# NINO RICCI

*Essays on His Works*

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Edited by

**Marino Tuzi**

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*Marino Tuzi*

# Foreword

THE FICTIONAL TEXTS examined in this book, *Nino Ricci: Essays on His Works*, are presented chronologically in terms of publication, starting with *Lives of the Saints* and the other two novels that comprise the *Lives of the Saints* trilogy (*In A Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*). The novels in this trilogy are examined individually and then the trilogy itself is explored as a whole. Following the essays on the *Lives of the Saints* trilogy, there are individual essays devoted to each subsequent novel that Ricci has published to the present day, respectively *Testament*, *The Origin of Species*, and *Sleep*. This chronological organization of the study of the novels written by Ricci gives the reader a sense of continuity involving the range of ideas and narrative techniques that encompass his work as a writer of literary fiction.

The essays in this book analyze Ricci's novels from a variety of critical perspectives. These perspectives include concepts about literature, culture, identity, politics, and society in relation to Canada and the modern world. Each contributor examines a specific novel in its own terms or as a part of the trilogy, focusing on the prevailing themes and literary elements used by Ricci

to construct his work of fiction. This analytical study allows the reader to enhance one's understanding of Ricci's particular style and vision as a writer. It also provides an understanding of his contribution to contemporary Canadian fiction and world literature.

*Brian L. Flack*

# The Gospel According to Nino Ricci: An Examination of the Novel *Testament*

IT TOOK A while, some 2,000 years, but there are now five Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and *Testament*, which is Nino Ricci's fourth novel. In this new Gospel, there are four further Gospels. One is according to Yihuda of Qiryat, Judas Iscariot. The second is according to Miryam of Migdal, Mary Magdalene. The third is according to Miryam, Jesus's mother, she of the mythical "immaculate conception" and "virgin birth." And the fourth is according to Simon of Gergesa. This last narrator is, in many ways, the most interesting of the lot in that he appears to be an invention, a character with no counterpart in the traditional mythology. Together with his picaresque travelling pal, Jerubal, he seems to represent a trinity of individuals. He is a pathetic shepherd without belief in the one true God. He is also, quite possibly, Simon of Cyrene — for the reason that when Jerubal is crucified beside Jesus it is his cross that must be carried by a bystander, not Jesus' cross and surely there is some symbolic connection in this. Lastly, he is representative of the thief who is saved at the crucifixion. It is a fascinating compilation of roles if not an entirely convincing one.

What Ricci has done, in his rather idiosyncratic and Catholic, but highly entertaining way, is reinvent the New Testament Bible story. It is a risky, but not un-elevated task that few have attempted — talk about setting oneself up for dissection at the hands of religious zealots — and one at which few of the dubiously courageous have been successful. Perhaps the best-managed retelling of Biblical "history" in recent years is Joseph Heller's riotous portrayal of King David in *God Knows*, also his fourth book. In it, he presents a King David posterity hardly knew: warrior, philanderer, psalmist, chip-on-his-shoulder Jewish boy, cocksman, liar, and much plagiarized creator of Great Literature:

> At Nob I told some lies and eighty-five priests were slain. Not only that, but all of the men, women, and children in their households, and all of the livestock in that sacred city, were put to death as well. Who is to blame? ...
>
> Me? Where do I come in for any of the guilt? How can anyone reasonably assert that the responsibility should be mine? I was running for my life and had never, not once, done anything wrong.[1]

He is portrayed as a character in many ways not unlike Ricci's Jesus who is also a man posterity hardly knew.

Heller's novel is told in the first person, a perspective fraught with potential sinkholes as the author attempts to present, from the protagonist's point of view, exactly what happened, when it happened, and to whom it happened. Ricci, bravely, and to his credit, copies the form. He allows each of his four narrators to tell what s/he knows, what s/he saw, what s/he felt, and what s/he thought about the life of the subject: Yehoshua, or Yeshua, or Jesus as he is alternately referred to by his assessors.

But before getting into a more detailed examination of Ricci's accomplishment, it is necessary to say something about the appearance and immediate life of the novel itself. As this essay is being written, it has been some five months since the book's publication. Not a lot of time, but enough time for more reviews of the book than has been written and said about it. In fact, the paucity of attention paid to this novel is startling, especially given the subject and against the backdrop of the times in which its readers live.

The book has been reviewed in all the right places, although those reviews have been surprisingly short and to the point. More importantly, these assessments have managed only qualified praise for the book. There have been a couple of newspaper commentaries discussing the effort, but that is it. This is the case in a time when religious zealotry seems to be at a fever pitch, with fundamentalists of every colour and stripe bursting the seams of almost every culture. Yet, here is a writer who takes on the Biblical tales and conceptions of the Christian Messiah and hardly anyone has anything to say. Moreover, what he has to say about Jesus, the way he presents this man and against what historical realities, fairly cries out for attention. Still there is none to speak of. At this point in time, the book seems to have dropped off the literary radar.

For all its multi-narrational convolutions and overlapping perspectives, the story is fairly straightforward. Four compatriots of Yehoshua/Yeshua/Jesus take it upon themselves to relate, from their own points of view, inasmuch as each is privy to what the others saw and heard, essentially the same tale. It appears to cover the last one to three years of Jesus' ministry, mainly in Galillee. From his home in Kefar Nahum (Capernaum), Jesus troops through the countryside spreading the wisdom he has

acquired over a life spent first wandering with his parents through Israel and Egypt, effectively banished by their families, and then at the knee of the prophet Yohanan (John the Baptist).

There are, however, a few rather salient facts presented about the man's life that define in rather unorthodox ways who he is and what he is doing. First, his family's banishment has come about because he is illegitimate. He is not the product of a virgin birth; no angels appeared to anyone to announce the coming of this holy man. He is simply the product of the rape (although there is much in scripture to suggest that what Ricci is offering is not so much a fabrication), by a visiting Roman legate, of Miryam, the daughter of a minor political official at the court of Herod the Great.

> One of these, a legate awaiting orders, my father befriended and presented me to, leaving us several times alone. In the end, because I was young and did not know better and because he threatened me with harm, I was forced to yield to him. I was never able to forget the smell of him — he did not smell like a Jew but had a perfumed odour underlain with a stench like rancid fat. ...
>
> The legate did not take me as his wife as my father had planned, but abandoned me the moment he had received his commission. When he had gone it grew clear that I was with child, and so was disgraced.[2]

She is then fobbed off on an older man, Yehoceph (Joseph), a mason, who has no sons and wishes to have them. He agrees to take her, pregnancy notwithstanding, along with a considerable dowry, which bankrupts her father, and promises to keep her if, after she has delivered the baby she is carrying, she is able to produce sons for him.

What's mildly radical about this situation, though, is that from a very early age, Jesus knows the circumstance of his birth. He does not try to hide it, and at the end of his life, he openly admits it to his followers, in a chilling scene that comes about after he is asked by a temple official, "Who was he, your father ... I might have known him" (409). This occurs shortly before Jesus is arrested in Jerusalem at the Passover, tried, and crucified. It seems fitting, somehow, that at this late date in his ministry he comes clean with his adherents who, understandably, do not take the news well.

> He [the temple official] stood there in front of Jesus, giving him time to answer, but still Jesus didn't say a word. The silence grew eerie then. ...
>
> Jesus had remained standing where he was with the dead stillness he had.
>
> "It was my mistake to come here," he said now, "and to bring any shame to you. But it's not because of what I've taught or what I've done but because of something I can't change, which is that I don't have any father but my god, and am a bastard.
>
> Joseph went white as marble. We all stood in silence and it seemed the walls of the place might fall in. ...
>
> "I'm sorry to have brought any trouble to you," Jesus said ... (409)

Still, it is curious that he is illegitimate, a bastard, for bastards were barred from the assembly houses (synagogues) and temples during these times. In other words, he had no standing in the Jewish community. Yet, he is presented as a Jew, thinks of himself as such, and preaches accordingly. One has to remember that Christianity had not been invented to coincide with his lifetime. He is just an individual spreading a philosophy of peace,

understanding, and love for one's fellow man, all attitudes perfectly consistent with Jewish belief.

He is often brooding and given to bursts of temper but just as often lively and open to all who seek his time and energy. This is not the common portrait of Jesus. He is seen in Biblical literature as a man filled with the milk of compassion and understanding, a man who existed without a contrary bone in his body. Yet, in Ricci's universe, he is this and also the antithesis. He has favourites, he can be terse, he yells at people, and he punishes them, not physically, but with a withering eye and demeanour that renders them nearly helpless when he turns on them, as he does more than frequently.

In this regard, he is also something of a tyrant. His sect has rules and regulations that he enforces strictly. When he wants something done or someone to be somewhere or someone to accompany him, he is not above saying so and then demanding it be done, often without explanation. The subtext is that he is the master and he must be obeyed. This is not the Jesus of conventional scriptural mythology. This is a man who has much trouble living and has as many human foibles as the rest of the human race. The trinity of questions that arise in the midst of this portrayal are clear: Is he simply a man, or is he a godlike man, or is he God's son?

There is another aspect that this lines up closely behind: the fact of his illegitimacy. This version of Jesus flaunts the separation of the sexes in the society of his day. Not only does he allow women to be inner circle members of his group of followers, he trusts them implicitly and worships with them. This is not a way of life that is corroborated by the New Testament nor is it very reflective of the place women held in the world of 30 CE. Does this make Jesus a man ahead of his time? Does it

make him material for holiness? This is not necessarily the case. But it does make him very different. He is almost always, in Ricci's text, presented as a man who had ideas that did not mesh with his times, but also as a man who was certainly a sympathetic character. He was a man who had something revolutionary to say and who had a revolutionary way of saying it. As Yihuda of Qiryat (Judas) says of him:

> I had visited a dozen nations, and heard tell of a hundred philosophies; but what had most struck me in this was how little of value there was in the world, how men were deceitful and base and would espouse to you the loftiest ideals in one breath and contradict them in the next. When the chaff was sifted from things there seemed only further chaff, the same tired notions, the same predictable vice. Thus when I considered what it was in Yeshua that had held me to him, it seemed exactly the hope of something new: a new sort of man, a new way of seeing things. I thought, if there was a single person who had found the way to speak the truth, perhaps the rest was worthwhile; if there was someone whose vision was truly more than hope for his own gain or greater glory, then perhaps God had not made us simply animals, a pestilence the world would be well rid of. (121-122)

This is high praise indeed for a man so flawed in his origins and behaviour.

Given his wholly quirky presentation of the man called Jesus, as described above, it seems that in this book Ricci has not focused on the obsessions that marked his first three novels: *Lives of the Saints* (1990), *In a Glass House* (1993), and *Where She Has Gone* (1997). These three

him and his mother, between him and his father, or between him and his sister, the gulf that haunts him the most. In like manner, the several narrators, each seeking the truth of Jesus, are left, at the end of their opportunities, flailing about in a wilderness that offers them no hope of anything resembling a unified opinion of the man who so obsesses them. Was he a blasphemer against God and an inciter against Rome as the "historical" Sanhedrin (religious Supreme Court) found him to be? Or was he not a blasphemer and inciter? Was he innocent of treason as Pilate found him to be—his trial before Pilate almost certainly a political rather than a religious hearing? Or was he not innocent?

In the end, as it was with Vittorio, the truth, whatever it is, does not matter: not in the Bible and not in *Testament*. In the end, Jesus suffers on the cross because he wanted to suffer on the cross. It was his choice. His silence when the possibility of relief from the charges is before him cements this belief. It is the final expression of his truth, of his helter-skelter, highly convoluted, confused search for identity. He wants, like Vittorio before him, to know who he is and what he is, even if this is impossible. It is the only logical endpoint of his existential angst, observed with such individualism by the four narrators. It is not surprising, then, that their stories cannot be told as one thread of truth. Their narratives have to conflict because the chronological truth of Jesus' life is not what is important, either to Nino Ricci or to history. What is important is an internal sense of the man, a feeling about him. This internal sense is presented by Yihuda when he talks about Jesus' method of teaching:

> Yeshua's usual practice when he arrived in a town was to go to the house of one of his disciples and share a

> bit of food or wine there while word of his presence was sent around to any other followers he might have in the place. When people began to gather he would tend first to any sick who had come, then settle in his host's courtyard to do his teaching or perhaps repair to some field outside of town. His methods were very informal—usually he simply sat in amongst his disciples and answered the queries they put to him, often turning the question back onto the questioner in the manner of the ancient Greek philosophers. Much of what he conveyed in this way was no more than what one heard in the assembly houses: follow the commandments; give alms to the poor; believe in the one true God. But he had a way of making these notions seem new again, and vital, while most teachers intoned them as if they were the remotest arcana of a forgotten era.
>
> What struck me in these sessions, however, was how he did not condescend to his pupils, or consider anything above their understanding; and this amazed me, for when it came to the core of his teaching, and to those notions that were distinctive to him like that of the kingdom, it often seemed to me that not Hillel himself could have followed the nuance of his thought. (48-49)

This idea about Jesus, if it is introduced by the structure and the motives of the characters who operate within that structure, is sealed by Ricci's use of language, the words of the narrators as well as those of Jesus. It is, for the most part, Biblical in nature and in some ways the utter charm of the book can be traced to this convention. With the exception of Yihuda of Qiryat's portion, which is curiously modern and forthright, almost militaristic

in style, but fitting because he is, after all, a rebel, a soldier of sorts battling against the occupation of his home, the text is punctuated with nuances of the Bible:

> Tsef had always been much looked to for wisdom ... (138).
> Then it happened once when we were in Arbela ... (143).
> I had never seen such wonders nor heard their like spoken of ... (146).
> As it fell out ... (234).
> Then, when he had been with Zekaryah for a year, he came to me and said ... (241).
> As the sabbath was coming on ... (289)

The examples are endless, but perhaps the most telling aspect of this form is the convolution of the sentences. To a modern ear, they sound just a little odd. Sentences are longer than they need be, there are more words included in any explanation than might seem prudent, and there is an elevated tone to the choice of language that suggests the import of what is being said is noteworthy. This is, after all, the tale of tales. It deserves such attention in its retelling. The particular use of language is evident, for example, in the following paragraph from Miryam's, his mother's, section of the text:

> As the sabbath was coming on, I had to make haste to reach Ammanthus before dusk. So I departed from Kefar Nahum without any sight of my son and with no comprehension of his plight. From Ammanthus, when the sabbath had passed, I immediately returned to my home so that Yaqob and I might confer, for of my children he was the only one with some understanding of his brother. (289)

What is she saying? Simply this: she had to get home from Ammanthus to talk to her son Yaqob about his brother because he was the only one in the family who understood him. That's all. But the language is mellifluous and soft. There are twists and turns, grammatical departures from simple sentence structure — a coordinate conjunction beginning a sentence, a sentence begun with a prepositional phrase immediately followed by an adverbial clause, another begun with an adverbial clause, and some very interesting verbs: "coming on," "had passed," and "might confer." All these devices are in the interests of rendering the reader slightly disarmed, slightly out-of-sorts in terms of grasping at first blush the essential meaning of what is said. In its very unusualness, the language both distracts the reader's attention and grabs the attention, and this is a marvellous stroke on Ricci's part. The reader is fairly mesmerized as the story builds, by not only the narrative structure, by not only the conflicting perspectives of the characters, but by this odd use of vocabulary and sentence structure, which is nearly brilliant.

In order to capture the essence of the story, the reader needs to constantly compare the original Gospels and their message with this new version of the Gospels. What better method of assuring that this is attended to than replicating to some degree the method of telling the story?

The most striking use of language is reserved for Jesus himself. The tone of his speeches to his followers, particularly when he launches into a parable, recognizable or not as comparable to something from the original Gospels, is masterful. The unbalancing of the reader, as to whether he is God or a man, is absolutely sustained at these moments. For example, this is what Jesus says

when Miryam of Migdal and others question him after he has turned his mother away from his door:

> When we questioned Yeshua about the incident, he grew angry with us. Why do you trouble me over this, he said. It was the first time we had seen him this way, and many of us were frightened.
>
> Yaqob said, But the law tells us to honour our mother and father.
>
> The law also tells us that a man leaves his mother and father, Yeshua said.
>
> But that is to marry.
>
> And so I've married you, Yeshua said. Now my followers are my family. (133)

Or it is when one of Herod's spies attempts to trap Yeshua by asking him about the kingdom he speaks of and in so doing reveal him for the rebel and threat to the established order he is thought to be:

> He was quick to ask about the kingdom saying he had heard others speak of it and wondered if it was a place of the heavens or of the earth.
>
> But Yeshua knowing his intentions, said, What do those you speak to tell you.
>
> Truly I don't think they've understood you, Chizkijah said, because some say it's in heaven, some on earth, and the rest somewhere in between, at which many in the crowd laughed, for though people despised him, he was clever enough to amuse them.
>
> Yeshua said, Then they've answered rightly, since it's all these things.
>
> But how can it be on the earth, Chizkijah said, when the Galilee belongs to Herod and Judea to Rome.

> Tell me this, who does the wind belong to, Yeshua asked him.
>
> How can the wind belong to anyone.
>
> Then the kingdom is like the wind, Yeshua said, which is in heaven and on earth and in between, and belongs to no one. (191-192)

He gives the impression of being a latter day Socrates, full of the wisdom of knowing what he does not know and being able to accept it, unlike his enemies.

The use of language in this way works well for Ricci, for it allows him to present his Jesus at one moment as a thorn in the side of authority and at another as a father-protector of those who would follow in his wake. It makes him human, like all the others around him. In his humanity, he is acceptable as the icon he is purported to be.

*Testament*, then, is a book that functions within the parameters that it sets out for itself. Nino Ricci is not attempting to present a man who is in any way, shape, or form to be perceived as all things to all people. He is simply a man who saw things differently as more than one of the narrators is at pain to say. It is because of the difference in his thought that they are attracted to him. It is in the quality of the difference, then, between this fictionalized gospel and the other Gospels that readers, too, will be attracted to this book and find worth in it.

**Notes**

1. Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984)) 157.
2. Nino Ricci, *Testament* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2002), 227 [Page numbers for all other quotations from

this novel are in parentheses after the quotation.]

3. Nino Ricci, *Where She Has Gone* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 321.
4. "Gospel of St. John," *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company), 11:25, 26, 27, 41-44.

*Marino Tuzi*

# Interview With Nino Ricci

**(This interview with Nino Ricci was completed before the publication of his latest novel, *Sleep*, 2015.)**

**Marino Tuzi**: What are some of the recurrent themes in your fiction?

**Nino Ricci**: It is hard to speak of themes without seeming reductive. I generally start with characters, not themes, though certainly recurrent theme-like entities or motifs have indeed grown out of the characters I've tended to work with. They are the usual Big Themes, I think: life, death, home, family, what it means to be human. There are a few subsets within these that are a bit more specific — my obsession with Catholicism, for instance, which led one critic to label me as a kind of Canadian Graham Greene, though I am certainly not Catholic in my life and really regard Catholicism less as a theme, per se, than as a particularly tempting corpse to dig my vulture claws into. I have also been very interested in the whole issue of displacement, something that comes out of my immigrant background but that is

really a basic aspect of being human in our time, and one that goes back to many recurring motifs — the journey; the search for home, for a lost paradise — that have been central to the Western tradition.

**M.T.**: How would you describe your work stylistically and formally? What literary tradition/s are they part of?

**N.R.**: My formative training in literature was in the English literary tradition — Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, as they say — and that training has stayed with me at a deep level. That tradition is certainly not one to scoff at, and I feel very fortunate to have been exposed to it. At either end of this exposure, however, are a mongrel host of other influences — all the nameless books I read as a child, for instance, and which were really what awakened the force of imagination in me, and then the eclectic assortment of world literature I have come to in one way or another, including through a year I spent studying at the University of Florence. Stylistically and formally — in the architecture of my sentences, for instance, in my use of language, in my reliance on certain conventions of literary realism — I still look back to the English tradition as the important one. But in the matter of tone, I am not so certain. Maybe one of the major influences on tone in my writing was not literature at all but the films of Federico Fellini. There is something in the pathos of Fellini's worldview, in the mix of irony and tragedy, in the willingness to include the whole range of human experience, that is very appealing to me, and that I have also found in writers like Svevo and Calvino. Perhaps this is an area in which my Italian roots have been determining ones.

**M.T.**: What do you believe are the important contributions of a writer in modern society?

**N.R.**: I used to make very lofty claims for writers, but now I am more ambivalent. The lofty claims ran something like this: that literature was the true repository of human knowledge, what was most likely to survive over time and what best captured all the nuances and complexities of human experience. We looked to writers, I thought, more than to any other source, to give meaning to our existence. But maybe this was just self-aggrandizement. Most writers are utterly forgotten, and probably don't do much for the furtherment of the race. Then it is an open question whether the race is indeed furthering itself, or if we are on some sort of evolutionary dead end that writers, by giving us a false sense of our importance in the grand scheme of things, have merely helped to obscure from us. Maybe it is true that the important literature, today as in the past, is the literature that reminds us how small we are, and how little we know, and that we will come to dust.

**M.T.**: How do you compare the *Saints* trilogy to your subsequent work in terms of style and vision?

**N.R.**: I see quite a bit of continuity between my *Lives of the Saints* trilogy and my subsequent work, namely *Testament* and *The Origin of Species*, which I have just finished. In the end all of these books go back, as I say, to the matter of the big questions. The importance of home and family figures as largely in *Testament*, for instance, as it does in the *Lives* trilogy, as does the issue of faith. My most recent work, *The*

*Origin of Species*, returns to many of these same questions again, though this time seen through the lens of evolutionary theory. In terms of vision, then, I have been stubbornly single-minded: the same issues that obsessed me when I began writing obsess me still. Stylistically, I have tended to be more wide-ranging, I think, trying on different voices, different tones, though what might seem wide-ranging to me might to an outsider appear predictably homogenous. In my recent book, I have returned, in many ways, to the voice of *Lives of the Saints*, more ironic, more self-effacing, more comic, partly because I feel this voice allows for a more distanced, and perhaps more accurate, view of the human condition.

**M.T.**: What do you believe makes the novel, as an art form, universal? How does the depiction of a particular time and place fit into this idea of universality?

**N.R.**: I suppose what makes the novel universal, if it is truly so, is that it is about humans, and we are all humans. From my recent researches into evolutionary theory, I'm tempted to say that even cows and dogs might find the novel universal, if we could find a way to communicate one to them. Given that we are all shaped by the same basic forces, essentially animal forces, anything that speaks to these is going to strike a chord with people. That is what novels primarily do, I think — they speak to our most basic motivations and drives, giving a shape to them that no straightforward analysis or description could ever quite capture.

The question of time and place does seem a bit thorny in this light, but maybe only superficially so. In my own work, time and place are central, I would

say, and I think that is the case in the writing I most admire. I suppose we respond to the particular in literature because we live in the particular, and need to feel rooted in some sort of credible world in order for a piece of fiction to work. That world might be quite different from ours; the important thing is that the author makes us believe in it. But part of that belief, I think, has to come from a leap we make at some point, from the gut sense that that different world has become our own, because the author has teased out the merely particular and time-bound and somehow connected these to a larger commonality.

**M.T.**: Which philosophical influences have shaped your fiction and why have they done so?

**N.R.**: I have had many philosophical influences in my life, and in the early drafts of a novel I always work very hard to weave them into the text, then spend most of the revision process threading them out. Writers, when they write, have to be bigger, I think, than their own particular philosophical influences; they have to act as if they know nothing for certain, as if all comers have a fair shot at coming out on top. That is the only way to stay true, I think, to what is most important in a novel, the characters themselves and their particular stories. In the context of fiction, a character's deeply help philosophical beliefs are much more important than an author's, I think, and they should have every chance to flourish or fail without the author putting his or her two cents in all the time.

**M.T.**: As an adult, which writers have influenced your work and why?

**N.R.**: I always cite Shakespeare as a major influence, even though I don't see his plays very often anymore and certainly don't sit down with a copy of *Troilus and Cressida* when I'm looking for some casual reading. And yet still he has a hold on me, from all those university courses where I was forced to read him. The language, the breadth of vision, the breadth of character — all these things. Then as a role model, I find him very appealing. He was not particularly innovative with regard to drama: his general method was to take what was out there and make it much better, the way the Japanese did with cars. In the process, of course, he challenged convention, but always somehow from within convention, which is the sort of subversion I feel most comfortable with as a writer. He was also not averse to playing to the pit, and had the singular talent of having been, despite his literary greatness, very popular and successful.

Among more contemporary writers I would cite Alice Munro, Doris Lessing, Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Pynchon, among others, for a grab bag of reasons, some for their nuances of language, others for their playfulness and ambition.

What I most look for in a writer is a combination of a kind of catholic view of the human condition combined with the particularity of evoking those nuances of feeling and experience that only literature seems able to get at.

**M.T.**: How does ethnicity fit into your fiction both in terms of human experience and the nature of the modern world?

**N.R.**: Ethnicity is one of those words that makes me want to run in the other direction. What does it mean? It almost invariably has a belittling tone. Things are ethnic only by contrast, and the implication is always that ethnic cultures are being contrasted to some realer, truer culture they are merely sideshows to. Alternately, ethnicity is raised up as a banner of specialness, which leads to all sorts of fascistic excesses. I suppose the way in which ethnicity has played into my own work is that I have somehow felt it my job to take apart these notions of ethnicity, and to avoid falling into the trap of them. I am more interested in complexity than ethnicity — the particularities of cultural differences, yes, but only as nuances within a range of other formative and connective forces.

**M.T.**: When you write, how do you deal with the process of creating fiction and in engaging ideas?

**N.R.**: This is a rather big question, not entirely answerable. In simplest terms, I start with some sort of idea for a story that has come to me from one source or another — usually it springs from a character or a particular situation or dilemma that seems suggestive — and then I write the story out and hope it works. If the idea is good, more ideas come. As for engaging Ideas in the capital letter sense: I always have lots of those, as I've indicated, and usually I have to throttle them. If the basic idea of the novel is sound — that is, if I have started with strong characters and a strong narrative — then the Idea will grow out of it on its own.

**M.T.**: What is the role of the novel today, given the massive dominance of visual imagery, especially through television and film?

**N.R.**: Well, the novel has died many deaths, and still straggles on. In strict percentages, surely a greater proportion of the human race is reading literature today than was ever the case in the past, given how recent widespread literacy is. So there is hope. I think it is also true that people have an insatiable need for narrative, that this is something that is hard-wired into them, and that the novel perhaps remains the primary source for complex narrative. You could certainly make the argument that film, as far as narrative is concerned — and narrative is central to it, as it is to most popular entertainments — tends to be highly derivative and reductive, and that if the novel died, film might go with it.

The novel and indeed most forms of literature have always been more meditative than direct, and it is true that it is hard to compete with the onslaught of much more visceral stimuli. But the brain is a complex place, and will always eventually crave complex enjoyments. So maybe the role of the novel is to be the guardian of the complex, of the view of reality that sees it in its fullness rather than reduces it to its most sensational elements.

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# Contributors

**William Anselmi** has taught courses at several universities on the representation of Italian experience in Canada. This teaching practice is connected to his work as a cultural activist, committed to raising social awareness about the consequences of nationalism and corporate capitalism on ethnic communities in Canada and the USA. He teaches popular culture and Italian Canadian literature in the Modern Languages Department at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

**Howard A. Doughty** has written numerous essays for various magazines and journals on a range of social and cultural topics. He has edited and written many books related to an array of social and political subjects, such as the role of the liberal arts in public education, the use of electronic technology in the context of freedom of speech, the particular features of modern corporate capitalism, the analysis of power relations in Canadian and American society. He is a fulltime professor in Liberal Studies t at King Campus, Seneca College.

**Brian L. Flack** is a retired Professor of English Literature. In addition to teaching, he has written books of poetry and novels that examine the intricacies of contemporary life in urban settings, among them *In Seed Time* and *With A Sudden & Terrible Clarity*. A decade ago, he fled the chaos of Toronto for the peace of Prince Edward County.

**Lise Hogan** has specialized in modern Italian literature and she has published essays on various aspects of this literature. She is especially interested in how Italian culture is expressed in Italian Canadian writing. She has incorporated her knowledge of literary and cultural theory in her analysis of minority literary texts.

**Marino Tuzi** is the editor of and contributor to this collection of essays. He has published essays in books and journals on a variety of subjects on literature and culture. His book, *The Power of Allegiances* (published by Guernica Editions), examines the fiction of selected Italian-Canadian writers within the context of the immigrant experience and minority writing in Canada and abroad. Tuzi has also co-edited two books of essays (published by Guernica Editions) related to culture, identity, and society in Canada. He has taught special topics courses in the areas of Canadian Literature and Canadian Studies at Seneca College and York University.

**Jim Zucchero** has developed a keen interest in Italian experience in Canada, especially in the manner in which it is represented in the literary work of writers of Italian origin. In his published essays, he has incorporated his knowledge of social and cultural history with his analysis of minority literature in Canada.