

**\* Published by Winona Kent**—Crime Writers of Canada 2023 Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Representative—in her CWC Regional Newsletter, February 2023 edition.



**I also spend time in Supreme Court observing jury trials and lawyers.**

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

This month he interviews author, publisher, and CWC Webinar Coordinator **Erik D'Souza**



*"It's always fun to chat with Bob Harris. His questions are unique, and it feels like hanging out with an old friend."* Erik D'Souza

**Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with Erik D'Souza:**

**While undertaking the research for this interview, Erik, I was intrigued by a line in your biography: "My creative mind stretches in many directions." How so?**

I'm sure that most writers have wandering minds and wild imaginations. We always find inspiration and often say to ourselves, "Hey, that would make a great story." In my head, at least a dozen stories are steeping. Characters and plot lines sitting in the maybe-one-day pile. They aren't all mysteries, and they aren't always about Suzanne, but the business side of the brain has

to remind my creative side that I have to stay focused. I'm telling Suzanne Rickson's story, and I must stay on point.

**As an accomplished wordsmith, you have enjoyed an interesting and diverse path. I would like to explore it in three parts: your passion as a reader and writer; your work as a publisher; and your role as Webinar Coordinator for the Crime Writers of Canada.**

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## **The Reader and Writer**

**Describe your ideal reading experience.**

I don't have an ideal reading experience. I consume books and information. I listen to audiobooks while driving or working out. I read paperback books from the library, and ebooks on my phone. I watch YouTube videos to learn more about publishing, public speaking and writing. Of all the media, I'm falling in love with audiobooks. I never thought I'd sit in my car and say, "Fantastic, there's traffic. I can listen to another chapter."

**When did you discover that writing was your calling?**

I still have some comic books I wrote in grade two. I have always loved writing and telling stories. (I know the classic and cliché writer response). I studied creative writing and poetry in high school and I researched it as a viable career.

I wanted a steady income and a house in the suburbs. I put my pen away and enrolled in fashion marketing. Eventually, I settled into computers and tech support. I promised myself that I'd write again in my retirement.

John Lennon sang, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." And sometimes that's good thing.

In my early thirties, I worked for the federal government, and my wife's second stint of maternity leave was ending. We were going to put my two young boys in daycare and did the math. Daycare costs were equivalent to half of my paycheck. We decided I would take a leave of absence from work and return in a few years, when the boys reached school age.

While my youngest napped, I started writing again. I probably should have been cleaning instead, but a few years later, I had written a novel and published several short stories. To my wife's chagrin and eventually her blessing, I never returned to work.

## **Reflecting on your path as a multi-genre writer, who and what are your influences and why? What about mentors?**

I started writing my first novel, *Straight Men in Gay Bars*, as a memoir but discovered that the truth is hard and real life doesn't always conform to good storytelling.

This story is heavily inspired by Henry Miller. Its tagline is Sex, Booze, and Softcore Philosophy. I often explain that it's three-quarters true, and it's up to the reader to guess which parts are fabricated.

The setting and premise are accurate. I did move from the sheltered suburbs of Montreal to live in downtown Vancouver. It was my first actual contact with the LGBTQ+ community. And as I say in the book, "If you have ever wanted to learn to speak French, move to France. If you want to get accustomed to a gay lifestyle and culture, move to the West End."

The *Modern Absurdist* is an unpublished collection of short stories focusing on our desire to find purpose in our lives, even when there is none. It grasps at the concept that wisdom is knowing that we cannot always explain the unexplainable. Traditional absurdist literature was written 100 years ago. Giants like Kafka, Sartre, and William Burroughs explored the theme of purpose without God. And now, I must throw in my own hat, and offer a modern interpretation.

When my grandmother, Helen, passed away several years ago, we discovered she had started writing her memoirs. We had grown up listening to the stories of her childhood. She had told us about living through the German Blitz bombing of her home and how she had met my grandfather in an Army Hospital. We knew that she had emigrated to Canada as a warbride. But there were stories she had not told us. Family secrets that had been kept for years. *Ever yours, Nellie*, is my interpretation of her memoir. There are minor fictional elements that help push the story along smoothly, but the core of her story exists. My grandmother's sheer determination to survive against any situation, prejudice against her, and pull herself and her family out of poverty is why my grandmother's story must be told. And at this point, it's half written, sitting on my laptop's hard drive.

Right now, I'm focusing on mysteries. *Death in Halfmoon Bay* was the first book with a story arc spanning a trilogy. I promised to finish this three-book series before allowing my creative mind to venture into something different.

When I first started writing it, I brought it to my creative writing class. My instructor (and fellow CWC member), Debra Purdy Kong, helped me shape

my book. She said if I was basing my story on the Sunshine Coast, readers would compare me to L.R. Wright.

I said, "Who?" I had a lot to learn and Debra helped me get there.

**When you transitioned from non-fiction and memoir genres to writing commercial fiction, what influenced you to write mystery?**

After publishing my first novel, my wife agreed that I could stay at home, quit my job and focus on writing. However, that support came with a caveat. I had to start making money.

One review I received from *Straight Men in Gay Bars* was that it was entertaining but not commercially viable. I scratched my head and thought, how can a book be entertaining yet unappealing to a larger audience.

Some of my friends thought that I was selling out when I decided to write a mystery. It's genre fiction and thus has little to no literary value. It's a gripe that many mystery writers can agree upon. Our books don't appear on must-read lists or aren't considered for The Giller Prize.

But that being said, (my full vanity on display), I believe *Straight Men in Gay Bars* should be discussed at Universities, and *Death in Halfmoon Bay* is best read on the beach. So, maybe I am a sellout, but my wife isn't bugging me to go back to work anymore.

**Your first novel *Death in Halfmoon Bay* was published in 2019. What inspired you to write this story? Describe the setting and lifestyle of your main character Suzanne Rickson.**

I asked my mother for feedback after she read *Straight Men in Gay Bars* and she said, "No comment. We will never discuss this book."

Fair enough, no mother wants to read about her son's sex life and alcohol abuse. So I decided the next book would be dedicated to her, and I wrote it with her in mind as my primary audience. When I was considering what to write next, I chose a mystery because she and I used to watch Mystery Theatre on PBS together. We both love Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle. My mother prefers the classics, with clever plot twists, no spotlight on the violence, and absolutely no swearing. Many tropes of a cozy, but not a cozy. The closest comparison I can make would be the Joanne Kilbourne series by Gail Bowen.

The plot itself was inspired by her. My mother was having a long-running feud with her strata president. They would have loud discussions at strata meetings and write each other passive-aggressive letters. What better inspiration could an author have? I added a murder and imagined how the two women would react. They'd instantly accuse each other of being the murderer and go about proving it.

Like my parents, Suzanne and Charles Rickson live in The Sunshine Coast, a strip of paradise tucked into the southwest corner of the BC mainland. It's technically not an island but rather a long peninsula, but it's inaccessible by road, and you have to take a ferry, boat, or seaplane to access it. My parents live in the city of Sechelt, but *Death in Sechelt*, doesn't quite work as a book title, so I moved my fictional characters up the road to the real-life community of Halfmoon Bay.

**Your next novel *Death Takes a Bow* is scheduled for release in April. In a sentence or two, explain the premise of Book 2 in the Suzanne Rickson series?**

The elevator pitch. Always the hardest thing to write.

*Death Takes a Bow* centers around a seniors' community theatre troupe, The Funnybones. Suzanne trusts the police's assessment that the death of their beloved director was an unfortunate accident. However, she reconsiders her position after his widow is attacked and robbed.

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### **The Publisher**

**Why did you decide to become a publisher?**

I used to tell people that it's easy to self-publish. And they almost always responded, "Sure, maybe for you it is."

Initially, I consulted authors on how to self-publish. As more and more people asked, "Can't you just do it all for me?"

Eventually, I said "Yes."

**In 2019, you edited and published *New Beginnings* - "a collection of creative writings from 39 local BC authors." Explain the purpose and subsequent success of this undertaking.**

*New Beginnings* was my publishing launching pad. It would be the first time that I'd publish other people's work. It is a collection of creative writings from 39 local BC authors. All of the proceeds were donated to SHARE Family and Community Services, a non-profit independent, community-based organization.

The success of this project relied on the quality of the contributors. I received short stories, poems, and creative non-fiction pieces from many established and emerging authors. I received a grant from Port Moody's Artist Grant Program and corporate sponsorship from local small businesses and larger corporations, including TELUS. To date, *New Beginnings* has raised over ten thousand dollars to SHARE Family and Community Services.

### **What authors are on your roster?**

A few of the contributors of *New Beginnings* have continued to work with me. As a result, I have published several works from:

Lyn E. Ayre is a talented poet, visual artist, and crime writer. I have published the first two books from her McClintock/Miller Romantic Suspense Series and two poetry collections.

C. Lozano Gilabert is a horror writer with a background in Criminal psychiatry. I have published two of his short story collections, *Voices from the Dead* and *Creatures from the Dark*.

Beverly Ann Gyori's *My New Tomorrow* is a lighthearted romance set on the Sunshine Coast.

I've consulted several other authors who have gone on to self-publish themselves or helped them find a traditional publisher.

### **Are you currently accepting submissions?**

I want to say yes. But I only focus on one project monthly, and I'm booked into early 2024.

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### **The CWC Webinar Coordinator**

### **How did this unique opportunity arise?**

I joined the CWC intending to be an active member. I didn't have to wait long for my first opportunity. Within months, there was a callout for the

Webinar Coordinator. I was lucky enough to get the position and almost instantly asked, how can I do more?

### **How many webinars have you hosted to date?**

Webinars are CWC members-only content. We make them monthly and I've been doing it for two years. CWC members can find links to them all at our website: [crimewriterscanada.com](http://crimewriterscanada.com) in the members-only section.

I also interview and recorded several author interviews and panel series. These are public videos and can be seen on our Facebook page or YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@crimewritersofcanada1279>.

Last year, I produced 67 videos for Crime Writers Canada.

### **What technical gear furnishes your studio?**

I have a laptop attached to a larger monitor, a Logi webcam, and a Yeti Blue Microphone. But, perhaps my most impressive equipment is my Nautilus Recreational Powerpack, which I plug my router into during power outages to keep my WiFi running. I hosted my first CWC national meet & greet using it.

### **Describe your process of planning the webinars.**

A webinar is planned months in advance. Our speakers often have different formats they'd like to use, and I'm happy to accommodate them. For example, some webinars are an interview with a Q&A at the end, and in other circumstances, I introduce the speaker, and they take the mic and run with it.

Afterward, I edit the video, upload them as an unlisted video on YouTube and share the link on our website.

### **When they become a *live* event via Zoom, describe the behind-the-scenes activity taking place in your studio as you host the session.**

People often comment that I'm not always making eye contact with the camera. That's because I'm multitasking. While interviewing the guest, I'm also responding to the audience in chat, ensuring the audio and video quality of the recording, revising my interview questions and referring to Google if there's real-time information gaps.

For example, the guest says, "I watched this great Spanish movie on Netflix about a kidnapping, but I can't remember its name."

I'm clicking away and quickly respond, "Was it Snow Girl?"

**How has this role contributed to your skill set as a writer and publisher?**

I've read that a successful writer must wear three hats. They must be creative and productive; writers have to write. But they also have to market. Even traditionally published authors need to be out there, giving interviews, attending conferences, and signing books in stores. We also have to network. We've all heard the adage, "It's Not What You Know. It's Who You Know."

Working for the CWC as the Social Media and Webinar Coordinator has been brilliant in helping me wear the latter two hats. I've learned so much and met so many great people. It hasn't helped in my writing output, partly because the CWC isn't the only organization I work for. My wife says that I have a problem saying, "No." and I spread myself too thin.

I know she's right, but I keep saying "Yes" to every opportunity that comes my way.

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**Are there other writing and publishing organizations that you participate in? How have they benefitted you?**

I am the Co-president of a local Literary Club called the Tri-City Wordsmiths. We're hosting our first literary festival this May and Iona Wishaw is a star speaker.

I host a reading series at my local Port Moody Library called *Writers in our Midst*. I organize four events a year and they are streamed on the library's social media.

I do a fair amount of public speaking, from hosting panels online to introducing movies at the Vancouver Film Festival.

I can't say they've directly benefited my career, but I like being an active member of the literary community.

**What writing and publishing conferences, book fairs and related events would you like to attend in 2023 and 2024?**



I've participated, in the past, at Vancouver Word, the Maple Leaf Conferences and When Words Collide. I look forward to working them with again.

Right now, my focus is on the Tri-City LitFest. It will be the first time I'm part of the organizing committee, not just moderating panels. It will be part of the Port Coquitlam May Days and we anticipate hundreds of attendees. It's a free event funded by grants and sponsorship deals. If you live in my neck of the woods (the burbs of Vancouver), you can learn more at [tricitywordsmiths.ca](http://tricitywordsmiths.ca).

The CWC will have a booth there, and did I mention Iona Whishaw is our headliner?

**What books have you read recently? Do you listen to audio books?**

Paperback on my bedside table: Colleen van Niekerk, *A Conspiracy of Mothers*.

Book borrowed from the library: Bill Arnott, *Gone Viking*.

(Both BC authors are speakers at LitFest).

Current book I'm listening to on Audible: Robert Rotenberg, *Stranglehold*.

Book I just finished publishing: Lyn Ayre, *Murder on River's Bend*.

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**Thank you for your time today, Erik. As a writer, book promoter and publicist, I have deep appreciation of the work you do. And, I admire the dedication and kindness you extend to the writing and publishing community.**

**To wrap up our conversation, kindly give me flash answers to:**

**Your favourite beverage.**

Tequila.

**A current international thriller author who inspires you.**

Partly due to my job at the CWC, and partly because there is so much great home-grown talent, I only read Canadian authors. I don't always read an

author's book before the interview, but I often find myself saying after an interview, "That book sounds amazing. I need to read that."

As a result, I have a large pile of 'to-read' books and it's growing faster than I can read them.

I'm also at the point where many authors send me copies of their books and I try my best to read them and leave positive reviews on Amazon and Goodreads, because that's how we can all help each other.

### **The most memorable family vacation with your children.**

For my fortieth birthday, my family and parents traveled to Oahu. I spent my actual birthday snorkeling at Hanauma Bay. I'm turning fifty this summer, but I don't think I'll top my fortieth birthday.

### **Your favourite Metro Vancouver landmark.**

Wreck Beach – readers of this interview will have to Google that location if they want more info.

### **An unexpected and thrilling moment you experienced while hosting CWC webinars.**

It wasn't unexpected, because it was planned, but for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CWC, we interviewed a few of Canada's most successful crime writers.

I met Maureen Jennings, Robert Rotenberg, Sam Wiebe, Iona Wishaw, Gail Bowen, Donna Carrick, Linwood Barclay, Barbara Fradkin, Cathy Ace, Catherine McKenzie, Joy Fielding, Nate Hendley, Rick Mofina, Alan R. Warren, and Brenda Chapman.

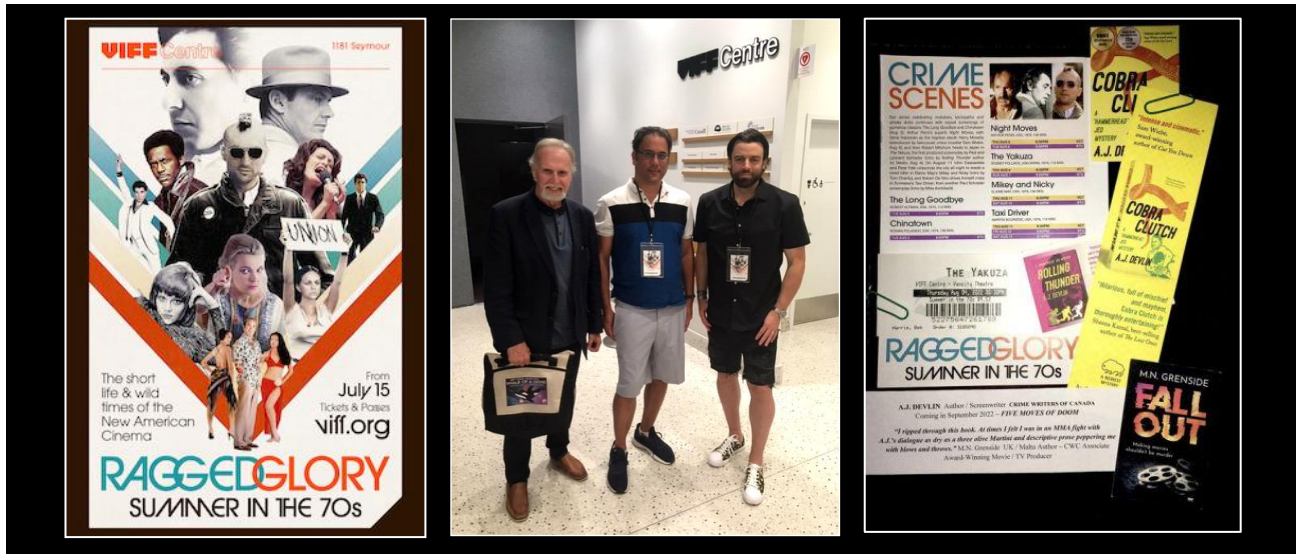
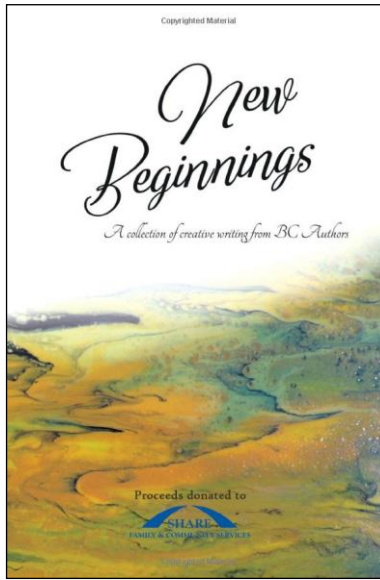
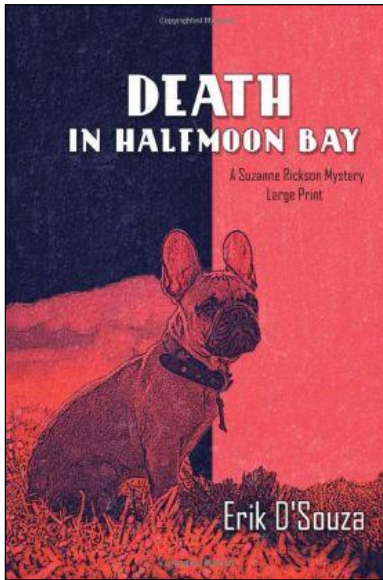
I'll admit, I was thrilled and nervous about interviewing Louise Penny. But I didn't have to be, she's one of the nicest persons I've ever met. And I can say the same about all the authors I've interviewed in the last two years. Canadians really are the nicest, most humblest people, even when they're international bestselling authors.

Erik D'Souza: <https://erikdsouza.com/>

Timbercrest Publishing: <https://timbercrestpublishing.com/>

Crime Writers of Canada: <https://crimewriterscanada.com/>

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In summer 2022, The Vancouver International Film Festival presented a terrific program of 1970s movies on the big screen at the VIFF Centre – Vancity Theatre. Thursday evenings featured a classic crime movie double bill. They booked five BC CWC authors to introduce a film and speak about it.

Erik (centre in photo with A.J. Devlin and me) introduced *Saint Jack* (Ben Gazzara, 1979).

CWC award-winning author A.J. Devlin (*Cobra Clutch*) introduced *The Yakuza* (1974, Robert Mitchum) and spoke about his Los Angeles screenwriting mentor Leonard Schrader who wrote it. Winona Kent introduced *Chinatown* (1974, Jack Nicholson), Sam Wiebe covered *Night Moves* (1975, Gene Hackman), and Iona Wishaw spoke about *The Late Show* (Art Carney and Lily Tomlin, 1977).

Writing professionally as Robert H. Harris and working as a consultant to writers, Bob Harris accepts email inquiries at: [harrisbobh@hotmail.com](mailto:harrisbobh@hotmail.com) (Profile and publicity photos available on request).