

Rooms of Their Own

Amid the bright lights of WordFest, it's easy to lose sight of the toil that goes into writing a book. We asked six local authors to show us the workspaces where the blood, sweat and tears flow before the ink hits the page.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY HEATHER SAITZ

The romantic notion of writers comes complete with comfy sweaters, deep thoughts (mere brooding is also acceptable) and some quantity of booze. Then, too, there is the mythical blank page, a mute object whose fear-inducing power remains undiminished in our paperless world.

The romantic image also includes a wretched garret and absolute solitude. Nobody in Calgary is writing in a garret these days (maybe a bonus room, but definitely not a garret), but writing remains a solitary task that requires great discipline.

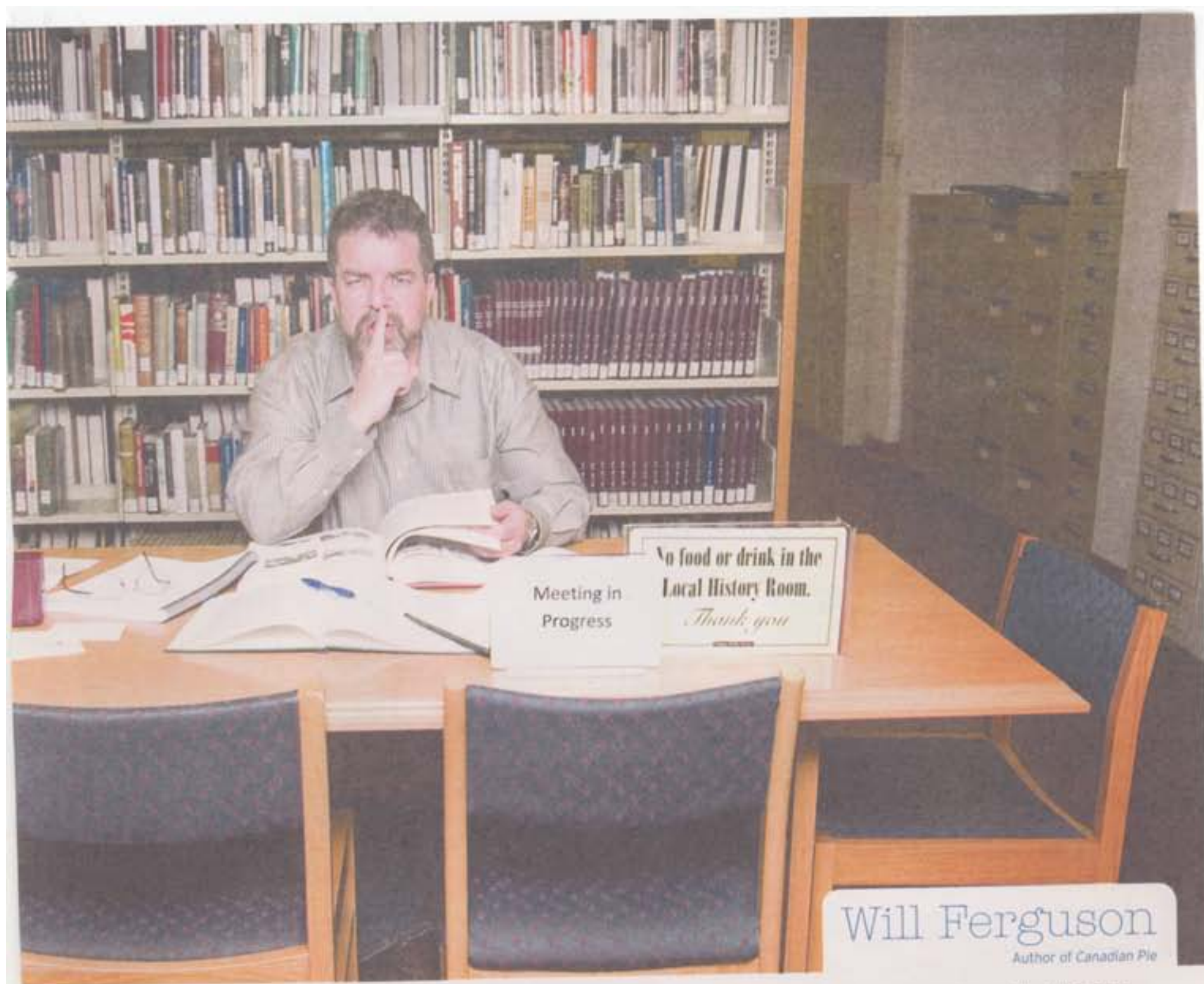
This last fact perhaps explains the popularity of little get-togethers like WordFest. This year's edition of the literary gabfest runs Tuesday, Oct. 11 to Saturday, Oct. 16, and gives writers the chance to leave their isolation chambers, swap tales with fellow sufferers and sell a few books.

We're excited about WordFest, but we were really curious to peek behind the scenes and see what a room of one's own looks like these days. As the following portraits show, the workspaces are as different as the authors who toil in them and the books they produce.

Ever since 1999, when he began researching *Canadian History for Dummies*, Will Ferguson has found the downtown library to be a great place to work—it doesn't hurt that the staff treats him right. For poet Rosemary Griebel, her home office (it's also the guest room) has the distinct advantage of being occupied by beneficent spirits that give the space a positive energy.

Writers who lack such visitations can find positive energy at WordFest, where they are given the opportunity to talk about themselves to rooms full of attentive listeners. It's really the best they can hope for when they sit down in their more humble workspaces to confront the blank page. — Bruce Weir





Meeting in
Progress

No food or drink in the
Local History Room.

Thank you

Will Ferguson

Author of *Canadian Pie*

While working on *Canadian History For Dummies*, Will Ferguson's shoulder was getting sore lugging his top-of-the-line-for-1999 laptop to and from the W.R. Castell Library downtown. Luckily, he befriended a librarian and got access to the Local History room on the fourth floor. The door locks, so for a few months Ferguson worked there, sharing the space with a few historians who would pop in and out, and was able to leave behind his "portable" computer when he went home for the night. "It was my first office," he says.

Now, he works out of an office that takes up two-thirds of

his detached three-car garage. (Initially, he planned on using the whole space, but his wife reminded him that they do own a car. "Oh right, we do need a place to park it.") Inside are stacks and stacks of books about Nigeria, Ireland or whatever he's currently writing about. There's also a desk for writing and one for thinking, but no Internet. He didn't want to tempt himself. The whole space is soundproofed, so that the rattle of passing garbage trucks is reduced to a slight hum. Unfortunately, however, the need to reduce noise means that Ferguson allowed himself only one small window. "Sometimes I wonder

if I made the right choice," he says. "It's a bit of a cave."

Inside, he went through the techno-archeological process of compiling *Canadian Pie*, a collection of unpublished material including essays, travelogues and scripts from a cancelled soap opera. He scoured old hard drives and floppy disks, bringing back material from a world that included defunct software like Word Perfect. He says it was fun and satisfying work, but by no means is this collection intended to be a swan song. "It wasn't really meant to be career-spanning," Ferguson says. "I hope this isn't the end of my career." —Jon Roe



derek beaulieu

Author of *Seen of the Crime*

derek beaulieu likes the way his name looks when it's spelled in lowercase letters. It's not bravado, but rather an esthetic choice. When his first and last initials are separated by the capitalized form of his middle initial, the result (dAb) is a perfect mirror image. These are the concerns of a visual poet.

"Visual poetry is something that uses the material of language like Lego," beaulieu says. "I'll look at letters or words or pieces of language that we find and look at how we can combine them. ...It's not poetry to be read, it's poetry to be stared at. It's a very social style of writing."

His chosen medium is Letraset or rub-down lettering, a technology created in 1960, which gave graphic designers access to standardized typefaces. beaulieu will sit down at his desk in the kitchen—the social centre of the house—and place the letters one by one. "Basically, I make it as I go along. I try to respond to the shape of the letters."

The result is a tableau of shapes we're all familiar with, taken out of their regular context. Unfortunately for beaulieu, Letraset no longer makes its "instant lettering dry transfer product." This means beaulieu is constantly hunt-

ing and scrounging around for the stuff. (He gratefully accepts donations in case you have some lying around from your past hawking cigarettes with Don Draper.) "I'm running out of my own chosen medium," he says. "I'm in the space now where every letter I write, is one less letter I can write in the future."

beaulieu's current stockpile is sufficient to see him through a couple of years of consistent work. But what happens when there are no more letters?

"Panic." —J.R.



Chris Turner

Author of *The Leap*

For a man who writes about global trends in sustainability and who travels to see these innovations firsthand, Chris Turner likes to keep things pretty close to home.

His latest book, *The Leap*, is a followup of sorts to his last book, *The Geography of Hope*, which told the story of people pursuing change. In *The Leap*, Turner takes things a step further, introducing us to the "second industrial revolution" and the wholesale transformation of countries, cities and businesses that have already made the shift to sustainability. In Europe, he says, it's "remarkable just how thorough the change is becoming, how broadly it is being adopted."

Just as his books have progressed from stories of hope to dis-

cussions of real-life change, Turner and his wife, Ashley Bristow, moved from their Ramsay home to Kensington just before he started working on *The Leap*. Turner left behind his old stuffy basement office for a converted bedroom with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a balcony and a much better view.

Turner, however, is a travelling man, and so he ventures at least as far as the University of Calgary library when working on a book. It's a fairly ideal little self-sustaining community, with good workspaces and, more importantly for a man on a deadline, MacEwan Hall's plethora of eating options.

Considering how busy Turner is it's probably a good thing that he's keeping up his strength. When not cranking out books, Turner

is a feature writer for the *Globe and Mail* and a regular contributor to the Mother Nature Network, a website focused on environmental news and information. He's also an in-demand speaker on sustainability issues, which helps him "kind of keep the bills paid" during the two-month-long homestretch when he suspends his other writing to focus solely on finishing his book.

The big payout for Turner, however, would be the day that he no longer feels frustrated by the lack of change in his own country. Maybe someday, he'll look out the window of his home office, over the backyard and the alley, and see some shift—a windmill or a crowded bus—in Canada's attitude toward sustainability. —Drew Anderson



Rosemary Griebel

Author of *Yes*

Unlike most poets—those stormy souls who prefer to be alone with their thoughts—Rosemary Griebel works in a space that is anything but empty—sort of.

Her century-old Inglewood home, in particular her simple upstairs office, is a busy place. “What’s interesting about the room is we’ve had people come over, including some people who are kind of psychic, and they are always drawn to that room. They say there are lots of spirits in it.”

For her part, Griebel will only say that the room does “have very cool energy,” but she attributes this at least in part to the fact that her office also serves as a guest room. This runs

counter to the advice she received from fellow poet Patrick Lane, who feels it’s essential to have a space used only for writing, but Griebel thinks the guests, like the spirits, add to the room’s energy. It’s a place where “they find comfort, where they make love,” she says. “There are all kinds of things that go on in that room and that’s okay. That’s part of it.”

Her book, *Yes*, is a collection of work from the past 10 years, and reflects both her inner-city present and small-town prairie past. Where once she wandered fields, letting her imagination roam, she now finds inspiration in the grit and bustle of her walk to and from the downtown library, where she is the

special projects manager. The resulting works form a perfectly Albertan narrative of wide-open nature meeting the energetic grey of urban Calgary.

And although her thoughts these days are on construction and architecture thanks to the new central library project, she won’t say whether her next book will be more jackhammers than jackalopes. While her latest work features some strange “spirit guides,” including Helen Keller, Galileo and Jonah, she doesn’t go so far as to credit the ghosts in her office with her work. She simply writes about what moves her, while soaking up the energy from her guests, ethereal or otherwise. —D.A.



Jacqueline Guest

Author of *Ghost Messages*

Her Bragg Creek home is ringed by three bird feeders and a bird bath, but while Jacqueline Guest says being a kids' writer in Canada means never driving a new car, she's not about to start fighting her avian visitors over the seeds.

The 58-year-old is content with her income, loves her work and, to hear her describe it, lives in a sylvan scene. "When I get blocked or jammed up, I just go for a walk—there's always a neighbour's dog to accompany me," she says. In the spring and summer she'll ride her bike the six kilometres into Bragg Creek to get her mail.

Guest's home office is dotted with whiteboards where she

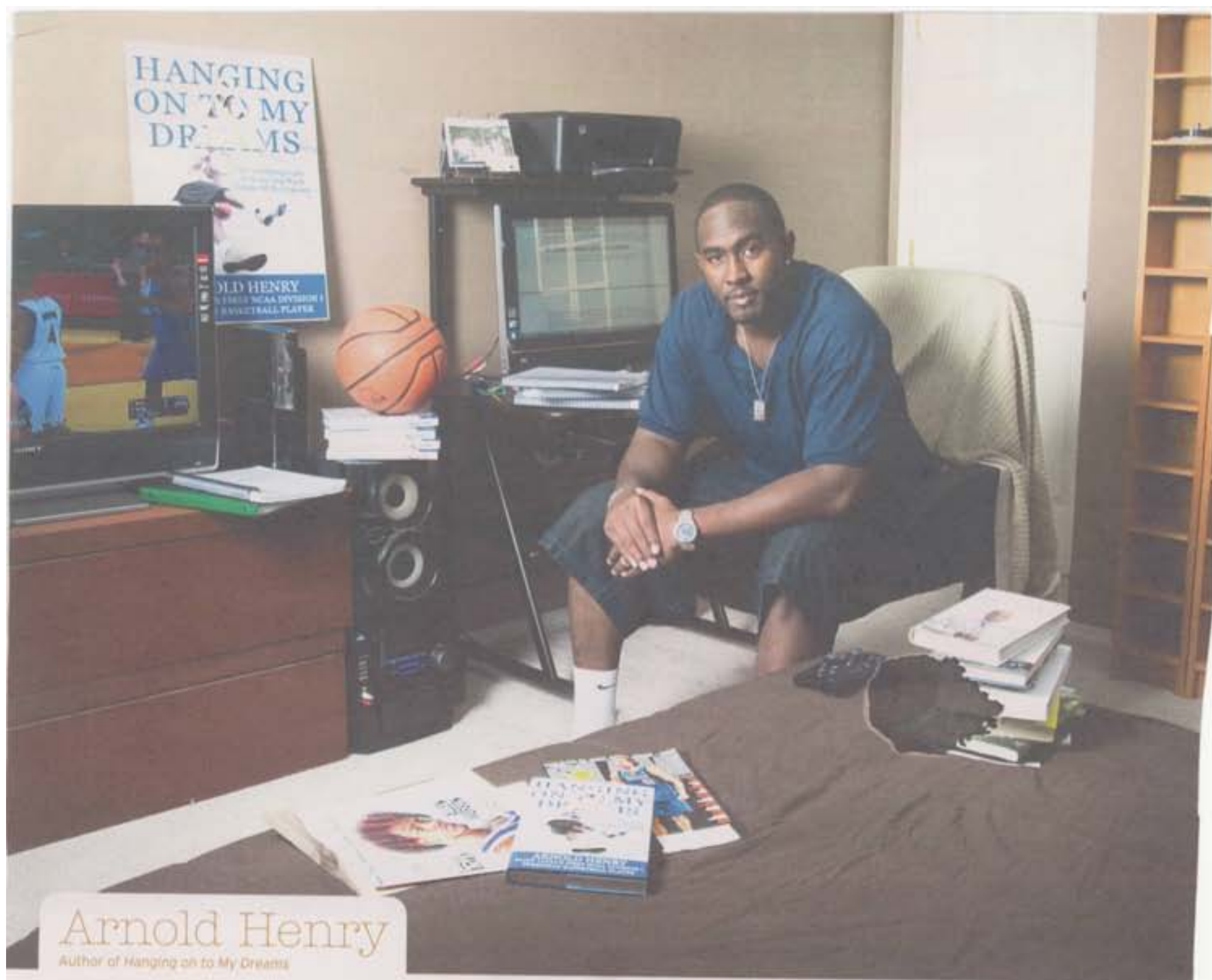
keeps track of appointments—she visits hundreds of schools a year—and administrative matters like invoicing. There are also framed covers of her books on the wall. These serve as more than mere decoration. "The reason I have them up there is that when people call and ask about a certain character or part of a book, I have to have a reminder," she says.

The need to jog her memory is understandable: her latest book, *Ghost Messages*, is her 16th. The book is aimed at young adults and revolves around the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable in 1865, which linked Ireland and Newfoundland.

Before sitting down to write—generally in the mornings—

Guest does extensive research, but in addition to this painstaking work, she also keeps a notepad beside her bed in case of sudden inspiration. "It can make a big difference to the book," she says, "so I do pay attention to what bubbles up from my subconscious at 2 a.m.—my husband just wishes I'd turn off the light."

That's not likely to happen because Guest's larger purpose as an author is all about flipping switches. "I just want to turn kids on to reading," she says. "And I don't care what they read. It can be comic books or cookbooks—it's all good." —B.W.



Arnold Henry

Author of *Hanging on to My Dreams*

At 6 foot 7 and 250 pounds, Arnold Henry is likely the biggest author WordFest has landed this year. (Sorry, Guy Vanderhaeghe.)

Given his stature, it should come as no surprise that basketball figures prominently in the 26-year-old's self-published memoir, *Hanging on to My Dreams*. As the title suggests, Henry has faced some challenges since 2004, when he became the first freshman from St. Lucia to play NCAA Division I basketball. In December of his first year at the University of Vermont he was accused of a crime (he is deliberately vague in our interview, fearing that specifics would hamper book sales). His legal troubles were resolved but his academic hassles were only

beginning. Over the next three years, Henry attended three different schools, playing basketball and earning a junior college degree in computer science.

Those trying years are at the heart of his memoir, but Henry also deals with his childhood in St. Lucia. "When I was 10 years old, I started keeping a diary," he says. "I felt it was a way of expressing myself without anyone being judgmental." He returned to those diaries while writing *Hanging on to My Dreams*, a project he finished after marrying a Calgarian (they met through mutual friends) and moving to town in January 2010.

Henry works out of his home office, which is a five-minute

drive from the basketball courts in Somerset where the photo on the cover of his memoir was shot.

"I keep a basketball close to my desk to reflect on how far I've come," Henry says. There are also photographs, including one of his Entrepot Secondary School team, which won the St. Lucian championship in 2000.

But Henry doesn't have much time for reflection these days. He's looking forward to WordFest, but he's really excited about travelling to Germany in December. He's not going there to promote *Hanging on to My Dreams*, but rather to perhaps write the first chapter of the sequel: Henry has landed a tryout with a professional basketball team in Bonn. —B.W.