
Heather Mallick is a well-heeled leftie with a soft heart and a strident style. She left the *Globe* in a huff, but there's no shortage of outlets clamouring for her sharp, witty and at times abrasive commentaries

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WHY UNTIL



Inside a classroom in the Bancroft Building at the University of Toronto, fluorescent lights buzz above Heather Mallick's head as she sits behind a long desk, poised in a long-sleeved dark blue dress, wide-eyed and nodding at a student in her continuing education course, Town Hall: The Bush Legacy. It's her first time teaching this four-week evening course to 18 students, many of whom look over 50. The course blurb promises an exploration of "social and economic change in the United States as the Bush reign nears its end."

Tonight, after Mallick talks about how Bush cares more about oil than Americans, she cites current statistics about the oil crisis and the severity of global warming. She paints a bleak picture of a future where Canadians won't be able to afford to drive their cars to work, strangers will need to share one house due to heating costs and the suburbs will have become slums.

A casually dressed male student in his mid-forties defiantly challenges Mallick, speaking in rambling sentences and not pausing even when she tries to interrupt him with a response. The gist of his objection is that people will be more concerned with high taxes than anything else. When he finally stops, Mallick looks him directly in the eyes, tilts her head to the left, smiles and politely says, "I don't think people are going to be thinking, 'My taxes are too high.' They're going to be thinking, 'Oh my God, my children's lives are fucked.'"

It's a typical Mallick moment. If it weren't for her mouth, you might mistake this 47-year-old for a woman about to attend a tea party, in her classy dress accented by a blue striped scarf and an iridescent brooch in the shape of a hand. Although she's calm and composed face to face, her writing is fiercely opinionated, whether the topic is high school education standards ("A huge proportion of students come out of high school unable to spell, construct a sentence or an argument or make a learned reference to back up whatever argument they might have"), or people in her Toronto Beach neighbourhood loving dogs more than children ("The signs along the boardwalk right by Lake Ontario say dogs must be leashed, intended for the safety of children and adults. Every sign has been spray-painted over. This was done by prosperous, white, middle-aged adults who have 'furkids'").

She's an outspoken feminist who for three years wrote a weekly fashion column for *The Globe and Mail*, "Bought," that detailed a purchase she'd made that week, ranging from a \$1.59 packet of morning glory seeds ("I can't think offhand of anything so gorgeous and so cheap") to a \$455 Woflord cardigan ("intended to be worn with the edges splayed open like a label for breast revelation"). Raised in small-town northern Ontario, she relishes her yearly trips to Paris: "I go out to dinner at Le Train Bleu above the Gare de Lyon, where in a gilded room coated with paintings of cherubs and courtiers

I drink champagne and such a great deal of wine that the praise I lavish on the waiter who removes the head, fins and spine of my sole is over the top no matter how good the guy is." Able to coolly deflect high-powered detractors like Bill O'Reilly on American television, she packed in her long-running *Globe* political column, "As If," over a matter of principle. Charmingly self-effacing, she insists that no one would be interested in a profile of her: "If it bores me, it will bore everyone else." Yet she is also capable of breathtaking self-regard. In 1996, when she received her second National Newspaper Award (NNA), she thanked her husband, Stephen Petherbridge. "I married him because he is the only man I know who's smarter than I am."

Intensely self-assured of her opinions in her columns, yet modest and self-critical in person, Mallick is a woman of extremes. As Sharon Fraser, her friend and editor at *rabble.ca*, puts it, "She exhibits a sense of insecurity at the same time as she's got this overpowering self-confidence." And it's her belief that she's right that drives her critics crazy.

The intelligence Mallick so values was apparent early on. A voracious reader, at nine she finished *Cancer Ward* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In the article for which she won a 1996 NNA, about returning to Kapuskasing, where she spent her high school years, she rhapsodizes briefly about the library: "One of the sweetest moments was revisiting the town library. Libraries are a safety valve for small towns, just as bars are, and as a teenager I brought home novels in bulk, not liking non-fiction at that age." Although Mallick is very guarded about her private life, then and now, you get the sense her beloved books offered a richness of human emotion that was somewhat absent at home. "I was raised in a very Scottish way," she explains of her mother's parenting style. "My parents didn't have a demonstrative marriage. I don't think anyone ever embraced. If we loved each other, God knows, no one ever mentioned it." About two years ago, her mother, Laura, mentioned matter-of-factly that she never hugged her as a child. Three days later Mallick received a large cheque from her mother in the mail. "I started dividing the cheque by hugs," she chuckles. "Ya know, a grand a hug." In relating this story she mentions that she always wanted to play the piano, but her mother never let her. "Perhaps if I mention that to her, she can send me another large cheque," she jokes, "possibly a piano."

Laura met her husband while studying English and philosophy in Glasgow, where Sushil Mallick had moved from India to study architecture and medicine, and eventually became an obstetrician-gynecologist. When the couple moved to Canada in the 1950s, Sushil responded to the federal government's plea for doctors to serve in isolated regions,

and spent most of his career in communities like Norway House, Manitoba, where Mallick was born. “It’s so far north, some people in Manitoba don’t know where it is. You couldn’t get there except by boat, bush plane or Bombardier, which is a huge Ski-Doo with tank-like treads,” says Mallick. By the time she and her family landed in Kapuskasing, they had already moved four times.

Growing up in this peripatetic fashion, Mallick likely found some solace in her non-stop reading. It was also a formative experience in another way: “If you read extensively, you’ll always turn out to be left wing,” she says. But it wasn’t just reading that politicized her. Her maternal grandfather was a conscientious objector during the First World War, jailed for more than a year in Scotland, and she guesses

had become too much for her was Kapuskasing, which she would later describe as a “white [as in snow], Siberian misery.” At the University of Toronto she completed a BA and then an MA in English literature, in the process studying Virginia Woolf, reading all of Shakespeare, and by her own admission, smoking a lot of dope.

After graduating in 1982, while trying to find a use for her Masters, she experimented with writing a couple of Harlequin-style romance novels, at which she claims she was terrible. She also tutored high school students in English. “I was horrified by all the things they didn’t know about the English language,” she recalls. It wasn’t until October 1983 that she stumbled upon journalism, attending a talk at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Ryerson University) by Seymour Hersh, the acclaimed

first full-time job as a copy editor for the *Financial Post*. Those pre-Conrad Black days were exciting, with the *Financial Post* competing head to head with the *Globe’s* Report on Business section. David Estok, an assignment editor working with Mallick as a copy editor, says she was a dominant person on the desk. “She had strong views and debated them openly in the newsroom.” After she became assistant news editor in 1990, though, *Frank* magazine not-so-subtly suggested that her rise was due to nepotism, not talent, since Petherbridge was executive editor — and her husband. *Frank* managed to get the couple’s recent marriage right, but their ages wrong, shaving years off of Mallick’s and adding them to Petherbridge’s to make the gap seem more ridiculous. Petherbridge was so angry he sued and later won. Still, within a year, Mallick had

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her own father was left wing, “but I have no idea because we never talked about politics.” Her five years in northern Ontario also had a significant impact on her political views. She was deeply disturbed by the poverty of the native peoples in Sioux Lookout and the dozen kids in her class from a residential school. “Seeing that will definitely make you realize something about hardship and which side you’re on,” she says. “They were treated so badly.” Mallick was also sympathetic to the struggles of Kapuskasing’s laid-off mill workers. “If you live in a mill town,” she says, sighing, “you’re very aware of the rights of the working man and what a miserable existence it is to work in a mill.”

This compassion is her trademark, and you get the sense it’s entirely sincere. Like the way she tears up while describing to me over coffee what it feels like to be waterboarded (a form of torture) according to an account she read by Eric Lomax, a member of the British Army incarcerated in Japanese prison camps during the Second World War. Or the time she sent me an email telling me to go to the *Toronto Star’s* website for a video of an ambush in Iraq. “It’s so unbelievably awful,” she wrote. “My hair is standing on end. I’m afraid I have to pour myself a glass of wine and sit quietly for a while.” It wasn’t the only occasion I got an email from her sounding genuinely anguished about the world. Fraser explains her sensibility this way: “She has a great feminist strength, but also a kind of plaintive helplessness.” At times, she admits, her husband will suggest, “Maybe you should take a break from being online? Maybe it’s too much for you.”

In 1977, by the time Mallick was 18, what

American journalist best known for uncovering the Vietnam War’s My Lai massacre. She was particularly moved by one comment he made: “It’s funny that people don’t have the same expectations about openness of their president as they do of their own family.” Over 20 years later, Mallick echoes Hersh’s comment in her 2004 book, *Pearls in Vinegar*: “Bush lying about his reasons for invading Iraq is like lying to your husband that you have landed a high-paying job in Tennessee or Guatemala so you have to move there.” Hersh’s talk galvanized her: “I knew everything he was talking about, was very familiar with politics, and writing had always come easily to me.” She started Ryerson’s two-year journalism program in 1984.

She now fondly refers to Ryerson as the “rundown polytech where my husband and I first met when he was teaching and I was studying.” (Petherbridge, 17 years her senior and now a magazine business consultant, was then a newspaper reporting professor.) Mallick specialized in newspaper studies in her final year of the program, filling a news editor position on *The Ryersonian* student newspaper, although her byline seldom appeared. The departmental assistant at the time, Miriam Maguire, says Mallick’s journalism school profile was low: “Some students you just know they are going to become really famous or get ahead in life. With her, you didn’t know.” Weekends, Mallick reported for the *Globe* and landed a coveted reporting internship there the summer after her first year. Just after graduating in 1986, Mallick got another summer internship at the *Star*. When that ended, she rejoined the *Globe* on a freelance contract until late 1987.

It wasn’t until early 1988 that she got her

resigned. As she explains now, “I don’t think you can be married to your boss. It’s a dodgy job. People were picking on me and I felt vulnerable.”

The controversy is ironic because Mallick never saw herself as the marrying type. At 11, she read *Lucy Crown* by Irwin Shaw and was frightened by the husband character. “I thought husbands were harsh, stupid creatures, always cold, forbidding and controlling.” But then one day, her stepdaughter, Victoria, started counting her family on her fingers. When she got to Mallick, she paused and said, “Well, of course you’re not *really* in my family.” Mallick shared her life with Petherbridge, and his two young daughters, who lived with them each weekend, for about a year. She was so hurt by her stepdaughter’s comment that she marched downstairs to where Petherbridge was cooking dinner and said, “That’s it. We’re getting married. We have to.” Ever the iconoclast, she wore a purple silk Alfred Sung suit at the Toronto Old City Hall ceremony. “It wasn’t a big deal,” she says. “I still find the idea of being married hilarious.” She boasts that she posted their marriage license on their bedroom wall, “like how dentists have their qualifications on the wall.”

After leaving the *Financial Post* in 1991, Mallick joined the *Toronto Sun* as an editorial page copy editor. Then in 1994 she became the paper’s Review editor for about five years. A paper with a reputation as sexist and right wing wasn’t an obvious choice for someone of Mallick’s political bent and literary tastes, but she says of this move, “I think I was just sick of the *Post*.” The Review section was also quite different in style from the rest of the paper with its literary focus on book and art reviews.

Working closely with Pam Davies, assistant art director, they would both ponder layouts for Mallick's section. "Heather was so in tune with the visuals side, as well as her writing side," says Davies. They speak fondly of those days, when they had great editorial and creative freedom over their work. Mallick also started writing book reviews for her section. "I probably read more than at any time in my life," she says, noting that meanwhile she was working with fellow editors "who had never read a single book." Not surprisingly, Mallick had a reputation for being a bit of a rabble-rouser. "She was controversial in her writing and some people respected that," says Davies, "but others, she upset." It was during her time working for the Review section that she earned her first NNA for critical writing in 1994 for three book reviews.

to caricature a people in that way is a form of prejudice, really." Again Mallick defends herself, "May I note that evaluating Americans has been a splendid intellectual stream since Alexis de Tocqueville."

Mallick's sudden departure from the *Globe* in December 2005 arose from a misunderstanding with her editor, Jerry Johnson. She was disturbed and outraged by a *Guardian* interview that she believed had libeled Noam Chomsky, and wanted to write about it. Johnson wanted her to include some of the material that so offended her in the column, to help provide context. She strenuously objected, saying that reprinting it would constitute a second libel. She then asked to have her column pulled, but the *Globe* flatly refused. In the end, the contentious statements didn't appear in the paper, and the

Japanese. You have been accused, but you cannot defend yourself against accusations you haven't been informed about. It's a situation that is completely blinding."

Mallick's compassion even extended into the necessarily contrived relationship we developed. She was often concerned about my well being, whether I had all the things I needed, if she was responding fairly to me and apologizing for having limits with her privacy. Some might say she was being so accommodating because I was profiling her, but I don't think so. Because if there is one thing I've learned about Mallick it's that she may be provocative and mouthy, but she's certainly not insincere.

She is also far more humble in person than her columns suggest. She waited patiently for me at tony Canoe restaurant while I was hope-

"She seems to treat Americans as though they are a loathesome species, not just a country whose policies she disagrees with"

In 1999, Mallick quit the *Sun*, saying, "I could not bear the thought of turning 40 and working there." She sent a few samples of her reviews to Simon Beck, then the *Globe's* Review section editor, who hired her freelance a few days later. Originally, "As If" was an arts column that appeared in the Review section, but a year later, the new *Globe* editor, Richard Addis, asked Mallick to move her column to the Focus section. It was supposed to be edgy, with a lot of attitude. "Bought" debuted in 2003 after a Style section editor talked her into it. Her *Globe* work brought Mallick the profile she still retains a year and a half since her departure, and led indirectly to the book contract for 2004's *Pearls in Vinegar*. But Mallick's memories aren't all fond: "I didn't fit in at the *Globe* at all." In her absolutist style she adds, "I was the only feminist there and that was pretty noticeable."

Absolutist plays well in some circles. *Pearls in Vinegar* editor Diane Turbide of Penguin Group (Canada) says, "What I love is her attitude that the world is going to hell in the proverbial hand basket, but there are these glimmers of light and little incremental changes, and maybe once in a while you can make a difference with something you write." Others are less impressed. "She is an anti-Christian bigot," says Ezra Levant, publisher of the *Western Standard*. "If her targets were Muslims or Jews, she would be roundly denounced as such." Mallick rebuts, "I dislike all religions equally. What matters to me is protecting the underdogs, the victims of religious institutions of massive wealth and power."

Similarly critical of her work is *Globe* columnist Marcus Gee. "She seems to treat Americans as though they are a loathesome species, not just a country whose policies she disagrees with. But

Guardian later issued an apology for misrepresenting Chomsky's views, but Mallick quit a few days later on a matter of principle. She says now of the incident, "Basically, I got hot-headed. I wish I knew how to stay calm more often."

The first time I phoned Mallick she told me she had been out getting drunk the night before with a girlfriend, and so her judgment was impaired. I laughed, recognizing the cynical humour from her columns. But what surprised me was the way she seemed so fragile and even somewhat innocent. It was hard to imagine a deeply sensitive person behind her ballsy writing. But I later realized it's precisely this sensitivity that fuels the passion and outrage. If Mallick has a second trademark, it's sniffing out injustice and exposing it in her columns. As Jim Stanford, an economist with the Canadian Auto Workers and a *Globe* op-ed columnist, notes, "She has quite a deliberate mission to stir the pot and stand up for things."

A perfect example of this was a 2005 "As If" column about her disgust that five Muslim men were jailed for years without charge under secret trial security certificates. "Canada is about to deport them to various countries where they will be tortured, probably unto death," she wrote.

Mallick attended a fundraising event for the families of these men, where she read sections of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* along with other well-known authors, such as Linda McQuaig, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Naomi Klein and Stuart McLean. She was visibly despondent when telling me why she felt it was necessary to write the column: "It is one of the most shameful things Canada has done since interning the

lessly lost, arriving 30 minutes late. There was no hint of superiority, nor was I reprimanded for wasting her time, which is what I was expecting. Instead, when I apologized, she smiled, took a sip of her wine and said, "Don't worry, Shereen, these things happen." Then added, "I think if I spent more time waiting in places this nice I'd be a much calmer person."

Globe television critic John Doyle, a pal of Mallick's, describes her in-person charm this way: "There are few people who are as polite and engaging in conversation with a waiter or waitress as Heather. She has the curiosity of any great journalist and wants to know who people are and draw something out from them." These days, she's been writing a weekly political column for Analysis & Viewpoint on *cbc.ca*, which is often reminiscent in tone and subject matter of "As If."

In September 2006, she began a monthly women's-issues column for *Chatelaine*. A typical entry: the importance of teaching children to houseclean, perhaps motivated by the fact that every Monday she cleans her stepdaughters' apartment. Recently she filled in for Naomi Klein for *The New York Times* Syndicate, writing yet another biweekly political column while Klein finished her latest book. And currently Mallick's promoting her new book of essays, *Cake or Death: The Excruciating Choices of Everyday Life*, released this month (April). Asked to describe it, she says, "It's just me blathering." Explaining both the sensibility of the book and her general outlook, she says, "The worse things are, the happier I am because it matches my world view." But like Mallick herself, there's also sweetness: At the end of the book there is a cake recipe "just to keep things positive." **RRR**