

salonbooks

The semi-literate century

Douglas Glover, award-winning writer of 'Elle,' wants us to work harder at telling our stories. Review by Laurie Glenn Norris

Douglas Glover, the award-winning Canadian writer of fiction, short stories and essays carries within him a huge sense of duty both to the craft of writing and to the language, and I, who likes to call myself a writer, stands before it in awe.

As I read his newest book, *Attack of the Copula Spiders and Other Essays on Writing*, I became keenly aware that writers, no matter the genre, can be divided roughly into two groups. The first group believes it has some interesting stories to tell and attempts to get them down on paper. The second group, to which Glover belongs, is fully immersed in the act of writing.

These writers care, not only about the story, but also about how it's told and the consequences of its telling. They care about grammar, words and the construction of each sentence. They become

exceptional writers by watching themselves, and other writers, write.

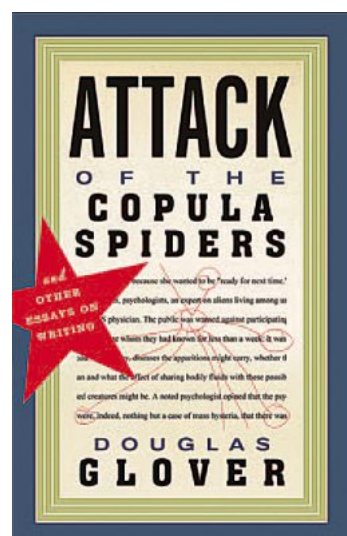
Glover pulls no punches here. He is a writing teacher who bemoans the current state of writing. He claims, and I agree, that we live in a post-literate and semi-literate world where lazy writers create "rough outlines of stories" instead of the real thing. Grammar is no longer considered important and most people couldn't care less that they are merely communicating, unable to differentiate between good and bad writing, and unaware of such a thing as a "literate sensibility."

Attack of the Copula Spiders is a practical guide for anyone serious about writing. Glover's first chapter, "How to Write a Novel," alone is worth the price of the book. "The Drama of Grammar" outlines the importance of knowing the basics and how to use

them – such knowledge really does produce better stories. The last portion of the book is dedicated principally to the writers whom Glover himself admires, including Alice Munro, Cervantes and Juan Rulfo, to name but three. Glover shows us what these writers do to make their work so good, and he tells us how we can do the same.

Attack of the Copula Spiders is a challenging read. Glover expects us to work hard here, to think about what he lays out before us, just as we should work hard to tell our stories.

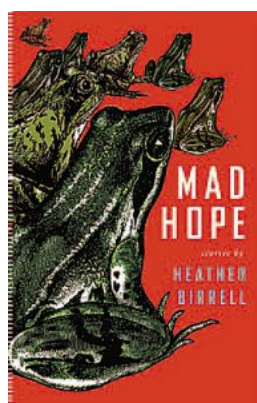
This is a book for all writers and for any creative writing class syllabus. It needs to be read more than once, to glean all that can be learned from it. I certainly will read it again before my next big writing project, in my own attempt to ward off those pesky copula spiders. **S**



Attack of the Copula Spiders by Douglas Glover, Biblioasis, 216 pages

Laurie Glenn Norris is a freelance writer based in Keswick Ridge. Her latest book 'Haunted Girl: Esther Cox and the Great Amherst Mystery' will be released in May.

Mad Hope by Heather Birrell, Coach House, 200 pages



Heather Birrell is madly hopeful. Her latest short story collection, *Mad Hope*, is a testament to marriage, sex, motherhood and death. Her Toronto-centric stories weave a tapestry of the human condition, threading together tethers of the universal with an artful banality.

Stories such as *Wanted Children*, *No One Really Wants to Listen* and *Frogs* leap out. The series of illustrated frogs on the cover and the book's epigraph *The Frog*, merely hint at the symbolic significance.

The story itself, *Frogs*, croaks with mad hope.

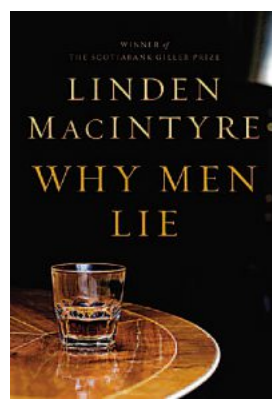
In *Dominoes*, Maddie, an aspiring writer recites the rule for good fiction writing: "More than one death is not a good idea. It's more weight than the story can bear. But the problem with deaths is that they line up like dominoes in the heart. Nudge at one, they all come clattering down."

Birrell breaks her own rule, exploring several deaths in *Mad Hope*, though it's her Journey-Prize winning short story, *Brianna Susanna Alana*, that shines. Three sisters – six-year-old Brianna, 10-year-old Susanna, and 12-year-old Alana – grapple with a murder that happens up the street from their house. Birrell's depth and insight into the imaginations of children is mindfully distorted and wildly true.

Birrell is a writer with audacity, flair and vision. *Mad Hope* hosts a sense of whimsy, a keen eye for details and precise craftsmanship. Birrell has an exceptional knack for the short story. Where the cast of characters in *I know you are but what am I?* (Coach House, 2004), sought meaning, *Mad Hope* captures the sheer madness of it all. **S**

Shannon Webb-Campbell for the *Telegraph-Journal*

Why Men Lie by Linden MacIntyre, Random House, 384 pages



Multi-award-winning author Linden MacIntyre has followed up his 2009 Giller Prize-winner, *The Bishop's Man*, with a novel that borrows characters from his last book. Naturally, the success of *The Bishop's Man* placed a lot of follow-up pressure on MacIntyre, and in that regard he's succeeded. *Why Men Lie* is as strong a novel, but a more rewarding, insightful read.

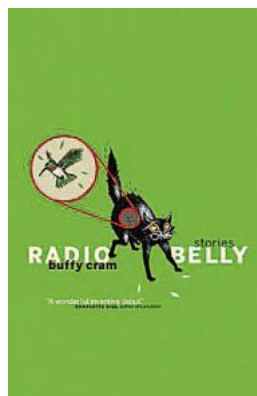
The main character here is the sister of Father Duncan from

The Bishop's Man. Effie is a tenured professor who embodies the kind of strong, independent woman a middle-aged man is easily attracted to. As the story unfolds, with a skillful pacing that draws you in more and more with each turn of the page, several men gravitate to Effie's charm. Among them are an adulterous ex-husband, possibly lurking for a second chance, and a man from her past who has never really settled down with a woman. While the former has deceived her with the openly disgraceful deception of infidelity, the other threatens to burn her with the secrecy of lies or withheld truths. As the title implies, it's a book about how men let women down, largely by never living up to the persona they present during courtship.

While it's a female character in the lead role, the novel is more about the physical and mental reformation that happens to men in their 50s, as they grapple with declining virility. *Why Men Lie* is a well-delivered story that speaks powerfully to certain all-too-true dilemmas and dynamics of romantic relationships. **S**

Chad Pelley for the *Telegraph-Journal*

Radio Belly by Buffy Cram, Douglas & McIntyre, 216 pages



Buffy Cram's debut short story collection is full of the stuff publishers salivate over. Oddball characters – a between-careers museum writer; a girl who believes her belly picks up radio – in absurd situations – on a giant island of plastic after the Armageddon; facing a growing hoard of middle-class homeless. Cram's stories, like her characters and situations, are slightly uninged, often choosing inventive quirk over heartfelt truth. But Cram does reach beyond novelty in stories such as *Mineral by Mineral*, where a publishing employee goes off the rails from anger and finds solace in eating dirt. There is something not-so-fun about these more disturbing selections. And Cram shows she doesn't need a smile to be smart, leaving you hungry for more. **S**

Mike Landry, *Telegraph-Journal*

IMPERIAL THEATRE

LORNE ELLIOTT

Thursday, May 3 at 7:30 p.m.

Lorne Elliott is no stranger to Imperial Theatre's stage. The long-time host of CBC Radio's *Madly Off in All Directions* returns with a new one-man show, chock full of music, stories and comedy! This Canadian funnyman will keep you in stitches with his witty observations, silly stories, impeccable delivery and hilarious songs!

This performance will take place in Imperial Theatre's Irving Oil Auditorium. Buy tickets online at www.imperialtheatre.nb.ca or call the Box Office at 674-4100 or 1-800-323-7469.



MEDIA PARTNERS



Not taking the bait



MICHAEL HIGGINS
mysteries & mystics

The Times of London thundered at one point in a review of the latest John Harvey novel that, "no one in Britain is writing better crime fiction." Time to get a new crime fiction reviewer.

Although *Good Bait* has its moments, they are rare and unevenly spaced. The best writing is found in the opening paragraph:

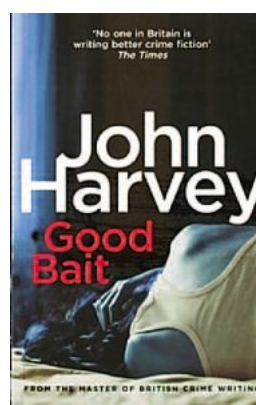
"The face looked back up at her from beneath the ice. Dead eyes, unblinking, their focus defused as if through bottled glass. Off to one side, a small covey of ducks,

uncomprehending, shuffled this way and that. In places, Karen Shields thought, the skin would have stuck fast: the forehead, the bridge of the nose, the chin. Little doubt the substance that had pooled close alongside the head, then frozen, was blood."

This is the first death – mysterious, cruel and haunting – of what will unfold to be many deaths. Detective Chief Inspector Shields will be drawn into a vortex of people trafficking, drug trade, prostitution, gang warfare and criminal misbehaviour at the highest levels of the constabulary. She has her hands full.

In addition, on a parallel track, Detective Inspector Trevor Cordon – in the employ of a different police force – will be drawn into a different vortex involving many of the same crimes but with a quite different focus.

Both detectives are at emotional loose ends – sexually frustrated, full of rage and a strange righteousness and, in their quite separate ways, attractive. Their colleagues find them a puzzle, but they manage to elicit deep loyalty from their much suffering friends and in their pursuit of justice – no matter how unorthodox – they have a common decency, even a certain unsoiled idealism, that makes them



Good Bait by John Harvey, William Heinemann, 346 pages

appealing as coppers.

But Harvey's plot sputters more than it soars. The prose is depressingly pedestrian, the dialogue cliché-laden, and the characters more interesting than they are credible. There is also some sloppy editing and a play on "good bait" that somehow never quite convinces.

Harvey successfully weaves many of the disparate strands together at the conclusion that is satisfying but the labour of reading the novel through to the end provides little reward other than that. Hardly worth the read. **S**

Michael W. Higgins is vice-president for mission and Catholic identity at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn. He is a former president of St. Thomas University.