



Michael Crummey's latest novel is born from the wreckage of love and war

## Salvaging Stories

An interview by Scott Sellers

With the publication of his debut novel, *River Thieves*, Michael Crummey surged to the forefront as one of Canada's most exciting talents. The novel received rave reviews across the country, was shortlisted for the prestigious Giller Prize, and became a huge national bestseller.

This fall Michael Crummey returns with *The Wreckage*, the story of a great love torn apart by intolerance and the forces of war. He sat down recently for a wide-ranging conversation.

**After you finished writing *River Thieves*, you were quite vocal in saying that you didn't think you would attempt another novel. What made the experience of writing your first novel such a difficult one?**

At the time, I thought no one but me would have had such a miserable time writing a novel and I attributed it to a lack of talent or skill on my part. Since then, I've gotten the impression from other writers that the misery is just part of the process. You aren't going to run a marathon without plenty of discomfort and moments where it seems impossible to finish. Likewise with a novel. It's such an innately unnatural process—as is deciding to run 26 miles—that putting yourself through it is going to hurt.

Having said that, things went a little better this time around. You learn from mistakes. Plenty of water. Pace yourself. Preparation. There's lots you can do to minimize the negative. I spent a lot more time thinking about *The Wreckage* before I started writing it, and had worked out most of the larger plot points and characters. This meant that there was less time spent banging my head against the desk, wondering

how to move a character from point A to point B. Or to find out where the hell point B was exactly.

***The Wreckage* is very different in style and tone from *River Thieves*. What were some of the challenges that you faced in sitting down to write your second novel?**

The biggest challenge in my mind was not repeating myself. I did not want to write another book like *River Thieves*. The tone of that book, and the way the story unfolds, felt pretty organic. It's all about murk, all the colours bleed into one another. None of the characters seem to know exactly what's going on, particularly if they think they do. There's tons of back story and the novel keeps circling in on itself. It wasn't intentional, but that style did seem to suit the project.

So when I started this book I was determined to go about it differently from the start. I wanted a simpler story, I wanted more narrative drive, I wanted a book with more distinct colours in the tone. The subject matter of *The Wreckage* is still pretty dark, but I also wanted to have a laugh or two in there. I think that's one of the most distinctive things about Newfoundlanders, the ability to find humour (black though it might be) in almost any situation.

**How have your skills as a poet and a short story writer helped you as a novelist?**

That's hard to pinpoint. Poetry is where I started as a writer and it's where most of the growing pains happened. Years and years of writing really bad stuff. And through that process I think I developed some kind of voice of my own and some notion of what works on the page and what doesn't. The stories helped with the whole issue of narrative, how to put a story together and move backwards and forwards in time. And

there are all kinds of mechanical things involved that were directly transferable, such as writing convincing dialogue, for instance, or giving readers a sense of the physical world the characters are living in.

Which is not to say that poetry and stories were a stepping-stone to the novels. The challenges and rewards of each

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genre are completely different. And nothing I did as a poet or short story writer really prepared me for novels. It's a completely different animal.

***The Wreckage* is a novel of great sweep, stretching from Newfoundland to the South Pacific and spanning over fifty years. Where did the idea for the novel come from?**

The original germ of the idea was a family story. I had an uncle who went overseas during World War II. He had a sweetheart in St. John's before he was shipped out and she was told a little while afterwards he'd been killed in action. It was fifty years later before she learned the truth about what happened to him. I always thought that was a great set-up for a novel. But there wasn't a hook there for me, there wasn't anything deep enough to convince me I could spend a couple of years of my life writing the story.

My editor at Doubleday Canada, Martha Kanya-Forstner, knew I was thinking in vague terms about the Second World War and she sent me a book three years ago called *Testaments*

*of Honour* [by Blake Heathcote]. It contained first-hand accounts from Canadian vets of World War II. I was struck by one man's account of being taken prisoner by the Japanese in Hong Kong. He talked about one Japanese soldier who had a hate on for the Canadians and was particularly sadistic towards them. And the reason for his virulent hatred was that he had grown up in British Columbia. He was getting his own back because of his experience of racism there.

I had been thinking a lot about tribalism, racism, hatred, imperialism, colonialism, and many other "isms" in the wake of 9/11. And the story of "The Kamloops Kid," as the Canadians called him, seemed to encapsulate so many of those issues. I knew right away I wanted a character like him in my novel.

The major problem I faced was the fact that, as far as I knew, there were no Newfoundlanders in the Pacific theatre. I had no idea how to deal with that. However, the same week I received *Testaments of Honour*, I happened on a CBC documentary by Reg Sherren called *Return to Nagasaki*. It was all about the last living Canadian present at the dropping of the atomic bomb, a man named John Ford. And, bizarrely, John Ford is from Newfoundland. He'd joined the British Army instead of the Newfoundland regiment, wound up in Singapore, and was taken prisoner there. Suddenly, I was off to the races.

**Can you talk a little bit more about the character of Nishino, the menacing Japanese prison camp translator. How did that character evolve?**



Holly Hogan

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Nishino was one of the real challenges of the book, simply because his experience of the world, his background and culture, is so far outside my own. As I mentioned earlier, the idea for Nishino originated with an anecdote from a Canadian veteran about a sadistic prison guard who had grown up in Canada.

In order to get a sense of what might be going on in that person's mind, I did some research on Japanese Canadians in the period before and during the Second World War and was really interested in the nature of the divided loyalties among them. Many of the younger kids often saw themselves as

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Canadian even when the country itself refused to recognize them. I was struck by hearing David Suzuki talk about how he was beaten up by other Japanese Canadian kids in the internment camps because he hoped for a Canadian/Allied victory over the Japanese. He couldn't imagine hoping for anything else, being Canadian.

A lot of the characters in the book end up finding in themselves those very things they hate most in others. They discover that the "enemy is in our bosom," in one way or another. And Nishino, who violently rejects everything about the place he grew up, eventually sees that, against his wish and will, he is just as much "Canadian" or western as he is Japanese.

**One of the most important themes that you explore in *The Wreckage* is the nature of intolerance; or more precisely, the capacity for intolerance to thwart opportunities of understanding. Is this a reflection of how you look at today's world?**

Sure. I'm not interested in writing history, really. Both of my novels to date have been set in the past, but they only interest me in terms of how they allow me to explore contemporary, personal concerns. The story in *The Wreckage* seemed like an ideal place to work through my own take on what's been happening in the world since 9/11. Not that I mean there to be a one-to-one relationship between past and present, or that *The Wreckage* is simply a parable or fable intended to comment directly on Bush and bin Laden. It's a story that exists for itself and stands or falls on its own merits. But I did feel there were a lot of parallels in the story that started to take shape when I was writing the novel and events in the contemporary world. And that was part of what kept me interested.

Many of the characters in *The Wreckage* feel they are act-

ing or being led by divine providence or guidance or fate. And some end up feeling completely justified in taking part in despicable and horrible acts as a result of that. Feel free to think Bush or bin Laden in this particular instance. I wanted to follow a character who has to deal with the fallout of realizing that the sense of divine approbation that carried him is bunk. **Both *River Thieves* and *The Wreckage* are historical novels. Does a novelist have a responsibility to the accuracy of history or is his or her only responsibility to tell a good story?**

That's a hard question. Or, more accurately, the answer is very complicated. I used to stand squarely in the "a good story is all that matters" camp. But a book about Newfoundland by an American writer changed that—and I don't mean *The Shipping News*. A lot of Newfoundlanders (including my mother) really disliked that book because they felt it distorted Newfoundland reality, that it got the place wrong. My take was a little different. I thought of Proulx as a gothic writer, and *The Shipping News* is Newfoundland gothic. Her portrayal of the United States in that book is just as "distorted," just as gothic. You won't find either place in the real world, although there are elements in both Newfoundland and the U.S. that made her portrayals feel "authentic." All of the choices that she made as a writer served particular aesthetic ends. And it's a damn good story. So I had no problem with it.

But there is also a way to go about this process which seems disrespectful to me. The book that changed my position on this whole question is supposedly set in a small Newfoundland outport at the beginning of the 20th century. All of the local residents spend most of their evenings eating at the local restaurant. Which is ridiculous. There were no restaurants in outport Newfoundland. People had barely enough money to feed themselves. It was as if the writer didn't give a damn what relation the story had to the reality of the place he was writing about. There's some talk in the novel of Beothuk Indians wandering into town to "trade" at the local store. Honest to God, the book had me spitting nails.

So what was the difference? I can't rightly say. But it has something to do with integrity, with respect, with authenticity. There is a way of massaging the facts of history, culture and place to suit a fictional story that honours the material being used. And there's a way of "using" this material which denigrates and disrespects it.

In both my novels I've done all I can to stick to the first method. **R**

Visit [www.BookClubs.ca](http://www.BookClubs.ca) for a book club guide and to read an excerpt from *The Wreckage*.