

2012

may 9-12

LET THE STARS

**SHINE**  
IN OUR BONES

(Robert Kroetsch)

Symposium on  
**Manitoba Writing**

Symposium on  
Manitoba Writing



WHAT YOU SAID, WHAT I HEARD

REPORT ON LET THE STARS SHINE SYMPOSIUM ON MANITOBA WRITING

MAY 9-12, 2012

WINNIPEG MB

1.

As rapporteur (rapporteuse?) for this Symposium, I must first submit my qualifications for this job. I am a born and bred westerner from Edmonton (Redmonton, Edmonchuk), a nonfiction writer finally granted a good review in 2011 in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, a junior writer when Dennis Cooley and Dave Arnason were already seasoned hepcats, a former columnist for *Border Crossings*, and a frequent visitor to Winnipeg over the years, whether teaching at CMU or researching a radio documentary about the Battle of Seven Oaks or attending Synods of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. By contrast, my grandparents rolled right through Winnipeg on their way to a homestead in Alberta in 1900.

Much of my literary identity has been shaped by that now-quaint notion of regionalism which was broadly institutionalized nevertheless: I was a founding member of the Writers Guild of Alberta, wrote for the *NeWest Review* and *Grain* and have been published by Coteau Books and NeWest Press as well as by publishers in Toronto.

As a kind of work-out for this literary anniversary, I took a look at the June/July 1989 issue of the *NeWest ReView* which gave a section over to contributing editors Ken Hughes and Walter Hildebrandt of Winnipeg. They ran Saskatoonian Don Kerr's "June 1988 Winnipeg Journal" in which we read that printmaker Bill Lobchuk complained about the Saskatoon influence in Manitoba and so Kerr decided "Mike Olito should stand in his critic-fighting armour on the Yellowhead, scaring off Saskatchewan intellectuals." Kerr met Per Brask at the Aberdeen to talk about his "Saskatoon poetry. He'd never been there before. Says he'll go back. Me too." Dennis Cooley contributed a long poem-in-progress, "1931," and Margaret Sweatman's "Scenes from a novel in progress" about the Winnipeg General Strike ran together with fiction by Birk Sproxtton and commentary by Doug Smith about Joe Zuken and the North End. Twenty-three years later, these writers and artists are the "elders" of a literary community making way for the incoming wave of creativity.

2.

Over the course of the Symposium (too rich a program for me to get to absolutely every presentation on offer, regrettably) I made note of how I was hearing certain names of writers and institutions repeatedly invoked, as though these constituted a kind of collective memory for today's writers and assorted literati. Frederick Philip Grove and Robert Stead, for example from the earliest generation of writers, writers who I have unsuccessfully attempted to reread, are being profitably reread by young scholars who track the shift from rural Manitoba to the urban centre, to industry and modernity; or Gabrielle Roy, whose work once answered the challenge (to the French and Quebecois literary canon), "How come we're not writing about us?" but who in turn has been superseded by today's francophone writers no longer writing in her shadow; Margaret Laurence, acknowledged as having written the template of "regional" fiction, especially the work of her formative years in Nipawa and Winnipeg; and the unforgettable, much-lamented, celebrated Robert Kroetsch, clearly the presiding spirit of the Symposium, so much so that I propose it be called *Seed Catalogue Redux*.

The role the Manitoba Writers' Guild has played since its inception – to welcome and help develop the new writer who arrives at that moment when “he or she shakes the shit off their shoes” and begins writing *now*, as well as to sustain the established writer, although this is more difficult for an organization that is not exclusively for professionals - was gratefully acknowledged as were the people of Turnstone Press, Editions du Blé and *Prairie Fire* magazine who all shared the same objective back in the 1970s, “to grow a Manitoba literature.”

Mentorship was another theme I noted, the many mentions of the impact of meeting, working with, falling under the influence of the living, breathing historian (W.L. Morton), or the journalist (Larry Krotz) or the poet (Kroetsch, Suknaski, Livesay). Related to this is the phenomenon of independent publishing unblushingly dedicated to bring the work of one's own friends to the public, not necessarily a “cynical” enterprise at all when no one else is going to do it. And, to judge from the handsome array of photographs of the Manitoba matriarchs that presided over the Symposium's proceedings in the Great Hall – Gabrielle Roy, Nellie McClung, Adele Wiseman and E. Cora Hind – even those writers who preceded us by a generation or more may be mentors if we but remember them.

Thinking about how Manitoba writing is gendered did evoke the memory of Nellie McClung and the long history in Manitoba of feminist radicalism, and observations about the veritable “cult” of Margaret Laurence among biographers. But, in spite of claims of the “disappearing father” in contemporary fiction, it is still he who “controls the narrative,” although the arrival of the social defiance of adolescent girls in some woman-authored fictions may displace him if only in the ‘hood.

More subtext than text, the love/hate relationship with “Tarana,” aka Toronto, was inferred: the reason why regional publishing is still - more than ever - important as writers working outside the charmed circle of the national media are invisible and inaudible, a situation of heightened anxiety as the entire publishing industry is in a state of flux and fluctuation.

Several presentations isolated certain trends in retrospect: the 30-year retro-perspective on a literature about small town and rural Manitoba to an urban and then to a post-modern, post-colonial metropolitan literature, to the current electronic, multilingual, Aboriginal, ecological and the (ah, the irony) anywhere-but-here-logical, in which our hot new publishers are no longer taking into account “geopolitical boundaries” (read: regional) in making literary evaluations. There has always been much perplexity about technological changes, from offset, back in the day, to digital printing, to what? publication by cellphone? And the “tyranny” of social media: “Now I have to blog about hang-gliding as well as about my book.” Journalism-by-Google is displacing old-fashioned “shoe-leather” journalism. As for traditional vs electronic publishing, do we still need to be “authenticated” by the gatekeepers at the corporate publishing houses?

Finally, I noted the theme of what I call “ec-centricity,” interest in the writing from the off-centre. But there are now so many kinds of “margins” that, where there is no hegemonic “centre,” neither can it be meaningful to locate a literature as marginal to it. Since the time that writers in western Canada coined the notion of radical regionalism as a political as well as literary stance, changes in Canadian national governance, urban demographics and the shift of wealth westwards, not to mention the globalization of so many cultural as well as economic relations, demand a new perspective on what writers do *here*.

Perhaps it is more meaningful to characterize this theme rather as *locality*: “here” as a kind of decentred centre wherever the act of writing happens. Think of the intensity of the *here* in the Manitowapow project which gathers together linguistic and textual diversity into an exuberant

inclusivity. “Here” are oral histories, rock paintings, syllabics; “here” is Lac Brochet and Norway House and St-Laurent, and we aren’t even at Winnipeg yet. “Here” is Anishinabe, Cree, Metchif, English.

“Here” is where we spoke French before or alongside English. Where the bush knowledge and a “disorderly” domestic life of the “dangerous outsider” up there in Flin Flon are off-centre from Winnipeg’s slickness. On the other hand, we now know that Winnipeg is also a bunch of back alleys, garbage dumps and sewer covers, the “material text” of the city rendered in architecture and film. Pluralities abound, not only linguistic along with new immigrants but also with retrieved histories of working class protagonists, rural Italians, urban Mennonites, and Black Winnipeggers. “Here” is a palimpsest of off-centre forms: daily diaries and seed catalogues, sermons and exploration narratives, intermingled graphics and texts, translations, journalism as literature, every kind of stanza, herstory....

3.

There were some things I *didn’t* hear - bear in mind it was not possible for me to be in more than one place at once – which I note not to complain about the symposium-that-wasn’t but to point to possible topics of a future gathering.

A few months ago I was co-editor of a special issue of *Rhubarb* which brought together under one roof, as it were, writing by Mennonite, Ukrainian and Jewish writers. This reminded me of how we used to talk about “us” and who “we” were in western Canada. Where are the Jews and Ukrainians of yesteryear? There were references at this Symposium to Adele Wiseman’s *The Sacrifice* and vaguer ones to Martha Ostenso and John Marlyn. But Missing in Action were Ukrainian-Canadian Vera Lysenko, whose *Yellow Boots* and *Men in Sheepskin Coats* can be compared to the status of the canonical works of Gabrielle Roy for Franco-Manitobans, likewise the writings of Icelandic-Manitobans Kristjana Gunnars and William Valgardson.

This was a very “white” symposium, as someone observed. Where are the “new” Winnipeggers writing and publishing? We did learn that, among Manitobans writing in French, Bathelmy Bolivar is from Haiti, but do we even know if there is a literature being written among Asian or Hispanic or African immigrants?

Is “class” the new four-letter word? The energetic intervention of the three women from the “frontier” beyond Winnipeg reminded us that the working class has become one of the disappeared identities in our post-modern literature. This city is rightly proud of its history of labour radicalism, and there is a literature about the General Strike, but what has happened in the intervening 90 years? Who is writing critically about Dorothy Livesay now?

Except for a number of Indigenous writers, I note also the absence of current narratives about that grand old theme of a protagonist’s fraught relationship with the Divine, themes of faith and doubt, piety and apostasy. These may be passé for writers whose heritage is nominally Christian or Jewish but might there be a western Canadian literature about Muslim faith emerging?

And what about Queer Manitoba? I’m sorry Lisa Grekul wasn’t able to be here, to take us through the “heteronormativity” of Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese*.

Among Franco-Manitobans, an impressive number of playwrights have emerged, which suggests a topic for a mini-symposium at least, on Manitoba’s theatre, given the references at

this Symposium to Michel Tremblay, Ann Henry, John Hirsch, James Reaney and Tomson Highway.

4.

If there is a Conclusion to all these observations, it may be what I read on the back of a t-shirt at the presentation on Franco-Manitoban writing: *Collectif post-néo-rieliste*. That just about sums it up, in any language.

Myrna Kostash