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# Imperiling Our Children: An Interview With Fred Stenson About Who By Fire

Jon Gordon  
*University of Alberta*

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Jon Gordon  
and  
Fred Stenson

## Imperiling Our Children: An Interview With Fred Stenson About *Who By Fire*



Fred Stenson (Photo: Greg Gerrard)

*Who By Fire*, the most recent novel by Fred Stenson, is about a southern Alberta farm family beset by a sour gas plant. The first part of the novel traces the impacts on the Ryder family members whose farm house lies in the path of the plant's toxic emissions, while the second part follows the youngest member of the Ryder family, Bill, who has now grown up to be an oil and gas engineer and remains unable to overcome his feelings of having betrayed his family. In these two ways, the novel examines short and long term effects of the collision between community and industry.

Jon Gordon recently spoke with Stenson about the new novel. The resulting conversation ranges from the role of environmentalists and the legal system in responding to the oil and gas industry in Alberta, to Stenson's earlier novels *The Trade* and *Lightning*, to topics including loyalty, betrayal, landscape, sacrifice zones, democracy, hope, and denial.

This interview has been edited. An unabridged audio version is available at <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/11/>.

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**Jon Gordon:** It's really a pleasure to talk to you. I was really excited to hear about the novel. It's quite uncommon, I'm sure you know, to have a novel that deals with the oil and gas industry in Canadian fiction [...] If you could, just give a sense of how you would characterize the novel and how that came out of your own childhood.

**Fred Stenson:** The primary story of the novel is the Ryder family, a farm family in Southern Alberta, colliding with a sour gas plant built on the western doorstep of their farm. The idea of the novel, really, is to follow the family as it deals with the thing [...] Through the novel, I wanted to see how that sort of thing plays out, how that might dog the family members on into the rest of their life. [...]

As far as my personal connection to the story, I did grow up in a farm family that had much the same predicament. What I've done here is use the problems my family had, as recorded by my parents in a daily diary. I've used many of the actual events while fictionalizing the family they happened to. The father, the mother, the three siblings are not closely based on myself or my family. That is, similar things

happen to the family in the novel, but the results in the family are quite different [...]

**JG:** I found the sense of betrayal in Billy, the youngest son, really interesting. In some ways, all of the family members feel like they've betrayed Tom, the father. [...] At one point we read, "When the time in his life came to be a husband, a father, Tom had felt he was up to it. As long as things in their lives and the children's resembled what had gone before, he was able to do it all, even easily, and mostly without thought. But now, this thing, this plant was testing him in undreamt ways. Daily he felt too ignorant and weak to solve their problems. He guessed that Ella felt the same way—that she was living in a life too foreign to predict. But knowing that was not a solution either" (81). And this seems to me like [...] a description of a kind of modern state of being in the world where everything is changing, and out of your control. [...] The way that Tom deals with that, or part of the way, is by getting Bill a job in the gas plant. And Bill doesn't know that his father has done this. Could you say something about how Tom tries to cope with the situation, after the lawsuit has failed?

**FS:** That's a real pivotal part of the story. Tom has battled the gas plant in every which way that he can think of, trying to get some justice. He's heard of another community that has a lawsuit that seems to be getting some traction, so he works with them to try to start one in his own community, but he can never quite get enough people interested. When he almost has enough neighbours with him, he can't get the lawyer he wants. The thing that is key to Tom is that he has always been trying, in his own way, in various ways, to protect his family. He wants to be the protector, the old-fashioned view of what a father should be in his family: the ultimate protector, and he keeps failing. Finally he enables his son to get a job at the plant—something he has learned his son wants and needs. This represents his acceptance of the reality that he lives in. Though he has failed to protect his family from the oil industry, he can, at the least, get out of the way and let them live their own lives.

Bill leaps through that gap as soon as it is opened [...] His father dies at the age of sixty, and Bill can never get rid of the idea that he has both betrayed his father and in some sense was one of the causes of his death. It's not that Tom put this idea in the mind of his son—he actually tried to put something else in Bill's mind—but Bill retains the idea that he has sinned against loyalty. Once he believes he is guilty of this, he actually does begin to actively betray people, a pattern that continues to the novel's present. He has the sense that his fate is to betray people, and he keeps doing it.

Loyalty is at the core of this novel, what loyalty is, and what it is to betray. In a society like Alberta's, in a place that is built around oil and gas, we have devolved over time into teams. You either play on "Team Oil" or "Team Environment" or "Team Farm." We've become quite extreme that way. Bill's lifelong effort is to extricate himself from the burden of his betrayals by being on no one's side. He wants only to do his job, and to avoid being on one team or another. This puts me in mind of Neil Young's visit to Alberta in the last year, which, I felt, showed the team-play tendency in Alberta at its most awful. The letters to the editor at that time were filled with condemnations of Neil Young simply for opposing the oil and gas industry. [...] I kept thinking, "Since when did Alberta become a place where people can't speak their minds?" It's in that sense that loyalty is an issue at the heart of this novel.

**JG:** [...] To go back to the idea that Tom is trying to take the only path that seems left to him, which is to help his son find a way to survive in this world [...] it reminded me that an earlier prairie novel might have ended with that kind of hopeful idea of learning the science and making things better. I think of the end of *Who Has Seen the Wind?* and Brian O'Connell sets out to be a dirt doctor... but that doesn't happen here. We see what happens to Bill when he grows up, and even though he's a good engineer, he can't make things work perfectly, and the consequences of the industry continue.

**FS:** Yeah. People talk about sacrifice zones in terms of landscape; the oil sands is often

depicted as that. What I wanted to get at through the Ryder family [...] and through Bill [...] is that there are also human sacrifice zones. The trees, the boreal forest, the people—all are treated about the same when they get in the way. Bill goes off, he's always running away, and his final flight is into the oil sands [...] and he slams right into this thing that he has tried to avoid: a community in the same position his family was in in 1961. The oil sands plows right into that community, in the same way it is plowing through the landscape. [...] It's the contradiction of progress—which is such an old idea. When you're busily making money and feeding royalties and so on, there's all this destruction. The society has for so long regarded this as its right: to destroy landscapes and human communities if that is the natural consequence of progress. I wanted to humanize that, to show what happens in average lives when this force is exerted on them.

The other side of the myth of progress is that industry makes things better and creates hope for the future out of the destruction. There's also this idea that people recover from whatever happens to them. We're consumed of late with the idea of post-traumatic stress, and yet, even in that discussion, at the root of it, we still believe that people do get better. [...] The novel is a questioning of all that. It is saying, "How will they get better?" "Why would they get better?" "How could they get better?" How would a child wake up in the night, scared to death, covered in blood

from a nose bleed, his house is shaking, grow up without a trace of that left in him?

I experienced all these things as a child, and I wonder, do people really believe that this stuff just goes away? All of it just disappears? Yet I think we do believe that; it's part of the progress myth of our society, that soldiers get over wars, farm kids get over pollution, that we're always getting over things. But perhaps not.

Michael Crummey wrote a fine book called *The Wreckage* about a Newfoundlander who is a survivor of Hiroshima. [...] I think there's a connection between Michael Crummey's ideas in that book and what I was trying to show in *Who By Fire*. On some level people, certain people, will not survive these things, or at least they will not remain whole.

**JG:** It's interesting. I think the myth of progress is so pervasive in our culture that it's hard to even say something like that. In the book there're a lot of times where Tom, especially, writes letters and burns them [...]. In one part Tom is writing to, not his MLA, but the neighbouring MLA, to try to explain the damage that's been done by this plant, and he writes, "I don't even get along with myself. Don't even recognize myself. I thought I was a good farmer, good trader, good husband, not a bad father. I counted on respect and had it. I don't know what I've got now. Some days it doesn't feel like much" (131). And that reminded me of a passage from George Grant where he's talking about Friedrich Nietzsche, and he says: "In Nietzsche's conception of justice

*People talk about sacrifice zones in terms of landscape, [but] there are also human sacrifice zones.*

there are other human beings to whom nothing is due [...] those of our fellows who stand in the way [...] can be exterminated or simply enslaved. There is nothing intrinsic in all others that puts any limit on what we may do to them [...] Human beings are so unequal that to some of them no due is owed" (*Justice* 94).

**FS:** That's a wonderful quote; should have been my novel's epigraph! I think it's important too that Tom destroys that letter. It never goes anywhere, and that's typical of the box he lives in. He's so uncomfortable with having put something like that on a piece of paper that he can't destroy it fast enough. That level of nakedness, you know? And I think that, too, the people who are owed nothing – it is fascinating that we have this sense. We talk about equality, we talk about rights, and yet, at the slightest hint of industry wanting something, there's an immediate bow down. We've done that so often that we, the society, [...] we even forget to question it; forget to question whether the thing that's coming is progress at all, or good for anyone. We assume that industry wins, and government is there to help it win. Period.

**JG:** Right, and this is important in the book in terms of the lawsuit. You mentioned that there's the lawsuit in the community of Dry Fork, which is ultimately settled [...] and there's Tom's lawsuit, which never gets anywhere. He [Tom] says after the Dry Fork suit is settled, "the sour gas companies had not admitted a thing. Not one gassed

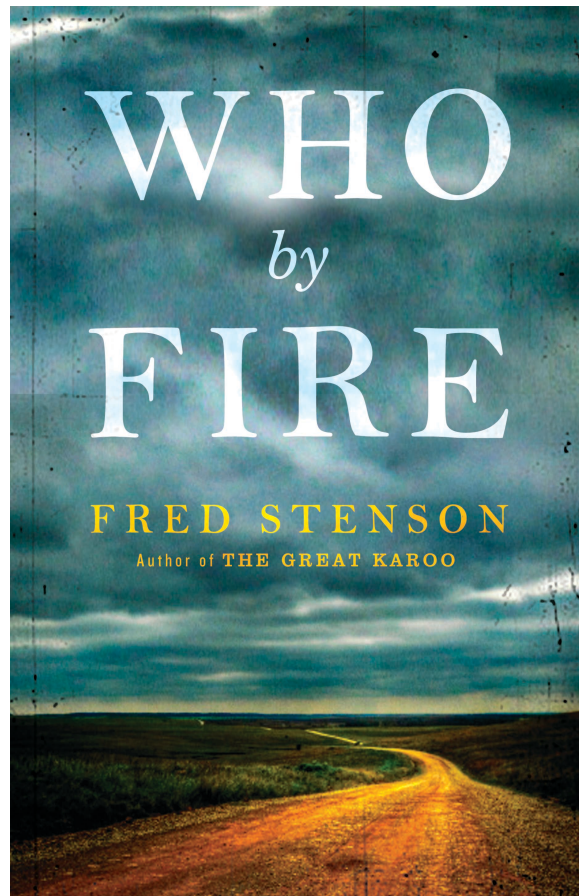
farmer, not one dead pig, was laid at their door" (303). This too makes me think about current circumstances. There are several lawsuits against oil sands projects, or the government and their approval process, before the courts now. Do you think that legal action is a place where environmental activism should be focused?

**FS:** I'm not an expert on these matters, but it's very interesting that it is the courts that seem to be the only hope of those struggling against industry and government. There's been such a stepping out of it all by government. They are obviously on industry's side, but they don't want to appear to be involved, so they take themselves out of the equation. I think it is the belief by people that they cannot expect to move their governments, that pushes everything into the courts. It wouldn't be in the courts if the government were regulating the industry in a way that was fair to the people. There wouldn't be that necessity, but now it's the only possibility. It's all you can do, within the law. And so, civil suits are pushed up to the Supreme Court in search of an unbiased decision. That's the only way to go, I guess.

**JG:** It seems too, at least some of the time, and maybe in this settlement too for the community of Dry Fork, that the courts provide a venue by which the status quo is able to justify itself. The people of Dry Fork win their lawsuit, but, like Tom says, they [industry] don't have to admit anything and they don't have to fix anything.

**FS:** I'm being a little less than candid here because the community of Dry Fork is the community that's based on my own community. My family was part of a lawsuit and after twelve years we did get a modest settlement. The thing is, that Tom is sort of weighing the good and the bad of that. The good is that a few farmers have managed to move a multi-national corporation to settle out of court for fear that they might lose in court. That was a rare thing and it was an important thing, a precedent that other people have built on, but not a legal precedent, because it didn't get into court. And because it didn't get into court, and because these things seldom do, because the companies always have the resources to settle out of court, the lawsuits are unable to prove anything. That's why I said that not a single dead pig is laid at the oil industry's door. These things are almost impossible to prove. [...] We saw that again in the oil sands with Dr. O'Connor and the bile duct cancers at Fort Chip. There was immediately such a scuffling to try and discredit the doctor and to establish that no cause and effect was proven. Same with the lump fish in Lake Athabasca. A fella who fished commercially there and took a sack of

deformed fish and left them on a government doorstep in Fort McMurray, and they were left to rot there, just as if to say, "You think you can prove something in this way, but you can't. You can't move us this way." And I put in the novel, from the point of view of Marie Calfoux, who is a Native woman living in the oil sands, that one of her relatives fished commercially and was told that all of these deformed fish,



that he was mistaking them, that they were just spawned out fish. She says to Bill Ryder, "Can you understand how many thousands of fish my cousin has looked at in his life. Was he likely to make such a mistake?" I remember cringing when I saw that in the newspapers. I thought at the time, "How can they do this? How can they tell people who have been fishing for generations that they don't know what a spawned out fish looks like?" It's terribly insulting and

so deeply unfair. If bodies like judiciaries or regulators, so-called regulators, on the government's behalf, will take such an approach to evidence... the bias is unbelievable. When a steer dies on the Ryder farm, Tom gets an autopsy done and his vet says, "You'll have to have a government person present or they won't

take this seriously,” and Tom says, “No. I just want you to do it. I want to know what that animal died of, and I don’t want the government involved, I don’t want the plant, the company, involved; I just want to know.” I think that’s a telling thing: that Tom has long ceased to trust the government or the company to be fair.

**JG:** It’s pretty bleak in that kind of a situation. In the novel, Bill ends up being a gambling addict, and it seems like a kind of coping mechanism. He talks about how sitting in front of the VLT [...] he doesn’t have to worry about all of the other things in terms of his personal life and the work that he does and the impacts of that. When you talk about the lawsuit or the government and how these things don’t necessarily have solutions, or they’re not there for the people when they need them, this [gambling] kind of seems like a reasonable response, to just tune it out.

**FS:** There’s something about that gambling addiction I’d like to say. Bill has his own pat way of dealing with this, of explaining it, that it’s something that zones him out, keeps his problems away, and it’s something that he’s deeply addicted to for achieving that purpose. Instead of cocaine, instead of something that would debilitate him physically, he just opts for something that will debilitate him financially. But I think there’s a greater symbolism there. In my novel *The Trade* I had one of the primary characters, Harriott, be an excessive drinker of trade rum. Ted Harriott was a real historical figure, and he is depicted in HBC notes as drinking too much rum. I had a sense there, with the historical

and fictional Ted Harriott, that he felt so guilty about what he did for a living, that rum for him was a kind of sacrament. Drinking the shame of what they were doing to people. At one time when a minister tries to help Harriott, tries to get him to see this as a problem, as something that he should stop, Harriott himself makes that comparison. He lifts his cup of rum as if it were a chalice, and drinks from it, to make this kind of mockery of religion, even though he himself is religious, and saying “If this is evil, then I’m drinking evil.” And I think the symbolism of Bill’s gambling problem is the same thing. In a sense, in this place that’s awash with money, something that is all done for money, and this great mess that’s created for money, for him to go and gamble money away, just throw it away in a sense, throw it back at the government, has that same sort of sense of black sacrament. It’s a mini-cosm of what the oil sands are: this great financial circus—money in, money out—and much destroyed.

**JG:** I was thinking of the symbolism in Bill’s gambling as symbolic of our culture and our relationship to fossil fuel extraction, and how it enables us to have money to do things to avoid thinking about the consequences of what we’re doing. [...]

**FS:** Because the royalty rates are so low in Alberta, society seems to dig the sands just so it can dig more oil sands [...] Is society even getting much out of it at this stage? Individuals may be winners financially. [...] But the bigger picture seems to be strip mining and processing and selling so you can strip mine and process and sell some



more. The province is going in debt. It's a crazy system.

**JG:** You mentioned your earlier novel *The Trade*. I was thinking after reading this [*Who By Fire*], about some of your earlier work with *The Trade*, the fur trade, and *Lightning*, the cattle business, and now we have oil and gas: there's kind of an economic history of Alberta there [...]. Do you see that kind of relationship, of moving from one kind of commodity to another here?

**FS:** Originally, when I started writing *The Trade*, my vision was of a cycle of novels that would deal with all the economic horizons from contact to the present in Alberta history. [...] *Who By Fire* does follow that pattern somewhat. Something that fascinates me about the economies of the west, and I think it might be frontier economies everywhere, is that you don't have smooth transitions from one economy to the next. The new economy comes as the enemy of the old one, like a young warrior who destroys an old and enfeebled warrior. I also think of it as an avalanche: the new economy avalanches the old economy, and there's no care about that. A Darwinian thing. The fur trade, which eventually included the buffalo robe trade, destroyed the buffalo and left the prairies standing deep in grass, with nothing to graze it, and, so, in come the cattle. The government passes ranch lease laws in western Canada and here

*My vision was of a cycle of novels that would deal with all the economic horizons from contact to the present in Alberta history.*

*The new economy comes as the enemy of the old one.*

come the cattle to eat that grass. Then the government sees that ranching is not putting very many people in the west, so they change their strategy to paying people to bring immigrants in to homestead and farm. The open range ranch industry is avalanched by the homestead farming industry, and then the farming industry is avalanched by the oil industry. This is

the way we do things. In a way, there's a real cruelty. And I should have started with the fur trade having avalanched the life ways of Native people. There's always been an element of cruelty, of not caring what you're destroying with each new economy. So it's nothing new. It's a perpetuation of things that we'd like to believe we've outgrown. The present day industries, oil sands and fracking, may be the worst thing yet because we're avalanching nature itself. Maybe then it becomes all-consuming.

**JG:** [...] You talk about an avalanche erasing one economy with a new economy, but in another sense they're both kind of extractive economies, extracting something from the land, for profit. [...] I'm wondering if you see both as exploitative industries, and how they're exploitative, and—you said the oil and gas industry may be the worst economy yet—if there's hope for restoration there [...].

**FS:** A more precise description of who is avalanching whom would be that large

farming has avalanched small farming out of existence—or it's in the process of doing it. The bigger farming gets the more destructive it becomes because it's not taking care of the soil, it's destroying the soil's capability of doing anything on its own. Only very artificial stimulants can make that land keep producing.

**JG:** And very oil intensive...

**FS:** So it's kind of a death scenario in the end. There's probably an argument that, after conventional oil and gas, the land and the people could revive. The oil sands seems different, because will that landscape ever revive? I don't know. It certainly won't be a boreal forest again in less than a thousand years, if ever. Toward the end of the book, when Bill is with his sisters on the farm, his oldest sister explains what she is trying to do. She's trying to break the cycle, to get that piece of land that was turned into a gas plant restored to ranch land. There's an ecological problem in reclaiming land that is thoroughly polluted, but there's also zoning and taxation matters designed to prevent land returning to its earlier use. "This land is zoned industrial and therefore it must remain industrial." We seem to want things not to be reclaimed or to be revived or restored. That would seem like a lost chance to do more destruction! It's an amazing idea, but lots of this does happen at the government level. I can't say often enough that we seem to have lost all instinct for democracy. Democracy, actual functioning democracy, could improve many things. Many of these death scenarios need not be so. But somehow the instinct

for democracy, the sense of democracy as a powerful thing, keeps on sinking. [...]

**JG:** In the acknowledgements you thank environmentalists [...] do you think there's a place or a role for environmentalists [...] in engaging people?

**FS:** I think the environmental movement has always been pretty pragmatic. The purpose is to win back ground. The purpose is not just to make great speeches from the pulpit. David Suzuki, in particular, I've watched him through his career experimenting with different approaches. I remember clearly when his approach was to try and speak to industrial entities as people with grandchildren; saying, "If you won't do this for yourself, do it for your grandkids." He has always been looking for a way to succeed in bringing forth a more positive active response on environment. I mentioned those people because I deeply admire what they've tried to do, what they go on trying to do. They're very important; they may be some of the most important people alive today, as we try to deal with the ultimate problems, these tipping point issues. Because they are rational and pragmatic and want to succeed in improving the world, they need to match up with people on the so-called other side who want the same. We need the three entities—government, industry, and the people—to meet and find common ground and do stuff.

**JG:** Maybe where we could end, then, is in that place, in terms of thinking about hope for the future. The novel doesn't exactly end in a hopeful place. There is a sense of hope in Bill's going back to be with Marie in

Fort McMurray, or near there, but the final image is taking us back to the title when you write, “He thought too,” this is Bill, “He thought of Tom and Ella, and his sisters, and of himself when he’d been Billy—of all the people, animals, and things whose fate it is to be born too close to the fire.

The shaking house, the creatures born dying, the rivers running discoloured to the sea” (355). And that idea of being born too close to the fire is going back to the title and that line from the Jewish liturgy, “who will die at his predestined time and who before that time, who by fire and who by water,” so I guess I’m wondering about how you see that conclusion in relation to some kind of hope, some kind of hope that people will be able to do things to make things better rather than continuing to make them worse.

**FS:** I am hoping that people will feel an emotion that’s partially empathy for others but also sympathy for themselves. In a sense we’re all living too close to the fire. It is our misfortune; it becomes the misfortune of ourselves and our children to be born at this time. Perhaps eventually everyone can share in that problem of being too close to the fire, born too close to the fire. People can do an immense amount if they recognize the necessity. I’m far from the first person to say that we need to approach the problems we have now, environmental problems, [...]

*In a sense we’re all living too close to the fire.*

*We need to approach the environmental problems we have now the way we have approached war in the past.*

the way we have approached war in the past. It requires that kind of personal sacrifice, on everybody’s part. People say, “Oh, I don’t want to limit my lifestyle [...]” You know, people could have said that in 1939-40, but they didn’t. They said, “Here’s a monster that wants to take over the world and we’re going to have to sacrifice in all sorts of ways and risk our lives to defeat this.” I think “defeat” and “war” are poor metaphors when talking about nature in peril, but still, that level of societal effort is an appropriate comparison in terms of what is needed. People have to believe that they must put forth their maximum effort now, for this cause, which is certainly their own cause. We’re still in this phase of having to convince people, and it does not help in any way that the government is unsupportive and that industry is still fighting tooth and nail to prevent current trends from being perceived as life-threatening problems. That’s where we are. We need to get past that.

**JG:** One part of the novel really brings that home for me, when it says, “It was a choice to go on imperiling their children. That was what they could not say to one another [Tom and Ella], and any conversation lacking that statement was not worth having” (177). [...] As a culture, if we’re not making that kind of effort, it is, it’s a choice to go on imperiling our children.

**FS:** That's a really good point you make: that statement, applying to Tom and Ella, is a statement that fits us all. We are going on imperiling our children, and the denial, the urge to deny, is great. People don't like feeling bad, and they'll deny for the longest, longest time. The idea put forth by current governments that you can depend on the oil industry to be good guys, you can depend on them to do the right thing – I don't think that's any more true than when Big Tobacco was denying lung cancer, when Asbestos was denying asbestosis. That's just not what corporations do: announcing their culpability. We need governments that will recognize that they are the final line of responsibility.

**JG:** I think that the novel, hopefully, will bring that home to people, you've got to get it in the right hands. It brings it home for me.

**FS:** Well, thank you very much.

**JG:** Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

**Jon Gordon** teaches Writing Studies at the University of Alberta. He has published on hog production, mountaineering literature, and bitumen. His most recent work, *Unsustainable Rhetoric: Facts, Counter-Facts, and Literature in the Debate over Alberta's Bituminous Sands*, examines bitumen extraction in Alberta. It is forthcoming from University of Alberta Press.

**Fred Stenson** is the author of eighteen books and 150 films and videos. He has lived throughout his career in the province

of Alberta, Canada. His book titles include the historical novels *The Great Karoo*, *Lightning*, and *The Trade*—and his most recent novel, an examination of the collision between the oil industry and community *Who By Fire*. Stenson has won several awards for his fiction: the WGA George Bugnet Novel Award, The City of Edmonton Book Prize, and the Grant MacEwan Writer's Prize (twice). *The Trade* was shortlisted for the Giller Prize in 2000. *The Great Karoo* was a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 2008. Stenson directed the Wired Writing Studio at The Banff Centre for fifteen years. He has been a regular columnist for *Alberta Views* magazine since the magazine's inception in 1999. He lives in Cochrane, Alberta with his wife Dr. Pamela Banting.