

Award-winning authors on borders, real and imagined

 cbc.ca/radio/ideas/award-winning-authors-on-borders-real-and-imagined-1.4942568

***This episode originally aired December 12, 2018,*

Borders are everywhere. They're also a central topic in politics, media, and public conversation, as migrants and refugees continue to arrive on the figurative doorsteps of the nations that they hope will give them a chance at better lives.

All around these dividing lines, there blooms debate and defensiveness, as well as the threat of desperation, separation, and violence.

These geographic borders are on the minds of many, including some of Canada's top writers. But boundaries of other kinds enter their work as well, as IDEAS discovered in teaming up with CBC Books and the Canada Council for the Arts for our annual thematic challenge to some of the English-language winners of 2018 Governor General's Literary Awards.

Darrel J. McLeod, who received the nonfiction prize for his memoir *Mamaskatch*, reflects on the lines around racial and ethnic identity in his personal essay, *Spanning Borders*.

His inclusive but observant sense of "the other" came from many sources: his endlessly curious Cree mother, the knowledge of his own mixed Cree-Métis ancestry, and experiencing communities, schools, and workplaces in which he was seen as an outlier.

The way borders operate in Greek myth are a source of fascination for **Sarah Henstra**, author of the fiction award-winning novel, *The Red Word*. Her story, *Perseus/Andromeda/Medusa*, explores the tension between a Greek hero and the woman he has rescued from sacrifice. L

Like snake-headed Medusa, a 'monster' that Perseus has killed and whose head he uses as a weapon, Andromeda develops a power that overwhelms men. She draws Perseus across the borders of his own identity, in an erotic erasure of their difference.

Jonathan Auxier looks inside himself for his consideration of borders. The GG winner in the young people's literature — text category for his novel *Sweep*, Auxier has a typical writer's temperament, and often wants to be left alone by others.

That led him to write a cautionary tale called *Vanishing Point*, about a girl who finds a magical pencil that allows her to draw boundaries and simply wall things off, therefore avoiding the many irritations of daily life. Ultimately, she finds just about everything irritating, including herself.

Political borders were the impetus for a poem called *Bare Witness* by writer/director and performer **Jordan Tannahill**. He is a Drama category winner at the 2018 GGs for his plays *Botticelli in the Fire* & *Sunday in Sodom*.

“Democracy is obviously more fragile than maybe any of us cared to imagine, as are all the attendant civil liberties that we've enjoyed with democracy. And we must be vigilant and we must act now in this moment to ensure that Canada...and the States don't follow the lead of countries elsewhere.” - *Jordan Tannahill*

He's currently living in Budapest, and is protesting alongside thousands of Hungarians against President Viktor Orban government's crackdown on refugees, minorities, and liberal educational institutions like the Central European University.

He began writing his poem around the idea of bearing witness through protest, which then morphed into the idea of a "bare witness" — a defiant act in which a person's body is a final site of resistance.

Tannahill grew emotional as he reflected on the recent photograph of a refugee woman and her two small children running from tear gas at the Mexico-U.S. border. But he is certain on what to do, as the world grows ever more troubled.

More about the authors and their books:

- Darrel J. McLeod
- Sarah Henstra
- Jonathan Auxier
- Jordan Tannahill

***This episode was produced by Lisa Godfrey.*