

MA Journalism, Western 1992
BAH Drama, Queen's 1989

In his own words: "Climbing his way towards a literary lifestyle."

Mark Rayner is a versatile, well-traveled, intellectual writer, but his boundless energy and quasi-bizarre sense of humour best define him. Asked for a concise, two-sentence description of himself, he simply responds, "Short. Brilliant, but short." Mark's humourous approach to life has undoubtedly allowed him to make it through his Queen's-and-after experiences with nary a scratch. However, the journey has had its bumpy patches.

Mark graduated from high school with marks that he calls "ridiculously high and never to be seen again." In his first year at Queen's in 1985, he watched those grades plummet by 20 percent. He pulled up his socks over the next few years, in the process switching his major from English to history to drama. "I got a good liberal arts degree," he recalls. "In addition to those majors I took interesting electives such as classics and religion."

Graduating in 1989, Mark set his sights on a world tour, which meant he spent a summer juggling three jobs — factory work, bartending and delivering singing telegrams — to fund his trip. The cash flowed in, he hopped on a plane and one year later he was back home with a backpack full of unforgettable experiences. The trip began his love affair with trekking; he hiked in New Zealand, Australia, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and — the high point — the Himalayas.

At home in Grand Bend, Ontario, he quickly found work as a stringer for a local

newspaper. Writing was always in his blood, he says, and he figured journalism was a sensible way to make a living. He soon graduated to a local weekly as its news editor, a job that offered more responsibility and challenges, along with 80-hour work weeks. "I was making next to no money, but I knew it was important to be getting experience."

After a year at the editorial helm, Mark decided to improve his future job prospects by enrolling in an intensive Master's degree in journalism at The University of Western Ontario. He believes that tackling the degree with some life experience under his belt gave him an extra edge. "I think journalism is a bad idea for undergraduates. Before you can write you need some broad knowledge about how our world works, the kind of knowledge that comes from doing a liberal arts degree and then getting out in the world for awhile."

Mark graduated at the height of a recession. Full-time jobs were scarce, but he managed to land some temporary work at the CBC as an associate producer, setting up on-air interviews and doing "streeters". A position opened up at a Tillsonburg radio station, but they wanted Mark to work longer hours for less money than when he was a stringer. "So I decided to go to Prague. I had no plan except that I knew it was a beautiful city, cheap, and I might be able to do some freelancing there."

He landed cold — no job, no place to live — but within three days he had found a place to live and, with the help of a contact at the CBC, had connected up with the Czech

National Radio Service. There he met with the head of the English Service.

"I went in and we started chatting about my experience. Then the man excused himself and came back with two colleagues. I said to myself, 'Hey, this is a job interview!' They took me into the sound studio to do a voice test. I went into that meeting just looking for information and I came out with a job."

Mark was charged with wandering about the city and observing it with a foreigner's eye, and then writing a commentary for recording in the studio. Mostly his observations focused on culture and tended towards the humorous: how to properly order a beer in a Czech pub or why Pragers preferred to own wiener dogs. He also wrote a couple of plays, one of which was produced by a local theatre company. "The success of that play and my frustration with the limits of reporting convinced me that my destiny probably wasn't in journalism."

A year later, in 1994, he was back in Canada, seeking public relations work and hoping that it would leave his evenings free for creative writing. Within a few months he was hired by The University of Western Ontario to work as the Publicity and Publications Coordinator at the Centre for Continuing Studies. He stayed for three years. "I see my time there as an apprenticeship in the communications field. I had to do it all — public relations, marketing, design."

In 1998, the director of Western's Department of Communications and Public Affairs offered Mark a job as writer/reporter for the administrative newspaper. "It was odd to be a reporter again, though it did get me writing

more, both at work and creatively. It was a sideways move, but there were opportunities to do other things within the department that I wouldn't have had in Continuing Studies."

After a year, Mark was promoted to the post of Communications Specialist, managing Western's undergraduate marketing materials and editing the news and research sections of the *Alumni Gazette*. And since the fall of 2000, he has been teaching a course on web design in Information and Media Studies.

Currently, Mark is on leave from his communications position to concentrate on his fiction writing. He has published short fiction in Canada and haiku in Japan, and one of his short stories was short-listed for the 2000 Aurora Awards, given to the best (and most popular) Canadian science fiction. His first novel is (as yet) unpublished, but on the strength of it he has found a literary agent.

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"I guess the good news is that if you want to be a writer in Canada it is possible, but you have to be creative and you have to figure out how to balance your writer's life with a work life. Up until now I've been bludgeoning my writing time out of my after-work and weekend hours, which is really hard on relationships and social life, so this leave is a great opportunity. My basic advice to all the aspiring Queen's writers out there is to

want it badly enough to stick to it. Eventually, slowly, the successes will come.

"I'm still definitely on the road to writing fiction full time, but at least now my trek has taken me over a couple of excruciating climbs. I've actually seen the Golden Palace of the Himalayas way out there on the horizon." ❖

