

# TLC Showcase

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## ANDREW MALCOLM

<b>Introduction to the novel</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Extract: Coast</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>About the Writer</b>	<b>10</b>

## Introduction to Coast

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In the summer of 2013, the same summer that I started *Coast*, I ended up drinking all night on Toronto Island's Wards Beach, where I and a friend met two guys from Ireland. We met the first guy at a bonfire that had too much of a Spring Break atmosphere, and he said, "You two need to be at our fire," so we followed him to it. His group was eclectic in age, the way they dressed, where they were from and they reminded me that groups like that are always made up of good people, different in every other way, but always good people.

I barely slept and when my friend woke up the next day on the beach he yelled out "What happened?" And one of the guys we met said, in his Irish accent, "You fell asleep on a beach". My friend sat up, saw only the open water of the lake in front of him, and said, "How the fuck did I get to Ireland." We went for breakfast and beers and continued the party until the following evening. Those kinds of nights aren't common for me, and when they do happen they don't usually leave me with all good memories, but that particular night, because of the people I met, the never-endingness of it, the fact that it all happened around a bonfire on a beach in the middle of a big city, it created a thrilling kind of social chaos, an atmosphere of complexity in our conversations that lasted no matter how inebriated we got.

That same thrill is something I tried to capture throughout *Coast*, particularly in the multi-chaptered bonfire scene I took an excerpt from for this showcase. It's of course dangerous to try and transpose any kind of special feeling into writing that is meant for an audience, not the writer's own self-indulgence, but so much of the work that inspired me — right now *Franny and Zooey* by Salinger comes to mind — was inspiring because of its long dialogues lasting in single settings that created an inexplicably thrilling energy in the complexity and chaos of the verbiage the author reported — from where? — I have to guess some crazy, difficult-to-describe-why-crazy, conversational moments in their life (and I'm sure Salinger had plenty in New York). So, employing my most creative and experimental tools, I ventured to capture a vibe with *Coast*.

There was never any doubt that I would need a blunt and thorough review of the novel, and I'm really happy I chose TLC for the job. I can honestly say I've received the most valuable feedback of my life in my experience with TLC. They made

comments on *Coast* that helped me recognize what was working and what wasn't, and they identified weaknesses in my writing that have always existed — in some sense with my awareness, but the comments from TLC identified problem areas with a specificity that has helped me make a more concrete effort to improve.

I'm very grateful to my reader, Tom Bromley, and to Aki Schilz at TLC for making such a sincere effort to look deeply into my writing and find meaningful ways for me to improve my work.

## Extract from the novel: Coast

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Four people showed up: two girls, Spry and Heather, and two guys, Martyn and Alamo.

Heather said, "Can we play cards at your fire? A bunch of annoying guys in golf shirts took over the last one we were at, and kept telling lame jokes and shaking hands. We left before we had to talk to them."

Jonathan said, "Of course, you're very welcome."

Martyn, softly and politely, said, "Thank you, thank you. We won't disturb you, please keep talking."

They threw their blanket down and started playing Asshole. Kate joined in and immediately took to Heather. They both had broad shoulders, giving them tough-girl looks, although Heather looked more like an athlete because her arm muscles were well-defined.

They said they're on the Scarborough Bluffs Collegiate's Dragonboat Team — The First Gens. The four of them graduated and turned eighteen this year, so they can roam the beach while the rest of the team has to stay in. I asked if Scarborough is in Toronto and Martyn said yes, but east of Toronto proper, and it wasn't part of the city twenty years ago.

Kelly said, "Damiond and I live in Etobicoke on the West side of Toronto Proper, and same thing, wasn't part of the city until amalgamation."

Kate said, "Good, so I can call Toronto stuck up and selfish and it won't offend you guys."

Heather said, "Go for it."

Sam finally played a song, the only song she knew that had vocals she could sing — Peace on the Rise by Chad Vangaalen. Her strumming chugged through a dreamy chord sequence, and she looked at me as she sang the first verse: "We can sit around this fire / and let our spirits ride on out / watch it as a flame gets higher / I can see it in your eyes / whispers on the rise."

Rory liked the song so much she made her teach him.

"There's only a few hand position you need to know, and the melodic part is easy to add on top," said Sam, illustrating on the neck of the guitar.

Rory, sliding behind the neck, said, "Still, teach me like I'm a child."

Claire started speaking to JS in French (I had forgotten she studied French and French Literature heavily in high school, and only then realized that that's why she chose Montreal for university) even though he stuck with English; they both wanted to practice.

Damiond and Kelly were talking with Mary and Jonathan, and I could tell they had all mutually reached that point when the alcohol had removed any conversation inhibitions. Kelly, loud and animated, said, "Every year Damiond says we should rent our own place so there's not all our friends and Rory's friends from Ireland everywhere, but I say why? You get so drunk every night it's not like we could do anything anyway."

I sat there listening to Kelly and Damiond's conversation. I was listening to a couple's conversation. More than that, I was listening to a couple's conversation with another couple. A newish one with an oldish one. I couldn't imagine what that was like. I'd been with a few girls, briefly, or on and off for a while, but I'd never had a girl that would sit beside me and tell another older couple lots of embarrassing stories about herself and me even if I got angry about it because who cares? We're going to be together for the foreseeable future, and as long as we're good who cares what other people think? At least that's how I imagined a real relationship.

Then I started listening in on the First Gens' conversation, and Spry in particular. She said, "That was close. That was so close last week it was a bit of a thrill – *I got an eight.*"

Heather said, "Tell Kate the story."

"Shit dude, I almost got dragged off a train yard downtown by security for spray painting this old beat up train car. There's a guy there that moves trains around with this remote controller, just like the ones for model cars and planes." She got up, sprung to her feet and held an imaginary controller. "And the guy moves all the trains across fifty tracks back and forth like he's organizing them." She sat back down, but

spun as she did. Her movements were amazing: they were silent, somehow didn't mess up the blanket or throw sand around, and appeared to consume not a calorie of energy, like they were really just inflections in her story telling. "That guy's great. He's cool, lets me stay and spray paint anything that's basically junk. But a truck showed up!"

Kate said, "Fucking trespass police."

Spry, popping up on her knees and throwing her palms up, her boney wrists sitting loose, as if her hands and forearms were two ends of a pair of nunchucks. "Yes, exactly, fucking tress—pass—police. Trespasspolice. But I rolled between cars, over their connectors, and lucky the guys in the truck were lazy fucks so they just kept driving to circle around the end of the train to drive after me." She stood up, looking at her cards, "*Three Jacks, anyone? Three queens.*" And then she did another spin on the ball of her foot without messing up the blanket or cards.

Kate said, "Fuck, I'm going to be asshole again — *pass.*"

Spry sat with a knee up near her chin and held her cards in front of it, "I signalled my guy, waved at him up on his platform, and he sees what's going on and he pretends *not to see* the truck and he's like, *mrnnn...*" — sitting on her knees, holding the imaginary controller and laughing, and she had a Joker like grin full of teeth, but wrinkles in the corners of her eyes that softened it (like an old man's). "The train's moving forward and the truck speeds up and he speeds the train up and the truck's honking trying to get his attention but he's pretending to look the opposite..." She fell over laughing.

Martyn got up on his knees — not like it was an inflection on his speech, the way it is with Spry, but like he was trying to find the right position for what he was about to say. "Spry, go to art school. Stop with the street art. You're eighteen now. The cops know you, they will give you no leeway. You'll go to jail. Is that what you want? You want to go to jail with those girls at school that get in fights and go to juvie because they assault other girls — helpless people?"

Spry fell backward and said, "Easy my friend, my beautiful, protective, concerned, and how did we not see that he was going to enrol in nursing school" (she kicked her legs in the air) "because he's so sensible, friend. It's okay, I'm a cat."

She jumped up and crouched behind Martyn. Every time he tried to look at her over his shoulder, she dodged his eyes. He said, "I'm concerned SP. Just go to school. Alamo, our voice of reason." He really pleaded with him, after Spry fell down laughing. "Tell her to go to art school."

Heather said, "First play your cards, let's keep this moving."

"Someone's eager to become asshole," said Kate.

"That's strong language to use with your President."

"Outgoing..."

"Two 3s," said Alamo. "Martyn, our friend Spry is a different kind of girl. You say she should take advantage of the fact that her teachers and guidance counsellor support her so much that they applied to OCAD for her, but you don't see that she's taking full advantage of the situation in the way that she precisely wants to. A street artist of no skill or recognition is just some punk vandal, but a woman who has acknowledged skill and professional opportunities and has rejected art school for street art, that woman elevates what she believes in."

Kelly, interrupting my eavesdropping, said, "Do you have a girlfriend, Coast?"

"I'm not very good at keeping relationships. Too non-committal."

"That's too bad. You're cute, a little short, but cute and strong."

Damiond said, "I'm going to have to cut you off in a minute."

"You cut *me* off? I don't think so."

I got back to listening to the First Gens. I wanted to know if Martyn and Spry were involved at all. In a really tight group like theirs it's hard to tell the couples. They were one of those groups that's as tight as couples. That's something I had missed out on; not that I would have complained, I preferred meeting random people all the time, and staying available for new relationships, rather than feeling stuck with the same few people. But still, watching that group play cards, I wondered what that kind of closeness was like.

Martyn said, "I just don't get it. Graffiti is what you believe in? Of all the ideas you could elevate, of all the beliefs you could advocate, you choose graffiti?"

Spry got onto her knees and shifted, digging them into the sand. She put her hands on her lap and then entered a state of perfect stillness, which, for this fractal of movement, spoke loudly enough that all quieted for the speech that followed. "I'm not elevating a belief in street art, I'm elevating a belief in the soul."

Martyn guffawed, "Oh, it's religious then, from the girl that says 'don't talk to me about that crap' anytime someone else talks about religion."

"It's not about religion, and *please* don't talk to me about that crap, because it confuses what we're all meant to do with our souls."

"Then tell me, what am I supposed to do with my soul and please don't leave out how it all comes back to graffiti — *three 5s, anyone? Three queens - I'm VP.*"

Spry, sitting cross-legged again, chin in her hand, elbow on her knee, said, "I don't know what *you're* supposed to do with *your* soul. That's my point: each person's soul is their own piece of the whole, their own bit of the universe to tend to."

"Fine, but what does that have to do with graffiti, and how is this not a religious conversation?"

Spry fell flat on her back, "*Pass* — because it's foolish to think there's a God to tell you how to tend to your soul, a heaven to reward you for doing it right, or a church that you have to go inside to get it done. It's foolish to think it's a collective responsibility at all." On the last point she popped back up cross-legged and fell into a deep study of her cards.

Martyn said, "And this is why you're going to let yourself drift into a life of jail, no income, and probably homelessness, because your soul requires full dedication to graffiti?"

Spry, daintily, said, "I prefer the term street art, but yes."

Claire crouched down beside me and spoke *sotto voce*, "You're drooling."

"What?"

"I bet she's far more attractive than the girls who are already street kids, I'm assuming that's your usual stock."

"I don't know what you're talking about."



"She's like your version of a virgin. Better, a virgin bursting with eagerness."

"Claire, I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh come, yes you do. Were you not just pulling out your notebook?"

"Yeah, because I feel like writing."

"Mmhmm, and when the homeless street artist" (she said artist with sharp syllables — ArT-IssT) "asks you about your writing, I'm sure you'll be quick to point out you don't like to 'think of writing in terms of publishing or making money'. I believe that's what I overheard you say at your last bonfire. Oh, and your bonfires, your great social de-evolution, I'm sure she'll love that."

"That was quite the little speech you had on de-evolving," I said, to change the subject away from Spry.

"It was only little because you stopped listening. You were featured quite a bit by the way. In fact little Spry would have appreciated hearing all I had to say about you. It was all meant as criticism of course, but she would have seen it as compliments. Just imagine, graduating high school into the arms of a bohemian, it's every girl's dream. Not mine, of course, but then I'm a university student."

I looked at Spry through the flames, both Claire and I did. She said, "*Two Jacks, anyone? Two Kings I'm Pres.*" She got up and did a backward cartwheel. It wasn't tight like someone who takes gymnastics would execute, but she did it with this mysterious movement; she reminded me of how the arm of an excavator moves, how something about the bounciness of the hydraulics gives away that the force is coming from somewhere not directly connected to the arm.

Claire said, "Adorable, but sad too." She sat back down beside JS.

Despite Claire's misguided perception of my reasons, I pulled my notebook out and wrote down notes from the conversations. Spry glanced over a couple times as I wrote, and I caught myself mentally rehearsing answers to questions. *Dammit, Claire.*

## About the Writer

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A. Richard Malcolm's writing is inspired by the books, music and art he engages with, and the urban and wild landscapes he explores.

While Malcolm was inspired first by the many regions of Western Canada he hitch-hiked, drove and ferried, North Vancouver Island deepened his engagement with art and landscape. He developed a hand for fiction and creative non-fiction while taking biology and writing courses at North Island College and Bamfield Marine Science Centre and blogging about skateboarding and canoeing on Coastalbc.com. He published articles and photographs in magazines and newspapers on skateboarding, canoeing, palaeontology, silviculture and urban growth in small cities, wrote a newsletter for the Comox Valley Community Arts Council, and worked as a content editor for a web design company. Throughout his NorthWest Coast years and his first few years in Toronto he experimented with creative process by writing incessantly in notebook after notebook, ultimately developing a writing process that takes full advantage of the spontaneous and sometimes surprising passages that are born from pages of hand scribbled prose.

