

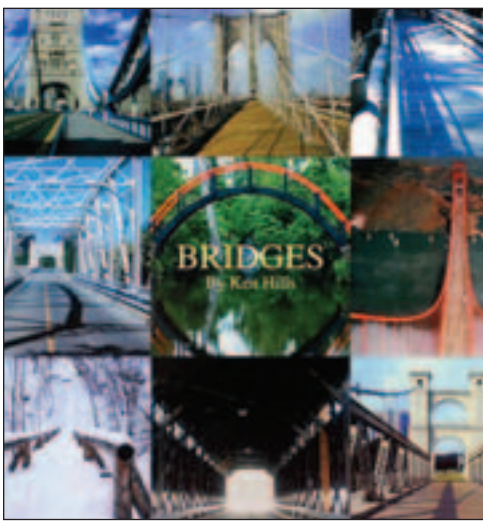
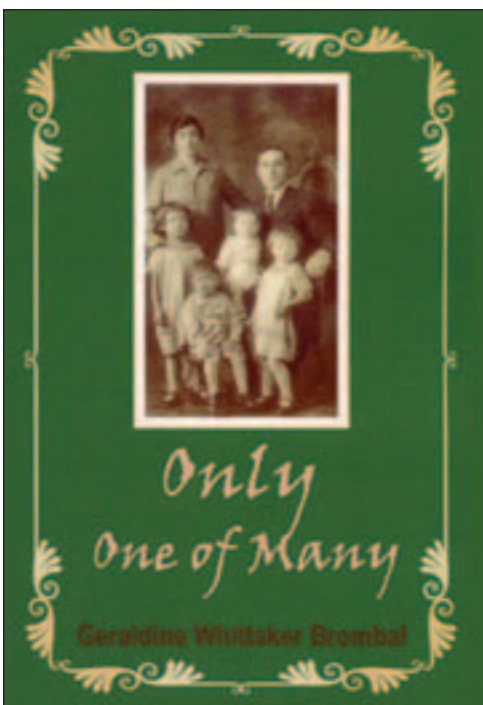


In their own write



Rocco Commisso, left, Ken Hills and Gabriele Wells are among a growing group of self-published authors in Guelph. They are hosting a book fair next Saturday at the West End Recreation Centre. RYAN PFEIFFER, GUELPH MERCURY

A group of Guelph writers has banded together to create a national organization for self-published authors and illustrators. Ahead of an upcoming book fair, Renee Tavascia finds out what drives their work.



For some writers, there is a challenge even greater than a blank page. It isn't the literary muse that is absent, but the chance to have your words seen. That's why the Independent Authors and Illustrators of Canada (IAIC) was created in Guelph last year. There are 20 members in the growing group, an eclectic mix of scribes who specialize in fiction, poetry, spirituality, self-help, travel and memoir writing.

The group's vision for its members includes a collaborative and nurturing exchange of ideas, as well as raising awareness among booksellers, publishing houses, talent agents and book scouts. Their cyber-home provides easy access for those who wish to buy books online. The IAIC Book Fair, being held in Guelph next Saturday, will feature books for sale at a special price, as well as workshops and readings.

One of the group's founders, Ken Hills, describes the fair as a "coming out party" to raise the group's community profile and provide readers and writers with the chance to meet, browse, buy and take writing workshops. He expresses understandable frustration with the stone fortress that can be the Canadian publishing industry, rife with delays and conditions.

"There is a 90 to 95 per cent rejection rate, publishers keep your work for up to six months before responding and the submission criteria is not always compatible with the writer's," Hills says. "For example, children's publishers will not accept verse — what would Dr. Seuss have to say about this? They will not accept a fully illustrated story."

That's why Hills and the other IAIC members have made their pens proactive. "As a writer, I would like to have more of a creative input for the children's story. Also, in my case, at the age of 70, I don't feel like waiting for six months at a time to hear from publishers."

A huge part of the IAIC's visibility is its online presence. The group's website, www.iaicanada.org, has links to each of the authors' sites as well.

Having a local base of colleagues helps, he says. "Many of our members are from Guelph. Some are from Cambridge, Kitchener, Fergus and elsewhere. We hope to attract many others and develop a growing readership."

Hills, a retired high school teacher and grandfather of five, is a prolific author. He has self-published many children's books, including "Pizza Pete," with illustrations by Cliff Train, and "Billy Bluejay," illustrated by another IAIC member, Rocco Commisso. Hills has also produced "Bridges," a collection of poetry and short stories and a novel, "Sherwood Park," all available through his website at www.kenhills.ca.

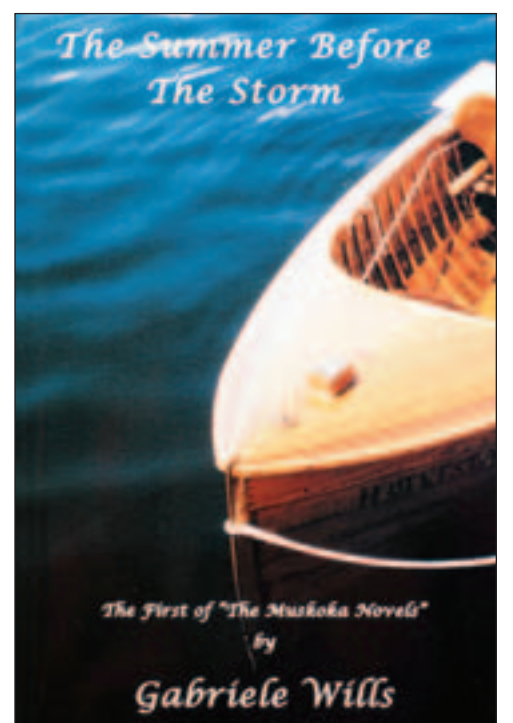
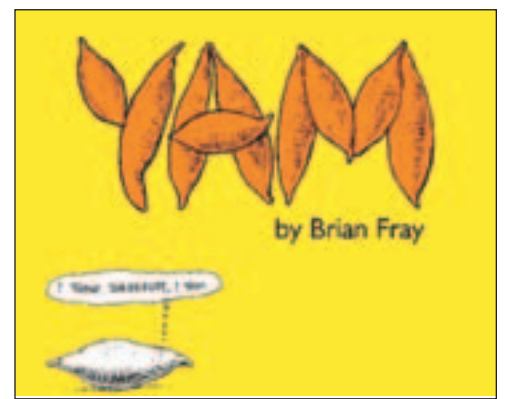
As well as Hills, the Guelph element of the IAIC includes two historical writers, Gabriele Wills and Geraldine Brombal, graphic talents Brian Fray and Commisso, and children's author Laura Grime.

Wills, a former history and English teacher, realized a lot of fascinating social history was missing from school lessons. She also thought very little Canadian historical fiction was available. This niche was an area where she felt she could "enlighten as well as entertain."

if you're going
Independent Authors
and Illustrators of
Canada Book Fair

Where: West End Recreation Centre,
21 Imperial Rd. S.

When: Saturday, April 26,
10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



As a historical writer, Wills's muse comes from a sense of place. Her first novel, "A Place to Call Home," reflected upon the turbulent history of Lindsay, Ont., her hometown. She was so dedicated to having her story published that she remortgaged her house to pay for self-publishing.

"Having had dozens of rejections and 'near-misses' with publishers . . . I was concerned that perhaps my book didn't have a market. But within days of the book's release, people started to call and write. It was not only a great relief, but exciting to know that I had touched people's hearts and minds," she said. "That novel is now sold out."

Aside from the validation, Wills enjoys the degree of creative input she keeps by publishing her own books.

"Having complete artistic control over everything, from the font to the cover design, is the most rewarding aspect of self-publishing. The speed of publication is also important. Once I get the files to my printer, I can have thousands of beautiful books delivered to my door within two or three weeks."

Since "A Place to Call Home," Wills has published two other books: "Moon Hall," inspired by her experiences and observations of Ottawa valley country life and "The Summer Before the Storm," a distillation of her visits to a Muskoka cottage as a teenager.

In historical fiction, stories and characters often spring from real events so it demands "meticulous research" to authentically recreate an era. Wills steeps herself in memoirs, letters and biographies to capture the flavour of their speech and insight into their psyche and ethics.

The most challenging part of writing isn't the muse, she says — it's the distribution. "Finding stores that will buy or take the books on consignment (is difficult). Large chains like Chapters won't, except at a local level. I put about 15,000 kilometres on my car the first year, driving around southern Ontario, talking to owners of gift shops and book stores. Trying to get reviews and media coverage is also very difficult, because there is no big publicity machine behind you. So word-of-mouth is the way I've sold most of my books."

Authors who self-publish also assume the tasks associated with running a business — everything from shipping and invoicing to checking stock and GST returns. It's a downside to taking the reins of your own business, Wills says, because it "keeps me from what I'd much rather be doing — writing."

Ken Hills contacted Wills after he heard about her first novel and they began exchanging books and ideologies. Late last year, Hills approached her with the idea of starting an organization of independent writers to offer more presence and clout with publishers and agents.

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