

SCOOP

Halifax-based author and journalist Chris Benjamin recently released his debut novel, *Drive-By Saviours*. AE spoke with the 35 year-old about crossing the fine line from fact to fiction.

AE: What inspired you to put this story together?

CB: Working with immigrants, the love of a good woman and faith in a good story. I'd taken a few stabs at novel-writing and was never that satisfied with the results. In 2003 I was working at a large Toronto-based environmental organization as their diversity coordinator. The stories I heard from new Canadians blew me away. These were people who - by choice or not - picked up their entire lives, everything they'd ever known, and relocated on another planet - a cold planet. I'd lived abroad a fair bit but seeing these folks out of their cultural context, trying to rebuild their lives from scratch, I wanted to write about that. I met my wife Miia right around that time and we shared lots of travel stories and life stories, and I guess somewhere in all these mini-narratives what became *Drive-by Saviours* emerged, or struck, and I plotted it out and started writing it on the TTC, to and from work. Before I knew it I had 50,000 words and plenty of plot left, and it was pretty good stuff.

AE: Did the book come together quickly or did you really need to work at it?

CB: It started quickly, all on the TTC, but then I missed reading so I got away from working on the bus. Three years later I wrote the second third of the book in a cottage in Finland. I finished it another year after that, on a grant from the Toronto Arts Council, back in TO. Then there were three years of editing. I guess you could say it came in spurts.

AE: What was the most challenging aspect of the process?

CB: Finding a publisher. It's hard for a new writer, an unknown. In some ways being a journalist helped because I had publications under my belt, but they weren't (for the most part) literary publications. It's a daunting, slow process that breaks your heart so many times you wonder if you'll still be able to feel joy

should you ever get a positive response. But of course you do - Miia and I had a movie moment dancing and jumping around our kitchen when I told her that Roseway wanted to publish it. It was up there with when she told me she was pregnant.

AE: What was the most rewarding part of the experience?

CB: It's a tie between the above-described kitchen dance and holding the finished product. The latter is maybe slightly more rewarding in that you can hold it any time you want and know you achieved something - you imagined something and then made it real. Writing a book is a massive leap of faith - you're just hoping a publisher will like it enough to complete the process you started, by bringing together an artist, an editor, a proofreader, a printer,

so you can see/feel/smell a finished product, an actual book in your hands. And your imagination fills in the rest, the same book in the hands of billions of readers across the lands.

AE: What did you learn during the process?

CB: I learned I could do it, that I wasn't deluding myself when I believed in the story and my ability to deliver it. I've also learned a lot about how publishing works, who does what, how little money there is in it for almost everyone involved, how it's not just my labour of love, it's the same for everyone involved - at least with a small press. I learned what it means to make a



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living as an artist, how scary that can be, but also how satisfying at times.

AE: How much of “Chris” found its way into the storyline?

CB: I suppose there is some “Chris” in Mark, the Canadian protagonist in the story. I was that office drone, though I dare say I was a lot better at it than Mark. I think I was pretty good at it actually, and managed to help a few people by believing in them and responding to the needs they identified. But I share Mark’s frustrations with the systems in place that keep people out, that fail to hear the powerful stories of people’s lives. And my politics probably leaked into the story, thematically, in terms of what I chose to write about and how the characters looked at things. I think there’s probably a lot of any author in their work; it’s inevitable. But the mix of characters in *Drive-By Saviours* forced me to look at the world, the story, through various lenses: those of Bumi, Yaty, Sarah, Sherry, Michelle, Yusupu, Robadise, Pak Syamsuddin, Pram, Arum, and Win. So whatever “Chris” is in the book isn’t necessarily the same “Chris” who started writing it. My own characters influenced me and changed me as I researched and wrote them.

AE: How did you feel once you were done?

CB: I’m not sure I’m done yet. I felt relieved on completion of each stage of the process, like I could get these people out of my head and get back to reality. But then I tire of reality and

the work keeps calling me. Now that it’s out there I’m anxious, afraid for how the world will treat my characters, hoping it’ll be kind to them but knowing the world doesn’t exactly have a history of kindness to the vulnerable. And I’ve transformed from Chris the Writer into Chris from Marketing. Or Chris from Logistics: planning book launches, readings, a book tour, writing blurbs and hiring musicians. These aren’t my strengths but I guess it’s what we (writers) do when our books come out, to make sure it sells and gets award nominations and allows us the chance to publish another one, in the vain hope that one day we can do what we love to do without worrying about the phone and power being cut.

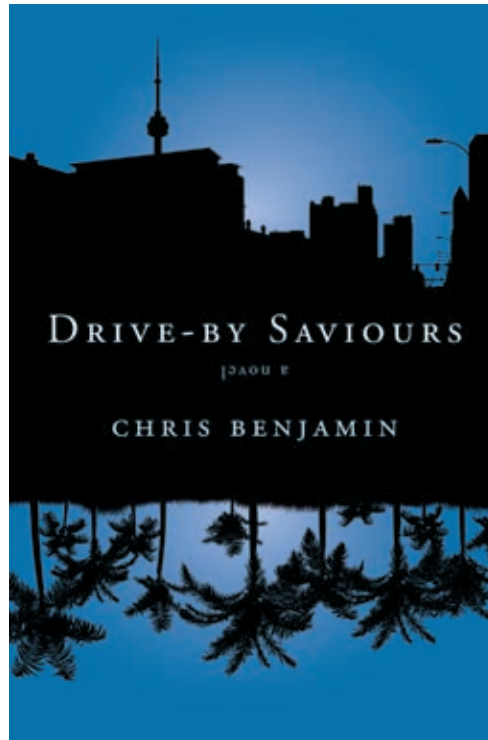
AE: Are you working on something new?

CB: I’ve got a rough draft of a novel - set in Halifax County in the 80s/90s - that needs attention but won’t get it until January at the earliest. At the moment I’m writing a nonfiction book for Nimbus called *Green Soul*, which is about inspiring people in Atlantic Canada who have done innovative things to give humanity a future in this region. It comes out Sept 2011. I’d love it if I

could get the second novel out in 2012.

For more information on

Drive-By Saviours, please visit www.chrisbenjaminwriting.com



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