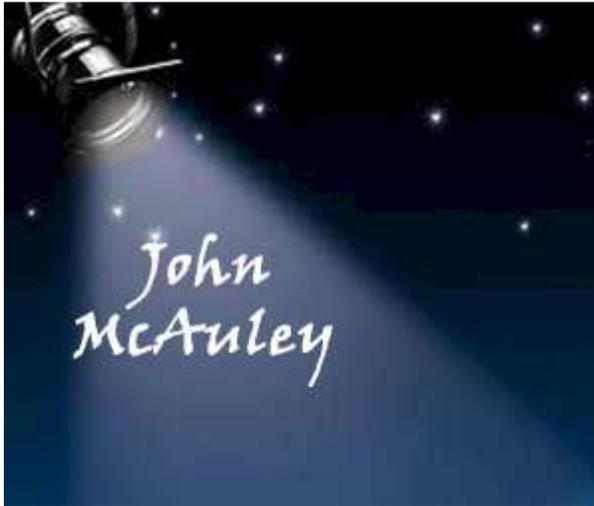


John McAuley Spotlighted



Poetry Quebec: Are you a native Quebecer? If not, where are you originally from? Why did you come to Quebec?

John McAuley: A native? If you mean was I born here, then yes indeed I was, as was my grandfather, who wrote in his journal on March 18, 1909, “Today we had a decent game of hockey and the side I was on won.”

PQ: When and how did you encounter your first Quebec poem?

JM: It might have been something by the black-belt-of-poets himself, Irving

Layton. The first poetry book I bought was Leonard Cohen’s *The Spicebox of Earth*, paperback edition. What blazing talent! I was an overawed teenager. Cohen’s use of the plural, his amorphous second-person, his Whitmanesque swashes, his paradoxes—it all seemed perfect at the time.

PQ: When and how did you first become interested in poetry?

JM: When I got into English 418 in 1970–71, George Bowering’s poetry workshop at Sir George Williams University, poetry went on steroids for me. He was unpretentious (not an Eastern slick), and originally from the South Okanagan. He had met or knew just about every contemporary poet I thought worth reading. I still look up to him.

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

JM: A poem is usually lineated and rhythmic, beamed in and absorbed, and, yes, you hear it, too. While some poets have fairly daunting definitions, I prefer the simplicity of Coleridge’s—a poem is the best words in the best order.

PQ: Do you have a writing ritual? If so, provide details.

JM: Superstition is all in the detail, isn’t it? I have a horse chestnut to hold, a green Dinky Toy steamroller (minus roof) from childhood to look at, and a 2 HB pencil (not too sharp) to push (for first drafts)—later they’ll be typed up with spur-of-the-moment changes, and then I revise with a red pen using copyediting marks. More and more, I type my first drafts. Revising in red means a change is mandatory.

PQ: What is your approach to writing of poems: inspiration driven, structural, social, thematic, other?

JM: Inspirational, yes, and whatever clicks open. Dreams are occasion sensations; there's a heft to the imagery and emotion. No narrative until I arrive, maybe telling me I'm alive. Inspiration-driven could mean coming up with a plan as I did for my translations of Latin poets who provided a tonal foundation I built my poems on. Structural? Yes, but not in the sense of a closed form. For that a little more elbow grease would be required. Is my approach thematic? Sure. Social, ditto. Other? Would that mean experimental? Some poems in James Schuyler's *Other Flowers* have edges—for the time. Make my experimental poem a latté, por favor. I still don't have a clue about fusion poetry. Is that a kind of displacement, poetic buoyancy?

PQ: Do you think that being a minority in Quebec (i.e. English-speaking) affects your writing? If so, how?

JM: Did being a minority affect Kafka? It affects me only in the sense that I consider myself an English-speaking Montrealer with some Quebec attitudes, yet feel I am an alien interloper and have been told that I am pathetic, a large bug, *moi*.

PQ: Do you think that writing in English in Quebec is a political act? Why or why not?

JM: Apparently it is—to some out there. Wasn't it the late prime minister Pierre Trudeau who once said, "Keep politics out of the bedrooms of starving poets' garrets"?

PQ: Why do you write?

JM: Why does a pigeon fly, a caterpillar crawl? Better—why do the African Grey Parrot, the Beluga whale, and the Asian Elephant mimic the human voice? Is it loneliness? Pleasure? I developed a love of words when young because I wasn't allowed to have a pet. My parents had a huge hardback Webster's dictionary, which I'd read on the floor near the china cabinet. And why do I write? For self-reclamation in the sense that poetry is redemptive and liberating and, I hope, a pleasure for readers and listeners. Maybe it's genetic. A distant relative of mine wrote poetry in Seattle.



PQ: Who is your audience?

JM: Is there one?

PQ: Do you think there is an audience, outside of friends or other poets, for poetry?

JM: Maybe a handful of students in one's classes if one teaches . . . or a family member. So few, the readers of poetry are mostly university undergraduates in arts faculties; for example, a long running Leeds University poetry magazine is aptly titled *Poetry and Audience* (*P&A*). Poets themselves make up for the lack of other readers. And what poet doesn't have a large collection of poetry books?

PQ: Does your day job impact on your writing? How?

JM: Raymond Souster was a looker-after of a bank vault, Wallace Stevens an insurance company

executive, William Carlos Williams a medical doctor. Souster's output? Over 50 books of his own poetry, WCW's around 20 books of poetry and well over a dozen books of prose. Stevens was the least prolific yet up there in the American pantheon. These three had one thing in common—none of them had a university or college job. For me, teaching (and marking) is a way of filling up time. It has taken me roughly a month to complete this interview.

PQ: How many drafts (beer, too) do you usually go through before you are satisfied/finished with a poem?

JM: A poem takes as many drafts as necessary to show through. I've always enjoyed the challenge of revising, maybe because getting a poem down sometimes feels almost weightless. I am a misreader writing. Many of my poems are clunkers until revised. In a way I envy the "rivers of ink poets" who revise little and produce reams. My motto for revision? Whatever it takes.

PQ: Do you write with the intention of "growing a manuscript" or do you work on individual poem that are later collected into a book?

JM: I usually work on individual poems though I now have a collection of football poems that is growing like a bunch of weeds. It sounds gardenish, but unfortunately I don't have a green thumb. In a way, my first book *Nothing Ever Happens in Pointe-Claire* was a type of growing manuscript as it contains letters fabricated to give the included poems a reason for being between covers.

PQ: What is the toughest part of writing for you?

JM: It's called management, knowing what to do with what's been put on a page and finishing it. A draft of a poem can sink to the bottom of a file folder for years and later be rediscovered. Then I wonder what I was trying to say. Recently I've fallen into too few participles and too much punctuation. For me, anything is potentially a distraction—a

particular tone, an irrelevant association concerning something on the page, an impulse to arbitrarily cull particular kinds of language in a draft. Stimulus errors.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

JM: To my mind, a muse exists in the here-and-now as flesh or spirit who might find a poet briefly amusing (the latter hearing bells in muse laughter, a sure sign, and metaphors over Dorval). Inspiration driven, the muse-worthy poet must grasp the moment and write. Look out, though. Don't try to tickle them. That'll really piss them off.

PQ: Do you have a favourite time and place to write?

JM: It always best when I know should be doing something else. Years ago, I would write in the evenings, and now any time of day will do. Any place will do too, though I'm a homebody. Sitting near an open window, I can look out and see sports history—the old Forum where the Maroons and Canadiens played, as well as Alexis Nihon Plaza. The land it sits on was a baseball field through the 1950s. Around 1900 it was called the Montreal Baseball Park (last home of the Britannia Football Club), and before that it was the Shamrock Lacrosse Grounds (the second of three grounds for the fabled lacrosse team).

PQ: Do you like to travel? Is travel important to your writing? Explain.

JM: I go out to Alberta regularly and that's about it. I travelled decades ago. Still remember it vividly. Travel has never been important to my writing directly though I take work with me and write a little and read poetry while away.

PQ: Do you have a favourite Quebec poet? If yes who and why? Who?

JM: Aren't poets globalizing these days? Right now, I'm reading *Le Spleen de Paris* by Baudelaire (who should be an honorary Quebecker, according to something I think I saw on Facebook). Hey, everybody I'm interested in gets a turn on my must-read poetry shelf. The bulk of my poetry books are stacked in a closet. I get a step stool, do a search, and exchange a handful for others. I've got a way of being able to yank a book from the middle of a stack without having it fall on my head very often. Or I bring home a new book.

PQ: Do you write about Quebec? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

JM: I guess I'm not a Krieghoff of poetry; that's about all I can say.

John McAuley teaches in the English department at Concordia University. He met Endre Farkas when both were undergraduates in the late 1960s and Artie Gold later at a *Booster & Blaster* meeting. In the 1970s, he edited *Maker* magazine and, with Stephen Morrissey and Robert Galvin, ran the poetry reading series at Vehicule Art Inc. As a coordinator at the gallery, he oversaw dozens of national and international performances and exhibitions and, as a member of the Vehicule poets, was instrumental in seeing *The Vehicule Poets* anthology through to publication with Maker Press. He has published four books, and his work has appeared in a number of anthologies.