
“OKAY, I’VE PUT MY DICTIONARY DOWN”
AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW FIRTH

MATTHEW FIRTH played lacrosse from 1973 until 1994, including two Senior A seasons in Owen Sound, where “The Rookie and the Whore” is set. He is the author of the short story collection *Suburban Pornography and Other Stories* (Anvil Press, 2006). He is editor and publisher of the lit-mag *Front&Centre* and *Black Bile Press* chapbooks (ardentdreams.com/bbp). Born in Hamilton, he now lives in Ottawa with his wife and two sons.



The Puritan: You work for a national trade union. What drew you to your occupation? What are the connections between your job and your fiction?

Matthew Firth: I work a day job for the usual practical reasons (for a paycheque to live, pay the mortgage, feed and clothe the kids, etc.). Nothing really drew me to it. It’s a job like any other job; has its ups and downs. There is very little connection between my day job and my fiction—the only connection is that I spend a lot of time writing material at work that is completely the opposite of my fiction, so that when I get time to write fiction, I relish it, ramp it up and fire it out.

The P: Why do you write prose exclusively? Does your subject matter lend itself to fiction and non-fiction, rather than poetry?

MF: Because it’s the form I’m most comfortable with. I write directly, bluntly, clearly, succinctly. Prose works better for this. It’s less obscure, more direct. I know next to nothing about poetry. I’d have a harder time convincing readers that my shit is real writing poetry.

The P: For several years, *Front&Centre* was the only literary journal in Ottawa to exclusively publish prose. How can you explain the lack of opportunities to publish fiction in the city? Do you feel there a healthy balance between poetry and prose?

MF: I’ve lived in Ottawa almost eight years. I can’t comment on the opportunity levels here. Ottawa is just where I live and work and from where I publish *Front&Centre*. Any link to the city is postal, at best. I don’t go to readings very often or literary events. I’m the wrong person to ask as to what’s happening here.

The P: Do you have any other thoughts on Ottawa’s literary community, aside from the balance between prose and poetry? Where do you fit in it? How does it differ from Hamilton’s literary community?

MF: I don’t fit in. I stay away. I’ve always found hanging with a literary crowd a colossal waste of time. I’d rather do something—anything—else. It sounds arrogant and selfish but so be it. If I want to drink beer and chat, I’ll do so with the guys I play hockey with, or with friends, my spouse, neighbours, etc. Or, more likely, alone (drink beer; that is). I can’t compare Ottawa to Hamilton. But I will say this—both cities produce solid writers, some of whom I’ve published in *Front&Centre* (from Ottawa, Nichole McGill, Matt Peake, Amanda Earl—from Hamilton Salvatore Difalco, Jeffrey Griffiths and others) ... I know most writers via the postal system rather than by hanging out at dreary readings. I’m a curmudgeon, sorry.

The P: What are your plans for *Front&Centre* in the near future? How has your publication grown since its inception?

MF: Well, just to keep it going pretty much on the scale that it’s presently on. I’ve done 18 issues since 1998. It was first published in a larger, more magazine format. I scaled back to a journal, half-letter size about five years ago. It goes pretty steady. Subscribers come and go. A core stick with it. I publish *Front&Centre* without grants or financial support from any institution, which is how I want it. I run it out of my house. I have a co-editor (Bill Brown) here in Ottawa. He does the website (www.ardentdreams.com/bbp). I lose money on it but it’s on a small scale so I don’t care too much. It’s in my blood. I did a smaller, rattier litzine from 1993-97 called *Black Cat 115*. So I’ve been at this fifteen years. It’s an addiction, a rush, a fix, a jones. You likely know what I’m talking about. Growing it does not concern me. I oppose the idea that things should get bigger. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.

The P: Who are some of your favourite Black Bile Press contributors? How does Black Bile Press go about selecting the work for (and producing) its chapbooks?

MF: Well, I just did three single-story chapbooks by Gerald Locklin, Virginia Ashberry and David Rose, so these writers are fresh in my mind. They’re powerful writers in different ways. I’ve published lots of great writers, from recognizable names (Kenneth J. Harvey, Len Gasparini, Laura Hird) to, in the most recent *Front&Centre*, writers having their first story published (Donald Avery, Parker Dorris). And everything in between. I’ve published over 100 writers in *Front&Centre*. Tough to pick favourites. It’s like choosing between your kids; you’re not supposed

to do it. As for the chapbooks, they come from an invitation from me after publishing a writer in *Front&Centre*. I don’t accept manuscripts for chapbooks uninvited. I first get familiar with a writer and then, when the time is right, offer to do a chapbook. I do them the usual, old-fashioned way—typeset, get art for the cover, print 100, if these sell, print some more. It works well enough.

The P: You’ve often railed against the Canadian publishing community’s unwillingness to publish more daring, diverse, and transgressive fiction. What literary journals and publications (other than your own) do you feel work against this Canadian orientation toward the middle of the road and the middle-class?

MF: *sub-Terrain* and *Urban Graffiti*. Can’t think of any others.

The P: Many of your characters are drawn to vulgarity, violence, alcohol abuse, and rape. Your stories and the characters that populate them lack a centralized philosophical or spiritual motivation. While many of your stories document collapse, depravity, and hopelessness, some works have the glow of small victories, tragedies averted, or hope of redemption. Which do you prefer writing about? As a self-proclaimed realist, which outcome do you perceive most in your everyday life?

MF: My characters’ actions drive the stories. The characters reveal themselves through their actions. This is how the reader comes to know them. I never write about what might motivate a character. That’s for the reader to decide based on what the characters do and how they interact with others. I despise writing that moralizes in a contrived or imposed way and it’s pretty much always contrived and imposed, as far as I’m concerned. I expose characters and leave it at that. Yes, sometimes the light shines through, as it sometimes does in real life. Small doses. Small victories. Minor epiphanies and climaxes. This is closer to how we live day-to-day. I resist grand themes and resolutions. In my experience, this is a false imposition, a fantasy; it gives false hope and raises false expectations. I tell it like it is, or how I see it—which includes moments of depravity, yes, hopelessness, etc. Maybe I’m too negative. But we are surrounded by fluff and tidy resolution on TV, in mainstream film, mythology, religion and literature. In my experience, those notions are divorced from day-to-day reality. They are like a religion; false and beyond our grasp. I write closer to the bone. Some people like it, some don’t. I don’t impose it on anyone. It’s their call.

The P: Almost all of the stories in *Suburban Pornography* (2006) resist a narrative closure or finality. Your characters are rarely, if ever, afforded any sense of epiphany or even of self-realization; instead they are bogged down by feelings of anxiety, confusion, and stasis. Many works of Modernist fiction and postmodern fiction avoid this finality. Do you feel that your writing falls into either of these paradigms? If so, which of these labels does your writing most resemble?

MF: Yes, you're right; most of my characters are left soldiering on, stuck in some mire, or lifted from it slightly but still with shit on their shoes. Does this make me a modernist or a post-modernist? I don't know. Those labels don't mean much to me. I'll go back to what I said: my characters are who they are based on their actions and leave it at that. This is what we all are when it comes down to it.

The P: You write a spare, minimalist, gritty prose, with an eye to the working class and below. This genre boasts many celebrated authors, many of which you source as inspirations, including Hubert Selby Jr., Charles Bukowski, John Fante, Raymond Carver, and Thom Jones. How does your work fit into, or differ from, the works of these writers? What do you feel is your unique contribution to the genre?

MF: Thank you, first, for comparing me to these gents. Flattering. An obvious difference is that those writers are American. And that four of five of them are dead. I'm Canadian and still alive. What's relevant here is that I had to look outside of Canada for inspiration to write honest, realist fiction that cuts and bleeds. At least to find bigger-time writers of this sort. The few examples I came across in Canada were stuck in the margins (Daniel Jones, Clint Burnham, Mark McCawley), like myself. Canada does a good job—as my writer friend Salvatore Difalco called it—of “fixing the game.” My work fits in with Bukowski et al in that I write about people I know or have known and I do not discriminate when it comes to what sorts of characters are worthy of documentation in fiction. I write about garbage men, street whores and psychiatric patients because their stories matter just as much as anyone else's story, but also because I know these people from experiences and can represent them authentically, plausibly, which is crucial. Where I differ—at least with *Suburban Pornography* especially—is that there's more sex in my stuff. So I'm a dirtier old man than *the dirty old man*.

The P: In your interview with *The Danforth Review* (2001), you consider why Canadian literature fails to reflect the cruel and uncaring world of the lower classes. By portraying this particular side of reality, your fiction serves as a mimetic counterbalance to the Canadian status quo. Despite your eschewal of academic, aesthetic, or philosophical motivations, are your works of mimesis in any way moral statements? If so, do you feel as though documentation of suffering is therefore the first step toward correction?

MF: Okay, I've put my dictionary down, so now I can try and answer this one ... I guess, like I said in the last question, the only thing I try and correct is the lack of diversity (in terms of socio-economic status) of characters that are presented in CanLit, to bring some folks from the margins into the mix. For the most part—though there are other exceptions in the fiction of contemporary writers like Difalco, Chris Walter and a few others—Canadian writers are middle class and write about characters who are also middle class. I aim to make things more pluralistic, to shed light on the life of, say, garbage collectors, soup kitchen clients, psychiatric patients,

minimum wage workers, etc. because these folks do make the basis for good fiction as well as doctors, cops, and all of that ilk. Suffering is universal. I would never claim any group has a monopoly on it. I’m not out to correct anything, just to bring a wider range of characters into the fold of CanLit.

The P: In the same interview with *The Danforth Review*, you claim that “[Canadian] writing needs to start challenging overtly the stereotype that Canada is a comfy-cosy place to live and breathe.” What do you make of the frontier and wilderness tradition in Canadian literature, which depicted people struggling against elemental and economic hardships? What about Canada’s tradition of minority literature, be it Asian, Native, Black, or otherwise, that depicts a clash between the oppressive rich and subjugated poor?

MF: Sure, you’ve pointed to some good examples. I don’t know about the frontier and wilderness stuff—sounds cliché to me. But, if forced into a corner, the exclusion I was referring to is primarily centred on the urban working class or below, those folks (like the aforementioned and others) who, for whatever reason, are shut out, who are deemed unworthy of depiction in fiction or elsewhere or, at least and at worst, are portrayed in some overly romantic light where the supposed hardships of their current state are overcome and they are lifted out of their class or circumstance. This is the sort of false epiphany and redemption that I really do not like. What’s wrong with just showing how people live, how they find comfort and release in sex, the bottle, in some minor diversion before they’re thrown back into the shitheap and leave it at that? This idea of the writer or artist having some responsibility to lift his/her characters is bullshit, is an imposition of will and is hugely arrogant, in terms of thinking that writers and artists can show others the way to salvation or somesuch. What a load or pseudo-religious deluded grandeur. There, you got to me. I’ve started to rant ...

The P: As befits the title of your collection, almost every story in *Suburban Pornography* includes some form of sex or sexuality. Most descriptions of sex acts can be described as grotesque or even clinically detached. Where do you draw the line between the tender and the pornographic? Has your work ever been labeled, or have you ever considered writing, fiction that would fall within the erotic genre?

MF: Well, no, I could not write erotica or what passes for erotica, because, for the most part, from what I’ve read, it’s boring and soft around the edges. My stuff is not. When I write about sex I write about how people fuck and suck. I don’t write about splendid, exaggerated moments of sexual euphoria—I leave that to romance, fantasy and fluffy erotica writers. That sort of writing is again false, is, from what I know and have experienced, not how folks really get it on. My sex fiction is pornographic in the sense that it’s harsh, unwavering and it’s pushed right there in front of you, perhaps closer to the readers’ nose than they would like. So be it. I don’t apologize. If the reader recoils, what can I do?

But, come on, take the story about the blowjobs in the alleyway—if readers are honest, they can relate to this on some level. Who has led such a sheltered life that they weren't exposed to some bit of this or knew about these sorts of sexual shenanigans going on while they were adolescents? "One Night in Oktober" is about a drunken and debauched one-night stand. Again, nothing out of the ordinary for the reader, if they fess up. "The Summer of No Love" is a bare-bones story of sexual exploitation, of a relationship where *both* the man and the woman use the other solely for the purposes of getting off sexually without any emotional attachment. Again, not radical. This is fiction based on what should be familiar to the honest reader. The sex might be uglier than the reader is used to but so what? Sex can be ugly, grunting stuff. It can also be tender. There's lots of tender sexual fiction (i.e., erotica). I portray it more in its grunting, naked ugliness, that's all.

The P: Speaking of genre, how has *noir* or 'hard-boiled' fiction influenced your work? Do you enjoy the genre? If so, do you have any favourite authors that have written *noir*, either in the form of pulp or literary fiction?

MF: No, I've never been drawn to hard-boiled or noir fiction. Mostly because I don't like the tidy formats and I don't like cops, either in fiction or, for the most part, in my life. I don't like the way cops are given venerated status in fiction, TV, film, etc.—though they may be shown to be flawed like the rest of us, they are also held up too much, afforded respect I don't think they deserve. So, no, anything to do with police and thieves doesn't do it for me.

The P: Certain stories in *Suburban Pornography*, especially those whose narrators are children, such as "Sheila Crawford Sucks Cocks", contain some archaic or out-dated phrases. For example, children refer to "skin mags", and of someone's father as their "old man". What is the specific time and place you've chosen to document? Were these the times and circumstances surrounding your own adolescence?

MF: The characters are adolescents, rather than children. But time and place here is not explicit, though, yes, to an extent this is one circumstance from my past. I knew a girl named Sheila back in the day and I had a friend named Clarence, which dates the story already. Never mind "skin mags", who names their kid Clarence these days?

The P: In your story, "Job Action", unionized garbage men frighten city officials into meeting the union's demands by disrupting regular pick-up times, drinking and smoking drugs. This disruptive behaviour breeds a form of solidarity between the labourers, which may not exist in their normal, day-to-day interaction. Is this the only way in which these blue-collar labourers can find solidarity? What does this say about the way in which powerless people assert their will?

MF: No, it's not the only way these workers find solidarity. Workers, of course, have other ways to assert their power. What's going on more in this story is that the

workers in question are having fun jerking the bosses around, little more than this. I wanted to take readers inside the cab of the truck, reveal something about garbage collectors, etc. There is nothing political in this story.

The P: Hess Village or The Byward Market?

MF: Neither. Both are too crowded. I prefer a more secluded local watering hole. That or my own living room, more likely.

*Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon and Tyler Willis
February 18, 2008
[Photograph by Andrea Firth]*