

Bill MacDonald

**At St-Tropez
with the late
Plessi Toussaint**

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For a writer, all experiences, no matter how terrible, can be used.

—Anne Chisholm: *Rumer Godden*

ON THE MORNING of Epiphany, *La Fête des Rois*, Plessi Toussaint and I had breakfast across the street at *Le Gorille*. Everyone else from the seminar was in Monte Carlo, gambling or sightseeing. We started off indoors, then took rum grogs out to a table in the sun. It was cool, but enjoyable, talking, smoking, sipping

Novelist Plessi Toussaint (named after Cardinal du Plessi Richelieu), unknown outside France, is the author of such odious books as *La Roukerie*, *Condamné*, *Magnéto* and *Jocrisse*. In 1998 he won the coveted Prix Médici for his outrageous political novel, *Crédillon*. A non-swimmer, he died this past June in Paris, having jumped or been pushed off Pont St-Louis, across the Seine from Notre Dame. I was privileged to take a one-week creative writing course from him last winter at St-Tropez.

our drinks. The waterfront was quiet till noon, with only church bells breaking the silence. Townspeople with hangovers straggled in for coffee, and Marius, the waiter, mixed vodka, beer and Tabasco into a cure-all for the jitters.

A group of children walked by, mostly boys, carrying fishing poles. They went out on the crumbling Customs pier, displacing the cormorants, and cast baited lines across the water. From time to time they pulled in wriggling silver fish, not much bigger than sardines. What struck me was how serious they were, how intent. This was no child's game they were playing. This was no juvenile diversion. It may have been a contest of sorts, a demonstration of ability, but they applauded each other's success, gave credit where credit was due. If there was anything comical about their antics, it was that most of them were puffing cigarettes, trying to look mature as they baited their hooks and dropped their catches into plastic pails. Soon, they were surrounded by gulls and girls, all clamouring for attention.

Plessi said it reminded him of his childhood in La Rochelle, an ancient seaport on the Atlantic coast, where two massive stone towers were built to guard the harbour when slave ships stopped on their way from Africa to the New World. He said his paternal ancestors had been involved in the slave trade as shipping agents, and some of them had become wealthy. Some had been murdered too, and some had gone to Martinique as government functionaries. His grandfather, César, had been born there, and did not come to France (looking for a continental wife) until he was middle-aged. Plessi remembered his grandfather as a gruff, intolerant man, who smelled of tobacco and aniseed.

For a period of two or three years, Plessi's father, an undistinguished solicitor, had taken his family to St-Malo, a walled city in Brittany, where they lived in a house once owned by the bloodthirsty pirate, Robert Surcouf. Monsieur Surcouf attacked passing Dutch and English ships, and allegedly brought nubile women ashore and

kept them in his basement. Plessi said he remembered playing in this dank dungeon with his sisters, Madeleine and Bérénice, tying them up to rings in the walls and making them beg for release. He said they used to take unsuspecting playmates downstairs and tie them up too, and show them where ruthless Captain Surcouf had tortured his prisoners and stored his loot.

Plessi said he remembered being sad when the family moved back to La Rochelle, to a cold, austere house on rue du Palais, where his mother soon took sick and died and he and his sisters came under the guardianship of crazy Aunt Lafaille. In time, Aunt Lafaille believed that the children were biologically hers, despite reminders from them that they weren't. As a short-tempered teenager, Plessi had run away to Ile de Ré, where he worked in vineyards and oyster fisheries. During this time, his father knew where he was, but was happy to be rid of him and left him alone. Then one day, hysterical Aunt Lafaille, fearing that Bérénice was possessed, beat her with a

stick, blinded her in one eye, disfigured her face. So severe was the trauma that poor Bérénice was never again quite right in the head. Eventually, she entered a Carmelite convent at Angoulême and Plessi lost contact with her, not seeing her until their father's funeral ten years later.

His other sister, Madeleine, a gentle girl with her father's looks and her mother's intelligence, had gone to Poitiers to become a nurse. Then to Troyes to become a teacher. And finally back home to become a journalist. As soon as Plessi finished his military service in Calais, he went to live with Madeleine in Châlons-sur-Marne, a hundred kilometres east of Paris. While there, at Madeleine's insistence, he'd obtained his *Certificat d'Aptitude en Anglais* from the Institut Gallice, which would allow him entrance to a university. What he'd been doing in his spare time all those years, unbeknownst to anyone, was bury himself in libraries to read books. He worshipped writers like Victor Hugo, Emile Zola and Charles Dickens – men who told

adventurous, believable stories. He said he began to feel a burning need to write such stories himself, and did, in classrooms, in cafés, in his bedroom at Madeleine's apartment.

When she was nearly thirty and afraid of becoming a spinster, or worse still, a nun, like Bérénice, Madeleine married a fellow journalist, a man named Montignac, who worked for *Le Figaro* and had two mistresses, one in Louviers and one in Veules-les-Roses. He and Madeleine moved to Paris, to an apartment in the 7th arrondissement, with a view of the Eiffel Tower, but when Madeleine discovered the depth of her husband's dalliances, she hastened back to Châlons-sur-Marne. Bitter but undaunted, she took up her old job and lost herself in work.

Meanwhile, Plessi had been living alone in a garret behind Cathédrale St-Etienne, working day and night on a rip-roaring novel of sex and violence, entitled *La Roukerie –The Rookery*. Its protagonist was a thinly disguised Baptiste Mercier, transvestite mayor of

Paris, who had been making headlines lately. Plessi said that when he showed the completed manuscript to Madeleine and asked for her professional opinion, she'd been shocked by the book's subject matter, but hugely impressed by its style and language. She made a few suggestions, which Plessi ignored, and showed the manuscript to a colleague at *Le Figaro*, the news editor, Jules Violette. After a single reading, Jules had sent the book to his friend Henri Barrage, a Paris agent, who, within a month, had sold it to Gallimard. Henri Barrage informed Jules Violette, who informed Madeleine, who informed Plessi, and the rest, as they say, is history.

THAT TWELFTH NIGHT morning at *Le Gorille*, as empty glasses accumulated in front of us, it became apparent that Plessi was in no hurry to leave. The more grogs he drank, and the more I probed, the deeper he sank into reverie. He seemed to be enjoying himself, even if the memories he dredged up were not entirely benign. As the

youthful fishermen out on the Customs pier became more animated and began playing tag, I told Plessi I thought his childhood had been useful and interesting, compared to mine, which was boring beyond belief. While I carried no permanent scars, neither did I have his wealth of experience to draw on.

He thought about this, expropriated my entire pack of Gauloises cigarettes. “It’s because of the maniacal people of my childhood, *mon gars*, that I am – how do you say? – all screwed up.” He took off his glasses, polished them with a paper napkin, as though hoping to see more clearly. “My Aunt Lafaille was a mad woman who belonged in an asylum.”

“The aunt who beat your sister?”

“The very one. To drive out the devil. She beat Bérénice on the legs to make her dance, on the head to hurt her. ‘Sortez, maudit morveux!’ Come out, damned filth! Release this child from your clutches. Oh, see the devil’s contortion. That’s proof he’s in there.

Sortez, Satan! Come out through the eye, the way you went in.”

He said that when he himself reached puberty, at the age of the energetic young fishermen on the Customs pier, Aunt Lafaille had taken it upon herself to warn him of the perils of masturbation. It was a practice she knew nothing about, but suspected he was engaging in. Not only because of his stained bed sheets, but because she watched him through the keyhole of the bathroom door. She would also burst into his bedroom, brandishing a flashlight, shouting that if she ever caught him touching himself she'd cut off his penis and fingers with a carving knife. Lest he minimize the horrors of autoerotism, she dragged him by the ear into the street and showed him the town hunchback, Monsieur Bellecroix, a deformed and crippled old man who walked doubled over, chin level with his knees, unable to see where he was going, eyeballs straining upward. “Look, Plessi,” she'd said. “That fate awaits you if you indulge in this unholy action. You will become *un bossu*, a hunchback, like this man, who, as a boy your age, fell victim to just such habits. It

is God's curse on him, and he will punish you similarly. There is no escaping it. What you're doing will make you insane and curve your spine. You will develop arthritis, tuberculosis, leprosy. Your teeth will blacken and fall out. You will be chained in an *oubliette*. You will never again see your beloved aunt, who prays for your soul. Or your beloved father, who would be ashamed of you. Or your sisters, whom God will punish in other ways for their disobedience."

While his aunt's dire warnings caused Plessi to abstain for a week, they did nothing to curtail his nocturnal emissions, over which he had no control and which left incriminating evidence. Nor, when he resumed the voluntary practice, on a trial basis, vowing to desist at the first sign of deformity, did they prevent him from making up for lost time. He said that during those years, even though burdened with guilt, he'd ejaculated enough semen to repopulate the entire planet, several times over. Despite which, his spine hadn't bent, he hadn't gone insane, nor had he grown hair on the palm of his hand.

Still, Aunt Lafaille's remonstrations had affected him, had affected his sex life and given him nightmares. Not until he went to Calais to serve his two years in the army, and was introduced by the regimental chaplain to far more aberrant pastimes than self-arousal, did his hang-ups begin to fade.

I remember how he sat quietly for several minutes, thinking, remembering, shaking his head. He took a gulp of grog, lit a fresh cigarette. With his eyes closed, he said, "I should probably not tell you this, *mon gars*, but if I'm screwed up sexually, so are my sisters, and mainly because of our father and Aunt Lafaille."

He stopped, watched the boys fishing, said hello to an old woman walking her poodle. I thought he might have decided to call it a morning, but then he said that his father, when drunk, as he often was, would force himself on Madeleine, his own daughter, in the bedroom she shared with Bérénice, and if Bérénice woke up, he forced her to watch what he was doing to Madeleine. It didn't matter

that both girls wept and shouted at him. Nor that they threatened to tell their aunt what a monster he was. Indeed, it was when Bérénice had gone to Aunt Lafaille with her complaints that she'd been beaten and had her eye put out. Aunt Lafaille had called her a witch, deserving of death by stoning. No wonder she'd entered a convent. No wonder Madeleine had waited so long to marry, and even then had chosen an adulterer. The whole family was screwed up sexually. He said that had he been born female, he'd have become a prostitute, good-hearted, yet eager to subjugate men, tie them to the bedpost, while making them pay for their pleasure.

AFTER MARIUS HAD refilled our grogs and brought us a saucer of prawns, Plessi admitted to a prolonged affair with the regimental chaplain in Calais, Father Dampierre. He was older than Plessi, and had slit his wrists with a razor blade after Plessi told him he could not continue the physical relationship, for fear of being discovered

and humiliated. And also because he no longer loved the priest. In fact, there was a pretty woman in Calais, a married woman he'd met at the cinéma, for whom he felt an overpowering emotional attachment. The last he saw of Father Dampierre, the military police were taking him away to have his wrists bandaged. He was sobbing and calling out to Plessi, pleading with him, but Plessi had turned his back.

He'd had his own brush with the law when he returned to Châlons-sur-Marne and had lured a young girl up to his garret and attacked her when she pretended not to know what he wanted. He'd lost his composure, he said, ripped her clothes off, hit her when she began shrieking, couldn't stop himself. Finally, after ravishing her as best he could, he'd let her go, and an hour later two policemen, in boots and leather jackets, had pounded up his stairs and arrested him. He'd spent three months in confinement, had been forced to apologize and attend "corrective" lectures.

"So you see, *mon gars*," he said, "I am – how do you say? – a fucking

nut case when it comes to *ardeur sexuelle*. I'm lucky to be alive. Yet these encounters are useful for my books, because what quirks I have, others have too. I request Madeleine to search for crackpots in *Le Figaro's* microfilm archive, and there I have my characters. Names, dates, details. Imagination on my part is not required."

I wondered how much of what he'd told me was imaginary. Surely some of it. The longer we sat there in the sun that morning, the more relaxed we both became. There were whitecaps beyond the breakwater and soaring gulls. The adolescent fishermen had departed, leaving the Customs pier to the cormorants. A large orange cat came wandering by, jumped briefly into Plessi's lap for a scratch and a prawn or two, then jumped down and ran after a crumb-seeking finch.

Sipping a fresh grog, tripping over my words, I asked him if he'd ever tried a genre other than his wicked novels. He said he'd once tried his hand at science fiction, but without success. One of his stories, entitled *Nervation*, had been about an invasion of Earth by aliens

in an amorphous spacecraft. Its passengers had been spineless, blob-like creatures, fleshy extensions of the mother ship. They had as many arms as we have fingers, as many legs as we have toes. Their faces had been where our genitals are located, their genitals where our heads are. Their voices were halfway between cats purring and frogs croaking. They'd come to Earth, it transpired, looking for food. They'd been away from home eons in our time, months in theirs, had visited six hundred galaxies and sent back reports on every one. "What a pain in the ass," their spongy leader had said, or at least intimated.

They weren't interested in precious metals, water, or nuclear reactors. What they found interesting were obese humans, as nourishment. Of the two sexes, neither of which entirely pleased their palates, they preferred women. Just as some people prefer Brie to Camembert. It's a matter of taste. Consensus was that if they took a few humans home with them (just as Charles Darwin had taken Jemmy Button and his wife home to England from Tierra del Fuego),

they might, through genetic engineering, breed a better tasting version. They took a few Swedes on board to see what elements they were composed of, and therefore what kind of atmosphere they'd need during the voyage to the other side of the universe. Among the scientists an argument broke out as to whether Caucasians were the best tasting. Again, like Brie versus Camembert. Or fish versus chicken. Finally it was decided they'd test a few Germans, a few Turks, a few Spaniards. There was debate as to whether broiling was preferable to roasting. And whether the skin was better left on, like a new potato, or removed, like an onion.

The final outcome of all this palaver was a consensus among the testers that plump Italians tasted best, closely followed by Peruvians. Midway down the scale were Scottish children, and at the very bottom, Belgians of either sex. Colour of skin didn't matter. They all crisped nicely on the gamma-ray grill. Of course there were allergies to contend with (Mongols gave some people gas, others got hives

from Lithuanians), but this was not a major problem. The main trick was concocting the right sauce and deciding what veggies to serve with a haunch of Greek.

Plessi said he was not surprised when Gallimard and several other publishers turned down *Nervation*. Not that it was badly written, they said, or too far-fetched, but they felt Plessi Toussaint's career as a serious social commentator might be jeopardized by the release of such a book. Better to stick to what he was known for – exposing celebrities as tainted hypocrites. This was his forte. It's what readers expected from him, what they paid good money to read. Leave science fiction to those whose names were associated with make-believe. You didn't see Paul Theroux writing science fiction. Or Peter Mayle. Or Mordecai Richler. Plessi Toussaint should stick to what defined him. A little satire would be acceptable. Lots of sex, a bit of humour, a few accusations, so long as they were well founded. A little personal reaction to world depravity. But no science fiction. Not unless he used a pen name.

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON before we left *Le Gorille*. Marius and the other waiters were busy serving lunch and drinks, both indoors and out. Seeking quieter surroundings, Plessi and I moved down the street to the next café, *Brasserie La Jetée*, whose rum grogs were larger and more potent than those at *Le Gorille*. From there, we watched older men fishing on the Customs wharf. Compared to the children, they were silent, brooding. They smoked, coughed, drank from thermos jugs. Every so often one of them would hawk and spit copiously into the harbour. They seemed to catch fewer fish than the boys, or perhaps they just made less fuss.

It had been a fascinating, illuminating, if not totally believable morning, listening to Plessi, drinking rum, smoking Gauloises. The only trouble was, when it came time to leave La Jetée, I found I could scarcely walk. Noting my condition, Plessi let me lean on him, helped me across the street to our hotel. “*Mon gars,*” he said, “unless you learn to drink in moderation, especially this early in the day, I don’t

know what's to become of you.”

We both stumbled, but didn't fall. Cars stopped and waited for us. Once safely across, we bowed to them and Plessi waved his hat. Some drivers tooted their horns. Some rolled down their windows and shouted at us, as they do in Montreal. Others raced their engines and sped off down the street.

Since our hotel had no elevator (or if it did, it either didn't work or we couldn't find it), we crawled upstairs. I remember saying to Plessi, “I'm afraid you won't get much teaching done today, Monsieur Toussaint.”

“*Mon gars*, I won't get any teaching done today. Have you forgotten? The course is finished. This evening, I take the train to Marseille.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

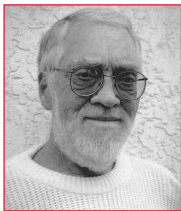
“Well, you shouldn't be. A week of this is all I can stand. I'll say one thing, though. You're a good listener. If we ever meet again, which is doubtful, you must tell me about your own childhood, and

who you blame for all your faults.”

“Faults, Monsieur Toussaint? I have no faults.”

Which made him laugh, as he pointed me at my door and continued on up the stairs to his own room. “Then you had no childhood, *mon gars*. Anyone who had a childhood has faults, and anyone who has faults had a childhood. If you were serious about becoming a writer, you would know that.”

About the Author



BILL MACDONALD lives in Thunder Bay, where he writes novels and sells scenic photography at Fireweed Crafts Inc. His two most recent books, published this year by Borealis Press in Ottawa, are *Clowns in the Closet: The Life & Times of Uncle Sol* and *Vive Zigoto! – Travels Through the South of France with a Lady Journalist and Her Cat*. He placed second in the 2004 Canadian Authors' Association (Toronto Branch) short-story contest. His two entries, "Five & Twenty Ponies" and "Froggie Went A-Courting", will appear in the next issue of York University's literary magazine, *existere*. His story "Family Portrait" will appear in the next issue of *Geist Magazine*.

