

where her husband, an official with the International Committee of the Red Cross, is based. She relishes describing the various escape plans she devised while living in Croatia during the Bosnian War, one of which involved renting a car and driving due north across the Austrian border. In 1981 she moved with her young family to Germany, not knowing a word of the language at the time. "She's always packed a lot into life," says Anderson. "She's made the most of her time."

Unlike most writers – who wrestle endlessly with the fact that they *must* give into the instinct to write, despite the risk of never producing a thing worthwhile, and the prospect of a lifetime of meagre earnings – Itani took up her profession on what sounds like pure whim. In 1965, after a year of graduate nursing studies at Duke University in North Carolina, she visited a doctor for a physical before coming home. He casually asked Itani what she would do upon returning to Canada. She shocked herself by responding that she would write fiction. "I thought, what have I just said? What has come out of my mouth? I'd never written a word of fiction. I mean, do you think that's strange? That just flew out of me. I can't explain it."

### Frances Itani Bibliography:

#### **Deafening**

HarperCollins Canada, 2003

#### **Leaning, Leaning Over Water**

HarperCollins Canada, 1998  
HarperPerennial edition, 1999

#### **Man Without Face**

Oberon Press, 1994

#### **Truth or Lies**

Oberon Press, 1989

#### **Pack Ice**

Oberon Press, 1989

#### **A Season of Mourning**

Brick Books, 1989

#### **Rentee Bay**

Quarry Press, 1983

#### **Linger By the Sea**

Brunswick Press, 1979

#### **No Other Lodgings**

Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1978

She was soon living in Edmonton, where she enrolled in a writing class offered by W.O. Mitchell. And that was that. Itani – who was also earning a psychology degree and caring for two babies at the time – gave up nursing. "I couldn't do everything," she says with a shrug.

We are talking war, a topic nearly impossible to avoid in the waning days of the latest U.S.-Iraq conflict, and virtually inevitable if you're with Itani, who spent several years immersing herself in first-person accounts from the First World War, and whose husband, Ted, is frequently posted to war-torn locales. She recently returned home from Geneva; the day she left, Ted was on his way to a memorial service for a colleague who had been caught in the crossfire in Baghdad. On the plane, in

a letter to her publisher, Itani wrote, "War flattens me. Some days I can hardly put pen to paper."

She immerses herself in it nonetheless. While in Geneva she was tentatively delving into her new novel – called, she says laughing, *Celebration*. "I was trying to work on it, but I always had the news on Iraq on in the background. I have to know what's going on." And though the book strikes "an entirely different tone" from *Deafening*, it spans four generations over 100 years; thus it, too, encounters war. "You can't reminisce about the past without covering the wars," says Itani. "You can't say, oh, well, I'll just live my Pollyanna life here and write about other things."

For Itani, writing about people during wartime is, in large measure, the same as writing about a deaf protagonist – or about anyone: an exercise in honouring individual struggle, its every pertinent detail. It's also – as war was for the young soldiers who signed up long ago – an adventure. In the book club reader's guide to her last book, Itani declared that the maxim "write what you know," would never work for her. "I have always gone after what I don't know. Areas that are a complete blank for me. I've always wanted to ride that edge of discovery."

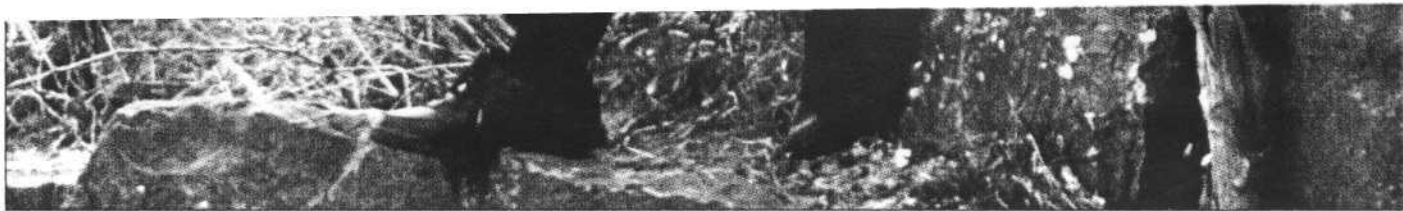
It wasn't enough, therefore, for Itani to have grown up with a deaf grandmother among a large, extended family of expert lip readers; nor to have vivid memories of

travelling by train with her mother and grandmother, the two mouthing silent conversations in the seats next to her; nor to remember that the vibration from the stomp of a foot on the floor could get the attention of her deaf grandmother. No. To write *Deafening*, Itani first had to spend several years immersing herself in the world of deaf people; she had to do time. Itani now joins sign-language conversations wherever she happens upon them: She has earned for herself an alternate angle on life. Her publisher has already received a letter from a deaf reader, asking, "Who is this Frances Itani? She seems to know an awful lot about us."

Itani straightens in her seat, pleased with this first bit of testimony that she "got it right." She brings a picture of her Granny out from her wallet and lays it on the table; a regal, bright-eyed woman looks up at us. "Look at her? Isn't she something?"

Itani wants to do justice to the woman who left her believing, growing up, that "being deaf was a wonder, a marvel." She keeps the seminal quote from Willy Loman's wife in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* on a piece of cardboard on her desk: "Attention must be paid." Clearly, getting it right is nothing more than a job well done, and nothing less than all that matters. Duty executed as duty ought to be: with diligence, and with care.

ANITA LAHEY is a freelance writer in Ottawa and a *Q&Q* contributing editor.



The maxim "write what you know" has never worked for Itani. "I've always gone after what I don't know," says the Ottawa writer. "I've always wanted to ride that edge of discovery."

IVOR J. EVANS