

# An excerpt from **PRECIOUS CARGO** by **CRAIG DAVIDSON**

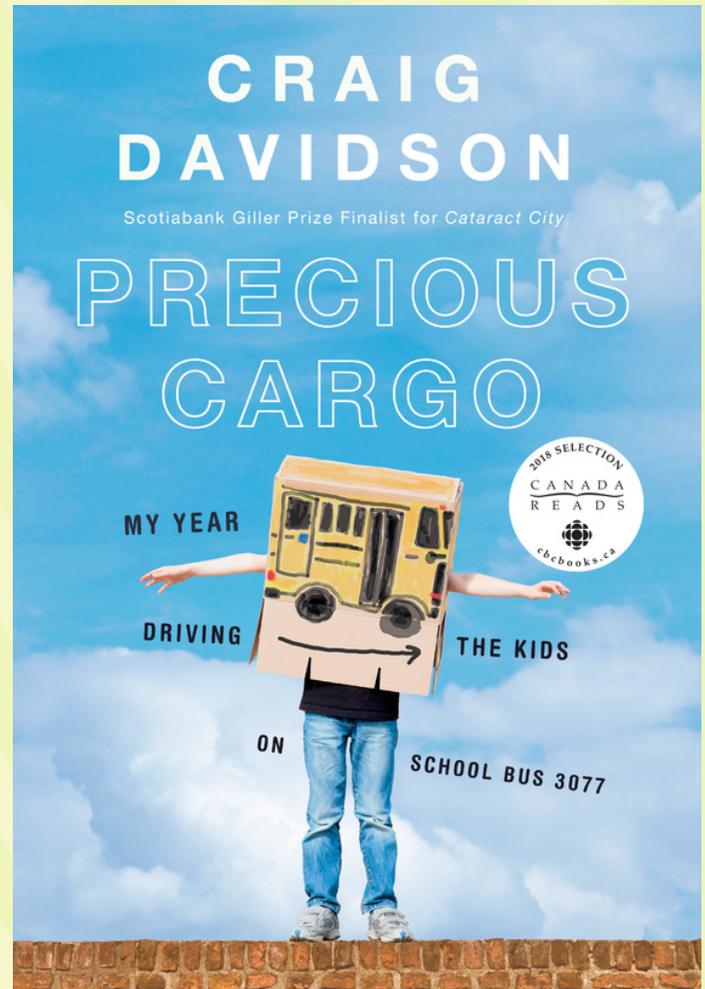
Over and over, I'd hear the kids' stories. Repeated, embellished, glossed, the same terrain covered and re-covered until a well-worn path had been carved. I could recite them from memory. I knew when the moments of high drama would arrive, and knew my own role—when to respond with an appropriately encouraging *oooh* or *aaah*. But I never got bored of those tales. They were like a book or film for which you had a long fondness; you'd take it down off the shelf or pop it in the VHS player (Jake was right—I *was* old!) and read a few pages or watch a few minutes, and unfailingly, it fills you with deep satisfaction. They were a safety blanket of sorts to the kids, and that's what they became to me, too. I felt snug and happy within the parameters of their tales.

*We tell ourselves stories in order to live.* Another, wiser writer said that. But after hearing these kids' stories, I was left thinking: do we not also tell stories to live vicariously in ways we cannot?

Nadja's tales of never-ending dinner parties were those of a young girl who lived in a modest condominium complex and yearned for a taste of the glamour glimpsed in the fashion magazines she toted in her Hannah Montana backpack.

Or consider Oliver's best friend Joey: erstwhile protector, he-man, namer of biceps. Not a boy with a condition typified by low muscle tone, a boy who crouched in the bus to avoid the attention of neighbourhood bullies.

Vincent's heroes were blessed with superior intellects and chiselled musculatures. None were awkward, hormonal teenagers with cumbersome physiques.



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Jake's hero—who could move objects with the power of his exceptional mind—was breathed into life by a boy trapped inside his own diminishing body.

Were these fictional characters or polar selves?

I am no different. I've never written myself—my true self—into one of my novels. I may have pillaged aspects of my existence—moments of fleeting grace, snapshots from the past—but who wants to read about a red-haired schlub whose life has been comparatively uneventful and privileged? So I write about characters struggling to surmount circumstances I've never faced, calling upon a strain of willpower and inner strength I have never possessed, not for one minute.

We all want a bigger life, don't we? Even those who've scaled mountain peaks must dream of ascending to the clouds when they close their eyes to sleep. The inability to find complete satisfaction is woven to the heart of the human condition. We all feel it—that witching hour thought: Isn't there more than this? In fiction, we can vicariously achieve everything that eludes us. (PAUSE HERE) Attain a heightened nobility. Be our best selves: best friend, best partner, best parent. We can put our proximal selves in the service of some grand Good, sling-shotting ourselves into wondrous adventures where we always do the right thing, show the courage we can't always display in life, kiss the boy or girl of our dreams and live happily ever after.

That is why such narratives never go out of style—because if you do it just right, others will want to live in the world you've created. They want to breathe outside of themselves for a while before returning to the real world, where the intensities are muted and dreams don't always come true.

Jake and the other kids conjured new lives into existence every day—any life they wished. They had already discovered something it takes some

storytellers half a lifetime to figure out: tell the stories that lie nearest to your heart. That way, they're not really fabrications at all. They're hopeful truths.