From the first paragraph of Wade Bell’s new short story collection, *Tracie’s Revenge*, I knew I was reading a gifted writer. Bell’s authenticity and artistry carried me through darkness and light towards a crescendo in two brilliant final stories.

The second last story, “The Trick”, follows a widowed oilpatch worker testing gas wells through rattlesnake country. Bell sets his last story, “Papers and Pearls”, in 19th century New Orleans from the point of view of a steamship captain’s young daughter who receives from her father a gift of black pearls (think blood diamonds here). When I finished, I knew Wade Bell was an extraordinary writer whose every book I must read. He’s too good a writer to ignore.
I spoke with him briefly by telephone for this review. The only child of American-born parents, Bell was raised in Edmonton. His father was an engineer in the oilpatch and his mother “a crossword fanatic.” Bell did a brief stint in reform school. “I became difficult to handle,” he says, with characteristic understatement. He spoke frankly of a 26 year struggle with depression and his mother’s suicide. And when I asked if I could include this, he emphasized, I must: “As a society, we need to talk about these things.” This understatement, honesty and compassion come through in his stories.

Bell’s been compared to Carver and Munro. But his gift is unique, starting with his hard-earned authenticity, and his mastery of the craft, especially of the classic short story. Although, some stories are as subversive as those of the Beat writers: “Rational Men at the End of the Reign of Reason (Graffiti on the Wall of Literature, #6)”.

73 year old Calgary-based Bell’s worked in the oil patch and for the CRTC. He’s soft-spoken, shy and witty. He descends from a family that fought on both sides of the American Civil War. Living in Ottawa, Bell met poets Dorn, Ginsberg, and Creeley. Not surprisingly, Bell has a poet’s perfectly pitched ear for tone and nuance.
Bell’s first book was *The North Saskatchewan River Book* (Coach House, 1978). It would be 25 years before his next collection, *Destroyer of Compasses* (Guernica, 2003), followed by *No Place Fit For a Child* (Guernica, 2009).

Others peer into the abyss, but Bell switches into four wheel drive, snaps on the light bar and explores the coulee floors. While Bell illuminates dark places, he also brings levity to well lighted ones, as fearlessly, humorously and wryly as Faulkner, or the Spanish-speaking writers he admires: Cortazar, Hernandez, Jimenez, Lorca, Puig, and Machado. Bell sets several stories in Spain and he switches locales masterfully throughout *Tracie’s Revenge* and his other books.

What makes Bell a standout, is his ability to move a story from reality to dream or nightmare, and back again, in a few sentences. He spoke of how the Spanish writers “create explosions and write from inside grief.” Bell’s characters often create or escape from small, sometimes large, sustained detonations.

For example, the title story depicts Tracie who blithely sets up her husband’s death and then walks away. Bell writes:
“She thought of her husband at the sawmill and hoped an accident there would take his life so she could inherit the insurance money and the pick up truck.” (9)

And we are now compelled to follow Tracie and her young son right to the story’s chilling final sentence.

Bell writes women vividly, often beautifully, from their fashions to their dark fantasies, from young girls to mature women, without romanticizing or demonizing. I asked him how he does this: “I’ve had three long-term relationships; I have two daughters and four granddaughters whom I love – I’ve seen what they can do.”

Bell writes sagely about desire, and is funny and flirty too. “Soft, & Easy, Hello or Goodbye” depicts two couples who meet separately in a bar, and how the dates don’t work out. A man remaining from one couple has been casually sketching the woman from the other couple and the two begin chatting. The woman looks at the man’s sketch:

“‘It’s me,” she said, “It’s good. You’re a real artist.”
“I am,” he said. “Starting tonight. Starting with you.”

”Sure. I believe that, Mr. Artist.”’(43)

In a few deft sentences, the flirtation is on.

Bell’s a smooth operator; never crude, always classy. He is an artist and as fine a writer as we’ve seen in a long time. And he’s currently working on a novel set in Spain. Lucky for us.