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## Brownstein: Leonard Cohen's life holds lessons for Westmount High students

*“He became a writer because he didn’t have a choice,” Cohen expert Christophe Lebold tells students as he gives a crash course on their school’s legendary alumnus.*

Bill Brownstein • Montreal Gazette

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Christophe Lebold, a professor of literature, performance studies and rock culture from Strasbourg, France, has just released Leonard Cohen: The Man Who Saw the Angels Fall, a 543-page compendium that takes a deep metaphysical dive into the late Montrealer’s world. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Christophe Lebold has come to Westmount High School, not to discuss [U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris’s](#) run for the Oval Office with students, but rather to ruminate about the school’s other most famed alumnus, [Leonard Cohen](#).

In another era, this would have been an English lit lesson. On this day, it is a history lesson.

Gathered in the school’s library on Wednesday are senior students, along with younger ones from Roslyn Elementary School, from which Cohen also graduated. The singer/poet’s name certainly resonates with students, yet few are at all familiar with his music or writings.

“That’s cool,” a smiling Lebold says after only a handful of students raise their hands to acknowledge they know at least something about Cohen. They are all about to learn plenty in the following hour.

Lebold, a professor of literature, performance studies and rock culture from Strasbourg, France, has just released the anglo opus [Leonard Cohen: The Man Who Saw the Angels Fall](#), an intriguing, massive, 543-page compendium that takes a deep metaphysical dive into the late Montrealer’s world. Among a host of other mystical subjects and pursuits, Lebold touches deftly and lyrically on Cohen’s obsession with falling and rising angels, pilgrims, avalanches and alchemy.

Lebold put in two decades of research chronicling Cohen’s odyssey from Montreal to New York to the [Greek island of Hydra](#) to Los Angeles. He even earned a PhD on [Cohen, who died in 2016](#).

Few know more about Cohen than Lebold. But no literary snoot is he. His goal in addressing the students is not to ramble in ivory-tower discourse, but to enlighten them on the magic of the man, with whom they share at least some roots. And he succeeds.

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Author Christophe Lebold talks with students about the life and work of Leonard Cohen at Westmount High School, the late Montrealer’s alma mater, on Wednesday October 30, 2024. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

In a discussion moderated by yours truly — much farther down the list of learned Westmount High School grads — the students appear awestruck as Lebold takes them on a Cohen voyage of sorts. They can relate when he tells them it was Cohen’s music that first turned Lebold on to the icon.

“When I was about 15 — your age — and beginning to learn English, my father took out from his collection two Cohen albums that he had bought for me in the year I was born,” says Lebold, 50. “Discovering those songs, I felt a calling. At first I was seduced by the melodies and the way he played the guitar. And then I listened to the lyrics and the poetry in them was really moving me, about people waiting for salvation.

“I thought, this is really speaking to me — this was a genius. I stumbled on to a realistic poet at last, and then I discovered the rest of his work, including his novels, which I loved.

“Still, at 15 I had no idea that one day I’d ever be writing about him, let alone that I would ever be eating cheeseburgers and talking Hamlet with him in L.A.”

In university, Lebold had to decide between devoting his postgraduate work to specializing in Shakespeare or Cohen.

“It was a close call. I loved both of them. But there was so much that had been written about Shakespeare and not many were writing about Leonard Cohen. So I decided I would write about this Canadian with the black raincoat and deep voice. This then became my PhD and this book, which I see as a kind of mapping of his imagination.”

Lebold goes on to note that Cohen was a superstar in France, whose name was uttered in the same breath as literary lions like Rimbaud and Sartre.

“People remember back in the ‘70s when he performed at the Olympia in Paris and he received 18 ovations. Fans wouldn’t let him leave the concert until 3 in the morning.”

That’s something even young Swifties can comprehend and respect.

“I think because of Montreal, he really liked French culture. In our relationship, he liked the fact that I was a French guy writing about him.”

Lebold completed his PhD on Cohen in 2005, and the two finally hooked up in Los Angeles toward the end of Cohen’s life.

Lebold had sent him the PhD, written in French, and was surprised when Cohen responded favourably to it. They then began emailing one another for a few years, which gradually developed into a friendship. This led to their meeting in L.A., and Cohen allowing Lebold to immerse himself in the singer/poet’s archives.



Leonard Cohen visits Paris in 2012. He was a superstar in France, notes Cohen expert Christophe Lebold. PHOTO BY JOEL SAGET /AFP/Getty Images

Lebold tells inquiring student Laura Jined that in one email Cohen told him they would have a drink together.

“I was so shocked that he answered me at all, but that drink together did happen — only eight years later,” Lebold recalls.

Student Addison Quinn asks Lebold what kind of person Cohen was.

“He was among the nicest people I ever met, and this was after he came back from a five-year tour and having played over 300 concerts around the world,” Lebold answers. “He was such a lovely man: humble, gracious, intelligent, sharp-witted — a really beautiful person. He seemed as interested in me as I was in him.

“He became a writer because he didn’t have a choice. When he was nine, his father died and he wrote a poem for him. He put that poem in one of his father’s bow ties and buried it in the garden. He later said that he had spent the rest of his life digging up the garden to find that poem again. And so he became a poet. In his case, writing was his way to fight demons. But he was really a literary alchemist turning his depression into joy and light.”

Student Arma Sattari is curious to know just how Cohen was able to transform dark depression into “something white and shiny.”

“He was influenced by an 18th-century Ukrainian rabbi who was interested in depression, a place where you realize you’re broken and where you go to fix it,” Lebold responds. “Cohen wrote in one song that there is a crack in everything

The last time Lebold saw Cohen was 10 months before he died. And the last email Lebold received from Cohen came three weeks before his death.

“He was joking about what was coming for him. But he wasn’t afraid. He was strong. He was in a better place. He was really emanating love.”

Class is over. Students seem genuinely moved. Many will check out Cohen’s music and writings. Some may even take to a keyboard to express their feelings.

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