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In his own words: Poet bill bissett lives inside his own language -- is it a private world, or can we all share?

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bill bissett walks onto the outdoor stage at High Park in Toronto wearing jeans, a black baseball hat and his trademark brown-tinted, 1970s glasses. In front of the audience that has gathered on the grass for a night of poetry, bissett begins his performance. "Ya, cool," he says, and immediately begins wailing, stomping his feet and shaking a rattle. He's sounding poetry from his latest book, scars on th seehors, chanting and intoning the words like a modern-day monk whose religion is words. "ium eetin filet mignon 4 breakfast, try 2 get ovr yu, buyin nu clothes, goin 4 walks, nothin will dew. . ."

He has a tiny stuffed animal around his wrist, a monkey that makes a funny sound when he squeezes it into the microphone so his audience can share his mirth. But they laugh harder after listening to this short poem: "watching broadcast nus/i see th salmon talks will resume on monday/well thank god at leest th salmon ar talking"

bissett has this exasperated, ecstatic way about him. He takes big breaths between each word and he talks as if he's just discovering the world for the first time and there is crazy magic lightning and rainbows everywhere and everything is raging.

Raging is one of his favourite words. When I call him, the conversation always begins: "So Cori, are you raging? Are you

excellent?" Nothing in bissett's life eludes his playfulness of words. Even his answering machine message: "Hi everyone . . . Are you everyone? (laughs) You could be the one. You are. Okay, raging. . ."

His love affair with language has attracted a significant following of Canadian poets. To them, he is a hero, a beacon of light, a mentor. For Adeena Karasick, a Canadian poet now living in New York, bissett is "one of the most important living poets."

At 59, he has just published his 60th book of poetry (or thereabouts; he's lost count and no one has ever done a complete bibliography), and he's already at work on the next. There isn't a course on contemporary Canadian poetry in a university across the country that doesn't examine his work. Like e.e. cummings, he has created his own phonetic language, but one that never spells the same word twice, underlining the way his perception of the world is always shifting.

But he isn't as recognized in Canada as he is abroad. "He isn't respected enough for his work," says Karasick. "I'm not sure why, but he hasn't been given the necessary tribute."

He should be, but isn't yet, a household name in Canada. Back in 1969, Jack Kerouac gave his last interview to The

Paris Review, in which he was asked who was the best poet of the day. He said bissett. About 20 years ago, several conservative MPs in Ottawa accused him of writing pornography for a poem made up of the repeated line: "a warm place to shit." Allen Ginsberg came up from the United States to support him. Margaret Atwood has come to his parties. He has seen it all through four decades of wordsmithing excellence and yet retains, miraculously, a heady innocence

bissett's publisher, Karl Siegler of Talonbooks in Vancouver, says only in the last few years have Canadians come to recognize "his vital and invaluable contribution." The Vancouver International Writer's Festival honoured bissett two years ago for his lifetime achievements and in the same year, the Capilano Review, a literary magazine out of Vancouver, devoted an entire edition to his work. "Unfortunately," says Siegler, "it took 40 years for Canadians to wake up to bissett."

With the publication of scars on th seehors, bissett's books now outnumber his age. But that's not all. He's had his paintings shown at various galleries in Vancouver and Toronto and is a darling of sound poetry festivals across the globe.

But bissett is blissfully unaware of his admirers. He lives in his own world, partly inhabiting this planet and partly inhabiting another he's named "zatria" in one of his latest and as yet unpublished poems. "my earliest childhood memoreez uv zatria/eye have bin heer 400 yeers they told me/voices whispering teeching levitating..."

When I meet him at a cafe in Toronto's Cabbagetown, where he now lives, he has

"rocks in his head" from an argument with a boyfriend over a movie. bissett watches a lot of movies and talks about them constantly. On this particular day, he's just seen *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and he is raging on about how good it is. That bissett finds beauty in a mediocre Hollywood movie is testament to his perennial optimism.

He has been living in Toronto for the last twelve years, and in this neighbourhood at least, he's a star. The local bookseller raves about him. The chef at the cafe waves as he passes by. But bissett also spends time in Vancouver, renting a room in "the magic house." But he's avoiding the magic house these days because a close friend just "went to Spirit."

He shows me a drawing he made recently about his friend's death. And then he returns to the movie. "Everything in the movie is if you experience love, then go for it and I thought, 'Am I doing that? How many healthy years do I have left?' "

bissett has had two bouts of physical trauma, one of which left him with a scar on his brain, the other with a scar on his stomach. But his memory is alarming in its accuracy and attention to detail and he is so quick-witted -- jumping like a spark from one double-entendre to the next -- that after a few hours, I leave with "rocks in my head."

No wonder he's so prolific. In developing his own language, he's been overwhelmingly busy with the assemblage of letters, dissolving the boundaries between life and art, creating, always creating, different worlds of possibility through language.

This language, which has been influenced by everything valuable in modern art and literature -- from Picasso and Blake to Emily Carr, Hollywood movies and dadaist and surrealist painters -- embraces what bissett calls "ecstatic yunyun." That is, the linking of the physical and the spiritual, the mystical and the functional.

Siegler equates bissett's experiment with language to the rise of the vernacular in Europe when it replaced Latin. Like Chaucer and Dante, he says, bissett has reshaped language in a way that reveals all that is "suppressed by formalism and imperialism in language and the unalterable, dictionary-definitions where it becomes difficult to express the voice of the common people."

Siegler says bissett is also like Quebec artist Michel Tremblay, who was the first to shift from writing in formal French to "joual," the common spoken language of Quebecers. For introducing the language of the common people into the realm of high art, Tremblay became a cultural hero.

But bissett is not recognized for playing a similar role, partly because his other, very visible preoccupations tend to distract readers and critics from the originality of his language. He has shunned punctuation and capital letters. And his work includes a vein of social commentary -- one that is poignant, pointed and often hilarious.

"People don't expect serious social criticism in poetry, especially when it's spelled funny," says Siegler. "But he has more to say about Canadian politics and the global village than almost any other writer I know in the country."

Whether he's writing about "th militaree,"

"th mountees," "mass xecusyuns," "spektakular klass strugguls," "death n direleksyun," or the horror of AIDS, "th pain us so manee peopul dying n th sexual prsonal frustraesyun," his poetry addresses the limitless discussion of the boundaries between the personal and the political.

By marrying the two in his life and art, Adeena Karasick says he has taught her "how to love when you live inside yr words, when yr language is yr life."

She tells me about her cross-European tour with bissett where "everyday was a new adventure captured by language witches and secret angels languishing in red velvet sleeper cars."

She recalls being on a hovercraft going to Dover. "It was very stormy and the boat was dancing. Water was flooding the boat. Cappuccino was spilling. People were hysterical and vomiting and even the stewards had on life jackets. We were convinced we were going to drown. But bill held me in his arms, caressing my head and chanting, not of rainbows, but of magic lightning, of water, water everywhere washing over us like language, like letters."

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