

A veteran poet and short-story author, Itani has published eight books over three decades of writing and, among other accolades, won two CBC Canadian Literary Awards. Her work has been described as “loving and serene,” and – though sometimes criticized for less-than-firm plot development – consistently lauded for its economy, lyricism, and perceptive quality. *Leaning, Leaning Over Water*, a collection of linked stories released by HarperCollins Canada in 1998, marked Itani’s first endeavour with a large publishing house. The effort garnered a great deal of praise from critics across the country, including a rave from the *Toronto Star*.

Her ninth book and first novel, *Deafening*, due this fall from HarperCollins Canada, is already like no first novel this country has ever seen. Rights have been purchased by publishers in 20 countries, including Japan, the U.S., the U.K., Germany, Brazil, Italy, Portugal, France, and Spain. Itani’s American publisher, Grove Atlantic, reportedly paid \$275,000 (U.S.) for American rights, while Britain’s Hodder Stoughton forked over the equivalent of \$500,000 Canadian. Itani’s agent, Jackie Kaiser of Westwood Creative Artists in Toronto, reports that Japanese rights were sold for the highest bid the agency has ever received for that territory. As we sit talking, *Deafening*’s Dutch translation is in production, way across the sea; its release in The Netherlands will coincide with its release in Canada. The book, in short, will propel its author onto the international scene. It will also make the long-toiling Itani – as yet little known outside literary circles – a millionaire.

Which makes the book’s accidental genesis worth pondering.

In 1996, Itani embarked on research for a novel she hoped would honour her late maternal grandmother, Gertie Freeman, who lost her hearing at 18 months (60 years old herself, Itani still calls Freeman “my

I knew I was in for it.”

Itani doesn’t sink when she says this, however. She appears to buoy up under mere thought of the challenge; she visibly rises toward duty, much like the soldiers she has written about. This is natural. Duty – to work, to health, to study, to craft, to awareness, to the singular life and the all-important detail – is what Itani is all about.

According to Kaiser, Itani’s charismatic U.S. publisher, Morgan Entrekin – known for his legendary ability to generate buzz – helped make *Deafening* the undisputed hot title at last year’s Frankfurt Book Fair. But it was undoubtedly the subject matter – and Itani’s handling of it – that also made the book so compelling. *Deafening* presents a unique dual adventure, delving simultaneously into the world of deafness and the horrible carnage (and explosive din) of trench warfare. To write it, Itani became, in effect, the writerly equivalent of a method actor. During six years of exhaustive research, she



made authentic in part by Itani’s long-ago experience as an emergency-room nurse. Meanwhile, Jim’s young wife Grania, who lost her hearing because of scarlet fever at the age of five, struggles through the war years back in Deseronto, Ontario. Grania, whom we have watched learn to navigate a soundless world, provides a biting portrayal of life on the home front: women’s work, women’s waiting, the return of ruined men. Twelve years ago, in reviewing a book of

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visited battlefields all over Europe, pored for an entire summer over journals and letters in the War Museum of Canada’s archives, and devoted several years to studying American Sign Language while volunteering at the Ottawa Deaf Centre and interviewing – repeatedly, over weeks and months – members of the deaf community.

Thus was born Jim, a stretcher-bearer from PEI retrieving the wounded along the dangerous Western Front, bringing to gruesome life a rare front-line perspective, and

short stories by Itani for *New Maritimes* magazine, Alan MacEachern wrote that Itani had “a knack for describing isolation in vivid and memorable terms.” With *Deafening*, Itani has wrung all she can from this talent. It has, if you trust her many, eager new publishers scattered about the globe, resoundingly paid off.

In my Ottawa, Itani has long been a persistent, low-lying presence, known – by everyone in town remotely connected to the

form of a poem on an Ottawa city bus about finding and quickly losing some unnamed understanding:

...Just one small truth  
(which I’ve now forgotten)  
Did I happen to mention what it was?  
Did I say where I was standing?  
What I was doing at the time?

Reading this barrage of questions, I’ve sometimes felt I had better not disembark the #95 until I came up with some answers.

Born in Belleville in 1942, Itani grew up on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, near Ottawa, the middle child of five. She boasts a dual BA (in English and psychology) and an MA in English lit and has worked as a nurse in hospitals across the country. She speaks English, French, German, and some Japanese and Spanish. She hates flying, but grits her teeth and does it. She composes longhand, in scribbles, and travels with a box of Papermate pens (not her favourite, but Pilots tend to leak on flights). She walks three miles a day, capped with 17 minutes of Tai Chi.

Both smarts and determination revealed themselves in Itani early on. Some unofficial home-schooling from older siblings allowed her to advance to Grade 2 upon entering school. Her old friend Jane Anderson – with whom she’s been close since the two met in Grade 6 – remembers her as an outgoing, “brilliant” student and athlete, and an excellent pianist. She recalls how Itani, as an earnest teen, devoted an entire summer to teaching herself to type. “She became quite accomplished,” says Anderson. “How many teenagers would do that? I admired her.” At 21, Itani was a rookie intensive-care nurse at Ottawa’s Civic Hospital. “I loved nursing,” she says. “It’s close contact with human behaviour. How can you not learn a great deal in intimate situations like that?”

Gabriella Goliger, a fiction writer who lives in Ottawa and who studied with Itani several years ago, describes her as intense.