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## Writer Tells Stories of Roncesvalles' Past



Author Andrew Borkowski. Photo by Brendan Ross/Torontoist.

Andrew Borkowski has spent most of his life writing, but it wasn't until the death of his parents that he found the inspiration for his first book of short stories, *Copernicus Avenue*.

By his own admission, the fifty-four-year-old writer spent much of his life "noodling around trying to be Franz Kafka or William S. Burroughs, and not being terribly successful," while also dabbling in theatre, writing freelance pieces for a variety of newspapers and raising a family. But with the deaths of his parents—first his mother, a Canadian of English descent, in 1999 and then his father, a Polish immigrant, in 2001—Borkowski realized some of his best stories were the ones he'd known for years, the ones he'd heard and experienced growing up in the Polish community along Roncesvalles Avenue. "Some of these stories began as family stories that I had told so many times in so many bars," he says over coffee in an east end café. "Part of me said, 'I'd better write these down before one of my writer friends steals them.'"

In 2007, Borkowski's short story, "Twelve Versions of Lech," which centres around a Polish artist moving into the Roncesvalles neighbourhood, was published in Saskatoon's *Grain Magazine*. The story was nominated

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for [The Writers' Trust of Canada/McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize](#) that year—as good a starting point as any for a book of short fiction. So, with a note taped to the top of his computer monitor reading "TFS" (Tell the Fucking Story), Borkowski set out to turn the Roncesvalles Avenue of his adolescence into fiction.

The resulting stories that make up *Copernicus Avenue* are mostly inspired by Borkowski's own experiences, as well as tales from the older generation of the area's Poles. Part local mythmaking and part fictionalized memoir, the stories provide a snapshot of what the neighbourhood was like before the current array of [artists](#) and stroller moms moved in, back when television news camera crews frequently came to the area to do "man on the street" interviews because, Borkowski says, nobody gave crazier quotes than the Poles.

Yet perhaps what comes across most strongly in this depiction is how the post-war Roncesvalles neighbourhood, like Canada through much of its history, defined itself by what it wasn't as it struggled to forge an identity. "It really was a nowhere place when I was growing up," says Borkowski, calling Roncesvalles a neighbourhood between neighbourhoods. "I spent my childhood on this street angled down toward the lake, this huge expanse of nothing."

Borkowski no longer lives in Roncesvalles, and his upcoming projects will take him away from the neighbourhood. His next book, about "artsy welfare bums trying to figure out their lives in Margaret Thatcher's Britain," is now in its second draft. He also plans to write a novel based on his father's time in the Polish cavalry in the Second World War. But Roncesvalles Avenue continues to occupy a special place for Borkowski, especially now that the street contains record shops, music venues, and cafés. "It's now the street that I wanted it to be when I was a teenager," he says.

*Andrew Borkowski will be sharing his thoughts on the area, along with authors [Pat Capponi](#), [Ray Robertson](#), and [Eva Stachniak](#), at "Writing Roncesvalles: Imagining a Neighbourhood," a literary panel discussion taking place March 8 at the [High Park Public Library](#). FREE.*

*Copernicus Avenue will be released this April by [Cormorant Books](#).*

CORRECTION: March 3, 2011, 5:30 PM This post originally stated that "Twelve Versions of Lech" won The Writers' Trust of Canada/McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize in 2007, when in fact it did not. It was, however, nominated for the prize. We regret the error.

[Contact the author of this article](#) or email [tips@torontoist.com](mailto:tips@torontoist.com) with further questions, comments or tips.

By [Brendan Ross](#) on March 3, 2011 12:00 PM 2 Comments 5 Likes 1516 Views

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[Mikey Kolberg](#) 1 month ago

Cafes? Sure.  
Record shops? We have 1. Well, 1 + 1 Polish record shop (not of interest to any teenager, methinks).  
Music Venues? Sure the Local and Gate 403 feature music regularly, but these are bars. Teenagers not exactly welcome. Hugh's Room (not really Roncy but sort of counts) is the closest thing and unless the kids are attending Joni Mitchell tribute concerts in unprecedented numbers, Roncy is by no means a teenage dream

Don't get me wrong, it's a great place to live and there's probably more going on now than when Borkowski grew up but, speaking as a recent teenager, Roncesvalles isn't very teen friendly.

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I look forward to reading some of his work. To capture the atmosphere of Roncesvalles when it was a more Polish neighbourhood sounds like an interesting endeavor. Toronto history through the experiences of immigrants and their communities shouldn't be neglected. Fictional works can still be relevant primary sources.

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