

Bog Tender

AMY REISWIG

Long-slumbering memories are awakened and explored in George Szanto's new book.

Gabriola Island writer George Szanto opens his new memoir with a quote from Thoreau's *Walden*: "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps."

This epigraph stands as a good introduction not just to the book's nature-writing aspect or to the bog Szanto lives and writes beside. It also introduces one of the fundamental elements of *Bog Tender: Coming Home to Nature and Memory* (Brindle & Glass, March 2013): attending respectfully to what many find unremarkable or even slightly fearful. Like a bog.

Or, another example: growing old. We are taught by the media to fear especially the changes of age. We will lose, we are told, our beauty, health, autonomy, money, memory and, ultimately, all of the people we love. While retirement can be an unkind time, depending on physical and financial conditions, living long also means developing a reservoir of knowledge, experience, perception and perspective. And if you are a reflective observer like Szanto, the life changes along the way add to the deep, sweet well of one's own becoming which, in turn, can be distilled into words and shared through the transformative power of art.

Bog Tender is all about transformation. Seasonal changes observed month by month in and around the wetland Szanto's writing cottage overlooks inspire reflection on moments of change—some great, some small—in his own life. While many memoirs trace a life lived chronologically, Szanto lets memory burble up, revealing things both delicate and weighty in seemingly no rational sequence other than that of mysterious natural process. Thus, while we do see Szanto's transformation from a child in Londonderry, Northern Ireland (after his parents fled Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938) to a distinguished and diligent student, world traveller, husband, academic, playwright, novelist, fisherman, father, and more, it is through non-linear narrative—the telling it like it is of the mess of memory.

It's a bit of a departure from Szanto's previous work. With a PhD in comparative literature from Harvard, Szanto has been a



George Szanto

Fulbright scholar, National Magazine Award winner, winner of the Hugh MacLennan Prize for fiction and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His publications include several books of essays on subjects such as theatre and propaganda, narrative consciousness, and Mexican culture, as well as a dozen works of fiction (including, with Sandy Duncan, the "Island Investigations International" mystery series).

In *Bog Tender*, the genre of memoir blended with nature-writing allows Szanto to tap his life's reservoir in a surprising, non-linear way representing our own experience of memory. "The stories have been there for a long time," the gentle-voiced, now-retired Szanto explains looking out to his home's painterly vista of trees, birds and water far below. "It was all free-floating, and the question was how to put it together in a package." And so he writes: "I have used my bog writing to discover what I am doing here, how I got here. As I've followed the changes in insect, animal, and botanic life, each season has awakened, month by month, long-slumbering memories."

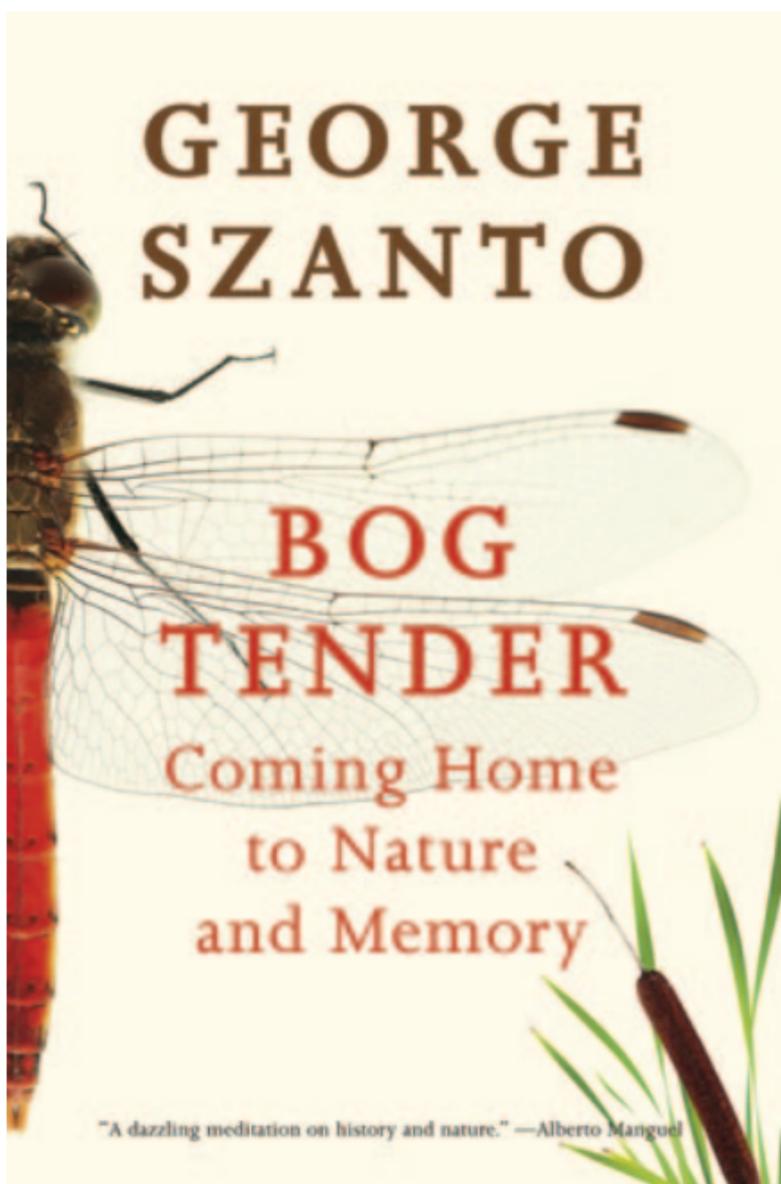
His free-association telescopes readers through time and place to potent moments both personal and historical, in the external

and internal worlds that have changed his mind, his heart, his life. And the process itself becomes part of the transformative theme. For example, the chapter "February" begins, as they all do, in the present. "It's cold and wet" out on the bog leads to thoughts of an upcoming trip to Hawaii, then to a family birthday while away, then to the birth of his own daughter and how that changed him: "I had become a different kind of son, discovering that my own father had once experienced this closeness with his son, with me, was in fact still feeling it. All this had been invisible to me for years."

Revealing the invisible is a major part of Szanto's bog/memory/writing process. And so February's associations lead him to thinking of his mother, a lament that he has fewer memories of her than of his father—or so he thinks. By letting his mind open, like the unfurling of a tight-fisted fiddlehead, he discovers—recovers—stories of his mother, her education, work, family trips, house-building, moments of laughter and tears, and concludes: "So. It seems I've found more memories of my mother than I thought I had in me. Up from the depths of the memory bog."

The book, therefore, is not just about individual observations and recollections; underneath the stories, Szanto's work is also about the act of seeing with renewed vision, of turning experience into thought, thought into word, and then making the personal public. Thus he looks with equal attention at branching pipes in his septic field and the way plum tree branches look coated with wet snow: "a suit of white armour on scraggly arms." And he chronicles the family life of a pair of shy ducks on the bog as well as the 1962 Parisian romance with his beloved Kit, where they walked the streets all night because no one would rent a hotel room to a couple with non-matching names on their passports: "this was 1962—not even in Paris," he writes.

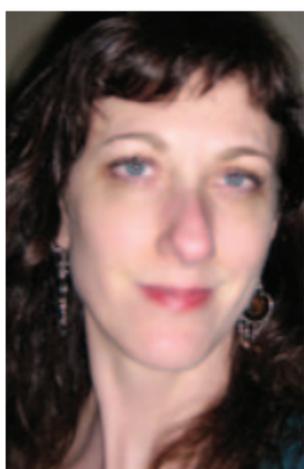
Szanto shares many personal revelations focusing on moments of transition. For example, we learn about his great-grandfather moving from Vienna to Budapest and "magyarizing" the family name from Schwartz to Szanto, making it more Hungarian. We hear about the death of two uncles in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. And we



see Szanto having to face his father's ageing and ailing: "He'd take my hand again, my fingers, as if they held the air his body needed."

Though Szanto tells me that writing *Bog Tender* was "purely and simply fun," he also admits that "emotionally, it was a difficult book to write. It's my history and a sense of what I love, and there were times when I wasn't sure I wanted it to go out into the world."

Fortunately he got over that. *Bog Tender* is a book of humanity and humour, sweetness and sorrow—of everything you celebrate and suffer by being attentively alive. When Szanto tells me "I want readers to recognize the possibility of change," I think he's referring to embracing changes through age, changes of perception, and changes through the artistic process—including valuing remembering itself. As the book's second epigraph states, "The ability to relive those parts of life that have been significant is a gift equal to life itself."



Amy Reiswig thinks not in degrees of separation but of connectivity and was somehow not surprised to learn she and George Szanto know someone in common from McGill, since it seems there really are only 250 people in Canada.