



# Peter Behrens

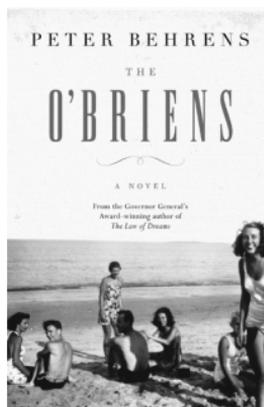
reading from  
*The O'Briens*

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Friday, 20 April, 7 pm  
Ganong Hall Lecture Theatre

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Peter Behrens' debut novel, *The Law of Dreams* (2006), won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, a Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and several other awards. He is the author as well of the short story collection *Night Driving*. His essays and fiction appear in the *National Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Saturday Night*, and other journals. In this new novel, Behrens, who was born in Montreal and lives on the Maine coast, picks up the story of the O'Brien family that he began in *The Law of Dreams*.



Peter Behrens' national saga *The O'Briens* embraces two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, four generations of the eponymous family, and two world wars. The novel's east-to-west, north-to-south sweep of the North American continent barely contains the ambitions of its central character, Joe O'Brien. At the outset of the novel, Joe is one of five children, the eldest, in the hardscrabble household of Ellenora O'Brien, a woman abandoned in the Quebec bush by her wanderlust-afflicted husband, who has gone off to the Boer War. A teenaged boy of "rough beauty" and "ferocious drive," Joe uses the money he makes selling firewood door-to-door to lease timber rights, increasing the acreage each year, and experiencing the enterprise as if it were a "half-broke horse," the management of which is thrilling to him. When his mother dies, Joe settles his two sisters at the Visitation Convent in Ottawa and accompanies his brother Tom to New York where Tom begins his novitiate for the priesthood. Heading west to the Selkirk Mountains, Joe assembles men, money, and machinery and becomes a railroad contractor, iron-stamping the country with his fierce personality. In this epic-scaled novel, Behrens catches exactly not only the energy and vision of empire-builders like Joe O'Brien, but also the vulnerability and fear that drives them. In Venice, California, visiting his brother Grattan, a discontented realtor, Joe meets the woman who becomes his wife. Boston-bred, stifled by her family, and deeply affected by her father's suicide, Iseult Wilkins is a woman in search of "clarity and calm" and "her own purpose." Equally driven, their differences in personality – "He was dark, Iseult was light" – emerge in the decades that follow, decades that include, after the railroad boom, a prosperous life in Montreal, the births of their three children, a house in Westmount, another house in Santa Barbara. Nonetheless, every now and then, Joe disappears, travelling to New York where, alone in a hotel room, he drinks himself through "the feeling of not belonging anywhere." Nor is Joe at home with his brother Grattan, hero of World War I, whose impractical streak Joe attempts to manage, as he does most everyone. The tensions between brother and brother seep into the next generation, manifest especially in the relationship between Joe and his son Mike who, in personality, is akin to Grattan not Joe. Mike's plan to head off to Europe in 1939 to be a fighter pilot reduces his father to inarticulate violence. Decades later, as the novel draws to its gentled and elegant conclusion – in a yawl off the coast of Cape Breton – the reader, like Joe, can look back on a country, and a century, shaped in part by a formidable and flawed man who was as often at war with himself as with others.

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"Behrens is capable of dazzling shifts from exterior to interior; all his characters negotiate the 'sharp, hard edge of joy' of being acutely, painfully alive."  
National Post