

Review of “Letters to Magdalena” by Curtis Nickel

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The history of Canadian urology is replete with idiosyncratic characters and multi-talented individuals. Few exemplify this more than Dr. Curtis Nickel, Professor Emeritus at Queen's University, Officer of the Order of Canada, and raconteur extraordinaire. We've all delighted to Dr. Nickel's folksy and hilarious speaking style while he communicates profound insights into the pathogenesis and management of prostatitis and chronic pelvic pain syndromes. He is widely recognized as the world expert on this topic.

Many may not be aware of his other talents and interests. Dr. Nickel is a motorcycle enthusiast, and he and his wife Karen have ridden their bikes around the entire continent of North America, and into the far Arctic. He maintains his stable of nine motorcycles himself, and nothing makes him happier than breaking a bike down into its component parts and re-assembling it. He lives in a rural environment, and is a master of construction, plumbing, and electrical. He is a terror on his Kubota tractor, creating visionary, earth-moving projects. He is an accomplished skier and sportsman. He is the patriarch of a large family of three children and five grandchildren.

And now, a published novelist. Dr. Nickel has just published ‘Letters for Magdalena’, a semi-biographical novel based on his grandfather's journey from a small village in Hungary to Canada in the early part of the 20th century. It is the real story of an uneducated but talented and cunning Hungarian cattle rustler, John Beischlag, who, after escaping from a Yugoslavian jail, found himself in a drunken stupor on the wrong boat sailing to Canada, leaving behind his wife and three children (to whom he was completely devoted). The story is based on his letters back to his wife in Harta,

Hungary, who waited patiently while he accumulated sufficient funds to send for them. The story is narrated by his 14-year-old grandson (Curtis Nickel, in fact), based on these letters.

The story follows his adventures across Canada and the US through the Depression years of the late 1920s and early 30s. He worked as a lobsterman, a bootlegger (meeting Al Capone in Chicago), a junk dealer, a patent medicine salesman, and a farmer. He learned English on the boat coming over from Europe. He learned automobile repair and maintenance almost overnight, a skill that opened doors for him. He was a master butcher. He was an amateur surgeon/obstetrician in the barber-surgeon tradition. He made lifelong friends wherever he went. He had drinks with Winston Churchill and W.B. Bennett. As a hobo, he rode the rails across Canada. The stories have been refined, and no doubt augmented, as they passed down through two generations of storytelling in his family. The letters, written in German and then English, were kept in a carved wooden box brought from Hungary by Curtis's grandmother, and handed down to him before she died. Dr. Nickel wrote the initial version of this book almost 30 years ago and filed it away. After his recent retirement, he retrieved it (with difficulty, since it was on an old floppy disk) and turned it into this novel.

Letters for Magdalena intercalates historical facts, genuine people, characters based on real people, real facts, and pure fiction into a historical portrayal of Canadian history during a period that shaped Canadian destiny and Curtis Nickel's personal and professional life.

As far as I know, Dr. Nickel is the first Canadian urologist to publish a commercial novel. His voice is present throughout the book, and his grandfather's character—confident, profoundly devoted to family, generous, funny, multi-talented, and an unbelievably quick study—is Curtis Nickel's character.

For those who know Curtis Nickel, and those who know of him, I promise you will enjoy this book.

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