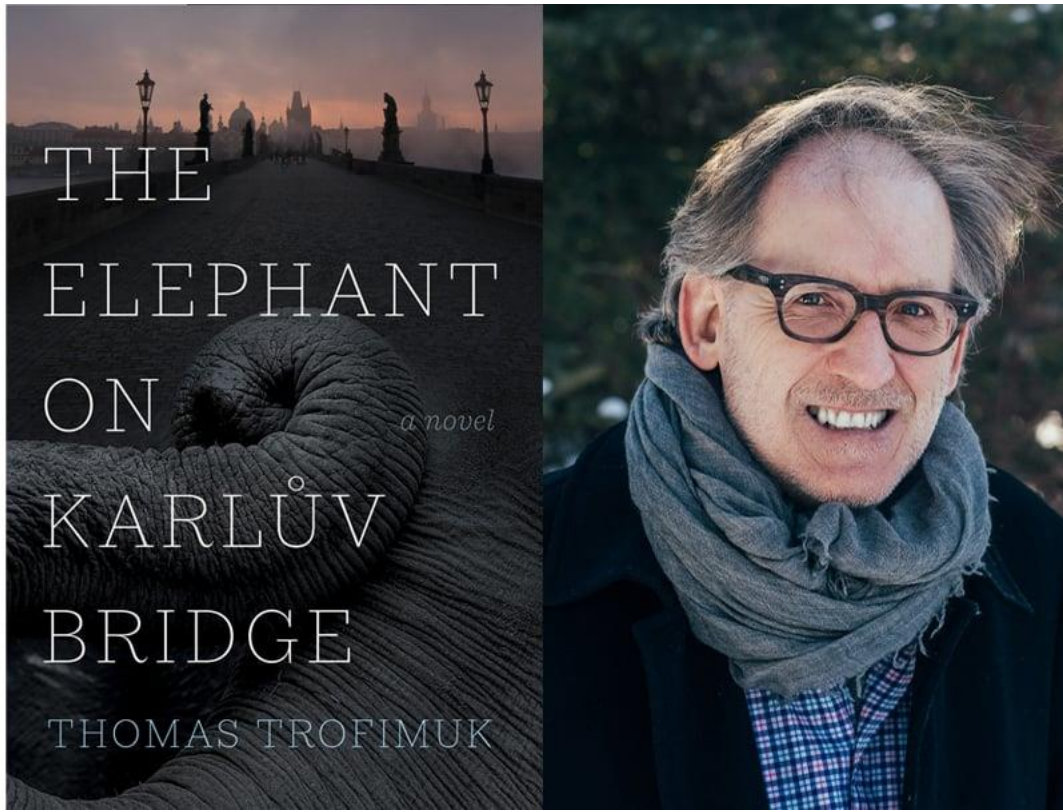


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The Elephant on Karlův Bridge

About Thomas Trofimuk

from www.thomastrofimuk.com

Trofimuk has published poetry, short-fiction, and novels.

His first novel, *The 52nd Poem*, explores the remnants of a love affair as a man sends a poem a week to his lover over the period of a year. The book went on to win a few awards including the 2003 Alberta Novel of the Year and the City of Edmonton Book Prize.

A second novel, *Doubting Yourself to the Bone*, is set in the Canadian Rocky Mountains and has received high praise from critics – including being named as one of the top 100 must read books for 2006 by the *Globe & Mail*.

In 2009, Thomas' third novel, *Waiting for Columbus*, burst onto the international stage, with a Canadian (McClelland & Stewart) and US (Knopf-Doubleday) release. In 2010, the book was released in the UK (Picador), and will be published in Serbia, Brazil and Poland. The book was released as an "audio book," and was optioned for film in the

summer of 2010. *Waiting for Columbus*, won the City of Edmonton Book Prize and was short-listed for the Alberta novel of the year.

Trofimuk is a founding father of Edmonton's Raving Poets movement, which was an open-stage poetry event held in a bar, with the poets backed up by the Raving Poets Band. He played piano (badly but with temerity) in the Raving Poets band.

He is happily married to his first reader, Cindy-Lou. They have sons, a couple of fine young men in their early 30s, and a daughter who, at 18, is still very tall for her age.

Trofimuk has recently taken up kayaking. He loves maps, and charts. He really likes new bed sheets. He's a huge fan of single malt whisky. He loves paper, and journals. He has been known to smoke Cuban cigars. If you offer him wine, he'll very likely accept. When he wakes up, he is delighted to be alive. He will very often say things like: It has been so delightful to have lived — to have been alive.

About the book

from www.thistledownpress.com

Set in Prague and narrated with great panache by the 600-year-old Charles Bridge, this novel begins with an elephant named Sál escaping the Prague Zoo. As the elephant moves through the beautiful Czech city, the lives of the men and women she meets are altered by the encounter. Each character is at a crossroads, and desperately seeking the wisdom they need to wrestle with profound questions—how to live, how to love, who to love, how to heal. And the elephant herself is haunted, as memories of her long-ago capture in Africa resurface.

Sál carries the narrative from one point of view to another: Vasha, a writer and night watchman at the zoo, and his wife Marta, a psychotherapist, confront the question of whether to have a child; Šárka, Marta's patient and a dancer at the end of her career, is visited by a charming and often abrasive manifestation of the long-dead ballerina Anna Pavlova; Joseph, a clown and bouffon, performs on the Karlův Bridge itself, and he is about to be struck down (literally and figuratively) by a new love...

Through it all, Sál steals the show, wandering the streets in search of water and food, bearing her own share of sadness and painful memories as she struggles to find her way out of her bewildering predicament. Though she, like the humans she encounters, is free now to make her own choices, she is also displaced and lost.

Thomas Trofimuk's novel masterfully convinces us to accept all the wonders contained in it: that a bridge can tell a story, that art is integral to our survival, that an elephant can scatter sudden flashes of insight in her wake, that there is no separation between the grief of elephants and the grief of humans.

Reviews

Quill & Quire
quillandquire.com

Reviewer: Alexandra Trnka

In his latest novel, *The Elephant on Karlův Bridge*, Thomas Trofimuk imagines the escape of an elephant named Sal from the Prague zoo on an early July morning. The novel follows the elephant through the streets of Prague to the famous Charles Bridge, where Sal causes a reasonable amount of havoc after being provoked by a swarm of bees. The elephant's journey is a narrative thread from which Trofimuk spins a web of interconnected stories that involve a cast of characters who are related to one another in ways that are both arbitrary and deeply significant.

The reader is first introduced to Marta, a therapist married to the night watchman at the Prague zoo, who tries to convince her husband that the two should start a family. From Marta, we meet her patient Šárka, a ballerina nearing the end of her career, who we follow for a time as she debates her uncertain future with an imagined Anna Pavlova, the late Russian dancer, and struggles to maintain her grasp on reality. Meanwhile, a lighthouse keeper and recovering alcoholic named Mercy staggers through the streets of Prague, reeling with grief after her father's death and trying to stay sober. Vasha, Marta's husband, reads aloud to the zoo's elephants from a copy of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a text that may have been a source of inspiration for Trofimuk. The narrative continues to expand in this way, collecting characters as it builds to a dramatic final spectacle on the Charles Bridge at dawn.

The story shifts frequently through time, paying particular attention to Sal's childhood in Zambia, the traumatic journey to Prague, and her eventual escape from the zoo. Though these passages are touching, the dialogue between Sal's past and the lives of the human characters is somewhat tenuous. In answer to this labyrinthine web of connections, Trofimuk provides a guide: the Charles Bridge itself, which acts as a classical chorus character, guiding the reader through the story. Consistent with his previous novel, *This Is All a Lie*, Trofimuk doesn't shy away from literary embellishments and metafictional experimentation. In *The Elephant on Karlův Bridge*, he grants the 600-year-old stone structure sentience, and the bridge interrupts throughout the novel to address the reader and comment on the events (the bridge thinks Šárka is "certifiably batshit crazy"). "It is my duty," the bridge reminds the reader, "to get you safely from one side of the river to the other."

Though the concept of the bridge as narrator is intriguing, it is unclear, by the novel's end, whether these passages are entirely necessary, particularly when compared to the compelling lives of Trofimuk's human characters. At times, the bridge's tendency to expatiate on the novel's events detracts from the reading experience by robbing the story of a necessary layer of ambiguity and nuance. Trofimuk's humans are the novel's core, and carry the narrative through its distractions. Each character is mired in loss and emotional turmoil and their unique stories of suffering are in themselves a worthwhile exploration of loneliness, desire, and the creation of meaning in a chaotic world.

Alberta Views
albertaviews.com

Reviewer: Glen Huser

In Thomas Trofimuk's amazing, inventive new novel we encounter not only a runaway zoo elephant remembering haunting, musical echoes from a heritage of free roaming but also a bridge celebrating its endurance and prominence as a Prague landmark. As narrator, the bridge can sound like a lecturer recounting crimes committed in the name of religion over its 661-year history or a tour guide itemizing the statues along its length. Expect, at times, a salty voice quite capable of declaring a regular visitor "nutty as a fruitcake" and, at intervals, reminding readers that "it remains my mission to get you safely from one side of the river to the other."

The bridge's commentary is so enjoyable that we can forgive Trofimuk for underlining story structure he thinks we might have missed: "The elephant is, of course, a thread that runs through the fabric... novels (if you can call this story-puzzle a novel) don't have to tie up the loose ends every single time. Right?"

It's no surprise that the Karlův serves as a bridge between stories focusing on an assortment of characters whose lives criss-cross in currents like the river flowing beneath. We first meet Vasha, an author with writer's block working as a night watchman at the zoo, worrying about the prospect of becoming a father. His wife, Marta, is a therapist treating a ballerina whose body is telling her it's time to quit. Šárka, the dancer, has ongoing conversations with a long-dead Anna Pavlova. Another of Marta's clients is Lem, who was once a Czech soldier working in Africa—where, in a horrific scene, he recalls encountering poachers ready to murder children as well as elephants—and is now a bodyguard to a Swiss banker's fiancé. Into this mix add Joseph, a busker who does clown turns on the bridge, and Mercy, a recovering alcoholic and Scottish lighthouse keeper who comforts Joseph when her taxi knocks him down.

It's a cast such as you might find in a Cecil B. DeMille movie. No accident, I think, that Joseph's cat's name is Buttons, after the clown in DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*. To the author's credit, we come to care about all of these characters—their dreams, regrets, loves. And then there is Prague itself, the medieval city lovingly presented—its cafes, boulevards, churches, cemeteries, zoo. Trofimuk paints it in colours: "pallid yellow sandstone, sepia facades, burnt sienna... If Paris is the city of light, then Prague must be the city of shadow."

The wandering narrative buoyed by humour while it tackles human peccadilloes and societal caprices has been with us since Cervantes and Laurence Sterne. Trofimuk brings his own skill and unique voice to this strand. Funny, candid, improvisational, historically anecdotal, sexy... it's a heady mix.

Interview

All Lit Up

alllitup.com

September 7, 2022

Interview: Thomas Trofimuk

All Lit Up: What do you enjoy reading?

Thomas Trofimuk: Everything from fiction to nonfiction, poetry to store signs, stop signs to coffee cups, and graffiti to scribbles on cubicle walls. I subscribe to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and regularly read *The Guardian* and the *Globe & Mail*. Mostly I like to read fiction that grabs me quickly – literary, genre, thrillers, even westerns. Once I'm hooked, I don't mind digressions and loose ends. I also love fiction that breaks rules, or is quirky, or tries to do something in a new way. I wouldn't say I enjoy all experimental fiction, because often it's so oblique it's unreadable. You have to have your eye on communicating, and entertaining, and experimenting all at once, or it can very quickly fail. It's a juggling act that few can pull off. But the failures are fascinating in their own right. Here's a list of six books I'm reading now, or am about to read in the coming weeks and months: *Ordinary Monsters*, by J. M.

Miro; *Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth*, by Avi Loeb; *Lorna Crozier's Through the Garden: A Love Story (with Cats)*; Italo Calvino: *Letters, 1941-1985*; Gail Sidonie Šobat's *Lessons From The Greeks*; and finally, re-reading Marquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*.

All Lit Up: Do you have any rituals that you abide by when you're writing?

TT: I have a ritual of writing 1,500 words per day, every day, for three or four months when working on a new book. This helps me get a first draft onto the page. I like to light a candle, specifically, this overpriced lavender-scented candle from Anthropologie – when I write. That scent is reserved for writing. I used to pour a dram of whisky whenever I sat down, but wound up pouring out way more than I drank – I just forgot it was there and this is a terrible waste of good whisky.

All Lit Up: What's the most surprising thing about being a writer?

TT: I thought being a writer was going to be romantic! I thought women would swoon (well, at least be impressed) when I told them I was a writer. I thought eventually I would wind up living in a quaint flat in Paris with a beautiful woman named Brooklyn, who would wake up every morning, make me coffee and tell me what a brilliant writer I was. None of this happened, and it's not romantic at all! The reality is that it's all about putting your bum in the chair and going to work on your story. Working on your craft. It's hard work to walk through the world with writer's eyes, with your sensibilities wide open, always looking for the possibility of a story, or a character, or a situation. You know you're a writer if in the middle of a heated argument with your partner, she says something and the writer part of you pulls back and thinks – Damn, that's a good line. I can use that in a story.

Once, a couple years back, I was sitting around with my wife (whose name is not Brooklyn) and going on about how good reviews should be received in the same light as bad reviews, and that I wasn't going to read any of the reviews of the new book I'd just released. "I'm just going to go to work on the next book," I said. She looked at me and smiled and said: "You're not that good." Meaning, I wasn't John Grisham or Margaret Atwood, or Michael Ondaatje. And she was right. You learn from reading the reviews (at the very least, you learn what one person thought of your book). You learn to be a better writer by going to book clubs and listening in. I can't remember who said it, but it's true: if you want to learn how to be a better writer, don't hang out with other writers – you'll just get drunk and get into trouble. No. Hang out with readers, listen to readers. Actually, I think it was me who said that – because I've done both. Ha!!

I never thought I was going to get rich from my writing, or make enough money to stop everything and just write. So it comes as no surprise that I am not rich and that I have a day job. You have to love writing, all of it: getting a first draft out, revising, rewriting, editing, getting a fiftieth draft out, getting a seventy-fourth draft out, and then working with an editor. You can't be in it for money or fame. If that's your goal, find something else to do. But if you love playing with words and sentences, and stories intrigue you, and the rhythm of prose is like music, then you're good to go. It has to be a love affair.

I think my biggest surprise about being a writer was that I loved writing as much as I do.

All Lit Up: What are you working on now?

TT: I'm working on promoting the new novel *The Elephant on Karlův Bridge* (Much gratitude to Thistledown Press for loving this book as much as I do) But, of course you mean what am I working on *right* now? Well, I just sent my agent a new novel called *The Saudade*. I'm still tinkering a bit (it's hard to let go). It's set at the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is about a man who has a terrible fear of death, and goes on vacation to Macon, France with his wife. She tells stories to help him deal with his anxiety around death, and so as they drink a bottle of wine in a café, in the middle of a very hot day, she tells her husband a convoluted story. Near the end of her story he looks away for a few moments and when he looks up and across the table, his wife is gone. He waits in the café until it closes, thinking she is playing a joke, pranking him, but she does not show up. He uses the story she was telling when she disappeared as a way to find her – looking for clues inside her story – hoping desperately that he's following the right clues to find his wife.

Right now, (this morning) I'm working on a new novel called *OUM* and I'm uncertain about it. It does not have the needed momentum yet. I'm playing with characters, introducing myself – seeing if anyone is going to be trouble down the road, and testing the waters of genre writing. Though, I doubt this will be a traditional speculative fiction novel. As a kid, I loved reading speculative fiction. So this novel is a kind of return to an old love.

All Lit Up: Describe your perfect writing day.

TT: A perfect writing day for me would start at 5 am. I would get up, feed the cat, make a jumbo French press of coffee, light that ridiculously over-priced Anthropologie candle, and sit down to write. There's snow falling past the window and this makes me happy. I am always happy when it is snowing. I might play music, all classical or ambient – nothing with lyrics. And then I will be lost for a few hours – focused and wandering around in my story. Seeing what's going to happen next. Around 10 a.m., I'll sweep the snow off the car, drive to Little Italy, and enter a café called La Dolce Vita (yes, like the Fellini film), where the espresso is fantastic and only \$1.50. After one espresso, I will open my laptop, or pull out the printed pages, of what I wrote earlier. I'll make some changes, tidy it up a bit, then order another espresso. The snow falling and the massive elms in the park across from the café might be a distraction. And I might be tempted to keep writing, but it's important to quit writing for the day when things are going good.

And then as I am crawling into bed, I am thinking about any problems in the book that might need solving, or I am making a mental list of my characters and what they want, who they love, and so on – to see if my unconscious notices any connections I've missed. Often, I will dream the solution to a problem I'm having with a story-line or a character. The unconscious is a brilliant place to sort things out.

All Lit Up: Have you experienced writer's block? What did you do about it?

TT: I don't believe in writer's block. Never had it. I always have words and story ideas floating around in my head – sometimes those voices in my head worry me! HA!!

Thank you to All Lit Up for the opportunity to be part of this blog. I love this concept, and I loved it that I got to choose the questions. Is this where I talk about my cat? All writers should have cats, so it seems natural that I should talk about my cat. Prada (we didn't name her – she arrived with this name) is 21 years old and is slowing down in her old age. We feed her whatever she wants, whenever she wants because she's so old – the internet says (so it must be true) she's the equivalent of 100 years old in human years. I hope that if by some miracle, I live that long, I will get to eat whatever I want, whenever I want.

(Note from ALU: Thank YOU, Thomas!)

This interview has been edited and condensed.

* * *

Thomas Trofimuk is the author of *The 52nd Poem*, which won the 2003 City of Edmonton Book Prize and the Georges Bugnet Award for Novel. Also a poet, playwright and author of short stories, Thomas is a founding member of the Edmonton Stroll of Poets and a Founding Father of the Raving Poets movement. Thomas lives in Edmonton.

Interview

Edify

edifiedmonton.com

January 5, 2023

Imagine this. You're a 20-something college student taking night classes to get your degree in professional writing. One night, your teacher invites a local author to speak to the class about what his writing life is like. A thousand words a day, he says, no matter what. Rain, shine, sickness or Christmas — until the word count breaks a grand, the day isn't done. That's what his writing life is like.

Now imagine 15 years later. You're a magazine writer producing about a thousand words per week, interviewing that author about his new book over a shared plate of fries. You bring up your college memory, which he vaguely recalls.

"I'm up to 1,500 words," he says, "but that's only when I'm working on a novel. Did I also tell the class how when I first started writing, I thought women were gonna swoon and I was gonna get laid a lot?" He grabs a fry. "That didn't happen."

However many words he tallies daily, Thomas Trofimuk writes a lot — he didn't even notice me approach the table as he scribbled in his notebook. Between novels, instructing at YouthWrite and sending out his weekly short story *Sorbet* newsletter (which often starts by telling the reader to *imagine this*), the self-described "failed Buddhist" is always writing — or helping others write — another story to send out into the world.

The story of his latest novel is simple, in one sense: There's an elephant on a bridge, and it needs to escape. But the bridge is in Prague, Czechia, a city of over a million people, and *The Elephant on Karlův Bridge* tells damn near every one of their stories (or at least the stories of the people hanging around the bridge).

We start with the bridge itself, which has a centuries-old voice as a secondary, intermittent narrator that opens the book and many chapters. We meet the zoo's nightwatchman, who wasn't watching when Sal the elephant escaped. Then we meet his psychologist wife, who's thinking about having a baby — and about her ballet dancer client who's been discussing the nearing end of her career with a long-dead, legendary ballerina. We meet three sisters whose cab, in a rush to get them to the hospital to visit their dying father, hits a street-performing clown. And we meet the clown.

There's the former special forces lieutenant now guarding the pregnant body of an ultra-rich socialite, both of whom have "issues with morality." Through the internal voice of Sal, and his elephant ancestors, we hear stories and hymns about African elephant life and find out how this one ended up in Prague to begin with. There's a conductor and a choir. There are fantasies, memories and affairs scattered across the single-degree stories that give a 360-view of the story of an elephant escaping a bridge.

If it sounds confusing, don't worry. A time-and-world-spanning story bricked together by a bunch of seemingly bonus stories is part of Trofimuk's style, and he's at the height of his engineering powers. "I'm not sure I'll write another book with this many characters — I really don't know," he says. "But I love when I read a book and I notice

one little detail from way back in the beginning reverberates at the end, and so I tried to do that. But even if you're just reading it for the stories alone, it still works."

The main narrative idea came from Edmonton, nearly a century ago. "There was a really bad circus that came to Edmonton in 1926, around the beginning of August. A dog spooked the herd of 14 elephants, and they ran down Jasper Avenue. Eventually, they contained them, except for one that roamed Edmonton for an entire day. And I just thought, *How the fuck do you lose an elephant?*"

Then the research started. Trofimuk spent a day with Lucy the elephant at the Valley Zoo, and longer on Google Street View, virtually wandering the many streets and bridges in Prague until he picked the Karlův. He used the life experience of watching a knee injury force his daughter out of dance classes after eight years, then sought out new experiences by going to clown school, where he "learned that clowns never try to be funny, they try to be *honest*, and they're self-centred about it," and seeing a psychiatrist, which "after three sessions, I found that I fucking loved it — for an entire hour someone was focused on me!"

So, five novels in, what would the author advise a new class of young writers to do, if they want to become better writers? "Don't hang out with other writers. Because you'll just get drunk and get in trouble. If you want to become a better writer, hang out with *readers* — and *listen* to them."

Trofimuk listened to six beta readers for this novel, all women, "because if you look at the demographics of who's actually reading novels today, it's mostly women. My market is young and middle-aged women." I say that reminds me of advice from another author, who said that as writers, we aren't competing with each other, we're competing with people who *don't read*.

"That's a good point," Trofimuk says as the young woman serving us takes our empty plate and passes the machine. While we awkwardly wait for the receipt to print, I make small talk by asking if she's a big book reader.

"No, not really," she replies.

Imagine that.

Discussion Questions

1. The author took inspiration for the novel from a 1926 news story in which a small dog startled a group of circus elephants and then ran off sending the roads of his home city of Edmonton into a panic.

Why do you think the author, a local Edmonton writer, chose to set the story in Prague and not his home city?

2. A rampaging elephant with no back story could still have thwarted attacks or been enough of a spectacle to set the novel's events in motion. Why do you think that the elephant has a personal story that is as authentic and complex as the other characters?
3. The emotional core of the book rests with its many characters. Are there any characters that you can relate to? Is there one that has stayed with you or left you wondering or even worried about what happened to them after you put the book down?
4. When Hild (Sál) begins singing a mourning psalm as a newborn, Mira is puzzled by how an elephant so young could know the melody. She questions, "Was she born grieving?"

What does this tell us about the power of holding ancestral knowledge that elephants in the book might have?

5. Throughout the novel, the Bridge reminds us that its duty is to get *you* safely from one side of the river to the other side. Do you think the bridge succeed at this?

As a reader, what other purposes, if any, did the bridge serve?

6. The elephant's journey is a narrative thread from which the author spins a web of interconnected stories that involve a cast of characters who are related to one another.

Were there any relationships between characters that were deeply significant to the story? Were there any that were inconsequential or frivolous?

7. In a moment of subdued rage, Tomáš *hears* his therapist (Marta) whispering in his ear "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves." What are your thoughts on this statement? Discuss.
8. Sárka is encouraged by her therapist (Marta) to continue talking to Anna to get to the bottom of what could be troubling her. Do you think Anna helps her in the end? Do you think Sárka is as "crazy" as she self-professes?
9. The elephant Mira refers to humans as *The Lost Ones* because they always seemed "misplaced, and uneasy – they were so far from the River."

Do you think the characters in the novel are lost or misplaced?

10. In defence of a lull in his progress, Vasha evades Marta's question about his writing with the response, "I'm reading right now. Because you can't write if you don't read."

Is there anything in your life that is linked to reading in such a way that you cannot do it if you are not reading?

11. In the last chapter, we leave Sál floating in the Vltava River as she attempts to chart a course to her home. Mira's voice can also be heard by Sál as she floats into the darkness, possibly out of the city of Prague toward the North Sea.

What do you think happened to Sál in the end?