her on the harmonium: ‘Hector is taking everything awful about the Griselda story into his own body and making it over, making Griselda’s nakedness his. But it is also still hers. And mine. So there is no difference, no Other.’

Earlier in the novel, Janey has been tantalized by an idea that keeps eluding her: ‘It is something about the entire basis of domestic life, about what it really feels like, from top to bottom, to be a wife and mother... but it will always elude you.... I cannot hold it in my head for long enough to trap it, envelop it in language.’ Yet this is precisely what Sorensen has done, and not a note rings false.

— David Ingham

Non-Fiction


Allison Crawford et al., *Body & Soul: Narratives of Healing from Ars Medica*, University of Toronto Press, 2011

Poet, novelist, short-story writer, essayist, editor and translator, Steven Heighton is something of a Renaissance man in Canadian letters. His novels, among them *Shadowboxer, Afterlands* and most recently, *Every Lost Country*, have been published all over the world, while his poetry consistently appears to much acclaim in his home country. With *Workbook: Memos and Dispatches on Writing*, Heighton contributes his views on writing, and the writing life, to a robust genre of instructive literature on the wordsmithing craft.

*Workbook* is difficult to review, mostly because it is tough to classify. While ostensibly sharing shelf space with other writing guides, the slim volume is its own kind of beast. Like all writing guides, what one takes from *Workbook* depends entirely on one’s expectations. One of Heighton’s contemporaries, American Anne Lamott, wrote her own book on the craft called *Bird by Bird*, a nod to her father’s assertion that any project can be completed one item at a time. Lamott’s book is more comprehensive than Heighton’s—in fact, nearly every book on writing can stake that claim with a degree of confidence. However, it’s the subtitle of *Bird by Bird* that interests me: *Instructions on Writing and Life*. It seems to me that Lamott’s subtitle more appropriately describes Heighton’s book, a collection of aphorisms, fridge-magnet-perfect assertions, and brief narratives from which the reader can draw a number of conclusions about writing, life, and the writing life.
In a strange way, *Workbook* is more extended poem than writing guide. The back-cover copy refers to Heighton’s dispatches making a splash on social media like Twitter, and it is easy to see why: nearly every ‘memo’ is bite-sized for easy digestion. The result is something akin to a sampler plate, from which bits of wisdom can be swallowed whole. Take, for example, this nugget about characterization: ‘The character’s necessary freedom becomes the writer’s fertile constraint.’ The relationship Heighton sees between character and creator astutely turns on its head our sense of who is in control of a piece of narrative writing. To breathe life into a character, to make one’s creation free, the writer must willingly accept a set of chains.

The book is split into nine roughly thematic sections: ‘Memos to a Younger Self’ is a list of tips ‘To be relayed back through time to a writer starting out,’ while ‘A Devil’s Dictionary for Writers’ is a clever collection of alternative definitions for terms like ‘FAILURE’ (‘phenomenon that allows writers to retain their friends’) and ‘GOOD FICTION’ (‘a collaborative confidence trick’). The book’s longest section, at least in terms of word count, centres on Heighton’s relationship with Al Purdy, grandfather of Canadian poetry. The narrative ‘essay’ culminates with Heighton wearing Purdy’s shirt, a delicious image that speaks to Heighton’s sense of literary lineage.

At around 70 pages, many of which contain an inordinate amount of white space, *Workbook* is slender and meditative. A Strunk and White this isn’t. Nor does Heighton dwell on narrative structure, agent hunting, or how to excise cancerous limbs from troubled manuscripts. Is Heighton’s guidebook only for writers? It’s possible. Getting the most out of *Workbook* might be a matter of balancing one’s expectations with the product in one’s hands. Few readers of poetry would complain about word count, for example, and I would encourage readers of *Workbook* to approach it with a poet’s mindset—to simply digest Heighton’s wisdom, letting it nourish the parts of the brain that are made for play. The author himself offers perhaps the best advice for approaching the material in *Workbook*: ‘The bad reviewer’s art involves universalizing, in authoritative, pseudo-objective language, a totally subjective response to a book.’ It’s to Heighton’s credit that his dispatches so wholly resist universalization.

A distinguished literary journal, *Ars Medica* has carved a niche in the literary community, publishing poetry, fiction and non-fiction about illness, health, and the medical profession. *Body & Soul: Narratives of Healing from* Ars Medica collects some of the journal’s best work, splitting it into three sections: Patients, Family and Friends, and Practitioners. A helpful index in the front matter further divides the
pieces along thematic lines. For example, readers with a particular interest in mental health will find listed the eight pieces that deal primarily with that topic.

Among the Patients section’s strongest pieces, ‘Sunday Nights at the Shangri-La’ follows an Internet chat group made up of suicide survivors. The conversation is alarmingly candid. The Golden Gate Bridge, we are told, has ‘logged well over a thousand final exits since it opened up in 1937.’ When another character admits to slashing her wrists, she’s admonished laconically: ‘You know only 15 per cent of those attempts work.’ In ‘Shangri-La,’ we see displayed one of the anthology’s many riches: a refusal on the part of its contributors to look away.

Three poems from John Grey are more whimsical in their approach to sickness. ‘Medicine Pudding’ accuses foul-tasting cures of ‘enjoy[ing] being a metaphor too much,’ and not making more of an effort to taste like food. Meanwhile, the wheezing narrator of ‘At Thirteen, Asthmatic’ likens the asthmatic’s thrashing for oxygen to being on standby for love: ‘There’s a lover out there/who’s waiting for me./For now, she’s not winnable./For now, she is oxygen.’

The most affecting piece in the opening section belongs to Jessica Handler. Aptly titled, ‘Daughter Cells’ is a strikingly well-crafted meditation on how frighteningly helpless we are when pitted against our own genetics. Early in the story, the narrator asks rhetorically, ‘How did two out of three sisters develop hereditary disorders that live at opposite ends of a spectrum?’ Later, she answers wryly, ‘Genetics is a good guess. So is bad luck.’

Curiously luck, bad or good, and all references to kismet are rare among the patients that share their stories. While the people who tell their stories inevitably suffer, the stories themselves are clearly exegetical: therapeutic tools, medicine for writer and reader alike.

In the section devoted to Family and Friends, space is made for those bearing witness to suffering, voices typically absent from representations of sickness and healing. As Rex Kay’s introduction to the section puts it, ‘the family and friends of the patient...are most glaringly absent or, at best, given a stereotypical walk-on part. The worried sister, fingers to mouth. The angry parent or spouse, obstructing care.’ Not only must friends and family members occupy the sidelines in narratives of illness, they must do so with a grim silence that precludes expression of their own pain.

Though the majority of the contributions make for worthwhile reading, two pieces in this section stand out from the rest. In ‘Something Happened,’ Jane Martin illustrates with pencil crayons the physical degradation of her friend, Ewen. As the short essay accompanying the images explains, each drawing was inspired by one of
Ewen’s odd expressions. For example, the illustration of a question mark-shaped scar on the side of Ewen’s head comes with the playful title, ‘The Roses Are Just Moving into Fabulosity.’ Though the images are worlds unto themselves, Ewen’s curious verbal expressions—the product of an undefined neurological illness—are as beautiful and troubling as Martin’s drawings.

Nancy Richler’s short story ‘Second Round’ also merits singling out. The author’s facility with language is a sight to behold, as she eloquently captures the purgatory that family members often feel in the presence of the sick: their pain necessarily a footnote, dwarfed by that of the afflicted. Consider the way Gina describes her mother’s compulsion to stand over her sister, Sandra:

Gina knew that their mother wouldn’t take the seat while Sandra remained standing. There was nothing she could do about Sandra’s lost hair or the nausea that overwhelmed her for days after each treatment, but she could at least remain standing by the entrance of the waiting room for as long as Sandra did.

The impulse to stand watch, to protect, tells much about a mother whose suffering compels her to fabricate futile gestures of control.

Doctors and health practitioners contributed the stories that make up the anthology’s shortest, and final, section, Practitioners. I am drawn to Robert Maunder’s essay ‘On Pathography’ because it provides a kind of meta-commentary on the stories in Body & Soul. The essay describes the author’s interest in a field of literature called ‘pathography’—stories about being sick. Referencing Susan Sontag, Maunder posits that terms like ‘battle,’ ‘triumph’ and ‘survivor’ (a word that appears in this very review) are troubling at best, pernicious at worst. He argues that ‘Triumphant battles, however much they actually do convey an important part of the experience of being sick for many people, seem to me to be the expectation of the well.’ The best pathography, in Maunder’s eyes, comes from those ‘who are curious and unashamed enough to write about what illness has done to their minds and preferences and relationships,’ a trend, incidentally, we see at work in the anthology’s first section.

Meanwhile, Ian G. Dorward’s ‘The Texture of a Word,’ presumably memoir, is a short but potent story of a doctor telling an elderly physics professor he has glioblastoma. What exactly is glioblastoma? Put simply, it is bad news. Put another way, it is ‘twelve more months—fifteen at best—punctuated by chemotherapy and radiation and lost hair and cognitive difficulties and intractable nausea.’ The list of unpleasantries goes on. Dorward grapples with the ethics of disclosure: how much information to give to a patient, and in what terms.
Like *Workbook*, Heighton’s meditations on the writing life, *Body & Soul* encourages piecemeal reading; blindly opening to a particular page in either book has yet to let me down. While neither book will be everything to someone, both will likely be something to everyone.

— Andrew MacDonald

**Non-Fiction/Fiction**


Gary Geddes’s *Drink the Bitter Root: A Writer’s Search for Justice and Redemption in Africa* explores what Geddes indentifies as the increasing importance of the perspective offered by those who are weaker. Adopting humanitarian Jean Vanier’s attitude that he is finally free in his older years to listen to the voices of the oppressed, Geddes critically examines the concept of justice in the context of contemporary African history, whether describing the slow bureaucratic machinations of the International Criminal Court or the plight of individual Africans. As Nancy, a rape victim in Uganda, says of her attackers: ‘Justice? What’s that? ...what I wish for [is] restoration. Bring them back, integrate them into our community. They were mostly abducted boys.’

Geddes acknowledges that he is no expert in African politics. Before leaving Canada, he consults a *Vancouver Sun* correspondent who advises him to ‘Keep moving. Don’t stand around looking lost and confused. An injured animal is fair game in Africa.’ His quick tour of sub-Saharan Africa is precisely what renders Geddes’s observations superficial. *Drink the Bitter Root* offers a skillful blend of history, literary criticism, memoir, testimony, and reportorial impressions of that continent. *Bitter Root* is thoughtfully researched and well structured. But its predictable ideology seems designed to fit a literary convention that balances despair with hope. Its many concrete, moving scenes are crafted with care but seem too often presented for effect.

Geddes’s motive for exploring the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somaliland, Rwanda, and other troubled areas is murky, beyond his fascination with a disturbing photograph of the ‘Somali Affair,’ the 1993 Canadian military scandal in which two young peacekeepers stationed in Belet Huen beat to death a local teenager they suspected of robbing the base: