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alt.poet

Calgary writer interested in how language constructs us

ERIC VOLMERS
CALGARY HERALD

“Am I a failure?” asks poet Derek Beaulieu, wryly repeating a question that wasn’t asked.

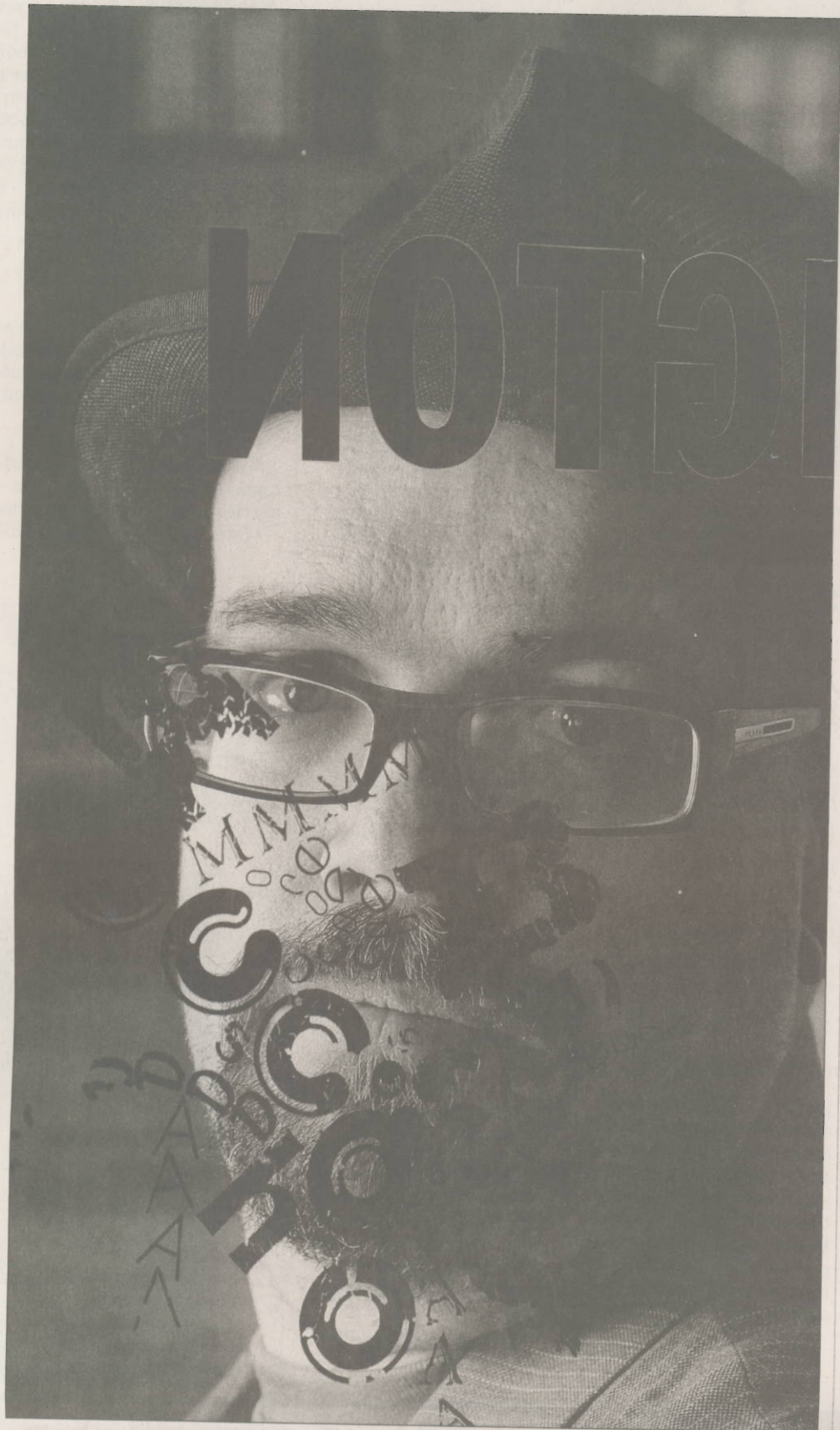
Given his fascination with how we use language, it’s perhaps not surprising that Beaulieu will offer more than a few linguistic twists during an interview. The real question was simply an attempt, albeit an awkwardly worded one, to have Beaulieu define his experimental work. Does he consider himself a poet? A visual artist? A literary renegade?

But while the 37-year-old Calgarian’s insistence on equating “poetry” with “failure” doesn’t sound like the words of a literary booster, they don’t appear to spring from an attempt to trivialize what he does either. In fact, the idea of writing without readers is quite appealing to Beaulieu, who once worked as a draftsman for the oil and gas industry. When teaching creative writing to students these days at Mount Royal University, he is nothing if not blunt about both the dim earning potential and likelihood of fame available to Canadian writers. That is usually his starting point, he says.

“If you had something amazing to say to the world, something important that must be declared, you wouldn’t write it in a poem,” Beaulieu insists. “Put in on a billboard, take it out in the newspaper, put in online, take out a cell-phone ap. But don’t put it in a poem. That’s the best way to make sure your lesson is not learned, your message is not heard. But if nobody reads it, nobody buys it, nobody is making money off of it — that means you can do anything. There’s that old phrase ‘dance as if nobody is watching.’ Write as if nobody is reading.”

Far from being self-defeating, Beaulieu suggests writing in such a “void” is liberating. This has clearly been a guiding principle for his own work in visual poetry and avant-garde, conceptual fiction, areas that place him in the more experimental wing of Calgary’s lively poetry community and given him an increasingly international reputation. For instance, he proudly says he has written two novels that contain no words. Those would be 2007’s *Flatland*, a collection of visual patterns based on the typography of Edwin Abbott Abbott’s oddball 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*; and the following year’s *Local Colour*, which consists of coloured blocks inserted to replace descriptions of colour in the text of Paul Auster’s novella *Ghosts*.

His latest book. How to



Calgary visual poet Derek Beaulieu is in the more experimental wing of Calgary’s lively poetry community, using visual patterns and numbers. Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald



LIVING LOCAL STATE OF THE ARTS

All this month, we’re putting the rising stars of Calgary’s art scene in the spotlight.

all of it from a variety of sources. Basically, I treated writing the way a DJ treats records: You sample it, you remix it, you override it, you play it backwards, play it forwards. You treat the music like raw material. When a DJ does that we admire it, we dance to it. When an author does that, we throw them out of the academy for being plagiarists.”

So How to Write features a story that compiles all references to numbers from

“IF YOU HAD SOMETHING AMAZING TO SAY TO THE WORLD, YOU WOULDN’T WRITE IT IN A POEM”

DEREK BEAULIEU

in the speech bubbles of American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s art, who was himself known for borrowing existing comic-book frames for his large-scale paintings.

Beaulieu recently constructed an abstract piece made up of stencilled letters on the window of Pages on Kensington, forcing viewers to peer through the design to see out into the neighbourhood. He recently flew to Manchester, U.K. to craft a similar piece on the doors of an art gallery that was holding an exhibition on visual poetry and text-based art.

based on growth, profit and economic immediacy — has an abstract influence on both his work and that of countless wordsmiths within the city limits.

“Writing poetry is a means of challenging how we see the world and we craft our worlds around language,” Beaulieu says. “Calgary tends to be a conservative city, a city that has defined itself not in terms of longevity but in terms of the now. (As poets) we use a lot of the same language that is being used around business, oil and gas and that sort of thing. I use the same words as Ralph Klein, Ed Stelmach and anyone else. So what happens if we start looking at how language constructs us — breaking down language, looking at its parts, putting it back together again? What can it do when it’s let off the leash? And I

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THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW BESTSELLERS

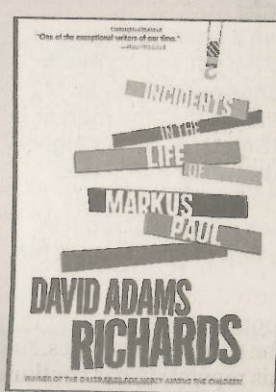
THIS WEEK	FICTION	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	NON-FICTION
1	DEAD RECKONING • Charlaine Harris. Sookie Stackhouse seeks the culprit in a firebombing.	1	1	IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS • Erik Larson. Berlin during the rise of the Nazi Party.
2	10TH ANNIVERSARY • James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. The race to find a missing baby.	3	2	DOES THE NOISE IN MY HEAD BOTHER YOU? • Steven Tyler with David Dalton. The rise, fall and rise of Aerosmith.
3	BURIED PREY • John Sandford. Lucas Davenport investigates the murders of two girls.	2	3	LIES THAT CHELSEA HANDLER TOLD ME • Chelsea Handler, Glen Handler, Roy Handler and others. Victims of her practical jokes.
4	THE JEFFERSON KEY • Steve Berry. Cotton Malone foils an assassination attempt on the president.	—	4	SEAL TEAM SIX • Howard E. Wasdin and Stephen Templin. His military training and missions.
5	THE SIXTH MAN • David Baldacci. A lawyer for an alleged killer is murdered.	4	5	BOSSYPANTS • Tina Fey. A memoir.
6	THE FINAL STORM • Jeff Shaara. The three-month struggle for Okinawa in 1945.	—	6	WHERE’S THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE? • Jerome R. Corsi. An argument that President Barack Obama is not a natural-born U.S. citizen.
7	THE LAND OF PAINTED CAVES • Jean M. Auel. The latest in The Clan of the Cave Bear series.	5	7	AREA 51 • Annie Jacobsen. The mysterious military installation.
8	CALEB’S CROSSING • Geraldine Brooks. A missionary’s daughter forms a bond with a scholarly Indian.	7	8	UNBROKEN • Laura Hillenbrand. A runner’s survival as a prisoner of war.
9	SIXKILL • Robert B. Parker. The final Spenser novel.	6	9	STORIES I ONLY TELL MY FRIENDS • Rob Lowe. His professional memoir.
10	THE GIRL WHO KICKED THE HORNET’S NEST • Stieg Larsson. A Swedish hacker and a journalist.	9	10	THE HEART AND THE FIST • Eric Greitens. A Navy SEAL describes his military deployments.

RANKINGS REFLECT SALES FIGURES FOR THE WEEK ENDED MAY 21, AT ALMOST 4,000 BOOKSTORES PLUS WHOLESALERS SERVING 50,000 OTHER RETAILERS (GIFT SHOPS, DEPARTMENT STORES, NEWSSTANDS, SUPERMARKETS), STATISTICALLY WEIGHTED TO REPRESENT ALL SUCH OUTLETS NATIONWIDE.

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CALGARY BESTSELLERS FICTION

THIS WEEK	FICTION	LAST WEEK
1	THIRTEEN MINUTES • James Davidge & Bob Prodor. A family scarred by tragedy yet joined by love.	—
2	INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF MARKUS PAUL • David Adams Richards. A Canadian novel about truth, lies and justice.	—
3	MONOCEROS • Suzette Mayr. A tragicomedy about teenage suicide.	7
4	ALONE IN THE CLASSROOM • Elizabeth Hay. Teaching becomes more than just a profession.	3
5	BRIDE OF NEW FRANCE • Suzanne Desrochers. A young woman moves from Paris to Quebec in 1669.	—
6	SQUIRREL SEEKS CHIPMUNK • David Sedaris. A book of animal fables.	—
7	THE SISTERS BROTHERS • Patrick De Wit. A homage to the classic Western.	10
8	THE BOY • Betty Jane Hegerat. Part fictional memoir and part investigation.	—
9	LEECHES • David Albahari. A Serbian journalist drawn into a mystic morass.	—
10	AND ME AMONG THEM • Kristen Den Hartog. A teenager deals with family secrets.	6



Story of the miscarriage of justice in the case of a 1985 death in a New Brunswick shipping yard. The novel is a meticulous study of the half truths, political machinations and lies that lead to the unfair incrimination of one man in the death of a promising young Micmac Native.

