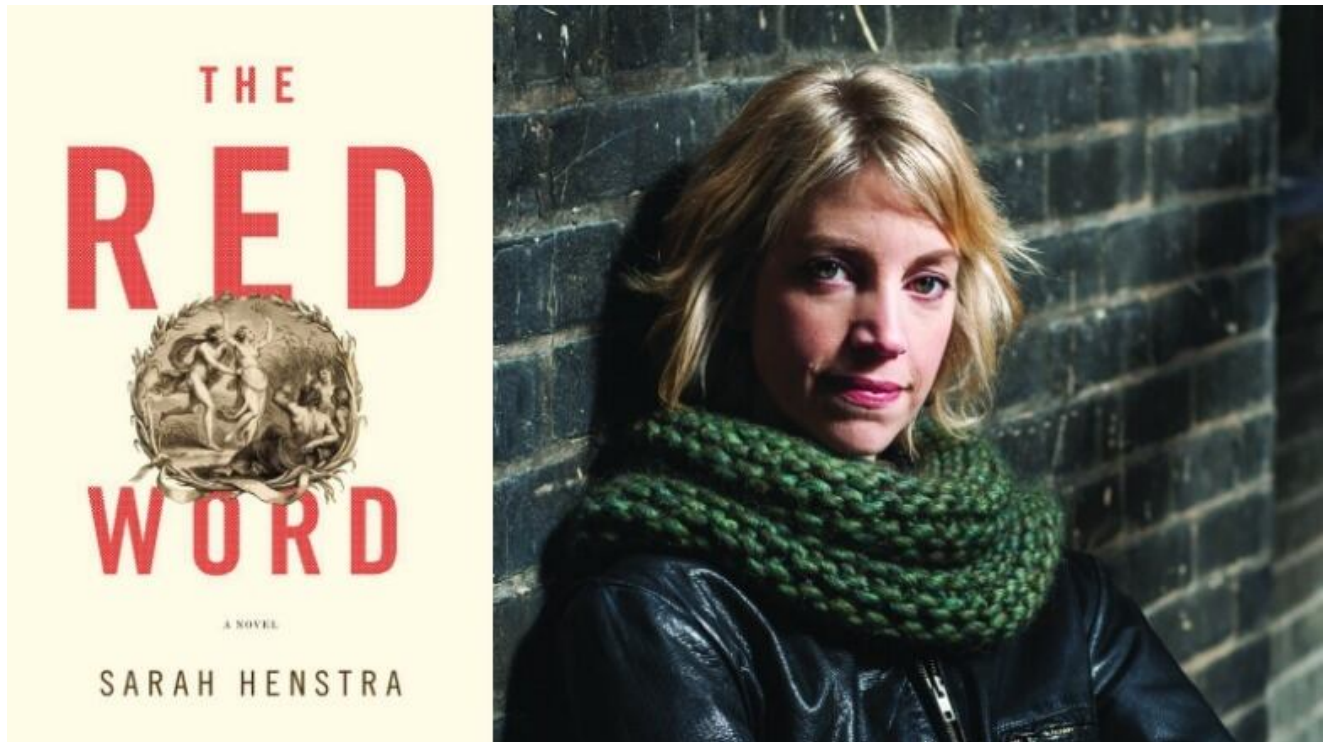


# Why Governor General's Literary Award winner Sarah Henstra keeps writing

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The Red Word is Sarah Henstra's first work of adult fiction. (Grove Press, ECW Press)

Sarah Henstra is a novelist and English professor at Ryerson University. Her first book was the young adult novel *Mad Miss Mimic*, which came out in 2015. *The Red Word* is her latest, it's a novel about a college sophomore who must deal with the aftermath of waking up one night on the front lawn of a notorious party fraternity.

*The Red Word* won the 2018 Governor General's Literary Award for fiction.

Below, Henstra takes the CBC Books Magic 8 Q&A and answers eight questions from eight fellow writers.

## 1. Melanie Mah asks, "Who are some of your favourite writers?"

My favourite writers are those who inhabit that sweet spot between everyday, vivid, granular detail and wildly fantastical or transcendent elements: A.S. Byatt, Anne Carson, Robertson Davies, Elizabeth Hand, Doris Lessing, Helen Oyeyemi, Marilynne Robinson, George Saunders, Ali Smith and Jeanette Winterson.

**2. Ahmad Danny Ramadan asks, "How do you build your characters? Do they come to you before you write your first draft or are they formed as you write them?"**

Before I begin a new novel, I try to work out what each of my characters wants. Having a clear sense of what everybody is seeking in the story is my starting point for generating conflicts, a.k.a. plot. The characters start to come to life, once I'm writing the first draft, through their interactions with each other. The way they speak, the sides they take in disagreements, the gestures they make — these are the characteristic details that emerge, often surprisingly, as the story progresses.

Once I have this clearer picture, as I continue to move forward in the draft I'll work a little more consciously to keep the characters consistent and recognizable. Revisions for me are often about reworking one or more of the "character arcs" to achieve the right balance of consistency and change/growth for each character.

**3. Jesse Jacobs asks, "Do you enjoy the act of writing, or is it a painful process?"**

One of the great breakthroughs of my writing career was the realization that I was never going to enjoy the actual act of writing, no matter how many novels I wrote. Those writers who say, "The book just poured out of me" or "I just had to tune in and take it down..." I hate those writers. The only sign of a successful writing session for me is that I sort of lose track of time. I'll look up from my laptop screen and suddenly realize that I have to pick up my kid from school, my tea has gotten cold, I'm starving and I really need to pee... It's like resurfacing from a dream that I don't even remember very clearly.

So, not exactly a euphoric experience, no. But afterwards! After a few hours of writing, if I've managed to meet my word count goal — if there's something, anything, on the page, quality notwithstanding — that's what feels amazing. The whole rest of the day I walk around feeling omnipotent, benevolent, giddy as if I've won a prize. That's the high that keeps me coming back to the page day after day to do it all over again: the enjoyment of having written.

**4. Lawrence Hill asks, "What do you do to steady your mind (if your mind is capable of being steadied), so that you can shut out the world and write?"**

Yep, this is half (90 per cent?) of the battle: showing up to the writing desk and staying there rather than jumping up after five minutes to check email, put laundry in, mark papers, order more dog food, etc. I do a lot of my writing in cafes, because a café is noisier, busier, less comfortable and more expensive than my house. At a café, I'm forced to block out the distractions. I put my phone on airplane mode, listen to music or white noise in my earbuds and slog through my word count for the day so I can get out of there, already! Ideally one of my writing friends will meet me at the café and sit across from me with her notebook or laptop to ensure I'm not surreptitiously checking Instagram.

**5. Peter Robinson asks, "What do you think is the value of creative writing classes?"**

I have only taken a few formal creative writing workshops (most recently, a poetry workshop with Hoa Nguyen), but I've taught creative writing classes at Ryerson University and for the Toronto Public Library. People say that creative writing talent can't be taught, and I agree that a class cannot stand in for constant, extensive, cross-genre reading as the best training for writers. But a class can help you develop good writing practices (e.g., how to meet a deadline, how to revise your work). And it can introduce you to a variety of fellow writers who, if you're savvy about staying in touch and/or organizing a writing group, can become long-term writing buddies, early readers of your work, and cheerleaders.

**6. Jordan Tannahill asks, "What is the worst sentence you've written that made its way into print?"**

My PhD dissertation was published as a scholarly monograph entitled *The Counter-Memorial Impulse in Twentieth-Century English Fiction*, so I have many, many bad sentences from which to choose. Here's one: "Pursuing a formulation of English, rather than British, national culture leads to the assertion that 'Englishness' is so completely imbricated in the enterprise of imperialism — historically politically, rhetorically — as to be inseparable from it." And another: "The emphasis on consensus and civilized acceptance over systematic rule or principled exclusion echoes the putatively unmethodical and unenforced structures of Englishness in general." Please don't ask me to explain what this means, because I do not know.

**7. Liz Harmer asks, "What is a non-writing hobby you have or activity you like that you think feeds your writing?"**

Great question! I sometimes think certain non-writing activities are every bit as important as the writing because without "filling the well" of my creativity I would burn out on writing FAST. I enjoy looking at visual art and reading about visual artists' process; the AGO is a great place to wander around when feeling uninspired. I live in downtown Toronto, and while I love the vibrancy (and cycle-ability!) of urban life, it's important for me to get out of the city once or twice a month and find some wide-open space: a hayfield, a forest trail, a beach. And I like getting my hands dirty, too, especially by gardening. I just built a DIY garbage/recycling bin shelter for my front walk with a little green roof. I can't wait to plant it up with sedums and other low-maintenance greenery.

**8. Sandra Perron asks, "Do you have regrets?"**

Sometimes I regret not committing to my writing when I was younger. I dreamed of being a writer from my early teens, but I was too busy with school, work, marriage, babies, etc. to develop a regular writing practice until I was in my mid-30s. I was a real hoop-jumper, in the sense that I sought external validation for my endeavours and chose endeavours at which I

was pretty sure I could succeed. Writers are not hoop-jumpers. Writers are risk-takers who turn their backs on what society wants them to do and go inward, go deep, to figure out what they want to say and how to say it. Needless to say it has been a great adventure and an immense joy to discover the writer in myself.