



# East Bound

## Au tour de l'Atlantique

Talking Atlantic Books  L'édition au Canada atlantique  
June 5-7 juin 2019 | St. John's, Newfoundland/Terre-Neuve

### KEYNOTE ADDRESS: LISA MOORE

#### Holding the Room Lisa Moore

Good morning, everyone. The title of my talk is “Holding the Room: Making Space for Atlantic Canadian Stories.” I think “Holding the Room” is a phrase many of you will know – it’s that moment in a bar or pub or kitchen party when a pause falls and someone starts in on a story and the entire room goes quiet and is enthralled. But let me start with the moment that provokes the storyteller. Gets them going.

It is a delicate moment.

A sudden silence that has people looking at their shoes and is rife with the friction of social awkwardness. It buzzes with a collective failure: the failure to communicate, to share, to express. It is a silence that makes us so uncomfortable we itch.

Perhaps the people at this party don’t know each other, or else they know each other too well.

It’s Atlantic Canada: they have run against each other in the recent election or their children have grown up together. They have divorced each other, or had affairs with each other’s partners, or they have celebrated births together. They’ve lost people on oil rigs; they have lost jobs; they have lost children to Fort Mac.

Or it’s an entirely different sort of party. They are gathered from a conference, say, and they don’t know each other at all. They’ve gathered from all over the world; they are academics studying climate crisis, or they are gynecologists who are all staying at the hotel near the airport because there are actually three conferences in town at the same time, or they’re orthodontists, just back from the whale and iceberg tour.

They have arrived on a plane. Remember the time after 9/11 when they banned books on airplanes? Remember the uproar.

It is not that time.



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They all arrived with a book in their carry-on. If they came through Halifax airport they may have got that book out of the library book dispenser, which looks much like a machine that might dispense a can of pop, but instead it's full of stories.

Whoever they are, the party is warming up and there have been a few awkward thrusts toward conversation, but the silence has built like a concrete border wall, stretching to the sky.

It is a delicate job, taking the jack hammer of a story to this wall of silence. Some brave soul decides to try, and begins with a phrase like: this reminds me of...

Or: Yesterday I was...

Or: I haven't seen weather this bad since....

And then they hold forth.

They barrel forward; they tell a story full of characters and danger, and a dark and multi-layered humour, a story blocked with surprises, a story that has so many plot twists it could give you whiplash, a story that makes people cry they are laughing so hard. It is a story that makes everybody in the room come out of themselves, forget themselves, shed their skins. They are immersed. They are no longer apart, but a part of it all.

And this is what we mean by "holding the room." It is the rapt attention of the audience that the story teller commands. It is the coming together of the crowd; it is the delight of smashing down that silence.

But whatever is happening now, as the storyteller reaches the climax of his story at this kitchen party that someone has offered to hold – someone from the Writer's Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador or the Nova Scotia Writers Federation, some organizer at the Frye festival, or a bookstore owner in PEI – this storyteller, as she reaches the climax of her story, and the story spills over into revelation, this storyteller is creating the space for entertainment, yes, yes, of course, but she is also sharing a set of specific details and circumstances about characters in particular a place. It is a story about the folly and joy and absurdity of being human, in this historical moment, no matter where you come from, because this is a story that can leap borders and geographies in a single bound, and no matter how far we've travelled to arrive at this party, we can find something of ourselves here.



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For the person who is holding forth, it means having the room in the palm of your hand, and to do that, to hold the room in the palm of your hand, requires a lifetime of listening to stories, absorbing them, of observing people, and conditions and social injustices and triumphs and coming to understand what makes people laugh, what makes people horny, what makes people cry, what makes them afraid and what reminds them of who they can become.

It takes a tremendous courage to speak into that initial silence. It takes courage and humility. It takes a willingness to fail. The set of circumstance necessary to hold a room requires a very precise alchemy, and it is completely absurd to try. Why bust in there, into that silence? Why smash it to pieces?

Because when the story works, it is magic, and it is forever altering. It doesn't matter if you remember the story later, the contents don't matter a bit, it is the moment when we are immersed and lost in the story that alters us and brings us together, simultaneously teaching us to forget ourselves and remember who we are.

And when we tell a story, a really good story, when we hold the room, or break the ice, or tear down the wall, we are also making room for the next story, because you can bet, people are crowding into the kitchen now; people in the living room and dining room have heard the roars of laughter from the kitchen and they are pressing in, and the walls are coming down, and everyone has a story now and the silence is obliterated and they're all yelling out with the next tale and the next. Each new story must make room for the next. Each new story paves the way and gets out of the way. Each story must have the built-in capacity to also listen.

And what is a book but a vessel for these stories? Books are just vessels to pour kitchen parties into – they let us send that moment when someone holds forth all over the world. And we do. In Atlantic Canada, we hold the room, we hold our own, we send our stories out there.

In starting out as a writer one is entirely consumed with learning the craft of telling a story. It is easy to be blind to the infrastructure that makes stories possible. But as a writer gets their footing, it becomes important, a dire responsibility, to pitch in and help maintain that infrastructure. The scaffolding becomes more and more visible as it is threatened. It is important, for instance, to



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get in front of a microphone or a megaphone, or a bullhorn; it is important to march, when they talk of closing libraries and taxing books. It is important to lobby for funding as Robert Chafe and others have done with the recent provincial budget here in Newfoundland, to demand that artists be funded.

Funding must go to the content creators. As much as this writing and publishing thing is a vocation, and we writers and publishers can't help ourselves but keep going, keep creating; as much as we love this work and are willing to give the very marrow in our bones to it, it is also the case that poverty is not romantic, and artists need to be sustained in order to create. Publishers need to be sustained in order to get stories out there in the shape of a book.

I am hearing that book sales are dropping, and Canadian books are 12 percent of book sales in Canada, and Atlantic Canadian books 6% of the total book sales in Canada.

I believe that as times get dark with the rise of the alt right and the rise of the 1%, there is an agenda to silence voices from the periphery and from the margins, experimental voices that struggle to shape beauty, and voices that work against received wisdom and heteronormativity, voices that question the status quo.

Stories can be potent and dangerous, and some stories are revolutionary because they show the world as it is and they show us how to imagine new worlds. Struggles for social justice have always been linked to a peoples' ability to represent their lives and the problems in them. Who gets to have a voice? The most urgent stories today, it might be argued, are those that concern the upheaval in our notions of gender and the demand for gender equality, stories about the global refugee crisis and racial prejudice, Indigeneity, stories on environmental damage. Literature has always done the work of showing how these stories touch down in our most intimate moments, how they touch us in the softest, most vulnerable parts of our selves.

If it is true that stories matter, that they are urgent, how do we go about protecting them, making sure they see the light of day. How do we make certain that all stories have room?

Let us begin, then, with the notion of lobbying the government for money. Let us begin with building respect for culture. Art for arts' sake. Often the argument for funding the arts turns to the



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financial viability of art, the revenue it generates for the province, the country, the amount of jobs, for example, that a film production creates. The worth of cultural tourism.

But the truth is we must recognize that nobody makes art to create jobs to fill the provincial coffers with revenue. We make art because art is what makes life worth living. I was once at a dinner party with a surgeon who was complaining about the poor financial compensation she received for her work, considering how hard she worked, the long hours, the stress. I agreed with her wholeheartedly. I said it was the same thing for me. I could not remember the last time I had taken a day off from writing, and I, too, was poorly compensated, when one considered the number of hours I poured, each day, into writing a novel. I too kept odd hours and lived with the stress of figuring out how to hone my craft.

The surgeon was aghast at the comparison. She burst out with, But I save lives!!!

To which I burst out with equal vehemence, Well, who wants to live without music, without stories, without films, without art?

The other day I was on the Brad Gushue Highway. Brad is an Olympic gold medalist, which he won for curling, and of course this province is also very proud of Caitlin Osmond, the gold medal Olympic skater, and she also has a street or highway named after her. Good for them. My husband was driving, and I suddenly became apoplectic. I was yelling at him, waving at the streets and roads all around us, Where, I was yelling, is the Megan Coles Crescent? Where is Bernice Morgan Boulevard? Where is the Joan Clark Cul de Sac? Where is a highway named after me, I yelled at my husband.

He said, I know, right? You should at least get an off-ramp named after you.

In 2014, I was a guest at the Festival of the Americas in Vincennes, France. This literary festival had invited writers from Canada, Mexico and the United States. The writers from Canada included, to name just a few, Margaret Atwood, Guy Vanderhage, Miriam Toews, Kathleen Winter, Noah Richler, and many, many more, from all across the country. We were joined by writers from Mexico and the United States. Each event was simultaneously translated, and I was in serious danger of falling in love with the Festival Coordinator who punctuated his introduction of me, which was



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entirely in French, and flowed like a beautiful river, none of which I understood, with my name, Lisa Moore. The only two words of his introduction I was able to recognize. Except he kept pronouncing it Lees Amore. Lees Amore. How could I not fall in love, but that is not the point.

The point is, because the Federal Department of Heritage had been gutted by Stephen Harper, at the time, the Canadian government was unable to host a party for this magnificent festival, that had brought writers from across the Americas together in France.

There was however, a cocktail party at the American Embassy in the centre of Paris. The party was held in a magnificent building where every surface was of white marble and gold leaf and giant doors of beveled glass opened onto a garden with pools and fountains and on every table was the same photograph, the exact same portrait, of President George Bush, also framed in gold. But I digress.

Vincennes is a suburb of Paris and maybe a hundred or more of the festival guests had to travel to the embassy at four in the afternoon, in their cocktail party finery— high heels and taffeta in my case. It was decided we would go by Metro. Picture more than a hundred writers making their way on the cross walk at an intersection that lead to the Metro in their hautiest couture. When we arrived at the Metro train, we saw it was empty. The entire train had been reserved for writers. There were waiters on the train, dressed in black and white, with bowties, and with trays of champagne flutes and there was a band on the train, playing jazz, and we rode through the City of Lights, us authors, like royalty, while all of the financial district of Paris, all those men with briefcases full of financial concerns, stood on the platforms of the Paris Metro while we passed, raising our champagne flutes to them, a bubbly salute. This is how France treats artists. Can anyone imagine such a thing in Canada?

But what we do have in the Atlantic Provinces, in small and sometimes difficult-to-get-to communities, are magnificent literary festivals and small libraries that bring writers in to read and share their stories, that fill every seat, leaving standing room only because these people want to support their local writers. We have visiting writers because they recognize the library as a hub, a place to gather, to build community, a place to hear stories.



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Recently I had the great fortune to read at the Drs. Tomkins and Coady Library in Margaree along with Johanna Skibsrud and Bill Conlan. The place was packed to the rafters; the cookies and tea from The Dancing Goat Café were extraordinarily delicious; young mothers brought their infants who sometimes cooed gently in the background, and if they started to fuss, were passed around from arm to arm, rocked by the entire community until those infants, too, started to listen.

I'd asked my publisher, Sarah MacLachlan, to come down from Toronto and drive me. I am not the best driver in the world. I'd suggested that I understood perfectly if she didn't come, of course I knew it was too much to ask, and not to blame herself if anything should happen to me, if, say, I drove over a cliff and was never heard tell of again. I suggested we could be Thelma and Louise.

She ended up sitting in a plane on the tarmac in Toronto for four hours due to a mechanical problem but arrived safely and we hit the road. I'm not sure every publisher would do it, but for Anansi, or at least for Sarah, this is publishing; this is all in a day's work.

Tremendous amounts of organizing occurred, with special thanks to Rebecca Silver Slater, Laura Carter and Sarah Faber. The event was held in honour of the Alistair MacLeod Short Fiction Award, for which we three readers had been nominated. Afterwards, we told stories about Alistair from the stage; we spoke his generosity, how he was a mentor for young writers, how he gave his time to workshops, how he gave his time to prize juries, how he had described, in his own writing, the lives of people who worked in coal mines and on the sea, how he held a mirror to life in Atlantic Canada.

At that event, there were t-shirts for sale that said, What would Moses and Jimmy do? They were the men the library was named for and the founders of the Credit Union which was born in Cape Breton, right there in Margaree. They were closing down the Cape Breton Branch of the Credit Union and the Library wasn't having any of it. They were in the midst of raising a protest. Because if you're a library in Cape Breton, this kind of outcry for the social justice is all in a day's work.





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I lost Sarah MacLachlan in the crowd for a moment or two after the reading. She had been outside checking out the community pizza oven that the library had fundraised for and built, another space for people to gather.

They had just given it the first test run, Sarah told me.

I have been floored and humbled by the volunteers who put off festivals and readings and author visits across this country. It is in this way we share stories and books and keep publishing houses publishing. It is through journalists and newspapers who write about writers and the CBC, who promote stories, it is through initiatives like NL Reads, sponsored by the local AC Hunter Library and the CBC, another event that got a big crowd and brought readers and books together. Trudy Morgan Cole, who won the award for her novel *Most Anything You Please* and who promotes Newfoundland literature, and all literature for that matter, with her podcast “Shelf-Esteem,” was gracious when she won and said, *A Rising Tide Floats All Boats*.

I am especially grateful for those festivals that bring writers to the schools. I love those teenage audiences because they are tough. They pull their caps down over their eyes and fold their arms and slouch in their chairs and pretend to be asleep. But they are listening, as you find out in the question period, for which they are NOT so uncool as to raise their hand, but they do jut their chin a bit in your direction and you know, then, to ask them, Yes, you have a question? And you learn that if they aren't readers already, they might pick up a book. They have been engaged.

Let me return to why we struggle, all of us writers and volunteers and indie publishers and journalists and librarians and bookstore owners and school teachers to promote literature from a community like Atlantic Canada. It is in part because the universal is rooted in the specific.

Place in Newfoundland, for example, has always included people from all over the world and sometimes this story is not as ‘feel good’ as we like to tell ourselves.

This is why we must be very grateful for a book like Sharon Bala's *Boat People*, written in Newfoundland, that tells the story of refugees arriving from Sri Lanka in Vancouver who are immediately incarcerated, their right to refugee status a bitter and traumatic battle.





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This is a story that reminds us that there are more accurate and perhaps less comforting stories to tell about new arrivals that those stories shaped as ‘rescue’ narratives.

Bala’s is a difficult, new and brave story about what it means to be on the run from war, (and often wars that are fueled by the west), to be on the run from dangers the west has had a hand in fostering, and to be treated like criminals upon arrival in Canada.

Bala holds up a mirror to the question of what home means and what welcome means, and what social justice looks like. What it is like to be prejudiced against, even when questions of life and death are at stake. Here too is the story of a child separated from his parent at a border, but it is a Canadian border, not the border we might expect to hear about.

This is why we strive to make sure our stories are told. I’d like to include a short quote I found online in The National Post by Rebecca Silver Slater who lives in Cape Breton. The piece took my breath away, because it captures so much of what we are trying to hear, at the conference, at the laptop, when we try to write, when we seek meaning and provoke change.

This is Rebecca:

Some religious scholars have written of a perfect, pre-Adamic language; in this language, there was no distance between word and world. To describe was to create. When God said, “Let there be light,” light was invented by the words themselves.

I speak only one language, and it is an imperfect one. But I have encountered books that made it seem, for a sentence or two, to be capable of summoning light. Blazing from the page. Maybe that’s what the best of literature aspires to, and occasionally achieves—that echelon beyond art that becomes magic. The incantation “abracadabra” is believed to have evolved from the Aramaic phrase “avra kehdabra”: I create as I speak.



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I think of this at my desk, stumbling, fumbling, bumbling along, questing for that perfect word, that perfect phrase. It's that magic, which eludes me, but which I have found in the work of other writers, that I am reaching for. That moment when language might seem like something perfect, as if that wistful phrase preceded every line. Let there be...

And I will finish with a little story of my own. While I was driving to Cape Breton with Sarah, she introduced me to the music of George Ezra and we had it on blast for the whole trip. Ever since that drive I have been running around Quidi Vidi Lake to an Ezra song that has a refrain that asks: What are you waiting for? It was very early in the morning and I was jogging down by the lake and the whole place was socked in with fog, and on both sides of the trail, there was construction. I had gone down there because in my next novel there will be a scene with some heavy equipment, backhoes and forklifts, and I'd wanted every opportunity I could get to watch the giant machines at work.

There was a part of the path where safety fences made the trail very narrow and I saw, ahead of me and running in formation, a whole cadre of men, maybe fifty or seventy-five, in some kind of uniform. They might have been police-in-training or they were a military outfit and they were running three abreast.

They were emerging from the fog, their feet hammering the pavement in unison, funneling into the narrow corridor constructed by the safety fences, a funnel I was already half-way through. They were coming at me with great speed and I saw they had no intention of breaking out of formation to let me pass. The heavy equipment was roaring on either side, pawing at the earth, and George Ezra was near yelling in my ears, What are you waiting for, what are you waiting for...and I started running as hard and as fast as I could; I tore down the middle of the path, men flying to the left and right, knocking each other out of my way, falling like bowling balls. And when I had gone through them, and came out the other side, I turned and yelled: Make room you guys! Make room, make room!



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