



# The Write Track

**Award-winning author Ian Williams on his middle-school teacher, who encouraged his love of writing.**

BY RICHARD OUZOUNIAN

**O**n the evening of November 18, 2019, Ian Williams made his way to the podium at the Four Seasons Hotel ballroom in Toronto, through a haze of colleagues' cheers and congratulations. He'd just won the Giller Prize — Canada's richest literary award — for his first novel, *Reproduction*. In that heady moment, in a heartfelt acceptance speech, Williams thanked Peter Lucic, the teacher who introduced him to the world of writing at Sir John A. Macdonald Sr. Public School in Brampton, Ont.

"When good things happen, people say it feels surreal," says Williams, now a professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia. "It feels like you are multiple people at the same time, living multiple realities at the same time. In that instant, I was the university student who needed to thank Margaret Atwood for what her work meant to me, and I was also the 12-year-old boy who spent three magical years with Mr. Lucic."

Lucic describes the young Williams he met in 1991 as shy. "It was hard to get a fix on him at first. But I immediately noticed his meticulous handwriting."

"Yes, I was shy, right until university, I think," says Williams, with a laugh. "Brainy and quiet and introverted and watchful."

The class that Lucic taught, with his teacher partner Ursula Keuper-Bennett, was part of a Peel Board of Education program for students identified as gifted. "I spent three years with Mr. Lucic," recalls Williams. "He made an impression on me from the beginning. A large, teddy bear kind of man. Very gentle. He was our school dad. There was such warmth from him."

"If you have kids for three years like that," Lucic volunteers, "you can truly personalize the work you do with them. You can almost become a kind of conduit to their futures."

To the young Williams, it was a lot simpler. "We'd just show up and trust him, and together we'd all get our stuff done. You don't realize you're learning. You're just in a space and time with someone, rather than being instructed."

One of the things Williams remembers most vividly about Lucic is that he would read novels and stories to them aloud ... through a microphone. "We were



Ian Williams (left) reunited with former classmates and Peter Lucic (right) last fall.

working in a pod situation that served two Grade 6 classes,” explains Lucic. “One very large room with a dividing wall separating it into two smaller classrooms. I needed the microphone to be heard, but I also enjoyed the drama it gave the readings.”

Williams chuckles at the memory. “Oh yes, he was a bit of a storyteller. When you’re in Grade 6, you’re a little bit too old to be read to, but you still like it.” What kind of stuff did Lucic read? “An eclectic selection,” he says. “Some award-winning books like Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* and others that I just enjoyed, like Roald Dahl’s *The Witches*.”

To the young Williams, “It never felt like something was missing. It all felt really organic. In Grade 6, we wrote every single day. We’d get a seven-minute power writing exercise. We got a topic and then wrote as much as we could. We wrote poems or stories.” Lucic’s teaching partner would suggest a topic and provide the structure. “We kids just got on board and ran with it,” says Williams.

From Lucic’s memories of the time, it was a period of wide-ranging artistic experimentation. “Sometimes we’d put together journals. I remember one was called *Choices*. Ian wrote a really interesting poem about two sisters, one of whom was being abused by her father. It was almost scary.”

Lucic recalls an Open House activity called The Imagination Café. “During one session, I remember Ian playing the piano while his classmate Vicki read a poem. It was truly moving. Kids serving hot drinks and selling cookies. There were a lot of different coloured lights and music suited to a coffee house atmosphere. Many of the students’ poems were illustrated and printed for the audience.”

Williams now sees that “Mr. Lucic had a bunch of these old-soul kids who could nerd out on their subjects. There was a stable community in that room with a person who was looking out for us, which left us free to be ourselves.” He says Lucic understood that the best thing he could do for his students was to encourage and support them, rather than critique them. “He kept us excited about what we were doing. He was a brilliant educator.”

Lucic was also broadening his students’ horizons, introducing them to the internet many years before it would become common practice. “I came to computers fairly early,” admits Lucic. “I’d bring in these old Commodore PET computers and wire them into a primitive network. I got funding for a phone line and modem. This allowed my young authors to connect online with the International Poetry Guild at the University of

Michigan and WIER (Writers in Electronic Residence) at York University.”

Williams brightens at the memory. “He had us on this makeshift computer network with guys from the University of Michigan — Americans and Canadians swapping poems in the early days of the internet! We had current affairs projects that connected us with American kids, learning about each other and the tech world that most people didn’t yet know existed. He gave us challenges. He was preparing us for a world that he saw as digital.”

Lucic brushes aside any suggestions he was a prescient educator. “You just do what you need to do in teaching and hope it will be what the child needs.”

Clearly his work suited Williams’s needs; he went on to earn his Hons. B.Sc. in psychology and English, as well as an MA and a PhD in English, all at the University of Toronto and all by the time he was 25. He then taught at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts and published a short story collection and two poetry collections, one of which, *Personals*, was short-listed for the Griffin Poetry Prize.

But Fitchburg was also where Williams lost all his worldly possessions when the condo building in which he lived burned to the ground. He moved back to Canada and started writing *Reproduction* shortly after.

In his mind, he now brackets the night of that fire with the night he won the Giller Prize. “Those moments have something in common because they’re very clarifying.” Williams recalls what he said to himself as he watched his life going up in flames: “Ian, you’ll have to rebuild yourself again, but you have everything you need in your head.”

He knows he began to discover that confidence in Peter Lucic’s classroom nearly three decades ago. “Something magical is possible if you trust the people who are guardians of your childhood,” concludes Williams. “And Mr. Lucic always delivered. He never disappointed that trust.” **PS**

*In this profile, notable Canadians honour the teachers who have made a difference in their lives and have embraced the College’s Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession, which are care, respect, trust and integrity.*



# Wonder Woman

**Actor and *Avengers* star Cobie Smulders sheds light on the teacher who helped her discover her superpower.**

BY TEDDY KATZ

**Y**eah, you did it! You guys friggin’ did it!” That was actor Cobie Smulders in a recorded video message last June that went to the graduating class at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver.

It was Smulders’ high school, too, until she graduated in 2000. In her message, Smulders tries to speak directly and genuinely to each of the graduates in this unusual year, saying, “Let’s just call it what it is: A bummer.” She’s talking about COVID-19 disrupting their end-of-school rituals and celebrations.

“Guys, I know first-hand what a challenging place high school can be. I did it. I’m a survivor as well,” Smulders jokes in her message.

In the two-minute video Smulders is at times silly, at times poignant, touching and human, and speaks about their shared experiences. “I mean, I know that Mrs. Hughes is still teaching there,” say Smulders. “[I remember we read] *Animal Farm* and it got very real.”

Mrs. Hughes is Amy Hughes. She also attended “Byng,” as the students call it, and has been teaching English and theatre at the school for 31 of her 33 years in the profession. Hughes taught Smulders English in Grades 10, 11 and 12, and definitely left her mark.

“I think Mrs. Hughes — it’s still hard for me to call her Amy — was the first teacher I saw as a human. Not just as an educator but a woman with a life outside the classroom,” Smulders says. “She instilled in me a broader view of the world and had me read books that enabled me to see from a new perspective.”

Smulders’ video message came about after Ryan Reynolds, another Vancouver-raised celebrity, posted a video and bought pizza for all the graduates at his alma mater, a neighbouring school that just happens to be Byng’s biggest rival.

“Someone on staff said to me, ‘Do you think Cobie would do one of those [videos]?’ so I just emailed her.” Hughes says Smulders was happy to do it, adding, “She continues to give back to the school in so many ways.”

Since leaving Byng, Smulders has built quite the acting résumé. She starred in the ABC drama *Stumptown*. She’s performed alongside Tom Cruise, and she’s played a kick-ass, gun-toting superhero in the *Marvel Avengers* series including the box-office record-breaker *Infinity War*.

Smulders started making a name for herself when she was just 23. Then, in 2014 she was nominated for a People’s Choice Award for her part on the CBS hit comedy *How I Met Your Mother* — a role that seemed written for her, in many ways. For starters, she played a Canadian and introduced a global audience to,

among other things, Canada's collective passion for Tim Hortons, hockey and universal health care.

Smulders' Canadian roots have always been important to her. Every year she donates money in the form of a "Centre Stage Award" at Byng, which goes to students who plan to pursue careers in the performing arts.

Smulders isn't the only celebrity to come out of her school. The year she graduated, Byng started a mini arts academy and it's become a magnet for talented musicians, actors and artists who audition to attend.

With all that talent around, Smulders didn't really stand out from the crowd in her high school days. Truth be told, she didn't really want to.

"She was a B student. She was thoroughly, beautifully average, and yet exceptional at the same time," Hughes says.

Smulders didn't like to be the centre of attention, but as it happened, the camera loved her. For a while in her teen years, she worked as a model and even travelled the world to walk the catwalk for international shows.

None of that went to her head, however. "She wasn't a look-at-me kid. She was, 'I'm in the herd and periodically have to pop out to model.'"

Her low-key approach included an effort to make her teachers happy. "I very much wanted to have my teachers like me and worked hard to make them proud," Smulders says.

Hughes was one of those teachers. "She had spunk. She was the kid whose eyes would sparkle when she smiled," says Hughes. "You would ask a question in class and look out at the students and think, no, I haven't got that one, nope, haven't got that one either. But that one there will follow me anywhere. She was that kid."

Alongside the modelling, Smulders began to gravitate toward roles in high school plays. But Hughes says there wasn't one "aha" moment where Smulders showcased her acting talent and signalled that she was going places. It was more her way of relating to people.

"She has that social-emotional intelligence that is so profound. That's what takes you places," says Hughes.



Amy Hughes teaches English and theatre at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver.

Some of that EQ may have grown out of her experiences at Byng. Looking back now Smulders says, "High school can be a magical, painful time of growth." She says Hughes often pushed her and her classmates, gently, out of their comfort zones.

For example, Hughes likes to equip her students with essential tools for debate. Her goal is to get them thinking critically and building their own arguments while breaking down stories and examining themes, plot and character.

"I remember reading out loud in her class and feeling incredibly nervous," says Smulders. "This was really the first time I raised my voice to speak in front of a group."

Hughes isn't surprised to hear this. "She was kind of a shy kid. It's one thing to get on stage and play somebody. It's another thing to be you."

As a teacher, Hughes worked hard to build her students' confidence and stretch their experiences. "When I look back at high school, it seems like I was continuously put into moments that made me petrified," says Smulders.

That risk-taking practice was put to use a short while later. At 22, after a few years of acting classes, Smulders drove to Los Angeles, looking for a way into an acting career. Not long after, she landed her role in *How I Met Your Mother* and hasn't looked back since.

Hughes says she's proud of Smulders' ability to remain down-to-earth in a high-flying profession. "There are so many people who've bought into the glamour. But that's not Cobie. She's just doing her job and doing it well.

Staying grounded likely helped Smulders through an especially dark time. At 25, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She had multiple surgeries over two years and only revealed the struggle some time afterwards. Now in remission, and a mother of two girls, Smulders says her battle with cancer has made her a better person and a better mom.

That healthy perspective has always been Smulders' particular strength. "I like to tell my students every one of them has a superpower," says Hughes. "Cobie has her superpower. She's just a good human. I really don't think Cobie has changed a lot in the last 20 years."

The admiration is a two-way street. When Smulders let Hughes know she hoped to single her out for this article, Hughes found it humbling.

"It matters to me as a human that Cobie thinks that way of me. I think that's lovely." **PS**

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# The Gold Standard

**A dream team of remarkable teachers helped shape Marnie McBean into the successful athlete and coach she is today.**

BY RICHARD OUZOUNIAN

It's no surprise that educating Marnie McBean was a team sport. McBean is one of the most accomplished athletes in Canadian history and one of only two Canadians to win three gold medals at the Summer Olympics. Last summer, she was named Chef de Mission for Team Canada at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, an appropriate next step in the career of a seemingly born leader, coach and motivator, whose well-received and insightful book, *The Power of More*, sums up her views on self-motivation.

When you talk to the disarmingly candid McBean, she'll admit that many of the qualities that helped her reach such lofty goals in life were instilled in her early on — years, in fact, before she ever settled on rowing as her major pursuit.

The time she spent at Park Lawn Junior Middle School in Etobicoke, Ont., from which she graduated in 1982, contributed to how McBean says she was “shaped, moulded and shown how to become the person I am today.”

McBean says it wasn't just one particular teacher at Park Lawn who guided her, but a veritable dream team of educators who helped her find her way. “If you asked me who changed my life, I'd struggle to name just one person,” admits McBean. “I don't think we do heroes that way in Canada. We take bits and pieces of all the people who helped us along the way.”

In some ways, McBean was a late starter. Although she was an avid athlete from her earliest years, the first time she was drawn to the Olympics was at the age of 16 when she watched the closing ceremonies of the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Games and felt what she calls “a strong pull” toward the camaraderie and joy of the athletes.

Rowing became her sport of choice after she watched the Rob Lowe film *Oxford Blues*, later that year, with its dramatic, exciting depiction of the world of competitive rowing.

Although all this happened shortly after her time in middle school, it was those formative years that “made me ready for everything that would happen to me,” she recalls.

When asked what she was like going into middle school, McBean laughs. “I was a strong character coming in. Whether it was misplaced or not, I always had a certain confidence.” She adds, “I was not without my own insecurities and issues. I'm not perfect! I wasn't beyond getting in a little trouble, on occasion.”

One of the teachers who made a big impact during those years was her Grade 6 health teacher, Barb Abbott. “I remember having normal conversations with her,” McBean recalls. “I was maybe a mature kid, an old soul, and she sensed that.” She hastens to add, “I always knew my teachers were my teachers. I never felt they were my friends or my buddies, but they talked to me like a person and that made all the difference.”

John Armstrong made a strong impression on McBean during those early years, as well. “He was a great teacher. I had him for math, history and homeroom. I remember he was firm — he never allowed any slacking off.”

But it was in the world of extra-curriculars where Armstrong made the strongest impression. “He was the chess coach and he was really brilliant at it. He put us into leagues and had us playing competitively. The competition really appealed to me. I was ranked in the top 25 of under-16 players nationally,” McBean recalls. She says Armstrong taught her how to think strategically — a skill she’d come to rely on down the road while training and racing. “In chess, I knew all these opening moves and where they would lead. I remember him saying ‘This is the Kasparov opening. Learn it.’ And I did.”

Another teacher who made a substantial impact was Mary Matsui, her music teacher. “She was a petite woman with quite a sense of style. She wore flared pants, big collars, stuff like that,” says McBean. “She made music fun, but she didn’t do it by trivializing it. Quite the opposite. She put theory to it. She helped us understand how music worked and then made us do research papers. I picked The Police and had to figure out what actually went into the songs that Sting wrote and sang.”

McBean reflects on her Park Lawn teachers and their lasting impact. “I liked teachers who taught real stuff, who could create analogies I could respond to,” she says. “If someone came up with an analogy I latched onto it. It didn’t just help me in that subject, I used it in my life, my rowing. I use them to this day!”

She remembers a math teacher in high school whose emphasis on problem-solving helped her in a



McBean visited her middle school in 1992 and took a photo with former teacher Mary Matsui.

biomechanics course in university. “He taught us how to strategize moves ahead, to look back at an equation and understand the principle behind it, not just the answer to the immediate problem,” says McBean.

She took that analytical thought process and carried it with her into adult life and into competition, as she recalls in *The Power of More*: Before every race, to give us a realistic idea of what to expect, my coach, my rowing partner, and I would use the real data of our skills and speed versus those of the competition to create a race profile prediction.

Back in school, life lessons were just a regular part of everyday classroom interactions. “At the time, I was just doing it. When you’re using those tools, you don’t really know where they come from. But it’s great to stop and ask yourself questions that dig up those memories. In hindsight, you can really put those pieces together,” says McBean.

She recalls another important area of growth early on in her education. “I was a good reader in Grades 1 and 2, so they asked me to work with ESL students. I became a real helper.”

Those experiences supporting others in their learning may have planted the seeds, helping her become a successful coach and mentor.

After an injury sidelined her from the 2000 Olympics and ended her active rowing career, she was hired by the Canadian Olympic Committee as a specialist in Olympic athlete preparation and mentoring, working closely with Canadian Olympic teams in a variety of sports.

It’s clear McBean’s early teachers made quite an impact. In 1992, she returned to visit and speak to the student body and staff. Her message to everyone in the crowd that day? “Try out everything, choose the thing you like the best and work very, very hard at it.”

There’s another moment from that same year that stands out in McBean’s memory, just as clearly. She had just stepped off the plane from the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, her two gold medals draped around her neck, and was joking with a newspaper reporter about where she should keep them because “They’re a bit heavy for earrings.” Then she looked up in the crowd and saw John Armstrong, the no-nonsense teacher who had taught her how to strategize, greeting her in a moment of homecoming glory. “That’s something I will never forget.” **PS**

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