



THE STORYTELLERS BOOK CLUB PRESENTS

*The Watch That
Ends the Night*

Hugh MacLennan

(Macmillan, 1959, now available from McGill-Queen's)

I knew Hugh MacLennan well. I knew him in the 1960s first as a friend and neighbour at his cottage at North Hatley, in the Eastern Townships, then as his editor (for his last novel, *Voices in Time*), and as his publisher. After his death in 1990, I created the anthology *Hugh MacLennan's Best*, selected from all of his work, fiction and non-fiction. In 2013, when *Two Solitudes* was selected as a finalist for Canada Reads, I was asked by the CBC to speak on Hugh's behalf, which was a very great honour.

Although I can claim to have edited all of the other four books that I have selected for this book club, I did not edit *The Watch That Ends the Night*, which I think is Hugh MacLennan's best book. It was published in 1959, when I was still in high school (although I still remember browsing through the paperback version at a Glasgow Station book stall, attracted by the exciting — if misleading — logging scene on the cover. Ah, those publishers!).

Hugh had spent many years writing it. Elspeth Cameron's definitive biography *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life* shows that as far back as July 1954 he had felt able to say that he had the whole novel drafted "from beginning to end," but it took him several years to finish it. One reason was Hugh's determination to make sure that this, a significant novel dealing with major themes, was not going to be rushed. The main reason, however, for his slow progress was that Hugh's wife, Dorothy Duncan, was ill throughout those years. Her rheumatic heart — the same disease that affects Catherine in the novel — meant that, in his words, she lived "knowing that at any hour of any day she might die." Like the fictional Catherine she suffered a series of embolisms, which caused her devoted husband to become all too familiar with doctors and surgeons and hospitals and waiting rooms late at night.

Like Catherine, when she recovered from her latest crisis Dorothy would say, "Well, I fooled them again!" Dorothy died in April 1957. Hugh wrote the last part of the book stricken by grief.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The book is dedicated, in Latin, to Dorothy. The dedication reads, “To you, wherever or however you may be, I give my thanks and this book.” How is your reading of the book affected by knowing that Hugh MacLennan, as a loving, protective, vulnerable husband, went through the same anguish as his fictional storyteller George Stewart?
2. Hugh MacLennan chose to make this the very first book (unlike *Barometer Rising* or *Two Solitudes* or *Each Man’s Son*) that he told in the first person. He wrote that George Stewart “partakes of some of my character (about 25% only).” Yet, like George, Hugh taught at McGill, did occasional CBC radio work, had taught at a boys school, had flirted with radical ideas in the Depression, and now lived west along Sherbrooke Street. What did Hugh gain by adopting a first-person perspective? And what did he lose, given that the book has the ambitious aim of telling the entwined life stories of its three main characters — George, Jerome Martell, and Catherine, the woman married to both of them?
3. In my book, *Stories About Storytellers*, I talk about this book’s opening chapter, where “after years of happy marriage to a widow named Catherine, at the end of the first chapter Stewart receives the most dramatic phone call in Canadian literature.” Did the drama (“*But it was in the papers you were dead!*”) catch you, making you eager to read on? What moment first grabbed you?
4. Here we come to the great storytelling sleight of hand. Did you notice how well Hugh handles the passage of time, and the pacing, so that after chapter two, Jerome and George never meet or speak again, *in the present*, until just twelve pages from the book’s end? The intervening pages are taken up with George’s life story from boyhood on, Catherine’s death-defying life story, Jerome’s equally death-defying life

story, and their intermingling. Which of these stories did you find most interesting?

5. When I was compiling *Hugh MacLennan's Best*, I selected the episode of Jerome escaping in his canoe from the murderer in the New Brunswick logging camp. I found it a superb, self-contained story, a wonderful piece of writing. Did you? If so, what impressed you most?
6. But did you notice the boy's strange reaction to overhearing his mother fighting in her bedroom with the man he knows as The Engineer. He seems to be taking *his* side, not hers, as she humiliates him. What did you make of that?
7. What did you think of Jerome's adoptive parents, the little minister from Halifax and his determined wife? And of the way the adult Jerome treated them, when he came back from the war, scarred mentally by his terrible deeds with the bayonet and determined to be a doctor?

The life of a doctor is a constant important theme here, (and in addition to Jerome, several doctors play major roles in the book). Hugh's stern father (Doctor Sam) was a hard-working medical man all his professional life. How important is that fact? Are Hugh's doctors and his views of the profession convincing? And to what extent can this book be called a great medical drama?

8. Hugh carefully balanced the serious side of the story, with its major personal and political themes, with some humorous characters, like George's crossbow-inventing father and the headmaster Dr. Lionel Bigbee ("You aren't from home, not with that accent, Stewart.") Which minor character did you enjoy most? And do you think that the loathsome bully Aunt Agnes (I see her as Maggie Smith with a Canadian accent) really deserves consideration as a great comic character, too?
9. It is Aunt Agnes who produces a line that causes the modern reader to sit up in alarm: "But as a freshman at McGill you'd

be just one little boy in a herd of Jews.” That is just one example of cases where Jews and Jewishness are mentioned in this book in a way that troubles readers today, and we assume that here Hugh was accurately depicting the casual anti-Semitism of Old Montreal. The worst example is, of course, the Polish man George meets in Europe who predicts that the coming war will kill him, but cheerfully assumes that it will also remove the Jews of Europe.

Having lived through the rise of Hitler (visiting Germany in the 1930s to see for himself) and the eventual revelations of the death camps, Hugh was very conscious of the power of anti-Semitism, not least because his friend and Montreal contemporary Gwethalyn Graham had enjoyed international success with her 1944 novel, *Earth and High Heaven*, about anti-Semitism in Montreal. What did you think of the several references to Jewish characters, whose religion and culture seem to us today to be hardly worth mentioning? Did any other examples of what would be “politically incorrect” today catch your eye?

10. For me, one of the main characters in the book is Montreal. From the crowds on St. Catherine Street to the squirrels on the paths up to the Mountain and its dramatic view, from the McGill campus down to the river, the city, with its rattling old trams, is such a constant presence that when we move outside it to the peace of the Laurentians, in my view a hush seems to fall over the book. How important was the portrayal of Montreal to you? And were you struck by the portrait of George’s “modern-day” Montreal, at the end of the 1950s, when we know that the Duplessis era was just about to end in “The Quiet Revolution”?
11. The character of Jerome Martell, a crusading left-wing doctor who went to the Spanish Civil War and ended up in China, naturally reminded many Canadians of Norman Bethune. Did you like how Hugh brilliantly heads off that problematic assumption by *making Bethune a minor character in the novel*? Hugh later suggested that a real-life model for

Jerome Martell was actually Frank Scott, the poet, McGill Law School scholar, and leader of Montreal left-wing politics who became one of the founders of the CCF party. How did this division of the story between George and Jerome allow Hugh to develop his theme of the contrast between observers and leaders?

12. One of the strongest points of the book for me was the picture of Montreal in the Depression. The crowds moving along St. Catherine Street, gazing hungrily at the shop windows is one powerful image. Another is the picture of the disillusioned young people (feeling that nobody wanted them — an unhappy reminder of today’s “overqualified” young people’s employment problems) going to parties and flirting with one another, and with Communism. What did you think of Norah — the Party member, the superb nurse assisting Jerome, the great beauty and the great troublemaker? Do you agree with Kate when she said that Norah knew what she was doing?
13. Elspeth Cameron’s fine biography tells us that Hugh (like George, disheartened by Depression-hit Canada) went to Russia in 1937 to see the new society, and actually saw “the shuffling kulaks” in Moscow. How does this information affect the way you see the novel’s treatment of Communist Russia?
14. For me, one of the finest set-pieces in the book is the riot at the Spanish Civil War meeting. Max and Monique Nemni’s book *Young Trudeau* has revealed shocking facts about just how pro-Fascist French-speaking young Catholic Montrealers like Trudeau were — in favour of Mussolini, Franco, and (later, during the war) Pétain’s Vichy France, and against de Gaulle’s Free French. How does Hugh make it clear that the authorities were in favour of the French-speaking students breaking up the meeting?
15. The book gives us a wide-ranging survey of European and North American politics through the ’30s and ’40s. During

the writing Hugh re-read Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, with the greatest admiration, and with hopes of also being able to deal with the great eternal themes. To what extent do you think he succeeded?

16. Towards the end of the book he pays an extraordinary tribute to the power of music: "Go to the musicians. In the work of a few musicians you can hear every aspect of this conflict between light and dark within the soul. . . . You can hear the spirit of Bach and the spirit of Beethoven explode from one vast chamber into another so enormous it fills, for an instant, the universe." We know from Elspeth Cameron that Hugh wrote, "While writing *The Watch That Ends the Night* I played Bach every day." Do you think this use of his record-player shows in his writing? Can you think of any other music that might complement his book?
17. As a writer Hugh was criticized in his career for his overly frank treatment of sex, although it seems tame to us today. Significantly, 1959, the year the book came out, was the year that the Pill was launched, changing sexuality forever. In this context, it's interesting to note that, when Frank Scott (in his role as lawyer) defended *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in a Montreal court in 1960, he called Hugh MacLennan as an "expert witness" in defence of the book. (Scott's very funny poem on this trial begins: "I went to bat for Lady Chat/ Clad in my legal gown/ The judges three frowned down at me/ The priests patrolled the town.") What do you think of the very restrained sex scenes between George and Catherine and even those reported scenes involving Jerome (once referred to as "a stallion")? And what do you think of the scene when Jerome and Catherine, the long-lost lovers, still married, finally meet, and, *in George's words* . . . "Then not smiling, but calm and natural as I also knew her, she opened her housecoat so that his lips might touch her breasts. He kissed her and she murmured his name, and he hers, and then she lay on the chesterfield small in his arms, and he was so still she thought him asleep."

This restrained intimacy seems to me a brilliant compromise. What do you think?

18. It's hard for us today to deal with a novel that speaks so often of "the soul," and with so many religious symbols. It seems as out of date as young Alan Royce, the boyfriend of George's stepdaughter Sally, always addressing George as "Sir." Did you have trouble with the "soul" theme, and the religious overtones of Catherine's struggle? Or is life and death always a religious issue?
19. If I had been the editor, I think that at the end I would have asked Hugh to add a scene where Jerome confronts his daughter Sally. As you notice, they never meet, and I regret that. Do you agree? And I would have asked Hugh to take us all the way to Catherine's death for the book's ending. Would I have been wrong? Do you prefer Hugh's gentle ending?
20. Like Catherine, Hugh's wife Dorothy took up painting very late in her life (taught by Frank Scott's wife, Marian) and proved to be very good at it. In the book Hugh used some of Dorothy's real-life paintings to describe Catherine's, and he pays a writer's tribute to the power of art, as he did with music. In George's words: "Then with that music in my mind, Bach's music, I fell asleep and lay motionless until eight in the morning when I woke to see Catherine's painting on the wall, its colours singing, and the joy she had when she painted it was mine again." I find this ode to creation inspiring — and it brings us back to the very first discussion point, the relationship between real experience and art. Do you ever share the joy of creation as you hear music, or consider a painting, or reflect on a novel?

After *The Watch That Ends the Night* had become a huge bestseller around the world (in Germany alone it sold more than 220,000 copies), Hugh wrote that "the novel is still the subtlest and most accurate of all literary forms invented, so long as it tells a story

about real people and seeks to communicate and is written with a little love.”

In my book, *Stories About Storytellers*, I have devoted the longest chapter to Hugh MacLennan, with the subtitle “Teacher, Novelist, Essayist, and Cottager.” I like to think that I wrote the chapter “with a little love.”

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