

Hear, Overhear, Observe, Remember.

A Dialogue with Frances Itani

Susan Fisher (SF): It seems odd that your new novel *Deafening* (2003) is being greeted as if you were a neophyte. Quotations on the book jacket describe it as “your first novel” and your “debut.” But you have been a productive author for many years—you have written three collections of poetry, four collections of stories, a children’s book. And strictly speaking, *Deafening* isn’t your first novel because *Leaning, Leaning over Water*, which appeared in 1998, is, as its subtitle announces, A Novel in Ten Stories. Why do you think that with *Deafening*, you have suddenly been “discovered”?

Frances Itani (FI): Well, I have nothing to do with the way people greet the novel, or any book, for that matter. If the media pretends to suddenly “discover” me, that may be because, generally speaking, little public attention is paid to the short story. Alistair MacLeod worked at the short story for decades and had no wide public recognition. I knew his work from the beginning, and had been teaching it to my students for 20 years before he was “discovered.” But the writers of the country have always known about him.

I have been part of the literary community in Canada for 30 years, and have been content to work away at the short story, a genre I love. It’s the way the world works; reviews for my stories have been very positive across the country since my first collection came out in 1989, but the wider reading audience buys more novels. Publishers, too, are more interested in novels. I have, however, been publishing stories and poems in literary journals since the 1970s. I’ve also been teaching for years in

Creative Writing programs in Canadian schools, universities and libraries, as well as at the Banff Centre. I've been earning a living from my writing for many years. My poetry and short story collections, by the way, are all mentioned on the jacket of *Deafening*, so it's easy for reviewers to see that this is not my first book. I couldn't begin to tell you how many times journalists have phoned me to talk about my "first" book.

As for *Leaning, Leaning Over Water*, that is what I think of as my cross-over book. It was written and begun as a collection of short stories. I sold and published each story as I wrote it, but by the time I had written six or seven I realized that I was returning to the same family, same period, same setting. I had never written a novel before, but began to shape the last three stories in a novelistic way. (The stories were not written in order—not the order they are in the book.) This also meant that I had to return to all of the earlier stories and take out the repetitions. Because I had written each story as a discrete piece, my publisher and I decided to call the book a novel in ten stories.

Certainly it was this book that prepared me for writing *Deafening*. From the beginning, I knew that *Deafening* would be a novel; there was never any doubt. I also had no trouble shaping and structuring *Deafening*, and I think that is because of my work on *Leaning*.

SF As I suppose many of your readers have done, I began with *Deafening* and worked backwards through your short stories. I was amazed by their range and strength. At times I was reminded of Alice Munro's stories of small towns and rural households; at times I thought of the elemental people in Alistair MacLeod's stories. And some of your stories of Europe—I'm thinking of "Scenes from a Pension" in *Truth or Lies*—seemed reminiscent of Mavis Gallant's works. I mention these three just to give a sense of your range. Are there particular Canadian writers with whom you feel an affinity?

FI I have always experimented with different voices, different points of view in my fiction. I think the settings of my stories reflect the places I've been, and I have lived in many places in the world. This actually worked against me when I attempted to have my first collections of stories published. I was told repeatedly by publishers that my stories should be "more regional," that regionalism would have greater appeal. But I resisted those confines. I did not want to set borders around my work.

I grew up in rural Quebec but began to travel alone when I was 15 years old. I went to London, England, to live when I was 21. Later,

I travelled to North Carolina, where I studied at Duke University. After marriage, I lived in seven provinces in our own country, as well as in many countries in Europe. I've always enjoyed moving around, always loved fresh starts. And as I've moved about—I think I've lived in eight or nine countries now—I've been reading the literature of the places I've been. I met Alistair in the 1970s, and always admired his work. I've always felt that he and I both work with rhythm and beat in our prose, though we did not discuss this when we were teaching together at Banff. For instance, while I work—especially after the first draft—I read my work aloud hundreds of times before it is sent out to be published. I've read most of Alice Munro's work and think it is very fine, but I don't feel that my work is similar. I met Mavis Gallant in 1975 and have also read most of her work. I do not think that my stories resemble hers at all. The reason some of my stories are set in Europe is because I've lived in quite a few European countries. My own stories are usually centred on a strong emotional core of some sort. At least, that's the way they begin.

The writers who have immensely affected my work are Heinrich Böll (a wonderful story-teller); Virginia Woolf—I learned more from her letters and journals than from any other writer; Chekhov—for pure craftsmanship (I still return to Chekhov so that I can learn); Frank O'Connor, whose short stories and autobiographies I love; Edna O'Brien—her early short stories are quite amazing; Flannery O'Connor, et cetera. For poetry, I read Seamus Heaney, Lorna Crozier, Michael Ondaatje, Paulette Jiles—all fabulous poets.

SF How did you get started writing?

FI I was writing a bit of poetry when I was 19 or 20. When I was a university student, various professors kept after me to “do something with this writing.” But I was involved in another profession at the time and did not actually begin to write seriously until I was 28 or 29. Our family was moving to Edmonton from Kingston during the early 1970s and, during the drive west, I wrote poetry while in the car. In Edmonton, I arrived at the University of Alberta, where I would finish my BA in Psychology and English, and asked to be admitted into W.O. Mitchell's creative writing class. W.O., who was commuting back and forth from his home in Calgary that term, saw the poetry I'd written in the car and invited me to join his group. I was in his workshop for only three months and, the following year, I studied with Rudy Wiebe. Those are the only two university courses I did in writing. Meanwhile, I was raising two babies

and finishing off my degree. I had a very busy life during my two years in Edmonton, as well as during two subsequent years in Toronto.

But it was the encouragement from W.O., as well as from Rudy, that helped me to “make the commitment.” W.O. and I became very close friends—our families met often over the years, and travelled together—and I always had the knowledge that he and his wife Merna were solidly behind me. They believed in my work and that was enormously helpful—just knowing they were in the background. I learned valuable things about craft from W.O. Mitchell—and, of course, had enormous fun along the way. I miss him and Merna very much—they were an important part of our family life. Later, when I completed my MA in English Literature (in 1980 at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton), I met poet Fred Cogswell, who was also my thesis supervisor. It was Fred, at Fiddlehead, who offered to publish my first book of poetry, “No Other Lodgings.”

SF Where did you have your first successes?

FI I wrote my first short story the summer after being in W.O. Mitchell’s course, and it was purchased by Bob Weaver for CBC Radio’s “Anthology.” That was in 1974. *Event* published my first poems. Dorothy Livesay wrote to me about a poem I’d written about the World War II internment of Japanese-Canadians, and she published one of my poems in *CVII* in 1976. After that, *PRISM International* published some of my poems. Fred Cogswell published my first book of poetry and, while living in Fredericton between 1976-1980, I published a children’s book with Brunswick Press. Molly Bobak did the illustrations and the book sold out immediately. This one was called “Linger by the Sea.” In the meantime, Bob Weaver continued to buy my early short stories for CBC. I also wrote a one-hour radio drama called “The Keepers of the Cranes,” while I was living in Toronto between 1974-76, and Frances Hyland and Eve Crawford starred in the main roles. My first published story was “P’tit Village.” One of the editors at *Queen’s Quarterly* saw a lengthy draft and asked me to tighten it up, and I did, and he published it.

SF As I read your short stories, I encountered some familiar characters and settings. Your deaf grandmother, for example, who served as the inspiration for Grania in *Deafening*, appears in the story “Grandmother” in *Truth or Lies*. In that story, you portray her with such love and admiration. Did you know after writing that story that there was still more you wanted to write about her?

- FI I did fictionalize the life of my real grandmother for that story, which I wrote during the 1980s. I had no idea that twenty years later I would write a novel with a deaf character. Indeed, the idea would have surprised me at the time, I think.
- SF The story “Grandmother” seems almost unfictionalized or pure memoir. Is it?
- FI It is not pure memoir, but it is based on family stories as well as my own childhood experiences of visiting the farm of my grandparents near Belleville, Ontario. I was most intent on trying to capture sights and sounds and sensory impressions in that story—as well as the love I had for my own grandparents.
- SF What about other stories in *Truth or Lies*? For example, “Foolery” seems to be about your own childhood, and “Songs for the Children,” which describes the death of a beloved sister, seems to be autobiographical. A third story in this collection, the very funny title story “Truth or Lies,” recounts the struggles of a young wife and mother to get her assignments done for creative writing class. How are these stories related to your own experience?
- FI There is as much of me in the old PEI farmer, Clayton (the title character of one of my sea stories), who goes out to do the roadfill on his land and scopes out the whales while he’s there, as there is in any other story I’ve written. What do writers write about? For me it is always about what I hear, overhear, observe, remember and imagine. I love to meet people as I travel, and I listen to their stories. The details in “Truth or Lies” and “Foolery” are not at all taken from actual events, except for the testing of the sister in hospital in “Foolery.” My only sister died of a brain tumour. I knew that if I had any hope of dealing with that terrible loss (and one never does deal with such a loss entirely), it would be through trying to release the emotional part of the experience. That is what I’m always after in short fiction—the emotional experience as told through story.
- When I write, I work very hard at trying to “pull back” to “understate.” It is my intent to leave enormous room for the reader to join me as partner. But the reader has to fill in the emotional part. My job is to be as concrete and bare bones as I can possibly be, in my prose.
- SF Even though many of the materials in this collection seem to have autobiographical sources, the collection as a whole exhibits quite a range. Alongside the memoir-like stories such as “Grandmother” and “Songs for the Children” are impressionistic pieces such as “White Butterfly,”

which describes an old woman in a garden in Japan. Where does a story like that come from?

- FI I don't think writers can be entirely exact about where stories come from. The short answer is that stories come from the imagination. When I am writing a story, it is always after two events have somehow come together in the brewing, percolating part of my mind. Never one. Always two. And the idea for a story is often there for years before the story is written. The only exception to this that I can think of is "An August Wind." I was actually part of a rescue team that saved a woman from drowning in PEI, and the experience was so unusual, so highly-charged, that I sat and wrote the story the day after the event. I think it took me two days to get down the first draft. (And that is pretty unusual for me—sometimes a story takes four to six months, or even years, before I get it right.) Even so, most of "An August Wind" is fictional. I was about thirty-five when I wrote that story, but I gave the "eyes" of the story to an old woman sitting on a chair on the cliff above the scene. Once again, however, the story came from two events: the near-drowning with all of its high drama, as well as a casual remark made by an RCMP officer when he drove me (I was barefoot) from the Summerside hospital in PEI back to the cottage on the north shore where I was staying.
- SF I want to turn now to *Leaning, Leaning over Water*, the collection of linked stories about a girl growing up in a Quebec village near Hull in the 1940s and 1950s. The young narrator, Trude, obviously is about your age. In the dedication, you thank your mother Frances Hill for the period details she supplied. And on the title page and the subsequent section title pages, there are family snapshots. First, are those photographs of your family, of you and your siblings?
- FI *Leaning* is set during the 1950s only. When I finished the ten stories, my editor and I discussed ways of structuring the book and integrating its various parts. I was concerned about it being "choppy" and suggested going to the National Archives in Ottawa to look for photographs from the 1950s, but my editor asked if I had any photos at home. I leafed through family albums and came up with several photos, and we decided to use those as authentic "views" of the period. I think we were mostly intent on setting mood. The reason Trude is about my age is because she grows up in a period that I knew well.
- SF How close is *Leaning, Leaning* to your own childhood? It seems to me that you are often working with materials very close to your own experience—

to events that might be the stuff of memoir or autobiography. But, to choose just one example, in the stories the mother dies, though obviously this didn't happen in your own life since your mother helped you with the research for the book. How do you move from autobiographical materials to a work of fiction?

FI *Leaning* is not at all true to my own experience. What is true is that I know the setting and period, and created the story within those parameters. I was always listening and watching when I was a child. I had big ears and was obviously intent on observing 1950s women—who were, after all, my role models. I also knew the language of the decade, in particular the language of French and English citizens living side by side. Because I grew up next to the Ottawa River, I love that particular place in rural Quebec. It is my place, and I still visit it frequently. I know the river well, and had always wanted to use “river” as “a character” in one of my books. But I needed two connecting themes or ideas. And it was the 1950s milieu combined with river as character, that gave me my book. I loved writing this book, by the way. I enjoyed every moment of it, though it took me a number of years (and all my life, the way I think of it).

If you want to know about facts, I come from a family of seven, with five children; my father was an accountant; my mother, indeed, did not drown and is very much alive here in Ottawa; I am not Trude; I did not move to Vancouver; I never worked as a candy-striper in a hospital; I did not have a grandmother even remotely like Granny Tracks. I had only my deaf grandmother (my other grandmother had died when I was a baby). But I do have a large imagination and try always to work from theme and story.

SF Forgive me if I seem to be flogging this to death, but I am intrigued by the correspondences with and then the departures from your own experience. For example, in the story “Graveyard” the narrator has a Japanese Canadian husband, as you do. But the narrator describes her own family as “a family of secrets hidden for generations, grudges held a lifetime.” Somehow, this doesn't square in my own mind with the very positive portrayal of family in many of your other works.

FI As an observer of the human condition, I do not stick to my own experience in my work. Perhaps your questions take this line because I use convincing detail. If this is the case, I am glad it works. If I were to stick to my own experience, I think my work would be impoverished indeed.

Most of the time, I live like a hermit. I believe that we are all surrounded and enmeshed in many relationships, some of which are good, some not so good, some, at times, surprising. I also did extensive work in psychology in university—particularly Psychology of Perception and Developmental Psychology. And had eight years of nursing behind me before I began to write. Those eight years of working with human behaviour at its most intimate probably contributed enormously to my understanding of the human experience. Then, there is the fact of raising children. I may have learned more from raising two babies than from any other experience I've had.

I do have a Japanese Canadian husband, yes, but I spent about three years reading the history of Japanese Canadians in this country—in texts, on microfiche, in documentation. I advertised in one of the Japanese Canadian newspapers for interview subjects, and interviewed extensively for my story “Flashcards.” I might know the history, but if I don't have authentic detail, I don't write the story. It is important to me to get things right in the background so that the emotional part of the story will work. In “White Butterfly,” I listened to tapes of the shakuhachi over and over, while writing the story. I had been to Japan, and as always, had kept my eyes open.

- SF Several of your short stories—“Foolery,” “P'tit Village” and of course the stories/chapters in *Leaning, Leaning*—are set in rural Quebec. I know that you are writing about a time that is only fifty or so years in the past, yet the village life you are describing seems so remote. Do you feel that you are chronicling a lost past?
- FI Not as remote as you might think. I am often in small Quebec villages, and some things haven't changed that much. For instance, while writing *Leaning*, I went back to my own village and met some of the older people who had been there when I was a child. Their lives haven't altered too much, because they have never left. Others did leave, and their lives would be quite different—as is my own. What has probably changed the most is education for the children. That would be more standardized now than my own was. I probably had a fairly unique experience in that I attended three one-room schools before I was in grade five. That was the decade after the Second World War, and money was just beginning to be put forth for the building of new schools. For some reason, children of my age were sent from one school to another in the country before a local school was built that could house us all.

As for chronicling a lost past, that would be the Duplessis era, which is definitely gone. I know it well, and tried to stay true to it in my book. That was one of the things I tried to accomplish in *Leaning* as well as in my short story “P’tit Village.” The mood of the citizens, of the priest-directed village, of the overpowering Catholic Church in the background, of the seeds of differences between English and French.

- SF I can’t think of many Anglophone writers who have written in such detail about Quebec life. Do you read a lot of Québécois literature? Do you see yourself as kind of straddling a border between francophone and anglophone writing?
- FI I have certainly read and studied literature from Quebec. I don’t expect that Quebec writers are aware of me, however. At least I have never heard anything to that effect.

I suppose I do straddle a border, especially now, by living in Ottawa. But the place of my heart is Quebec, where I spent almost twenty years (age 4–21 and then back again to attend McGill when I was 23, and then I taught nursing on St. Urbain Street in Montreal at the Royal Edward Chest Hospital). My husband and I eloped in Montreal. The straddling part that I’m aware of is south-eastern Ontario and Quebec. That would be because my large extended family (families of both parents) mostly remained in the Belleville, Ontario region. I frequently visit family members in that city and, of course, I did set *Deafening* partly in Belleville and partly in Deseronto, Ontario.

- SF Another kind of border you straddle is that between Euro-Canadian culture and the Japanese Canadian experience. In the story “Flashcards” (in *Man without Face*) you describe the internment of the Japanese Canadians. The form of this story is what one might call reconstructed oral history. How did it come about? What were the sources?
- FI I placed ads in a couple of newspapers, and put the word out to the Japanese Canadian community that I hoped to interview Nisei and Sansei. I also flew my late mother-in-law from B.C. to Ottawa, so that I could interview her. I gathered up as many detailed stories as I could and decided to create and imagine one family with several members. Each member would tell his or her own story as he/she experienced the internment. I created parents, two brothers, a sister, an amalgam of people and experiences that I had been listening to. I felt that it was important to get these stories down in as powerful a way as I was capable of telling them.

“Flashcards” might look like oral history, but in fact it is a story very much crafted from my own structural improvisation. And the work required enormous research. I’m certain that I spent over a year collecting material for this. I wanted each small story to add up to something larger. Each story is turned in the palm the way one would hold up a flashcard and then turn it over and go on to the next.

- SF I want to turn now to *Deafening*. It is clear from the book itself and from what you have written about it (for example, your article in the *Globe and Mail* [Dec. 20, 2003: R1, R5]) that a great deal of research went into this book. When and where did the book start for you?
- FI I began to think about the beginnings of this book in 1996 while I was still writing *Leaning, Leaning Over Water*. I was visiting Belleville, Ontario when I decided to stop in at the old residential school for the deaf, now called Sir James Whitney School. This was an unplanned visit, entirely spontaneous. I just drove into the grounds while I was passing. My own grandmother had lived at the school when it was called The Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, though I did not know her exact years of attendance when I walked into the place. I learned that in 1913 the name was changed to the Ontario School for the Deaf. (Our large extended family has always referred to the place as the OSD.) In any case, it was that first visit to the school that tugged me back. From the beginning, I was intrigued by the place, primarily because I began to imagine what life must have been like for my own grandmother. It is not easy to imagine one’s grandmother as a child, especially if one has no information—and my late grandmother had never talked to me about her childhood.

I was given a tour of the buildings and grounds during that first visit, and I was permitted to wander around and take photos. I guess I knew, when I drove away, that I would be returning. The place had huge attraction for me: the old Victorian buildings, the age of the place, the darkness, the possible and probable secrets, the history, the lives of thousands of children who were isolated and segregated from their families and communities and who virtually grew up in the company of one another, with no trips home permitted except during the summer months.

- SF What motivated you to put so much research into what must have been in the beginning just an idea—did you know where it was all leading?
- FI I had no idea what I was getting into in terms of research. If I had, perhaps I wouldn’t have embarked. Nor, at the time, did I know that I would

be getting into First World War research or that I was about to begin the study of American Sign Language. That was all ahead of me, and unfolded in the way that life does—entirely unexpectedly. One discovery leads to another and, before you can change course, you are embarked on a long journey during which you cannot at any point turn back.

SF Why is there so much about World War I in the book? I ask this just because you could have written a novel that focused only on your grandmother, on the particular experience of the deaf among the hearing. But about half the book leaves the southern Ontario world of Grania and takes place on the Western Front. What motivated you to divide the book this way, between Grania and her young husband, Jim?

FI The answer comes from the research itself. I set myself the task of reading the school newspapers printed at the school. I chose, in a more or less arbitrary way, the years 1900–1915 as a starting point. The newspapers came out of the school print shop and contained material of enormous interest to me. What fascinated me the most was what the children themselves had written. I discovered a few writings by my own grandmother and was very excited by this, and set her works aside for the family. But I carried on reading because of the children's voices. I could see that they were, in many ways, telling their own stories in a unique language and from a unique time. Their voices literally shouted to be heard. It was when I reached the fall of 1914 in the newspaper reading that I also began to understand how the life of every child in the place was affected by the war. Fathers, brothers, cousins and uncles marched off to that war. The entire tone of the news changed. Everyone was reporting individual war stories which directly affected each family. The editorials became high-handed and war-centred. The children's home communities were raising materials to send to the "poor Belgian refugees." All of the news for the next five years dealt directly or indirectly with war.

I felt, pretty quickly, that I could not possibly set a book during this period and pretend that the war did not exist. That would have been a pollyanna book, indeed. So I stepped in, without caution, and kept wading forward.

As for the structural decisions—I suppose those resulted from my concerns of theme. I always work from theme and knew from the beginning that this would be a book about sound and silence, love and loss, hope and despair. I was particularly interested in how hope can

come from the idea of emptiness. One creation led to another, and after making the decision to have the main character, Grania, grow up in the place and become a young adult, I decided to have her meet a young hearing man. What young hearing men did in those days was go to war, so that was pretty inevitable.

SF Could you tell us a bit about how you proceeded? Did you proceed with a plan, or was your method intuitive?

FI I had no plan. That is for sure. But I began to enjoy finding family information along the way, and shelved that part of things, because my emphasis was not on family but on creating story. I knew that I'd have to learn the social and cultural background of the times in order to set the book at the turn of the last century. I also wanted to be comfortable with the language of the period (and, of course, I was learning a brand new language at the same time—American Sign Language—so that I could interview deaf men and women).

Once I made the decisions about including the war, I began to meet historians and experts, attended lectures, visited the archives of the Canadian War Museum, interviewed veterans, read dozens and dozens of histories and memoirs. I did this in an entirely random fashion, and had two large milk cartons, one for war material, one for material about deafness.

The book set up parallel experiences for me. In some ways, I was learning about my own family history, but my priority was to create a war novel about a young deaf woman and her hearing husband. The later, structural decisions, pretty well fell out of the material. I always work in an organic fashion and let one thing lead to another. I never have a plot or a plan ahead of time. But I walk a lot, and I dream about the work in progress, and I solve problems away from the work. Because of the complexity and length of the book, this all took a great deal of time and much moving around of material.

SF Each chapter in *Deafening* begins with an epigraph. Can you tell us a bit about the epigraphs and how you found and chose them? I am particularly interested in the epigraphs from *The Canadian*.

FI *The Canadian* was first called *The Canadian Mute*, but the word mute was dropped at the time of the change of the school name in 1913 (dumb and mute were both dropped from the official lexicon). The school newspaper and others like it were important to deaf students as well as to the greater North American deaf community. I quickly learned that

these bi-monthly papers were exchanged and sent out to other schools for the deaf all over the continent. Also, graduates from the school kept in touch, subscribed, and occasionally sent back items of interest. So there was a community “feel” to the paper, and the community was a wide-ranging one.

On a practical note, the reason there was a print shop at all in these old schools was so that deaf boys could be trained to be typesetters. There was little work for young deaf men about to graduate, and, because their visual acuity enabled them to be very good type setters, many were able to obtain positions because of the number of newspapers using hand-set type at the time. Also, noise in print shops was extremely loud, and deaf men and boys could work in the shops without damage to their hearing.

Each issue of the paper had one or two entire pages devoted to student writings, and I quickly became fascinated with these. I wrote down the paragraphs that were most interesting to me, and later tried to fit in some that were appropriate to chapter content. I hoped that each would add a note of interest that I would not be able to invent. I wanted the epigraphs to set scene and to provide actual detail of the time—but always from the perspective of a deaf child.

- SF Why did you choose to make Jim a stretcher-bearer, rather than an infantryman?
- FI I have a medical background, myself, and have never lost interest in this area. It was easy for me to use the language of medical personnel, because the language also belongs to me. Also, I knew that this area had not been covered in other novels. Some of the histories I read were about my own institutions—for example, the history of Number One Canadian General Hospital; the history of medical units made up of members from the Montreal General Hospital and McGill, both of which I attended as a student. So, in part, it was learning something of the history of my own academic background at the same time. Some of these stories and histories are truly moving. Of course, I also read hundreds of documents in the archives of the War Museum—letters, telegrams, memoirs. And I was shown examples of First World War surgeon’s kits, medical paraphernalia, and actual World War I stretchers.
- SF It seems to me that you give a very balanced picture of what the war meant, both to the men overseas and to their families at home. For example, several secondary characters, like Grew the barber, lose sons in

the war. Grania's sister Tress must cope with a husband who comes home shell-shocked. And the influenza epidemic also appears in your novel. Was this quite deliberate on your part—to show the range of consequences that the war had?

- FI Yes, I did want to show the range as well as the magnitude of what was happening at the time. But I also wanted to show how innocent boys who knew nothing about what they might be getting into, went tearing off to that war without a second thought (at the beginning). Every community in Canada was affected, and in similar ways. Some men went missing, more than 60,000 died, some were gassed, or were mutilated and returned, some went mad. I heard one of my elderly aunts say that one of her cousins had “never been right in the head after the war.” One of my grandfather's cousins was lost at the Somme, and when I visited the Vimy Monument in France, I immediately found his name as I walked up the steps to that huge and impressive structure. What I was trying to show was that the war affected everyone—most certainly the women and men left at home and those who had to deal with the young men returning. I learned, too, that thousands of men were deafened by the noise of that terrible artillery war. Sign Language and Lip Reading courses were set up for them in the same Belleville school (the OSD) my grandmother had attended, and were taught by the same teachers.
- SF Did you ever talk to your grandparents about the war? Was your grandfather a veteran?
- FI Unfortunately, I never had a chance to discuss the war with my grandparents. My grandfather died in the early 1970s. He was too young to join up when the war broke out, but his older brother served in the artillery for three years and wrote home continually (so the story goes), telling him not to join up when he came of age. Others of their cousins were killed, or gassed and returned home, only to die very young. My grandfather was conscripted in early 1918, but was still training in England when the war ended in 1918. He returned to Canada in 1919.
- SF Over the last few years, a surprising number of Canadian authors have turned to World War I—Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, Jack Hodgins' *Broken Ground*, Alan Cumyn's *The Sojourn*, to name just a few. Why do you think this has happened?
- FI My theory about this is that this was our grandfathers' war. And we are of an age to write about it. All of us who have done so have been writing for a number of years, and we seem to be ready and willing to tackle the

material. It is pretty difficult material to deal with, and I can say this first hand. It soon became obvious to me, when I was writing the book, that just about every file I read was going to have a sad ending. That was almost a given. But I kept on because I felt that it was important to tell the stories—especially while I still had access to collective memory.

- SF What works about World War I did you read to prepare for *Deafening*? Were there works that particularly interested you? For example, had you read Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy before you embarked on *Deafening*?
- FI Mostly, I read histories and documents. Also memoirs. I loved reading the memoirs that came out of the period—"in his own words" sort of thing. And the letters provided direct emotional content. I also read journals in the archives of the Canadian War Museum because I wanted to follow one particular unit through the war—once I narrowed the field to medical/stretchers bearer/Canadian field ambulance unit.

As for other novels, I had seen the film "Regeneration" and stayed away as much as possible from Pat Barker's theme so that I could create something entirely different. I read her trilogy long after I had prepared the war sections of my own book. Also Sebastian Faulks—I read *Birdsong*, but not until the end of my own work. I read his World War II novel, *Charlotte Gray*, after finishing *Deafening*.

What I was most interested in when I was beginning my own book was the poetry of the period. I read the British war poets first, and then the Canadian poets after that. I discovered and purchased a number of rare books of our own war literature, and went through everything I could find. But most of these were memoir/poetry/history/unit histories.

I had read *The Wars* in the 1970s but did not look at it at all during the writing of my book. I did not want anyone else's influence or voice leaning into my work. I did read Jack Hodgins' book when it first came out. I have not yet read *The Stone Carvers* or *The Sojourn*. Those both came out while I was writing *Deafening*. Now that I am nearly finished the tour and promotion of *Deafening*, I hope to catch up.

- SF As in your earlier fiction, there is a certain amount of family history that seems to form the bedrock of *Deafening*. Do you feel that you have "written out" that source or are there still more stories to tell?
- FI Well, as I mentioned earlier, I kept setting aside family history documents that turned up during my research. I am the "keeper of the papers" in our family, so these things do interest me. I also took advantage of the information I was finding with regard to Irish settlement in

Tyendinaga Township, and integrated some of that background history into the book. As for the epigraphs from *The Canadian*, I chose only one that my grandmother wrote and used it at the beginning of the book. That was entirely as a tribute to her.

I have no idea if there are more stories to tell from this source. If there are, they won't be similar, that's for sure. I should add that many people have called or written and asked me to write a sequel to *Deafening*. They want to hear Tress and Kenan's story next!

SF I find it so interesting that you as a writer—a person who works with words—learned American Sign Language to prepare for this book and, to judge from your account of learning it, found ASL fascinating. Can you talk a bit about your experiences learning ASL?

FI I love languages anyway, so it was natural for me to be excited by ASL. I needed it in order to meet and interview deaf persons, and to work with the deaf archivist at the Belleville school. But ASL is a visual-gestural language, so it was entirely different for me and I felt that it was using a new area of my brain. It also opened an awareness of an entire community to me, a community with which I'll be involved in the long term. So I have learned at many levels.

Of course, it was frustrating, too. But I was prepared to put up with the frustrations. I determined that whatever I could use would go into the book. When I wrote about Grania learning “the sign language” when she first went to live at the school, I gave her the frustrations I had experienced while I was trying to learn the language.

The development of ASL in North America has a pretty interesting history and I enjoyed learning about that. Learning the language somewhat has also enabled me to visit many schools during my book tour. I've addressed the students at Gallaudet University in Washington, in Rochester, in Belleville, in Edinburgh and Hamilton, Scotland—just outside Glasgow. I've also been interviewed extensively by deaf writers and students—in Canada, the US, in London, England, in Scotland, Belgium and the Netherlands. My life is much enriched by working (and playing) with the deaf community.

SF *Deafening* has had wonderful reviews in Canada. It seems to be a book that people respond to very strongly. I heard, for example, a bookseller in Vancouver praising it as the book she recommends to her customers without reservation—and they all love it. How has it been received internationally?

FI It is being wonderfully received, but all of the translations are not yet published. I just returned from touring in Amsterdam and Antwerp; in London, England, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dublin. I travelled throughout Canada and the US between September and December 2003, before I left for Europe. The book is now out in all of the English-speaking countries of the world, as well as Germany and Brazil. I've also seen it in bookstores in Denmark and Switzerland. The other translations will follow later in 2004, including, by the way, the French translation from Lattes.

SF What are you working on now?

FI I have a collection of short stories, "Poached Egg on Toast" coming out in September 2004. So I've been really busy preparing and editing that manuscript. This will be a collection of new and selected stories—about 22 or 23 in all. Seven or eight of the stories are new and uncollected.

Now that the story manuscript has been turned in, I am returning to the novel I began in Geneva last summer, 2003. It is called "Celebration," and will be published in the fall of 2006. That's about all I can say about it for the moment, as it's in the writing and developing stages now.

