

BOOKS



HAIKU YOU B.C. Premier **Gordon Campbell** has submitted a haiku (with a 5-7-5 syllable pattern) to the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival's Haiku Invitational. It reads: "Mountainous province / Lions smile on the city / Warm friendships blossom." Although the festival celebrating Vancouver's 36,000 cherry trees is three months away, its haiku contest closes Jan. 7, 2009. More than 1,000 entries have come in, including some from the Hawaiian town of Haiku. Remember, it's a three-line poem in 17 syllables or fewer. See vcbf.ca.

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ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

BIOGRAPHY | In the late 1800s, English actor Henry Irving managed London's Lyceum Theatre. He and his leading lady, Ellen Terry, did much to give acting a good name. Michael Holroyd tells their story



A STRANGE EVENTFUL HISTORY
The Dramatic Lives of
Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and
Their Remarkable Families
BY MICHAEL HOLROYD
Chatto & Windus/Random House
of Canada, 620 pages (\$45)

BY JONATHAN BATE

It must have been in about 1920 that my grandmother was pushing my aunt's pram down Tenterden High Street. They bumped into the elderly Ellen Terry, who leaned over the pram and said, "What sweet little red cheeks! They're just like rosebuds." My aunt thus became known as Bud for the rest of her days.

My grandparents were extremely respectable middle-class folk, the sort of people who in generations past would have regarded actors as glorified vagabonds and actresses as little better than whores.

But Ellen Terry they adored. Soon she was to become a dame, and when she died in 1928 there was national mourning of Churchillian proportions. It's no exaggeration to say that she and her stage partner, Henry Irving, transformed the social status of the theatrical profession.

Neither of them had auspicious beginnings. Terry was born into a family of itinerant actors and played Mamillius in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* when she was nine.

Seven years later, she was married to the pre-Raphaelite painter G.F. Watts, a man three times her age. He purportedly "couldn't do very much, but liked to fumble about." He did, however, manage some ravishing paintings of his child bride, clothed and unclothed.

A *Strange Eventful History*, Michael Holroyd's biography of Terry, Irving and their children, is at its best in a mordant account of how Terry was made unwelcome by the redoubtable Mrs. Prinsep, who managed Watts and his household and sniffed disapprovingly about the girl in letters to her equally redoubtable American friend, the Honourable Mrs. Edward Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes.

Naturally, the marriage didn't last, and before long Ellen was living with a bohemian architect and interior designer, E.W. Godwin. Renunciation of the stage had been a condition of the marriage to Watts. The financial necessity of a retreat to the boards was the consequence of Godwin's fecklessness.

Irving, meanwhile, was born John Henry Brodribb to Methodist teetotal stock. Brought up in a Cornish backwater, he left school at 13 and became an actor through sheer hard work, shedding his unstageworthy surname along the way. He achieved fame in a highly strung drama called *The Bells* and followed it up with a *Hamlet* that ran for an unprecedented 200 performances.

Before long, he was running the Lyceum Theatre, converting it into something like a genuine National Theatre, pleasing all classes with a repertoire that mixed Shakespeare, spectacle and contemporary melodrama.

Ellen Terry was his leading lady on stage and his intimate friend off it. They were both separated from the partners with whom they had children, but they were probably not lovers, contrary to thousand-tongued rumour. The irregularity of their relationship meant that William Gladstone's cabinet overruled the prime minister's first attempt to make Irving a knight.

When he did finally become Sir Henry in



Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth, an 1889 painting by John Singer Sargent.

1895, the acting life was given a respectability it had never had before.

Holroyd also tells the story of the Irving and Terry children. The most interesting of them was Gordon Craig, Ellen's son by God-

win. He fathered 13 children by eight women and had a tempestuous relationship with the dancer Isadora Duncan.

Holroyd reproduces the telegram Duncan sent him when her two children were



Henry Irving as painted by Jules Bastien-Lepage, 1880.

drowned in a freak car accident, bizarrely anticipating her own famous death by scarf-strangulation at the wheel of a sportscar on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice.

Craig and Duncan can justly be claimed as progenitors of what is now called "physical theatre" — that is to say, they believed an actor's body was as important as his or her voice and that drama should bring together the arts of music, dance and costume design. Craig was indeed the pioneering theatre designer of modern times. Think of, say, the wedding scene in *Much Ado about Nothing*. In Irving's theatre, the action would stop while stagehands brought on a full-size replica church. In Craig's, the setting was simply evoked by diagonal streams of coloured light from an unseen stained-glass window illuminating a vast, partially obscured crucifix.

That's the sort of thing we are used to in the theatre today.

Holroyd (married, since 1982, to the novelist Margaret Drabble) writes with all his customary panache and benefits from many a gorgeous theatrical anecdote, such as the story about how, when Irving became Sir Henry, the company started calling Ellen "Lady Darling."

But the actor biography is a difficult genre. In writing the lives of Tyrton Strachey and George Bernard Shaw, Holroyd could quote their writings; for Augustus John, he could show us the paintings. But Irving's *Hamlet* and Terry's *Lady Macbeth* can never be recaptured. Actors, as Shakespeare said, are all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air.

Holroyd is sometimes shaky on his theatre history, as when he calls Hannah Cowley's brilliant comedy, *The Belle's Stratagem*, a Restoration play. (It was actually written a century later.)

Such lapses don't really matter, but it would have been possible to evoke more of the life of the theatre. We hear little of the rehearsal process, of how Irving would have learned his parts on "sides" — a convention going back to Shakespearean times whereby actors were given not full scripts but just their own lines and cue words.

Similarly with the business side: Irving's success with the Lyceum owed an immense amount to his indefatigable front-of-house manager, Bram Stoker, whose innovations included advance reservations, numbered seats and season-long planning.

Although *A Strange Eventful History* contains some good pages about how Irving was reluctant to stage a dramatization of Stoker's *Dracula*, perhaps because he saw a somewhat unflattering version of himself in the character, the book fails to get its teeth into the intriguing figure of Stoker.

Sunday Telegraph

JUST IN TIME, A 2008 TITLE TO RAVE ABOUT

BY ROBERT J. WIERSEMA

I was beginning to become concerned. Usually by the time December rolls around, I've long since found my favourite book of the year and have been happily extolling its virtues to readers, customers — well, anyone who will listen, really — for weeks.

This year was different. I've read many fine books (among them, Richard Price's *Lush Life*, Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, Jonathan Carroll's *The Ghost in Love* and Kelly Link's *Pretty Monsters*) but nothing that made me feel that this was the book against which all other 2008 titles would be measured.

I was dreading the thought of having to compile a list, weigh the pros and cons, and name a favourite when nothing was a clear standout.

And then I read Roberto Bolaño's dazzling new novel, *2666*. I knew, before I was even halfway through, that I had found this year's best book, at long last.

The second half of the novel only built on that initial good showing.



2666
BY ROBERTO BOLANO
FSG/Douglas & McIntyre,
912 pages, available in
hardcover and paperback (\$33)

It's something of a bittersweet discovery, though. Bolaño, who was born in Chile (though he spent much of his life in Mexico), died of liver failure in 2003, at the age of 50. Although he was celebrated as one of the foremost writers of his generation in the Spanish-speaking world, he was largely unknown to English readers until the publication last year of *The Savage Detectives*. That book, which won almost universal critical praise, created a significant cult of readers.

Bolaño spent more than five years working on the mammoth *2666* (there's much speculation on the meaning of the title, since the num-

ber doesn't appear in it at all), delivering the almost-complete first draft to his publisher shortly before his death. The book was published posthumously in Spanish in 2004 to sustained critical approval.

Originally intended by the author to be five separate novels, it has been published in English as one work in five parts. Essays have been written on this choice to go against Bolaño's wishes, but I have a hard time imagining that it would work as well spread over five books.

As it stands, *2666* is very nearly perfect — a dizzying phantasmagoria of narrative, philosophy, violence, humour, despair, loss, love, war, history. It's not an exaggeration to claim that it contains whole worlds.

And they're five disparate, but connected, worlds. Each section has its own approach, while at the same time linking with the others.

Thus, the opening section, "The Part About the Critics," deals with four European academics falling under the thrall of mysterious German writer Benno von Archimboldi. When they pursue him to Santa Teresa, Mex-

ico, they meet Oscar Amalfitano, the subject of the second section. And so on.

The constants, across the book, are the enigmatic figure of Archimboldi (whose story is told in the final section) and the city of Santa Teresa. Modelled on Juárez, Mexico, it's one of the most violent cities in the world, a hell on earth where hundreds of young women have disappeared over the last 20 years. (This succession of crimes is explored in gut-wrenching detail in the fourth section.)

Perhaps not surprisingly, *2666* can't be adequately described in a brief review. Suffice it to say that despite its underlying complexities, it is utterly accessible. It's a fundamentally human novel, rooted as much in character and emotion as in ideas and ambition. It will surprise, and satisfy, and terrify, often on a single page.

It is a towering achievement and a poignant reminder of a major talent, Roberto Bolaño, tragically gone before we had a chance to know him.

Victoria author/bookseller Robert J. Wiersema last reviewed *Giles Blunt's No Such Creature*.