

people to know

THE ENGINEER AS WRITER

Veteran engineer and educator Michel Bruneau has incorporated his understanding of earthquakes and structural engineering into an award-winning novel.

SINCE WHEN can engineers write fiction? That's a difficult question for Michel Bruneau to answer. Bruneau is the recipient of the 2012 AISC T.R. Higgins award, as well as a long-time lecturer and author of numerous technical papers, but the roots of his writing fiction go further back than any of that.

"Writing is something I've always enjoyed and I can't say when I began because it seems like there's never been a start," he said. A self-described child of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution," Bruneau grew up in a culture very much connected to a European outlook on life but with a growing regional identity.

As a result, he said, "all the literature that we studied in classes was not European, but by Quebec authors. And in those days, none of them would make a living writing—all had another primary job—so I never even contemplated the thought of becoming a novelist as a career."

Instead he began to study architecture, but because what he really wanted to do was design bridges and buildings, he soon transferred to civil engineering. Meanwhile, he continued to write.

In 1998 Bruneau published his first book, a collection of short stories written in French and in the spirit of much of the popular literature of that time. "These were very much dark stories with kind of a twist that makes you reflect a bit on things," Bruneau said.

"Writing is a solitary experience," Bruneau said, "and you only harvest the fruits of that labor when you get feedback. Of course, tastes vary and those with classroom experience are in a good position to know that one cannot please everybody, but all the feedback I received so far has been very good. And that is the part that is enjoyable—delivering a story that grabs the reader."

In fact, many of his non-French-speaking friends and colleagues were disappointed that they could not read his book of short stories, which is at least part of the reason he began writing in English.

In 2010, after an 11-year effort often interrupted by his other responsibilities, Bruneau finally published *Shaken Allegiances*. A fictional account of what ensues when a devastating earthquake strikes Montreal Island in the dead of an icy winter, the Kafkaesque tale was well-received by readers and critics alike. The book captured first place for regional fiction and second place overall in the fiction category in the 2010 Next Generation Indie Book Awards, an annual competition that recognizes outstanding independent authors and publishers worldwide.

Although Bruneau has always been comfortable writing in French, having been born in a town that was 99% Francophone, he said that for many years writing in English was more challenging. "You feel like you're writing correctly, but there's always that nagging doubt. So getting a prize was great, and it put that doubt to rest."

To learn more about Bruneau, both as novelist and engineer, visit www.michelbruneau.com. If you are at NASCC: The Steel Conference in Dallas April 18-20, be sure to catch his T.R. Higgins Lecture on steel design, which will be in English. MSC

▼ Michel Bruneau, Ph.D., P.Eng., professor in the Department of Civil, Structural and Environmental Engineering at the University at Buffalo, Buffalo, N.Y. and award-winning author of the novel *Shaken Allegiances*. Left: The Quebec Bridge over the St. Lawrence River. Right: The U.B. Structural Engineering and Earthquake Simulation Laboratory (SEESL).

