

THE AFTERWORD

Postings from the literary world

Main | About | Contact Editor | Subscribe RSS

Q&A with Martin Amis: "There's only one way of judging quality and that's time"

Posted: August 01, 2009, 4:15 PM by Mark Medley
Q&A, Martin Amis, Humber School for Writers



For the latest installment in our series on [The Ecology of Books](#), I enrolled in the [Humber School for Writers Summer Workshop](#). The story appears in Saturday's National Post. One of this year's star instructors (and the Timothy Findley Visiting Chair in Creative Writing) was the novelist Martin Amis. [I wrote about my time in Amis's workshop on The Afterword a couple of weeks ago](#), but didn't include the more formal interview we conducted at breaks during the class. Below is the complete transcript.

National Post: Did you read [the essay on creative writing programs in the New Yorker](#) a few weeks ago?

Martin Amis: No.

I have a copy of it upstairs. I'll give it to you.

Great.

It was a book review. A [UCLA] professor has just done a history of creative writing programs in North America, and it talks about the explosion of programs. Something like, since 1970 there was 40, and now there's over 800.

Really?

And I was wondering, in Britain, is it the same thing? Have you gone through an explosion of these MFAs.

Yeah. You know I teach in Manchester? I'm professor of creative writing at Manchester University. And yeah, everyone says they're all over the place. Every university has one. What was his slant, the New Yorker writer?

He actually thought they were a good thing. He said the state of contemporary fiction has never been higher because of these

The Afterword is National Post's books blog.

Editors:
[Brad Frenette](#) / [Ron Nurwisah](#) / [Mark Medley](#)

Feedback:
theafterword@nationalpost.com

Twitter:
[Follow us on Twitter \(NPBooks\)](#)

- Index:**
- [Book Reviews](#)
 - [Bookmarks: News from the literary world](#)
 - [Philip Marchand's Open Book](#)
 - [Events](#)
 - [Features](#)

For our music, film and pop culture news, visit National Post's arts blog, [The Ampersand](#).

Search

Recent Posts

Bookmarks: More Lemony Snicket, A book lover's guide to Ikea seating, new Sony reader
—Ron Nurwisah
[The Afterword](#)

Bookmarks: Weird stuff on Amazon, Korea's city of books, mini-fiction on iPhone
—Ron Nurwisah
[The Afterword](#)

Oprah Winfrey, Sam Mendes and Christopher

- POPULAR**
- Book Review: The Wife's Tale, by Lori Lansens
 - Open Book: Philip Marchand bemoans the lost art of creating vivid characters
 - Swindle: I'll take my RSS in pentameter, please
 - The Last Supper: A fiction serial — Part

The history of libraries is the history of humanity'

Writing Scotland: IFOA receives £50,000 in funding (and its own tartan) from Scotland

New William Golding biography contains confession of attempted rape

Buy It or Skip It? Tracing Your Family History

Bookmarks: Weird stuff on Amazon, Korea's city of books, mini-fiction on iPhone

Bookmarks: Debating book trailers, Lolita covers, knitting poetry

Details for Eden Mills Writers' Festival announced

Circumstances under which National Post writers toot their own horns

Bookmarks: Just one book, Sherlock Holmes goes pulp, poetry aggregator

Bookmarks: De Botton to write Heathrow book, where to put controversial books, SXSW publishing panels

Buy It or Skip It? Zeitoun

Buy It or Skip It? The Last Supper

Animated trailer for The Walrus released

Oprah Winfrey, Sam Mendes and Christopher Hampton teaming up to bring "Netherland" to the big screen

Buy It or Skip It?

programs. You listen to the critics and they'll say there's such a thing as a "workshop novel" or a "workshop short story." They have a sameness to them. You can tell it's been picked on by the six or eight people in that class. Do you get that sense?

I wouldn't come across it. I read very few contemporaries. I read my friends. But I'm always reading a generation back, at least, because the idea of reading the latest hot novel, there's no interest to me at all. There's only one way of judging quality and that's time. So if a writer's survived a generation and is still very present, then it's much more likely to be good than if he's got a few good reviews for his first book.

How does that tie in to your own work, then? Are you telling people not to read your books because they haven't been tested by time?

No, I'm telling young people to read my books.

In that same piece, and I'll quote the writer, Louis Menand, says "virtually no one has ever tried to lay down rules for what should go on in the classroom." So I was wondering: do you have any rules when you teach creative writing? How do you approach the workshop?

In Manchester, my rule is I don't look at their work (*laughs*).

What?

It's not like that. We don't do it that way. We read great books and we talk about them. And then there's general conversation about general things about writing, and I ask what they are and what they're trying to do, but I don't look at their work. We look at Conrad, we look at Dostoyevsky. So that's my rule there. But, I mean, it's always detail, detail, little things, trying to work on the surface, to bring it up a level. That's what I think the job is.

So how do you approach a week like this, when are you going to be looking at student's work?

Well, this is the first time I've ever done it.

Really?

Yup. And it's interesting. Part of the fun and the appeal of teaching -- anything, I suppose -- is to find another milieu and to see other people's characters. And nothing reveals you more than a bit of fictional prose. You find out a lot about people within their prose, and putting that to a face is a good sort of novelistic exercise in itself.

David Mitchell said, when I was talking to him yesterday, that he was surprised he'd gotten a lot out of this. He's learned from his students, in addition to teaching. Have you learned anything?

It's too early to tell. But all experience, especially new experience, teaches you something.

After working on your students writing this week, do you think you might bring that back to Manchester and start taking a look at their writing?

No.

Why did you decide to come here, then, if you've never done this before?

For the experience. Curiosity. At a certain age you want another milieu. I'm by myself all day, all year long. And I like literary people. I'm very fond of my colleagues at Manchester, and there's a very nice crowd here, good company.

Do you think there's something brave about the workshop? You have students here who are, for the most part, beginning or emerging writers, and they're putting their work out there to some of the best writers in the world. Do you respect that?

Yeah, and I'm very careful, always positive...I would hate to put an end to anyone's ambitions. So you say what you can. You don't lie. But there's always something to be said. And sometimes you don't quite praise as much

Hampton teaming up to bring "Netherland" to the big screen

—Brad Frenette
[The Afterword](#)

The Last Supper: A fiction serial — Part 12

—NP Editor
[The Afterword](#)

Open Book: Philip Marchand bemoans the lost art of creating vivid characters

—Sarah Murdoch
[The Afterword](#)

Book Review: The Wife's Tale, by Lori Lansens

—Sarah Murdoch
[The Afterword](#)

Buy It or Skip It? The Peep Diaries

—Becky Guthrie
[The Afterword](#)

Circumstances under which National Post writers toot their own horns

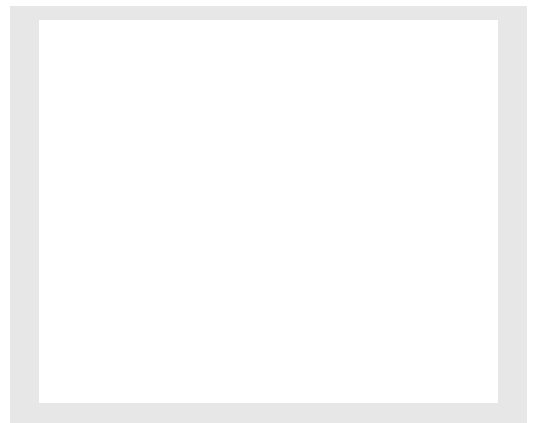
—Adam McDowell
[The Afterword](#)

Buy It or Skip It? The Last Supper

—Becky Guthrie
[The Afterword](#)

Bookmarks: De Botton to write Heathrow book, where to put controversial books, SXSW publishing panels

—Ron Nurwisah
[The Afterword](#)



Recent Comments

Bukowski's right. We should stop letting lesser writers review better-known authors' work. Their jealousy (and condescension) shines through in every sentence. Grainger...

—litman
[The Afterword](#)

This reviewer is completely wrong (and her envy of Lansens' talent and success is laughably transparent)...The Wife's Tale is a great book, like Lansens' first two...a...

—litman

The Peep Diaries

Bookmarks: More Lemony Snicket, A book lover's guide to Ikea seating, new Sony reader

as you want to, so you don't discourage the others. And then you take the person aside and say 'That was even better than I said.'

I wanted to get to that idea that you can't teach talent, but you can teach craft. But can you harness talent? Can you hone talent?

I don't believe there's any undiscovered talent around. With the volume of publication now, there's no Mute in Glorious Milton on this planet. Anyone who's any good will get published. You can't create talent. Talent is originality. I don't mean innovation, I mean having an individual voice that hasn't been heard before. Of course, we've all got our individual voice, but it's a sort of resonant one. By clearing away all the second hand stuff -- the cliches, the dead sentences -- I think you can make people a lot more alert, and if talent is there, it will emerge quicker if the surface is very strictly attended to. I mean, they're not in isolation, these things. You could be a wild talent. It's just getting to know what's good in you and what is not so good. Playing to your strengths. You can't create it out of nothing.

Have you talked to any of the other faculty about their philosophies for teaching writing. I don't know if you heard but David Mitchell, in his speech yesterday, he kind of contradicted you and said that sometimes you have to embrace cliché and use it, and that was one thing you are very vocal about.

I don't know if I said it during [my] speech but of course the great uses of cliché -- Joyce in *Ulysses* is playing with clichés all the time, and beautifully -- of course they have a place. But it's got to be a deliberate, an artful use of cliché. Not a lazy use of cliché. Not a cloth ear use of cliché.

To me, so far, what you seem to be hammering into students is making sure the author always has control. Not leaving anything up to the reader, what you called "the obliteration of any doubt."

It's the bit you can affect. I think everyone in this class will come out a stronger writer because [they'll be] a more careful writer. Earlier on, I told them the most important book on their shelves is not the collected Shakespeare, it's the concise Oxford Dictionary. You should find out what words mean and what their origins are and that will deepen the word for you. For instance, what does obsess come from? Obsidere. To besiege. To lay siege to. You know that, and you know the word better. You're more intimate with the word.

You feel more confident to use it.

Yeah. And you don't say "dilapidated hedge" because dilapidated comes from lapis, which means stone. So you can say a dilapidated building, but not hedge. You zoom in a little bit more on precision, your intimacy with words. You've got to become an expert at words. These are your tools.

I was told the other day the first assignment you gave your students was to write a sex scene by the end of the week. Why that assignment?

Because it's uniquely difficult to do. In fact, some people believe that you can't do it at all. That you're doomed to failure when you write a sex scene because you de-universalize yourself. You're supposed to be a kind of Everyman, and the minute you start writing about sex, you're sort of following your preference. And it's always going to be a bit different. No two people are the same, sexually. When you watch pornography, and you keep saying, no don't do that (*laughs*). I told a very damaging story about myself. I was having a really floundering failure of a love affair with a girl, and she said, at one point, 'Oh this is hopeless. What's your favourite?' (*laughs*).

What do you hope your students get out of this week?

That they'll be more attentive to the detail of their sentences, and the sound values within the sentences. I keep thinking I'm being a pedant, but it's so important. You really get the trust of your reader strengthened if you don't make these little toe stubs all the time. A smoothness that isn't slickness but is confidence.

When did you feel that confidence?

Well, I started so young that I had the folly, recklessness and courage of

The Afterword

Hear hear!

—Scott Maniquet
The Afterword

It doesn't matter what kind of addict she may be, it's the fact that she may be an addict that we need to focus on. We need to get help for her quickly...somebody think...

—CoolShitBlog
The Afterword

I remember when newspapers reported news. This article is a waste of space. Who cares what Margaret Atwood does in her private life.

—Bay Bulls
The Afterword

Congrats guys, continue and keep up the good work. <http://www.reversemortgagepage.com> anchor text "reverse mortgage"

—malmonica
The Afterword

Thanks very much. And it's my sixth year. Don't take that year away from me, man.

—Bookninja
The Afterword

One detail of interest to me is that Father MacAskill is a War bride child, born in 1944 in the U.K. to a Canadian soldier and a British mother. Some of the real War...

—RobertA9
The Afterword

No wonder the newspapers are in such dire financial positions, who would pay for such useless drivel? Take those reporting skills and start writing about something...

—Denis Pakkala
The Afterword

I totally miss Don Bluth movies. Disney kinda sucks.

—Van Grungy
The Afterword

--Select One--

Browse by Date

JUL		August					SEP
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	
26	27	28	29	30	31	1	
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
30	31	1	2	3	4	5	

youth. I just burst in. I can't read my first novel. It pains me.

The Rachel Papers is sitting on my shelf. I picked it up a few weeks ago.

(Shaking his head) No.

Well, how old were you when *The Rachel Papers* came out? 22?

I'd just turned 24. I wrote it when I was sort of 22, 23. So you just sort of lurch in. It's a good way of doing it, actually. There was a time when I was having a bit of a struggle a few years ago, various things, where I thought I started too early -- I didn't let the tank get deep enough. But I don't think that's true. I feel full of words now. [I'm] writing two novels at the same time.

That's what you're doing right now?

Well, I started a novel [but] then I'm going to write a novella before I get on to it. But I was in big trouble a few years ago, with a huge, dead novel. And it took me a long time, and a lot of grief, to realize -- I thought I was clutching at straws - it turned out it was actually two novels, and they couldn't go together. So I wrote *The Pregnant Widow*, [that's] one half of it, and the other half I started, and it will be very autobiographical, the next one. But what you can't do is sex and autobiography, even fictionalized autobiography, you just can't do it. So I changed the main character to a million miles from me, and made him much more innocent, much less experienced than I was, and I kept having to shave away at how many girlfriends he'd had. Now the poor bastard's only had 7 as he turns 21. Whereas before he had three dozen.

[Martin Amis outside Revival night club in 2003. Photo by Kevin Van Paassen/National Post]

BOOKMARK Comments (2) Send to a friend Permalink

2 Comments

You must be logged in to post a comment

[Click here to post a comment](#)

by Bookninja » Blog

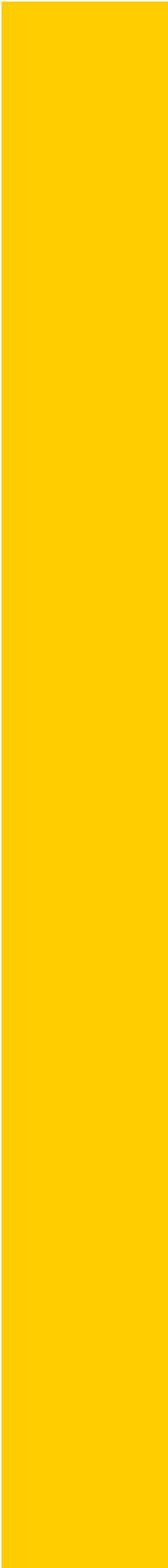
Archive » News cleanup Aug 03 2009 1:02 PM Pingback from Bookninja » Blog Archive » News cleanup

by Amis-isms «

Writerly Type Aug 06 2009 11:44 PM Pingback from Amis-isms » Writerly Type

Active Tags

Adaptation Alan Bradley Alice Munro Alistair MacLeod All The Living Amanda Boyden amazon Andrea Gunraj Anne Enright Anne Michaels Anthony De Sa Apologize Apologize! Aravind Adiga ask a bookseller Awards Barack Obama Barnacle Love Ben Okri Bestsellers Between the Assassinations Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures Book Review Book Reviews Book Review Book Reviews BookCamp Bookcast Bookmarks Books Border Songs Brad Gooch Brian Evinou Brian Joseph Davis Buy It or Skip it? C.E. Morgan Children's Books Chris Cleave Chuck Palahniuk Clancy Martin Colin McAdam Columbine Come Thou Tortoise Comics Commonwealth Writers' Prize Contest Contests Craig Davidson Dan Hill Daniel Goldbloom Dante's War Dash Shaw Dave Cullen Dave Eggers Dave Lapp David Bezmozgis David Foster Wallace Davy Rothbart Deborah Willis Deborah Willis Brett Josef Grubisic Denis Johnson Dennis Lee Design Diana Tambllyn E-books Elizabeth Kelly Ellen Seligman Emily Schultz Eric Soblin Ernest Hemingway Evan Munday Events Fall Features Fiction film Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor Flash Forward Frank Moher Gabriel Garcia Marquez Gaspereau Press George Murray Giller Prize Gina Mallet Granta Graphic Novels Griffin Poetry Prize Guest Editors Hal Niedzviecki Hannah Holborn Hannah Holmes Haunted Heart Heather B. Armstrong Heaven is Small How to Sell Humber School for Writers I Am My Father's Son IFOA XXX infinite summer James Harkin Jeff Lemire Jeff Rubin Jennifer Baichwal Jeremy Dodds Jessica Grant Jim Lynch John Keats Jonah Lehrer Joseph O'Neill Joy Fielding Joyland Katherine Govier Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer Kevin Connolly Lee Henderson Leonard Michaels Linden MacIntyre Linwood Barclay Lisa Moore literary journals Literary Magazines Literary Mashups Little Bee Lori Lansens Lost in Cyurbia Luminato Magazines Making an Elephant: Writing from Within Malla Nunn Man Booker Man Booker International Prize Man Gone Down Margaret Atwood Margaret Christakos Mariko Tamaki Mari-Lou Rowley Marina Endicott Marjorie Garber Martin Amis Martin Jacques Mary Ann Shaffer Mary Gaitskill Matt McCarthy Matt Stewart Maurice Sendak Mavis Gallant McSweeney's Memoir Michèle Laframboise Michael Jackson Michael Chabon Michael Cho Michael Coren Michael Crummey Michael Davie Michael Helm Michael Ignatieff Michael Kimmage Michael Ondaatje Michael Thomas Michael Winter Michel Houellebecq Mike Doherty Mike Sacks Miles From Nowhere Millard Kaufman Miriam Toews Mitchell Parry Moez Surani Monica Ali Moon People Murder Without Borders Music My Two Polish Grandfathers My Winnipeg Mystery Nami Mun Naomi Klein NaShoStoMo Nathan Sellyn Nathaniel G. Moore National Poetry Month Natural Elements Neal McLeod Neil Gaiman Neil Smith Netherland neuroscience News Newspapers NFB Nicholas Pashley Nicole Winstanley Nikolai Gogol Nobody Move Nonfiction Non-Fiction Northrop Frye: New Directions From Old Not Yet Nothing Right Novel Novel About My Wife Novels NP Books Podcast Oana Avasilichioaei Obituary Old City Hall Once Open Book Open Book: Philip Marchand Oprah Orange Prize Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis Pasha Malla Patrick Keeney Patrick Lane Paul Quarrington Paul Rivoche PEN Canada Peter Abrahams Peter Goodspeed Peter Pigott Peter Russell Peter Terzian Philip Kerr Philip Marchand Philip Roth Philipp Meyer Piers Paul Read Plays Podcast Poetry Policing the Fringe politics postpartum prizes



Profiles Profiles, Q&A **Publishing News** **Pygmy**
 Q and A **Q&A** Quill & Quire Rachel Kushner Rachel
 McAdams Ramon Perez **Random House** **Randy**
Boyagoda Rebecca Eckler Rebecca Rosenblum Reborn
 recommendations Red April **Reif Larsen** Revenge of the
 Spellmans Reverend Jen **Review** Revolver Reynolds Price
 Richard Flanagan Richard Greene Richard John Neuhaus
 Richard Mason **Richard Poplak** Richard Rosso Ricky
 Jay Rina Piccolo Rivka Galchen Rob Scotton Robb Walsh
 Robert Burns Robert Chandler Robert Crawford **Robert**
Cushman **Robert Fulford** Robert Goolrick **Robert**
J. Sawyer Robert J. Shiller Robert J. Wiersema Robert L.
 Fraser Robert Remington **Robert Rotenberg** Roberto
 Bolaño Roberto Escobar **Robin Sears** Rocket Men Romeo
 and Juliet Ronald Chevalier Rose Keefe Ross Campbell Ross
 Pennie Rudyard Griffiths Ruins & Relics Runaway Devil Rupert
 isaacson Russell Banks Russell Smith Rust and Bone Ryan
 North Saleema Nawaz Salinger Sam Acquillo Samantha Harvey
 Sandra Sabatini Santiago Roncagliolo Sara Barron Sarah Becan
 Sarah Dunn Sarah Lazarovic **Sarah Murdoch** Sarah
 Waters Sarah Weinman **Science Fiction** Scott Campbell
 Scott Griffin Scott Lasser Scott Pilgrim Scott Taylor **Scream**
Literary Festival Screenwriting Sea Sick Sean Cullen
 Secrets to Happiness Seeds of Terror **serial Seth** Seven
 Pleasures Sex Shakedown shakespeare Shakespeare and Modern
 Culture Shambling Towards Hiroshima Shani Mootoo Shena
 Mackay Sherri Zickefoose **Short Fiction** **Short**
Stories Sima's Undergarments for Women Simon Louvish
 Sina Queyras Six Months in Sudan Six String Nation Six
 Suspects Songs for the Missing Sonia Sotamayor Spade & Archer
 Speaking Volumes Spies Splat spoofs Step Closer Stephen Cain
 Steve McOrmond Stewart O'Nan Stone's Fall **Summer**
Books Sunnyside **technology** **Terry Griggs** That
 Good Night The Housekeeper and the Professor The Atlantic
The Believers **The Bishop's Man** **The Book**
Pages **The Cover Review** **The Ecology of**
Books **The First 50** **The Gentlemen's Reading**
Society The Great Karoo The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel
 Pie Society The Heart Specialist The Horse Boy The Kindly Ones
The Last Supper The Little Stranger The Long Fall The
 Lost City of Z The Mao Cae The Mysteries of Pittsburgh The
 National Gallery in Wartime The Neighbor The Next 100 Years
 The Other Hand The Other Side of Desire The Pale King The
 Peep Diaries The Perfect Baby Handbook The Pleasures and
 Sorrows of Work The Sea is My Brother The Secret Lives of
 Litterbugs The Secret Pleasures of Menopause The Selected
 Works of T.S. Spivet The Serpent Beneath **The Sheikh's**
Batmobile The Shock Doctrine The Song is You The Spare
 Room The Starker **The Sweetness at the Bottom of the**
Pie **The Thing Around Your Neck** The Uninvited
The Walrus The Well Dressed Ape The White Tiger The
 Wife's Tale The Wikipedia Revolution The Wilderness **The**
Winter Vault The Withdrawal Method The World In Half
 The Year of the Flood The Year That Follows Theodore Geisel
This Weekend in Books Thomas Hine Thomas Homer-
 Dixon Thomas Pynchon Thou Tortoise Thought You Were Dead
 Tim Falconer Tim Fish Tim Wynne-Jones Time Traveler's Wife
 Tom Henighan Tom Humberstone Tom Neely Tonja Gunvaldsen
 Klaassen Top Fiction Top Non-Fiction **Toronto Comic**
Arts Festival 2009 Tracing Your Irish Family History
 Tracing Your Scottish Family History Travel **Trillium**
Prize Troy Little **True Patriot Love** **Twitter** Under
 the Volcano Underground Unembedded Unmasked: The Final
 Years of Michael Jackson Ursula le Guin Valerie Sury Valmiki's
 Daughter Vanishing and Other Stories Vanity Fair's Tales of
 Hollywood Vendela Vida Victoria Glendinning Vikas Swarup
 Vikram Seth **Vincent Lam** Vlad the Impaler Wake Walter
 Mosley Wanting Watchmen Waveland **Wayson Choy**
 Wedlock: The True Story of the Disastrous Marriage and
 Remarkable Divorce of Mary Eleanor Bowes **Weekend Post**
Weekend Shift Welcome to the Departure Lounge Wells
 Tower Wendy Moore Wetlands **What I'm Reading**
 What It Is When China Rules the World Where The Wild Things
 Are Wherever Nina Lies White Is for Witching Whittaker
 Chambers Why Your World is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller

Wilbur Smith Willard Spiegelman William Golding **William Shakespeare** Willow Dawson Wired for War Witold Rybczynski Word on the Street writer Writing Scotland Yann Martel Yellowgrass Yesterday's Weather Yogi Berra Yoko Ogawa Yoni Goldstein **Yoshihiro Tatsumi** You You Are Here You Better Watch Out Young Adult Fiction Yu Hua Zachariah Wells **Zeitoun** Zen Rankin **Zoë Heller** ZZ

Services: [Privacy](#) | [Terms](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Copyright and permissions](#) | [Today's paper](#) | [Digital paper](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [News Feeds](#) | [Subscription services](#) | [Site map](#)

National Post: [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Life](#) | [Sports](#) | [Cars](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Classifieds](#)

Financial Post: [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Trading Desk](#) | [Markets](#) | [Money](#) | [Small Business](#) | [Executive](#) | [Careers](#) | [Reports](#) | [FP Magazine](#)

National Post and **Financial Post** are Part of the  **canada.com** Network Canada.com Newspapers

© 2009 The National Post Company. All rights reserved. Unauthorized distribution, transmission or republication strictly prohibited.