



## Travels in Narnia

*Laid low by a lacklustre rock tour and personal tragedy, DAVE BIDINI experiences the healing power of C. S. Lewis.*

*Illustration by John Perlock.*

**B**efore the turn of the century, my wife and I lost a child. It happened just as my band was preparing to go on tour. We were promoting a children's album, *The Story of Harmelodia*, which we'd conceived while backstage after a series of stadium shows opening for the Tragically Hip. We wanted to make small, wild music for the small and wild, but the experience now promised to be mostly about my lost child, who'd been aborted during my wife's second trimester. He or she had been

afflicted with a rare cyclopic condition that slowed brain development. Doctors removed the fetus, and my wife and I subsequently floated through a gummy fog of loss—mourning, as all stricken parents do, for our child, ourselves and the sudden misfortunes life can throw at you.

Then, before we hit the road Janet became pregnant again. The news filled us with happiness, panic and uncertainty. And yet there I was, grimly stuffing my cigarette-stained cap into the back of the van and

leaving to cut a path between Thunder Bay and Winnipeg and further west. I phoned my wife every seven minutes to make sure that she and the baby were doing okay. The band had had a good year or two—playing to rousing houses, getting lots of media attention. But this tour turned out to be underwhelming, with bookings in large theatres we couldn't possibly fill. We were also hamstrung by a boutique Maritime record label and burdened by self-management. It was January, and frost covered most of

the country. We were drinking more than ever before, and the popularity we'd achieved opening for the Tragically Hip had evaporated. And back home in Toronto, my wife sat nesting a fragile embryo.

One afternoon in Saskatoon, I made my way to Broadway Avenue, looking for a place to park my anxiety for a while. I happened upon A Book Hunter, a skunky used bookstore with an unkempt interior that matched my state of mind. Walking in, I noticed a large, square man in short sleeves with a thistle brush cut sitting behind an old, book-strewn wooden desk and arguing with a patron.

"This darned guy on the radio. He was asking his listeners a question and no one could answer it. Not a single person in the whole province of Saskatchewan, even though it was a Saskatchewan question. Can you believe it?" he shouted.

The man to whom the bookseller was speaking just stood there with his hands in his pockets and giggled at the bookseller's outrage and indignation. After the bookseller finished his tirade, I stepped forward and asked him if he could point me towards the sports section.

"Sports, eh?" he said, looking straight at his friend. "Ok, here's the question," he proposed, throwing a forearm in my direction. "Name the only two brothers to win the Stanley Cup with the Toronto Maple Leafs!" he shouted, daring me to produce an answer. I was about to say, "Doug and Max Bentley?" when he said, "Other than Doug and Max Bentley!"

There's a misconception among those who've read my books that I am a maladjusted sports nerd whose every waking hour is spent absorbing the kind of pro sports minutiae that one is supposed to be able to recall on occasions such as this. But for me, it's always been more about players and the drama of games than who scored the winning goal in the 1948 Stanley Cup. Nevertheless, two names found me while standing in this cruddy bookstore: "Don and Nick Metz."

The bookseller reared back, his hands gathering into fists. "Yes!" he yelled, pounding the table, spittle flying across a stack of old books. "No one else in Saskatchewan knows this but you!" he said. "Well, me and you.

My name's Wayne Shaw. I'm in the CFL Hall of Fame."

In an effort to further emphasize his athletic pedigree, he immediately rose from behind his desk—his body thick through the middle, neck snapping with muscles—and began to re-enact a series of downs from the 1973 Grey Cup, which he'd participated in as a linebacking Green Rider. His shoulders pistoned as he dragged bookcases around the store, giving him just enough room to show me how he'd moved on the other side of the ball when Tiger Cats quarterback Chuck Ealey dropped into the pocket with a few minutes left in the game, looked downfield for receiver Garney Henley, then threw the ball deftly over the middle—only to see Wayne Shaw leap to grab it out of the air.

Breathless after his pantomime, Shaw returned to his chair and told me, "Growing up, I loved books and sports. It's what Père Athol Murray taught me and that's how I was for most of my life. But then," he sighed, "I got addicted to sex."

Wayne had been mentored at Notre Dame College, just north of Saskatoon, by Monsignor "Père" Murray, the college's patriarch. Murray tried to instil a love of books in every young athlete on his watch, and this love of books stayed with Wayne after his retirement from the CFL—which is why he ended up opening a used bookstore.

"Père Athol had a huge library of books, and I read 'em all. All the classics," he recalled. "He taught us the importance of gaining knowledge through reading books. But in the CFL, this was impossible to stay with, and that's why I got addicted to sex. It was hard. There were girls everywhere and I did some terrible things. But eventually I found my faith. It wasn't the church or anything that did it. It was C.S. Lewis. His book, *Surprised by Joy*, changed my life. Père had given it to me in school, but I'd forgotten about it. If there's one book you should read, it's this one. It'll help you find yourself, teach you who you really are in this bloody mess of a world."

I'd thought of C.S. Lewis during Janet's first pregnancy, dreaming what all expectant parents dream: sitting in bed beside your child, reading from the very books your parents

read to you—stories about Narnia and the fiendishly addictive Turkish delight and talking lions and the great mysterious wardrobe that, whenever we went visiting other families, compelled a younger me to search the rooms for similar portals. Such doors, Lewis showed us, weren't found in rocket ships or time machines or the sea-faring vessels of Jules Verne, but in mundane dressers in average homes.

I ended up buying some old Saskatchewan minor hockey league pins, then headed to Louis' Pub at the university for our gig. The band played for a small crowd in a room where, in previous years, excited bodies had been stacked floor to ceiling. Afterward, our lead guitar player said, "When I die, I want to be buried under the stage of Louis' Pub." It was funny, but nobody laughed.

**The next day**, we headed to Edmonton, fighting wild snow and a killing wind the whole way. I called Janet from every pay phone I could find. She told me that she was well, everything was normal. Well—not entirely normal. After all, instead of being with her, I was miles away, cruising endless ice-glazed highways.

After our show that night, a kid in a ski jacket approached and asked if I wanted to see his hockey rink. I told him that I did, and I went backstage and asked the rest of the band if they wanted to come, but the state

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of our group was such that nursing a tray of beers was more their speed, in face of the reality that our rock 'n' roll careers were sliding down the pole every Canadian band fights to shimmy up.

The kid's name was Spencer. He had freckles and a bouncing mop of red hair. We drove to a part of town he called Sylvan Glen, a broad, leafy suburb lost beneath great pillows of snow. As we reached his parents' old manor house—the very kind, I thought, where *Narnia*'s Pevensie kids might have lived during the war—I was guided into a room

filled with hockey skates and told to pick out my size. I found a pair and pushed them on my feet, then Spencer and I skate-stepped over a small wooden terrace towards a square rink lit by Christmas lights, which wound through trees with branches that hung over the ice like the tired arms of aging doyennes. As I skated alongside Spencer—our feet kniving the clean, cold sheet—he casually said, “Do you know who used to come and visit here? Aldous Huxley, the writer. He was my grandfather’s uncle and he turned up all the time.”

With the name of another great British writer hanging in the air, we continued our whirl around the rink. Huxley had written about the doors of perception, and about unlocking the mind’s subconscious. He was one of the first writers to explore LSD as a way of understanding his feelings and connecting his childhood with his later years. Then I recalled that Huxley also recommended LSD for dealing with trauma, as a tool for freeing the mind from distress. I wasn’t stoned, but skating with Spencer, the snow falling softly against the Christmas lights, I was suddenly under the spell of an epiphany: a wardrobe flung open, beckoning me from my sadness. It tantalized, and then the moment closed. I was reminded of the William Blake lines that had given Huxley his title: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” After spanking a puck around the ice, we retired to remove our skates in the equipment room, where, to my surprise, I noticed a great bookcase rising against one of the walls. I wasn’t sure whether it had been there before. Perhaps I’d missed it the first time; perhaps it had been conjured out of my imagination; or perhaps, like Huxley has suggested, it was a wall now manifested as a bookcase because it’s what my subconscious wanted to see. I took off my skates, walked towards the redwood shelves and reached for one of the books. Drawing out its spine, I saw that it had the face of a lion: *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

**The following day**, we were scheduled to perform at a Chapters bookstore on the fringes of Calgary. We were anxious to finish the tour, and depressed that we still had a few weeks left. One of our members thrashed the sides of the van, outraged that he’d been pulled from his sleep to wrestle with a hangover. When we arrived at the store, I went to the manager’s office and phoned my wife, complaining to her about what we were going through. At the end of my tirade, I felt like a jerk: she’d spent the last few weeks dealing with the uncertainties of carrying a second child alone. My journey had produced strange figures and waves of Huxleyesque magic, but for my wife there were no doors, only a dark tunnel that stretched from nowhere to somewhere.

Damaged and bitter-minded, we performed our bookstore set. We played out of small amps to twenty people in the bookstores’ cavernous hall. We had trouble singing through the alcoholic damage of the night before, and possessed the weathered and shipwrecked look that affects many touring bands. I rolled up my cables and tried to get out as quickly as possible, but before I could leave, a tall young woman in a long dress strolled towards me, hugging a comic book to her chest.

Her name was Julia, and she looked as if she’d emerged from a mist, her voice as placid as a summer lake, her hair as fine as gold silk. “I brought you this,” she told me, handing over the comic. “It’s written and drawn by my brother-in-law, David Collier, the Hamilton graphic novelist.”

Books absorbed on the road are essential because they help stay the madness that comes with protracted travel, but books brought by young women who arrive when the cloud of one’s misery is at its thickest are more treasured still. Even better are books that help you understand the nature of, and the reason for, your travels. The comic Julia gave me was about how British medical researcher Dr. Humphry Osmond had pioneered the use of LSD in Saskatchewan’s southeastern city of Weyburn. Osmond’s dear friend and supporter, it turned out, was a fellow Englishman named Aldous Huxley. It was Osmond who’d suggested

that Huxley experiment with mind-altering substances and supervised Huxley’s first drug trip. Osmond was also the one who coined the word “psychedelic.” This was interesting because, during interviews for *Story of Harmelodia*, I always made sure to point out that the best children’s music—Shel Silverstein, Harry Nilsson’s album *The Point* or Zero Mostel’s reading of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*—had more in common with psychedelic music than rock and roll. Saskatchewan, Huxley, doors of perception: the coincidences were piling up. What answer was trying to find me?

**Our last gig was in Duncan**, BC, at the Centre for the Performing Arts. The Centre is part concert hall and part skating rink, with a facade that is decorated with a 70-metre hockey stick, the world’s largest. Had we encountered this object in the band’s early years, we would have greeted it with raucous cries. Instead, there was a muted cheer as the van pulled around back to unload our gear.

On this evening, my misery and the toil of the tour, combined with the heavy company of Huxley and C.S. Lewis, became too much to bear. I called Janet for the last time from the road, my head falling into my hands. I cried into the phone, trying to describe all that had happened. She told me to “try to hang in there” and “don’t worry, you’ll be home soon,” but my tears were the result of understanding that I was in fact travelling in a dreamscape conjured by our lost child, a fantastic kingdom of old linebackers, skunky bookstores, mystical winters, brilliant hockey rinks and wild comic books. In its passing, the child had left me with a heroic gift: the world itself. The lesson was to keep moving. In that moment, I understood where I was, and why. I hung up the phone.

**The next day, driving** through the forests of Vancouver Island, I looked out of the window, playing these notions over in my head. At the side of the road, I noticed a crooked wooden shed where a small child was painting the last stroke of a phrase written in fire engine red across the flat of the wood:

“Welcome to Narnia.” 🦁