

Writing this book purged him of his childhood fears

Story & Photo
By Dan Davidson

James FitzGerald, the most recent Berton House writer-in-residence spent his early career working in the book publishing field and as a journalist, writing for a variety of Canadian newspapers and magazines.

There were always demons lurking in his personal background, and he began to explore them in the 1990s, leading to the publication of his first book, an oral history entitled *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College (1994)*. This was a controversial inside look at the attitudes and values of English Canada's ruling class families, among which James had grown up. Revelations of sexual abuse of boys at the school, first published in the book, led to the conviction of three former teachers and a successful multi-million dollar class action suit against UCC.

With his second book, *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son's Quest to Redeem the Past (2010)*, FitzGerald moved into the realm of creative non-fiction, producing a memoir dealing with the lives of his father and grandfather, both of whom were physicians whose successful careers ended in ways that made them taboo subjects within the medical community.

His grandfather, Gerald, in particular, was a pioneer in the study and practice of hygiene and had as associates such luminaries as Banting and Best. The Connaught Antitoxin Laboratories and University Farm, which he helped to found, did groundbreaking work in the cure of diphtheria and the production of tetanus antitoxin during World War I, and other vaccines later on.

In spite of this, Dr. John Gerald FitzGerald's life fell apart, his mind broke and he tried to take his own life with an overdose of Nembutal tablets. A year later, while still in hospital after a second similar attempt, he slashed his femoral artery with the knife provided with his meal, repeatedly stabbing at himself, bleeding out and dying at the age of 57.

His name was never spoken in the FitzGerald household, in the home he had built, when FitzGerald was a boy, and the first he knew that there was a problem was when, at the age of 6, he told his mother he would like to change his name to Gerry, a name that simply was not mentioned in the family except

as part of the surname. Who was this invisible grandfather?

Later, he would watch his father, Jack, an unhappy though successful doctor who he thinks would have been happier managing a jazz club, descend into depression, attempt to take his own life, and live out the rest of it with what was left of his mind ruined by repeated electro shock "treatments".

When he learned that one great uncle had also committed suicide, and another had been given electro shock treatments for depression, he began to worry about his own possible link to what he called "Irish madness" in an essay called "Sins of the Father", which is still available on a number of websites, including the one connected to the firm that now owns Connaught Labs.

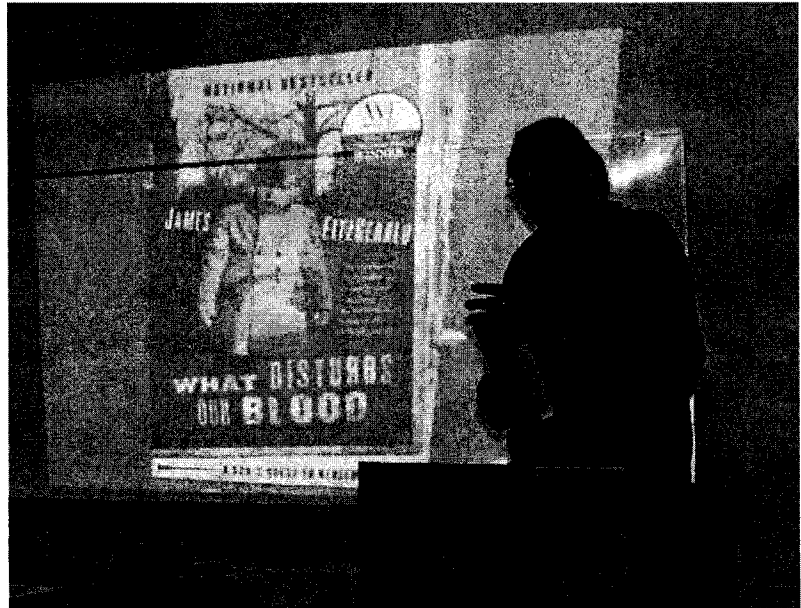
FitzGerald, who had avoided the family curse of pursuing the career that was expected of him, found himself obsessed with the story neither he nor his siblings had ever been told, and certain that there was to be found in that mystery some sort of answer to the problems that had plagued two generations.

To his audience of about two dozen at the Dawson Community Library, James read some of the more dramatic passages of his memoir, and spoke about the risks inherent in digging into family history the way he was determined to do. Some of his progress at this was simple hard work, but the key to unlocking the narrative came when in 1995, he chanced upon a cache of letters his grandfather had written during his last year in the hospital. There were 60 letters, filled with despair and guilt, repetitive and yet informative.

Then there was a dream FitzGerald had, a haunting dream that seemed to him to symbolize his quest. He described it to the audience and in the essay.

"Not long before I began to plumb my grandfather's life, I dreamt that a doctor in a white lab coat took a scalpel and made a deep, vertical incision down the middle of my face, releasing a violent torrent of water. Was it an uncanny, pre-cognitive allusion to my grandfather's lethal, self-inflicted wound? A symbol of the accumulated generations of untapped grief of which I was the contemporary carrier?"

FitzGerald doesn't have much use for traditional psychotherapies, and spoke with some intensity of the benefits of a simple but earnest



James FitzGerald at his public reading at the Dawson Community Library.

talking cure, which is a process he has undergone. It did him more good than all the drugs and shock treatments that were administered to his ancestors.

It may seem a rather dated philosophy now, but he believes that finding your bliss, making the most of a life that you find fulfilling, is the best therapy of all. Both of his parents were trapped in lives they did not really want and the result was unhappiness for both them and their children.

For him, writing that book was a purging, almost an exorcism, of the negative detritus from his childhood.

James worried about the

repercussions of writing this book, given that it caused him to dig so deeply into the secret history of his own family. He was especially concerned about how his sister, who once barged in on his father while he was attempting to kill himself, would react to the book. As it turned out, her response was very positive, and they are closer now than they ever were.

The book was the winner of the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction in 2010.

A good deal of the post-reading discussion dealt with the inadequacy of the "medical model" when it

comes to dealing with peoples' emotional problems. FitzGerald has spent a good deal of time over the last several years speaking to groups of medical and psychiatric specialists and he reported that what he has to tell them about how badly he feels they are failing their patients has many of them squirming in their seats.

His project while at Berton House has been an even more personal memoir called *Dreaming Sally*. During his stay in Dawson he learned that the project proposal had been accepted by his publisher.



Berton House was a mind-expanding experience for Fitzgerald

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As James Fitzgerald moves further towards the actual writing of his next book, *Dreaming Sally*, a tale of young love and tragedy, he realizes that his chosen style, that of writing non-fiction using the techniques of fiction, leave him wondering how to deal with the dialogue in events that took place nearly 40 years ago.

Fitzgerald has been fascinated with creative non-fiction since he was exposed to the early pioneering work of writers like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, all of whom blended the techniques of the journalism and fiction in their work.

While his first book, *Old Boys: The Powerful Legacy of Upper Canada College*, is best described as an oral history, for his second book, *What Disturbs Our Blood: A Son's Quest to Redeem the Past*, he blended a number of different genres into one powerful narrative.

Part memoir, part biography, part mystery, part personal therapy and part history, the book not only deals with Fitzgerald's inner demons, and those of his father and grandfather, but also reveals an almost forgotten chapter in the history of Canadian public health.

"These worlds (and styles) meeting is a fascinating thing," he said as we chatted during the last few days of his residence at Berton House.

He says that what he's been seeking in this style is emotional truth.

"That's ultimately what you're looking for - something that rings true and affects people in a universal way. You know when it's working because people are all going (he nodded). They're all identifying - right? If it didn't interest them they would be bored and nod off."

He hasn't found many people doing that during his readings from *What Disturbs Our Blood*.

The other big risk in creative non-fiction is that the writer may be dealing with people who are still alive. In *What Disturbs Our Blood*, Fitzgerald worried about alienating his sister, who had had to deal with his father's attempted suicide as a young woman. Fortunately, she responded well, and he says they are closer now than they had been for years.

Working on *Dreaming Sally*, he has had to consider the feelings and experiences of a group of his peers, those were on the bus when Sally was killed, particularly the young man who was the driver that day.

"I've interviewed all of the (people who were on the bus) that day, except (the driver)."

When he did finally call him to talk about the accident, the man didn't want to be interviewed about it.

"I have six versions of what happened that day and they're all different. I told him I would write a version and that I would send him a draft. He agreed to that."

Fitzgerald credits Berton House and Dawson with opening his mind, letting him delve more deeply into himself and getting a better sense of the country. But he wasn't sure about any of that when his application was accepted.

"Going in one of my concerns - one of my standard jokes to people - was that I was going to turn into Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* (the movie version) and be metaphorically frozen in the snow bank."

He spent his childhood waking up in the dark in an emotionally and physically cold house and he really didn't want that to happen here.

"What I didn't get in the original experience was all these warm people around me. The arc of my experience here has been that I'm so glad I did it. This place just seems to be built for it (a positive experience). I can see why it is the way it is - especially in the winter."

He was amazed by the depth

of the artistic community in the town, and also by the number of first rate performances he was able to attend, in places as varied as peoples' living rooms, the offices of a landscaper, and the Oddfellows Hall.

"Getting to see Martha Wainwright here was probably a better experience that I would have had in Toronto, being that close to the stage and that personal."

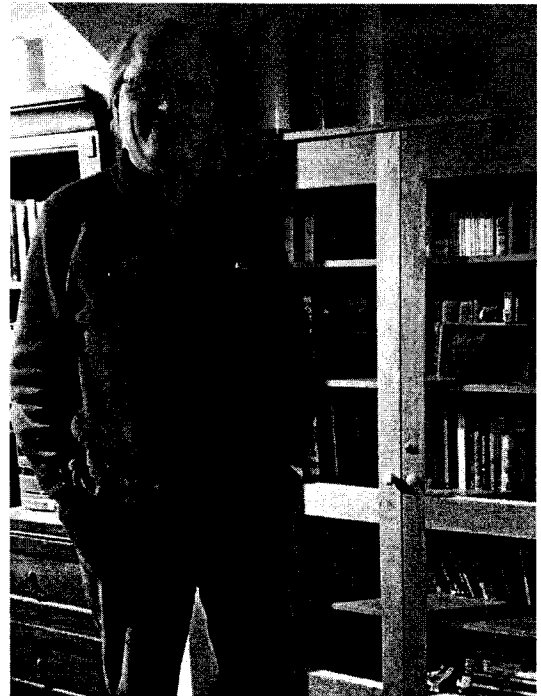
"You can't invent that, and you can't transplant that anywhere else."

"Berton House has worked brilliantly for me. I was told I could write 2 words or a book or nothing. Berton's strategy, which has worked great on me, was to Canadianize the writer - consciousness expanding through experience. All that stuff like the spell of the Yukon - it's kind of mythologized - but I actually experienced it."

That Random House accepted his *Dreaming Sally* proposal while he was here was just some Yukon frosting on the cake of his experience.

"Mid-stream here I get the 'Yes', so now I can really hit the ground running. Here you can be a workaholic recluse or not - but it's set up so you can make the choice."

He holds fond memories of going to the Arctic Circle,



James Fitzgerald developed a fresh appreciation for the genius of Pierre Berton while dipping into the Berton bookcase at Berton House.

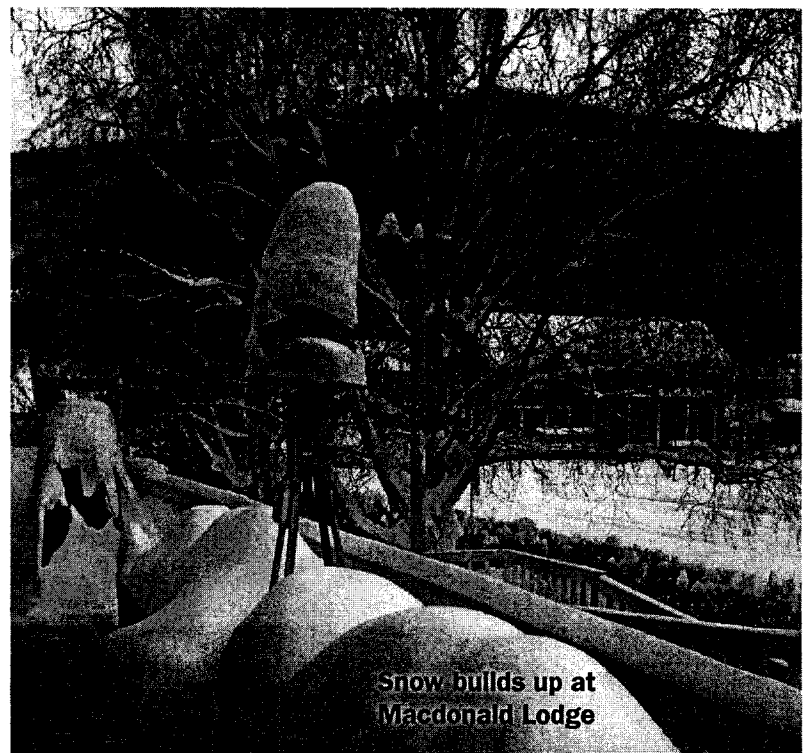
visiting the paddlewheel graveyard, Dredge No. 4 and Discovery Claim, and even what turned out to be a very dangerous drive on an icy hill up to the Midnight Dome and down again.

"The only thing I've missed is the Aurora."

Writing, he says, can be very hard work, something a lot of

people don't realize. There's almost an expectation that you have to suffer for your art.

"The pleasurable aspects of it were coming to me here much more readily and it has much more of a flow. I'm conscious of carrying the good vibe back with me on the plane and working with it."



Snow builds up at Macdonald Lodge

The Yukon Council on disABILITY

We have opened a new office in Dawson City to assist persons with disabilities in the community!

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CONTACT US: New office at 137, 2nd Ave. In the new town building. Also by phone: 867-993-2372 (look for North 42 sign on all signage on application)

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