

# Sitting down with ...

Guy Vanderhaeghe, Will Ferguson and Wayne Johnston

BRENDAN HARRISON

## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

### A GOOD MAN

Guy Vanderhaeghe  
McClelland & Stewart, 464 pp.

Guy Vanderhaeghe will be participating in the Banff Distinguished Author Series on Saturday, October 15 at the Eric Harvey Theatre along with singer-songwriter Justin Rutledge.

In his new novel *A Good Man*, Guy Vanderhaeghe returns to the same territory he explored in his acclaimed Canadian bestsellers *The Englishman's Boy* and *The Last Crossing*. Like those books, *A Good Man* is set in the late 1800s against the backdrop of the area known as Whoop-up Country — southwestern Alberta, southeastern Saskatchewan and northern Montana. Reaching the author at his home in Saskatchewan, I ask him why he returned to this time and place.

"In modern terms, I think we're kind of preoccupied with the notion of radical and rapid change," he says. "The late 1860s up until about 1880 in the Canadian West was a time of incredibly radical change for First Nations people in particular.... At the same time, it was the beginning of white incursions into the area and the formation of the society that we in the West now live in and occupy. And this happened with incredible speed, which has always intrigued me."

In *A Good Man*, we see this fast-changing world through the eyes of Wesley Case, the son of a wealthy Ontario lumber baron who leaves behind his failed military service and short tenure with the North West Mounted Police for the opportunity to seek his fortune as a rancher in Montana. Through Case, Vanderhaeghe is able to tell a wide-ranging story that touches on many historical events from this period.

"One of the things that it deals with is when Sitting Bull ended up in Canadian territory after the battle of the Little Big Horn, and the difficulties that it caused between the American, Canadian and British governments," he says. "But it also deals with the establishment of the first Canadian secret police, and the incursions of the Fenians and the Irish Republican Army into Canada in the 1860s and 1870s."

With so many real-life details woven into the tapestry of the novel, Vanderhaeghe knows the importance of getting the facts right.

"I've always said that in a historical novel, the emphasis has to be on the noun, not the adjective," he says. "But at the same time, because I have an MA (master of arts) in history, I do my best not to introduce gross distortions. Having said that, there's no record of a man called Wesley Case.... A historian would never dare to make that leap. But, of course, that's the work of a novelist."

### CANADIAN PIE

Will Ferguson  
Viking Canada, 383 pp.

Will Ferguson will be appearing Tuesday, October 11 at the Auburn in conjunction with WordFest. He will also be participating in a panel at The Banff Centre on Sunday, October 16.

When I ask Calgary-based writer Will Ferguson to tell me about his new book, *Canadian Pie*, he answers my question with a question of his own.

"Have you ever eaten at a Saskatchewan smorgasbord?" he asks. "We call them buffets, but in a lot of Prairie towns, they call them smorgs, and they are the most complete smorgasbords you'll ever get, because they'll have chicken chow mein and perogies on the same buffet."

And that's how *Canadian Pie* was conceived.

"There's a bit of everything in it, because I have readers who follow my travel writing or political satire, or the family humour. It was a way to gather it all up in one book, to create a classic Prairie smorgasbord of a book."

*Canadian Pie* gathers up short pieces ranging from the very first pieces he wrote about Japanese culture back in 1995, to his work on the Vancouver Olympics closing ceremonies.

"When you start shaking out your hard drive, it's like shaking out your toaster," Ferguson says. "You're surprised by just how much is actually there. So there was a lot more than I realized. The hardest thing was figuring out how to break the book down and organize pieces."

The final product is surprisingly cohesive, collecting highlights from a writing career that shifts between travel memoir, political satire, Canadiana and works of fiction. I ask him what motivated him to write the small pieces between writing books.

"By temperament, I'd lean towards book-length, long-haul projects," he says. "The freelance magazine and newspaper articles are kind of a fun side.... It was like, I've got a funny idea and it would be a shame to not write it down. And then over time, after about 10 years, it slowly dawned on me that, if I gathered these up, that's a collection. I've got enough work over time to put out a collection."

### A WORLD ELSEWHERE

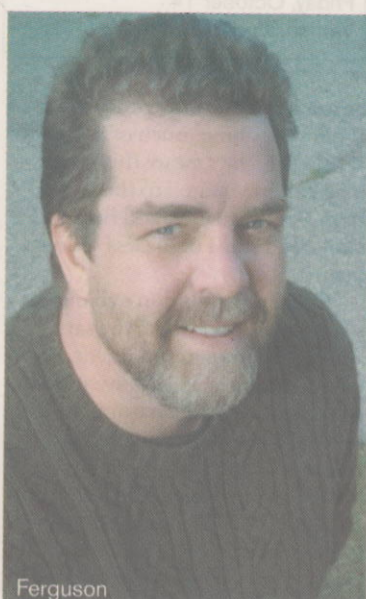
Wayne Johnston  
Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 294 pp.

Wayne Johnston will be appearing Wednesday, October 12 at the Vertigo Theatre Playhouse in conjunction with WordFest.

Inspiration can come from curious



Vanderhaeghe



Ferguson



Johnston

places. For author Wayne Johnston, a visit to a vast mansion built in the wilderness of North Carolina planted the seed that would bloom into his new novel, *A World Elsewhere*. The 135,000-square-foot, 250-room Biltmore Estate remains one of the best examples of Gilded Age architecture, an era that Johnston explored in his novel *The Navigator of New York*.

"I think I made six visits," he says. "Some for the inside, some for the outside. After the second visit, I began to talk to some of the tour staff about the people who lived there or used to live there."

These discussions led back to George Vanderbilt II, the man who commissioned the vast estate, by all accounts an unusual and eccentric character who set himself the task of building the greatest private residence in the world.

"That's exactly what Biltmore became," Johnston says. "It was a very modern house for its time, almost impossibly so. It had things in it that wouldn't be in other private residences until almost 100 years later: elevators, air conditioning, intercom systems so that people could speak from room to room."

Johnston makes it clear that his book is a work of fiction by changing Vanderbilt's name to Vanderluyden, and introducing the character of Landish Druken, the son of a Newfoundland sealing captain who meets the wealthy young aristocrat while attending Princeton.

At school, Landish yearns to become the first Newfoundland writer, but can't seem to stop burning every page he writes. Before he can graduate, he is expelled and forced to return to St. John's. Through a strange twist of fate, he ends up adopting an orphan boy who he attempts to raise as his own. Poverty and desperation soon force him to beg his old friend Van to permit them move into Biltmore (here called Vanderland), which he eventually does.

Upon arriving at Vanderland, Landish realizes that his old friend has changed in ways that he

couldn't have imagined. Twisted by his father's inheritance and his desire to protect his daughter Goddie from the wider world, Van transforms Vanderland into a virtual prison. In many ways, Johnston uses the house as a symbol for a country that has lost its way.

"The notion of America in terms of the founding fathers was that America was a place where anyone could rise to a place of distinction

or wealth," he says. "By the time of the Gilded Age, there were very few Americans who still believed this.... I was fascinated by the notion of a country going through a phase that subverted the very principles that it was founded on. It seemed to me to be the best time to write about a country, to get to the essence of a country."

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