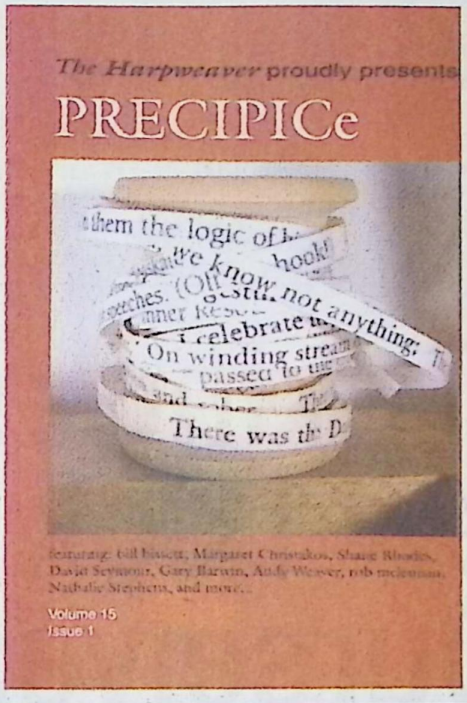
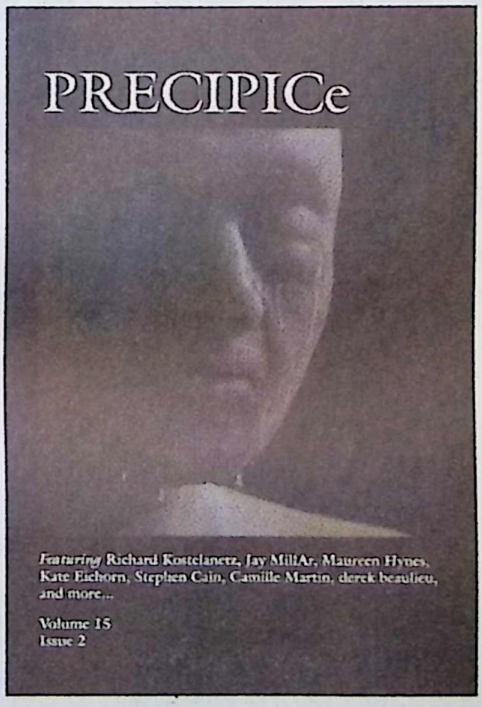
poet BP Nichol once walked past a bed of crocuses in full bloom and realized that he had never written a poem about crocuses. Moreover, he realized that he never wanted to write a poem about crocuses. He realized that he wanted his poems to BE like crocuses: beautiful, living, things thrusting themselves into the world, insisting on their own survival. How important is it for a crocus to know its audience?





Do you think every novelist writes history, both at a personal and a social level?

No. I personally don't think that history is available to a novelist. The medium of literature is one of experience in the present, unfettered from the physical world by the abstraction of language. When we read a text that purports to be historical, we can imagine the world being described, can even feel ourselves a part of it. Ink blots on a page, however, are too tightly constrained and orchestrated and individualistic to ever be the equivalent of the dynamic forces of material history. A novelist can create an experience that conforms to our sense of what it would have been like, but that sense is overwhelmingly determined by the values and experiences of the present. It is for this reason that historical novels are constantly being re-written, as in the Alfred A. Knopf "Myths" series, because values change and our sense of what was important about the past changes too. Through this twisting sense of what was important (and consequently what was not), our changing values can dramatically alter our sense of what happened in the past. Novelists may write about historical events, but novels are never historical (except in the most elusive metaphorical sense).

In Canada, we are undergoing our very first Truth and Reconciliation hearings (the first in the Western world, actually) regarding the abuse of aboriginal peoples and their cultures. It had been an overwhelming trope of Canadian novels that considered the subject to depict aboriginal culture as inevitably dying. Contemporary novelists and readers, however, return to the past to look for signs of life despite the hard times of Small Pox and cultural genocide. The past and the future were both changed by a change in attitudes in the present. To your question, I would counter that novelists write about the present, at a personal and social level.

Do you think the world has become a dangerous place in which to live?

I think, as always, the answer to that question is primarily determined by where you live and how much money you make. People in Canada have almost never been as safe from war, crime, and disease as they are at present. At the same time, though, we are presently at war in Afghanistan where people probably don't feel so sure about the state of the world. For people in Iraq, Algeria, Congo, Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Sudan, Tibet, and other conflict spots, the world has probably become much more dangerous. Compared to the Hitler/Stalin/Mao years, though, is it fair to say that present the world is more dangerous than the past? As always, in terms of non-domestic violence, the experience of poor people is far different for rich people even living in the murder capital of the world (whether it be Baltimore or Bogotá). The same applies to the global climate crisis: the devastating effects, should we fail to prevent them, will primarily be felt by the world's poorest citizens. Looking back over the history of human civilization, was there ever a time where this was not the case? Has the world become dangerous, or has it always been dangerous especially for the most vulnerable in our midst? At PRECIPICe, we wrestle with the writer's responsibility in light of the inequalities of danger. In general, we conclude that a work does not need to engage with ideology and politics directly, but if it does it must, at the least, be well written and new. ■