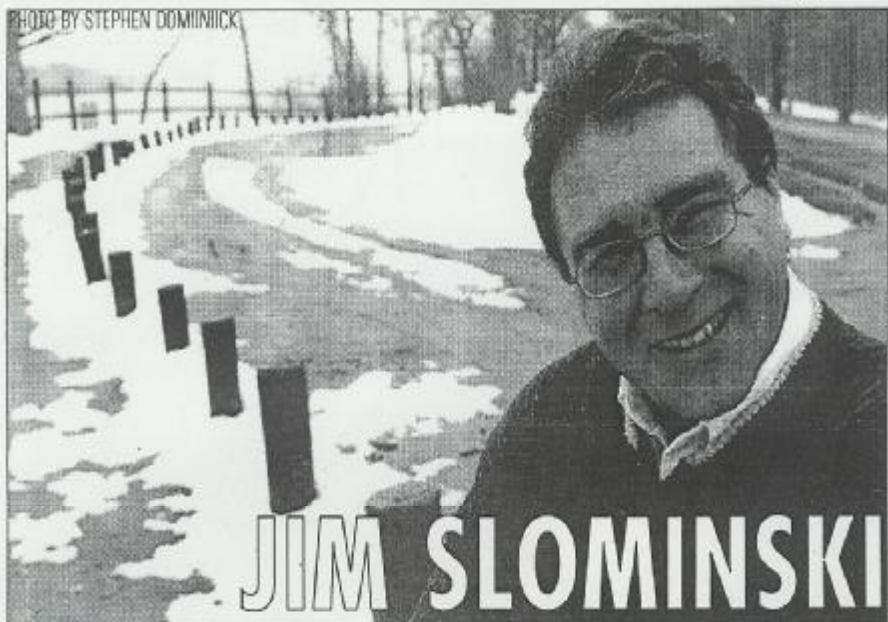


PHOTO BY STEPHEN DOMINICK



JIM SLOMINSKI

BY SEAN CHARLEBOIS

Jim Sломinski's life has been filled with unexpected journeys. The most recent began in mid January with a brief, congratulatory phone call from writer and broadcaster Robert Weaver, summoning the 41-year-old Niagara-on-the-Lake poet to Montreal. It ended about two weeks later with Sломinski seated in the third row at Les Salles du Gesù, shoulder to shoulder with other Canadian writers, absorbing the entertainment of various musical guests, and waiting for the "official" announcement that he had tied for second place in the category of English Language Poetry in the annual Canadian Literary Awards.

These awards, which are among the most prestigious in Canada, were founded in 1979 by Weaver and are sponsored by CBC Radio, *the Canadian* magazine, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Over the years they have honoured such familiar Canadian literary talent as Michael Ondaatje, Carol Shields, Barry Callaghan, Bonnie Burnard, and Susan Musgrave. And on that late January night, Jim Sломinski joined that lineage, sharing second place—which includes a \$4,000 purse (split equally between the two) and publication in the March issue of *enRoute* magazine—with Toronto poet Laura Lush.

However the path to this prize was certainly never pre-ordained, explains the author, who will be reading from his award-winning collection of poems, "The Light Load," as part of the World of Words Passport Authors Series on April 4. In fact, Sломinski credits a number of fortuitous, and sometimes difficult diversions in his life, for transforming him into the kind of poet who can communicate his private experiences successfully to readers.

Sломinski grew up in a middle class area of Montreal and remembers getting hooked on reading through his mother, who read voraciously in all genres. In high school, it was science fiction and fantasy writers like Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and J.R.R. Tolkien that appealed to the teenager, who also maintained a fascination with music and began playing the string bass at age eighteen. About this time he eschewed literature and concentrated more on philosophy, which he began studying seriously while he attended CEGEP at Dawson College. He eventually earned a scholarship to Concordia University, but, he laughs, "I disappointed the whole philosophy department by taking that scholarship and going into English Literature instead of philosophy."

Sломinski attended Concordia for two years. But while his reading interests had turned to great international authors like Beowulf, Garcia Marquez, Mishima, and Kawabata, he found himself increasingly uncomfortable with the direction his university studies were taking him in. "I was studying great writers but I wanted to write," he remembers. Feeling the need to be more active creatively, he

turned his attention to studying music seriously.

It was through a weekly jam with a group of musicians that he discovered writing poetry. One week a classical guitarist brought in some poems he had written and he read them while they played. Everyone enjoyed it and it was imitated the next week, this time with Sломinski providing some of his own poems. Meanwhile he continued to travel the city, absorbing its rich beauty, and playing music on streets and in nightclubs.

It was also through music that Sломinski met his future wife, Mary, in 1992, while she was studying at McGill. Her roommate offered their apartment as a depot for Sломinski to store his string bass during a bus strike and he found himself stopping by every day to pick it up. But the allure of the wandering musical lifestyle was wearing off. "I was getting quite sick of the busking, and even being in the city," he says. So when the opportunity to return to Mary's family peach farm in Niagara came in 1995, Sломinski embraced it. "Not only did I know I wanted to write at that point, but I knew I wanted to write about the natural world. There was some gravitation there."

He threw himself immediately into the work of a peach farmer while trying in the early morning to stay true to the writing muse. But after about two years, he found himself too caught up in the farm work and in trying to establish himself financially to write with any regularity. In addition, he was now married and had started a family and found he just didn't have the passion to write anymore. So he took creative rest.

Sломinski can pinpoint exactly when he began writing again. It was right after his life was changed irrevocably by the diagnosis of his son Jake with Muscular Dystrophy. From that day forward he began a regular regimen of daily writing that has captured this the poignant journey of a father in painfully honest terms. A collection of "Jake" poems made the 2000 shortlist for the Canadian Literary Awards and eventually comprised the first section of his book, *The Wind is a Tall Man Standing*.

But while the "Jake" poems garner much attention because of the empathy they evoke, the careful reader will find Sломinski's other poems imbued with a highly rewarding vision of patience and familial courage. He is clearly a man struggling to make sense of his environment, his life, and how to draw strength from small blessings. His new collection, "The Light Load," which Sломinski has assembled into a small chapbook, carries on this tradition, portraying a highly evolved, almost enlightened approach to living with adversity. The twelve poems culminate in a profound and moving vow to his son, which appears late in the title poem: "You will never be too heavy for me to carry."

Powerful lines like that resonate with the reader long afterward offer a sense of hope that every struggle is ultimately worth the effort and that every journey, no matter how unpredictable and challenging, can still lead to great things.

JIM SLOMINSKI

READS FROM HIS AWARD WINNING
COLLECTION THE LIGHT LOAD
ON THURSDAY, APRIL 4 AT 7:30 P.M.
AT THE OLD COURT HOUSE THEATRE
101 KING ST. ST. CATHARINES
TICKETS \$5 AT THE DOOR