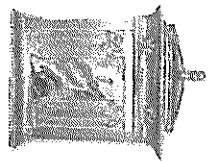
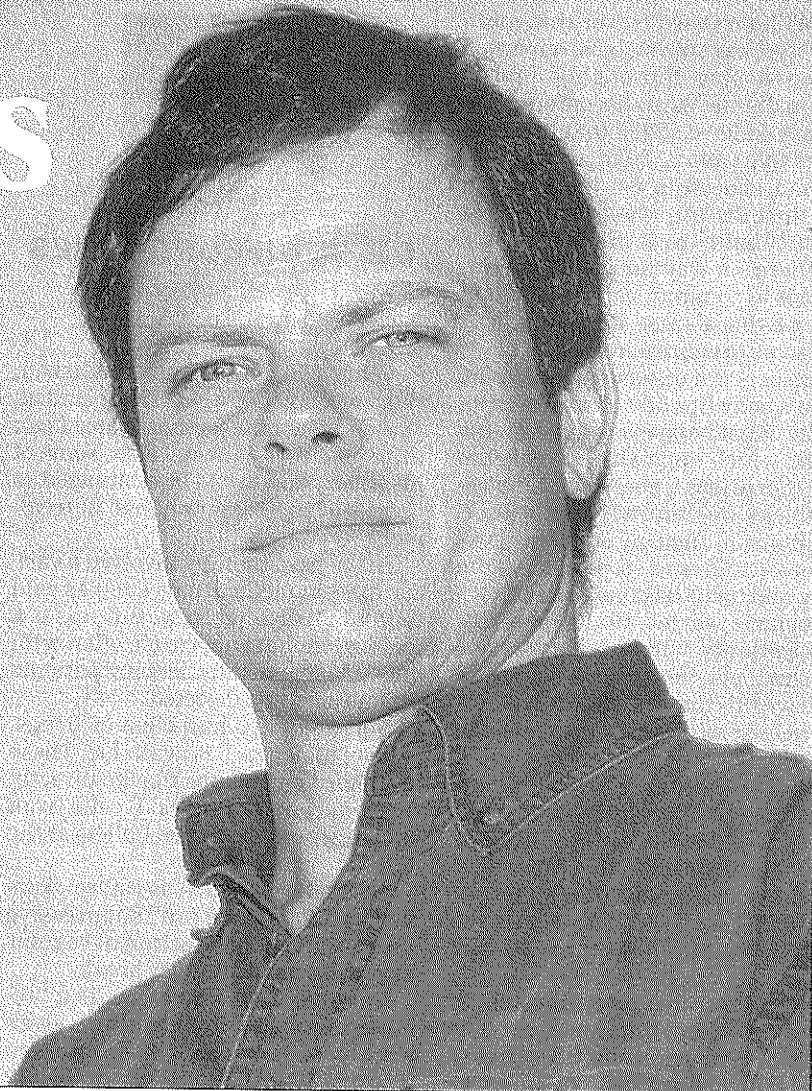


INSIDE
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Henighan's storied return



DAVE CARTER, GUELPH MERCURY

University of Guelph instructor Stephen Henighan poses for a photo this week ahead of Tuesday's launch of 'A Grave in the Air.'

Guelph's 'literary bad boy' returns to fiction with 'A Grave in the Air' collection

By JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH
MERCURY STAFF

GUELPH

After a controversial examination of the Canadian literary scene in a series of essays, with some pointed barbs at iconic Canadian authors, the publishing industry and the coveted Scotiabank Giller Prize, Stephen Henighan has turned his sights on central and eastern Europe with his latest book, "A Grave in the Air."

The short stories in the collection, which the University of Guelph teacher and researcher will launch at the Bookshelf Tuesday evening, are fiction, but they are based on his family history and some personal experiences in countries such as Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia.

And while they are not linked by characters or time, there is a common theme running through them, one Henighan has put forward in previous books: we must know our history and learn from it, but we can't let it colour our view of the world.

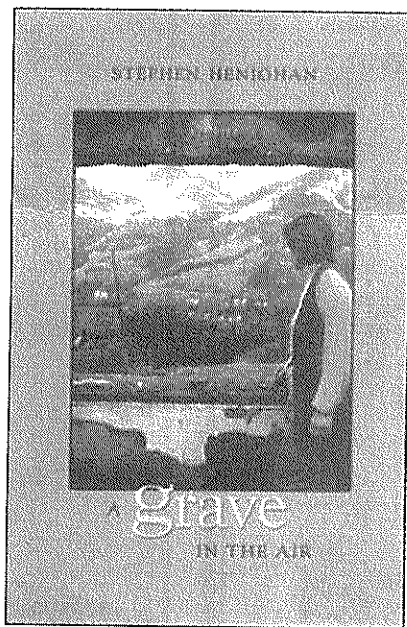
"I used eastern Europe because that's a place where history is important. There's a long history of ethnic conflict, and yet the people are living in the present. That's part of what I'm looking at," said Henighan in an interview at his Guelph home.

"I've always felt that being a writer means you have to comment on your milieu, to give an opinion on how things are developing."

With globalization and international travel, the world is getting smaller, Henighan said, and how people view themselves, in terms of national identity, is also changing.

"What's happening more and more is people don't have just one identity," he said. They are Italian-Canadians or African-Americans or other dual nationality distinctions.

"In a funny way, people are defining their national identities more precisely than they used



to. So nationalism is not disappearing. But we need to have different approaches."

The first story in "A Grave in the Air" is based on Henighan's great-grandfather, B.A. Glanvill, who attempted to stop the outbreak of the Second World War through international soccer matches.

"He was convinced the sporting spirit would prevail over the war spirit," Henighan said with fondness at the naivete of thinking.

His stories take his readers to concentration camps in Nazi Germany and to Bosnia during the genocide. One of the stories is about a Hungarian in Montreal. Another of an East German writer in Toronto.

"In some ways, he's a cinematic writer," said Dan Evans, a book seller at the Bookshelf and a fan of Henighan's writing. "But you can tell he's thinking about his sentences, too. It only gets flowery when the scene necessitates. And I think

LAUNCH TIME

What: Book launch for Stephen Henighan's "A Grave in the Air"

When: Tuesday, Sept. 25,

Time: 7 p.m.

Where: The Bookshelf, 41 Quebec St.

his dialogue is bang-on."

"When Words Deny the World," a series of essays Henighan wrote about the Canadian literary scene in 2002, was sharply critical of the Canadian literary scene and he took a lot of flack for it.

"He's got the persona of a literary bad boy now, but his critical writings are incredibly precise. He's an excellent thinker," Evans said.

"All his braininess, travel and world-weariness go into his books. For Stephen to put out novels and stories (after "When Words Deny the World") is really exposing his throat."

Henighan was born in Germany, but spent most of his childhood on a farm in the Ottawa Valley. He lived for a long time in Montreal, but has studied or travelled all over the world. He speaks five languages: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian and German and teaches Latin American literature at the University of Guelph.

Henighan said he's always been a storyteller. At four years old, he would dictate stories to his mother, who would write them down. As soon as he learned to read, he gobbled up books, he said.

"The problem with young writers, generally, is that they don't read enough. TV and film gives a sense of narrative, but you don't get the literary texture by watching movies. You learn to write by reading," he said.

"You don't have to experience war in the jungle to write a good story. You can make anything interesting if you tell it well enough."

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“ IN AUTHOR WORDS . . . ”

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In a funny way, people are defining their national identities more precisely than they used to. So nationalism is not disappearing. But we need to have different approaches.

STEPHEN HENIGHAN

ON SOME OF THE INSPIRATIONS BEHIND 'A GRAVE IN THE AIR'