

Obituaries

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SHELDON OBERMAN 1949–2004

Writer performed his stories

Award-winning Winnipeg author focused stories on city's Jewish neighbourhood, wrote songs for Fred Penner

BY BRIAN BRENNAN

Sheldon Oberman produced what he considered his first significant piece of writing the summer after he finished high school in Winnipeg. He was working for the Canadian Pacific Railway as a cook on the Rocky Mountain run between Calgary and Vancouver when a four-ton boulder crashed onto the train and derailed six cars. One person was killed and several injured. Mr. Oberman sat in the dining car while waiting for the rescue train and described the derailment in a letter to a friend.

He never mailed the letter. He stashed it away and decided he didn't need to look at it again. But in writing down the words, in expressing what he could not say aloud, he found his calling as a writer. "The shock pushed me completely out of my adolescence," he said.

It took him a while before he actually became a writer. He completed a BA at the University of Winnipeg, travelled around Europe and North Africa for a year, studied Conrad and Yeats at the University of Jerusalem, trained as a teacher, and taught English and drama at a Jewish high school, Joseph Wolinsky Collegiate, in Winnipeg. He married fellow teacher Lee Anne Block, and fathered a son and daughter, Adam and Mira.

In 1978, at age 29, Mr. Oberman left teaching for a year to freelance for The Winnipeg Free Press. He wrote about whatever interested him — garage sales (one of his personal enthusiasms), Winnipeg street characters, fairground midway barkers — and he marvelled at the power of the press. "I only had to say I was from the Free Press and suddenly I could enter almost anywhere and ask anybody almost anything. I'd then write up a story, get it published immediately, and be paid to boot."

He wrote a book about the Winnipeg Folk Festival, of which he was a long-time fan, and then returned to teaching because he wasn't sure yet if he had what it takes to be a writer. A six-week summer writing course at the Centre for Continuing Education in Banff, Alta. gave him the answer. With the encouragement of author W.O. Mitchell, he practised a directed form of stream-of-consciousness writing called free fall, and emerged with his own distinctive means of expression. The Winnipeg of his boyhood, specifically the Jewish immigrant ghetto in the city's north end, became his subject.

Mr. Oberman, known to family and friends as Obie, continued to

teach while using his childhood experiences as scaffolding for his fictional stories. His book *This Business with Elijah* featured as its central figure a 10-year-old boy, Danny Stein, whose neighbourhood was populated with characters drawn from Mr. Oberman's past. Two were based on Mr. Oberman's father, Allan, a former army-boxing instructor and weightlifting champion who ran a clothing store with Mr. Oberman's mother, Dot. A reviewer for The Jewish Post and News, Matt Bellan, wrote that the book showed literary sophistication "and a sensitivity toward the plight of blue-collar workers that's reminiscent of John Steinbeck."

Mr. Oberman wrote *This Business with Elijah* for an adult readership. Most of his other books, including *The Shaman's Nephew*, *The Almost Prayer Shawl* and *By the Hanukkah Light*, he wrote for children. While growing to adulthood he had feared forgetting what it was like to be a child, "and so I promised myself that somehow I would make myself remember; I would make everybody remember."

Mr. Oberman worked slowly at his writing, sometimes taking up to six years to complete a book. He never considered a story finished until he could commit it easily to memory and perform it comfortably. Performing came naturally to this eternal class clown who as a teenager had disrupted a high school production of the Strauss operetta *Die Fledermaus* by crashing a scene in a gorilla costume and frightening the chorus girls off the stage. Mr. Oberman delighted in remembering that his teachers unwittingly paid for the costume rental when he collected money from them for a "special presentation" on closing night.

Performing his stories became as important to Mr. Oberman as writing them. He always had an active role for the children in his storytelling performances because he wanted to show them how they could develop their creativity. He expanded the range of his own creativity by working as a stage and movie actor, writing screenplays, directing short films, and writing lyrics for the songs of Winnipeg children's entertainer Fred Penner.

Mr. Oberman earned five Juno Award nominations for Penner albums featuring such Oberman songs as *John Russell Watkins* and *Julie Gerond and the Polka Dot Pony*. "He continually challenged me," Mr. Penner said. "Obie was just a brilliant and creative guy. Every time now that I do those tunes, it will reinforce the talent and joy of that man."



ELAINE HALPERT

Sheldon Oberman, 'wrapped [readers] in the embrace of his stories.'

Mr. Oberman received wide recognition and awards for his children's books, starting in 1991 when he won a silver medal at the Leipzig International Book Fair for *The Lion in the Lake: Le Lion dans le Lac*, a bilingual alphabet book. Then came *The Always Prayer Shawl*, about a boy and his grandfather and the traditions that bind the generations. It won two major American prizes — the National Jewish Book Award and the Sydney Taylor American Librarian Award — and was turned into a play produced by the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre. "That book gave me a lot of recognition so I could keep writing," Mr. Oberman said. When his finances allowed, he took time away from his teaching job at Wolinsky Collegiate to focus full-time on his writing.

Sheree Fitch, a fellow author of children's books, recalls that when she first saw Mr. Oberman perform *The Always Prayer Shawl*, she complimented him warmly and he responded by gently placing the shawl around her shoulders. "The metaphor is apt," she said. "He wrapped us all in the embrace of his stories."

High-profile recognition in Canada came in October 2000 when *The Shaman's Nephew*, a collection of vignettes about the life of the no-

madic Inuit artist and hunter Simon Tookoome was shortlisted for the Governor-General's Award for children's literature. Mr. Oberman didn't win that award but he did win the \$10,000 Norma Fleck Award, one of Canada's richest prizes for children's book authors. Toronto Star columnist Michele Landsberg, a judge for the Fleck Award, described *The Shaman's Nephew* as "startlingly fresh, original and immediate."

In his spare time, Mr. Oberman collected what he called "found" objects to create collage art, and spent his Saturday mornings buying garage-sale bric-a-brac that he cheerfully conceded he didn't really need. ("For 20 bucks I fill my station wagon with stuff to replace the stuff I filled it with before.") In one charmingly perverse exercise in recycling, he donated several items from his bric-a-brac collection to a friend holding a garage sale, and then went to the sale and bought them all back.

With editing help from his daughter Mira, Mr. Oberman completed his most recent book, *Island of the Minotaur*, a retelling of the Greek myths of ancient Crete, while recuperating from cancer surgery in early 2003. He went to the doctor because he had difficulty swallowing, and discovered he had a malig-

nant tumour at the base of his esophagus. The cancer spread and Mr. Oberman spent his final months in palliative care at St. Boniface General Hospital. "People say to me it must be hell, but I don't use that word," he told Free Press reporter Morley Walker. "Hell is when you hate yourself. I suffer no guilt, no shame or hatred. I feel love and support from everyone around me."

His wife Lisa Dveris, whom Mr. Oberman married in 1985, said that she and Mr. Oberman accelerated plans for their 12-year-old son Jesse's bar mitzvah when they learned that his cancer was terminal. "We held it in the hospital chapel, and the pastoral-care people were just extraordinary. Jesse had his bar mitzvah, with his dad there, and it was everything we needed it to be."

Mr. Oberman died on March 26 at age 54. He leaves his wife Lisa, children Adam, Mira and Jesse, and his mother Dorothy. A two-volume collection of his Jewish folk tales is scheduled for publication later this year. The Manitoba Writers' Guild, of which Mr. Oberman was a founding member, has named its emerging writers' program in his memory.

Special to The Globe and Mail

IN BRIEF

PERCY YOUNG, 91
British musicologist completed Elgar opera

London. Percy M. Young, a musicologist who published more than five dozen books on music and reconstructed an unfinished opera by Sir Edward Elgar, died on May 9. He was 91. The cause of death was not announced.

Mr. Young's books included studies of George Frideric Handel and his oratorios, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Robert Schumann, Arthur Sullivan and the Bach family. He also contributed to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and wrote a biography of the founder, George Grove. In 1991, Mr. Young published his edition and completion of the Elgar opera, *The Spanish Lady*. It was first performed in Cambridge three years later. AP

BERNARD LEFKOWITZ, 66
Writer investigated rape in New Jersey suburb

New York. Bernard Lefkowitz, an investigative journalist and author whose books explored contemporary culture, died Friday in New York of cancer. He was 66.

In 1997 Mr. Lefkowitz wrote *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb*, about the 1989 gang rape of a mentally disabled girl by a group of popular high-school students in an affluent New Jersey suburb. The book explored the town's willingness to rally around the perpetrators and disparage the victim.

A New York Times notable book of the year and an Edgar Award finalist, *Our Guys* was also made into a television movie.

A native New Yorker, Mr. Lefkowitz worked as a reporter and assistant city editor at The New York Post during the 1960s. He left the Post to work for the Peace Corps before becoming an author. AP

DIED THIS WEEK

Mary Pickford, 1979
Actor and producer born Gladys Louise Smith in Toronto on April 9, 1892. After first going on the stage at Toronto's Princess Theatre in 1900, she spent years as an impoverished actress until 1909 when she auditioned for director D.W. Griffith, who at that time was a maker of short films. Hired at a rate of \$40 a week, she went on to become the silver screen's first female star. Died at Santa Monica, Calif.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

25 years ago: The Globe and Mail reported that Liberal cabinet ministers still supported Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and believed their government was defeated because Canadians simply felt it was time for a change.

50 years ago: The Globe and Mail reported that blacks won victories before the U.S. Supreme Court on appeals involving racial segregation in colleges, public housing and municipal golf courses. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov countered a French peace plan for Indochina with a proposal that both sides establish direct contact for arranging a ceasefire.

100 years ago: The British Navy made the extraordinary blunder of appointing a dead man to an honorary post in Liverpool.

'Each book creates a new audience'

KUNZRU from page R1

A witty and at times moving satire on the emptiness and difficulties caused by globalization, the new novel also very obviously has a heart: the story of Indian computer programmer Arjun Mehta, who travels to the United States, then writes a devastating computer virus after being fired from his job. Those affected include the rapidly hollow agency director Guy Swift (a man "who wants marketing transcendence," Kunzru says — talking about all the young Brit execs he's observed — and whose company Tomorrow* promotes such nonsensical concepts as Total Brand Mutability) as well as the lonely Bollywood superstar Leela Zahir.

The backdrop is global, the writing impressive and the imagination at times remarkable.

There are some wonderfully ironic moments in the book, too, including the panic when Mehta's fellow programmers try and answer

an e-mail questionnaire about Asperger's Syndrome (it's clear most of them are autistic). It is also in some ways both familiar and very different territory to *The Impressionist*: more in fitting, perhaps, with those who knew Kunzru as a former editor of the technology magazine Wired. However, no one should doubt that he can write.

"I think each book creates a new audience," he explains. "People who liked the Merchant Ivoriness of the first book aren't necessarily going to be into reading this. And that's what *The Impressionist* was about, a response to a slightly fake version of India that I'd grown up with in Essex. That was pretty much the major source of images on television, that nostalgic sepia image. This book doesn't have that response — it's a straighter attempt to talk about the condition of people under a globalized world."

So what prompted the choice? "Well, . . . I had an image in my head of a guy walking down the side

of the road in California," he says by way of inspiration, referring to a particular poignant moment in the book. "I've done that, I've been the non-driver. I travelled around the States with a backpack as a youth. Everyone has a car; even the size of the blocks is car-designed, the entire space automobile-dictated. If you're suddenly a pedestrian in that space, it's incredibly hostile."

He spent six weeks driving from Seattle down to the Mexican border researching material for *Transmission*. He would spot homeless guys with shopping trolleys and headsets walking by the side of the interstate. "You realize these guys are travelling hundreds of miles, on foot, over a period of weeks or months, migrating with these trolleys of stuff. Their version of California is so utterly different."

Writing with "the fresh eyes of the immigrant" seems very much Kunzru's style. He has become known as a spokesman on racial and diversity issues, as well as

cheerleader for groups such as the Guantanamo Human Rights Commission and the imprisoned writers charity International PEN.

Last year, he very publicly turned down the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, based on the literary award's sponsorship by The Mail on Sunday tabloid newspaper.

"Along with its sister paper The Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday has consistently pursued an editorial policy of vilifying and demonizing refugees and asylum-seekers, and throughout their political and social coverage there is a pervasive atmosphere of hostility towards black and Asian British people," his agent read out at the ceremony. "As the child of an immigrant I am only too aware of the poisonous effect of the Mail's editorial line."

His public profile may now be higher, but Kunzru claims his life hasn't changed much. He has more or less the same friends, the same East End London stomping grounds and claims to "be pretty

much sociable; I don't require meditative concentration 24 hours a day."

His close friend and fellow novelist James Flint, author of *Habitus* and the forthcoming *Book of Ash*, says: "He's become more confident and self-assured. I think success has removed any hesitancy. And he's much better dressed."

The Oxford-educated Kunzru also still contributes to the social justice/technology magazine MUTE, set up by arts-school colleagues, and he has some tentative links to the broad anti-capitalist network. Our e-mails, too, seem to be shared between his increasingly exotic transatlantic locations. The money must have had some transforming effect. "I travel a lot," he explains, rather simply, "there's a sense of control over your own destiny, you've stripped your life down to the things you can carry."

Kunzru currently fends off media offers of columns and articles, claiming "I don't want it to pollute

my writing," although he is shortly to host a BBC4 show on Islamic art. He is also preparing for book three. "I'm reading a lot of political material from the early seventies, I'm interested in a story about somebody who hitches his colours to the mast of revolution in that time. I'm interested in what made people want to change things, political things, and why that feels very distant now."

For now, his life goes on. "I still go on marches sometimes. . . . I run away from cops down the mall once or twice," he says with a laugh. "My main interest, though, is trying to imagine another world, another set of possibilities. That's what I'll continue to do."

Nick Ryan is author of *Into a World of Hate: A Journey Among the Extreme Right, and creative producer of the recent BBC TV drama, England Expects.*

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