

**WRITE**

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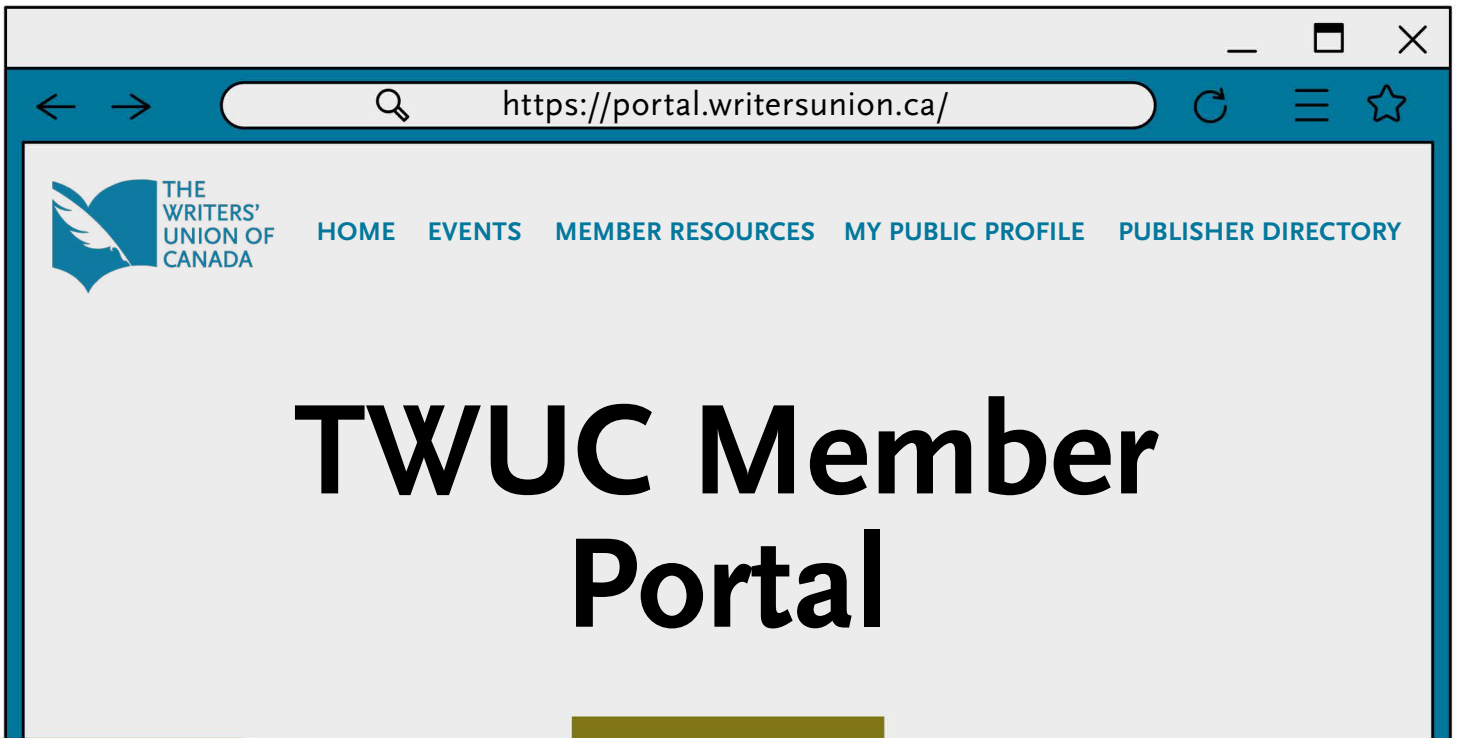
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# There Is No Writing Gene

Or, what I learned teaching adult writing classes

BY CYNTHIA REYES



One by one, my new students enter the room. A woman with greying hair smiles, her face so cherubic I can picture her as a little girl. A tall man strides in right behind her, head down.

Everyone, all eight, sit around the big table, waiting. It's the first session of a memoir writing course I'm teaching at the Bowmanville Older Adults Association, a learning centre for people over 55. I tell them what to expect from the course, and me, and what I expect from them. They're professionals and business people, most retired.

The one thing they have in common? They've "never written anything before."

To reduce the tension, I tell a joke about my powers of observation, like the time I took care of a bunch of plants for a vacationing friend, never guessing they were all marijuana.

My audience laughs, but nervously.

"I feel like a fraud," one woman says. "I'm here because my daughter pushed me and paid the registration fee herself. She says I have to write down the stories I share at family dinners. And since I'm 75 years old now..."

The others nod.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," the tall man says, rubbing his hands together or wringing them. "But my friends say I tell interesting stories. The thing is..." He pauses. "I've never written anything — except for the occasional cheque."

Laughter greets this last part. They can relate.

## "Tell me something"

This isn't my first time giving this course. "Give me eight weeks," I'd boasted to my husband when my fourth course ended. "Eight weeks, and I can teach anyone to write."

"Almost anyone," I corrected myself later. *Let's not tempt the fates.*

Now, as I watch my students' anxious faces, I nearly panic. Am I looking at my "almost?"

Was I about to learn the fear I had when I first began teaching — that some people simply lack "the writing gene" — was justified?

"Tell me a story," I say instead.

Silence.

"Tell me a story about something that happened to you recently," I continue. "It must have a beginning, middle, and end. Something must happen and there must be an outcome. And don't forget: you're the central character."

*What?*

"You have five minutes to think about it," I say.

One after another, they share their stories; every one interesting.

## Memory alone is not enough

The word "educate" comes from the Latin *educare*, often defined as "to bring out, lead forth."

If my students are to succeed at writing, if writing isn't some kind of innate talent, but a learnable skill, I need to focus more on "bringing out" than teaching.

So, that first morning, I ask the group to identify the key features of a well-told story.

"Strong characters," someone offers.

"Action!" says another. "And reaction."

The list grows. It becomes both guide and yardstick.

In and between sessions, the students write. Using the list, we critique their stories and those of other writers. Along the way, we identify new writing techniques. Each week, the writing and discussion take on greater depth, complexity.

Memory alone is not enough — the most engaging memoirs result from fact as remembered, imagination mined, insight delivered. Imagination's smallest brushstrokes are similes and metaphors: windows allowing new ways of seeing. Insight often comes from a simple "What if?"

My students discover they're both personal historians and artists. By week three, individual styles begin to emerge. Despite my boast to my husband, I'm careful to mostly coach and nurture.



By week five, some have discerned their memoir's main theme. Within eight weeks, the stories are so compelling, they draw laughter, gasps, tears and, sometimes, profound silence.

### **New ideas, new questions, new growth**

After a break, we continue with the second section of the course. I ask, "Read any good books lately?"

Everyone has an answer.

"Tell me what made them compelling."

In the silence, I pick up my marker and head to the flipchart.

"A great cover and opening line!" someone says.

"Suspense!"

"Strong character!"

"Clear writing!"

Word by word, the new list develops.

We revisit themes, characters' journeys. We critique books, from title and front-cover illustration to back-cover blurbs. We read opening lines, chapter endings, tables of contents. Everyone critiques. Everyone writes, urgently now. Each week brings new questions, new ideas, new growth.

Even before their draft manuscripts are complete, some students win writing competitions. Their books, many completed within a year, will be self-published, traditionally published, or printed only for family and friends, an important piece of legacy.

They've done something they or others once thought impossible. I, meanwhile, am thrilled. And relieved. Before I started to teach writing, I believed more in innate skill — that idea of "the writing gene." But that's not the way it works. It's my ninth course, and I still haven't hit my "almost." *But let's not tempt the fates.*

*Cynthia Reyes has published seven books including the trio of memoirs A Good Home, An Honest House, and Twigs in My Hair, and the Myrtle the Purple Turtle children's picture-book series. In a previous life, she produced more than 100 episodes of network television. Her programs and projects at CBC TV won her national and international awards. She coaches writers and, in her own writing, tries to practice what she teaches.*

# When the Lights Go Out

Indigenous writers on the apocalypse as unraveling and renewal

BY WAUBGESHIG RICE



I was at my dad's place on the reserve when the lights went out. It was a warm, sunny day in August 2003, and I was house-sitting for him and my stepmom while they were away on summer vacation. My two younger brothers were there too, and we were puzzled at first by the outage. There were no high winds or storms to knock out the power. With the TV dark, we eventually got bored, and drove from Wasauksing First Nation into nearby Parry Sound, Ontario, only about a 10-minute drive away.

When we got to town, we immediately noticed that all the traffic lights were out and the stores were closed. We stopped on the main drag to chat with some buddies. One of them had heard on the radio that it was a widespread blackout, and that most big cities in northeastern North America were in the dark. No one knew how it happened or when power would be restored. Alarmed by this news, my brothers and I drove right back to the rez and started forming a survival plan.

We thought it was the end of the world.

That evening, after counting cans of food, gathering firewood, and checking in on relatives, we started planning for the next morning, which we believed would be day one of the post-apocalypse. We planned to carry on as we had in the afternoon: ensuring loved ones were safe and provided for, offering help where needed elsewhere in the community, and securing food and water. We took turns listing the people around us whom we could help or who could help us. While taking stock of the resourceful family members and friends in our community, we reminded ourselves that we'd be all right if the blackout dragged on. Our ancestors — even as recently as a couple of generations ago — had lived well enough on the land without the modern luxuries of electricity and telecommunications.

That revelation comforted us, and we slept soundly that night. We awoke the next morning and prepared our fishing rods and tackle because we believed fish would be our primary menu item and protein source for as long as the lights and phones were out. But shortly before leaving our dad's place to go down to the water, the power came back on, and within minutes we were tuned into CBC TV to see the footage coming in from Toronto, Ottawa,

Boston, New York, Detroit, and more. There were long lineups at gas stations. Grocery store shelves were empty. Pedestrians directed traffic at busy intersections. But power had been restored in many places, and the cause of the blackout was under investigation.

Watching the video of unease in the big cities, juxtaposed with our calm response on the rez, reassured me that I was in the right place for a potentially cataclysmic moment. A few days later, I returned to Toronto — where I primarily lived and worked as a freelance journalist — and heard more stories of both mild chaos and communal support during the blackout in the Big Smoke. While a major apocalyptic threat never truly materialized, I resolved to escape the city for the rez if something similar happened in the future.

And then I considered writing a story about that.

**“Watching the video of unease in the big cities juxtaposed with our calm response on the rez reassured me that I was in the right place.”**

## **Post-apocalyptic, dystopian... or neither?**

Fifteen years after what came to be known as the Northeast Blackout of 2003, my novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow* was published by ECW Press. It's about a fictional Anishinaabe First Nation in far-northern Ontario that experiences a mysterious blackout just before the onset of winter. The outage isn't a major threat at first, because the community members are adept at survival without electricity or communications technologies. But as the weeks drag on in the dark, things start to unravel, and mysterious visitors from a big city in the south bring chaos when they arrive.



The response to the novel was overwhelmingly positive, prompting a sequel, *Moon of the Turning Leaves*, which was published in October 2023. For me, the big blackout more than two decades ago sparked a saga that changed the course of my life.

Both novels are regularly categorized as post-apocalyptic or dystopian in catalogues, bookstores, media, and literary discussions. They are labels I accept, having been inspired by other novels in the post-apocalyptic canon since my youth. But I didn't set out to write a typical or classic post-apocalyptic story. I didn't see the saga I had playing out in my mind as one about the finality of collapse. I saw it as an opportunity for renewal and growth, fuelled by resilience and the lived experience of Indigenous nations who've already survived apocalyptic colonialism. Whereas end-of-the-world tropes are generally about endings, I wanted to write about new beginnings.

My approach with *Moon of the Crusted Snow* wasn't original or new. When I started dreaming up the story, there was already a growing body of novels by Indigenous authors that explored renewal after the end, like the modern classics *The Marrow Thieves*, by Cherie Dimaline, and *Future Home of the Living God*, by the legendary Louise Erdrich — both of which greatly inspired my own writing.

Exploring renewal, and celebrating survival and resilience, are common themes throughout Indigenous literature regardless of genre, and it could be easily argued that all Indigenous literature is post-apocalyptic: borne from and existing in a dystopian state created through the attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples and the theft of their homelands.

### Rethinking finality

To further understand this broader, more layered view of an apocalypse and its aftermath, it's important to contextualize the concept of an "ending" through an Indigenous lens. I wanted to discuss that further with my peers who are Indigenous authors, so I reached out to Joshua Whitehead, award-winning Oji-Cree author from Peguis First Nation in Manitoba. His works include the acclaimed novel *Jonny Appleseed*, the poetry collection *full-metal indigiqueer*, and the collection *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*, which he edited. He believes the fluidity and relativity of the notion of an ending is inherent in Indigenous culture and language.

"I think constantly of *kihtwâm* and *ekosi*, two words, in Nish [Anishinaabemowin] and Nêhiyaw, a form of 'goodbye' that signals 'see you again, see you soon, in time,' that immediately tell me that finality is non-existent in my languages," he says. "This comforts me as

someone incredibly preoccupied with and paranoid of 'the end.'" He adds that as stewards of the land who have survived colonial violence over generations, Indigenous people can experience apocalypse as gradual degradation rather than cataclysmic moments, and as a result, we tell and write our end-of-the-world stories differently.

"As... survivors of settler colonization and further, with the intersections of queerness, doubly survivors of world-ending events, we are primed for thinking of what activates the verb 'end,'" he says. "This I think is where Indigenous writers excel, for the ending of the world is not a singular, grand catastrophe (as in an asteroid or nuclear war, for which it surely could be) but rather a slow, wilting necrophy — a neologism for the state of being in decay, death, dying. It's a splicing of a sign, untethering of signifier and signified, it's the loss of name and memory, unbuttoning of kinship structures, and the highrise of hierarchies that remove us from our grounded realities through avenues of heteropatriarchy, biowarfare, late-stage capitalism, settler colonization, and the infusion of these imperial powers into our cultural practices under the visage of 'traditionalism.' There's much to be said of the 'end' from this vantage point."

**“Indigenous people can experience apocalypse as gradual degradation rather than cataclysmic moments, and as a result, we tell and write our end-of-the-world stories differently.”**

It's a spirit and sentiment Whitehead and the many contributors to *Love After the End* — including Nathan Niigan Noodin Adler, Nazbah Tom, jaye simpson, Adam Garnet Jones, Darcie Little Badger — wanted to nurture and boost in the anthology.

"Queer, trans, and Two-Spirit Indigenous peoples have already survived an onslaught of endings; dystopia is not a future orienting oncoming, it was an already," says Whitehead. "And what an abysmal way for thinking of futurity to imagine and create even more destruction, to foresee, or scry, into a future that has further, if not totally, destroyed us. So I thought, why not imagine utopia (not that it was simply binaric, as the stories and authors demonstrate) but as a form of Indigenous futurisms that imagines a rich, fleshy wellness (to quote Audre Lorde)

and joy — even if that joy hinged on the ‘end’ of a world we may only know through our sensorial based forms of knowing via the physical body.”

Whitehead is continuing to explore Indigenous futurisms in fiction. He is currently guest- and- co-editing the forthcoming issue of the *Wíčazo Ša Review* — published by the University of Minnesota Press — focussed on a global Indigenous approach to the genre. He’s also working on his forthcoming novel, called *The Stonewallers*, which he’s been describing as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* meets the *X-Men*.

### “Wonderworks”

With so much historical and cultural context to consider when creating Indigenous literature, the depth and diversity of storytelling across numerous cultures and landscapes can transcend genre labels like “post-apocalyptic” and “speculative.” Writer and scholar Daniel Heath Justice, a member of the Cherokee Nation, has developed his own term for Indigenous writing in these realms. A professor of Critical Indigenous Studies and English at the University of British Columbia, he prefers to call these books “wonderworks.”

“I’ve been interested in how Indigenous writers explore... imaginative horizons, but speculative fiction, and science fiction and fantasy, always felt very vexed to me in terms of categories, because they start from a particular kind of worldview,” he says. “It’s a particular kind of materialist, rationalist, European idea about what reality is that doesn’t necessarily align well with Indigenous experiences and Indigenous worldviews.”

## “Genre labels like speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy can be constraining for Indigenous writers.”

As Justice pondered a better way to describe futuristic or imaginative literature by Indigenous writers, he says the word that kept coming to mind was “wonder.”

“There’s a humility in wonder that doesn’t presume that we know that absolute truth about things, but is open to possibilities,” Justice explains. “And so the concept of ‘wonderworks’ really emerged out of that. It encompasses works we might consider to be fantasy, science fiction, horror — these other speculative genres — but also in a way that understands that the spirit world isn’t necessarily alien to Indigenous worldviews.”

Justice believes genre labels like speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy can be constraining for Indigenous writers because, he says, they’re commercial categories rather than content categories. And when an Indigenous literary work is relegated to a category like science fiction or fantasy, he feels that can strip away substantive issues like erasure of language and tradition due to the brutality of colonialism.

“So I think ‘wonderworks’ and ‘wonderworking’ is a way to kind of free us from that and still be flexible,” Justice says. “That yeah, it accommodates all of these things, and it may accommodate things that we wouldn’t necessarily think of as within the kind of speculative spheres, but still pushes the boundaries of what... a materialist culture considers to be reality.”

### Beyond genre labels

My latest novel, *Moon of the Turning Leaves*, is an imagined reality set 12 years after the blackout that ended the world in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. In the story, I speculate about the future of Anishinaabe communities in the aftermath of Canada’s collapse, and the potential for cultural and social regeneration for a people long denied the sovereignty to determine their collective destiny. When I spoke publicly at events and in interviews after its release last fall, I found myself citing Justice and his “wonderworks” concept regularly. It was very inspiring, validating, and liberating to have a communal term I felt I could carry as my own as an Indigenous author.

I asked Whitehead about where he saw Indigenous literary futurisms heading, beyond the genre labels of post-apocalyptic, dystopian, and so on. “I think we’re all writing towards that next ledge of Indigenous literatures,” he said, leading into a “richer and wilder field of storying” that he sees as a collective movement of peers.

“This may seem feral or mercenary to Western ways of knowing because it is so deeply ingrained with our worldviews, languages, cultural practices (even if we are yet learning or autodidactic) as, in such a way, we are bending our histories with our futurities and we sit in the nexus between this ouroboros — that to me is Indigenous literary futurisms, Indigenous futurisms, and so incredibly hopeful.”

*Waubgeshig Rice is an author and journalist from Wasauksing First Nation. He has written four fiction titles, and his short stories and essays have been published in numerous anthologies. His breakthrough novel, Moon of the Crusted Snow, was published in 2018 and became a national bestseller. The sequel, Moon of the Turning Leaves, was published in October 2023. He lives in Sudbury, Ontario, with his wife and three sons.*



# “Tortured Artist”

And other damaging myths about mental illness and creativity

BY LIANA TANG



Tired eyes. Hands grasping hair. Seemingly being a drink away from death. The tortured artist mythos is alluring. Yet, behind closed doors, the same creators we deify may be under constant strain from their mental illness — those slippery demons who wrap around their necks and choke them like a noose. Because their pain gave birth to their gift. Because being just an artist is never enough.

I would know because I've lived to tell the tale.

On the outside, my life is filtered through a shiny silver sheen: a traditionally published author and University of Toronto student with a paid three-project comics deal with Comicker Press. I'm also an assistant screenwriter for the film company AllWhat's, recently had one of my poetry chapbooks picked up by Earnshaw Books, and secured an upcoming guest lecture at my own university. Not bad for someone who is 17.

On the inside, good grief... Months would ebb and flow, each day punctuated with a wave of panic attacks. My throat would lock up, my fingers glued to the keyboard while the sky blacked out, tears burning my eyes. At the drop of a heartbeat, I am 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, 15, or 16 again. The numbers and dates stop mattering at some point. Sometimes, I would be 13, washing my hands again in the bathroom under the cool running water. Then, the lacquered wooden door would slide open, and I would jump, feeling the squeeze on the left cheek of my buttocks. The shadowy figure was sketched out by the skin-suit of my perpetrator — someone I trusted and loved for years. Apparently, I was “occupying too much space,” they said.

I was property back then. And, no matter how much I try to prove my worth, I feel like I will always suffocate under the weight of my past.

Growing up, it seemed like mental illness was just another common flu everyone had, something that was never questioned. The struggle was further exacerbated by growing up in Hong Kong, where talking about mental health is hush-hush and asking for help is reserved for the “weak.” So, for God knows how long, I had the bootstrap mentality of just shutting up and picking up my pen. I thought what happened to me made me stronger, wiser, or more “mature.” If I was living in some Greek tragedy, my story defined me because it made my writing real. It strapped me to the harsh reality, as if I'd better understand because I worked for my right to be seen, my right to be heard, my right to a peace of mind.

After all, all great art comes from suffering. Doesn't it? “If I don't [write my book], that means all the damage I got isn't ‘good damage,’ it's just damage. I have gotten nothing out of it, and all those years, I was miserable for nothing.” When I was in my senior year of high school, I first heard this quote from Diane, speaking to Princess Carolyn in the animated comedy drama *Bojack Horseman*. It shattered my everything. For the first time since forever... I was speechless. My words failed me.

I vividly remember staring at the ceiling in my bed at midnight, under the cold covers, asking myself the same question Diane asks Carolyn: “What was it for?” If I don't turn my damage into something greater, then why have I been so, so depressed? What did the people around me suffer for?

Often, the media fetishizes a female character's sadness because it somehow makes them tragically beautiful. Think black-and-white photos of a noose, sad quotes, and aesthetics that draw on pain — all romanticizing mental illnesses, depicting them as edgy or poetic.

This romanticization of mental illness can be found in film and TV, such as in *Girl, Interrupted*, where the suicidal main character would spout poetic one-liners about wanting to know “what's it like to want to die.” Or in *13 Reasons Why* where it shows a graphic step-by-step method of Hannah Baker's suicide, linking her death to a virtue because she gets her revenge post-death on those who wronged her.

In reality, something like mental illness is just another wound, damage. I was only able to publish my co-authored young adult novel, *Stuck In Her Head* (Earnshaw Books, 2023), when my scars had started mending, not when I was calculating the falling height from the top of a four-storey building. It's only through realizing that it's safe to be me — a teen who goes on hours-long tangents about trashy anime, who breaks into song in the shower, who is needlessly competitive in Roblox speedruns — that I can finally tell my story. I learned to stop being ashamed of my own emotions, my own body, my own

past, and it's only when I owned my existence like a badge of honour that I did more than just survive.

We must stop pushing the narrative that misery is some great trial to overcome for our grand character arc. This means stopping this romanticization of pain and realizing it for what it is: hurt without a full stop. While there may be no Prince Charming to save you, no incredible happily ever after, maybe we can finally breathe once we look outside to see the colours of a new day.

*Born and raised in Hong Kong, Liana Tang is a teen writer who has been published or is forthcoming in 60+ publications. She is the co-author of a YA novel, a screenwriter, and marketing advisor for an upcoming 2025 feature film, and a university guest lecturer. She has recently been invited to Vancouver for a book event. You can find her on Instagram @lianatang.yantung.*



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