

## Distinct sounds of success

Waterloo writer offers an infectiously energetic look at this country's top pop music artists

### WHISPERING PINES

by Jason Schneider  
(ECW Press, 347 pages, \$28.95 hardcover)

By Robert Reid, Record staff

Waterloo author Jason Schneider has been writing about music for the Waterloo Region Record and other publications for close to 20 years.

*Whispering Pines* is his second non-fiction book devoted to Canadian music, following *Have Not Been the Same: The CanRock Renaissance*, which he co-authored with Record freelance reviewer Michael Barclay and Ian A.D. Jack.

Subtitled *The Northern Roots of American Music from Hank Snow to The Band*, *Whispering Pines* is certainly ambitious.

Moreover, it's an infectiously energetic read for anyone interested in Canadian music. Schneider has a nose for a good story and the writing skills to tell it enthusiastically.

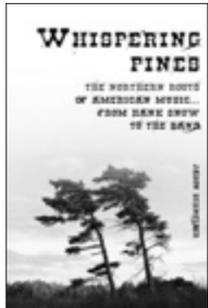
According to the dust jacket blurb, the book is "the first thorough exploration" of how a handful of Canadian recording artists established "a distinct musical identity."

Unfortunately, *Whispering Pines* fails to live up to both its subtitle and the blurb.

Schneider never gets around to analyzing or evaluating how a distinct Canadian musical identity developed, other than to offer an occasional tease in the form of a sentence or two.

A more accurate, though prosaic, subtitle based on Schneider's actual study would be: Canadian contributions to American music.

The blurb goes on to describe the book as "a sweeping narrative history, explain-



ing the personal and creative connections that many of the artists shared, with emphasis placed, always on the music — how and where it originated, and what impact it eventually had

on both the artists' subsequent work, as well as the wider musical world."

Here, *Whispering Pines* is successful. The major artists Schneider covers — Hank Snow, Wilf Carter, Ian & Sylvia, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young and The Band — have all been written about before.

Most have received biographical treatment at least once. He also pays secondary attention to Ronnie Hawkins, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Anne Murray, Bruce Cockburn, Murray McLauchlan and Kate and Anna McGarrigle, among others.

The Band's famous Last Waltz concert in the fall of 1976 acts as bookends.

Much of the territory Schneider explores has been covered before, but *Whispering Pines* provides a breezy distillation of the material, with an emphasis on touring and recording histories. He draws some interesting connections among the artists' personalities and careers.

It's not always clear whether Schneider is offering primary research or the research of others. He seldom attributes quotes and there are no footnotes, both of which are disconcerting for readers.

Also, Schneider's career histories of the artists are somewhat truncated, focusing primarily on their work in the 1970s.

Nonetheless, *Whispering Pines* is a valuable addition to the regrettably paltry critical commentary on popular music by artists born in Canada.

Robert Reid is a Record arts reporter



Jason Schneider

ECW PRESS



## WHAT THEY'RE READING



Mary Margaret Smith is education co-ordinator for the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum in Kitchener. She recently read:

### BIG BONED

by Meg Cabot  
(Harper Collins, 304 pages, \$16.50 softcover)

"I often read the same books that my children are reading. My daughter and I just finished *Big Boned*, third in a series of Heather Wells mysteries by this author.

"It's a college drama that includes murder, romance and a delicious fact-finding mission featuring a fresh-from-the-oven cherry cobbler."

• *Mary Margaret Smith leads the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum's Backyard Tourist program. On Thursday, Aug. 20 the group will visit the Art Gallery of Ontario. The \$105 price includes a guided tour, lunch and transportation. Call 519-742-7752 for details.*

## Hugos for best science fiction of 2009 announced

Record staff

The Hugo Awards for excellence in science fiction and fantasy writing were presented last week in Montreal.

Among the winners were:  
Best novel: *The Graveyard Book*, by Neil Gaiman

Best novella: *The Erdmann Nexus*, by Nancy Kress.

Best novelette: *Shoggoths in Bloom*, by Elizabeth Bear.

Best short story: *Exhalation*, by Ted Chiang.

Kitchener science fiction writer James Alan Gardner was a runner-up in the best novelette competition for his work *The Ray-Gun: A Love Story*.

## Bestsellers

Based on sales by 250 independent Canadian booksellers for the week ending Saturday, Aug. 8. Bracketed figures indicate number of weeks on list.

### Hardcover fiction

- 1 (3) **The Girl Who Played With Fire**  
Stieg Larsson
- 2 (1) **Order in Chaos**  
Jack Whyte
- 3 (5) **Sacred Hearts**  
Sarah Dunant
- 4 (66) **The Host**  
Stephenie Meyer
- 5 (19) **The Winter Vault**  
Anne Michaels
- 6 (7) **Finger Lickin' Fifteen**  
Janet Evanovich
- 7 (48) **Through Black Spruce**  
Joseph Boyden
- 8 (3) **Twenties Girl**  
Sophie Kinsella
- 9 (25) **The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie**  
Alan Bradley
- 10 (13) **Assegai** - Wilbur Smith

### Hardcover fiction

- 1 (12) **Why Your World is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller**  
Jeff Rubin
- 2 (12) **Slow Death By Rubber Duck**  
Rick Smith & Bruce Lourie
- 3 (18) **Norman Bethune**  
Adrienne Clarkson
- 4 (19) **Always Looking Up**  
Michael J. Fox
- 5 (140) **The Secret** - Rhonda Byrne
- 6 (1) **Empire of Illusion**  
Chris Hedges
- 7 (11) **The Vanishing Face of Gaia**  
James Lovelock
- 8 (21) **Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World**  
Vicky Myron & Bret Witter
- 9 (34) **The Ascent of Money**  
Niall Ferguson
- 10 (10) **Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working** - Dambisa Moyo

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## Say hello to Phineas, an endearing nine-year-old

### AMPHIBIAN

by Carla Gunn (Coach House Books, 212 pages, \$19.95 softcover)

By Cindy Matthews

Canada keeps producing great authors. Carla Gunn's debut novel *Amphibian* is a darn good read.

Some writers can grab your attention with their opening sentence and never let go until you have gobbled up the last word on the final page. Carla Gunn is that kind of author. She holds your attention through use of crisp description, realistic characters and believable dialogue.

In *Amphibian*, we meet Phineas William Walsh, a super smart nine-year-old boy with a pile of encyclopedias residing in his brain. He is also sensitive, often serious, at times obnoxious yet also endearing. He knows more about science, the environment, nature and animals in general than 100 other nine-year-olds combined.

In order to be so smart, Phin spends hours combing the internet like an ant in an open jar of honey.

But all this knowledge pushes him over



the edge sometimes, into an unhappy world of excessive fretting. More often than not, when his before-sleep anxiety takes over his brain, he finds comfort crawling into mom's bed to bunk with her.

Phin's mom gets quite fed up with him at times.

She becomes so concerned about her son's worrying about the world that she makes him visit a shrink. Mom and the shrink decide that Phin watches too much TV, in particular too much of a disturbing show called Green Channel. They decide to ban Phin from watching such anxiety-producing media.

There are things about life Phin doesn't understand, such as why bullies can't be stopped, why his dad left his mom, and why a "waste-of-flesh" like Lyle always picks on him and wins.

When his sometimes very stressful existence gets the better of him, Phin expresses

his dismay through extreme tantrums.

At one point, Phin's teacher brings a White's tree frog to school to become the class pet.

It's given the name Cuddles. The choice of class pet suits Phin because of his particular interest in amphibians, particularly frogs. He and best friend, Bird, eventually find a compelling and compassionate reason to steal Cuddles, a plan that goes horribly wrong and has an untimely, unexpected result.

Occasionally, this book reminded me of Mark Haddon's book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The tone is sometimes light, but often very dark.

The story ends far too quickly, but leaves the reader fully satisfied.

While this novel is about a young boy, it's safe to say this is a read more suited for adults than kids.

Readers should be aware Gunn uses some off-colour language — but they are words that certainly fit the circumstances in the story.

Cindy Matthews is a Baden writer and a member of the Record's Community Editorial Board.

## War correspondent knew where news would happen

### WELLER'S WAR

by George Weller  
(Anthony Weller, editor)  
(Crown Publishers, 644 pages, \$34 hardcover)

By Bob Gordon

The era from the Second World War to the Vietnam conflict was the golden age of war correspondents.

The cloak of silence and secrecy that covered the trenches during the First World War had evaporated and today's era of embedded — read shackled — correspondents had yet to arrive.

During the Second World War, many correspondents established the foundations of life-long careers.

Lorne Greene, best known as Hank Cartwright on *Bonanza*, first came to national prominence as the CBC's "voice of doom" reporting from London during the blitz.

Bill Mauldin established his career and reputation with the creation of the cartoon G.I.s Joe and Willie. Chester Wilmut's *The Struggle for Europe*, one of the first histories of the campaign in northwest Europe, 1944-45, remains one of the best, despite his untimely death in 1954.

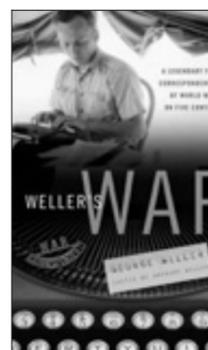
The late George Weller, a U.S. correspondent who is virtually unknown today, left America for Europe in December 1940 as foreign correspondent for the Chicago Daily News. At the time, the Daily News' foreign reports were syndicated in over 80 newspapers that in total had a readership of over 10 million.

This collection of Weller's numerous dispatches highlights the knack he had for finding the most obscure theatres of the war, and only days before they erupted in vio-

lence and events of momentous importance.

As one of his editors noted, "You can always count on Weller — he proceeds from A to B by way of Z."

In the spring of 1941, Weller witnessed the German occupation of the Balkans. In fact, he remained in Greece too long. He was arrested and spent nine weeks 'quarantined' in Athens and then Berlin, an unwilling guest of the German authorities.



Released he witnessed the departure of the German airborne troops bound for Crete.

His next theatre was east Africa where he interviewed Emperor Haile Selassie, newly restored to his Ethiopian throne in Addis Ababa and the then unknown Colonel Charles de Gaulle

of France in Brazzaville.

From there he proceeded to Singapore shortly after Pearl Harbor and covered the succession of Allied defeats in Southeast Asia.

Despite recurrent bouts of malaria, Weller refused to leave the field and became the only war correspondent to qualify as a paratrooper.

Although he never made a combat jump, he made seven qualifying (training) jumps and his dispatch describing this experience is included in the book.

The collection — it was edited by Anthony Weller, the correspondent's son, who is a

novelist and also author of the memoir of India and Pakistan called *Days and Nights on the Grand Trunk Railroad* — also includes the dispatch that won him a Pulitzer Prize, entitled "Yank Sub Crew, in Action, Stops, Snips Appendix" and dated Dec. 14, 1942.

The report describes how, using an inverted tea-strainer as an ether mask, a 23-year-old pharmacist's mate named Wheeler B. Lipes performed an emergency appendectomy on a crewmate named Dean Rector when mission objectives made it impossible for their submarine to leave the theatre of operations — or for the ill sailor to be evacuated.

Unfortunately, there is one glaring hole in this otherwise remarkable book.

In the wake of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Weller ventured to the latter city and wrote a series of dispatches.

He avoided the military police cordon and by passing himself off as an American colonel to the Japanese civil authorities, became the only correspondent to report from ground zero.

While he avoided the military police, he was not able to avoid the censors and none of these dispatches saw the light of day at the time.

Unfortunately, none of them are included in this volume either, as they were published in an earlier collection of Weller's writing titled, *First into Nagasaki*.

Educated at Harvard and the author of three novels before he became a newspaper correspondent, Weller died in 2002 at his home in Italy when he was 95. This collection of his writing vividly documents with literary flare and deep emotion some of the most obscure operations of the Second World War.

Bob Gordon is a Guelph writer.