

# Where the muse lives

For novelist Donna Morrissey, Halifax is a source of comfort and inspiration

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS  
PHOTOS BY JAMES INGRAM

**O**n a late spring afternoon the port city outside novelist Donna Morrissey's home office is never far from her thoughts. "I discover Halifax every day," she says. "I've never ever gotten over the newness to it."

The multi-award-winning author of four novels and a screenplay, Morrissey was born in The Beaches, an outport on the west coast of Newfoundland, about an hour's drive from Deer Lake. Morrissey left the village at age 16, living in Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Grand Prairie and Vancouver. In her 30s, she moved to St. John's where she graduated from Memorial University with a Bachelor in Social Work and a diploma in adult education. Then, just over 40, a complete upheaval in her personal life prompted a move to Halifax.

"I came to Halifax because my mother was first diagnosed with breast cancer and my father had a heart attack," she recalls. "My

siblings were scattered all over the country and I was contemplating a move, via a relationship, to Antigonish. The relationship broke down but I didn't go back to Newfoundland because Halifax was a more central location for my siblings to move to."

Both parents recovered at the time, but Morrissey had been badly scared and was determined to bring the family closer together. "I was adamant that we all live in Halifax in case [our parents] got sick again and we could be together as a family to care for them and each other as we aged," she says. "I guess I suddenly realized that we are mere mortals and I became needy of family. It proved to be the very best decision because after a year of living here, my mother's breast cancer returned and my father had a second major heart attack. That did it. All my siblings moved to Halifax and we nursed our parents through to their separate endings."





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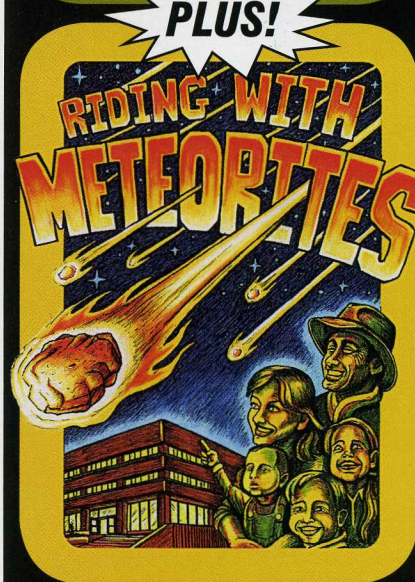
—Donna Morrissey

Before Morrissey's family joined her in Halifax, she felt totally alone here. For comfort and diversion, she decided to "make friends with the city." Her encounters with the city began up close and solitary and remain that way. "I walk a lot, you see, for writing," she says. "I don't drive... so I'm always walking new routes and new directions."

As she walks, she "processes" her writing. Currently, this means processing scenes from her new novel. The book is not yet titled, but Penguin Books plans to publish it in the autumn of 2011. "Yesterday, I was at a pivotal point in the story; I had no idea where I was going to go," she says. "I went down across the Commons, ran it three times, up and down Citadel Hill. By the time I got home, it was mapped out what I needed from the scene."

Morrissey was not a published writer when she came to Halifax and hadn't thought to be one. Not long after, however, at the urging of a friend, she began writing full time. In 2003, Penguin

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published Morrissey's first novel, *Kit's Law*. The international attention and praise that followed changed her life.

Jane Buss, the retired Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia's executive director, vividly remembers meeting Morrissey for the first time. "I didn't actually meet Donna until she'd finished *Kit*," says Buss. "She arrived, unannounced, mid-afternoon at the Fed [office]. She had a contract in hand. It was awful, feudal. When she came back for the follow-up meeting, I asked for her story, which was so compelling, original and intriguing. She seemed so feisty! There were no compunctions at all in pointing out that signing the thing would be like selling her first-born."

Buss had sound advice for Morrissey: wait for a better deal. "I knew there'd be another who'd offer more professional terms," she says. She gave Morrissey three alternative suggestions.

"She got offers from all within the month," Buss recalls. "The book was out very quickly with [Penguin]—a fall release, as I recall—and into maybe five printings before Christmas. What a firecracker of a book!"

Japanese, German and Dutch editions followed. Now the author of three more novels and a Gemini-award-winning screenplay, Morrissey is a committed writer with many more stories to tell. *The Globe and Mail* has called Morrissey "A Newfoundland Thomas Hardy." *Quill & Quire* described her prose as "threaded with echoes of Shakespeare, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell."

Morrissey's five siblings and their families live in Halifax, along with Morrissey's son and daughter. Morrissey shares her home with her 27-year-old daughter, Bridgette, a painter and graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Her son David, 33, "a computer whiz" and "the kindest-hearted soul this side of heaven," also lives near. "We are a beautiful family together," she says. "We fight and we argue and we laugh. We have an incredible sense of humour and it usually gets us through, so when we do want to murder each other, it only lasts for five minutes or sometimes a day, depending on the weapon used..." Her smile takes a wicked turn.

As she had hoped, the close bonds Morrissey shares with her family helped ease the pain of the loss of her mother eleven years ago and the loss of her father, only two years ago. She introduced her

parents to her "friends"—Point Pleasant Park, the Public Gardens, Historic Properties. Spending time with them in these places, gave her permanent, precious memories—the kind that say home, as few others can.

Morrissey revels in the vibrant student presence in the city. "That is part of what makes Halifax exciting for me," she says. "That is the edge, those 30,000 students that haunt the streets. They keep us on our toes with their fashions, their bizarreness, and their energy."

Morrissey is also, to her delight, "still learning Halifax, still finding out its secrets." Her current novel, set partly in Newfoundland and partly in Second World War-era Halifax, means ongoing research about the city she has chosen to call home.

Another significant boon the city has brought to Morrissey's life is perspective.

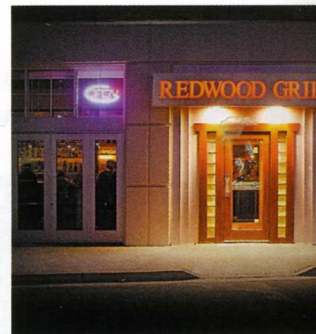
"[Halifax] has allowed me to get away from that psychological grasp that the Rock has on me, and it has given me the distance to be able to look back," she explains. "I feel insulated from it, to the point where I can be an objective writer and not get lost in the nostalgia. If there's anything Halifax has done for me, it has given me that. At the same time, it has kept me in tune with the sea because the ocean is everything."

Finally and most joyfully, life in Halifax has seen new life come to the Morrissey family. The birth of Morrissey's grandson, Bentley (her son David's son) has brought a new infusion of "big love" to the family. "I have a Haligonian in my family [now] and we're going to be buried here," she says.

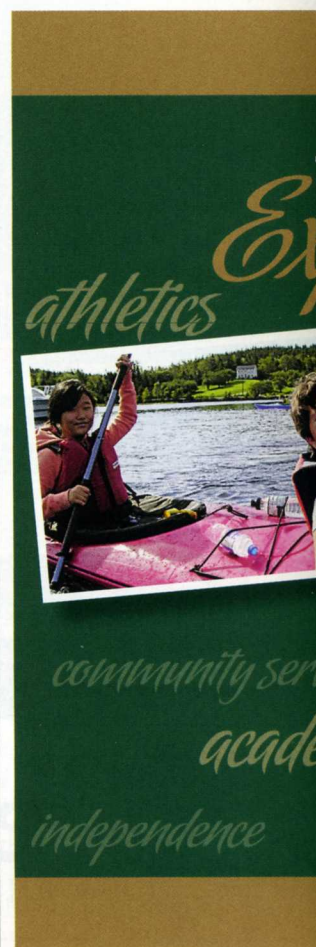
She muses on the changes in their lives, thinking especially about all three grandchildren in the family. "They've become a focus. It's like the heart left with Mom and Dad and we've been floundering together, all of us, a lot of deep pain and deep missing," she says. "Not all pain though. That's the strength they left behind because we got a lot of strength from Mom and Dad and a lot of joy in our memories." She takes a deep breath and tenderness lights her eyes: "They put the heart right back in the family, those grandkids." ■

#### FEEDBACK

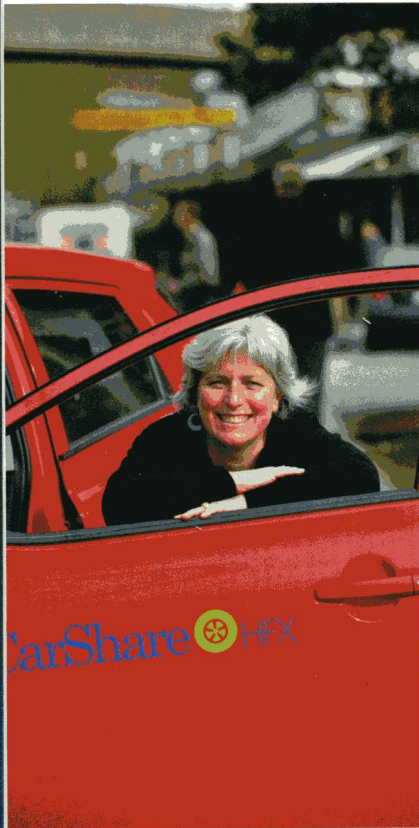
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## Green Mobility Comes to Halifax

"I believe that business can change the world and that it is a noble thing to do," says Pam Cooley (left). "It's an amazing reflection of how you can move through the world."

Pam Cooley is the president and co-owner of CarShareHFX, a young, award-winning company based in Halifax. Cooley co-owns the business with Peter Zimmer, who works as the general manager. Both are committed environmentalists and life-long community activists.

The premise of car-sharing is simple: use a car only when you need to, save money and live a greener life. For a flat yearly fee and a small hourly rental, members have access to a fleet of fuel-efficient cars or vans, on an hourly or daily basis. Fees are all-inclusive. Vehicles are parked in nine central locations on the Halifax peninsula and in downtown Dartmouth. Access is 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Members book their vehicles online or by telephone.

In January, CarShareHFX won gold as the best new company of the year at the Halifax Chamber of Commerce Business Awards. The company's registered name, CarShareAtlantic, reflects the owners' ultimate hopes to expand across the Atlantic Provinces.

"CarShare is a terrific business that is both entrepreneurial and environmentally progressive," says Colin MacLean, CEO of the Waterfront Development Corporation. "We are inspired by their vision, and pleased to be a partner."

CarShare is ideal for those who deliberately choose a car-free life, but need regular transportation. "CarShare is absolutely perfect for me," says Halifax MP Megan Leslie, of the New Democratic Party. "The riding of Halifax is bigger than people might think it is. I can walk or take a taxi or bus downtown, but once I need to get off the peninsula, I need a car."

CarShare's newest client is the provincial Department of the Environment. Using CarShare, says Solveig Madsen, an environmental analyst with the Department, "supports a new transportation option in our community that is environmentally preferable to individually owned vehicles."

In the future, Cooley hopes CarShare will be part of "regional mobility strategies" at all three levels of government and across the business communities. "We want a people culture," concludes Cooley, "not a car culture."

*By Marjorie Simmins*



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