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SHAO-PIN LUO

PROBING THE DARK HOUSE OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN COLFORD

IAN COLFORD IS A WRITER FROM HALIFAX whose fiction, reviews, and commentary have appeared in numerous publications in print and online. He earned a bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University in 1979 and two master's degrees from Dalhousie University in 1982 and 1985. He then worked as a librarian at Dalhousie from 1985 to 2017, and in the early 1990s he began publishing short stories in such journals as *The Antigonish Review, Blue Moon Review, The Dalhousie Review, Event, The Fiddlehead, Grain,* and *Riddle Fence*. His story "The Reason for the Dream" was also shortlisted for the Journey Prize and was reprinted in *The Journey Prize Anthology 10* (1998).

From 1995 to 1998 he edited the literary journal *Pottersfield Portfolio* and the anthology *Water Studies: New Voices in Maritime Fiction* (1998). He also completed residencies at the Hawthornden Castle Retreat for Writers in 1998 and Yaddo in 2008, and he was a three-time graduate of the Humber School for Writers Summer Workshop in 2003, 2004, and 2005.

His first book, *Evidence* (2008), is a collection of linked stories about a refugee from Eastern Europe searching for a new home in Canada. It was a critically acclaimed debut, and *The Globe and Mail* described it as "a rich, shadowed, mind-tweaking puzzle of a book: a shrewd gathering of evidence that entrusts judgment and verdict to the reader." It was shortlisted for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award, the Thomas Head Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize, and the ReLit Award, and it won the Margaret and John Savage First Book Award.

His second book, *The Crimes of Hector Tomás* (2012), is a novel set in a fictional country in South America during a period of civil unrest. *The National Post* noted that it "brims over with confident momentum; not a word or a scene arguably feels out of place," and it was named Trade Book of the Year at the 2013 Alberta Book Publishing Awards.

His third book, *Perfect World* (2016), is a novel about a young man who is abandoned by his parents and left to care for an elderly grandparent suffering from dementia, which leads to a psychotic collapse. *The Winnipeg Review* described it as "a carefully written, sometimes painful tour through one man's trauma and resilience, his greatest falls and ultimately, his acceptance of a difficult reality," and the *Toronto Star* asserted that "the power of this novel . . . is the measured tone of the storytelling, without ornament or sentimentality."

This was followed by his most recent collection, *A Dark House and Other Stories* (2019), in which characters often commit horrific acts for well-intentioned reasons. For example, in the story "Stone Temple," which is included in this issue, a destitute man kidnaps his young son from his ex-wife, and their road trip quickly spirals out of control. "On the Beach" focuses on a single mother who befriends an unstable neighbour and embarks on a drunken shoplifting spree. "The Comfort of Knowing" features a self-righteous civics teacher who hires a detective to follow his sister, whom he suspects of adultery. *Quill and Quire* enthusiastically praised the book, noting that "the care Colford has taken is evident throughout this altogether excellent—immediate, sobering, intriguing—collection that examines fallible characters at pivotal moments." The book was also shortlisted for the Alistair MacLeod Prize for Short Fiction and the Relit Awards, and it was awarded Bronze in the Best Short Fiction category at the Miramichi Reader's "The Very Best!" Book Awards.

The following interview was conducted over email in the summer of 2020.

Shao-Pin Luo: Your first collection of stories was published in 2008, but you had been writing long before then, right? Your latest collection, *A Dark House and Other Stories*, was published more recently but contains stories from as early as 1996. What was your original impetus for writing?

Ian Colford: It certainly seems like I've been writing forever, but I did not grow up with literary ambitions. I didn't start to get seriously into books until my last year of high school. In grade 12, My English teacher, Mr. MacMillan, assigned an inexpensive paperback anthology titled *Short Story*

Masterpieces (1954), which was edited by Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine. It included stories by writers that I knew by name but had never read, like James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, as well as others that I'd never heard of at all, like John Cheever, Eudora Welty, William Carlos Williams, and J. D. Salinger. For me, this collection turned into a significant discovery.

After high school I spent three years at Saint Mary's University doing a bachelor's degree in mathematics (I was a science geek in high school), but my growing interest in fiction, prose styles, and storytelling was having an effect. After I graduated in 1979, I enrolled in the English program at Dalhousie University, graduating with a master's degree in 1982. I had started writing by then, and most of my pieces were humorous or satirical. I think at that point it would have been impossible for me not to write since most of my friends and classmates were writing fiction, poetry, or both. By the time I got my master's degree in library science in 1985, I was writing a novel (now lost), and in the 1990s the writing picked up steam when I started attending writing workshops and submitting stories to literary journals.

So while there wasn't any single person or incident that started me on a literary track, when I look back it almost seems like a conspiracy of circumstances propelled me in that direction or, more accurately perhaps, helped me to discover my true aptitudes and interests. I was also lucky that I was able to pursue an interest that was not particularly at odds with my professional career as a librarian.

Luo: I know that you read much and widely, as there are epigraphs in your books from Cheever, Phoebe Hesketh, René Descartes, and Francisco Ayala, and your prose is peppered with allusions to writers like W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, and Thomas Hardy. What are your literary influences, and what sorts of writing and literary qualities do you admire?

Colford: The fiction I enjoy most is morally complex, artful, enigmatic, and grounded in the real world. I want to finish a book with a genuine sense of wonder. I want to find myself asking what the author is getting at or trying to tell me. At the same time, to be satisfying, a novel or story has to build sufficient narrative momentum to keep me turning the pages. Fiction writers can never lose sight of the fact that, first and foremost, fiction is storytelling, and storytelling is entertainment. The author's responsibility is to maintain a crucial balance: to use the characters' words and actions to present ideas that explore larger issues and feed our intellectual cravings, while at the same time building suspense and tension so the reader is driven to find out what happens next.

Cheever was the first writer to move me in this way. He was nearing the end of his career when I first discovered his work in the late 1970s, but he was still producing stories and novels that were fascinating and highly original, such as his wonderfully comic prison novel *Falconer* (1977) and his collection *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978). I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that this collection cracked things wide open for me. I plowed through it quickly the first time and then read it several more times, studying its effects. My response to it at first was visceral—admiration and envy tempered with a realization that anything I produced would never measure up to this standard. But it was also intellectual in the sense that it gave me a much better idea of what I wanted to do. Cheever's stories introduced me to a world of possibilities that I didn't know existed. He took huge risks when he stretched the limits of narrative plausibility (as in "The Swimmer"), but he never took it too far. He never lost the reader. His stories are pure comedy, tragedy, and triumph, and his characters are deeply flawed, vulnerable, misguided, confused, inept, naïve, and far too trusting. Their struggles are real, and their goals are almost always laudable.

After Cheever there came a slew of other writers whose works I encountered early on and to varying degrees would also count as influences. Franz Kafka and Jerzy Kosinski taught me how to generate disquiet, build tension, and incorporate grotesque elements into a story. John Gardner's novels provided a master class in setting and description. I admired Margaret Drabble's prose for its civility and polish. I thought William Trevor was a master with dialogue.

So books and authors are obviously important to me, and I cite authors in my own work more as an homage than anything else. Many of my characters are also academics or librarians, so naturally they have their own favourite authors and books. But I'm always making new discoveries. The variety, as they say, is endless.

Luo: You also worked as a librarian for many years, and you often use universities and libraries as settings, so is your writing autobiographical to any extent? Where do your ideas come from?

Colford: I think I might be a "situational" writer. What seems to get me started most often is an idea centred around characters facing a specific, sharply defined set of circumstances. With *Evidence*, for instance, I had an idea about a young man of indeterminate national origin who leaves his impoverished home country, makes it to Canada, connives his way through a labyrinthine immigration system with the help of luck and deceit, and then at some point returns home. This idea came to me almost fully formed, though the details emerged gradually. It was only when I started writing the first story (which is the first story in the collection) that I began to envision and understand the type of person Kostandin Bitri would turn out to be.

I can say without any doubt that my writing is not intentionally autobiographical. Of course, I draw from my own experience all the time. But at no point in any of my fiction am I writing about myself—not knowingly at any rate. You've probably heard that nugget of writerly wisdom that generations of aspiring writers have had foisted on them by lazy creating writing teachers: "Write what you know." I don't believe it, and I don't follow it. What I do believe is that over time writers settle into a "comfort zone"—that is, they unconsciously develop a set of defaults that they fall back on again and again, such as defaults regarding character, setting, and other elements that form a foundation upon which they construct their stories. So having said that none of my work is autobiographical, I can also say that personal circumstances, such as where I work and live, inevitably turn up in my fiction. That much is guaranteed. A story has to be set somewhere, and a character has to have interests and possibly a profession. One of my defaults is to make my characters academics, librarians, or archivists and to set my stories on college campuses, so to that extent my characters might share aspects of my direct experience. But part of being an artist, I suppose—not to sound pretentious—is to constantly rebel against that comfort zone by exploring alien or unfamiliar states of mind, pushing your own boundaries, and expanding your art to keep it interesting.

Two stories particularly come to mind. In "Stone Temple," for example, the main character, Bobby Flint, is impetuous, impatient, vindictive, and violent when pushed. He is not especially educated, and he doesn't think about consequences, but he is as much a part of me as Kostandin, Tom Brackett, or any of my other characters. And then there's Warren in "The Comfort of Knowing," who is a judgmental evangelical Christian. My challenge with him was to present his dilemma and the solution he settles upon without the reader losing sympathy with him. I had to find a way to get inside his head and make the reader understand that his motives are pure and that he's genuinely trying to do the right thing, even though he goes about it in a fashion that's misguided and somewhat ridiculous. Completing that story took deliberate and painstaking effort. It was a slow and sometimes agonizing process because I didn't always like Warren. To think in ways that are foreign to your own experience is neither simple nor easy, but it can be enlightening and artistically liberating. That being said, I'm still attracted to the university campus as a setting. Professors and students make fascinating characters. I'm not done with the academic side of things yet. But my writing has also evolved and roamed far and wide over the years. I don't think I'm in any danger of being regarded solely as a practitioner of the "campus novel."

To get back to where my stories come from, what's important to me as a writer is how a character responds to the world around him, and I think that what I'm doing when I write (this isn't easy to articulate) is mining my own habitual way of doing things, my own day-to-day observations, and my own distinctive feelings about what it means to be imperfectly human. I filter all of these things through an instinctive and highly personal manner of perceiving the world, and what comes out the other end is a story that only I could write.

Luo: The main narrative thread in your first book, *Evidence*, is woven around Kostandin's encounters with a host of strange characters that comprise, among others, a gay person, a mother with a disabled child, a refugee from Romania, and a sociologist who studies how circumstances influence people's behaviour. Many of these encounters seem to be a way of establishing connections with others, and the experience of being alienated seems to afford the narrator a keen sense of observation. How did you imagine an immigrant's sense of loneliness and nostalgia following the trauma of losing a home, language, and family, and how did you empathize with the intense pain of exile and the perpetual feeling of being a foreigner and an outsider?

Colford: The sense of being on the outside looking in is, I think, an elemental and inescapable aspect of the human condition. If you think about it, you realize that as individuals all of us are essentially on our own. Our thoughts and experiences belong to no one else. We're alone even when we're in the company of others. We can share a view with someone, but nobody else can see with our eyes. It's not necessarily a happy way of looking at things, but it's liberating because it makes it possible for us to regard ourselves as free agents, unencumbered by responsibility or attachments. This is pure fantasy, of course, because real life is nothing but responsibility and attachments. But I suppose, because I've always had this at the back of my mind as a literary conceit, it was inevitable that I would write a book from the perspective of someone who is emotionally isolated, perpetually struggling to fit in, and looking for a way to navigate circumstances that might not always be encouraging or welcoming.

I think this also makes it possible for me to empathize with characters who are suffering that loss of home, family, and self. I can easily imagine that state of being isolated, even in a crowded room. With Kostandin, I envisioned a young man who travels from place to place as the need arises, assuming new identities and adapting to each new setting and each new set of strangers he encounters. In every instance he is watchful and circumspect. He is slow to trust because he's been betrayed in the past, and he resists the temptation to form attachments because he knows what it's like to lose everything. The psychology may be simple, even obvious, but the fictional worlds it implies are rich and plentiful.

Luo: The stories in *Evidence* take place in various unnamed Eastern European countries, although we eventually learn that Kostandin comes from Shkodër, Albania. Your first novel, *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, is also set in an unnamed South American country, although one can find Envigado, one of the main settings, on a map of Colombia. How did you conjure up so viscerally the sensory impressions of the heat and dust of a hill town, the riotous atmosphere of a market, the life of country folk on a farm, the tension and horrific chaos of an explosion at a bus station, the darkness and despair of a prison cell, the fear and tension of an interrogation room, and the suspense and confusion of a military manoeuvre at a train station that goes horribly wrong?

Colford: For me it seems like scenes and events emerge into life and become vivid when character and story start to feed off and into each other. You can look at it maybe as a river that flows both ways at the same time. At the beginning of the creative process, you imagine a fictional character.

You place that character in a situation, and you look backward and imagine that character's life—the steps that led to that person being in that situation. This helps you get to know your character because you see the character making decisions, and you find that the imagined life will suggest further situations and more characters because nobody moves through life free of the influence of others. Eventually, if all goes well, the details solidify, your knowledge of your character deepens and broadens, you enter the character's world, and then you start writing.

Knowing Kostandin and Hector as well as I did was essential to being able to place them in dramatic situations and to see, feel, and experience every aspect of the scene I was writing as it played itself out. When you get to that point, the process of writing morphs into something nonverbal or instinctive. At least, that's what I find. So when I placed Hector at the farm with Claudia and Francisco, I could smell the manure and hear the bleating of the animals like I was there with them. When you become that connected to your characters, it all starts to seem real at a more profound level that brings all the senses into play. In the market scene I experienced Hector's anxiety as he watched the situation deteriorate and the soldiers move in. I can't say it was effortless because it never is, but as I was writing all the details were there: the dust, the heat, the noise, the flies buzzing around fruit that had spent too long in the sun.

When you write a novel, you spend years getting to know the characters. You see them at many stages of their lives. You see them at their best and at their worst. That starts long before the actual writing. If you're good at what you're doing, and you like doing it, then your characters become real, and their stories come to matter as much as or even more than your own.

Luo: Interestingly, there seems to be both a vagueness and a precision to your settings. Are they based on real upheavals in Eastern Europe and Latin America, or are you trying to give them a certain universal, fablelike quality that reflects a general human condition?

Colford: I don't do a lot of research. Maybe I'm just lazy, but my excuse is that I deliberately avoid accumulating too many facts because I'm afraid the facts will get in the way of the story. I like how you phrased the question, but I think this vagueness and precision can also be found in many other facets of my work. It's a counter-intuitive notion, but I believe that the more precise or specific you make the details, the more likely it is that readers will see themselves reflected on the page and the more universal the writing will become. I had read a lot about the Pinochet regime in Chile long before I even started thinking about *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, and one thing I came across was an article that stated that even though the regime was reviled in many parts of the world for its murderous cruelty against its own citizens and general disregard for human rights, it was still popular among certain sectors of Chilean society because it brought about social stability and stimulated the economy. I'm also fascinated by the repressive Communist regimes that sprang up in Eastern Europe after World War II, and certain details are enlightening, such as how the Stasi (secret police) in East Germany was involved in every aspect of civilian life, to the point where you can easily imagine a country where half the population is watching the other half, or the Ceaușescu regime in Romania, which was so corrupt and paranoid that the government controlled the sale and distribution of typewriters the way other countries regulate the sale of firearms.

This knowledge, if that's what it is—I'd hardly call it research—was picked up along the way in an unstructured, piecemeal, and desultory manner. And because I found these bits and pieces interesting, I retained them and then years later began incorporating them into my work. I'm sure some of the anecdotal incidents my characters recall were inspired by accounts I came across during those early readings. Some I know I made up. At this point the line separating fact from fiction is hazy, and the actual sources are long forgotten. But sometimes research is necessary. When I was writing *Perfect World*, for example, I had to look up the names of Tom's drugs. I don't know anything about antipsychotics, but it was important for the names to be real.

Luo: In contrast to the seemingly imaginary landscapes of foreign locations and characters in *Evidence* and *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, I would call *Perfect World* and *Confessions of Joseph Blanchard* (unpublished) your Halifax novels, as they are full of references to real locations in the city, such as Gottingen Street and Almon Street in the North End, Young Avenue in the South End, Perks Coffee on Lower Water Street, the Esso gas station on South Street, the Commons, and the Angus L. MacDonald Bridge. What are your feelings about setting fiction in the city where you have lived for so many years?

Colford: I've been hesitant and probably too circumspect about using Halifax as a setting. I suppose that I've been put off doing so by decades of reading stories set in New York, London, Paris, Toronto, and other literary hubs. Put plainly, iconic works of literature set in cities where historic decisions were made are intimidating role models for a young writer. You develop your craft emulating the writers you admire, and Halifax seems very insignificant when you compare it to New York and London. For much too long it seemed to me, irrationally of course, that if my setting was small, the work would be small. A lot of my early pieces are set in some unnamed, unidentifiable location—a topographical mishmash modelled after everywhere and nowhere. With a couple of exceptions, the stories in *Evidence* take place in this shadowy nowhere-land, which remains deliberately out of focus. Now I'm more comfortable using Halifax as a setting, and I attribute that fact to maturity and greater confidence in the writing. I love Halifax as a city, and it has enormous potential as a place where characters can go on quests, interact, or get into trouble. The city also has a distinct history and a unique geography.

Luo: Many of your stories also seem to have a distinctly Canadian feel to them, as the landscape is often cold and stark. For example, the cinematic opening of "Stone Temple" sets the scene for a horrible tragedy, as one can feel the freezing cold of the snow and hear the piercing wind in the unforgiving woods in a Canadian winter.

Colford: A lot of Canadian writers use landscape to evoke states of mind, and I think it makes sense for writers to exploit their immediate environment in their fiction. My intention in "Stone Temple" was to explore the earnest heart of a misguided young man who's been pushed to the wall, and the bleak, frozen landscape helped me to do that. The story is very visual, but the emotions I want the reader to feel are visceral, so the characters go through a lot of discomfort from the cold. You hear snow and ice crunching under Bobby's boots, and as the temperature drops the reader shares his mounting desperation.

Luo: The play of light and darkness also accompanies the father's gradual descent from indignity and self-justification for his action into confusion, mounting anxiety, and desperation. Throughout the story, we see how gentle he is with the child and how he tries to resist the temper he inherited from his own father. Is the ending, when the character walks away from the scene of the crime, intentionally ambiguous? Were you attempting to extend sympathy and understanding to the character and pass no judgment by suggesting that, no matter how tragic the consequence, this is not a cruel man with evil intentions?

Colford: At the heart of the story is moral ambiguity: there's Bobby's actions, but there's also a sequence of events leading up to his decision to kidnap his son. As a writer, I'm interested in the circumstances that drive him to act as he does—the sense of injustice that's burning him up inside because of the odds stacked against him. In his mind, he's trying his best, but nothing he does is ever good enough. As he sees it, everyone has turned against him. He's a good guy who can't catch a break. But I'm not striving for sympathy so much as understanding. The reader will never condone what he does. The ending is tragic, and the outcome is avoidable, but I'm not interested in judgment, condemnation, or assigning blame. The ambiguity is carefully calibrated. I want the reader to enter this small drama and observe it from within, to see the events unfold in their totality, and to reach his or her own conclusion with regard to the forces that drive people to behave as they do. Luke is certainly a victim, but is Bobby also a victim? Do we feel sorry for him? I want the reader to go through that kind of internal debate.

Luo: One is reminded of this story while reading *Perfect World* (an ironic title if ever there was one), as there is a similar sense of confusion and helplessness, and the wind at the beach is not unlike the cold of the woods. The novel clearly addresses mental health issues, but is the father-son relationship also an important theme in your fiction—that is, the influence fathers have on their sons and the indelible marks families leave on their children? Is the neglect, deception, and betrayal of fathers at the root of the troubles and tragedies experienced by Enrique and Hector in *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, Charlie and Tom in *Perfect World*, and Joseph and his father in *Confessions of Joseph Blanchard*? And do these novels illustrate the resentments and frustrations of sons who are abandoned, abused, and stuck in situations not of their own making and who fail to find the love, kindness, family, and stability they are craving?

Colford: Father-son relationships seem to turn up as a critical motif in a lot of my work. I don't think it's because I'm obsessed with it or anything. I look for dramatic potential wherever I'm likely to find it, and fathers and sons have been battling it out for as long as humans have been roaming the planet. If I've been fascinated by anything, then I suppose it's the father who somehow disappoints and lets his son down—not because of meanness or through malicious acts but because of a personal weakness, incapacity, or lack of understanding. We sympathize with Tom's father because he comes from a rural community where mental illness is a taboo subject. You might say someone is "odd" or "queer" and leave it at that. What we see in him is a man who is completely out of his depth facing a situation that leaves him helpless and confused. The relationship between Enrique and Hector is fraught for another reason. Enrique is an intellectual, but he's also weak and self-indulgent. When Hector discovers the extent of his father's selfishness, he's driven to take revenge, and the course of his life is set. Joseph has been kept in the dark his whole life. He witnessed his parents' behaviour first-hand and might have understood and sympathized if the truth had not been withheld. But it was withheld, and he was left to draw his own unflattering conclusions. On the other hand, Kostandin recalls his father with great affection and mourns that loss throughout his life. Then there's Sara and her mother in "On the Beach"—a push-pull relationship if there ever was one. If anything, I think I'm drawn to the parent-child relationship because of the passions and emotions it implies and the various dramatic threads that can be teased out of it. Where parents and children are concerned, feelings are guaranteed to be strong. You rarely encounter indifference. But even if the son feels nothing for the father, that in itself speaks volumes.

Luo: Your work also explores the "dark house" of human psychology, human weaknesses, and human vulnerabilities. Many of your characters seem to be alienated misfits, who sometimes exude exterior calm and reason but whose internal world is full of conflict and doubt. They harbour terrible secrets and embark on illicit and forbidden passions. They have to make complex moral choices and difficult decisions. They have lost dreams, face cruel realities, and seek small pleasures. Many are decent but can also be selfish, despicable, cruel, and capable of small and large deceptions and betrayals. Some suffer miserable childhoods that leave long-lasting effects, some are caught in larger conflicts not of their own design, and some are just victims of an indifferent and hostile world. Rarely is there an optimistic ending, except perhaps in "McGowan on the Mount," in which the title character possibly finds happiness, yet even that happiness we understand will be short-lived and tempered with illness. Most of your characters lack such courage, and almost all of them are devoid of faith or religious beliefs. Do you take a nihilistic view on the human capacity for goodness and change? Do you hope for your characters if not outright joy and happiness then at least a glimmer of hope or a degree of consolation?

Colford: I grant that my fiction tends to be dark, but I'm not sure that it's unrelentingly pessimistic. I hope what I'm doing is balancing the light with the dark that we see in the world every day, while keeping the story real, which is my chief concern. It's not in my nature to sugarcoat things. I once wrote a review of a novel and complained that the ending was unsatisfying because after a story of betrayal and loss, in which many characters face danger and bleak prospects, the author cheapened things by giving almost all the characters exactly what their hearts desired. Now there's nothing wrong with that, and I can see why lots of readers enjoy the escape into stories that end with everyone being rewarded, happy, and safe, but that's not how people's lives turn out in the real world. Dramatically speaking, happy endings aren't all that interesting, and in that particular instance I felt the author had shortchanged the reader by leaving an assortment of dramatic possibilities unexplored. In the 19th century, writers could close out their novels with happy weddings because readers approached literature with different expectations, and exceptional writers like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens could satisfy the reader while at the same time largely avoiding the pitfall of sentiment, but the intervening years have been filled with calamity and destruction, including two world wars and all sorts of injustice and needless suffering. For this reason, readers in the 21st century expect a different kind of experience and are unlikely to find endings in which everyone receives everything they wish for convincing.

The struggles I depict in my fiction tend to pit uninformed, idealistic, or naïve characters against forces that remain somewhat out of focus. Tom battles his illness. Hector falls victim to a complex web of political deceit and opportunism that he never comes close to understanding. Kostandin loses his family and homeland to a faceless enemy and then struggles with various forms of bad luck, ill-timing, and his own inner demons while fighting to make a new life for himself. Rather than having little or no faith that people can improve themselves and their lives, the vision of humanity that informs my work is built on my faith that people can and must try to make those improvements. What really counts, more than success or failure, is the struggle itself.

I've said before that what I choose to write is going to depend on what I find interesting. Two things that do not interest me are absolute good and absolute evil. There are no saints walking among us, just as there are no demons. When I review a book, I will level a criticism if I find that it promotes a simplistic morality or a black-and-white view of the world. In my opinion, that kind of simplistic moral outlook is a sign of either naivety or lazy thinking, and it only works if the effect you're striving for is comic or ironic. It is not faithful to the reality we see and experience every day of our lives, and it will never be convincing in a work of realistic fiction, as it just doesn't ring true. The world and the people in it are endlessly complex and layered. We'll never get to the bottom of human behaviour, and so much the better. We'll never understand the forces that determine a person's trajectory through life and why some people seem to get what they deserve while others don't. That's why my characters will not always be rewarded for virtuous, selfless behaviour or punished for depravity, cruelty, and deceit. Injustice is inherent in the human condition. That's simply the world we live in.

At the same time, when it's relentless, this kind of pragmatism will wear the reader down. Unmitigated by any glimmer of hope, it's just depressing. You have to strike a balance, or you'll lose your reader. You have to find ways to infuse the story with the lifelike verisimilitude that readers will find authentic, wondrous, and engaging. This is what we are looking for when we start reading a book. We don't want to be lectured or browbeaten. We want to be challenged, to look at the world in new ways, and to question our beliefs and assumptions. We want to be entertained and enlightened. We want to be shocked or even horrified. And the way writers do this is by fully engaging both our emotions and our intellect. Life is full of contradictions, and we want to see those contradictions reflected on the page.

In a letter to his friend Oskar Pollak, Kafka wrote that the books we read should "bite and sting us," as a book "must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us." A good book changes us for a week or two. A great book is a wake-up call that changes us forever.

Luo: Why is it important for you to bear witness to the relentless suffering and struggle of your characters? In *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, for example, there are prolonged scenes of torture full of minute details portraying the sadistic cruelty of man's boundless inhumanity towards other human beings. What gives you the strength to cope with such difficult material?

Colford: I believe what sustains me through my depictions of pain and suffering is my connection with the characters and the story I'm trying to tell. The deeper I get into a story, the more it grips me and the more vivid it becomes. When the blinders fall away in this fashion, more dramatic possibilities present themselves, and I start to see and, more importantly, understand what the characters must strive for and endure in order for the story I'm writing to remain authentic and true. All the suffering that takes place in the pages of my books is necessary for the story to attain the purity and truth I want to achieve.

In the case of *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*, the Nadia character pushed her way into the story and took on greater importance than I had anticipated. I suppose the story needed a naïve idealist—someone with principles who wants to bring about change but has no idea how to make it happen. At first, I simply saw her as Hector's girlfriend, but then I started thinking about her family's past and the injustices her parents endured. That made all her future actions dramatically explosive because the reader would be more heavily invested in her fate. I decided at one point that she was going to survive, and I even sketched a couple of scenes that paved the way for it. I envisioned her crossing the border with a forged passport. I saw the tearful reunion with her sister in another country. But everything I wrote in support of that scenario was stale, flat, and unconvincing. Fortunately, before I wasted too much time and effort on it, I realized this was because I didn't believe it. I think I knew all along that I was lying to myself. As much as conventional morality seemed to demand that her bravery be rewarded and that she make it out alive, I knew that her survival simply would not ring true within the moral context of the novel. If I made her survival part of the story, it would be nothing more than wish fulfillment. I would be betraying my vision of the book as I originally conceived it, and I would be betraying the reader by offering up a product that had been watered down. Then, as I got to know her better, I began to understand that her story would end in tragedy, and this made it possible for me to see the stages she would pass through on her way to that tragic finale. Everything she goes through in the novel leads up to that moment in the truck, when she reverts to speaking Polish. It makes her shockingly vulnerable because at that point all of her defences are gone and she's showing us her soul. When we read that scene, we can't help but be devastated.

Luo: Hector is only 16 when he is captured and tortured, and the punishment obviously does not match his crime, which is simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The darkness and silence of his prison cell, the indifference and meaninglessness of the circumstance, and the excruciating pain he suffers all leave him in a state of despair. Facing such an impersonal, incomprehensible, and overwhelming force of evil, what kinds of moral or ethical choices could he make other than acquiescence and resignation?

Colford: I agree that Hector's fate seems decided before he reaches an age when he is able to develop a personal morality or code of ethics. Up until then he seems to operate by instinct. He's impulsive and often thoughtless, as many teenagers are. The treatment he receives is ruthless and calculated to break down his character and rebuild him into a sort of automaton that will be useful to the state. This is where research came in handy. I read about indoctrination tactics used by operatives in repressive states to build paramilitary forces comprised of individuals who will commit atrocities and not ask questions. In the most extreme cases, they abduct very young people—girls and boys—and use torture and threats to completely annihilate the individual, break their resistance, and wipe the slate clean of memory and meaningful links to the outside world. Once that's accomplished, they build the person up again, convince them that they are part of a new family, teach them how to take orders, and give them a mission and a purpose, which could be anything but is usually focused on eliminating threats to the regime. In this sense, Hector's fate is sealed the moment he's taken into custody by the military. When they're finished with him, he is unable to make moral or ethical choices on his own. He does escape, but by that time he's so messed up that any chance of recovery is faint.

Luo: The characters in your story "The Dictator Considers His Regime" are simply named "the dictator," "the colonel," and "the prisoner." Did you mean for this story to be an allegory that takes on universal dimensions, and did it provide the seed for *The Crimes of Hector Tomás*?

Colford: That's exactly right—completing that story gave me the confidence to embark on the novel. In 2000 my wife and I also did some travelling in Portugal, and in preparation I read a bit about the country and its history. The dictator is loosely based on Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar, who ruled the country for more than thirty years. I made up about 95% of the details, but I became fascinated by the idea of a totalitarian dictator who grows old and feeble in office and who eventually loses touch with the citizens and becomes detached from much of what's being perpetrated in his name. I wrote the story later that year, and I began working on the novel the following year.

It's important for me, when I'm working on a story where the action takes place in a context with which I'm not familiar, to keep the human side of things very much in play. That's why the dictator remembers his wife, who died of a stroke, and some humorous incidents from throughout his reign. That's why Branco thinks of his girlfriend while he's being tortured and why the colonel talks about his daughter getting married and going to America. These kinds of details spark the reader's sympathies. At the same time, I was also happy with the military characters not having names. The lack of specifics infuses the story with an alluringly enigmatic quality that it wouldn't have otherwise and that contributes to what you describe as its allegorical or universal dimensions. In the novel, the matter of names was a practical one. At that point in the narrative, I was delving into the personal lives of military people whose actions would have a direct bearing on Hector's fate. I had to give up the imprecision and mystery and introduce specifics in order to move the action along while making it comprehensible for the reader.

Luo: I can definitely sense the sheer delight and pleasure you derive from crafting impeccable sentences and intricate plots to keep readers engaged in the stories and involved with the fate of the characters. There is a remarkable precision to your language, a controlled and even pacing to the narratives, and above all a restrained, detached voice and tone that make the scenes of torture or emotional turmoil even more heart-wrenching. How do you achieve that kind of effect?

Colford: I write with two aims in mind: to keep the reader turning pages and to construct sentences that vividly evoke the world in which the action is taking place. I pay attention to language and rewrite obsessively in an effort to accomplish both of these effects simultaneously. I also try to think cinematically by visualizing the characters on the stage, as it were. I listen to them talk. I note their gestures, their eye movements, their level of comfort, and their state of mind. I envision other things going on as the scene unfolds, such as the fading afternoon light, leaves swirling in the wind, or someone walking by casting a shadow. I also like to focus on sensory details, such as smells and sounds, pencil shavings, a door closing, or a dog barking in the distance. I trust my own vocabulary, and it's very rare that I run off to the dictionary looking for a word to describe what I'm trying to say. I feel that if the word doesn't come naturally, then it's likely to seem forced and unnatural to the reader. A needlessly esoteric word will distract from what I want to say and call undue attention to itself. I then translate the information I have into language that tells readers only what they need to know and at the same time moves the story forward. The process is not as neat or precise as this makes it sound. The edges aren't smooth at all. When the scene I'm working on comes alive, it can happen in a flash, instinctually—you don't even think about it—but when the scene puts up some resistance, it can turn into an agonizing grind.

Scenes of suffering and torment are particularly difficult. The ones I've managed to write live and die on the quality of the language, and I think—because these scenes are so completely alien to me—the only way I can carry them off is to shut down the emotional side of things and rely on purely observational, descriptive language—hence the sense of watching the action unfold from a surreal distance.

Luo: Could you comment on the more vernacular, working-class dialogue in *Perfect World*?

Colford: A writer is always trying to capture the rhythms and cadences of normal, everyday speech patterns and to explore how the situation and the characters' regard for one another influence how they speak. One way to aid this process is to read the dialogue aloud, which I often do. A scene that I think works well is when Tom meets his sister Beverly in the diner. There are a lot of pauses in their dialogue, and Tom distracts himself from

Beverly's obnoxious behaviour by reflecting on the past and gazing out the window. Then, when the dialogue resumes, it does so from a slightly altered perspective, which I think is very natural. I also had some difficulty with the explicit vulgarity of their father's speech later in the book, as I didn't want it to sound like parody or exaggeration. It's often very difficult and complicated to capture the simplicity of everyday speech because no two people speak in the same way.

Luo: Do you strive for a certain quality in your writing, and do you think you have developed a unique style?

Colford: I'm not aware that I consciously strive for features in my writing that would make it distinct from that of other writers. I suppose when I say I'm happy with something I've written, what I mean is that I can see that it's achieved a certain effect—a combination of voice, tone, and mood—that I find pleasing and satisfying. And over the long haul, if I keep being pleased by the same effects in my writing, the stories and novels will be imprinted with a personal stamp that readers might sense is different from what other writers have done.

Luo: How do you think your writing style has changed over the years?

Colford: If my writing has changed, it probably has a lot to do with greater confidence and a deeper knowledge of how to use language to create certain effects. I prefer a natural approach to language, but a couple of my earliest published stories use a type of language that's stripped of emotional content. All writers experiment, and I wrote those stories in an attempt to mimic the eeriness of Kafka's writing and the emotional detachment I admire in Kosinski's writing. The style is baldly declarative, such as "I went here" or "I did this," but it can generate great tension, and it creates a wonderful sense of foreboding when the reader begins to realize that the narrator is capable of terrible behaviour. However, this kind of writing also gets boring because it doesn't allow for nuance or subtlety. Writing those stories was a valuable exercise and learning experience. Even though I don't regard them as particularly successful, the process of constructing those worlds provided insight into how language and narrative voice can be used as tools to influence the reading experience. It wasn't long after those stories were published that

I started working on *Confessions of Joseph Blanchard*, which is written in an entirely different voice and with a totally different aim. Now, after many years of working with language in a variety of narrative forms, when I dream up a story it doesn't take me long to determine what kind of narrative approach is likely to work best.

Luo: Why is writing important to you, and how has it influenced the way you perceive the world, objects, and people?

Colford: I've always felt that writing is a way of seeing and experiencing the world, and I'm always thinking about the project I'm currently working on or gathering ideas for the next project or one further down the road. Every emotional and sensory experience has the potential to feed into the work, and the importance of writing in my life is immeasurable, as the act of creating gives me a sense of purpose and meaning. Writing is also a form of communication, so there's that aspect as well. There are few things more satisfying than working out what you want to say, finding a way to say it, and getting a response from people who've taken the trouble to read what you've written.

I can hardly remember a time when I wasn't writing, so it's difficult to make comparisons to my life before I started. I suppose it's possible that I was always looking at the world this way—as material for fiction—but I simply didn't realize it until I reached my twenties. Discovering the imaginary worlds of writers I came to admire would have awakened me to the fact that I wanted to do what they were doing. Those discoveries would have served as a trigger, opening me to the possibility that I could contribute something meaningful to culture and society by imagining lives that would only be lived and events that would only take place between the covers of books. It sounds pretentious when you say it like that because all you're really doing is making stuff up. It's easy to be cynical and dismissive. But then you realize that the stuff you make up can actually get inside another person's head and change the way they see the world. That is the power and privilege of being a writer, so you have to take it seriously.

Luo: What do you think is the larger purpose of fiction? Your work amply displays your profound understanding and keen observation of human psychology in terms of motives, passions, and behaviours—often under extreme circumstances—but how important are political issues, such as human rights, democracy, social justice, etc.?

Colford: We can learn a lot about past societies and civilizations from reading factual accounts, but I think literature is an important part of the legacy of any society, as fiction provides a unique window into prevailing attitudes, ways of thinking, routines of daily life, prejudices, inequities, and social norms. Virtually every aspect of life at any time and place in history is accessible through the imaginative work left behind by its writers. Dickens grew up in a brutally unjust society, in which the poor were victimized just for being poor, and he satirized it relentlessly in his novels. Austen was fascinated by gender relations and depicted smart women working around the inflated egos of stupid men to get what they want. In other times and places, fiction writers were persecuted, killed, or sent into exile for telling the truth, but political leaders who try to suppress or silence the censuring voices of their time are fighting a losing battle. Regimes and civilizations pass out of existence, but stories always get told one way or another.

I don't write with the notion of legacy in mind, but I am aware that I am part of a community and that my books are part of a large body of work, which will presumably still exist a hundred years from now and which people can consult to help them understand what Canadians were thinking about in the early 21st century. Fiction helps us understand who and what we are, and anything that contributes to a deeper understanding of our place in the universe and suggests ways in which we can improve should be cherished and encouraged. I also believe that politics are inescapable and that an author's political sympathies will always be manifest in a work of fiction. This can be subtle or overt. For example, *The Crimes of Hector Tomás* is a political novel that depicts the brutality that a corrupt and inept authoritarian regime will gleefully inflict on its own citizens in its demented lust for power. But *Perfect World* is political as well, as it tries to make a case for the better understanding and treatment of people who suffer from mental illness.

Luo: What effect do you hope writing can have on the transformation of people and society?

Colford: Maybe it's naïve or overly optimistic to think this way, but I do believe that fiction has the power to change the world. Books expose people to new ideas and change how they think, and the courageous among us envision broader and bolder change and struggle to bring it about. We're certainly living in a more just world because books like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) were written, published, and read.

Luo: What are your plans for the future, and in what directions do you think your work will go?

Colford: I will continue to write according to my interests, and I'm sure my interests will evolve, as they always have. I'll pursue stories that fascinate me, wherever they lead, and I'll keep trying to improve. I just finished a novel provisionally titled *A Momentary Lapse*, which is set in contemporary Halifax and refers to many of the city's landmarks. Its focus, which I have a better perspective on now that I've attained a bit of distance, is the conflict between family life and the individual craving for privacy. I was trying to write something action-oriented, which I think I've done, but it's also very much centred on character. And the book I have in mind to write next is a first-person account narrated by a retired academic with a checkered past, although I haven't worked out all the details. Beyond that, where my writing goes is unpredictable, but never knowing what comes next is what keeps it exciting, tantalizing, and inspiring.