

Stuart McLean



Photo: [My Reading Tree](#)

Today I picked up a book my daughter gave me last year. I was saving it to savour, and then I realized that another Christmas was almost upon us and *The Vinyl Cafe Diaries* (Penguin 2010) was still sitting by my bed.

Unlike the others in [The Vinyl Cafe](#) series, this book is not filled with funny stories about Morley and Dave, their kids, Sam and Stephanie, and their pets, Arthur the dog (who eats ice cream) and Galway the cat (who knows how to flush the toilet). Say "Dave Cooks the Turkey" almost anywhere in Canada and you'll be greeted by hoots of laughter.

Instead, the reader gets a glimpse of a more serious, contemplative side of this much-loved broadcaster, storyteller and writer. Still, as soon as I opened it, I was in Stuart McLean land, that magically pleasant, funny, happy place his fans love so much.

Born in Montreal, Stuart McLean moved to Toronto to work on CBC radio, where he created the fictitious family of Vinyl Cafe fame. For many years, McLean has travelled across this wide country, knitting it together by telling his tales -- hilarious with an undertone of optimism that flirts with naivete. After many years of good intentions, last year we finally made it to his concert at the [Centre for the Arts](#).

This year's [concert tour](#) brought him last night to Hamilton. Tomorrow he plays the McPherson in Victoria. The first week of December, he works his way across the prairies, hitting Calgary, Banff, Edmonton, Regina, and Saskatoon before going back to Toronto. Then back out west to Vancouver and Seattle, and east once more to Montreal and Ontario destinations before Christmas. His concerts also feature wonderful musicians.

In an essay called "Salt of the Earth," McLean meditates on salt. Now used by the ton on winter roads, he tells us, salt has been revered since ancient times as a ritual substance that can still remind us that "we are here for each other for there is *salt between us*." (87)

In this book of essays, McLean writes about weather and seasonal chores, about neighbours and neighbourhoods, about what holds communities together, about pets and mementoes and clothes we hang onto long after we stop wearing them. In other words, the themes are the same ones he uses in his stories.

One essay that strikes a poignant note is his meditation on newspapers. If newspapers like

the [\*Montreal Gazette\*](#), founded in 1785, should go down, he says, the big loss would be the shared experience they have given us. "I love newspapers," says McLean and in this he is certain to touch a nerve with many readers who feel the same, for as McLean says, "our newspapers are more than the sum of their parts." (40)

I'll close on the essay about a tropical plant McLean bought on the advice of a real estate agent. After first resisting the idea, he saw a potted palm and succumbed to a whim. Lo and behold, the house sold.

I snuggled down more comfortably in my chair when I read that McLean kept his palm alive after he moved. His comment on this small victory so well expresses my own view of life: "the important lessons...[are] patience and faith." (14)