

Matt Cohen (1942-1999)

“Underneath all the intelligence and wit, there was a sweet romantic.”

An Appreciation by Margaret Atwood

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Matt Cohen liked to write the same story several different ways, from several different angles, and so I'll do that now.

- 1) When I heard Matt had died, the first image that came to mind was Matt in his brown felt hat with the wide brim, the hat he used for walking. We're up in the rocky, scrubby hills in southern France, Graeme Gibson, Matt and I, on one of our epic walks. None of us has used the word “lost” yet, but there's no one around for miles. We come upon an ominous object – some huge, fresh cow bones wired into the shape of an X and hung in a tree. It's a hex sign, we decide, symptom of some local, venomous feud. It begins to drizzle. Our feet hurt. We're out of food. Matt is exhilarated.

Exhilaration is one of Matt's best things. He'd switch into a mode of surrealistic ebullience. (“Surrealistic ebullience?” Matt murmurs, questioning – as always – my choice of words?)

- 2) When Matt died, I heard the news in a long, train-sized suite in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (“Tulsa!” says Matt. “How perfect!”) There were two phones, but only one of them was connected – the one at the other end of the suite. It rang. I sprinted, dodging coffee tables and sofas and wing chairs and lamps. Just as I got to the phone, the caller hung up. But I knew what it was anyway.

It was a Matt Cohen moment – the message that is not delivered, but nevertheless received. Paradox, oxymoron, conundrum, the mixture of nightmare and slapstick absurdity – he loved them all.

- 3) When Matt died and this newspaper finally made contact with me and asked me to write this piece, I explained I was in a hotel room with no machine. It would have to be handwriting – mine, somewhat illegible. That would be fine, they said. They'd decode it. Then I started looking for writing paper. I opened every drawer. There wasn't any. By this time I was talking out loud. “Matt,” I said, “I want to do you justice, but I'm going to have to write this thing in the middle of the night, in writing no one can read, on paper that doesn't exist.” Matt grinned. “What's the problem?” he said.

Matt was a consummate writer. I don't know of anyone who lived a commitment to the process of writing more thoroughly and with more intensity than he did. Even when he knew he was ill and his chances were not good, he managed to put together a book of short stories and to complete a memoir. His forms were varied: Short stories, novels, translations of Quebec writers – he was one of the few Canadian writers who could move easily between English and French – even some children's books. His approaches varied as well, from the vernacular of his Ottawa valley novels to the quirky fabulism of some of the stories, to the historical (The Spanish Doctor) and the almost European elegance of Freud's Nephew.

His tone ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime to the harrowing, sometimes all in the same package, as in Last Seen. He was very smart, very funny and very intellectually tough, which not surprisingly made him restless and a seeker after new things to write and new ways of

writing them. “Mercurial” is one of the adjectives that comes to mind. He was hard to get a handle on because he had so many handles.

I first met him though writing. And through the small press publishing we were both involved in for a time. That was in 1971, in the Red Lion Tavern, on Jarvis Street, where the people from the House of Anansi Press used to hang out. In those days we inter-edited one another, and it was Dennis Lee’s idea that I should edit Matt’s book of stories, *Columbus and the Fat Lady*. Matt was 28 and had already published two novels. He was an ethereal, rather nervous creature then – you wouldn’t have guessed he was a ruthless tennis player, though he was. Growing up Jewish in the Ottawa Valley in the forties and fifties was a recipe for radical disjunction, and he certainly had that. He’d also been George Grant’s star philosophy student, done a post-graduate thesis on political theory, and taught religion at McMaster University.

Editing him was daunting, but we managed to get through with a certain amount of frenzy and laughter.

People’s lives in those days – or the lives of people we knew – were subject to radical revision on the spur of the moment, and Matt’s was an extreme example. He liked women, they liked him, and there were many permutations. He told me about some of them over the years but I could never get the chronology straight. No one was more startled than I – except possibly himself – when he met the love of his life in the person of Greenwood Books publisher Patsy Aldana and proceeded to settle down and have two children. He loved being a father to Daniel and Madeline but also to Patsy’s previous children, Seth and Coca. He took great delight in his family role, though he never quite stopped being amazed by it. It was a treasure he hadn’t been expecting, and more treasured for that reason. Underneath all the intelligence and wit, there was a sweet romantic.

But there was another side to Matt as well. He was intensely logical and very firm-willed when the situation called for it. He was a five-star chair of the Writer’s Union, and one of the key negotiators for the Public Lending Rights. He was an expert political tactician. Only last year – when Matt was already ill, but didn’t yet know it – the Toronto Arts Council called, because they needed someone to represent the virtues of their position to a committee of Toronto City Council. “Get Matt Cohen,” I said. “He’s one of our best speakers. He’ll do it right.” And so he did.

Once they’d got the bad news, Matt and Patsy decided they’d have as good a time as was possible. The chemotherapy worked for a while, Matt was able to go for walks with friends such as David Young, and to spend time at his beloved Kingston-area farm with the help of long-time pal Wayne Grady. He was awarded the Harbourfront Festival Prize, and managed to attend to hear the excellent things said by John Ralston Saul. He won this year’s Governor-General’s Award for Fiction for *Elizabeth and After*, and made it to the ceremony, where he got hugged by the Governor General, a protocol-breaker to the end.

After quite a few years in which he’d been ignored by critics, he heard that his book, *Elizabeth and After*, would be on *The Globe’s* bestseller list. He didn’t see it though. It wasn’t soon enough.

Q: “...The prospect of time when you no longer want to write or can’t write, does that frighten you?”

A: "I see two possibilities. Scenario Number One is that I gradually become a wino, or my brain turns to jelly from acid ... and I can no longer write and, you know, it's really tragic.

"Scenario Number Two is that I write these fantastic books, which I'm really pleased with, but I become detached from them, and go and sit under the Bhodi Tree ... and no longer have a need to do such eccentric things as writing. I've no idea how to decide which one it is."

In the event, it was neither. Matt was still in full flight as a writer, still in process. It's our loss, which has so many dimensions, like Matt himself.

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