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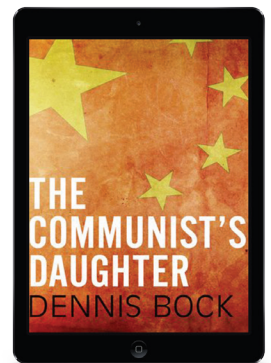
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An Excerpt from *Olympia*

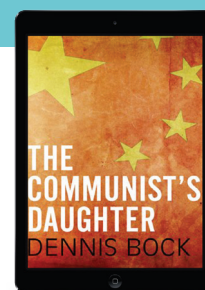
An Excerpt from *The Ash Garden*

Recommended Reading

Web Detective



The Communist's Daughter
by Dennis Bock



Author Biography



Raised in Oakville, Ontario, Dennis Bock is one of five children born to German parents. His mother and father are both craftspeople: she, a weaver; he, a carpenter. The family lived near Lake Ontario, and Bock remembers his father building a sailboat in their basement, an experience that later influenced his short story collection, *Olympia*.

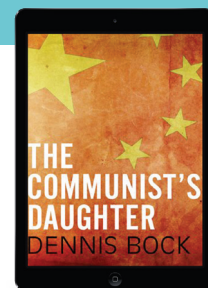
There were few English-language books in his childhood home, so becoming a writer wasn't Bock's original career choice. As a boy, he dreamed of being a marine biologist. During high school, however, he got caught up in the magic of *Gulliver's Travels*. "It was the first book I read with the understanding that someone's mind had put all those words together— that someone's imagination had constructed something that didn't exist before."

After studying English and philosophy for three years at the University of Western Ontario, Bock set off for Spain. Wanderlust, he says, took him there. "Spain was the setting of some of my favourite stories and novels. I had a preconceived, literary notion of what it would look like. Of course, it was totally different." He also wanted to experience dislocation and immigration, "to break down my elements." While living in Madrid, Bock taught English as a foreign language and wrote short fiction. Though he returned to Canada to complete his degree, after graduating he was drawn back to Spain where, for the next four years, he continued to teach English and work on his writing.

In 1993, his talent and efforts were rewarded. One of his stories, "The Wedding," was published in Canadian Fiction Magazine and included in Best American Short Stories the next year. In 1994, Bock returned to Canada and served as the editor of Blood and Aphorisms magazine. Four years later, "The Wedding" became the first story in his collection *Olympia* (1998), a series of related tales about a German- Canadian family. The title story was selected for the 1997 Journey Prize Anthology, and *Olympia* won the Canadian Authors' Association Jubilee Award, the Danuta Gleed Literary Award for best first collection of stories by a Canadian author and the British Betty Trask Award. The Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star both named *Olympia* a Notable Book of 1998.

Bock's first novel, *The Ash Garden* (2001)—first tentatively titled "A Man of Principle"—began as a book about an atomic scientist. The plot evolved to follow the parallel lives of two people intimately connected to that watershed moment when the first atomic bomb was detonated over Japan—one, a victim of that day, and the other, a nuclear physicist. *The Ash Garden* became a #1 national bestseller and won the Canada-Japan Literary Award and the Drummer General's Award. It was shortlisted for the prestigious 2003 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the Amazon.ca/Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Kiriya Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (Canada and the Caribbean Region). The Globe and Mail named it a Best Book of the Year.

The Communist's Daughter (2006), Bock's second novel, also received high critical acclaim. Donna Seaman of Booklist wrote, After imaginatively considering the freighted legacy of Hiroshima in *The Ash Garden*, Canadian writer Bock continues his profound inquiry into the morass of war in a beautifully measured yet deeply felt portrayal of a battlefield surgeon. . . . Reminiscent of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) in gravitas and lyricism, Bock's novel about a man who means to do good in the world, steadfastly faces death and reveres the planet's beauty is a study in sorrow, courage and mystery. As Bock's hero unflinchingly parses our insistence on war and our caring more about ideas than life, he also, even amid horror, celebrates "the rapturous wonder of being alive. As a reader, Bock appreciates books that ask tough questions; therefore, when he writes, he is committed to tackling what he calls



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Big Challenges. His published works thus far—*Olympia*, *The Ash Garden* and *The Communist's Daughter*—reflect this determination. Bock lives with his wife and two sons in Toronto, Ontario, where he is currently working on his fourth Big Challenge. Visit the author at www.dennisbock.ca.

An Interview with Dennis Bock

In a 2001 Quill & Quire interview, you stated, “It would be sad not to take on a big subject. I’m not taken in by books that don’t.” What aspects of writing about Norman Bethune’s life and times “took you in”?

Bethune’s is a story of great political triumphs and bitter personal failures. How was he to strike the balance between public service and private commitment? In a way he reminds me of Anton Böll, a character from *The Ash Garden*. He, too, is a brilliant man whose gifts lead him to walk the fine line between ethics and morality. What is the right thing to do? This is a conflict that must be resolved in Bethune’s life, and his ability to do so (or not) gives his life story a heightened sense of urgency. It’s also one that offers great range and depth for a novelist interested in how his characters live their lives.

Why does such moral complexity appeal to you?

I love a good mystery, but not in the conventional sense of that word: the mystery of right behaviour, moral choice, responsible action. I’m put off by novels that pretend to answer the questions they raise. There can’t be answers—not sincere or meaningful answers—to the questions of moral action raised in a great book. A serious writer, in my mind, attempts to expose the flipside to any commonly held belief. It’s a shell game of sorts, with each shell containing—or seemingly so—the seed of truth. Point to it with anything resembling conviction or certainty and you will be proven wrong.

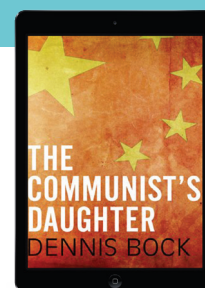
That being said, a novel isn’t a game. It doesn’t try to cause the reader to stumble, but in resisting an easy answer to justify a character’s choices, readers may find themselves in the confusing position of simultaneously loving and hating characters, their choices, their beliefs. For me, a novel is at its best when it brings contradiction to the surface of a character’s life and when those contradictions are highlighted by a dramatic conflict between characters. In exposing those contradictions by the right positioning of character, setting and drama, you approach the heart of what it is to be human. There is in this world, instead of the simple black-and-white universe of poorly imagined fiction, an infinite variety of greys.

What is the biggest issue for an author in writing a novel about such a well-known figure?

A lot of people know who Bethune was and might take issue with the fact that certain key events or characters in my novel divert from the known record. Bethune did not have children, for example. Anyone who knows anything about the Bethune story knows that. But my novel doesn’t start with the historical record. It starts with a hypothetical, a notion that came to me when, much to my surprise, I discovered that Bethune had an affair in Madrid with a woman suspected of harbouring Fascist sympathies, a woman who was maybe even a spy. That’s what got it going for me. That was too good to ignore. The irony of a devout, internationally known Communist sleeping with the enemy, and the resulting crisis, was begging to be explored.

Why did you choose to depart from historical fact in creating a daughter for Bethune?

Every novel set in its historical time and place must diverge from fact to some degree. Simply choosing to begin your story on your hero’s birthday and not on the weekend of his first kiss invokes the novelist’s creativity, decision-making and editorial position. What interests a novelist is what works for the book, not the historical record. I began



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to wonder what would happen if Bethune had left a daughter behind in Spain. Entirely possible, I thought. As I wrote deeper into the story, this possibility became—for me—probable, and then, little by little, I became convinced of it. But only in the world of my novel, and only according to this narrative and this voice. The Bethune I created does have a daughter. It all starts with the “what if” scenario. Move forward with that. When the reader agrees to come along on the journey, the balance of power shifts from the historian to the novelist; and within the narrative there can be no greater truth than that of the speaker, who is, in this case, the man who would know. The novel I had to write necessarily included a daughter with whom Bethune could share his secrets. Without her as his muse he would have remained one-dimensionally heroic. In other words, he wouldn’t have been interesting to me, or believable to the reader. There is an aesthetic truth and purity that a writer strives to achieve in his writing, and only in pursuing the fictional narrative can that purity be achieved.

Did the epistolary form call to you immediately or was it the result of some experimentation?

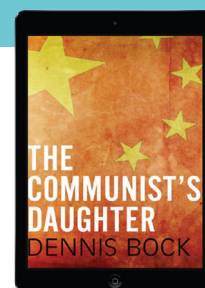
Chiefly, I was interested in getting Bethune’s voice, and this meshed nicely with the central motivation in the story: namely, a father’s attempt to connect with his daughter. I could have written the novel in the third person. It would have been a good story. But for me, the interest—and the challenge—lay in creating the voice of a man desperate to explain himself. Obfuscation, indirect truths, outright lies— they are all within Bethune’s repertoire, not to mention a fair bit of raging and, in the end, a sort of out-of-body delirium. A first-person narrative gives the writer and the reader direct access to Bethune’s thoughts, whether they be concise or muddled. We feel closer to him, whatever the case. We know how he’s thinking as well as what he’s thinking. With a flawed, or unreliable, narrator the story becomes more intricate, more layered, and the line separating the “truth” from the emotional priorities of the character becomes blurred. With a narrator as interested in his legacy as Bethune is, and so interested in offering his truth, there could be no other choice.

What differences did you encounter between writing a novel such as this, based on a real person, and writing *The Ash Garden*?

When you’re working with completely imagined characters, there’s nothing to look to outside of your narrative world. If you’re lucky, you’ll find something like the suntan lotion episode in *The Ash Garden* and make a connection between that small anecdote and the larger ideas in the novel. Whenever I came to a tough spot while writing *The Communist’s Daughter*, I was always able to refer to the historical record. What did Bethune do after Spain? He showed his film in North America. So, you take your character to Toronto or New York. Knowing elements as basic as when and where helped me get back on track long enough to find the Bethune I was looking for—the non-historical Bethune. In this way, using a historical character for a novel is less dangerous because you can always look back to what the biographers have to say on the matter, mix that a little with your imagination and voice, and off you go.

What research provided the basis for this novel?

I read only Bethune’s collected writings and a couple of his biographies to help put him in the right place at the right time. After that, I worked on his voice, and the closer I got to what I hoped was the right voice for him, the more the narrative picked up. I also read other novels very selectively while writing this one. I always seem to do that when I’m working on something. If a novel doesn’t address some issue I’m struggling with in my own work, some technical matter like structure and pacing, a question of voice, use of image, whatever, I’ll put it down pretty quickly. I became an architect nosing through the great cathedrals of Europe. One cathedral I visited frequently was True History of the Kelly Gang by Peter Carey.



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How do you approach the writing process generally?

As a writer, I am a firm believer in serendipity, in accident and chance. Some things just happen. Some images occur. They insist. They reoccur. Suddenly you have a motif on your hands. Then you look at what you've got laid out before you, and you ask, Could I use this? Can I turn this into something significant, meaningful, even powerful? There's a lot of alchemy that happens right in front of you as you write. I believe that artists must possess an inner sense of aesthetic balance, just as musicians have an "ear" for their music, to help them deal with the accidental nature of creating art. That's why I create so many drafts when I write; then, when I feel the time is right, I start sifting.

In terms of efficiency, I'm probably the most wasteful writer there is. I edit a lot. I generate hundreds of thousands of words, then go back for the cull. I see the assembling of the big mess of words in the earlier stages of the novel as the search for the right block of marble in the quarry. Only after you get your hands on the right block can you start chipping away inch by inch. Hopefully, with a couple tons of crumbling, excess marble at your feet, you get your little, perfect, six-pound statue to show for it, gleaming and smooth, as if it existed in that block of stone all along and you were the only one able to see it.

You chose to emphasize Bethune's time in Spain during the Civil War and in China during the Communist Revolution. Why?

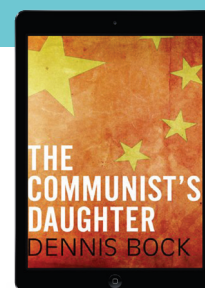
Well, on the one hand, it's during these two wars that Bethune's emotional battle begins and ends. It's in Spain that he enters into the relationship with Kajsa, the mother of his daughter and a possible spy; and in China he has to deal with the consequences of that relationship. On one level, it's as straightforward as that. On another level, Bethune is a man at war with himself. We witness the internal struggle, hoping for the emergence of a final defining identity. I don't think a writer could hope for a more interesting background, both historically and metaphorically, than the Spanish and Chinese civil wars, during which both countries struggled with this notion of identity.

An Excerpt from Olympia

In August 1972, just before my fourteenth birthday, almost a year to the day after my grandmother drowned, my uncle Günter came to us from Germany and found cracks at the bottom of our swimming pool. Because war stories had always been a part of my family, I thought I knew something of my mother's brother. All the grown-ups around me then had lived through war, including my father, and everybody had a story they seemed willing to share—friends of my parents, the teller from Frankfurt who worked at the Bank of Montreal at Lakeshore and Charles and spoke to my father in whispers over folded fives and twenties. It seemed that everyone my parents knew back then had escaped to this country from that dark place, as they had, after the war ended. But it took me until that summer to find out that there were things I hadn't been told, that there were secrets in my house.

I knew that my mother spent her war years in the north of Germany, trapped there among falling bombs. She told me about brushing her teeth with salt, the constant drought under her tongue, how they ate nothing but salted cabbage. She told me about the dead man who fell from the sky and lay in the front yard of their house through the month of May and into June and how an old woman from the neighbourhood came by with a bucket of salt every week and sprinkled it over the body to keep the fumes down until the town came and took him away.

She, my uncle, and their mother—the father already half-dead in the salt mines near Odessa, the mineral of dehydration sucking the liquids through his skin, his eyeballs, bringing his lungs, his hunger to the ridge of his teeth.



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The three of them, six months in a basement. And when the end of the war finally came they were collected onto railcars and rolled over the great smouldering landscape to the shores of the Gulf of Riga where they were released like sickly cattle into a February blizzard. Then hopping trains to get back, holding her little brother's hand dry with fear as they ran, and she the hand of her mother, the three of them grasping for the invisible hand that reached from the tousled boards of departing freight cars and missing, always missing that train, that hand, walking and waiting and running again. Four months to return home and nothing left but stories of salt and drought, stories that in my boyhood meant as much to me as television, as the map of the untravelled world.

An Excerpt from The Ash garden

The Bantai Bridge
August 6, 1945

One morning toward the end of the summer they burned away my face, my little brother and I were playing on the bank of the river that flowed past the eastern edge of our old neighbourhood, on the grassy floodplain that had been my people's home and misery for centuries. It was there I used to draw mud pictures on Mitsuo's back with a wideedged cherry switch, which I hid in a nearby hickory bush when it was time to go home. I liked its shape and how it felt in my hand, like a fine pen or paintbrush. I scooped up mud from the bank and shaped it into pictures of all sorts: trees, fishes, animals. The day my parents were killed I'd decided to paint my grandfather's face. I had turned six just a few weeks earlier. Mitsuo, my little brother, was only four years old and three months.

I enjoyed the way the black mud quivered like a fat pudding and glistened in the clear morning sunshine as I held it up to my face. When I fingered the first dab to apply to the cotton of his white shirt, I felt a child's pleasure in making such a mess, which we were always punished for; but I was also excited to be able to create something almost beautiful from this thick smelly puddle. Whenever my brother squirmed I threatened to call off our game and march him home. I knew he liked getting dirty, and enjoyed the tickle of my stick on his back. Sometimes he tried to guess what I was drawing there between his shoulder blades. I knew this because his fidgeting stopped and he was silent, concentrating with all his energy on the image I held in my imagination. It was as if he were looking with my own eyes at the drawing emerging before me. But today he was impatient. At first he was unable to follow in his mind's eye the lines of the cherry switch. Something had made him anxious, I thought. After a few minutes, though, I settled him down and my grandfather's old wrinkled face began to take shape in earnest.

I did not choose to draw my grandfather for any particular reason. Of course I had seen him earlier that morning, as I did every day. His face was fresh in my mind, I suppose. And so, with a dab and a blob here and there and a simple sweeping circle, accurately placed, the old round mouth slowly appeared. Next I added his crooked teeth. I drew the eyes closed and tufts of hair sprouting from the top of his head. At the sides, below the small pits of my brother's underarms, I placed the floppy, exaggerated version of the ears we often teased our grandfather about. As a whole the portrait bore at best a crude resemblance, perhaps recognizable to those who knew him, perhaps not. But it did look like a face, and that was good enough for me. I continued to bend and scoop mud from the bank and apply it, with increasing delicacy and accuracy, to my brother's back. To capture the shading under the eyes and his light mustache, I employed a thinner paste, which I made by letting less water drain from between my fingers before touching it to the cotton shirt. During this lighter dabbing, Mitsuo began to giggle and shift again. I stopped and told him in a stern voice to hold still. He knew he had to listen, because I was his older sister. When we were away from our parents I made the rules.

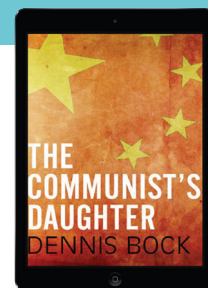
That's when we heard the plane.



The Communist's Daughter

by Dennis Bock

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Recommended Reading

The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art, edited and introduced by Larry Hannant

Readers will get a glimpse into the mind of a passionately devoted humanitarian and raving empire-builder.

Norman Bethune, by Roderick Stewart
I often referred to this nuts-and-bolts biography to help get a sense of Bethune's journeys through Spain and China.

Prologue to Norman: The Canadian Bethunes, by Mary Larratt Smith

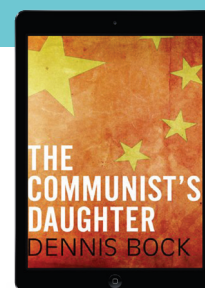
Smith provides background on Bethune's ancestry.

"The Second Battle of Ypres, Apr–1915," by Dave Love.

Originally published in *Sabretasche* (May 1996). Reproduced with permission at www.worldwar1.com/sf2ypres.htm.
This is a highly detailed account of an important First World War battle.

Journey to a War, by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood

This compelling book, by a famous couple—one, a poet; the other, a diarist—was written as they made their way through China during a time of war.



Web Detective

www.pc.gc.ca/lhn-nhs/on/bethune/natcul/natcul1_e.asp

The website for Parks Canada's Bethune Memorial House, a national historic site in Gravenhurst, Ontario, features a biography of Dr. Norman Bethune.

www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_25.htm

Read Mao Tse-tung's essay on Bethune: "In Memory of Norman Bethune" (December 21, 1939).

<http://archives.cbc.ca/300c.asp?id=1-74-1345>

Listen to "'Comrade' Bethune: A Controversial Hero," a series of nine radio clips, each running two to nine minutes, presented by CBC Archives.

www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/nb.html

View a series of historic Chinese posters featuring Bethune.

www.collectionscanada.ca/physicians/002032-210-e.html

On the Library and Archives Canada site, read biographies of "Famous Canadian Physicians," including Bethune.

www.filmreferencelibrary.ca/index.asp?navid=46

The Canadian Film Encyclopedia site offers background on both the documentary Bethune (1964), directed by Donald Brittain, and the film Bethune: The Making of a Hero (1990), directed by Phillip Borsos and starring Donald Sutherland. Key "Bethune" into the search box.

www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=20051024_114045_114045

"Sex, spies and Bethune's secret" (Maclean's, October 19, 2005), by Michael Petrou, is an intriguing article on Bethune.

www.dennisbock.ca

Check out the author's official site.