



# **Because Somebody Asked Me To**

**Observations on  
History,  
Literature,  
and the  
Passing Scene**

**Guy Vanderhaeghe**

Because Somebody Asked Me To

Guy Vanderhaeghe

This book is dedicated to the memory of Morris Wolfe,  
editor, mentor, and man of letters.

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Thistledown Press Ltd.  
Unit 222, 220 20th Street W  
Saskatoon, SK  
S7M 0W9  
[www.thistledownpress.com](http://www.thistledownpress.com)

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Because somebody asked me to : observations on history, literature,  
and the passing scene / by Guy Vanderhaeghe.

Names: Vanderhaeghe, Guy, 1951- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240355350 | Canadiana (ebook) 20240355393  
| ISBN 9781771872584 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771872638 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Canadian literature—History and criticism. | LCGFT:  
Essays.

Classification: LCC PS8593.A5386 B43 2024 | DDC C814/.54—dc23

Cover and book design by Michel Vrana  
Cover image by marekulasz/iStockphoto  
Printed and bound in Canada

Thistledown Press gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of SK Arts, The Canada Council for the Arts, and the Government of Canada for its publishing program.



Canada Council Conseil des arts  
for the Arts du Canada

Saskatchewan

Canada

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# Influences

IT WAS ONLY AFTER I had published a book that I was forced to consider the question of influences on my writing. Until that point, I had merely written. But reviewers made me aware of the problem of influence, drawing as they did convincing parallels between my short stories and the work of writers I had never read. Interviewers, too, were keen to unearth literary debts. Which writers and books, they asked, had most influenced me?

It was a question I wanted to answer honestly but I was not sure I could. For one thing, I had the impression that I was really being asked which books and writers I admired most, the questioner being certain that the answer to both questions would be the same. That might be so, but isn't necessarily so. *Ulysses*, for instance, is one of those universally admired works which has influenced writers less than one would think. Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is another.

What I was coming to suspect was that literary influences are more various and varied than I had imagined. In my case, the threads of these influences resolved themselves into a knot which stubbornly resisted all my efforts to untangle it. For instance, when asked to produce a list of those authors I particularly admired, I was inevitably struck by the heterogeneity of the list. I could not but help imagine these writers incongruously yoked in

conversation at literary cocktail parties. Flannery O'Connor and Anthony Powell? Christopher Isherwood and Rudy Wiebe? Alice Munro and Evelyn Waugh?

I could not see how these converging vectors of probable influence had shaped my writing. Worse, I felt I was suppressing another, perhaps equally important list of names. Names such as Zane Grey, Walter Scott, John Buchan, and Robert Louis Stevenson came immediately to mind. Yet I was afraid of being thought facetious if I gave these writers a nod of acknowledgement.

It was only when I read Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, that I seriously began to define and elaborate a dim suspicion I had been harbouring, which is that "bad" writing is as influential in the development of a writer as is "good" writing. A brief reference by Nabokov to an article he had read as a child in the *Boy's Own Paper* strengthened that suspicion because it helped carry me back, back beyond my first acquaintance with Zane Grey, Stevenson, Buchan, and Scott, back to my earliest reading, to my introduction to the *Boy's Own Annual*.

During Nabokov's Edwardian childhood, the *Boy's Own Paper* was one of those bellicose boys' magazines which tub-thumped for the British Empire and the "right little, tight little Island!" It may seem strange that such a paper found its way into the Nabokov home, but Vladimir Nabokov's father was a wealthy anglophile who insisted on English governesses, governesses who, in turn, insisted that their little Russian charges read and wrote English before they read and wrote Russian. Thus, the *Boy's Own Paper*.

All of this smacks a bit of Alice in Wonderland. There is surely something absurd in the notion of a young Russian aristocrat, citizen of a xenophobic empire, reading, in English, the rival claims to glory of another xenophobic empire. The only thing possibly more absurd is that almost exactly fifty years later, in 1957 or thereabouts, I was poring over the *Boy's Own Annual*, which was the bound copy of all the issues of the *Boy's Own Paper* published that year. My



volume was Edwardian, comprised of issues that Nabokov might conceivably have read on dark St. Petersburg winter evenings, a tome that had lost its covers and was coming apart in my hands and which I, at the age of six or seven, took to be a reasonably accurate picture of the world outside my bailiwick. No one told me that the fabulous world described in its pages had expired on the battlefields of World War I more than forty years before.

Or perhaps I refused *not* to believe what I was reading. In any case, I held on to that illusion for something like three years before it finally evaporated in the face of reality. During that time, I confined my reading essentially to two books (aside from the insipid things assigned in school), and those books were an old school text of my mother's, *A History of the World*, and the previously mentioned volume of the *Boy's Own Annual*. In the beginning, I found *A History of the World* the more intriguing because of its illustrations: photographs of antiquities such as Mycenaean daggers and Etruscan coins, reproductions of "historical" paintings which showed Egyptian charioteers dramatically dying, transfixed by Hittite arrows. The *Boy's Own Annual* supplanted the *History* in my affections only as my ability to read improved, and then it became the staple nourishment of my imagination. I never read, or had read to me, any of the children's classics such as *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Jungle Book*, or *The Wind in the Willows*. In retrospect, I can say it might have been a good thing if I had read other books, but at the time I certainly didn't feel the lack of them. My pre-World War I issue of the *Boy's Own Annual* kept me entranced. I needed no other books. I was like a fundamentalist with his Bible.

The *Boy's Own Annual* fell into my hands by way of an elderly lady who was cleaning out her attic. This lady was typically English—or at least what North American readers of Agatha Christie mysteries might imagine as typically English. A widow, she lived for her huge garden, her budgerigars, and a cocker

spaniel named Rusty. She presented me with the tattered copy of *Boy's* with an assurance that it was “just the thing for a lively young fellow.” Against all odds, it was.

The contents of the *Boy's Own*, as I remember it, divided fairly evenly into three broad categories: practical knowledge; historical yarns which even I recognized as historical; and “contemporary” tales which were, at the time I read them, already more than forty years old. The latter I insisted on thinking of as accurate reflections of life in the British Isles and Empire. With hindsight, I conclude that this misconception of mine probably continued to flourish because my parents didn't own a television. A TV set would have rubbed my nose in the grit of reality. But I also must have practised self-delusion on a grand scale, some part of my mind censoring all evidence that contradicted the *Boy's Own* picture of the world. Still, in my defence I can say that this was also the age of Tarzan movies.

Anyway, who wouldn't wish to keep alive such magnificent delusions? How well I recall the *Boy's Own* article on self-defence. Here was practical knowledge indeed, a step-by-step, blow-by-blow account of the proper use of one's walking stick in repulsing assailants. The reader was advised to strike threatening blackguards with *glancing* blows, because glancing blows foiled any attempt at seizing one's walking stick, wresting it from one's grasp, and turning it against one. (It being understood that blackguards were clearly not the kind of fellows to carry walking sticks of their own.) Recommended targets for such glancing blows were elbows, shins, and, of course, the crown of the head. As a bonus, several policeman's grips were described and illustrated. When applied, these grips promised to bring about the instant submission of the felons. Young readers were cautioned to use minimum force when practising such grips on their chums.

## Influences

The article incited in me a powerful longing. I knew there were no interesting blackguards stalking the streets of Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, of the type depicted in *Boy's Own*. Nor did I own an ashplant. However, that didn't mean I oughtn't to study the article very closely, particularly since after careful consideration, I had made up my mind to go off to England at some future date to enjoy the abundance of blackguards, villains, and ruffians found there, all suitable for thrashing.

The rest of *Boy's Own* was, if possible, even better, stuffed to bursting with plucky youths. There were plucky youths of the past: a ferreter-out of the Gunpowder Plot, an alarm-raiser at the Great Fire of London, an aider and abettor of the escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie to France. Then there were the plucky youths whom I mistook for my contemporaries. My favourite among these was a lad who had stained his skin with berry juice, wrapped his head in a turban, and embarked on a steamer ferrying pilgrims to Mecca. His mission? To uncover Arab slavers dealing in British subjects. After making fogbound London streets safe for respectable strollers I thought I might lend this chap a hand tidying up the Red Sea. My future bloomed.



DAVID STOBBE

GUY VANDERHAEGHE is a three-time winner of the Governor's-General Award for English language fiction for his collections of short stories, *Man Descending* and *Daddy Lenin*, and for his novel, *The Englishman's Boy*, which was also shortlisted for the Giller Prize and The International Dublin Literary Award. His novel, *The Last Crossing*, was a winner of the CBC's Canada Reads Competition. *August into Winter*, his most recent novel, won the Saskatchewan Book Award for Fiction and the Glengarry Book Award and was shortlisted for the Writers' Trust Atwood Gibson Fiction Prize. He has also received the Timothy Findley Prize, the Harbourfront Literary Prize, and the Cheryl and Henry Kloppenburg Prize, all given for a body of work.