

Up in the Sky, it's not a poet's mind wandering lonely as a cloud. It's a bird. It's a plane.

It's a COVID writing workshop for health professionals! And a COVID literary book!

by Shane Neilson MFA MA PhD CCFP FCFP; Damian Tarnopolsky

Damian:Shane, Covid has been such an unsayably horrible experience, thus far, don't you think?

Shane:Agreed on the horrible. Disagree on the unsayable.

Damian: In that case, wouldn't it be good if there were some place gathering and collecting the stories and experiences of health care workers going through the pandemic. These words "essential workers," "front line workers," they don't really tell the whole story, do they?

Shane: They do not. We really need a COVID *book*.

Damian: This COVID book. Let's talk about it.

Shane: When you say *this* COVID book...

Damian: Our COVID book?

Shane: Yours and mine. Everyone's.

Damian: That's the one. **(waiting)**... Well, first of all, where is it?

Shane: I could've sworn I left it just right over here. Damian. I just set it down somewhere. I think? On the table? You know, the book of stories by healthcare workers about COVID? It was blue. I'm sure it was blue!

Damian: Pretty sure it was red, actually.

Shane: Is it underneath you on the couch? Get off the couch, Damian! I need to find it!

Damian: Shane, this book you keep mentioning... Does it collect healthcare workers' pandemic stories from all over the country? Does it try to go beyond the initial narrative of heroism and gratitude, into grainier, darker territory? Is it trying to give practitioners the opportunity to tell their own stories? Or am I thinking of something else?

Shane: Yeah, that's the book. What will we name it? I'm thinking COVID SUPERHEROES! Just kidding. COVID JUSTICE LEAGUE! Kidding again. Tell me, o serious and reliable one, o prose writer, what's the name of the book? I hope the title's snappy!

Damian: Let's call it *Ulysses*.

Shane: Taken.

Damian: That's a movie.

Shane: I mean the title *Ulysses* is taken.

Damian: Well, we can leave the title for now. I want to add that people can find out more about this missing, yet-to-be-born couch-troglodyte book at <https://covidjournals1.wixsite.com/info>. Over to you, Shane. **(waits)**

Shane? Are you listening to me Shane?

Shane: (In Spaceman Poet Mode) That's not a good title. "Yet to be Born Couch Troglodyte Book" - no, not good. We gotta work on that.

Damian: I just said leave the title.

Shane: Titles are important.

Damian: Titles are hard. Even archly spangle-footed accentual-syllabic versifiers with their heads permanently stuck in the clouds know that, right?

Shane: *Dude.* My head is firmly on straight. I'm an end-rhymer. The kind of poet you're talking about? You find them in Montreal. But okay. *Fine.* Let's leave the title. Maybe people don't need a book as much as they need to tell their own stories as part of a larger community. Maybe they need a workshop?

Damian, opening a trench coat and a series of tickets to cancelled Maple Leaf and Raptors games appear in internal pockets): Well, if they do, then we've got them covered! Although maybe you forgot about the workshop too? Shane, *seriously.* Stop being such a slacker poet. We're offering a virtual writing retreat, with Giller-Prize-winning novelist Ian Williams and celebrated memoirist and poet Madhur Anand as our featured speakers, to give health practitioners some exposure to writing techniques that might help them through this time? Or, if they're anything like me, just a weekend away from it, in the digital company of like-minded folks and expert tutors. Surely there must be more people out there like me. And not like you, who is never away from anything. (If you, reader, are interested the workshop, you can find a link here: <https://sites.google.com/view/writingascraftcovid-19>

Shane: Oh yeah. A book! A virtual workshop!! Both on COVID. Both awesome. I remember. Which also reminds me of something I wanted to ask you: what kind of stories are you hoping get told in the book and workshop? Me, I'm really hoping for stories from disabled contributors or participants. COVIDtime is experienced differently by disabled people. I'm hoping a story or two comes from that place. And I know we're on the lookout for Indigenous and Black contributors too. The Health Arts Research Centre at UNBC is a partner on our project, and they may be able to help with that.

Damian: Speaking of genre, we're looking for personal stories, creative flights, reflections, poems, artwork, their gut reflex scrawlings and their more measured responses to this experience. In terms of contributor demographic, we're curious to go beyond COVID headlines into what it's been like, day-by-day, in urban centres and in the far north, for: paramedics, neurologists, social workers, spiritual care workers, occupational therapists and orthopaedic surgeons. We want to know what you say to your friends about what it's been like for you and what you don't say to anyone because it keeps you up at night. We also want to know what Camus got wrong about this Plague! Be it unsettling or inspiring, we want people to hear the story that hasn't been told.

Shane (with open curiosity, for this is not merely a leading question): How do contributors or prospective workshop attendees get in contact with us?

Damian (happy to oblige): They can send their work or their queries to us at covidjournals1@gmail.com We could take up to 3000 words. We'll be able to talk payment and terms shortly. Right now we want to see your work. We may be speaking lightly here, because so much of our speech these days is dark: but the fact is, the world needs to see your work. Please share. And if you're really keen, keener than Shane, I'll mention just one last time (like an infomercial scrolling past at rocket speed) that you can click on these links to learn more about

the workshop: <https://sites.google.com/view/writingascraftcovid-19>

the book: <https://covidjournals1.wixsite.com/info>.

Shane: Maybe the help the health professions need around COVID is a record of experience, a portable kind of help to plug into and reflect on, to compare and contrast, to identify with? That's what I want the book and workshop to do. Just like the *CFP* is doing in their way with their COVID blog. Thanks *CFP*!



Dr. Shane Neilson is a poet and physician who works in Guelph and is an assistant clinical professor of family medicine at the Waterloo Regional Campus of McMaster University.



Damien Tarnopolsky is a novelist and playwright. He teaches narrative medicine with the Health, Arts, and Humanities Program at the University of Toronto.