

SON BIRD SAINT

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By

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## ABSTRACT

*Son Bird Saint* is a literary novel that explores the idea of human lives influencing each other. At its core it is the story of Simon Hemphill who receives the handwritten life story of Wren Wallace, a famous friend of his parents' whose life and death has shaped Simon's past and future. When Simon travels between Saskatoon, Montreal and Toronto to interview the characters from Wren's manuscript, he pieces together all the stories that converged to influence Wren Wallace's life and, ultimately, his own. A story about understanding where you came from, *Son Bird Saint* is an omniscient narrative comprised of first-person narrators. Alternating between Simon's interviews and Wren's manuscript, the novel unravels a story much larger and more intricate than Wren or Simon could have foreseen. Spanning three generations and five decades, this novel explores character from youth to old age. It examines how we're shaped by the people in our lives and those absent from it. Using metafictional techniques, the novel merges form and content into a multi-narrative story that exists outside the boundaries of traditionally structured literary novels.

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## DEDICATION

for mom and dad, as ever  
and  
grandma helen

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Novels have authority. They have the power to make us suspend our disbelief, inhabit imaginary places, and live in the minds of some fantastical people. The trick of the novel is to make us believe in it, and yet, like all art, it has the power to reveal insights about the human experience. *Son Bird Saint* is a work of literary fiction that aims to subvert traditional narrative structures and conventions in order to elucidate their constructed nature for the reader. I invite my readers to think about the problematic nature of representing real life in the medium of the novel and to explore depth of character by navigating perspective through the eyes of multiple narrators. *Son Bird Saint* is also a deeply human story about love and relationships spanning three generations of interwoven character narratives.

I did not set out to write a multi-narrator, multi-timeline, historical novel experimenting with elements of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and metafictional devices. However, other novels that have influenced me have often incorporated one or more of these shifts from narrative conventions in traditional novels. *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonders* by Robertson Davies, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark were particularly influential as I was writing this project. It is of note that each of these texts contains a restrained tone, multiple narrators and perspectives, as well as notes of irony, satire, and exaggeration. The resulting novel is an elaborate construction. It is no longer Wren writing his life story or Simon coming to understand Wren through interviews with characters from Wren's manuscript. The novel the reader holds in their hands is a collated construction, amassing a story that no single narrator could be privy to on their own. Consequently the novel assumes the omniscient point of view overall, but is comprised of various first-person limited narratives.

In terms of literary influences, I sought novels that subvert traditional narrative structure for insights into technical devices, as well as character-driven writers like Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, and Ann-Marie MacDonald. My writing is grounded in character. The process of writing this novel helped me understand my own deeply-rooted ideas about literature, writing, and criticism. Character is my way into, and guidewire through, a story. In her essay on character, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf writes:

But novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learnt enough about it for practical purposes. They go a step further; they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming important, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character to them is an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean

when they talk about character, what the impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing (Woolf, 5-6).

This quotation illustrates the intangible quality of the pursuit of writing quality characters. Personally I feel drawn to understand all the levels of a character: what they say to others, what they do, what they think, and finally, the most basic emotions that dictate their actions and reactions in the world.

My mentor, Rosemary Nixon, advised me to abandon writing plot and allow the story to develop organically. I gave my characters control and let them surprise me, so that when I finished writing for the day I had learned something new about their lives, their personalities, and their story. I was then, and still am, most drawn to Wren. Understanding Wren involved looking at him from many different perspectives, which I think is reflected in the structural conceit of the novel.

Filling out the other characters' lives led to further creative decisions regarding form and elements of metafiction. I needed the story to have an impetus for being told, a *raison d'être*. I decided to make Wren write his life story. The 'nostalgic narrator' may be a traditional narrative device, but in this case, the traditional is subverted by structural and narrative innovations. The 'nostalgic narrator' trope of someone writing his or her life story substantiates the myth of the novel by providing a narrative explanation for the novel's physical existence. The opposite would be a first-person narrator "recounting" or presently "living" the story filtered through the lens of language which is expressed in grammatically complex, artistic sentences. The physicality of the book itself subverts the novel's dream state; it is a story "written" by Wren, compiled by Simon, created by an author, curated by an editor, etc.

Wren's narrative is partly a confession—an explanation for the son he gave to Alphews out of love and selfishness. His narrative is told in the present-past: that is, the camera is able to move back and forth, closing in tighter to the narrative and pulling away from it. This way we have the double advantage of looking objectively the events, alluding to the future, and increasing dramatic tension by focusing very tightly onto past events. Although a scene might be chronologically in the past, Wren's narrative is able to switch into present tense, suggesting that Wren is reliving the moment as he is writing it; in effect, he is closer to the dramatic action and therefore, so are we. Varying narrative distance increases dramatic tension by controlling pacing in order to keep the reader actively engaged

The resulting novel is a narrative comprised of many first-person narrators. The novel evolved from telling Wren's life story, to include the stories of the people in his life as well. This shift allowed me to play with the idea of 'objective truth' in literature—the belief in, or acceptance of, the narrative at face value.

The idea of subverting 'objective truth' is not a new one; its core is the foundation of metafiction. The unreliable narrator isn't new, either. However, what was exciting about this novel as a character-driven writer, was the opportunity to experience a character (and/or scene, setting, events) through multiple perspectives. The responsibility of interpreting the novel then,

becomes the reader's. Simon is the reader's lens into this world. Through Simon, the reader encounters multiple perspectives but experiences the story even further removed than Simon. The reader alone can experience Simon's narrative as a part of the whole, constructed novel. The reader alone has access to the full narrative arc, particularly including Aubergine's narrative.

To highlight distance between readers' semi-omniscient perspective and my characters' limited perspective, I omitted strategic details such as the way in which Beulah's face was burned, destroying the illusion of the novel containing a complete story. Similarly, the reader cannot be sure what happened in the space between Aubergine's two letters to Tippe wherein the first letter portrays them as antagonistic towards each other and the second illustrates that a close personal friendship has developed between the two women.

The technical machinery of the novel developed out of writing multiple character-driven narratives. *Son Bird Saint* revolves around Simon who receives Wren's manuscript (his life story) and travels to meet and interview its surviving characters. There is a multiplicity inherent in this kind of narrative device—that is, characters being represented at different ages and through different perspectives. Wren's version of Beulah is very different from Simon's or Norah's or even Beulah's own self-image.

Multiplicity is a central theme in the novel. Almost all the characters have multiple names, some they choose and others they have chosen for them. Wren Wallace the first, and Wren Wallace the second are the most obvious example of naming devices. Others include Beulah/Rose Allan, Tippe/Gov/Baby/Pip, and Barney/Sad Clown. Characters might appear in different settings depending on the narrative, but there are a few settings that are variations on a theme; diners, theatres, parks, and apartments are all spaces that appear more than once in comparative and contrasting forms.

Themes themselves are subject to multiplicity, with many characters dealing with different shades of a core theme such as gender, parent-child relationships, or violence. Wren's experiences with his father, Vernon Morris, and Wren 1, mirror Simon's relationships with his father figures, Alphews and Wren. Characters also appear in "fictional" stories that rearrange their relationships to one another but highlight their individual narrative journey in core narrative of the novel. These stories are meant to reinforce their characterization while also calling attention to the construction of the novel by an external author.

Metafiction requires its reader to participate actively in the narrative; to receive information from the novel and make connections. Metafictional elements like Wren and Simon's stories force the reader to engage with the novel. Many of the choices I made in writing *Son Bird Saint*, such as the use of metafictional and literary devices, invite the reader to participate in the construction of the story.

The novel's structure switches between Wren's manuscript and Simon's interviews. Within these two narratives are sub-branches of narrative told by the interviewees. The overarching story is about Simon's relationship to Wren, Alphews, and Aubergine—his parents. Sub-narratives have their own internal narrative arcs while at the same time, serving the narrative at large. The strategy is to create an interwoven narrative in the style of Robertson Davies, who

can plant tracks seamlessly earlier in the text and resurface them towards the novel's conclusion.

I chose not to include chapters because switching between Wren and Simon's narratives creates a natural pacing. I also wanted to develop momentum within each narrative such that dramatic tension would pull the reader from section to section. Chapters produce in the reader the sensation of stopping and starting again. I felt that this motion would be damaging to the momentum I was trying to cultivate, and would disrupt the main narrative enough that the reader would have difficulty holding the story in their mind.

*Son Bird Saint* is a complex novel. As a reader I am drawn to literature that gives me room to participate, challenges me intellectually, and rewards my engagement. Form and content should serve each other organically, and while this novel foregrounds its own machinery, plot remains a priority. This is a novel about one man trying to understand where he came from and learning how many lives have influenced his own.

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