

# A tale of raw speech vs. revision



**Verbatim: A Novel**  
By Jeff Bursey  
Enfield & Wizenty  
294 pages; \$29.95

“Verbatim” means “literally,” “faithfully,” “word for word,” all issues at the heart of this unusual novel, formatted in side-by-side columns of Hansard transcriptions and bolstered with exchanges of memos and emails. The upstairs/downstairs drama (perhaps on-stage/backstage might better describe the machinations) follows, via Hansard, the cast of Honourable Members in the governing and opposition parties and their manoeuvrings on the House floor, bookended by textual back-and-forths from the unseen transcribers, editors and managers whose job it is to produce Hansard.

Hansard (named for printer and publisher Thomas Hansard), is associated with the Westminster system of government, and is, in Canada, the record of debates in the federal and provincial forums.

It sounds straightforward enough, but it can be a minefield of traditions and misperceptions. Grammar is often corrected, and obvious errors (such as calling a minister by the wrong name) fixed, while phrases like “Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!” can cover a multitude of sins.

“Verbatim’s” government is introduced with a List of Members, giving their names, positions (such as “Premier” or “Social Services Critic”), political affiliation and the district they represent (all from an unnamed Atlantic province). Otherwise, their characters emerge entirely through dialogue.

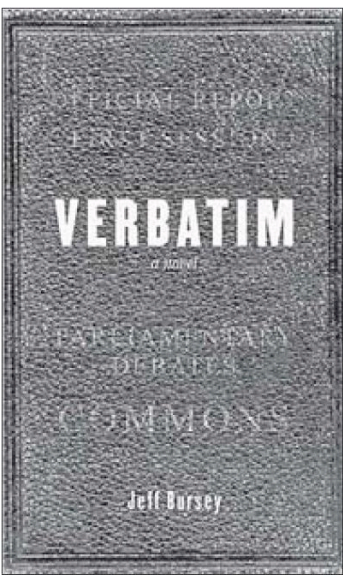
The Hansard provides the formalized pace of questions, supplementary questions, petitions and Speaker’s rulings. These fuel such activities as the passage of bills, cries of points of order, and the continual attack and defence between the ruling and opposing parties, which is often pitched with calibrated wit and insult.

Through this, major dilemmas take shape. The province faces economic crises on several fronts. Unemployment is a big problem. And the health care system needs some support, too — not that that hasn’t stopped a certain minister from queue-jumping, or so an opposition critic alleges.

Behind these scenes, the players are known only by the initials they sign to inter-departmental communications. The new director of Hansard is “SV.” SV toils endlessly to produce a good Hansard, but is seemingly foiled at every turn by routine squabbles about photocopying, office temperatures and bread machines, as well as larger questions of overtime policy and editing standards.

In illustration, “Verbatim” will present two different edits of the same session, like this:

Nov. 12, 199-  
UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT, Tape 1017 - Trans. RC



Hon. Member for the Canyons

Mr. Carew (AP-The Canyons): [...] She should be listening to my speech, because it is going to be the best. It will be the best because it is, Speaker, going to be the least longest. The best one because there is the least to it. The Government House Leader I believe sometimes believes that he is probably the best speaker in this House of Provincial Legislators because he is up pontificating all the day long and is quoting Hamlet, from Shakespeare — I mean Shakespeare, from Hamlet.

Nov. 12, 199 - EDITED TRANSCRIPT Tape 1017 Editor: HF

Mr. Carew (AP-The Canyons): [...] She should be listening to my speech because it is going to be the best. It

will be the best because it is going to be the shortest. The best one because there is the least to it. The Government House Leader I believe sometimes believes that he is the best speaker in this House of legislators because he is up pontificating all day long and is quoting Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

The differences between them produce ructions, and complaints ensue. Just as the government faces a surprise election, SV determines to produce a new style guide, one that will create a polished and reliable Hansard once and for all. But the skullduggery the Opposition alleges runs rampant in the government ranks above is subtly at work in the bureaucracy below, where the beleaguered SV is continually badgered about contractions, capitalization and budget cuts.

“Verbatim’s” structure is challenging. But there is an audience for it. If you, for example, have been following the one-space-versus-two-spaces-after-a-period debate, or can argue intelligently about the merits and drawbacks of Helvetica, this drama, unfolding through quarrels over not just editing, but best editing practices, is for you.

**Sheilagh’s Brush**  
By Maura Hanrahan  
Inanna Publications & Education Inc.  
160 pages; \$22.95

This story is set in Rennie’s Bay, in the 1920s and 1930s, and concerns two sisters, Sheilagh and

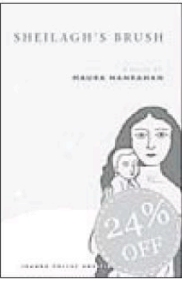
Claire.

It begins with Sheilagh having just given birth. The labour was wrenching and the attending nurse, Mrs. Clarke, does not think the baby will live. But live the little girl does, and Sheilagh names her Leah, after the nurse, and Mary, to tuck a Catholic name in there, as was normal practice.

Claire was present, and witnessing Sheilagh’s labour was enough to make her decide against ever having children. Mrs. Mary was there, too. The local midwife, she insisted on putting an axe beneath Sheilagh’s bed, to cut the pain, but otherwise did not interfere with the nurse. But Mrs. Mary knows a lot about the needs of women, and both Sheilagh and Claire will rely on her for comfort and counsel.

They and the other women in “Sheilagh’s Brush” carry the story, with their tasks and their gossip and their romances and their beliefs, it is a domestic world, structured around their work, making bread, making fish and making a family. Or, in Claire’s case, her desire to never so do. The women also remember the lore of their community, the rituals and the necessity to have breadcrumbs in your pocket when you go berry-picking — a caution that especially applies to Leah, so small and so sick and so special.

Her fate, and that of her relatives, drives the story, a slender book and easy page-turner.



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