilibrium.

Still, the fans have to follow the lead of the show, not the other way around, says Mitchell. "I think following the fans is a recipe for — you know, give them exactly what they want. Well nobody's ever surprised because as far as they are concerned they came up with it ... you kind of disappoint them a little. I engage in conversations, but I never ask people what they want."

Langer agrees that giving fans exactly what they want may be the worst idea for the show. "I mean, I'm sure that you would have gotten just so many fan requests for Scully and Mulder to get together after season one of the X-files, but the show wouldn't have worked if they had."



*Clockwise from top-left: Sarah Glinski;
Heather Conkie; Peter Mitchell;
Rachel Langer.*

Besides, more often than not, by the time the first episode airs, the season has already been written and shot.

“I think it allows you to sort of test whether you’ve achieved your goals,” says Glinski, “It’s an interesting tool.” When Glinski was working on *Degrassi* the series tackled a lot of difficult topics. “It was really exciting to see once the shows aired whether people who had struggled with any of those issues and were very close to them, how they felt about what we did or whether what we were trying to do with a story was successful.”

If the response wasn’t what was intended, it allowed the writers a chance to tweak a character or storyline a bit going into the next season. “But we’ve never been like, ‘fans don’t like a couple together therefore we’re gonna break that couple apart,’ that’s never how we reacted to social media. We would never let them tell us how to tell our stories. But I think we’re aware of when the stories we’re trying to tell didn’t work in quite the way that we wanted.”

Social media also allowed the issue-based show to listen to fans when they were talking about specific topics or were looking for certain kinds of characters to be represented. “We ask ourselves in the writers’ room why we haven’t talked about it yet? If you have the information you can’t turn it off, it’s there.”

For a long-running show like *Heartland*, according to EP and writer Heather Conkie, fan reaction can sometimes influence the importance put on a certain character. If the charisma of the character, or connection with another character really takes off, then the show may put more emphasis on it, whereas if there’s no interest, they may play it down going forward.

“I think the ways where the fans have a lot of power is letting us know which characters they really respond to,” agrees Langer, “It’s easier for them in American television, because a lot of the times the

shows are on the air while they’re still writing, so they actually can change the show based on fan reaction. But for us in Canada, our rooms are so short and our production schedule is so short that by the time it’s on the air, it’s kind of sealed. So then — we could do something for a second season.”

“Television isn’t necessarily meant to be responded to in real time,” she adds. “As a writer on the show sometimes you feel like you’re getting people’s knee-jerk responses to something when they don’t know the full picture.”

Netflix is also having an impact. When *Degrassi* was on TV, tens of thousands of people were watching and interacting at the same time. “Once we were on Netflix and it was airing 10 episodes at the same time, you never had that big mass fan reaction,” says Glinski, “People are watching it different ways at different speeds, we don’t have everyone tweeting at the same time. So you don’t have that same feeling online, you don’t have the same feedback mechanism and real community feeling.” But, she admits that it’s also “cool to see that six months or a year later, people are still discovering and tweeting about episodes when you thought people aren’t watching this anymore.”

It isn’t always easy for writers to ‘read the comments’ — social media brings a frenzy of unabashed feedback, both good and bad. But whether they love it or hate it, at least they are talking about it.

“Our job is making people feel things and they’re not always gonna be the feelings that you want to feel. So I think as long as they’re talking about it and debating decisions ... then we’ve done our job. We’re trying to start a conversation,” says Glinski.

“I always think it’s fun when people are really mad or really passionate or really excited,” says Langer, “If I made someone mad, then they’re passionate and engaged. If we made someone excited, then they’re

“I remember when I grew up watching and living vicariously through all my favourite shows as a teenager, I didn’t know there were showrunners, I didn’t know how shows were made but everyone’s just that much more aware right now”

“I think the ways where the fans
have a lot of power is letting us
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really respond to”

loving it and that’s really cool. So I just kind of like to see what the response is, but it’s quick, I don’t sit there and read them for hours at a time, just because you know, it’s a rabbit hole.”

For many writers, social media also represents a perfect tool for research, allowing unprecedented access into the minds and conversations of a diverse range of people around the world — without even having to leave home. “You can go on Tumblr and you can read first-hand accounts of what people are going through, or you can go on Twitter you can find a group of teenagers that are talking about something that you’re interested in, and see how they’re talking about it and what language they’re using,” says Glinski.

When it comes to expectation for writers to be active on social, there’s increasingly a pressure to participate. “We certainly get requests to go on social and live tweet our shows and host promos,” says Langer, “And I get it, I mean it’s free advertising and it’s more interesting for the viewers if the creators and anybody who works for the creators are engaged.” But it’s also free work, so while Langer will often support a show she loves, she tries to do it on her own terms.

As she gains more attention on social, she has also learned that just because someone tweets her, doesn’t mean she is obligated to share anything with anybody she’s not comfortable with, and that it’s not always realistic to talk to every single person that reaches out. “That one was tricky because it was so weird and narcissistic but, you know, you just need to protect yourself a little bit. A lot of people really want something from you and it’s just not feasible to give it to them.”

As social media grows, it increasingly becomes an extension of the shows — and the characters themselves. *Heartland*, which has the largest digital social media footprint across all CBC’s shows, is also active in the realm of transmedia, expanding on the character of Georgie by giving her an Instagram page, Georgie Rants, which she runs in character. *Murdoch Mysteries* has also been successful in creating

webisodes with beloved characters that take place in a parallel universe, as well interactive mysteries.

Social media allows creators to take a show beyond the small screen, and keep audiences engaged through content and interactions, keeping them interested and active even when a show is not on the air.

“I think, to a lot of people, our show’s characters are real,” says Conkie, “I mean I know that sounds bizarre, but they’ve known them now for so long. When the show started the main character, Amy was 15 turning 16 and now she’s married with a baby. So people feel like they’ve lived their lives over the last 11 years. So they’re very involved with whatever any of the characters do.”

Langer believes that social media will stay polarized forever among writers. “We’re such a weird breed where we like being in a group and talking to other writers and sharing our ideas, but sometimes we’re very weird about being in public — some writers just hate social and I get that. I’m not that way but I just don’t think we’ll ever get everybody on the same page.”

No one sees social going away anytime soon though. “You know, I think sometimes people are engaged it for ego stroking,” jokes Mitchell, “and every writer likes his ego stroked, so I don’t think it’s going to disappear.

When Conkie was first adjusting to the influx of social media response for *Heartland*, it wasn’t easy. “There could be ninety nine really positive wonderful things said about the show and one negative thing is the one that stays in your mind.” But she grew up with it over the past few years and grew to find the interactions eye opening and useful.

“I can’t even imagine what we did without it, in a weird way now. And I think because of it, the showrunners and the writers are more visible and they’re more recognized. It’s not just about the actors. The people realize that there’s a whole team behind these shows that they need to hear from. And I think that’s really healthy. I think it’s terrific. And it’s also so incredible to have so many crazy fans who take the time to write and express themselves.” ■

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

When an iconic vampire hunter meets a creative funding model

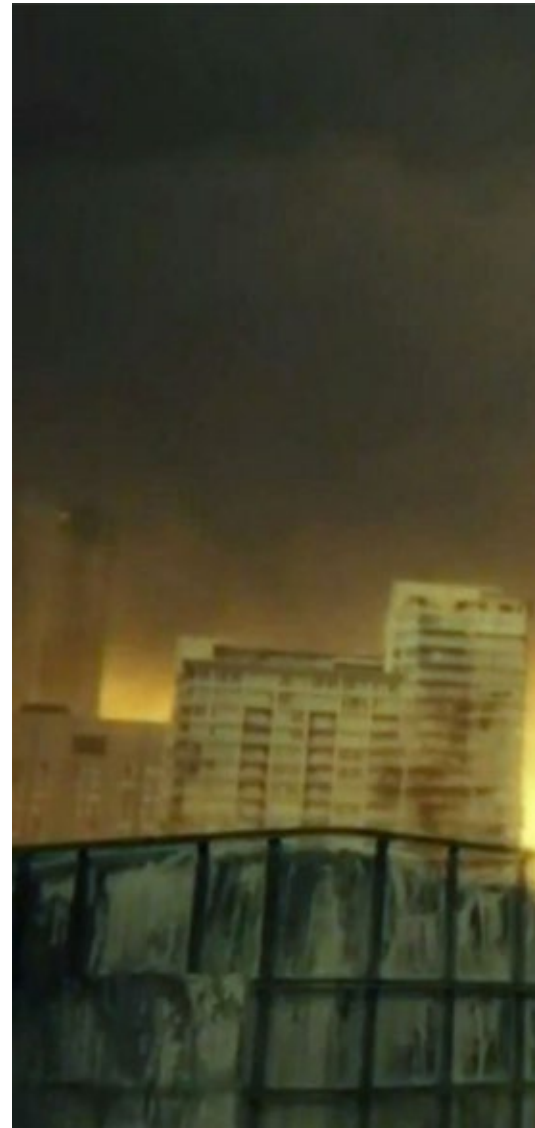
By Diane Wild

Neil LaBute may not seem like the obvious choice to helm the Canadian writing room of a vampire television show. But the American playwright and filmmaker, known for *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, is no stranger to writing about the dark side of humanity. And how much darker can you get than *Van Helsing*'s life and death struggles between vampires and mortals?

"When I was a kid I used to watch *Dark Shadows* with my mom, so a vampire show was one of the first memories I have of watching TV," says LaBute, acknowledging that he is nonetheless not a particular fan of fantasy and science fiction. He has, however, always been drawn to Dracula and at one point adapted that story for the stage.

He was brought to *Van Helsing* — his first experience writing traditional episodic television — by Nomadic Pictures producers Chad Oakes and Michael Frislev. LaBute had directed a handful of episodes of their Calgary-based show *Hell on Wheels* when they proposed he take on showrunning duties for a property they were developing, loosely based on a graphic novel where the iconic Van Helsing character was a female vampire hunter who could turn vampires back into humans.

"I love the human dynamics — these people who are in their own little soap opera but they're facing life and death at any moment," LaBute says of the show now entering its third season. "I love to write the scenes between the big fights with vampires





when everyone's just trying to survive, and falling in love, and misunderstanding each other."

"Early on, one of the mandates in the room was that vampires are only part of the problem. The people you really worry about, are the people next to you, and behind you, who are more recognizably human," he said. "We want to make the humans as messed up as possible."

"I like the mix of horror and sci-fi but at its heart it's really about what does it mean to be human," said *Van Helsing* writer Jackie May. "We also get to investigate what does it mean to be a human who has done horrible things and now has to deal with that. All of that is meaty and interesting. And then you get to kill some monsters."

Not only was writing traditional episodic television and showrunning new to LaBute, he'd never written with others before, so a writing room was a novel experience. "Some days you do feel like, gosh, after all the talking we've done today I could have written the script faster," he says. "But in fact you gain different things — new perspectives and a take you might never yourself have come up with."

Having worked with what she calls "auteur showrunners" such as Laurie Finstad-Knizhnik (*Strange Empire*) and Bruce Smith (*19-2*), among others, May is used to non-traditional writing rooms and those new to television. "Being different is what I do. It's fresh every time. One of the things I can bring to a room is that there's no one way to make

“I love to write the scenes between the big fights with vampires when everyone’s just trying to survive, and falling in love, and misunderstanding each other.”

television. There are many, many ways to bring a show to camera from the writers’ room.”

“Neil couldn’t be easier to work with. He’s very open to everybody else’s ideas and very open to consensus. We don’t just pretend to value each other’s opinions, we actually value each other’s opinions.”

Continuum’s Simon Barry was brought on board for the first season to help develop the writing room and scripts, until the producers offered him his own show in *Ghost Wars*. “Essentially my job was to make myself redundant,” said Barry. “I felt like Neil was more than capable when we were halfway through the season of *Van Helsing*. By that point he had figured out everything he needed to figure out about the management of a TV series.”

Besides sharing Barry’s writing talents and a production company, *Ghost Wars* and *Van Helsing* share an unusual funding model. Both air on Syfy in the United States and Netflix in Canada (and internationally), meaning that while their writing rooms, producers, directors and filming locations are Canadian, they have no Canadian broadcaster — and therefore no Canadian Media Fund funding. That’s true of the upcoming *The Bletchley Circle: San Francisco* as well.

Rarer than a vampire who craves sunlight, that model may become more common as the number of traditional broadcasters to pitch to in Canada shrinks and the streaming service options grow.

The main difference, said Barry, is “it’s one less layer of notes.”

May concurs. “We get notes from Syfy, but they would fit on a page and they’d be very specific things about what’s worked for their audience in the past — not the kind of in-depth notes that are common in Canada.”

Another difference is that the Canadian writers often can’t see the show as it first airs, because in the case of *Van Helsing* and *Ghost Wars*, Syfy has the first window. Barry believes there will be more and more Canadian shows that have their first run on streaming services or outside of Canada. “There are more Canadian shows than there are Canadian broadcasters willing to make them,” he said. “Naturally that means other companies are going to make them.”

For *Ghost Wars*, the producers tried to get a Canadian broadcaster but Netflix snapped up the Canadian rights before any expressed interest.

He points out that unless writers take on the role of producer — as he has done with his company Reality Distortion Field — they have no control over how their show is funded. “We’re not looking for one fix for all, we’re taking each show as an individual business model and seeing what best serves the show. I don’t think there’s one cure-all for Canadian television. There’s too much diversity and too much competition. You have to take each show almost like a pop-up business.”

“The more of my fellow Writers Guild members invest in their own education in terms of how television is financed, the less restrictive the situation will be. I think one of the problems right now for Canadian writers is there’s less and less money in the Canadian system and more and more in the international system. But we’ve been conditioned to only know how to do things within the Canadian model, which is not necessarily going to support all those creative minds. Learning how to double down on other ways of getting television financed is now an essential survival skill.”

Because Barry and his production company focus on genre, he feels that non-traditional funding

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that happens by default.”

and streaming services as broadcasters open up the marketplace. “In Canada it’s very hard to sustain genre if the Canadian broadcaster is bearing too much of the load,” he says, pointing to genre’s often-smaller audiences. “Being already on the fringe creatively in the Canadian marketplace, I feel like I’m liberated from depending on them. We don’t have to lean in creatively to what I think the Canadian marketplace wants.”

Though *Ghost Wars* and *Van Helsing* don’t have a Canadian broadcaster, he says “a Canadian sensibility seeps in because of who we are as people. We aren’t making an attempt to articulate it or highlight it, but it’s something that happens by default.”

Jackie May concurs. “I don’t think we can avoid that. I was on another show where I was actively trying to write like an American and then when it was reviewed in the New York Times it was, ‘wow isn’t this a cool Canadian socialist look at the teen night-time drama.’”

“More and more in Canada we’re able to write television shows that don’t have to be about being Canadian. It’s not the only way to achieve a Canadian sensibility, to write about a specifically Canadian subject. Our point of view goes beyond that. So yes, we can write a vampire show and we have no choice but for it to be a Canadian point of view.”

That point of view travels the world with Netflix bringing the shows to an international audience. “It’s fun seeing tweets in different languages from all around the world,” says May. “Comedy might not travel but apparently vampires do.”

“The international marketplace is very, very friendly to genre and that’s why it’s so successful as a model,” says Barry. “It’s not as star dependent as other shows so you can promote the concept more than you have to promote the face of the show, and that’s really handy.”

LaBute is the lone American in his writing room but he doesn’t feel a cultural divide — other than when he hears a lot of Bryan Adams, Rush, and The Guess Who on the radio, or when “a thousand hockey jerseys are walking toward me.”

“I just see very eager writers. There’s a lot of work in Vancouver but the shows that film here often have their rooms in Los Angeles. Having people in the room who are local brings an energy and excitement that they can do what they love to do at home. It’s been a very positive room.”

He has kept most of the season one team intact into season three. “It’s all about personality for me, being with people you feel like you can get along with and work. I like to put all the conflict on the page.”

“Overall I use the same approach as I do in directing — make people feel like they’re wanted, encourage collaboration and I think you get their best work. It’s also great to be surrounded by people who love the genre.”

LaBute’s writing career reflects his desire to span platforms, styles, and genres. There is one aspect of writing *Van Helsing* that he finds constraining: the teaser plus six act structure to hit an exact 42 minutes and 30 seconds.

“Not that I begrudge helping sell Toyotas, but it’s often at the cost of someone’s wonderful performance or a great storyline,” he says. “For the good of the cause you have to make some choices that you wish you didn’t have to do.”

Still, he knew that was the game when he got into it, and “I’ve gotten really good at timing scenes in my head. Soon the 42 minutes and 30 seconds will come so naturally that it’ll make for a very awkward feature at some point.” ■

FAKE NEWS, CANADIAN-STYLE

By Mark Dillon

Showrunners Jeff Detsky and Luke Gordon Field made season two of *The Beaverton* a more timely assault on the day's headlines



From top center: Luke Gordon Field, Micheal Chong (E&O researcher) at the head of the table, Kurt Smeaton (writer & supervising producer) and Cathryn Naiker (story coordinator).

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEAVERTON AND STEVE WILKIE

The idea that website *The Beaverton* could be adapted for TV was a no-brainer to Jeff Detsky.

The screenwriter — whose previous credits included comedies *Call Me Fitz* and *Seed* — was a fan of American satirical news shows *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and after reading *The Beaverton's* humorous (I know two people who don't think it's all that funny!) fake-news posts on Facebook, he knew there were the makings of a like-minded Canadian series.

"It had a very specific voice and a built-in audience," says Detsky, sitting beside *The Beaverton* co-founder Luke Gordon Field at Bell Media's Agincourt complex, where the show has production offices and shoots before a live studio audience. Together they are showrunners on the series, which in February wrapped production on its second 13-episode season for prodco Pier 21 Films and The Comedy Network.

"By early 2014, Beaverton articles were being shared by more than just my comedy nerd friends," Detsky continues. "Many had gone viral, and that's when I asked, 'Why is nobody taking advantage of this voice and why isn't it a television show?'"

He found Field's email address buried on *The Beaverton's* website and sent him a note out of the blue. "I tried to convince him I was this TV big shot who would be able to make all their dreams come true and they were naïve enough to believe me," he recalls. He contributed pieces to the website while also developing the property into a TV format with Field and *Beaverton* senior editors Jacob Duarte Spiel and Alexander Saxton.

The latter was no small task, given the website was text-based and had never shot any video. Inspired by Chicago-based digital publisher *The Onion*, it was launched in 2011 by the late Laurent Noonan, who had written for the University of Toronto's satirical newspaper *Toi ke Oike*. He was soon joined by Field, a Queen's University history major and stand-up comedian, and Field's schoolmate Alex Huntley, and then by Spiel and Saxton.

"It started from us being friends and wanting to make each other laugh and creating this thing with no money," Field recalls. "It was basically a WordPress site with no functionality whatsoever because we didn't know how to do anything except write jokes — or at least we thought we did. Every day we would write so much and we got funnier and developed a very small audience. Then, around 2013, our articles started to go viral and it began to snowball."

Field, who has kept his role as editor-in-chief at thebeaverton.com, says that just prior to the TV show's launch, the website was attracting about 500,000 hits per month, which has by now doubled.

The development process seemed longer to the TV newbies than to the veteran Detsky. "We put our heads together to see what kind of stories we wanted to tell, what would be the avenue for telling those stories and what twist on satirical news we could bring to the equation," Detsky says.

Key to all that was getting comedians Emma Hunter and Miguel Rivas involved. The show centres around the pair at the anchor desk riffing on headline stories — things like "Oscars extend speech length so male winners have time to apologize for all their actions." They throw to a band of intrepid field reporters — Laura Cilevitz, Dave Barclay, Aisha Alfa, Donavon Stinson and Marilla Wex — whose segments sometimes feature recognizable performers such as *Traders'* Rick Roberts and *Corner Gas'* Tara Spencer-Nairn.

In a couple of recent segments, Barclay lampoons Toronto's sharing economy and high cost of living by driving for Uber while simultaneously working on freelance Ikea furniture assembly, while Cilevitz attends a fair where universities persuade Canadian youth *not* to enroll, to free up space for higher-paying foreign students. All field clips were shot in Hamilton over 13 days in the fall, taking advantage of production tax-credit bonuses and more ample location space.

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The show's concept took flight after the property was optioned by Toronto's Pier 21, run by veteran producer Laszlo Barna and Melissa Williamson. The timing couldn't have been better, as Canadian networks were itching for just such a show. Bell Media in particular was kicking itself for not having a homegrown outlet to skewer Rob Ford, while stateside programs *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* reaped big laughs off the Toronto mayor.

The broadcaster made a strong play for the show and funded a pilot that shot in 2015. A year later it announced a series pickup on The Comedy Network and the series went to air that November. From the beginning, the production has liaised on a day-to-day basis with Bell Media's Sarah Fowlie, director, comedy original programming, and production executive Bill Lundy, while Corrie Coe, senior vice president, original programming, also provides notes.

"Three of us were TV outsiders, coming in trying to reinvent the wheel," Field explains. "We had a lot of

high concepts, like 'this character will be a parody of that,' but Bell Media quite rightly said, 'Keep it simple.' They wisely thought the website is at its best when it's doing a cutting take on current events. Obviously you can't do 22 minutes of reading a website article on TV. It needs to be bigger and more engaging, but we agreed that's home base and let's build from that."

For season two, the production has had to adapt to a new world — one in which the American president makes news with every Tweet. All of the first season's anchor-desk material was shot before the series went to air, which left the creative team in a bind ahead of the U.S. election, and so they hedged their bets and shot for two different scenarios: one with Hillary Clinton winning and the other with Donald Trump the victor. They expected Clinton would win and believe they had a better show ready for that outcome.

Shooting everything in advance, Field says, "leaves you vulnerable to big changes happening. We covered Trump being elected in our first episode but really never again [in season one]. It drove home the



Luke Gordon Field, Miguel Rivas and Dave Barclay on set in Hamilton.

“Every day we would write so much and we got funnier and developed a very small audience. Then, around 2013, our articles started to go viral and it began to snowball.”

obvious reality that for a current-events show, shooting as close to airdate as possible is vital.”

So, for season two the turnaround time was whittled down to shooting with Rivas and Hunter on Monday nights for airing that Wednesday. But even in that smaller window the writers still need to protect themselves. A recent example was Trump’s State of the Union Address, which occurred on a Tuesday sandwiched between shooting and air dates.

“We shot two versions: one if Trump’s address sticks to the script, and the other if it goes off the rails,” Detsky explains. “The nature of the show is that we make up the news, so that helps us a little, but we have to figure out how to react to something like that.”

While the U.S. head of state certainly has provided plenty of fodder, the showrunners want to keep the series as Canadian as the nickel rodent from which it derives its name. “Our show sings best when we’re going after Canadian and broader social issues,” Detsky says, adding that’s what sets it apart from American counterparts such as *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

And of course, Canada has a Prime Minister to mock. Rivas recently read an item proclaiming “Trudeau still polling well with his core demo: non-Canadians.” But how does our illustrious leader stack up on the laughs scale?

“He’s one fifth of a Trump at best,” Field says. “But there are things about Justin Trudeau to make fun of — from the political to the personal and his quest for fame, shall we say. There’s a lot there. It’s just that he happens to be in power at a time when a birthday clown is running the United States of America.”

History buff Field says his all-time favorite bit on the show is one written by Detsky that takes a poke at the role *Heritage Minutes* have played in Canadians’ collective history education. But there is little history

alluded to in the series, which strives to be topical. So Field and Huntley — who joined the TV writing team for season two after passing on season one — found another outlet in the book *The Beaverton Presents Glorious and/or Free: The True History of Canada*.

Published last year by Penguin, the book consists of a series of fictitious newspaper clippings that take an alternate account of our nation’s past. It’s rich with barbed details such as a 15th-century Iroquois lacrosse game played between teams called “the Cayuga Pale Faces” and “Seneca Honkies.” Four other writers contributed to the work.

“Writing a funny history book was something Alex and I had talked about before *The Beaverton* existed, being in history classes together and being huge fans of historical comedy like *Blackadder* and *Monty Python*,” Field says.

He and Detsky get plenty of input from other scribes on the series as well. For season two, the writers’ room averaged 10 participants, some on long-term contracts and some who came in for two- to four-week stints.

“There are so many amazing writers who have worked with us on the website, and comedians and writers we’ve wanted to work with for years, so this allows us to have a wonderfully diverse room with a constantly changing energy that makes the show sharper from week to week,” Field says.

While there is no confirmation yet on a third season, the pair is hopeful the team will return to ridicule the next cycle of newsmakers. Detsky says he loves coming to work and walking into that small writers’ room crammed with “very smart people who are very informed on current affairs and politics. Sometimes it can develop into fireside chats about interesting subjects, but for the most part everybody comes in every day with pitches and we spend all day laughing.” ■

Unfair Engagers

The Guild has declared the following engagers “unfair” for failing to abide by grievance procedures or the decision of a joint standing committee. The WGC’s working rules prohibit members from working with unfair engagers.

All I Want Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Battered Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Christmas Town Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

FOTP Productions Inc.

Principal: Richard Rapkowski

**Guardian Films Inc./
En Garge Films Inc.**

Principal: Kirk Shaw

H & S Films

Principal: Nicolas Stiliadis

Hiding Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

High Seas Rescue Productions Inc.

Principal: F. Whitman Trecartin

Ice Planet (1) Canada Ltd.

Principal: Philip Jackson

Justice Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Kangaroo Court Productions Ltd.

Principal: Robin Payne

Les Productions les Plus Belles Routes du Monde Inc.

*Principal: Andre Belanger
(not affiliated with Spectra Animation Inc.)*

Lester Beach Entertainment

Principal: Jeff Lester

Mikisew Keemiwan Productions, Ltd.

Principal: Norman Champagne

Nikolai Productions

Principal: Cindy Lamb

Norfolk International Ltd.

Principal: William Macadam

Numb Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Perfect Stranger Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Prospero Entertainment Group Inc.

Principal: John Lambert

Richard Lowry Productions Inc.

Principal: Richard Lowry

She Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Spiritual Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

System Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

T Man Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Zolar Productions Inc.

Principal: Kirk Shaw

Please Help Us Find These Writers!

The CSCS is holding foreign secondary authors' levies for writers

The Canadian Screenwriters Collection Society (CSCS) is holding foreign secondary authors' levies for a number of writers and uncredited productions. As CSCS does not have a current address for these writers or the productions do not have complete credit information we have not been able to forward any monies to the entitled writers. The complete list of writers and productions is available on the CSCS website at:

www.wgc.ca/cscs/hot_news/index.html

If you have any information that would allow us to contact any of these writers or their agents, or if you are a credited writer on the listed production, please contact:

Marisa King at m.king@wgc.ca

or call (416) 979.7907 ext. 5231 or

1.800.567.9974 ext. 5231.

Please note that CSCS may require writers to furnish contracts in support of their claim. According to CSCS regulations, if a writer does not claim his or her monies within two years of being posted on our website these monies revert to the operating expenses of CSCS.



Matt Venables and Jeremy Smith

Pair worked their way up from directors to screenwriters

By Greg David

Matt Venables and Jeremy Smith as a team, are unusual in Canadian television. Though it's common to have writing teams in the United States, it's a rarity here. The duo wouldn't have it any other way. Friends since meeting at the now-defunct Victoria Motion Picture School, Venables and Smith teamed up for the first time as writers in the room on *Continuum*, followed by *Van Helsing* — they're both on season three of the vampire drama — and the reboot of *ReBoot: The Guardian Code*.

Jeremy, how did the two of you meet?

JS: When I went to film school and walked into class, I was kind of surprised by how small it was. There were a lot of older people there who were looking for a new career path or hobby. I saw these two guys who were more like me so I gravitated to them. We started hanging out and making silly videos. We quickly learned we were the only ones that took the course seriously. This was a career path for us.

You didn't start out as screenwriters. You were directors of music videos first.

MV: It was during the creative process of making the music videos

when we realized the writing was the most fun part.

Matt, do you find that, in your writing partnership, you complement each other? Are you better at some things than Jeremy is?

MV: We definitely complement each other. We joke that I build the foundation and he builds the house. The thing with us is there is no ego. It's always about the best idea. When we go through a script together, the best line wins.

JS: We hate unnatural dialogue and will call each other out on it, which is great. It's both of our pet peeves. It might be a snappy line, but nobody talks like it. There is a way to do it and make it sound like a real person said it. That's just one example of how our partnership works.

Jeremy, you usually write the front half of the script and Matt writes the back half. Have you ever switched it up?

JS: Actually, because of production on season two of *Van Helsing* we're each writing a script each and then doing a pass each. So, I'm laying the foundation on the back half of an episode, for the first time in while, and Matt was joking, 'I haven't had

to do the set-up on a script in quite some time!' It's weird.

What did you learn about writing from Simon Barry when you worked on Continuum?

JS: There is no bullshit. He taught us the whole concept of best idea wins, whether it comes from the writing assistant or the showrunner, he doesn't care. Everyone has a voice.

Matt, are genre series particularly fun to write for because you're creating a world and the rules within it?

MV: I think they're freeing because you get to create these whole new worlds and universes and show more creativity than [other programs], where you might just have your drama of the week. We get to create a whole universe and then create the drama within that universe.

JS: It's a far more vast sandbox to play in than a police procedural where you're stuck with the rules of engagement. If we're known as 'the genre guys'? Cool.

The first two seasons of *Van Helsing* can be seen on Netflix. *ReBoot: The Guardian Code* is scheduled to air on YTV in 2018. ■

Money for Missing Writers

The Writers Guild of Canada is holding monies for the writers listed below. The WGC has been unable to locate the writers and forward the money to them. If you have any information that would help us reach these writers (or their agents or estates), please contact the staff member indicated below. These writers would thank you.

IPA - contact Aaron Unrau at a.unrau@wgc.ca
1-800-567-9975 ext. 5270

NFB - contact Aaron Unrau at a.unrau@wgc.ca
1-800-567-9975 ext. 5270

Dawn Cumberbatch — *Top Cops*
Elana Devine — *Student Bodies*
Warren Easton — *Odyssey II*
Joe Flanigan — *Stargate*
Gerald Fourier — *Littlest Hobo*
John Hollard — *Littlest Hobo*

Laszlo Gefin — *Revolution's Orphans*
János Szanyi — *Revolution's Orphans*
Gilles Toupin — *Cycling: Still the Greatest*
Peter Vogler — *Ernie's Idea*

MEMBERSHIP

Welcome (Oct. 3, 2017 – Feb. 12, 2018)

Shanna Albert Cobourg ON
Sarah Alderson Ojai CA
Valerie Jean Alexander Los Angeles CA
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Douglas Bell Toronto ON
Ned Benson Los Angeles CA
Andrew Berzins Dartmouth NS
Hans Boggild Halifax NS
Wendy Brathwaite Toronto ON
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Frank Spotnitz Paris France
T. A. Stafford West Vancouver BC
Diana Stenberg Vancouver BC
Maciek Szczerbowski Montreal QC
Shawn Tolleson Vancouver BC
Jeffrey Wachsmuth Peterborough ON
Allison Whalen Chelsea QC
Jake Yanowski Toronto ON
Oz Yilmaz Vancouver BC

Our condolences

Alison Gordon Toronto ON

William Weintraub Westmount QC



Sonja Bennett

A tough act to follow

By Cameron Archer

A 2012 graduate of the Telefilm Canada Feature Comedy Exchange, writer-actor Sonja Bennett (*Mistresses*, *Godiva's*, *Cold Squad*) made her feature writing debut with 2014's *Preggoland*. In 2016, she created webseries *Sunnyhearts Community Centre* for Telus Optik. Bennett was story editor/writer for the first season of CBC comedy *Kim's Convenience* (Thunderbird Films/Soulpepper Theatre Company). Bennett acted, wrote and was a consulting producer for Simon Barry series *Ghost Wars* (Nomadic Pictures), which recently ended its first season on Syfy and streams in Canada on Netflix. Bennett is currently writing a few episodes of CraveTV comedy *Letterkenny* (New Metric Media/DHX Media/Playfun Games/Bell Media).

How difficult was the transition from acting to screenwriting? *Christmas is for Cats* is listed on your website as your first screenplay, yet it was the second (*Preggoland*) that premiered at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival.

When I started writing, I did it for fun. I wrote two screenplays before *Preggoland*. The first I chalked up to practice. The second, *Christmas is for Cats*, got me an agent. By then I had children and so had very little

free time. If I was going to write another screenplay I needed to be strategic about writing a producible and commercial script that would work for me on more than one front.

With efficiency in mind, I trotted out an outline to producers to find out if the concept generated any excitement. A company was immediately interested but wanted a produced writer. I had to dig my heels in and say, wait a minute, everyone has to get their first credit sometime! *Preggoland* being selected for the Telefilm Canada Feature Comedy Exchange, gave me credibility as a writer and was a huge leg-up for the project.

How does writing for digital media, as you did for *Sunnyhearts Community Centre*, differ from writing for television? How do the overall needs of digital media affect the screenplay's structure?

The sweet spot for a webisode is between three and four minutes, and you need to grab the audience's attention in the first fifteen seconds or they'll bail. I found the process of writing stories with character development and a satisfying journey in the three-minute range extremely humbling. This level of compression requires a huge amount of discipline and

specificity. The fact that viewers could watch *Sunnyhearts Community Centre* on their phones forced me to write in attention-grabbing visuals and movement that would pop on a tiny screen.

As a writer and story editor for *Kim's Convenience*, how do you make sure the show retains the tone of *Ins Choi's* play?

I think the show retained the heart and spirit of *Ins'* play but found its own tone. Reading the play I found the first act comedic and the second act more dramatic. At the beginning of the writers' room, we spent a lot of time clarifying what the tone of the television version was.

In the play, Jung stole from the store and then disappeared after a violent family fight, vanishing into a world of drugs. One of our first tasks was figuring out how this dark backstory would fit into a comedic television show. Jung is also estranged. Telling a story about a family in which the two main characters don't speak was an interesting challenge. Once decisions were solidified about the style of comedy we were aiming for, adjustments were made to keep the show in the right zone. Finding that pocket took some time but once it was nailed down, pitching and writing for the show was much simpler. ■

News from WGC Members

Kristal Clear will screen at HollyWeb Festival in L.A. in April. Created/written by **Amanda Fahey** (CBC's *Anne*, *Frankie Drake Mysteries*) and starring Melanie Leishman, the comedy webseries explores the challenges women face behind the fantasy of social media.

Ross McKie and **Debra Felstead** have returned to Toronto after a few months in L.A. working on a variety of projects, including one with Man of Action Entertainment. Work on the recently completed pilot for their comedic webseries, *Fully Dilated*, continues.

Carly Heffernan has wrapped production on season two of *Second Jen* for OMNI as head writer and showrunner. She wrote this season with co-creator and star **Amanda Joy**, while co-creator and star **Samantha Wan** story edited.

Gillian Muller headed to South by Southwest film festival this year with Rebekah Miskin to represent the webseries, *Night Owl*, for the festival's inaugural "independent episodics" programme.

In February **Robert J. Sawyer** was inducted into the Order of Ontario, the highest honour in that province, by Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the Lieutenant Governor. Rob is the first person ever to be named to the Order for science-fiction writing.

Tom K. Mason has written the pilot script for a series pulled from comedian Phil Hartman's files, while continuing to develop his own series for DHX.

Josh Sager & Jerome Simpson are partnering with Squeeze Studio Animation to develop the new comedy series *Wacky Island*. Other shows in the works for Josh & Jerome include *Kooky Peninsula*, *Zany Isthmus*, and *Preposterous Archipelago*.

Will Pascoe is currently adapting a Dean Koontz novel for a U.S. cable network and developing the international co-production series *Beneath* for the producers of Netflix's *Babylon Berlin*.

Judith Murray was invited by Southern Women in Film & Television to present the documentary *Do You Know Me Now?*, a film on effective Alzheimer's care giving, at SWIFT's Summit 2018 in Nashville, Tennessee. Judith wrote, directed, and co-produced the film.

Michael MacLennan has returned to his hometown of Vancouver, where he's working as executive producer and showrunner on *The Bletchley Circle: San Francisco*.

Sean O'Byrne just finished writing the refugee/ISIS film *I Am You*. Sean is currently attached to write *Red Carpet Burns* and *Dancing with Demons*, both of which are based on Australian best sellers.

Edward Kay is shopping his pilot script for *Get Happy*, a drama series set in an addiction recovery hospital. He is also writing the sequel to his crime novel *At Rope's End*, which is in development with Seven 24 Films.

Cat Girczyc is pleased to have some newly published sci-fi works available: *Card + Ancient tech* (Tesseract 20: Compostela), *Night Market* (The Vancouver Sci-Fi Anthology), and *The Cup* (Polar Borealis).


Vancouver-based writer **Pat Holden**'s project *The Beekeeper's Daughter* is through to the polish and packaging stage of the Harold Greenberg Development Fund. It's hoped the project will go into production in 2018. Stephen Hegyes of Reality Distortion Field is producing.

Donald Martin has been commissioned to rewrite the TV movie *The Christmas Town*, based on the bestselling book by Donna VanLiere, for Hallmark's Movies & Mysteries. It will shoot in British Columbia and is scheduled to air in December.

Jacob Potashnik's story collection, *The Golem of Hampstead and Other Stories*, was short-listed for the QWF/Concordia University First Book Prize and is available on Amazon and as an audio book. His current feature project is *The Audit*, a social comedy set in a tax inspector's office.

Lisa Rose Snow's short documentary *Meet Maurice Crosby* screened at the Kingston Canadian Film Festival.

Sugith Varughese is among the first members to be contracted under the new second draft feature film rate in the Independent Production Agreement for



Something Delicious, about a young woman from Lahore, Pakistan who comes to Canada to train as a chef.

Craig Brown is nominated for a Canadian Screen Award for *3 Amigonauts*. The second season of his award-winning series *But I'm Chris Jericho!* is now streaming on CBC Comedy.

Carolyn Saunders' debut feature, *The Wasting*, opened in March at Toronto's Carlton Cinema. Writer/director Carolyn shot in England with a Canadian/

British cast led by Alexz Johnson and Lauren McQueen. APL Film is handling sales; Canadian distribution is by Indiecan Entertainment.

Bedtime Story, a short film comedy written by Vancouver-based **Adrian Cunningham**, is doing the festival rounds in the U.S. in 2018. So far it's garnered Best of the Festival award at the Hollywood Short Film Festival and Grand Jury award for best short at the Mammoth Lake Film Festival.

Robin Hays was selected as a finalist for her script, *Post No Bills*, in the American Zoetrope screenplay contest.

Screenwriter **Madeline Thompson** joins producers Rob Heydon, Carlo Liconti and L.A.-based Boris Damast in presenting the limited series *I Siciliani*, based on Lou Quattro's novel. It tells of the battles of the Cosa Nostra to preserve their men-of-honour origins from crime-infested encroachment, maintaining the theme of 'man's lust for power' into season two's contemporary Machiavellian politics. ■



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Writers Guild of Canada

Moving Goalposts

By Jason Filiatrault

There was a time, when I was a young and hopeful screenwriter — in other words, when I was a fool — that I thought success meant getting a screen credit.

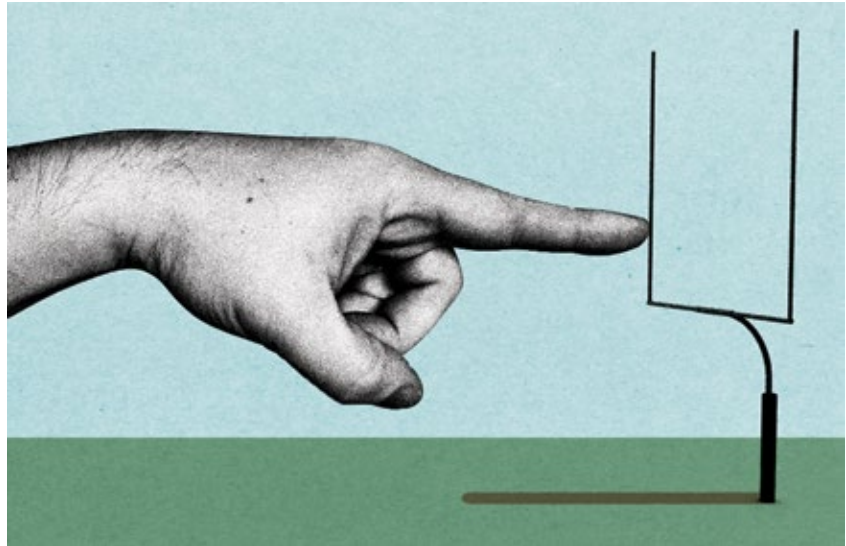
Like I said, I was a fool.

And as the years passed and I slowly (very slowly, because I was in Calgary) crawled toward that credit, I remember anticipating the feeling it would bring. As if I would be standing on a mountain looking down at the years of my struggle stretching back to the horizon. Which is as far from reality as that last sentence was to a decent metaphor.

The truth was something very different, for which I was unprepared. Because, what I realized and have come to appreciate, is that there is no success in screenwriting. There's no raising your arms like Rocky Balboa, no Star Wars medal ceremony, no... whatever happened to Harry Potter at the end of his movie — probably an owl high-fives him, I can't remember. Point is, there are no touchdowns in our industry, there's only the exhausting view of a goalpost moving farther downfield.

Did you get optioned? No one cares, go get development financing. Did you get some money to write a draft? Doesn't matter, you need a broadcast license. Did you cast a lead actor? Fine, but are they a star? Oh, they were in a movie at Sundance? Tough shit, come back when you actually get to production. Is your series going to camera? Who cares, what's the budget? Your animated show got a pick-up? Fart sound, how many episodes? Did you say you write features? That's adorable, here's a cookie.

But wait! Did you actually get something on camera and then



actually edit it and it didn't burst into flames? Big deal, get a theatrical release and we'll talk. Except we won't talk, because even if you find a distributor and by some miracle they actually tell people about your film, and even if people see it, which they won't because it's only playing one day on one screen on the edge of town in a multiplex that usually only plays kids movies and yours is about an elderly couple addicted to heroin or something... even if all that happens, you still have to do it all over again forever. And if you don't, you're a failure.

Notice we haven't even come near to approaching the question of whether or not the script you wrote was any good, which it probably wasn't. I just mean statistically speaking, I don't mean you specifically — whoever you are, I don't know. Kelly maybe? Hi, Kelly. What I mean is that simply making film and TV is hard enough, forget about making it into anything other people might actually want to watch. Again, not you, Kelly — you're great.

The point, this rather long and meandering point, is that I wish someone had told me early on that there is no "victory" in screenwriting. There is no finish line to cross and nothing you ever do will be as good as the next thing or good enough to satisfy that need in you to reach beyond.

And the sick thing is. I like it that way. It feels right. It's how I know I'm doing a job and not just goofing around having fun like a dummy.

So sure, it's annoying and I hate that making one movie doesn't feel like a victory because some part of me knows that making the second is the real victory, but it won't be either... and so on and so forth. So maybe let's all stop measuring our success in the steps we take along the path to nowhere. Let's appreciate the writing for the writing and love the people we meet and the experiences we share. And let's give up on treating each script like it's our only hope. There will be many losses and many wins and you'll never get to enjoy a single damn one of them.

I'm sorry. You're welcome. ■

March

5 - 11 — Canadian Screen Week academy.ca

20 — WGC Presents Writers Talking TV wgc.ca

April

19 — National Canadian Film Day canadianfilmday.ca

19 - 21 — Vancouver Web Fest vancouverwebfest.com

30 — WGC Screenwriting Awards wgc.ca

26 - May 6 — Hot Docs hotdocs.ca

May

24-June 3 — Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival insideout.ca

June

10 - 13 — Banff World Media Festival banffmediafestival.com

23 - 24 — Toronto Screenwriting Conference torontoscreenwritingconference.com

28 — WGC Presents Writers Talking TV wgc.ca



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Los Angeles

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Los Angeles, CA 90025
310-479-2777

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WGC Screenwriting Awards

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The Writers Guild of Canada congratulates the 2018 finalists

BEST SCRIPT FROM SEASON ONE

.....

Anne, Season 1 "I Am No Bird, And No Net Ensnares Me"

Written by **Moira Walley-Beckett**

Bellevue, Season 1 "You Don't Understand Me At All"

Written by **Jane Maggs**

Ghost Wars, Season 1 "Whatever Happened to Maggie Rennie"

Written by **Rachel Langer**

CHILDREN'S

.....

The Bagel and Becky Show, Season 1 "The 12 Quadrillion Days of Christmas"

Written by **Evan Thaler Hickey**

Mysticons, Season 1 "Heart of Gold"

Written by **Elize Morgan**

Mysticons, Season 1 "Sisters in Arms"

Written by **Sean Jara**

DOCUMENTARY

.....

The Hundred-Year-Old Whale

Written by **Mark Leiren-Young**

The Road Forward

Written by **Marie Clements**

The Taming of the Queue

Written by **Josh Freed**

FEATURE FILM

.....

Allure

Written by **Carlos & Jason Sanchez**

Entanglement

Written by **Jason Filiatrault**

Indian Horse

Written by **Dennis Foon**

The Man Who Invented Christmas

Written by **Susan Coyne**

MOW AND MINISERIES

.....

Alias Grace "Part 5"

Written by **Sarah Polley**

Anne of Green Gables: Fire and Dew

Written by **Susan Coyne**

Bruno & Boots: This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall!

Written by **Adam Barken &**

Mike McPhaden

Bruno & Boots: The Wizzle War

Written by **Mike McPhaden**

SHORTS AND WEBSERIES

.....

The Drop In

Written by **Naledi Jackson**

Hotel Transylvania: "Who's the Boss?"

Written by **Mike D'Ascenzo**

Spiral, Episode 101 "The Girl In The Dream"

Written by **Karen McClellan**

TV COMEDY

.....

Kim's Convenience, Season 2 "Business Award"

Written by **Matt Kippen**

Kim's Convenience, Season 2 "Resting Place"

Written by **Anita Kapila**

Letterkenny, Season 2 "Relationships"

Written by **Jared Keeso & Jacob Tierney**

Still Standing, Season 3 "Fort McMurray"

Written by **Jonny Harris, Fraser Young,**

Graham Chittenden and Steve Dylan

TV DRAMA

.....

Cardinal, Season 1 "John Cardinal"

Written by **Aubrey Nealon**

Mary Kills People, Season 1 "Bloody Mary"

Written by **Tara Armstrong**

Pure, Season 1 "Ordination"

Written by **Michael Amo**

X Company, Season 3 "Promises"

Written by **Nicolas Billon**

TWEENS & TEENS

.....

Degrassi: Next Class, Season 4 "#FactsOnly"

Written by **Courtney Jane Walker**

Degrassi: Next Class, Season 4

"#RollUpToTheClubLike"

Written by **Matt Huether**

Raising Expectations, Season 1 "Food Fight at the Algonquin"

Written by **Barbara Haynes**

The Stanley Dynamic, Season 2 "The Stanley Cheer"

Written by **Matt Kippen**

The 22nd annual WGC Screenwriting Awards

Hosted by **Gavin Crawford**

Written by **Kyle Tingley**

Winners announced

April 30, 2018

at Koerner Hall in Toronto

Ticket information:

www.wgc.ca



Writers Guild of Canada