

Alumnus opinion column

Truth in Fiction:

How the power of storytelling can help us address social issues

Words by ROSEMARIE BOLL

STORY IS THE STRONGEST non-violent persuasive method we know. Tell me facts and maybe I will hear a few of them. Tell me an argument and I might consider it. Tell me a story and I am yours.

- Ball, David, *Theater Tips and Strategies for Jury Trials*, Third Edition (NITA, 2003) National Institute for Trial Advocacy

Humans have been telling stories since the beginning of time. Stories inhabit our thoughts, influence our behaviour, consolidate our memories, and shape our emotions. Stories are fundamental to our identities.

In life, people avoid conflict. In fiction, writers connect events in ways that propel their characters into adversity. Novels allow readers to experience conflict with an immediacy and level of stimulation that non-fiction cannot touch.

Take domestic violence. When the average person has no experience of domestic violence, how does she inform herself? Perhaps by listening to the true stories of survivors, but more likely from television or the news. The newsworthy stories are often horrific – the Australian man who stabbed his girlfriend 212 times, the man who dismembered his wife's body in the bathtub, the man who lit his wife on fire. These salacious details are greedily absorbed but quickly forgotten, shelved when the trial ends and life goes on.

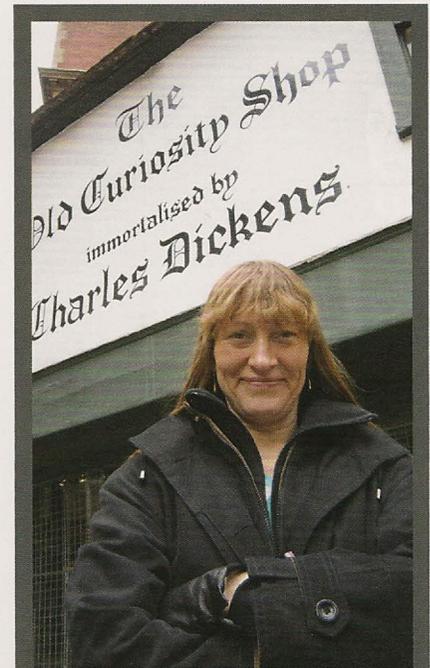
Domestic violence is more insidious than this. It is the everyday cuts and humiliations, the hidden bruises, the mysteriously-broken bones, the crushed spirits. These are the private

matters that we're taught to ignore or turn away from, like the uncomfortable argument overheard in the fast food restaurant. These are the details that do not make it into the news.

Stealthy abusers succeed by shielding their actions behind closed doors. Fiction opens those doors, allowing the minutiae of domestic violence to invade the security of your own home. Novels give names and faces to anonymous victims. Read Roddy Doyle's *The Woman who Walked into Doors*, and abused wife Paula Spencer will let you into the most intimate places of her heart – and her story may just break your own. Her experience resonates with us because we aren't just observers, watching her life unravel on a flickering TV screen. We're inside her head, finding clarity in what at first seems incomprehensible.

Charles Dickens' novels changed English society by laying bare the ugly truths of Victorian life. Roddy Doyle's novel lets us live through the soul-sucking sickness that is domestic violence. Both writers harness the power of literature to sharpen our understanding of human misery, and shame us into action.

Truth is never more powerful than in fiction. ■



Rosemarie Boll

Rosemarie Boll ('79 BA, English; '83 LLB) is a writer and lawyer. She has been practicing family law for 25 years, and currently practices with the Family Law Office of Legal Aid Alberta. The issue of domestic abuse and how the justice system fails families inspired her to write her first novel, *The Second Trial* (2010). Told from the point of view of a young boy who is witnessing his family being torn apart by domestic violence, *The Second Trial* has been used as a teaching tool in classrooms. It has also been short listed for a 2011 White Pine Award for young adult fiction, and named a ForeWord Reviews' Book of the Year Award finalist in young adult fiction.