



Findley, Timothy (1930-2002)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Award-winning Canadian writer Timothy Findley produced works in a number of genres, including plays, novels, and short stories. While his works are impossible to pigeon-hole, they often examine the nature of power in society and the struggle of people to understand and achieve what is right.

Timothy Irving Frederick Findley--"Tiff" to his friends--was born into a prosperous Toronto family on October 30, 1930 and grew up in the fashionable Rosedale section of the city. His father was the first person outside of the founding families to head the Massey-Ferguson company. His mother's family had a piano factory.

Although Findley grew up in a privileged environment, his childhood was far from happy. Under the influence of alcohol his father frequently terrorized Findley's mother and older brother. Findley himself generally escaped his wrath, but, in the words of journalist Alec Scott, "vicarious scar tissue developed nonetheless" in the sensitive young boy.

Findley suffered from poor health as a child. He nearly died of pneumonia in his second year, and shortly thereafter he was confined to an oxygen tent due to complications of an ear infection.

Findley was a bookish youth who loved creating his own worlds of make-believe. He was not, however, a particularly avid student. He dropped out of high school at the age of sixteen in order to study ballet.

A fused disc put an end to Findley's hopes of a career in dance, and he turned to acting. When he won a small role in Shakespeare's *Richard III* at the inaugural season of the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare Festival in 1953, he met Alec Guinness. Impressed by young Findley's potential, Guinness coached him for his performance and then sponsored his further training at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

Findley was soon appearing in productions in the city's West End, including Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* (1954). The show starred Ruth Gordon, to whom Findley showed a short story that he had written. She shared the story with Wilder, who urged Findley to try his hand at playwriting. Although Wilder did not consider Findley's first attempt a success, he nevertheless encouraged him, saying, "I do not mince words, but neither do I mince writers. You are a writer."

After a brief stint in Hollywood, where he attempted unsuccessfully to become a screenwriter, Findley returned to Canada in 1958, where he worked on his writing but also continued to act in order to make his living. While he was appearing in a drama for the CBC television network he met an actress named Janet Reid, whom he married in 1958.

The union was a disaster and ended after only three months. During the divorce proceedings Findley, who had never hidden his homosexuality, suffered humiliating treatment from his wife's attorney and from the judge. The former demanded that his genitals be examined to determine if he was "normal," and the latter flippantly told him, "You don't know what you're missing."

An encounter during another CBC production had a much happier ending after Findley met writer/producer William Whitehead in 1961. A week later, Findley recounted in a 2002 interview, "Bill invited me over to his place to watch television, and I never left." The two remained devoted companions until Findley's death.

Whitehead provided much-needed stability for Findley, who had developed a serious alcohol addiction. Whitehead helped him overcome it and also gave him the security to devote himself to writing full-time. In addition, Whitehead typed all of Findley's handwritten manuscripts.

The couple--and their menagerie of dozens of cats and several dogs--lived for over three decades on a farm called Stone Orchard in Cannington, Ontario before moving to Stratford in the early 1990s. Around the same time they bought a house in Provence and thereafter split their time between the two residences.

When asked in a 2000 interview if he and Whitehead had created the perfect marriage, Findley replied, "If such a thing exists, I think we've done it. Because it's in our equal determination to persist and not give up on the negatives--my drinking, the occasional dabble with another person on his part The basic love is so absolute, there would be no life without him as far as I'm concerned."

With the freedom to spend his time writing, Findley authored two novels in the late 1960s, *The Land of the Crazy People* (1967) and *The Butterfly Plague* (1969). Although the books received some favorable reviews, they were not aggressively marketed, and sales were modest. Findley continued to write scripts, some in collaboration with Whitehead, for CBC television.

Findley's third novel, *The Wars* (1977), proved to be his breakthrough work, especially in Canada, where it won the Governor General's Award. The novel, set during World War I, finds its protagonist in a situation that Findley would revisit in other books--trying to do what is moral and sane in a situation that has clearly spun out of control. A film version, directed by Robin Phillips, appeared in 1983.

Findley hoped that his next novel, *Famous Last Words* (1981), a surrealist tale dealing with the rise of fascism in Europe and featuring such historical figures as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Charles Lindbergh, might be "the novel to make [his] name in the U.S." But, as he stated in a 1994 interview, although "the reviews were wonderful," his publisher, Seymour Lawrence--"a wonderful man, maddening at times, but a great character"--was "too preoccupied with personal troubles" to promote the book properly.

Findley's subsequent novel, *Not Wanted on This Voyage* (1984), is a dark and complex retelling of the biblical story of Noah. War once again plays a role in the work as those consigned to the lower portions of the ark fight the tyranny of the patriarchal authority figures. Among those forced below deck is a character who can be read as gay, Noah's son Ham, who fails to conform to the masculine ideal by eschewing violence. With him is the androgynous fallen angel Lucy, who is on an ultimately unsuccessful quest to find a "promised land" where difference does not bring discrimination and oppression.

Not Wanted on This Voyage earned Findley a Canadian Authors Association award for fiction in 1985. Four years later he was honored with an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for *The Telling of Lies: A Mystery* (published in Canada in 1986 and in the United States in 1988).

The Telling of Lies opens with the murder of a formidable pharmaceutical tycoon who owes his wealth to the manufacture of tranquilizers. The elderly woman who finds him dead at a charming Maine hotel is drawn into solving the crime, which embroils her in a world of CIA operations, kidnappings, and other fearsome situations. The novel reveals Findley's mastery of the murder-mystery genre, but it explores many of the same themes present in his more conventional works, especially the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the nature of truth, and the quest to find the right moral path in the midst of chaos.

In his darkest novel, *Headhunter* (1994), which Findley described as Joseph Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness* set in Rosedale," he offers a dystopic vision of a future Toronto where both AIDS and a bird-borne disease called sturnusemia are exacting heavy tolls. Power is again vested in a patriarchy, including a secret organization, the Club of Men, that recruits teen-aged boys for sexual purposes. Opposing the powerful are two women, deemed insane by others, who are, like Lucy, searching for a way out of the darkness into a world of light and love.

The issues of questioning--indeed defying--authority and of trying to find sanity, hope, and love in a far from perfect world recur in Findley's later novels, *The Piano Man's Daughter* (1995), *You Went Away* (1996), *Pilgrim* (1999), and *Spadework* (2002), as well as in four collections of short stories that appeared between 1979 and 1997. Although reviews of these works were mixed, he gained a solid and enthusiastic readership, particularly in Canada, where academics have devoted more attention to his writings than have their U.S. counterparts.

Findley also authored seven plays, including an adaptation of *The Piano Man's Daughter* (1995). His best-known drama is *Elizabeth Rex*, which premiered at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 2000. The story takes place on the day before the beheading of Queen Elizabeth's lover, the Earl of Essex. After watching a performance by Shakespeare's acting company, the queen adjourns to the castle barn with the playwright and several actors to pass the night in conversation in order to distract herself from Essex's impending fate. *Elizabeth Rex* played to sold-out houses for its entire run and earned Findley a Governor General's Award for drama.

Another play, *The Stillborn Lover* (1993), set at the height of the Cold War, centers on the dilemma of an ambassador who reveals to his family that he is gay. The play has received several productions, including a 2003 Berkshire Repertory Theater mounting that featured Richard Chamberlain.

During a stay at the house in Provence in early spring 2002, Findley fell, fracturing his pelvis. In the ensuing weeks he suffered infection, paralysis, and cardiac problems. Whitehead remained at his side throughout the terrible ordeal. Findley died on June 20, 2002.

Findley's passing occasioned mourning across Canada. Of his literary legacy, publisher Iris Tupholme said, "His superb storytelling, unforgettable characters, deep empathy for the dispossessed, and his ultimate joy in life meant that his works reached many readers, both young and old, here and around the world."

Findley was remembered not just as a fine writer but also as a fine man: his kindness and generosity were mentioned repeatedly in tributes to him.

Cited was his willingness to give time to causes important to him. He and Whitehead were two of the first to volunteer at Casey House, an AIDS hospice in Toronto. Findley was also deeply concerned about the environment and animals.

Encouraging writers, especially those just starting out, was a task that Findley joyfully undertook. He made a point of answering all the letters that he received from them. In addition to offering advice, he sometimes lent financial assistance and help in finding a publisher. His nurturing even extended to traveling to book launches by his protégés. In recognition of his contributions in this area the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation established the Timothy Findley Award for New Canadian Plays. The inaugural prize was given in April 2004.

Findley received numerous accolades during his lifetime, including many Canadian literary awards, the Order of Canada (1986), and the Order of Ontario (1991). He was also named Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres in France (1997). One tribute that would surely have pleased him was the action taken by his beloved Stratford: when news of his death reached the town, flags were lowered to half-staff in his honor.

Bibliography

Crew, Robert. "A Candle Burns . . . ; Heartfelt Remembrance for Timothy Findley, Writer and Friend." *Toronto Star* (June 22, 2002): A4.

Gatenby, Greg. "Obituary: Timothy Findley: Bestselling Canadian Writer Who Articulated the Sensitivities of the Outsider in Society." *The Guardian* (London) (June 25, 2002): 18.

Jefferess, David. "A Pacific (Re)reading of Timothy Findley's 'Not Wanted on This Voyage.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 72 (Winter 2000): 138-57.

Marchand, Philip. "Findley Rejoined Life's Meanness with Tenderness." *Toronto Star* (June 22, 2002): A4.

Reichard, William. "Who Am I . . . This Time?" *Lambda Book Report* 8.7 (February 2000): 6-9.

Scott, Alec. "You Went Away . . ." *Toronto Life* 36.14 (September 2002): 67-71.

Slopen, Beverly. "Timothy Findley: The Canadian Writer's New Novel Is a Surrealist Evocation of Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.'" *Publishers Weekly* 241.15 (April 11, 1994): 41-42.

Yanofsky, Joel. "Timothy Findley's Whodunit Is Medium for His Message." *The Gazette* (Montreal) (October 25, 1986): B8.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.