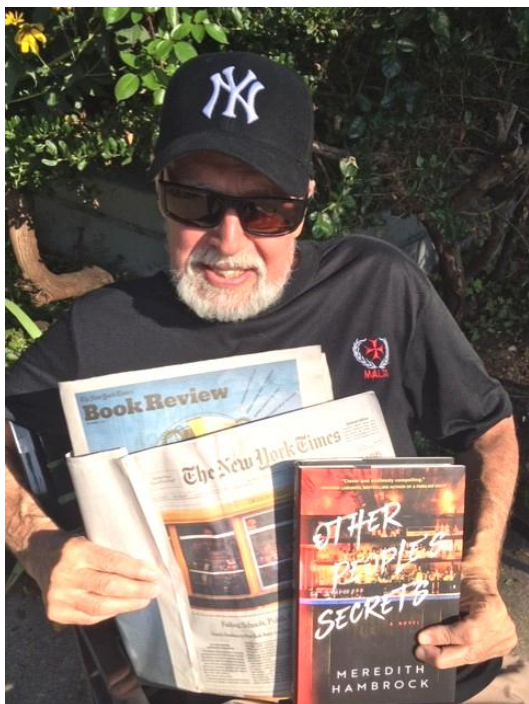


*** Published by Winona Kent**—Crime Writers of Canada 2022 Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Representative—in her CWC Regional Newsletter, August 2022 edition.



Bob Harris is a Vancouver writer, book promoter and publicist.

"I love New York," he says. "The Yankees. The New York Times. And the music hits and Broadway shows that originate there. I've only been to NYC once. At 3 o'clock in the morning in a New Jersey taxi cab, when I had a flight layover on my way to Haiti for a meeting with a government minister not long after the 2010 earthquake.

I saw Wall Street, the 911 crater, Times Square, 42nd Street and Central Park. Hardly anybody was around. It was an absolute thrill!"

This month he interviews mystery author and screenwriter Meredith Hambrick.

"Bob Harris is a fantastic interviewer who asked really in-depth questions that helped me get to know my own book better. I revisit his interview before any promotional event I do because it netted me some great talking points." Meredith Hambrick

*** Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with Meredith Hambrick:**

Your debut crime novel *Other People's Secrets* is set at a small town lake country resort. What inspired the story and your choice of setting?

A few years ago, I visited a resort town in Ontario. It was one I'd visited a few times as a child and I was shocked at how much it had changed.

Summers on this lake had once been really bustling, busy, and vibrant and I found that now, about twenty years later the lake was empty. You could get a frozen yogurt without lining up. Shocking, I know.

But seriously, it was the middle of July, peak season and no one was there. In place of people, there were so many new empty lakeside mega mansions no one was using. It really grossed me out and got me thinking about how this area had changed, how that had impacted the people who grew up,

lived, and worked there, and how perhaps my own childhood nostalgia was influencing my point of view.

Were you influenced by real-life incidents? How was the moral dilemma at the heart of your novel born?

I'm always drawn to sloppy, messy, female characters. I read in a George Saunders interview that the characters we are drawn to are the types of people we are trying to redeem because when we write we are, essentially trying to redeem ourselves.

So in a way, I think my writing is always trying to make room for messy women in the world, for them to be allowed to be who they are without apology. Though of course, personal growth is always on the table.

As for the moral dilemma, well, I think it just came out of developing these characters and examining their lives. But I think editing this book during COVID really made me think deeply about communities and how we can best look after one another.

How did your protagonist Dumpster Baby emerge? Describe her lifestyle and motivation. Can you give me a glimpse of how Baby's essential nature is revealed by her choices in pursuit of her desires?

Dumpster Baby emerged out of this darkly comedic idea of a woman who was struggling with self-definition because she was born in a dumpster. Instead of turning away from that, she leans in and claims that identity and all the messiness that comes with it. What seems like a shameless joke is her attempt at owning something that is actually incredibly dark and painful.

And well, Baby was raised by an emotionally withholding alcoholic on a lake who works at a resort, so she becomes an alcoholic that works at a resort. She's, in a way, someone who doesn't know how to be, but she knows who she doesn't want to be, which is something she calls a "City Bitch," that is, a put-together, confident woman who has control over her life and her circumstances. Basically, everything Baby is not.

Baby's happiest and most comfortable living and working at this shit resort that's falling apart, with the same friends she's had since kindergarten, repeating the same patterns over and over again, fighting to keep her life exactly as it is. And everything she does is an attempt to preserve that.

But we have to change, right? Evolution is our birthright. I think when we take a look at what's going on, especially in the United States, fighting

against change can be an incredibly toxic, terrible, violent act that hurts people, especially poor people.

An interesting mix of social issues surface in *Other People's Secrets* – alcoholism, social alienation, wealth gap and corruption, and the illicit drug trade – can you expand on how you arrived at these choices?

As a crime writer, I think for me it's so important to (at least try to) center the human being in my work – to take a look at all of the socio-economic conditions that have an impact on someone's life. This might be naïve but I think a truly evil person is very rare; I don't think there's any one simple reason that your average person commits a crime and I try to bring compassion to all characters in my work, even the so-called antagonists. I'm certainly not perfect, but I think it's important to try.

On September 30, 2021, Publishers Lunch Deluxe "The Publishing Industry's Essential Daily Read" (Publishers Marketplace) announced your deal, pitched by Abby Saul (The Lark Group) and picked up by Ben LeRoy at New York's Crooked Lane Books. Tell me about your amazing path to publication.

In 2016 I'd written a draft of a novel called *Sympathy for Terrible People* - an upmarket work of fiction about a female stand-up comedian on a road trip with a male comedian she can't stand. I was selected to work on it with Miriam Toews at a residency outside Saskatoon called Sage Hill which was so, so, incredible. I learned so much and wrote so much and got so, so many mosquito bites.

After some rewrites, I started submitting to agents with the goal of getting an American agent because there were more of them and that made me feel less intimidated (for some reason.) I'd also heard they usually had smaller client lists and the dream was to find a creative partner who was willing to work on edits with me.

So I wrote a query and started submitting it to agents. I adopted a policy that with every rejection I'd query a few more agents. This is really key, honestly, because it changed the process of rejection mentally for me. Rejection was giving me a chance to find the right person.

After I'd submitted to about 55 agents, I submitted to Abby Saul who'd previously worked as a junior at an agency but was striking out on her own. The catch was, as a solo agent, she hadn't sold any projects yet. That said, she loved my book and gave me an offer and I reached out to a few agents

who had the full. My dream agent passed but offered to chat with me on the phone. I wasn't sure what we were going to talk about—she was keen to give me advice. We stalked Abby online, together and she told me to just go for it.

I signed with Abby, who I really liked and had a lot in common with. We went out with *Sympathy* and it didn't sell, unfortunately, but since then Abby's career has blown up. Many of her clients have bestselling books.

Two years later, *Other People's Secrets*, which used to be called *Dumpster Baby*, went out on submission and landed at Crooked Lane Books. They have been excellent partners for me. I signed the contract in August 2021, worked through edits October-March and it'll be published this September.

Reflecting on your journey as a fiction novelist, television writer and screenwriting educator, who are your influences in each and why?

I read all over the place. My favourite books of the last few years are: *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *Saint X* by Alexis Schaitkin, *The Plot* by Jean Hanff Korelitz, *Hellgoing* by Lynn Coady, *My Absolute Darling* by Gabriel Tallent, *You* by Caroline Kepnes, *Made for Love* by Alissa Nutting, *Severance* by Ling Ma... oh I could go on forever, baby! Any genre-bending thing with voice... delicious.

As a screenwriter, I love Alec Berg, Bill Hader, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Sera Gamble, Mindy Kaling, Jesse Armstrong, Loren Bouchard... again, I could go on.

As a writing instructor, I'm still learning but I like George Saunders' newsletter on Substack, Cheryl Strayed's old advice columns, and Michael Arndt's free videos on Vimeo. I also got to attend a webinar conversation between Jennica Harper and Elan Mastai a few years ago which was super helpful and formative.

What *light bulb moments* have you experienced along the way? And milestones you've accomplished.

I think the biggest light bulb moment happened for me between writing my first novel and *Other People's Secrets*. I took a moment to interrogate what I really loved about writing - what fascinated me, what got me out of bed in the morning. I was spreading myself too thin and had this feeling like I was constantly failing because I wanted to be great at everything. And that is obviously, a very bad career strategy.

I've realized I'd always been fascinated by narrative, what makes a story satisfying more than anything else. And so I just put my head down, focused on that and wrote this book. I think it's important, as a writer, to check in with yourself and remind yourself what drives you. It'll help you focus your creative efforts and form new and exciting creative goals.

You are on a roll, Meredith:

- *signed by a New York publishing house staffed by an impressive team, several members with notable backgrounds at former Big Five and Imprints;*
- *a television screenwriter on Corner Gas Animated, the spin-off series created by award-winning funny man Brent Butt, creator and star of CTV's hit sit-com Corner Gas ("Funniest Show on TV" as voted by TV Guide Readers, currently in 60 countries);*
- *and a screenwriting educator at Vancouver Film School ("a global leader in entertainment arts education").*

How do these talents and accomplishments interrelate in terms of your creativity pool and your fast-rising profile as a professional writer?

Oh, you're making me blush! I wish my bank account reflected this. With screenwriting, the industry is really built on relationships. Every job can lead to other jobs and making friends and staying friends with writers is my favourite thing about it. It's also very collaborative; you build stories together, as a team, and get to play off one another as you do it.

The collaborative element has been instrumental to my growth as a writer because you have these excellent writers working with you and you get to learn from them.

Publishing a book has been similar – I've gotten to meet so many novelists who have become friends. My literary agency has a group chat and having people to waste time with online really helps with all the anxieties that come with publishing.

Honestly, though, it just means more emails, which means less time writing and I've been struggling to organize my days in the last few months. I'm looking forward to things quieting down a bit in the fall so I can refocus on drafting.

What is ahead of you for the remainder of this year—given that *Other People's Secrets* is releasing on September 6th in Canada and the United

States through Penguin Random House Distribution Services—and are you planning to attend writer’s conferences and book fairs?

Yes! I just got to do two events at the When Word’s Collide Festival which is an online Canadian festival. It was so much fun and I have so many books to add to my TBR. In September, I’m really excited to celebrate my book launch by going to Bouchercon, the World Mystery Conference. This year it’s in Minnesota and I’ll get to meet my publisher, the marketing team, and all of my new novelist pals which I’m so excited about. I’ll be speaking on a panel Friday, September 9th at 1:45. I’m also hoping to go to Left Coast Crime in March 2023.

Other events are TBD! But I’m hoping to do some signings in and around Vancouver.

Do you have a sequel to *Other People’s Secrets in mind?*

I’m currently working on another standalone mystery novel. I do have some ideas for a sequel but it’s on the back burner for now.

What is the best lesson and most valuable piece of advice you’ve experienced? For both the screen and the commercial fiction marketplace. What would you like to share with writers?

What you should invest in and nurture above all else is your love of the craft. I’m a firm believer that the way you write, how you approach writing and how you feel about writing will show up in your work. Your own creative output is the only thing that you can control and the care and heart that you bring to it when you show up is really all this job is. The business crap is just noise and if you focus too much on it, it’ll break your heart.

It’s so impossible to be business-ambitious in this industry because the business side of it is so murky. Better to just focus on being creatively ambitious by writing excellent books.

What have you read recently?

I got an early copy of Erin E. Adams’s novel *Jackal* which is coming out in October and is so excellent. Beth Morgan’s *A Touch of Jen* is a favourite read of 2022, as was Deb Rogers’ *Florida Woman*. Elle Grawl’s *One of Those Faces* is also so compelling and arrives in December 2022.

Who are you reading now?

I just bought one of Sam Wiebe's Wakeland novels and am excited to finally read something set in Vancouver. My TBR is overflowing but I'm excited to dig into work by Kris Calvin, Mindy Carlson, Steph Cha, Jane Pek and Amina Akhtar.

What and who are you watching?

I'm watching Nathan Fielder's deranged comedy *The Rehearsal*, a show about work, *The Bear* which feels spiritually close to my novel, similarly *Below Deck*, a reality show about the staff on a superyacht. I'm sad to say goodbye to *Better Call Saul* and am excited to start watching *Black Bird*, Dennis Lehane's new crime show on Apple TV.

Thank you for taking the time to chat today, Meredith. In closing, here's the thing—give me your flash answers to:

1. Favourite beverage

Lime sparkling water.

2. Your first celebrity encounter

Christian Slater at airport in cowboy hat.

3. Most memorable childhood vacation

A family road trip through the Rocky Mountains (where the only song we could agree on was Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved*).

4. Favourite street sign

Quesnel, BC's gold pan.

5. Most interesting North American small town

Haven't found it yet.

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"Meredith's first book was released September 6, 2022 and five days later it appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*. Her book launch in Vancouver was attended by CWC writers S.M. Freedman, A.J. Devlin, Bob, Winona Kent and broadcaster Jim Goddard.