

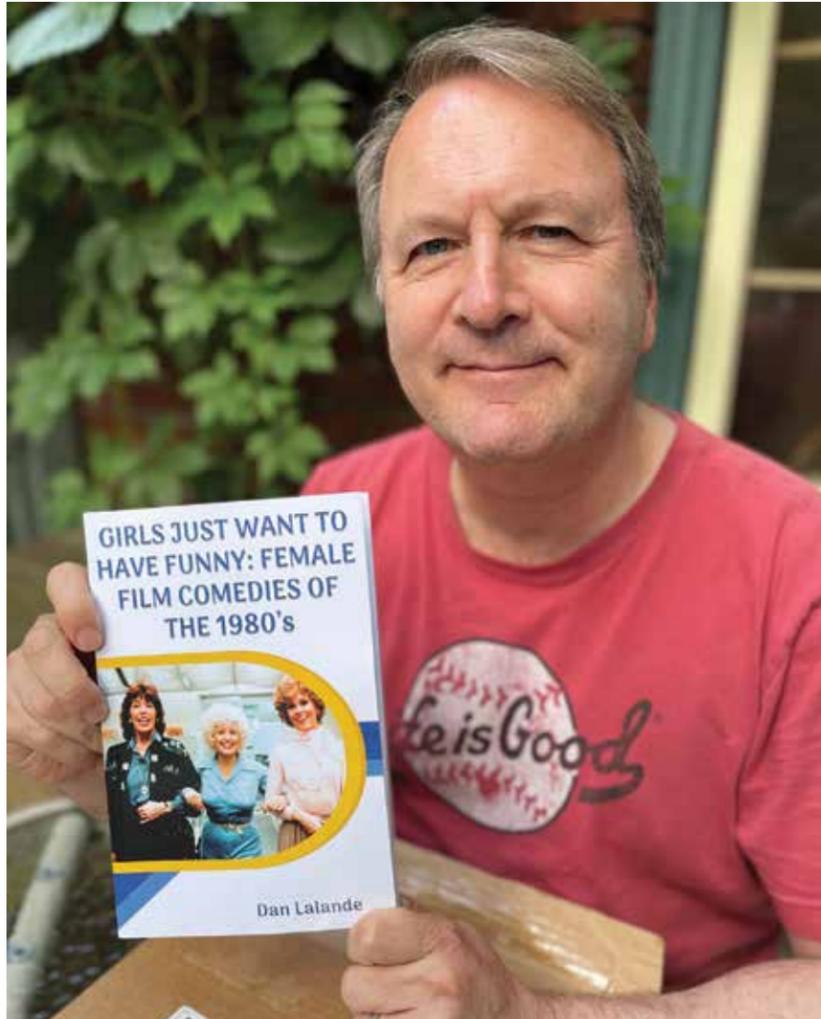
## THIS CREATIVE LIFE

Dan Lalande

“I fell in love with the challenges and rewards of public expression at an early age.”

By Nadine Dawson

Does this happen to you? You're bumping along the road, doing this and that, and when you chance to look up, you discover before you a Life Landscape so perfectly suited to your talents and desires that with one easy step you arrive where you were meant to be. Okay, maybe you've been here all along, in this place of serendipity, only now you see clearly how the disparate details of your life are coalesced into this wholeness of being and doing, and you have this deep sense of belonging to yourself, and in the world. When I met with writer, Dan Lalande, I had the strong impression that his life's work has brought him to just such a place of creative elegance. Certainly, talking to him felt like one to me.



Dan Lalande, author of a number of books including the recently published *Girls Just Want to Have Funny: Female Film Comedies of the 1980's*.  
PHOTO BY NANCY HUGGETT

**What does creativity mean to you?**

Both my answers start with “P”: passion and processing. I fell in love

with the challenges and rewards of public expression at an early age. My first talent was visual art. After I started making my own comic strips, I found that the grown-ups were more impressed with my dialogue than my drawing – so I switched. Since coming of age, I've written as a way of processing experience, from life's quotidian mysteries to its elusive big questions. I do it through short fiction, cultural criticism (my preferred form these days), and autobiographical vehicles like memoirs and my daily diary (which I've kept for 30 years). It's my only avenue to perspective, to a point of view that allows me to live in relative peace. Otherwise, I'd walk around as baffled as Alice in Wonderland.

**What propels you to live a creative life?**

Most artists come from dysfunction: troubled parents who couldn't give us their full attention, making our lives a lifelong plea of “Look at me – anybody!!!” I'm definitely a product of that. Some of us end up in therapy, at which point we either get out of the business or come to realize, if we decide to stay in, that there's actually a healthier reason why we do what we do: love of play. As a kid, I couldn't get enough of enacting scenarios with my stuffies, puppets, and plastic figures. At 63, I'm still at it, only the “toys” are characters of my own invention or those created by others, on which, as a cultural historian and critic, I impose my own contribution.

**What are you most proud of?**

Foremost, survival. I've had

my share of challenges and have weathered them all (so far!)... Also, making a (fairly) consistent living as an artist in Ottawa – not easy in a mid-sized market... Another point of pride is my marriage: 40 years and still going strong. Try finding another Gemini-Virgo combo that can say that!... And last but definitely not least, co-raising my daughter Jessie, now 35, who has a variety of special needs and ongoing challenges. I was the LEAST qualified person on the planet for that task, but I think I'm a pretty good father.

**How did you come to your writing?**

I started writing in earnest at 15. My first love was the movies – it was the 70's; great stuff was being made – so I tried my hand at screenplays. They were, predictably, thin and derivative, the works of a sheltered teenager trying to second-guess adult life. But they helped me to understand the form. At the time, there were no DIY books on how to do it nor, of course, anything like the internet. I was part of the last generation to learn that craft the hard way: by figuring it out for yourself.

**What obstacles did you face?**

Steve Martin (I have a book coming out about him) once said, “Comedy is not pretty – you spend a lot of time asking yourself, ‘Why aren't I funnier?!’” Writing is the same: “Why aren't I better?!” Its challenges, no matter the form, include clarity, fluidity, and likeability – you want readers to keep looking forward to your work, like they're about to have lunch with a smart, witty friend they only get to see now and again.

**How did you overcome them?**

There are two basics to writing well: One, study like mad. Any time you read anything, make sure your critical eye is switched to “On.” Two, write till your fingertips are pleading you to stop. I'm not exaggerating when I say I went through a period when I put in 16-hour days. About a year after that experience, I found myself bursting into tears almost weekly for no discernible reason. I finally realized that it was all of the residual anxiety from all of that writing flowing out of me like a factory-recalled garden hose.

**Where does your inspiration come from?**

These days, I write books about film – so, obviously, films! As a practicing nostalgist, it's usually ones from my formative days. Part of me feels that I'm shortchanging myself; it's a sycophantic act after all, in which you're writing about the works of others. It's like sports analysts: Great as some of them are, you won't find one who wouldn't



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rather be a player. Often, I have to remind myself that if a critical essay or a review has something unique to contribute and is well-written to boot, it's a work of originality in its own right.

### What does your daily creative practice look like?

My life these days is perfectly bifurcated: Half of it belongs to my writing, the other to my daughter. I'm at the keyboard at 5:30 am. I write for three hours, at which point my daughter, Jessie, wakes up. I help her prep for her day, then, depending on her schedule, go at it again for

another three and spend the rest of the day in her company or declare it a "Daddy-Jessie Day," as we call them, and put any additional writing off till the next day. Being a Gemini, I find the split very comfortable.

### Who are your greatest influences?

Everybody wants to know an artist's influences because it helps the interviewer frame the artist's work better. But hero worship is a young person's game. At some point, you come into your own and stop living in shadows.

### What do you dream of doing?

My ancillary ambitions have been curtailed by some physical misfortunes. I'm a huge jazz fan

and have always wanted to play the saxophone. No sooner had I started than I developed tinnitus, that incurable condition where it sounds like you've rented out your head to bees. I've learned to live with it, but it's keeping me from jamming with Sonny Rollins (who I know is as frustrated as I am). It also curtails my cultural life: no rock festivals or sports events for me. It's folk music and Harold Pinter plays only! That said, as a lifelong baseball fan, I do chance the odd ball game, with earplugs. In fact, I only have eight more stadiums to go in my lifelong quest to attend all 30 Major League ballparks (note to Major League Baseball: no expansion – please!)

### What motto do you live by?

In my screenwriting days – I authored five independent features, which were official selections at festivals in Palm Springs, Toronto, and Montreal – I wrote (and co-starred; I used to act) in a serio-comedy with Buddhist grace notes called *House of Luk*. I was later in charge of coming up with a tagline for the poster, which I wish had come to me earlier so I could have put it into the movie: "Life is like a fortune cookie – it has to come apart before you get the message."

### What is your superpower?

I'm self-disciplined, insightful,

witty, and humane. Swipe right, ladies!

### What advice would you give someone interested in developing their creative talents?

Go over the following checklist: How durable is your passion to create? How solid is your work ethic? How good are you at receiving criticism? How much of life's basic needs are you willing to risk? How do you handle self-doubt, self-pity, and all of those other nasty "selves"? None of these questions are offered to put anybody off from honouring their talents. A true artist must! But a nascent one needs to know the degree of danger that's involved. That said, the rewards are great: Your hours are your own, you meet colourful people, you get periodic ego strokes, and best of all...you get to make cool shit!

To find out more about Lalande's work, or to dip into one of his books about the films you love, visit his website at: danlalande.com.

*Nadine Dawson is an artist of fickle loyalties who lives in Old Ottawa South. She is the almost completely unknown author of Lavender, Longing, Love; A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Memoir, as well as the facilitator of the column: This Creative Life.*

## Old Ottawa South Artist "FUSSY"



By Dinos Dafniotis

Michael "FUSSY" Lavergne began drawing at the age of 15. Mostly portraits and wildlife. His artistic talent led to a high school placement at the Ottawa School of Art which inspired him to further studies there. Art History, drawing, painting, printmaking, photography and sculpture.

Unfortunately, life turned for Michael in his late teens. As he struggled with addictions, he abandoned his art for many years. Rediscovering his love of art helped with that struggle. He finds solace with paint, brushes, canvas and imagination.

Artists like Picasso inspired him

but his art is now tied to creating "art from your mind and inventing abstract characters that you couldn't see in a photograph."

Though mostly a closet artist, FUSSY – his artist pseudonym – has displayed and sold his work at a few art shows. He hopes more people will have an opportunity to see his art.

FUSSY will display and sell his art at this year's Old Ottawa South Porch Sale on Saturday, September 6 at 111 Grove Ave. between 8 am – 3 pm.

*Dinos Dafniotis worked for the City of Ottawa as Program Coordinator at the Firehall for many years.*

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