

# THE LANDSCAPE OF CHILDHOOD

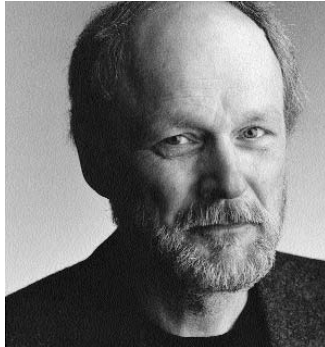


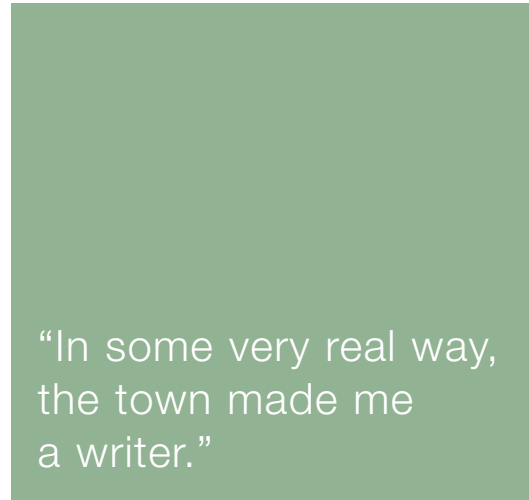
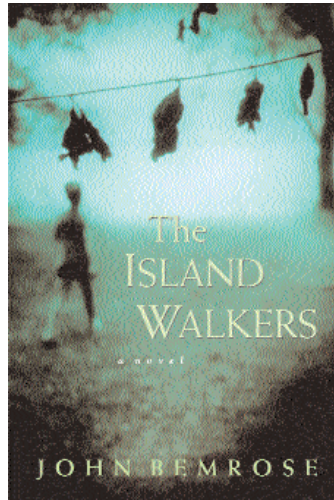
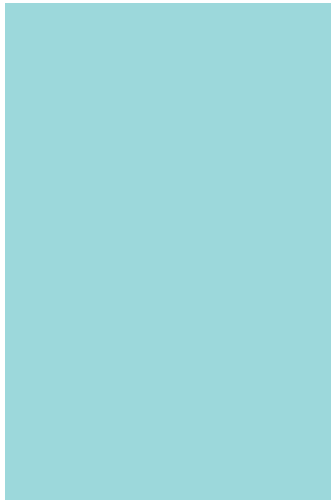
PHOTO: BRIAN PICKELL

**JOHN BEMROSE** writes about the influences and inspirations behind his highly acclaimed debut novel, *The Island Walkers*

**MORE THAN ANYTHING I'VE WRITTEN**, I think, *The Island Walkers* was inspired by the place where I grew up during the fifties and sixties. This was Paris, in southwestern Ontario, my family's home for almost a hundred years now. Paris was —and is—an exceptionally pretty town, with its two forking rivers, its steep hills, its bridges and fine old houses, but for me it has always meant something more. It's a place saturated with narrative. And this came about because of the many stories my parents and grandparents told me I couldn't look at a street and see only a street: It was also the spot where my twelve-year-old father had chased a herd of escaped cows. And over there was where my grandfather had fought and defeated the Indian who had spit in his tool box. These events were so real to me, that I lived in a kind of mythic landscape, and consequently was held by a sense of belonging—sometimes comforting, at others suffocating—that I haven't found anywhere since.

The beauty of Paris was part of this. The light striking under bridges, even the strangely haunting cry of the steam whistle calling the workers to Penman's knitting mills—these things marked me, and in some way, oppressed me,

## JOHN BEMROSE THE LANDSCAPE OF CHILDHOOD



because as I grew older I began to feel that it was incumbent on me to do something with it all. I had to let people know. In some very real way, the town made me a writer. I was in my early twenties when I started trying to put Paris into a novel—but those early attempts were failures. I just hadn't lived or written enough. In any case, I went on with other things. When I graduated from university in 1970, I went to work as a sales rep for New Press, an upstart publishing company in Toronto. I was the company's only salesman, and my territory—which I covered in a green Volkswagen "bug"—was the entire country of Canada. Later I went to England, wrote a novel, which I wisely decided not to publish, and met the lovely woman from West Virginia whom I would marry. Back in Toronto, I became a father, published a couple of books of poems, staged a play, and earned my living as a freelance arts journalist, mostly doing reviews and profiles for *Maclean's* magazine, where I'm still a contributing editor.

I was also filling drawers with half-finished novels, increasingly aware that I hadn't accomplished the central task of my writing life. I hadn't written the "Paris" novel and with age fifty looming I knew I had to start soon or miss my chance. So in the winter of 1996—spurred on by jealousy of a friend who'd won a big literary prize—I began *The Island Walkers*.

I figured the project would take two or three years. It took six, as the story expanded to accommodate the tidal wave of ideas and feelings that had built up over the decades. And the curious thing was this: each time I sat down to write about the fictional town of Attawan—about Alf Walker's hard choices and his son Joe's first love—I seemed to re-enter the vivid atmosphere of Paris as I had

known it. Most of the stories in the novel are invented, as are all of its characters. But Attawan is Paris clear through, and if there is any poetry in the novel, any joy in the telling, this has flowed, I think, from some never-broken connection with my childhood. Even while writing the novel's darkest scenes, I felt myself in some queer way to be eight years old again, trailing happily over the Lions Park footbridge, stopping to look up the river where it gleamed in its distant reaches like the future I was sure held something marvellous.

I've told the story from several points of view, using the Walker family as a microcosm for the stresses and conflicts of society—for the fullness of society in all its variety of age, class, sex, and experience. But just as any family is a mystery to the society around it, so the members of the Walker family are mysterious to one another: each locked in a solitude that envisions the world in what I hope are unique and surprising ways. And yet everyone in the book is also bound to everyone else by a matrix of humanity and place they are often unaware of. We belong to each other, I think, and to a common fate, even in the hell and solace of our aloneness.

I think that literature, if it's to have any value at all, must have the courage for unhappiness. I've tried to be honest in following the Walkers to the bottom of their night. But at the same time, every good story dances its way through the shades, with all the sprightliness, poetry, and music it can muster. The real hope is there, in the flame we make as we go out. I believe *The Island Walkers* is a happy book. ■

Visit [www.readmagazine.ca](http://www.readmagazine.ca) to read an excerpt from *The Island Walkers*.