

My life and letters

Kevin Major

Résumé: *Dans ce texte autobiographique, Kevin Major nous raconte ses souvenirs d'enfance à Terre-Neuve, ses premières lectures, ses années d'université, ses rencontres des enfants des ports terre-neuviens qui marquent son oeuvre. Ceux et celles qui ont aimé lire Hold fast reconnaîtront dans ces lettres parfois fictives la vraie genèse de cette oeuvre.*

During the many years I spent reading about what it took to become a writer, one of my most important teachers was the collected letters of various well-known and admired authors: Hemingway's letters to Maxwell Perkins, Steinbeck's daily letters during the writing of *East of Eden*, a wonderful book of fictional letters titled *Woman of independent means*. Emerson has said that when his writing was blocked, he would sit down and write a long letter to a friend he loved. Some novelists I hear use letter-writing as a warm-up exercise before getting into their real work each day.

I, however, have no time for writing letters, as people who write to me hoping for a quick reply have found out. It is my least favourite activity next to completing my income tax form. I have often thought that in years to come there is bound to be a dearth of "collected letters" books, due to the widespread use of the telephone. Many writers, I suspect, would rather use it than stationery, and the collected phone calls of say John Updike or Margaret Atwood are bound to be much more profound than their correspondence.

Steinbeck is said to have hated using the phone. While I don't love it, my friends and publishers certainly prefer my using it to the days and weeks it takes me to get around to answering their letters.

It is only for the sake of my budget or when I see letter-writing as performing a function other than conveying information and good wishes that I resort to it. It can be an interesting and entertaining way of telling a story, as some of my readers tell me.

What I propose to do here is to present my version of my collected letters (and when the need arises, diary entries) selected, rewritten and invented especially for this occasion. I do not want any master's students in the years to come to be without enough research material to write an interesting and revealing paper. I want there to be some written record of my development as a writer, some source of speculation as to how much of my own story is to be

found in my books. But like all the correspondence I enjoy writing, it will be a mix of the plain and the coloured. It is for you to decide which is which.

Here then (in rather premature form) are "The collected letters of Kevin Major", born September 12, 1949.

* * *

Stephenville, Newfoundland
April 1, 1949

Dear Mom,

So Joey Smallwood got his way--Confederation. When I finally get out of this sea of amniotic fluid I'm going to be part of the 10th province of Canada. I hear Dad is already referring to me as the only real Canadian in the family. What do the six others think of that?

I have my doubts about this Confederation business. You know things will never be the same. Yesterday we were an independent country, now those Canadians in Ottawa will be telling us what to do. Okay, okay, I know there's going to be more money in the house as soon as I pop out, but a few dollars' baby bonus is not everything. Who knows what those Canadian politicians will do to us? What will a prime minister from Alberta or Quebec care about us down here?

I say we should have given this more thought. Dad's got a good job with the Americans, right? Since he gave up fishing and you guys moved from Bonne Bay he's had steady work on the base, right? I say thank God the Americans decided to build an air force base in Newfoundland during the war. They've put more money in this place than the Canadians ever did. I'd say we should have listened to those who wanted us to join up with the U.S., make us the 49th state. I wouldn't have minded being born under the Stars and Stripes. The way those GI's talk you know it's just got to be one heck of a prosperous place. They'd be pumping money into Newfoundland like you wouldn't believe. I'd say we'd have more movie stars and skyscrapers and hot dogs than we'd know what to do with.

Yeah, I know you're not too fussy about the way some of those GIs have been trying to date my older sisters, and I know Dad thinks they shoot a lot of bull, but we've got to think about the future. I sure am.

Seeing as I haven't got much to do except float around here and gestate, I'm all the time thinking about what the years ahead are going to bring. What am I going to do with my life? I suppose now I will grow up wanting to be a hockey player?

I know you and Dad have always put a lot of importance on education, seeing that neither of you had very much yourself. Maybe I'll want to be a doctor? Or a teacher? Maybe. But you know what I think I'd really like to do with

my life? Travel, see the world. Go to far away places and see how other people live. I know that might be just a reaction to the way I'm so cooped up in here, but I don't think so.

And I'd like to write. I think I have a way with words. I know, I know, I can't even speak yet, and maybe when I do finally get out of this place and learn to, I still won't be much of a talker. But that's not to say I won't have lots to write about. Anyone who resorts to scratching thoughts on a uterine wall with a finger must have something inside that wants to be a writer.

Anyway, I better give up for the night. I know you can't sleep when I poke around like this. By the way, thanks for not smoking or drinking. But, could you please lay off the salt fish a bit more? I keep floating to the top and banging my head on the ceiling.

By the way, I like the name Kevin. You can forget the Karen.

All my love,
Son.

* * *

Stephenville, Nfld.
December, 1959

Dear Santa,

For Christmas this year I would like a hockey game. Please make sure one of the teams is the Toronto Maple Leafs. That's all I want. Thank you. Unless you can leave me some of the hockey coins I'm missing from my collection. Mom is tired of me spending so much money on Jello just to get them. And I keep getting the same ones anyway.

I'm thinking about writing Frank Mahovlich, just to tell him how big a fan of his I am. It seems kinda silly, but I really think a lot about what he would think of me, and what it would be like to get a letter from him or something.

I'm looking forward to Christmas a lot. Since I'm the only one of the children left home now (Ina, the next oldest, started her nurse's training in September), it will be great to have them all home again for a while. It's turned out to be like growing up as an only child.

Dad is not working for the Americans anymore. He has a restaurant. That's kinda fun, but he has to work long hours. And Mom is kept busy, especially now that she's started to take in boarders. There's a lot going on most of the time. My sister and her children (one of them is only a month younger than I am) live close by, and there's lots of aunts and uncles and cousins who live here in Stephenville.

Still, I find I'm by myself a lot of the time. I don't have any real close friends. I feel like I'm a bit different from what they are. I like to read. There's no library in our school, but there's a small public library down near the Catholic

school. Being Church of England, I don't go to that part of town too often. My sister sent me *Pilgrim's progress* last year and I read that. I think it's the influence of the man she's going to marry. He's a minister.

Guess what? We've got T.V. now. The Americans brought it in for the base. We're one of the few places in Newfoundland to have it.

In fact, I better go. Hockey Night In Canada is soon on. The Leafs are playing the Canadians. I'd say Mahovlich is going to get another hat trick tonight.

Merry Christmas,
Kevin Major

* * *

Stephenville, Nfld.
November, 1963

Dear Maxine,

I hope you are settled now in the new rectory. I'm looking forward to coming to visit you again next summer. Tell Mark I'll be eager to continue the swimming lessons. And in a couple of years I'll take him up on that offer to teach me how to drive.

I guess Kennedy's assassination has hit hard where you are as well. With the U.S. base here, it's really been a shock to the whole area. I've been keeping a scrapbook of newspaper clippings since it happened. It's really like we're a part of history. I can remember the Cuban Missile Crisis when the base was on alert and how tense everything was. A lot of people thought it was going to be the start of another war.

School is going okay. I'm in grade nine this year. There's a few real hard cases in my class. Last week the French teacher grabbed one guy and banged him up against a window, hard enough to break it. I can't stand them. Probably they'll fail so we won't have them in grade ten next year.

I guess Mom told you how I broke out a guy's front teeth playing field hockey. It was an accident, but it played on my mind for weeks. There's not much I can do about it, but his family haven't got much money and I don't know if they can afford to buy new ones.

I'm still an altar boy. During Lent last year I used to have to get up at six o'clock on Wednesday mornings to serve at Holy Communion. The church was always cold and there was never more than three or four people there, but I got through it. It's kind of fun to be up by the altar looking down.

I don't think I want to be a minister though. Two in the family is enough. Maybe a doctor. I've been reading this book about a doctor who went to work in underdeveloped countries. I don't know what I want to be really. I'll be going to university after grade 11, I know that. One of my teachers thinks I'm a good writer. I've thought of journalism maybe, but that means I'd have to

go the mainland somewhere to study, and I won't be able to afford that.

Thanks, by the way, for that booklet "Boys Want to Know" that you sent. It answered a lot of the things I've been wondering about. I guess you know that I'm too shy to ask about stuff like that.

See you soon.

Your loving brother,

Kevin

* * *

Stephenville, Nfld.

June, 1966

Mr. Deputy Mayor and Mrs. Ford; Reverend Sirs; Sisters; Guests; Fellow Graduates:

I am pleased to have been chosen the class Valedictorian.

I recall, as I am sure all the graduates do, how in elementary school we looked with awe upon Grade Eleven. Oh, how lucky to be in the last year of school. Now we have attained that height. We are senior students, graduating.

The journey we have travelled has been one of which we can be justly proud. The path has not always run smoothly, but in the end we have become better human beings for taking it. School has matured us. It has done this by providing us with an accumulation of vital knowledge. It has also matured us mentally by giving us a coating of man-or-womanhood to wear when we enter the adult world. Roosevelt once said, "The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people." We have, through school, become closer to success, not only because we have made many life-long friends, but also because we have laid hold to that "important ingredient" which will enable us to make more.

Who have we to thank for our graduation? Firstly, our parents. You have extended the kind hand of encouragement and assistance when we needed it and the iron hand of discipline when we were neglectful. You have given greatly of yourself for our education and we hope that we have proven worthy of the sacrifices you have made.

Secondly, our words of gratitude are directed towards our educators, past and present. They have been teachers who have led us to paths of honesty and ambition, and friends whom we are proud to know. At times we have felt the sting of their discipline, but this too is a part of the drama of school.

We have reached one goal in life. What of the future? What will be our next goal? Let us aim high--aim for the highest of all goals in life--happiness. The best way to get happiness is to give it.

At school a few weeks ago we heard a man raise the question "What am I here for?" Is life any more than a job, money, security--a mere existence? It can be more, much more. Graduates, our dominant purpose in life should be to leave a world that has profited by our being here. Not just to be a person who lived for himself, died and was forgotten. We can best be remembered by the people we have helped--whether it was the ignorant we educated, the poverty-stricken people we aided, or the children of our community to whom we were a little league coach or youth leader in our spare time. As we slip into adulthood it would be good to remember that our truest happiness is found in the faces of others.

We see before us our school crest and colours. As at times we wear the crest on our coats, so too we should wear what its colours symbolize on our character. As we go through life, we should radiate the courage of the red and be led by and lead others to the loyalty, honesty, and truth of the blue. Let us strive and succeed and seek the beauty of life found in the gold.

With our school life so near its end, we can now "pass the torch", so to speak, to the next class of senior students. We pass it with pride for having carried it with the desire that the Amalgamated School will leave its mark of stability on next year's graduates, as it did on us.

Thank you.

* * *

[Diary entry]

St. John's, Nfld.

September 30, 1966

This is my third week at university.

At 2:30 this afternoon I heard two very good lectures in the Little Theatre. The first by Professor Story on Folklore of Newfoundland and the other by Professor Aldrich who said, "Be proud of being Newfoundlanders and never excuse yourself for being one."

At 8 o'clock I went to a basketball game and at 9:45 to a sock hop. The best dance so far, yet not too good because of the difficulty of finding the right girl. Night spoiled by Linda F. who accepted my invitation yet stood on the floor like a stick, not having the slightest interest in anything but looking for someone else.

Impressions: Girls should refuse offers if they don't intend to dance or try to. One doesn't realize the value of friends until one sees their character traits lacking in others.

* * *

[Diary entry]
St. John's, Nfld.
November 17, 1966

Dear Journal,

Yesterday was the day of the Biology midterm. I'll have to keep my Biology marks up if I'm going to get into medical school.

The highlight of today was a speech by Harold Horwood, author of *Tomorrow will be Sunday*. He gave a history of his career and gave various other views on writing. He said writers can do without imagination and inspiration, but they must be tough, stubborn, and above all conceited. They must have faith in their own work. He is against religion and all for pre-marital sex. Like him, to a degree.

Spent most of tonight doing an English 100 assignment on the Essay.

* * *

[Diary entry]
St. John's, Nfld.
March 25, 1968

Right now I don't feel too good. A bit of a headache and a little depressed. I have no energy for study, with a Chemistry test coming up soon. After studying hard last week, I can't seem to get back into it.

I'm not sure of what I want in life any more. I want happiness but the question is which road to take. Medicine still seems to be my greater inclination, but presently I'm considering the possibility of doing pure Biology, either Marine Biology or Mammalogy.

I get in such different moods that it's hard to tell where happiness is for me.

This summer I plan to get across Canada. I'll be 19 in September so what better time than when I'm young. It's hard to realize how time is fleeting. So I feel determined to share some of the happiness of youth. So what if it costs a couple of hundred dollars? In a few years I will be old and perhaps money will be nothing to me. I picture myself going off alone taking pictures of Canada with my new 35 mm. And perhaps I will find a moonlight long-deserted beach with nothing but me and the ocean and some long-haired girl. At times I feel that there could be nothing greater than that. But still it comes back to the idea of something to believe in.

And I often think of the happiest time I was last summer. It was out in the park the night it rained so hard. And I just went outside and walked, with rain splattering all over me, making me soaking wet. It was beautiful. I felt so free and happy and it was great to be alive.

* * *

[Diary entry]
Vigo, Portugal
November 12, 1969

Today marks our arrival in continental Europe. It has been 2 and a half months now since we left Newfoundland, 3 weeks since we left Trinidad aboard the "Montserrat". We have seen quite a lot (the boat stopped in Panama, Venezuela, the Canary Islands among other places), but I am glad to be finally on land for good. Every day aboard the ship the same food--rice and vegetables, with meat or fish, and the same damn tomato sauce over everything.

Vigo, I like a lot. We spent part of the morning finding a place to stay. This Hotel Peninsular is a good choice. Most of the day we spent walking around, first with Jeffery, Slim, and Anna (whom we met on the boat) and then by ourselves.

And we ate in a restaurant--squid--good! Seafood here is their specialty. One sees restaurant windows displaying great varieties of food. I recall one with a rabbit, a basket of fruit, and leg of meat hung up, with mussels, prawns, scallops, crabs, etc., below.

For the first few hours I was here I was elated and still feel very good now. I hope to retain this sense of joy, even though home is in my thoughts.

Last night I had the most difficult time in getting to sleep. I kept thinking about what I will do. I came very close to giving up the idea of sticking with medicine. Is it what I want? Maybe a switch to education--that could lead to other things. Yes, by God, medicine might well be a rut, a good one perhaps but nevertheless a rut. And those 5 long, strenuous years. I have doubts about my determination to become an M.D., a good one that is.

* * *

[Diary entry]
Beatenberg, Switzerland
December 26, 1969

We have been here for five days now and intend to stay until the 6th of January. That's a little over 2 weeks and I will enjoy every minute of it.

Returned a half-hour ago from fifth ski lesson. (Some of the Swiss have heard so much about Nancy Green that they can't believe we're from Canada and don't know how to ski.) Today was our first day up the ski-lift. The class is loads of fun (all others are French speaking) and with downhill run looking out over the mountains on a sea of clouds, I know I couldn't have a better time. The instructor's name is Christine--speaking German, French, and English--

maybe 25 and blonde.

Beatenberg is on a mountain terrace with a wonderful view of the mountains around and the Thunersee below. It is part of the Bernese Oberland. Just as magnificent as the postcards picture it.

It is the people that I like so much. Their way of life--simple, yet not lacking, not hurried, cheerful and fun. They have to be the kindest people we have met in Europe. The woman at Hotel Jungfraublick, where we stayed the first two nights that we were here--she speaks English and charms us by inviting us in for chocolate or inviting us to come to see the Christmas tree (candle-lit) and not letting us pay for the beer. And the people here at the Bel-Air Tea Room (we have rented the top room) are also extra kind. Mrs. Kampf supplies us with everything we need from ornaments for our Christmas tree to boxes for my gift to send home. They have a pastry shop and tea room downstairs--what delicious smells in the morning!

* * *

[Diary entry]

Gander, Nfld.

February 26, 1970

Left Heathrow this morning and arrived here at 1 o'clock Gander time.

London was a rush. We didn't do any sightseeing since we were there for a week in January, but did manage to see four movies, including "Alice's Restaurant" and "Anne of a Thousand Days".

Waiting for the bus now to Corner Brook. Someone will come in from Stephenville to meet us there. 67 cents in my pocket. Tired.

* * *

Robert's Arm, Newfoundland

November, 1971

Dear Don and Jocelyn,

I hope you are enjoying your life in Labrador. Don, three years ago when we first became friends it would have been hard to imagine that you would be married and teaching in a tiny settlement in Labrador, and I would find myself here in the outpost of Robert's Arm. Anne, as you know, got a job in Springdale. It's not far away.

I drive there on weekends in my second-hand Volkswagen. I paid \$500 for it and I'm not sure if it's even worth that. There's a hole rusted through under the back seat and I had to put a piece of board over it to keep the battery from falling through. Last weekend I took Anne and her mother for a ride and when

we got back there must have been an inch of dust covering Mrs. Crawford and her clothes.

My home-room, Grade Seven, has thirty-six students, and a real mix of personalities. Some are pretty on top of things; others are reading at a grade-three level. It's a lot more work than I ever thought it would be. I have to spend a great deal of time in preparation and correcting.

I came here so filled with the ideas of the open classroom, and all those other educational reform theories we discussed in university, but have been forced to come down to earth a bit for the sake of my own sanity. The hard part of it is, once you give them more freedom than they're used to, it's hard as hell to get them back to a greater sense of order in the classroom.

The unfortunate thing is that I enjoy the kids more as people than as students. I spend a fair amount of time with them outside of class. They have been taking me out in a boat in the evenings squid jigging and sometimes after school setting rabbit snares. I really am enjoying the experience of living here. A lot of things are new to me. Growing up in Stephenville, you don't get the real flavour of outport Newfoundland. And spending time with the kids is like having a second-chance at boyhood I missed the first time around.

One of the things I've noticed is that there is very little on the Literature course that is set in Newfoundland. Not many characters in the books we have to use are much like the characters I find in my classroom. I've been thinking back to the course on adolescent literature I did at university, and how good it would be to have books like those set in Newfoundland. That's one of the reasons I think a lot of my students don't like to read--the stories are so far removed from their own experiences.

I'll talk more about that next time.

Take care,
Kevin

* * *

Mint Brook, near Gambo, Nfld.
August, 1974

Dear Anne,
It was very good to hear from you again. You must be excited getting ready for your trip around the world. I guess we both realized we have a lot of things we want to do rather than settle into any permanent relationships.

I'm here at Mint Brook for a week again this summer, at the Senior Boys Camp. It's a camp run by the Anglican Church for boys 12 to 15. They come from all over Eastern Newfoundland. What an interesting mixture of backgrounds and characters and accents! I spend most of my day supervising canoeing and it's great fun.

The atmosphere created here is like nothing I've experienced before. With 80 boys there are bound to be disagreements, of course, but overall there is a tremendous sense of community, a real spirit of goodwill. There are several members of the staff who keep coming back year after year. People from the outside world would think we were half-crazy to judge by 6 a.m. swims, the mock trials, and the insane skits the staff and boys come up with for the campfires at night.

In September I will be moving to Eastport and to a new teaching job. It's one of the most scenic parts of the province and I'm sure I will enjoy it there. I'll be teaching special education and high school Biology. I'm looking forward to a steady income again.

This past winter I spent in St. John's putting together an anthology of Newfoundland Literature (from the 17th century to the present) that will be published this fall by Breakwater Books. It will be called "Doryloads" and hopefully will be used in the junior high schools across the province. I've published a few poems and a couple of short stories myself, but I haven't included any of my own work in the book. Maybe I have something bigger in the works. You never know. My own writing is not something I feel comfortable talking about, for fear that it might never get published.

Write again soon and send lots of postcards,

Sincerely,
Kevin

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
June, 1976

Dear Mom and Dad,

I know it must have come as a bit of shock that I resigned my teaching position, but don't worry, I've saved up some money and I'll be able to substitute teach next year. And I'm going to be applying for a Canada Council Explorations Grant to work with some young people here interviewing the older residents of the peninsula about life in Newfoundland years ago.

I guess you both have learned by now that when I get something in my head I'm going to try it. I don't think I could be happy spending all my life teaching. Although I enjoy it for the most part, I would like to see if I can make a go of it as a writer. If I don't, well I can always go back to teaching full-time. But I at least want to give it a try.

I'm going to continue to live here in Eastport. I am renting a house now so you will have to come visit. I enjoyed the time I spent in the boarding house. The people I was staying with were really good to me and there were so many people coming and going in their house that I really felt part of the commu-

nity. Over the winter I spent a lot of time in the woods, skidooring and hunting and fishing.

I must say I really like Eastport a lot. The people (with only one or two exceptions) have been very nice to me and I have made a lot of good friends. And now that Maxine and Mark and the girls will be only an hour away in Gander, it will be even better. I was very pleased, as you must have been too, to hear of Mark's election as Bishop. They are going to be living with me this fall for a month until their new house is finished.

See you sometime this summer. Take care of yourselves.

Love,
Kevin

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
July 11, 1977

Shelley Tanaka
Juvenile Fiction Editor
Clarke, Irwin & Company Ltd.
Toronto, Ontario

Dear Ms. Tanaka,

As a follow-up to our telephone conversation this morning, I am pleased to be sending the enclosed two copies of *Hold fast* for Clarke Irwin's consideration. It is a novel about a young outport Newfoundlander.

Regardless of your publishing decision, I would be pleased to know your readers' reactions to the manuscript. I have invested a considerable amount of time and energy in it and would welcome any comments regarding the possibility of making writing a career.

As I mentioned in the phone conversation, Clarke Irwin did consider in 1974 a manuscript of mine (titled *Overnight*) and replied that although it did not warrant publication, it did show promise. Eventually, after making the round of 5 or 6 publishers, that manuscript was shelved.

I will be in Toronto at the end of August. If you are interested, I would certainly be happy to meet with you at that time.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,
Kevin Major

P.S. If the use of dialect in the novel should prove difficult, I will be happy to send a glossary of words and phrases.

Eastport, Nfld.
September, 1979
Nancy Colbert and Associates
Toronto, Ontario

Dear Nancy,

I'm very pleased that you have agreed to act as my agent. I was never very good at negotiating with publishers, and it is a relief to me to have put it in the hands of someone else.

Since the publication of *Hold fast* last year I have been somewhat overwhelmed with the attention the book has received--the three Canadian awards and now the Hans Christian Andersen Honour List. The fact that the book will be published in the U.S. next year is also a great source of satisfaction. And Shelley tells me there is a serious inquiry from a Danish publisher. Plus the movie interest.

It all puts a considerable amount of pressure on me to produce something equally as good the second time around. I hope I'm up to the challenge. I will probably set the new book in the same place as the first, but there will be a new set of characters. I'm not much interested in writing a sequel to *Hold fast*. I am toying with the idea of writing a story from a number of points of view --a multi-narrative. again the character will be a teenage boy, but he will probably be slightly older than Michael.

Since I gave up full-time teaching I've gotten to know some of the young fellows around here on a more personal level and it's given me insight into their lives that I would like to make use of in fiction. And for years I have been attending a summer camp which I think could form part of the setting for the book as well. As before I want to keep the flavour of Newfoundland and the theme of the change in Newfoundland society over the years since Confederation.

As you are aware, despite the awards, *Hold fast* has not been popular with everyone. Some teachers and parents in particular have been upset by the language in the book. The school board in this area undertook a pilot project with the book, with a view to putting it on a list of novels to supplement the English curriculum at the grade nine level. However, due to pressure from some parents and the local Salvation Army Pastor (and in spite of some very positive response from some students), the teachers have chosen not to recommend it. The Pastor wrote the School Board saying "I would be so happy to endorse this book with much enthusiasm if one page (p. 70) and about twenty (20) words throughout the text could be deleted."

And then teachers complain that students have no interest in school!

Regards,
Kevin

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
April, 1981

Dear Anne,

It won't be long now till May and we will be together again. A long distance romance between Calgary and Eastport is not the best state of affairs, but I'm sure by the fall things will be more settled. By then you will be finished your masters and hopefully have a job here in Newfoundland. If not, I'll just have to pack up and move out West. It seems that's where a lot of Newfoundlanders are heading these days anyway. I'd say a good half of those who are finished with school, like the ones you met when I saw you last, have found their way to Alberta.

The presentation of the award for *Far from shore* is set for the 22nd of May in Regina. Let's think in terms of driving out there together on the 21st.

I have made a start on a third novel, but it's slow going. It's more mature in both subject matter and style than the other two. At this stage I'm not really sure what it is. I wouldn't consider it a young adult book, but neither would I think of it as adult. I'm trying to make use of my background in photography. The main character is a camera buff as I was and he shares some of the shyness and detachment from his parents that I felt at his age. The storyline, however, is contemporary and the ideas for some of the situations that the main character has to deal with came to me from knowing young people here. There was a strike at the local school a couple of years back. Although it was over a different issue than what is in the book, I have it in the back of my mind as I write.

The book is about a group of students in the last few months of high school. As with the other books, in preparing for this new one I started with a list of concerns of young people that age. Relationships with the opposite sex are of paramount importance to many of them and so it plays an important part in the story. I have to be honest in my portrayal of them both in terms of language and sexual activity. It's bound to provoke more criticism, but I'm not willing to avoid it as if it weren't a part of their lives. I have to be honest to myself and to the reader.

I'll tell you more about it when we see each other. Let's just say that at this point I feel good about what I've written. In fact, I think it's the best writing I've done so far.

Love,
Kevin

Because you have shared in our lives
by your friendship and love
you are invited to share with us
Anne Shankland Crawford
and
Kevin Gerald Edward Major
when we exchange marriage vows
and begin our new life together
on Saturday, July third
nineteen hundred and eighty-two
at five o'clock
Holy Cross Church
Eastport, Newfoundland.

Reception following ceremony
Holy Cross School
Dance at Janbu Lounge.

Gander, Nfld.
May 17, 1983

Dear Ina,

First the good news. You're an aunt again. Yesterday Anne gave birth to an 8lb. 10oz. baby boy. I was with her from the beginning of labour and what a wonderful, if exhausting experience.

I'm a father now, with a whole new set of responsibilities. When Anne goes back to work in the fall at the school in Eastport, we will arrange for a bay-sitter to come part of the day, and I will look after him the rest of the time. Should be interesting.

Now the bad news. Today, driving back from the hospital, I heard on the radio the news that my publisher Clarke, Irwin has gone into receivership. We were all ready to sign the contract for the new book, *Thirty-six exposures*, but now I don't know what will develop. It will mean a delay in the publication of the book no doubt and uncertainty as to who will publish it.

Right now I have a lot of other things on my mind. I'll let you know what develops and I'll send baby pictures as we get them.

Take care,
Proud new father.

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
May, 1984

Olga Litowinsky, Senior Editor
Delacorte Press
New York

Dear Olga,

Received the bound manuscript of *Thirty-six exposures* and the colour copy of the cover. I was delighted to see that the book is set to go for fall publication. This manuscript has been a long time getting into print and I'm relieved to see it finally on its way. The cover I'm not so happy about. I know there's no turning back at this point, but it seems to me that the cover is rather soapy and without the edge that is to be found in the writing. I would have preferred something other than the romance angle; that is not representative of the story. I know Delacorte thinks the book jacket will attract girls, but I believe it risks losing the male component of my readership.

Other than that beef, I'm very pleased with the way things have worked out. We seem to work well together and I look forward to publishing more books with Delacorte in the future.

You mentioned about book number four. I have been working on a manuscript for some time now, although I'm not sure at this point just how pleased I am with it. It's proving to be more difficult than I first thought it would be. It is partly historical and required a fair amount of research. This I have completed, but it now seems to be in the doldrums in respect to the writing itself.

When I started this book I did so with the idea that the main character would again be older than the main character in the previous book. In this case, the character is at university. However, the flow of the writing is not nearly as smooth as what it was with the other books. I'm never sure I'm doing the right thing, and from time to time I think perhaps I should make the character younger and not be attempting to write what I think could be called an adult novel.

As you know I have never been comfortable with the label "young adult" writer. It suggests to me that what I write is only of interest to teenagers and that it is a sub-literature of sorts. Perhaps, by writing an adult novel, I'm wanting to prove that I should be taken more seriously by critics and the literary establishment. As opposed to that, I'm often of the opinion that it is the fault of the system, rather than of me as a writer, and that I should only be writing what I feel comfortable with. I should be writing what I write best and the hell with everything else.

I'm sure things will eventually sort themselves out. Other than that all is well. Luke turns one this month. Our friends were right, a child changes your

whole life. For the better, I might add.

Kind regards,
Kevin

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
February 28, 1986

Nancy Colbert
The Colbert Agency
Toronto

Dear Nancy,

I've taken the leap into word processing, and after a few early frustrations, am now a convert.

Thanks for the attempt at Groundwood with the children's story. I still think it's a good story and not too long for a picture book, but perhaps they are right, perhaps the voice is too mature to appeal to young children. But please go ahead and try some others and see what they have to say.

As you know I have put the Beothuk book aside for the moment. The new book consists of approximately fifty letters to Bruce Springsteen by a boy of 14. The letters are written over a five-month period following the sudden departure of the boy's father (a band musician) from the family. The boy is left with a lot of questions about his relationship with his father that he feels his mother cannot answer objectively. He sees Springsteen's music as a connection between himself and his father, and what starts out in the first few letters as a way of making sense of his confusions, turns into almost a diary of the events leading to a reunion with his father and to the subsequent coming to terms with the changes in his family situation.

It is a bit of a departure for me in that the setting is not rural Newfoundland. The town is more of the size of the one where I grew up, although it could be anywhere in North America. The idea for the book started with a strong personal liking for Springsteen's music, with some knowledge of the lives of musicians, and with the experience of having organized some local young people into doing a lip-sync concert to raise money for Ethiopia. Once I started writing the letters in September, the whole book took shape rather quickly. In November I took a replacement position at the local school, but I am determined to have the manuscript completed soon. That means six o'clock mornings to work on the book before getting ready for school.

Anne is going well. We're into the homestretch--the last trimester. It seems like she has been pregnant for a year. We're looking forward to a sibling for Luke by June. Anne is convinced it's a girl.

By now I'm sure you're praying for an end to the Canadian winter. So are we. The problem is our prayers take longer to get answered.

Best wishes,
Kevin

* * *

Eastport, Nfld.
March 31, 1988

Olga Litowinsky
Delacorte Press
New York

Dear Olga,

Thanks for your letter with its detailed comments on *Blood red ochre*.

I worked on the manuscript prior to receiving your letter, having had discussions with John Pearce at Doubleday Canada over the whole matter of the last chapter. That really seemed to be what everyone was having problems with (including Nancy and Anne) and so I started revisions by reworking that final section. Having been steeped in modern-day realities for four books, it took a little abandon on my part to pull a character out of the bounds of standard time, but I feel much more satisfied with the book now that I've done it. I feel the whole thing works much better.

This book has been in the works for some time as you know. It was only when I changed the age of David and accepted the fact that I could best write it from a teenage perspective, that the book seemed to take off. I guess that says a lot about me as a writer. Or maybe it's just saying it about this particular book. We'll have to wait and see. I've already made a beginning on a new novel, but it will probably be a year before I feel comfortable enough with it to tell you what it's about.

I enjoyed this sojourn into historical fiction. I find that I am drawn less to contemporary realistic fiction than I was when I first started to write. That is in part because I have less contact with young people than I did when I was writing the other books, and in part because I feel I've said a lot of what I wanted to say about the problems of growing up. It's time for a new approach.

If there is one thing that all the books together show, it's a willingness to take chances with the way of telling a story. I'm still very excited by all the possibilities that loom ahead of me. I hope that excitement will produce some interesting results.

As I mentioned on the phone, I'm off this week to Montreal with the family for an Easter vacation. I hope to hear from you before long. Both John and I are anxious for things to move ahead, with a view to fall publication in Canada.

Rest assured, however, that my priority is to do the best job I can do with the book.

Regards from Anne and the boys,
Sincerely,
Kevin

* * *

St. John's, Nfld.
September 1, 1988

John Smallbridge
Children's Literature Centre
London, Ontario

Dear John;

First let me thank you for the invitation to speak at the summer institute. I very much enjoyed meeting with the participants and the other speakers. It was great to be together with so many people interested in the quality of literature for young people.

We are now starting to feel settled in St. John's. We have come here for a year so that Anne could return to university. She has her job back at the school in Eastport for next year and right now we plan to return there. We may, however, find ourselves staying in St. John's longer; it depends on how we like city living.

It depends too, of course, on what effect the change of locale will have on my writing. I will certainly miss the ease of contact with young people that I had in Eastport. And at times I will miss the isolation which on the whole was a benefit to my writing. There just weren't the distractions that I may find here. Nevertheless, we are looking forward to the change and to the excitement of new surroundings. We are living very close to the university and to the arts and cultural centre. Both these will give me many hours of pleasure no doubt. Already we are planning the many new activities we can do with the children that weren't available in Eastport.

What it will do to the direction of my writing I'm not sure. As you know *Blood red ochre* will now be published in early 1989 due to some delay with the cover art and other things. It will take me most of this coming year to complete the manuscript for the sixth novel. And beyond that I see the possibility of a book that would require research at the university here. So the immediate effect will not be apparent. By the end of the year, however, I should be able to gauge whether or not I will have enough to draw on from the experience of living in St. John's to want to stay here.

Right now I'm content to settle into the fall and get back to the business

of the new book. Anne registers for university in a few days, as does Luke for his year of school. I will be looking after the children half days and composing on the computer screen the other half.

Sounds very good to me.

Kindest regards,
Kevin Major

* * *

So there you have it--my collected letters and diary fragments. I hope they have given you some insight into what made me write the novels I did.

What an author uses in his writing is, of course, a mixture of many things --autobiography, the experience of other people, pure imagination, things as diverse as a news item or the passing comment of someone at a conference he is attending. It is a reflection of all he is or might want to be, and at times a reflection of something as trivial as what he has had for lunch prior to writing a particular few pages. Unlike those of some authors, my first books are not an attempt to come to terms with the inadequacies of my own youth. I have chosen to write about young people in contemporary society. But an author can't help but put a lot of himself into what he writes. You see it in the choice of subject, the attitudes of the characters he has created, in the injustices he wants to bring to light. It is his story, no matter how deeply coloured.

I began this article with the notion that I hate writing letters. I still do. However, the exercise of putting together these letters has proven to be less torturous than I thought it might be. Coming as it did at a point in my life where I am moving away from the setting which has been the root of most of



Kevin Major

my work so far, it gave me the opportunity to relive the years that have brought me to that point. It has shown me how far I have come and what turn in the road I now might want to take. I still get excited by writing projects beyond what I am working on at the moment. As long as I retain that excitement, I will be happy to be a writer, no matter where I am living.

Kevin Major has used his Newfoundland background in a series of strong novels beginning with *Hold fast*. His latest book is *Blood Red Ochre*.