

DIGGING IN

Who Dunnit?

How Katie Daubs used archival documents and photographs in an attempt to solve a 100-year-old mystery

BY URBI KHAN

ON A COLD DECEMBER NIGHT in 1919, millionaire theatre magnate Ambrose Small went missing. He was last seen at the Grand Opera House—which he owned—by Edward Flock, a lawyer who was helping him to close a deal to sell his theatre holdings, rumoured to be worth \$1.75 million. Flock left Small at his office at 5:30 p.m. on December 2. At first, his disappearance wasn't a cause for alarm—Small had worked his way up from a downtrodden life, and tended to go off the radar occasionally. But when Christmas came and there was still no sign of Small, his wife and business partners began to worry. As the days and months went by, the public increasingly began to wonder how a man of Small's stature could vanish without a trace.

Reporter Katie Daubs first stumbled upon the story of Ambrose Small in 2012 while she was researching an assignment on the PATH, a network of pedestrian tunnels in Toronto that connects office towers in the downtown core. Daubs had always been interested in Toronto's history, and she was particularly fascinated with stories related to Toronto's underground and the street-level neighbourhoods above it. Someone told her she should look into the story of Ambrose Small—his Grand Opera House used to stand in the Financial District, just above the PATH, where the Scotia Plaza is today, and a fictionalized version of Small was included in Michael Ondaatje's *In The Skin of a Lion*.

Daubs' reporting on the PATH was akin to a graphic novel, rather than a written story, as it visually represented the underground network. In the end, though, the near-mythical story of Ambrose Small proved too complex to be included. However, she continued her research on

Small, eventually landing a book deal with McClelland & Stewart in 2017. The 100-year anniversary of Small's disappearance would occur in 2019—a perfect time to launch the story of what happened to him.

WHEN DAUBS DECIDED to write about Ambrose Small, she wanted to be more rigorous and factual with her research than previous books written about him, which had relied on myth and legend. If she was going to write Small's story, she wanted to present readers with a proper paper trail so they could evaluate the mystery presented to them.

So, she headed to the archives. She was looking for everything from birth, marriage, and death certificates, to contemporaneous newspaper accounts and the weather forecasts for particular days from the 1910s, which Small would have experienced. "It takes a long time to find a gem in the archives," says Daubs. "But it's worth it when you find what you're looking for."

At the Ontario Archives, she unearthed a trail that led her to court cases from the Attorney General's office; eventually, she got a hold of an Ontario Provincial Police investigation file from 1936. In that same year, the publisher of a local tabloid newspaper had claimed to possess a confession about Small's murder, but it was quickly found to be a forgery. Nevertheless, the documents from the case were crucial, as they contained notes from the Toronto police dating back to 1919.

Daubs also filed freedom of informa-

tion requests for documents that hadn't been made available in the archives. Unfortunately, some boxes arrived with missing records. In one instance, Daubs received a file on a 1924 civil court case, which detailed the fight between Small's wife and sisters over his estate. When Daubs opened what could have been an envelope containing tantalizing clues, it was empty.

Luckily, newspapers had covered the case thoroughly. The *Toronto Star*, for example, ran full court transcripts. Daubs used microfilm at the Toronto Reference Library to access records from the *Toronto Telegram* and *Toronto World*, and she retrieved letters from Small's mistress Clara Smith through the *Toronto Star Weekly*. These letters portrayed Small as an elusive character.

Daubs also relied on city directories to bring Small's story to life. She stood on Toronto street corners, mapping the route Small regularly took into Rosedale on the Church streetcar line—and the alternative Yonge Street route he took the night he dis-

"I looked at pictures and I could see what the artwork was like. I had a real sense of it. It was time to build something by researching these places"

—Katie Daubs

appeared. She even went through obituaries and cold-called people who shared his last name, trying to find a descendent of the Small family.

Every new tidbit of information Daubs collected bolstered her portrait of Small. To keep organized, she uploaded physical research, like birth and death certificates, to Evernote, a notetaking and archiving app, where she sorted everything with tags. Alongside her trove of documents, Daubs



used archival photos to visualize the world Ambrose Small came from.

“I would picture the City Hall bustling with all these different departments, city police, city work, police offices,” says Daubs. “I looked at pictures and I could see what the artwork was like. I had a real sense of it. It was time to build something by researching these places.”

“As a journalist, when you cover something, observation is the most important tool that you have,” she continues. “When you’re going back a hundred years, I really felt like I had to do my homework.”

After nearly three years, Daubs’ research

paid off in the form of a book: *The Missing Millionaire: The True Story of Ambrose Small and the City Obsessed with Finding Him*. By the end of the process, Daubs could almost picture Small. “I could see him laughing at me, thinking I am running a fool’s errand,” she says.

While *The Missing Millionaire* provides a critically acclaimed portrait of Small and old Toronto, Daubs says we may never know exactly what happened, as Small’s body was never found. Still, she holds out hope that an enterprising reader, presented with the records and evidence she’s unearthed, may finally solve the mystery. **R**

As History Disappears

Go online to learn more about the disappearance of digital newspaper archives and how their loss impacts the development of stories like *The Missing Millionaire*. To access this piece, head to **RRJ.ca**.