

Prognosis poetry

New Brunswick born poet-doctor Shane Neilson has found literary success and a medical practice in Erin, Ontario, dealing with tales of life and death daily. Story by **Thomas Hodd**

Shane Neilson is not your typical family physician. Sure, he knows how to talk to you in that calming, friendly manner. And, not surprisingly, everyone in the small town of Erin, Ont., where he practices medicine, knows him by name. But here's the thing: Neilson is also a writer, and a very successful one at that. What's more, he's a product of the Maritimes and a native of Oromocto, N.B.

"I always wanted to be a doctor," Neilson tells me as we sit on a couple of stools inside the office of The Porcupine's Quill, the award-winning publisher that helped launch the careers of people like Jane Urquhart and recent Giller Award-winner Elizabeth Hay.

Neilson is here to promote his third book of poetry, *Complete Physical*, a wonderfully compact collection of confessional poems that explores the relationship between a doctor and his patient. I was half-expecting to see him in a lab-coat and stethoscope, but he looks very much relaxed in his light-blue checkered shirt and cotton pants as he reflects on his youth in New Brunswick.

"My mother was a nurse, but also a voracious reader," Neilson tells me, "and I modeled after her, I guess." Neilson was born in the small town of Sheffield, but moved to Oromocto when he was eight. He did well in school, and played left-wing for the high school hockey team. In Grade 12 Neilson took enriched Canadian literature and had a life-changing moment.

"Everybody on the right-side of the class was assigned Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*. I was on the left-side and so had to read Alden Nowlan's novel *The Wanton Troopers*. There was something about that book that I could identify with."

From then on, the determined Neilson decided his future career in medicine would also have to involve writing.

He spent three years at the University of New Brunswick, studying bio-chemistry, but was accepted into Dalhousie Medical School at the ripe old age of 19. It was during this time that he published his first work in the *New Brunswick Reader*. "I went into the Daily Grind Coffee Shop (in Halifax) and bought five copies," Neilson says with a chuckle.

It was also during this time that Neilson met his future wife, Janet, who would become the inspiration for part of his first full poetry collection, *Exterminate My Heart*. The other part of the collection was inspired by his daughter, Zee, who is now 10. A future collection may involve Neilson's son, Kaz, who is just turning two.

Then in 2000, Neilson began his residency for family practice at Memorial University, including a rotation at the Saint John Regional Hospital. "I could

have gone anywhere (for residency) but I wanted to be in the Maritimes."

The most moving part was his work in Labrador and in places like Davis Inlet. "People don't realize it," Neilson says, "but it was like a Third-World country there. It affected me deeply." And when asked if he draws on such moments for his art, Neilson confesses that such tough medical challenges become a source for his writing. "How can I not want to write about my experiences?" The result was Neilson's moving memoir about life at medical school, *Call Me Doctor*, which he published with Nova Scotia's Pottery Press in 2006.

After Memorial, Neilson spent a year with Dalhousie emergency. Then Janet was accepted into the University of Guelph's veterinarian program, and so Neilson took up practice at the student health services on campus. Then in 2005 Neilson got a letter in his mailbox that the doctor in Erin was leaving. As a published writer, Neilson had often driven through the town and dreamed of publishing a book with The Porcupine's Quill. So Neilson called and came up to Erin, and has been there ever since. Of course, little did Neilson know that his future publishers would also become his patients.

Judging by his output, Neilson has certainly lived up to his twinned dream of medicine and literature. He has published four collections of poetry, with a fifth slated for publication with Goose Lane Editions. He writes a regular column in the prestigious *Canadian Medical Association Journal* and is an editor with the British Columbia publisher Frog Hollow Press. Neilson also edited a series of Alden Nowlan's medical poems, entitled *Alden Nowlan and Illness*, in 2005. Oh, and did I mention Neilson just won a major Canadian poetry competition, ARC's 15th annual poem of the year contest?

Given all this literary success, I asked Neilson if he had any advice for young would-be writers. For him, it all starts with reading. "If you get that feeling of being transported by the exquisite," he says, "then you probably have an aptitude for writing."

But Neilson is also quick to point out that it takes more than skill to make it as a writer in Canada. "Writing is a life of poverty if you don't have a day job," he jokes. "I am lucky to have the kind of financial security that allows me to write."

For Shane Neilson, writing and medicine are not separate ambitions. He has found a way to turn them into the best of both worlds. □

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Shane Neilson has had three books of poetry published since 2008.