

BY PHYLLIS REEVE

Bog Tender: Coming Home to Nature and Memory by George Szanto (Brindle & Glass \$19.95)

ON A ROCKY, WET, HILLY, bumpy, property known to local realtors as the “Engineer’s Challenge,” **George Szanto** of Gabriola Island has recently come to terms with petty annoyances and the Holocaust, with being young and becoming old, in a memoir written in a cottage beside a bog above the Salish Sea.

“Our bog’s ongoing transformations give me a way of dealing with whatever is immediate and unique,” he writes in **Bog Tender: Coming Home to Nature and Memory**, “with the local as it exists here, now, and nowhere else, filled with its private mysteries. I look into the September bog, under the water—what’s down there in all that murkiness?”

Clearly tending a bog has affected Szanto as a writer. “I report what I discover or recover, I write down snippets of memory. Often I merely mull about what could be down there, back there, in my memory bog.” And so Szanto acknowledges that human recollections over the course of a lifetime gestate into a kind of bog, “obscure on the surface, at times clearer when waded into, at times murkier.”

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DIVIDED INTO TWELVE CHAPTERS—one for each month of the year—*Bog Tender* begins and ends with September and dragonflies mating by the water, while the writer, an avid fisherman, reels in the memories, chronology determined only by what ripples just below the surface, and how one thing leads to another.

Although he was born in Londonderry, Northern Island in 1940, George Szanto takes the reader to Vienna, where his parents lived until **Hitler** arrived, before he was born. His father had been born in Budapest. Two uncles disappeared into the Theresienstadt death camp.

Szanto spent his early childhood in Ireland and England, then his youth in New England small towns and Ivy League campuses, followed by postgraduate studies in Europe. The highlight remains his romance with **Kit** in Paris. Married after fifty years, the couple still likes to roam the streets of Paris.

Memory allots Szanto’s many accomplishments as a teacher,



DAVID SZANTO PHOTO

Novelist and playwright George Szanto speaks four languages, has written fifteen books—and has one wife, Kit.

BOGGED UP NOT DOWN

George Szanto goes wading into the murkiness of memory and the thrill of a Paris romance

playwright and novelist in the United States and Mexico no more space, maybe less, than the honing of his fishing skills and the construction of his house.

In *Bog Tender*, Szanto lingers with loving detail over cherished family moments, significant introductions, chance encounters, and unexpected opportunities, such as organising antiwar protests in Somerville, Massachusetts, dealing with anti-Semitism beside a Laurentian lake, or developing protective covenants for the Commons on Gabriola Island.

“The bog beside the road has

its own kinds of secrets,” he writes, “long invisible, unsmellable, unheard, till the season comes for it to release one or another of them—a deer trail here, some lily pads in the newly open water, a thousand frogs mating, ten thousand tiny crab-apples heavy on the boughs—whatever is ready to burst forth at its moment in the cycle.

“Our bog has given me the pattern, seasonal, monthly, an external imposed structure for this memoir.”

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THE SENSE OF ONE REALITY HIDING another reality keeps turning up in

Szanto’s work, in book titles such as *The Underside of Stones*, *Inside the Statues of the Saints* and *Second Sight*, as well as his recent whodunit series of mysteries co-authored with **Sandy Frances Duncan**. Nothing is ever what it seems in murder mysteries, so perception matters, including physical perception and the act of seeing.

“The notion ‘magical’ is not part of my active vocabulary,” he insists, and yet when he describes his first encounter with the area of Gabriola Island where he would build his home, he admits, “in this instance to have called that space

magical wouldn’t have been inappropriate.”

When aging islanders board the ferry from a Gulf Island, they are most likely keeping a doctor’s appointment on the mainland, armed with the pink voucher which allows us to travel free.

For Szanto, the most frightening off-island trips have involved his eyes, the care and restoration of his sight. Yet the diagnosis of an unusual syndrome called birdshot retinochoroidopathy can suggest the author’s bird’s-eye view, and successful cataract surgery can stand for clear-sightedness. Even in the operating room he notices, observes, witnesses.

Only someone who has learned to perceive, notice, observe and witness could identify the process of loading and unloading the Gabriola-Nanaimo ferry as “choreography,” revealing the artfulness hidden within a humdrum slice of our everyday life.

“A sense of impatient dance seems to build, the passengers partnering the ferry workers. One crewman steps over the rope to tie the ship fast to the dock, a second crosses the breadth of the deck. He slides the orange netting into a bunch at the far end, then comes back, unhooks the rope and holds it, expectant.

“With the ship secure, the man carries the rope across, looping it as he goes. Only then do the passengers stream off, each still a member of the disembarkment ritual...The ritual takes place, unaltered, sixteen times a day on the Gabriola end, sixteen in Nanaimo.”

Bog Tender also recalls Szanto’s life in England, France, Germany, Mexico and the U.S.

Szanto has a Ph.D in Comparative Literature from Harvard and he worked as executive director of New Heritage Theater in San Diego (1970-1974).

He came to Canada in 1974, taught at McGill University and served as president of Playwrights Canada (1980-1981). He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1988.

For more than two decades he lived in Montreal before moving to British Columbia in the late 1990s. For more info, see his entry at abcbookworld.com

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