

# THE REPUBLIC

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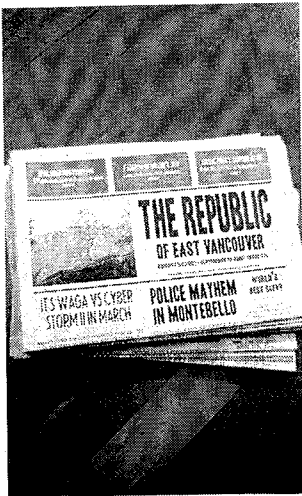
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Arts

## Cutting down our tall poppies

By Cate Sercombe

Why this writer strikes fear into the hearts of the Canlit establishment

Stephen Henighan's face is relaxed and open, greeting people as they come through the door at Pulp Fiction Books on Main Street. He is late-forty-something but looks twenty years younger. Is this why the literati in Central Canada resent him? Are they envious? He begins to read from *A Grave In The Air*, his recent short story collection. His performance is light and entertaining, the writing is smooth, and the story draws the audience into the mind of Agnieska, an educated Polish girl who elopes with her older and also well-educated boyfriend to Germany where they settle into typical new-immigrant jobs.

Henighan's parents met in Yemen. The family lived in seven houses in four countries by the time he was nine, when they immigrated to Canada. He speaks French, Spanish, German, Portuguese and Romanian. Oxford University's European Humanities Research Centre published his doctoral thesis "Assuming The Light: The Parisian Literary Apprenticeship of Miguel Angel Asturias." He's written for the *Times Literary Supplement* since

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1994 and is often invited to speak about culture and writing in Europe. He is a professor of Spanish-American literature at the University of Guelph and his prodigious literary output includes two novels, four short story collections, a memoir of his year in Moldova and two collections of essays.

A public intellectual on the cutting edge is lauded in most countries, but in Canada many literary types have not read Henighan or they bristle defensively at the name as though he doesn't quite know how to behave around the Canlit table. Picture your favourite uncle who comes to Christmas dinner and pokes gentle fun at stuffy family habits.

The audience at Pulp Fiction is friendly, young, educated and happy to listen to his thoughts on Canadian culture and his speculation as to why Canadian writing is not generally as fresh or innovative as that of South America (is it the climate, the lack of revolution?) or the northern European countries (is it the proximity to Paris, the lack of war?). Henighan reads from his new book *A Report on The Afterlife of Culture* and the audience peppers him with questions on the state of Canadian literature.

In response to the question of whether Canadian fiction is "bloodless" he says he would not recommend violent revolution as a fix to the somewhat bland state of much Canadian writing. He posits that new writers are encouraged by publishers and agents to write historical fiction on the premise that readers prefer stories grounded in the past over new representations of the mostly urban lives Canadians lead.

The literary elite based in Toronto paints Henighan as a curmudgeon. They periodically lob letters to the editor at Geist Magazine where he

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1607 E Hastings

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writes a quarterly column, but his criticism is balanced and constructive. "This is the value of a nation as a filter to the outside world," he says. "How does our writing get to the world if Canada doesn't have a presence?" Traveling extensively in Europe and South America teaching and speaking to other thinkers and writers, he provides a thoughtful and informed feedback on how the world views Canada and Canadian literature.

Henighan also has a fresh point-of-view on a favourite Canadian myth, that we are a young country still in its formative stages. "I don't completely buy that we are a new culture. Canada as a nation is older than many European countries that formed since the Second World War. It's also a bit of a myth that immigrants come here and help to create Canada. In some ways Canada is pretty solid already."

His first essay collection, *When Words Deny The World*, was not reviewed by the mainstream media or stocked in bookstores, so it was encouraging to see stacks of his new book at Pulp Fiction, Duthies and other independent booksellers. Despite the weighty title, the essays are amusing and easy to read. Or a reader can start with Henighan's first novel, *The Places Where Names Vanish* (in which a young Ecuadorian girl immigrates to Montreal), available at the Vancouver Public Library.

As a public intellectual, he's smart, funny, not at all pompous or full-of-himself. His fiction is described by one reviewer as "beautiful fresh writing, which insightfully explores its territory—the disparate struggles of being an outsider in our so-called global village." Henighan's writing is especially compelling when he takes the female point-of-view to portray strong, quirky, authentic women.

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His body of work will continue to grow and whether the Canlit cocktail-party crowd takes him on as one of their own is of little consequence to Henighan. Unlike most of them, he's out in the world having fun and making us think.

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