

# Funny how things work out

## Vancouver comedy writer finds an accidental memoir in alphabetical compendium

By Shawn Conner, Special To The Sun October 14, 2015

When it came to arranging a book of essays via the alphabet, many of the letters suggested their subjects to Charles Demers quite readily — A for Adolescence, for instance.

However, the Vancouver writer did get stuck on one entry.

“I just could not figure out to do with Q. Originally it was going to be ‘quagmire,’ which was a reflection of what I’d got myself into by promising to write an essay for every letter of the alphabet,” he says.

A “quagmire” the process may have been — especially while trying to steal moments to write during the first year of his daughter’s birth — but Demers got through the experience.

On Saturday, Douglas & McIntyre will publish the result. *The Horrors: An A to Z of Funny Thoughts on Awful Things* is a collection of essays covering everything from Demers’ adolescence as a teenage Trotskyite to bombing onstage during standup routines to Quentin Tarantino (that pesky Q essay — other possibilities were Queen (the band) and the Queen (the head of state)).

Though originally intended to just be a compendium of funny thoughts, *The Horrors* ended up being something more.

“I did not set out to write this as memoir, but it ended up being much more of a memoir than I had anticipated,” says Demers.

“I think that happens to a lot of people. We think we’re talking about the world, we think we’re talking about an idea, and we’re actually talking about ourselves in relation to that idea.”

In some ways, writing *The Horrors* helped the 35-year-old get a better handle on his life.

“I think in a lot of ways, it’s the story of a person whose first third of his life was not very good, was really terrifying or just difficult, traumatized and confused, and then life started going better.

“If there’s an arc, I think it’s coming to grips with the idea that, even though your formative years can be really difficult, you can emerge into a different part of life.”

The major cause of his early trauma was the loss of his mother to leukemia when Demers was 11 years old. Not only did he lose a parent, but the world lost a funny lady.

“People were, I’ve been told, constantly telling her that she should be on *The Carol Burnett Show* — a compliment she couldn’t fully process because, inexplicably, she hated *The Carol Burnett Show*,” he writes in the introduction to *The Horrors*.

Demers remembers his mother in the book’s centrepiece, *Motherlessness*.

“She was just so funny, while also sometimes being angry about the way things had gone in her life,” he said.

“It was a strange thing to be left with one parent, and with, in some ways, your personality resembling so much the one who’s gone.”

Not only does he owe his sense of humour to his mother, but also some of his dissatisfaction and anger, Demers says.

But despite what he calls his catastrophic nature, he says he recognizes that he now has what he calls “the building blocks for real happiness.” He is happily married with a new daughter and he has “a very rewarding professional life.”

*The Horrors* is Demers third book, following *The Prescription Errors*, a novel, and another book of essays, *Vancouver Special*, both from 2009. He is a faculty member at the University of B.C., where he teaches comedy writing, and is a frequent guest on CBC Radio’s successful program *The Debaters*.

He also writes and performs in Theatre Replacement’s successful, year-end musicals *East Van Pantos* (the next in the family-friendly series is *Hansel and Gretel*, starting in December).

“It’s all kind of there,” Demers says. “I do feel these moments of happiness, these splashes of happiness. I haven’t quite put it together yet. I think, in a lot of ways, writing this book has made me reckon with what it is that gives me that pessimistic, catastrophic sensibility. And will I be able to shed that skin now that I don’t really need it?”