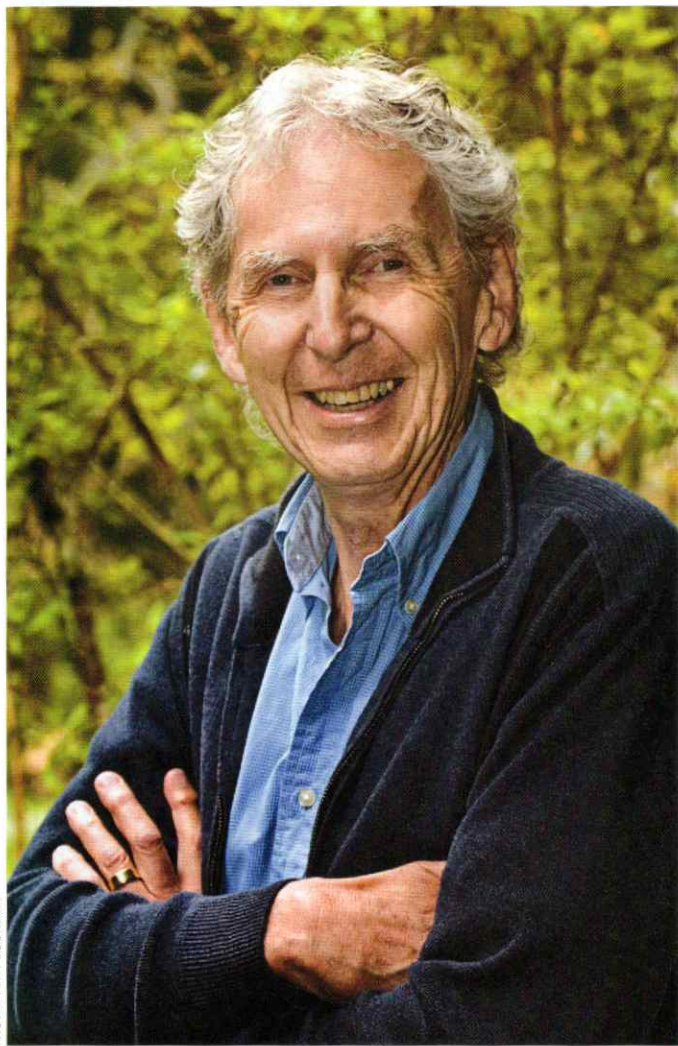


No endings at all

AMY REISWIG

Jack Hodgins' latest novel explores ageing and how it's never too late to take new risks.



Jack Hodgins

We have all been taught not to judge a book by its cover. But in the case of Jack Hodgins' *The Master of Happy Endings*, it is actually an apt introduction to one of the book's major ideas. For the jacket presents you with the title, in bold yellow on red, and then together in their own black circle "Jack Hodgins A Novel," as if the author is the real read here. This strange arrangement reminds us that the real story, the true epic, is on the inside of each one of us.

Raised in rural Merville in the Comox Valley and now living in Cadboro Bay, Hodgins is indeed a man of epic creativity, having published 14 books—including novels, a writing guide, travel, and children's literature—as well as stories and articles in a long list of periodicals. As a writer and former English teacher, Hodgins' honours and awards read like the roll call of victories in heroic sagas: the Governor General's Award, Commonwealth Writers Prize, Lieutenant Governor's Award for Literary Excellence, Canada-Australia Prize, and Terasen Lifetime

Achievement Award. He is a member of the Royal Society of Canada and the Order of Canada, has been awarded several honorary degrees, and has a literary award and TV character (in the popular series *Bones*) named after him.

This year *The Master of Happy Endings* (Thomas Allen, 2010) has garnered more accolades, both local and international, as it was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize (BC Book Prizes) and *Monday Magazine's* M award for favourite fiction book by a Victoria writer.

Hodgins, exuberant and looking very easy-going in a blue shirt that matches his kind eyes, is slightly incredulous about and grateful for all his literary success, especially since he feels this most recent book is based on two very risky propositions. "I'm writing about small places on the west coast—that's risky. How many people are interested in that?" he wonders over coffee at Moka House in Cook Street Village. "And this story's also about an old man—that's risk number two." But risk, as the book explores, is essential to life, and danger is one of our best self-testing grounds.

The "master" of the book's title is 77-year-old Axel Thorstad, a widower and retired English teacher living on the small (and fictitious) Estevan Island. Again suggesting the epic of the individual, Thorstad is not only named but framed to conjure the realm of myth: he is described as "taller than everyone else and fiercely unbent," "a figure descended from Norwegian giants" and "a lank Goliath wading through the underbrush."

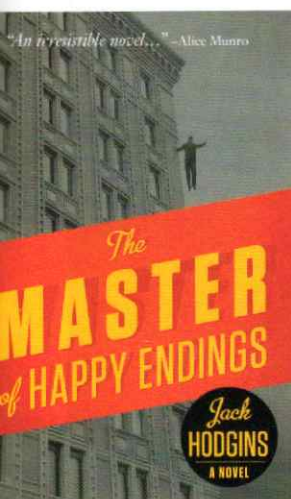
Like many mythological figures, Thorstad finds himself in exile from the world after a life of battle—in his case, battle in the high school classroom, where he was determined to help students reach their hopefully "happy endings." But Thorstad's life of peaceful retirement proves to be a danger internally, and he reflects on "the dangerous isolation of this place" where he grapples with the very palpable absence of his wife and the perpetual mystery of the death of his Hollywood stunt-double father just before Thorstad was born.

An aged man afraid of his own ageing, Thorstad therefore takes one last big risk: he puts what he calls an adoption request in the newspaper, advertising tutoring in exchange for living with a family back in "the world." The epistolary responses he receives are both hilarious and heartbreaking, and every envelope is a potential source of danger—threatening his peace of mind and faith in happy endings. He hears from former students, strangers, people looking for kinds of help he both can and cannot give.

"These letters are dangerous but also an impetus to creativity," Hodgins tells me, "an antidote to complacency, to thinking that everyone's life is the way we imagine it." And that includes Thorstad's own. For Hodgins believes that no matter our age, we are never done learning about ourselves. "You forget about your age," Hodgins says of his own experience: "Living other people's lives"—whether through creating fictional characters or through Thorstad's kind of commitment to helping others—"keeps you young...that is, if it doesn't wear you out," he laughs.

Eventually, Thorstad accepts an invitation from a rich couple in Victoria and the exile returns, but to a world "much changed since he'd

6th Annual Teeny Tiny Garden Tour



said good-bye to civilization." What follows is the story of Thorstad's relationship with the couple's teenaged actor son and a trip to the uber-urban world of L.A., "a city as magical as it was dangerous," where Thorstad confronts not only

the speed and greed of the present world but his own past—and future.

Torn between movement and stillness, involvement and retreat, Thorstad's push and pull with environments and people are his ways of working out his inner orientation, and Hodgins shows that there is no need to rest at one pole or the other, no need to choose between them. "Life is fluid and shifting," he says, "and we have to be open to the opportunities we never expected"—a view Hodgins himself continues to live by, as he is currently participating in a collaborative novel experiment with Unlimited Editions as well as in a project he wouldn't talk about, except to say that it involves music.

An optimist, Hodgins believes (and notes that it's one of the title's ironies) that there are no such things as endings. Certainly there seems no end in sight to Hodgins' career, enthusiasm or willingness to take risks. This freedom from endings is because everything—even a person, through their spirit or their ideas—is ultimately transferred and carried on in the heads and hearts of others. As Hodgins explains with a characteristic infectious, genuine grin over the din of a coffee grinder, "the real world is what's inside."



In honour of the fluid and shifting nature of life and, these days, government, writer and editor Amy Reiswig is learning to embrace the fluxus quo.



Garden #7 showcases a number of sculptures by homeowner Ron Carter.

Whether it's a Zen-inspired urban meditation garden with a display by the Victoria Bonsai Society, a Japanese-style garden retreat, or a collector's garden packed with plants from as far away as Tasmania, this year's Teeny Tiny Garden Tour is sure to offer something to please.

The Sixth Annual Teeny Tiny Garden Tour takes place on Sunday, June 12 from 9:30 am to 5:00 pm. Proving how wonderful things in tiny packages can make a big impact on the lives of others, the owners of 13 miniature masterpieces will open their garden gates to the public in support of the Victoria Hospice. Attendees will also be able to visit Victoria Hospice's own special garden located atop the roof of the Richmond Pavilion at Royal Jubilee Hospital.

"All the gardens this year are truly amazing, and we thank all the homeowners who have generously offered to share their beautiful gardens to help raise funds for our end of life services," says Corporate and Community Relations Officer Pam Prewett, adding that community support helps to fund almost 50 percent of the annual operating costs for Hospice's specialized services.

"The rooftop garden is a peaceful spot with trees, flowers, benches, water features and a spectacular view," says Prewett. "The gardeners are all volunteers, and they have created a beautiful space for patients and families to enjoy and find serenity. It's fully accessible, too—we can even accommodate beds."

Susan Henderson and Ron Carter, owners of Garden #7 where a Master Gardener will be on hand during the tour, emphasize the importance of supporting Victoria Hospice. "We all face challenges in accepting and supporting the end of life for ourselves and our loved ones," says Susan. "Victoria Hospice provides a

compassionate range of services and counselling which cannot be overvalued."

Susan and Ron say they were new to gardening when they tackled the transformation of their 30x30-foot shade garden ten years ago. Ron, a painter and concrete sculptor, designed gravel paths that flow around a tear-shaped garden bed in the centre, placing his sculptures "as the primary focus of our 'walk around.'" Packed with hostas, ferns, calla lilies and dozens of trees and shrubs, Susan says the garden's "intimate scale means that you're never very far away from any one part of your garden, so you always feel connected to the growth and cycle of the seasons."

If you have or know of an exceptional garden of petite proportions, Prewett says she and the volunteer organizers are always on the lookout for Teeny Tiny Gardens to feature in future tours. "In the past, we've featured the gardens of townhouses, Victoria's narrowest house, and floating homes," says Prewett.

Taking part in the Teeny Tiny Garden Tour allows you a rare glimpse into Victoria's smallest backyard gems, while supporting Hospice's compassionate programs for patients and their loved ones. "It's important to have a model of care that shows that death need not be feared," says Susan. "Using the garden metaphor that is so apt: 'To everything there is a season...'"

Tickets are \$25 and on sale at: Dig This stores (560 Johnson St, 1990 Oak Bay Ave, Broadmead Village Shopping Centre, 2387 Beacon Ave, Sidney); The Victoria Hospice Thrift Boutique (1315 Cook St, near Yates); and All Thrifty Foods locations.

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Give online at www.VictoriaHospice.org