

## LITERARY NONFICTION IN SASKATCHEWAN

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### ''' *Definition*

“Literary nonfiction” is the preferred term for a genre known variously as creative nonfiction, literary journalism, narrative prose, creative documentary and nonfiction novel. It has its contemporary roots in the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s when, in magazines and books, writers of nonfiction developed "a style of journalism characterized by the use of subjective and fictional elements so as to elicit an emotional response from the reader," to cite the definition of the Oxford Canadian Dictionary. Its materials are documentary, its techniques novelistic and even poetic. It is increasingly the practice not to hyphenate non-fiction, on the grounds that is a genre in its own right, not a non-genre.

Although such a hybrid genre has been practised at least since the eighteenth century, it still provokes controversy whenever readers or reviewers expose as “made-up” what they had assumed to be “factual.” The point is that, as a genre, it occupies a very wide spectrum of types, from the point-of-view reportage of New Journalism, to narrative-driven travel writing, memoir and biography, to the reflective or metaphysical or lyrical essay, to boundary-breaching experimental prose-poetry. (The factualness of facts is more properly the concern of journalism.) Publishers have got into the habit of signaling a work of nonfiction, literary or journalistic, by adding a subtitle, especially when the work in question is a hybrid of several styles; works of fiction and poetry never have subtitles, unless by ironic intention.

### *Wolf Willow as Ur-Text of Literary Nonfiction*

Wallace Stegner (1909-1993) first published *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier* in 1955 and it has never been out of print. It has become a classic of Western Canadian and American literature, and although Stegner spent most of his life in the United States and went on to write a lot of fiction, his output of nonfiction, mainly nature and landscape writing, remained impressive.

*Wolf Willow* may now be read as the source text for literary nonfiction in Saskatchewan of the last half-century. For example, what I call its “apparatus” has become typical of the genre. The book has a map, lists, literary citations; library staffs and friends are acknowledged, as is a grant for “Anthropological Research” and a fellowship to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, all of which confirm the work’s rootedness in “objective” nonfiction. But the very subtitle signals that Stegner has more than one intention with his material: his work is a documentary (History), a narrative (Story) and a memoir (Memory).

Perhaps anticipating objections to the occasional “warped fact,” Stegner explains he has done so in the service of “the fictional or poetic truth that I would rank a little above history.” Even a literature based on fact and evidence reaches for a transcendent effect. The publisher’s blurb (in the 1977 edition) calls it an “uncommon” book, because it “combines fiction and non-fiction, history and impressions, childhood remembrance and adult reflection. Its language gives music and excitement to wisdom...” All of which encapsulates what has come to be known as literary or creative nonfiction.

But *Wolf Willow* is the prototype. In the opening chapter, “The Question Mark in the Circle,” already on page four we are in the territory of the first-person narrator as full-throated story-teller, Stegner himself, writing from the point of view of a “middle-aged pilgrim.” Revisiting the town he calls Whitemud (in fact East End) on the eastern flanks of the Cypress Hills, he launches into the story of “the cowpuncher named Buck Murphy,” then into history, geography and geology. This is followed by travelogue, lyric landscape-writing, reflection, reminiscence and imagined scenarios. In “First Look,” we have the 1805 Lewis and Clark expedition on the Missouri re-imagined and the entire history of the fur trade in Canada summarized in one lyrical paragraph. The topography, geology, biology, paleology, meteorology, ethnology and cartography of the Cypress Hills are scooped up in five pages of “The Divide.” In “Carrion Spring,” the classic text within the classic, much of the riveting drama of the terrible winter of 1906-07 is told in dialogue.

The structure of the pieces within the book is a constant juxtaposing of elements; because not linear or expository, the seeming unreality of the narrative feels fictional. But that is really a function of “memory,” which, Stegner tells us, “because it is not shared seems fictitious.” That is an interesting if implicit proposition: we may know *nonfiction*

by the communal (shared) memory. Memory is one of Stegner's big subjects, its repression and denial, the ambivalence of the rememberer between wanting and not wanting to remember, its return to beginnings. In *Wolf Willow* the narrator's reflections on reality and memory, the past and the present, history and literature, are all provoked by his reflections on his boyhood in Whitemud, and from this locale –“if I am native to anything, I am native to this” – he spins out all the big topics and tropes of what is today recognizably SaskLit: the panoramic land, the connection between place and memory, the lost because unstudied past (“...we never so much as heard the word *métis*...”), the excitement of recovering it, the tragedy of the First Peoples starved off the plains, the glorification of the pioneers who displaced them (“after all, what other history and what other mythic figures are so intimately theirs?”) and, from the point of view of a literary history, the “disquieting” notion that “Saskatchewan” has been the production of “words spoken and attitudes struck by romantic philosophers and poets.”

### **Writers and Texts**

The literary nonfiction under consideration in my essay will be discussed according to *types*, none of which of course are pure forms and often overlap: travelogue (McCourt, Abley); nature and landscape writing (Savage, Herriot, Butala, Gayton); personal essay (Ratzlaff, Safarik); narrative reportage (Siggins, Simmie, Butala); memoir (Campbell, Rigelhof, Cariou, Calder, Wiebe, Crozier)

#### *The Travelogue*

Edward McCourt (1907-1972) was raised by Irish immigrant parents on a homestead in Alberta and educated at the University of Alberta and Oxford; in 1944 he joined the faculty of the University of Saskatchewan. But his main legacy was a production of books ranging from academic articles to fiction, from biography to popular history and travel, and an early foray into literary criticism of writing in western Canada, *The Canadian West in Fiction* (1949). In the 1960s, he wrote two volumes for the series *The Traveller's Canada* for Macmillan publishers, *The Yukon and Northwest Territories* (1965) and *Saskatchewan* (1968).

*Saskatchewan* opens with a Preface followed by a Prologue. The Preface serves as the author's justification of his enterprise: if any reader shall take offense at his remarks (and McCourt can be very witty), he or she should be reassured that "I have written never out of malice, occasionally out of anger, and always out of affection." In the Prologue, he refers repeatedly to "the Saskatchewan man" as his subject. Women of Saskatchewan would soon enough write their own correctives to this male-centred address, as would Native writers to McCourt's regretful observation that "Few people have left behind them scantier evidences of their culture than the Indians of the great plains."

Here McCourt was referring to the fact (according to him) that "only the Indians remained indifferent" to the blowing up by dynamite of a sacred rock, the Mistaseni, when the Gardiner Dam and its reservoir were constructed on the South Saskatchewan River in 1966. McCourt is equally dry-eyed about his own kind, the "typical westerner," who he deplores as a species-at-risk, now that he has outgrown his homestead habitat: "Natural-gas heating, T.V., improved road transportation, school buses, and indoor plumbing are sapping his vitality."

In *Saskatchewan*, McCourt and his wife Anna Margaret travel around a large part of the province, visiting many places that will be featured in the next generation of literary nonfiction as well: Eastend and the Cypress Hills, Regina, Moose Jaw, the Qu'Appelle Valley, Rosthern, Saskatoon, Meadow Lake, Jan Lake. The literary travelogue indulges the opinionated, emotional and self-revealing traveler/narrator (this is not a travel guide), and so we read of McCourt's admiration of the "flourishing" Mennonite communities, appreciation of the "exotic" domes of the Ukrainian churches "which call to mind names learned in poetry like Xanadu and Samarkand," pity for Moose Jaw, which "huddles in a setting of tangled ravines and creeks," outrage at "man's folly in the woods" when he describes the destruction of forest fires as he travels toward Jan Lake, his exhilaration at the view of the valley of the Qu'Appelle which "shocks the eye and excites the imagination by its sheer unexpectedness."

For all his deprecating wit, however, McCourt is a booster, a resident Saskatchewanian who invites us along for the ride, telling yarns to keep us interested. Mark Abley (1955-), in *Beyond Forget: Rediscovering the Prairies* (1986), has an altogether different tone, for this is elegy as well as travelogue: Abley left Saskatchewan at the age of 20 with a Rhodes scholarship for Oxford, never to live there again. But in

1986, three years after settling down permanently in Montreal, he published *Beyond Forget*, the account of his solo car trip across the prairie provinces. It proved a pilgrimage of return to places both familiar and mythical, which belong entirely to his past but which continue to haunt him one way or another. “I will always love Saskatchewan,” he tells an interviewer in the summer of 2006. “I still miss the intensity of prairie light, the majesty of the South Saskatchewan River, the constant awareness of nature.” On the other hand, he is of that species of Saskatchewan writer who got away. “I tried to explore why I’d been so hungry to leave the place as a teenager. I took it for granted in an almost unthinking way that I would have to leave.”

Although *Beyond Forget* includes no Prologue or Preface, no Foreword or Introduction, it bears a nonfiction apparatus nevertheless: a map shows his itinerary from Churchill to Brandon to Eastend to Edmonton to Battleford to (the scenes of his childhood), Saskatoon, an Index lists place names, and he thanks Canada Council’s Explorations program for its support. His citations of and references to other writers are generous, and function as a kind of bibliography of his project: Gerald Friesen’s *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, McCourt’s *Saskatchewan*, Heather Robertson’s *Grass Roots*, the Earl of Southesk’s *Travels in Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*, Andrew Suknaski’s *Wood Mountain Poems* and, tellingly, Stegner’s *Wolf Willow* (“probably the finest book of nonfiction about the prairie west”). He makes reference to Henry Kelsey, a William Kurelek painting, Tom Sukanen’s quixotic boat-building in the depression dust bowl, the Book of Joshua, the Book of Common Prayer, ballads, television soap operas, and the annual report of the American Secretary of the Interior in 1874.

In fact, his opening chapter functions as an Introduction or Foreword. Here he tells us something of his life history and admits us into his musings about the nature of the project he has set himself: to revisit a land he had fled with alacrity. He sets the scene “on a patch of brown grass above the old [South Saskatchewan] river, a week after Easter, watching a gopher watching me” as he writes. Although Abley has worked for decades in and around journalism, where he learned the “virtue of clarity,” he acknowledges that “History, beyond memory, is speculation: the play of a mind with facts.” All of the land flowing away from the sides of the highway as he tootles along comes under his literary as well as journalistic scrutiny: his language can be imagistic (“The canoe shone against the dark water, a slim trap for the sun”), and his

philosophizing poetic (“On the prairies, history is rarely incorporated into the life of the present. Instead, it lies at an angle across it”). As he rents a beige Dodge, buys a road map, and heads southeast from Saskatoon to Forget: “Departure is the mother of hope.”

For all the anecdotes featuring conversations with colourful local citizens, there is something unremittingly solitary about Abley’s enterprise. His reflections on history and historical characters make up his “company.” His encounters are often full of mutual misgiving if not mistrust. He likes to get out of the car and admire the view. “Indifferent monotonous eating, long wearisome driving, no sport to speak of, no companion: nevertheless I was happy.” He pokes around a deserted farmhouse, an empty church, an abandoned graveyard. He tanks up. Listens to C&W music on the radio. Watches a calf-branding on a Cypress Hills ranch. Visits a Hutterite colony. Refuses spare change to a man in Moose Jaw. There is something of hoarding impressions for some other literary goal, loftier than the travelogue. He is as concerned to register the emotional quality of the experience as he is to record his observations. Often the landscape seems to breathe with a human sigh: “That morning the [Qu’Appelle] valley had an air of wasted expectation, as though some promised call to greatness had failed to materialize.”

In Eastend, Abley pays homage to Stegner, who “analyzed it with a merciless love” in *Wolf Willow*. Following Stegner, he is laying down layers of literary silt on a landscape that will be visited and revisited by writers whose themes he anticipates. In Grasslands National Park, for instance, he names the creatures in need of our protection, the prairie dog, burrowing owls and short-horned lizards, ferruginous hawks and wind scorpions, whose populations have since become if anything smaller. According to the scientists, the Saskatchewan grasslands have become “one of the most disturbed, ecologically simplified and overexploited regions in the world.”

The cities may be no better off. For in Saskatoon they have closed the Ritz. Abley as a student knew it in its final incarnation, a bar with little round tables “that attracted a motley, unpredictable crowd of blue-collar workers, students, drifters, gays, New Democrats, slumming professors, Indians, drug dealers, artists and a few incoming farmers.” But even if the Ritz were still there, you get the feeling that Abley would still have felt the “feeling,” the one you get when you are full of yearning and there is no cure but to leave.

### *Landscape Literature*

For all its dense particularity, Stegner's evocation of the landscape around Whitemud can now be read as the forerunner of so much of landscape writing in Saskatchewan, which ranges from the bucolic pastoral to the glinty-eyed, pitiless glare to the outright mythopoeic, especially of the plains south of the Trans-Canada highway. Stegner wrote: "The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small." It is as though he were writing the first page of a Scripture for the writers who would follow in his furrow, as it were. It is remarkable how, for so many of them, the apparently simple act of walking the land and making observations yields insights which shake and rattle their spirits.

Candace Savage (1949- ) has been publishing books of nonfiction since the early 1980s, nearly all of them on one or another subject of natural history: grizzlies, pelicans, wolves, eagles, bees. Among her most popular books is *Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys of the Avian World* (2005), which like the rest of her work exemplifies her seriousness as a writer of nonfiction: the text includes extensive notes, suggestions for further reading, picture credits (her books are often lavishly illustrated by art and photographs) and an index. The project always begins with research, scrupulously reporting back to the reader the work of specialists, and democratically folding into the narrative stories that readers have sent to her. As she writes in the Preface to *Crows*: "One of the many delights of writing this book has been making contact with this growing flock of corvid enthusiasts." And she lists their websites. After the publication of *Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Crows, Ravens, Magpies and Jays* (1995), "people kept sending me their crow stories. They would send me the pictures of their albino raven, or they would tell me about the crows they saw in the park who were bowing to one another in a mysterious way." This emphasis on story-telling as well as the arcana of science lends distinctive narrative momentum to her "reports."

But Savage is also a lyricist of the natural world ("part science, part poetry," as one review put it) and, although the first-person pronoun usually bows out after the Preface, the writing carries on with intense feeling. In the Preface to *Prairie: A Natural History*, she writes of her response to the clear prairie air when she "burst" out of Saskatoon airport one day: "'It's blue right down to the ground,' we said to each other,

goofily, over and over.” “When a crow leaps into the air,” she writes in the last chapter of *Crows*, “our hearts take wing with it and we join in the rowdy revel of existence.”

She professes a love-hate relationship with science, deploring the “meticulously worded tedium” of scientific papers and the emotionally-voided persona of the scientist. So she has produced prose in which she tries to put “flesh back onto bare bones of fact,” as succinct an explanation of the function of literary nonfiction as any.

In a collection of excerpts from her books and articles, *Curious by Nature: One Woman’s Exploration of the Natural World* (2005), Savage writes an openly-autobiographical Preface, fully disclosing the literary nonfiction narrator as an “I” who has taken pleasure since childhood in learning, “the pure, animal happiness of sniffing around and finding something worth chewing on.” Behind themes of animal reproductive behaviour lies the fact of Savage’s motherhood and widowhood; books are written while her daughter is in nursery school; a research team of scientists “dumps” her on a barren esker in the High Arctic where she watches a den of wolves, “the electric vitality of living things.”

She charts her progress as a writer from the cold and dark hours stolen from early mornings in her Yellowknife household to the roots she has emphatically put down in Saskatchewan. For all her writing about the natural world, however, she resists the label “nature writer.” She writes outside the boundary of a single genre, she argues, blessed with a “magpie mind...always on the lookout for something worth checking out.” She also resists the “high calling” of some literary nature writing, “the philosophical interpretation of nature,” which she views as “mere backdrop for meditations on human existence,” as though for these writers nature always stood for something other than itself, “as signs and symbols of transcendence.” As a writer she stands aside from the object of her impassioned gaze, in order to bring it into her readers’ awareness; this is, perhaps, an intention “both humbler and perhaps less achievable” than more high-minded writing: an interesting point, if we accept her claim that the reality of the non-human world is in fact “ungraspable.” Savage is too much of a (self-taught) scientist to see Divine Writ in this ungraspable reality. Science’s own texts are “audacious” enough, but she does use words like “wonder” and “vision” and “amazement” in a kind of humanist manifesto for hope for planet earth, or what theologian Sallie McFague calls “loving



empathy for and delight in,” which the artist-writer “frames” with her words for our full attention.

Sharon Butala (1940-), who had already published fiction, came to national prominence with her first book of literary nonfiction, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (1994). The book is catalogued on its ISBN page as Biography and Homes and haunts-SK, which is one way of underlining the concentrated presence of its autobiographical narrator situated within a Saskatchewan landscape in which she struggles to feel at home.

The story is well-known, how Butala, a divorced mother in Saskatoon, a Special educator, a feminist and thoroughly urban, met and married a man, Peter Butala, in 1976 and moved to live on his ranch near Eastend, Wallace Stegner’s country. Echoing Stegner’s complaint that much of the history of southwest Saskatchewan is not known even to Saskatchewanians, she writes in her Preface: “I hadn’t studied it in school, since no early explorer had crossed it, no one going this far south, the miles and miles of open plains being as daunting as an ocean to a nineteenth-century traveler.” She had grown up in Nipawin, in the bush (a landscape she will return to in *The Girl From Saskatoon*). But here, on the grasslands, she has to find purchase on “the vast Great Plains of North America which extend north to Edmonton and south to Texas” as though the place underfoot can first be understood as belonging to planetary geography.

The nonfiction credentials of *The Perfection of the Morning* include a map, historical references, two pages of Sources, and reportorial observations on landscape, agricultural practices and the community of ranchers. But at the heart of her project, as with later work such as *Coyote’s Morning Cry: Meditations and Dreams from a Life in Nature* (1995) and *Lilac Moon: Dreaming of the Real West* (2005), lies the fruitful tangle of multiple themes and voices that literary nonfiction so readily accommodates: the rapture of the land (“I had never seen such beauty”), solidarity with Nature (“Nature is alive...Nature has a memory”), the letting-go of the earlier self (“a metaphorical unfurrowing of my brow”), and the spiritual journey (“this is the place where words stop”).

The spiritual journey or adventure in Butala’s work emerges as the deep subject of the encounter with the land. Her daily walks triggered “déjà vu” of her childhood in bush country – she wasn’t always a city slicker – and created a longing for those early

“connections” with the natural world. She learned how to be “still and in the present,” not purposefully as a hunter or student or collector or farmer, but slowly to become aware of an “entity” that was “alive” in Nature. She acknowledges that, in relationship with Nature, she was involved in a “monumental act of self-creation.” The attempt to equate a specific theology with this act – Catholic, Buddhist, Taoist – only frustrates her (“fine if you were a monk”). Like Savage, she is equally impatient with the materialists whose unshakeable and hegemonic belief in an objective world means that “only in religious life” in our culture are we permitted to push the boundaries of the “real.”

But the journey is also about learning how to write what she now writes, from keeping a daily journal with no thought of publication, to thinking of writing a “small, impersonal” book about what she saw and felt in Nature, to the fully-realized self-disclosure of autobiography (she does not call her work “memoir”) which accepts that “there is a way in which all nonfiction is fiction: the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning.... I am torn between the facts and history and the truth of the imagination, and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean. In terms of the people and the land...I have tried to be as accurate factually as possible.”

In an essay, “Down to the Qu’Appelle,” published in 2002 in an exhibition catalogue, *Qu’Appelle: Tales of Two Valleys*, Trevor Herriot (195? -) lays out an abbreviated version of the themes and ideas that preoccupy him in all his literary work. He situates himself in beloved landscape – the Qu’Appelle Valley – and surveys it for its geology, its natural history, its human cultures, its narratives and its spiritual resonance. All these themes together comprise what might be called a kind of uber-Scripture which will reach an ecstatic pitch in *Jacob’s Wound: A Search for the Spirit of Wildness* (2004).

In the earlier essay, Herriot’s survey of the land, its beautiful grassland curves now “drawn and quartered” by the grid of ploughed fields, is nonplussed. “Engulfed” by cropland, landscapes over the world have become “colonized” by the facts of agriculture and ranching. Now they are even overrun by city dwellers who want “country-style living” by setting up next to a golf course. Its remnant beauty still pleases and soothes us: yet it is “exile makes it so.” We are so torn away from the ligaments of earth that we can only visit nostalgically; we do not live there anymore. Or we can struggle to reconstruct the broken bond through art, or in Herriot’s case, through “story,” fulfilling “our deepest

wishes for a landscape that keeps its narratives.” This will not be easy; even “texts” have been brutally colonized and appropriated by rapacious modernity.

Ecological, existential, textual - Herriot’s agonies are nothing if not cosmic. But that is as it should be: Herriot shakes his fists at the heavens as well as at the works of man.

The catalogue listing for *Jacob’s Wound* has three categories for it: 1. Human ecology-Religious aspects 2. Nature-Effect of human beings on. 3. Religion and civilization. In addressing issues of the environment from the perspective of a man of (Roman Catholic) faith, Herriot is a member of a coterie of landscape writers for whom the search for an authentic spirituality leads through the land as blighted as it is. He cites some of them: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Wendell Berry, translations of Urdu scripture, and a Sutra from *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. He also reads TS Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, Don McKay’s *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness* and *The Jerusalem Bible*.

The two parts of the book have their own internal structure: in Part One, Herriot and his family construct a teepee on their land in the Qu’Appelle Valley, and quite a few things happen. There are windstorms, rain, prairie fire; teepee poles are sanded and raised; the Herriot family roasts corn on the Land; woodpeckers return on the feast day of Lammastide (August 1); a medieval monk in Gloucester has a dream. In Part Two, Herriot climbs Mount Carmel not far from the Benedictine Abbey in Muenster where he also retreats; for all his meditation on texts, he can only get near to the “wild energy” of faith where there is “grass and wind...the possibility of fire.”

Fire is a recurrent image, from the burning sacrifices of the ancients to the metaphorical “fires of bewilderment and imagination” of the anti-Enlightenment poet and artist, William Blake, to the eternally rising sun in whose heat we may yet be reconciled to Creation. In fact, the book concludes in a neo-pagan allusion to the Green Man, the vegetative deity of rebirth: in Herriot’s cosmology, he is “green gilt with the fire that is the very face of God.”

The dominant motif and allusion, however, is of Jacob of the Hebrew Bible, who stole his brother’s birthright, wrestled with the Angel and emerged wounded from this rite of passage of a people who were still coming into their identity as agriculturalists.

Jacob has wrestled with the “archaic hunter in his own soul” but it is as archetypal farmer that Jacob “will no longer walk the gait of original man” but as an alien, an exile.

And we are all still exiled, still ravaging earth with our ploughs, but not only ploughs. For along with colonizing land we have colonized myth by the “usurping sorcery” of the written word and (citing Don McKay) “the mind’s appropriations.” And along with the plough and the alphabet comes the Cross and the “people of the word” who “sent the children of Esau [Aboriginals] into bewilderment.”

As the grandson of farmer-immigrants to the Valley, as a baptized and catechized Christian, and as a writer, Herriot wrestles with his own Angels. He owns property where he nevertheless seeks contact with “wildness.” He goes intermittently to church yet bows to the “mystery of the Divine” while walking along a railway track in a remnant of prairie. He regrets the “exile into the individual interior” which began with Moses, the father of religious writing – those stone tablets – yet asserts that “if there is any magic remaining in the everyday rituals of modern life it is in the power of the written word.”

Herriot is a walker of the land, an exegete of holy texts, and a composer of stunning verbal and imaginative power. The genre of long-form literary nonfiction is ideally suited to his purposes as it stretches to accommodate the range and diversity of his artistic and spiritual gifts.

The grasslands ecologist Don Gayton (1946 -) no longer lives in Saskatchewan; but in *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (1990), he has written a series of essays in which he brings to bear a poetic sensibility to a rigorous science of the grassland. In his “Introduction,” he defines prairie as a “thin membrane of grass, stretched tightly over secret horizons of soil, and shaped by drought, geography and solitude....[It] is also a region of the mind.” Like Herriot and Butala, he is distressed by the consequences of the industrialization of the land; unlike Savage, he finds poetic inspiration among scientists and their language: “Geological loading. Feedback inhibition. Gravitrophic movements.....What great basins of new metaphor, what ranges for personal exploration!” He is heedless of the boundary between science and poetry and refuses to be “frightened by mechanism;” after all, if a writer-advocate is honest about his relationship to landscape, he will concede that it is “the common ground of where the worlds of myth and mechanism do finally come together.”

Gayton is also the author of *Interwoven Wild: An Ecologist Loose In the Garden and Landscapes of the Interior: Re-Explorations of Nature and the Human Spirit* (2007).

Gayton employs scientific language and references not only to enlighten us but to fuse them with his poetic sensibility. To reconstruct the historical grassland, he would not only study pollen rain in lake sediments but also command William Butler, author of *The Great Lone Land* (1872) off his horse, “down onto his knees amid the dusty grass and roses, to tell me exactly what he sees.” He reads scientific journals such as *Nature*, *Botanical Gazette*, and *Journal of Experimental Botany* but also references the landscape photographer Ansel Adams, Wendell Berry, John Palliser, Chief Sitting Bull and Chief Joseph. He is an acute observer of the Sprague’s pipit but when he lies down in a hilltop pit, called “dream beds” by the Blackfoot, he drops into a light sleep, and the bird’s “unending, liquid song ...comes with me. All else is quiet. History accretes upon itself, the sun advances several degrees, and we move further into the Holocene.”

He is no Romantic of the industrial landscape; he notes the “abiotic” waterscape of the reservoir behind a dam, the “gaunt” transmission towers marching toward the horizon, the concentrated toxins in the atmosphere, “excess pollution beyond my earth’s ability to absorb, detoxify, forgive.” Like Herriot, he acknowledges the “virus of tearing up landscape.” Yet it is done to provide for the loved ones of family. Unlike Herriot, he sees in agrarian society a still-preserved “earth-bonding,” but we are perhaps beyond the point of no return where the altered landscape of the industrial age is now itself inalterable. Where Herriot dares hope for spiritual awakening in the face of the apocalypse, Gayton hopes for a return to “common social agendas.” He admits that, in the balancing act between science and myth, his imagination “has its balance profoundly tipped toward the rational.” But he also admits that, if there is ever to be a renewed bond with “our earth,” then a rebalancing must occur “by personal explorations that go far beyond simple analysis and concern, into realms of imagination and myth .” At which point, of course, the exploration is no longer personal.

*The Personal Essay*

In a books column in the Alberta-based magazine, *Legacy*, Gordan Morash recalled high school English assignments to write a personal essay. “The ‘try’ or *l’essai*, we learned, was to swing a reader to our way of thinking...through the consideration of a well- or even seldom-travelled corner of our personal universe.” It is not so much about story-telling – in fact it might not have any story to tell – as about persuasion, cajoling, seduction. There is pleasure at stake here, not just argument.

In defense of the form, Alberto Manguel, defends the essay vigorously from those who, with a misguided “faith” in literature, “confuse the pleasures of the essay with academic jargon.... Literature, at its best, doesn’t define anything; it suggests, it hints, it points.”

As the author of essays, David Carpenter writes them “when something interests me.” It’s as good a reason as any. Carpenter continues: “The word ‘essay’ comes from the French *essai* and from the Latin *exagium*, ‘to weight,’ or ‘drive out, examine.’ It’s well suited to so many causes and modes of expression, to such a wide range of intellect and sensibility, that it seems to have a nebulous meaning these days. It’s an undervalued form, a misunderstood genre with a bad rap. Why else would the ungainly term ‘creative nonfiction’ ever have been born? Isn’t this a way of saying that most nonfiction is by definition noncreative? Surely the hep wordsmiths who dreamed up this one were never lovers of essays....I’ve tried to write about literature less as a critic, theorist, or academic, and more as a reader. But not as a belletrist or a writer of creative nonfiction. You see? We need a better word here. Essayist? Why not.”

Allan Safarik’s essay collection, *Notes from the Outside*, bears the subtitle, *Episodes from an Unconventional Life*, a nod to the intention of the essay away from narrative and toward the documentation of “themes and subjects from various regions of Canada with portraits of writers and others.” Safarik is a poet; in these essays he is a “generalist,” a person without expertise but with opinion, and nothing links one episode to the next except that “something went off” that triggered a need to “document certain people, places, and incidents at different stages of my life for different reasons.” He writes that it has produced a steady stream of “literary journalism.” “Writing is writing. There isn’t much difference in the process of producing print in any of the writing *genres*. It always amounts to taking the time to sit down and work at it as if it was a job.”

With the essays of Lloyd Ratzlaff (1946 -), however, we are in more complicated territory. As with literary nonfiction in general, he is trying several things at once: a bit of a story, a memory, a reflection, a metaphor, an epiphany. One of his reviewers wrote, of his second collection, *Backwater Mystic Blues* (2006), that it should be read as “narrative poetry, a collection of reflections, a series of intimate snapshots....” Ratzlaff is as preoccupied with language and rhythm as he is with meaning and so I think of his work as lyric essay. The variety of places where he has published points to the diverse readership he has reached: *NeWest ReView*, *Rhubarb*, *Wildflower*, *Quest*, *Prairie Messenger*, and *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

All literary nonfiction seems to require an author’s Preface or Prologue or Introduction, as though to help the reader situate herself in the genre, and it is the case here: in his “Prologue” to *The Crow Who Tampered With Time* (2002), Ratzlaff mulls over his criteria for a successful life, “compassion and creativity,” and proceeds to demonstrate them in the essays that follow. In “The Bush on the Grave,” he begins with a chokecherry bush over the grave of a little boy in a pioneer cemetery, moves to a plastic pail, then to a reflection on the “untidy leave” of Ratzlaff’s break with Mennonite Christianity, then to the bush’s roots in the boy’s body, then to the “sacramental wine” he will make of the berries, and finally to God’s voice from within the Burning Bush... all in three-and-a-half pages. This crescendo of tone and imagery is typical of his strategy: the confidential anecdote, the homely details, the shift to a portentous reflection, the passionate ah ha!

Although he writes of a walk in the park, an encounter with a gopher, the throaty breathing of a grazing cow and a chipped blue enamel cup beside a water pump, Ratzlaff is not writing about “nature” or even the countryside; he *uses* them, objects and sightings, in an extended aide-memoire from which he retrieves memories which, transformed into text, “restore the world to word.” It is a curious formulation. In the “Epilogue” of *Backwater Mystic Blues* he explains what he means by a series of religious imagery: it is a “reverse incarnation,” back into the Logos from the flesh, a “communion” of words, “and the trinity itself, perhaps, returning to the peace of union.” The saturation of his texts by such Christian allusions is not just a marker of the years lived as a committed Christian but also of his life as a reader since childhood of the King James Bible, and familiar with many of its “sublime passages.” So much so that when he became a pastor

“it was as if I were preaching in my native tongue.” In his essays it is still his mother tongue, renewing testaments over and over again.

### *Narrative Reportage*

Maggie Siggins (1942 -) is nothing if not a journalist, a professional newspaper writer and columnist and a television producer in Toronto before she moved to Regina and turned her craft to writing nonfiction books. In these she demonstrates the masterful art of shaping a journalist’s diligent and scrupulous research into powerful narrative.

Her technique wins her admirers among general readers. The *Winnipeg Sun*, reviewing *Revenge of the Land: A Century of Greed, Tragedy, and Murder on a Saskatchewan Farm* (1991), claimed exuberantly that “Siggins’ lively stories of Prairie settlers tell her reader more about Canada than dozens of experts preening and pontificating”. The *Toronto Star* puts her inside the same genre as Pierre Berton and Peter Newman, “serious, well-researched, popular narrative history.” But, inevitably, she also risks the disapproval of “experts,” especially academics, when she stakes her literary claim in their territory, as in her biography of Louis Riel, *Riel: A Life of Revolution* (1994), where (to some) a romanticized and sympathetic view of the Métis leader as a misunderstood revolutionary figure is an unscholarly intrusion of authorial bias.

When she turned to the biography of Riel’s grandmother, *Marie-Anne: The Extraordinary Story of Louis Riel’s Grandmother* (2008), she employed a strategy shaped by the nature of the project, the “daunting task” of writing the life of a “brave and endearing woman” who left few documents behind her. While still vividly told, this narrative is meticulously footnoted and comes with ten pages of a Bibliography which includes the Hudson Bay Company Archives, articles and books, theses and internet sources. Much too honest a journalist to *make up* what she cannot substantiate, Siggins’ reconstruction of Marie-Anne Gaboury’s life necessarily includes many conjectures (“perhaps,” “must have,” “might well have,” “one can imagine”). Siggins’ own field research also fills in gaps. For example, she tracks Marie-Anne along the Ottawa River and across Georgian Bay to Sault Ste. Marie (Marie-Anne by canoe, Siggins by motor launch). “I used original documents wherever I could – censuses and wills, fur traders’



journals, oral histories, the eyewitness accounts of the Selkirk Settlers,” she explains in her “Introduction.” On the other hand, with a literary flourish, she opens the narrative with a “Prologue” purporting to be a letter from Marie-Anne in 1869 to Louis Riel. It is not footnoted or otherwise sourced. However, it is italicized, a signal, perhaps, that she has made it up?

Winner of the 1992 Governor General’s Literary Award for Nonfiction, *Revenge of the Land* opens with a “Preface” in which Siggins’ voice sets up her tale in an angry, sarcastic and almost violent tone. With no pretence of authorial neutrality, although her research remains impeccable, she summarizes her point of view on her subject, which is the history of a particular section of land in south-west Saskatchewan, a view very far from the elegiac and spiritual mode of the landscape writers. The bureaucracy is “arrogant”, the RCMP officer class “stupid,” the moneylenders “cut-throat;” the land speculators and land-flippers are “exploitative” and their wives in Moose Jaw are served tea by “Chinese servants.”

The apparatus of nonfiction includes the very concreteness of the eponymous “land” of the story, 11-16-25 W2 or 640 acres “of black-brown clay, located seven miles south of Moose Jaw;” the chronological structure, each chapter devoted to the sequence of landowners and to the local and national context of their lives, fleshed out by land maps and photographs; and by pages of Notes on Sources – homestead files, autobiographies, correspondence, MA theses, court transcripts, family memorabilia, school yearbooks; the acknowledged help of a researcher, the archives of the *Moose Jaw Times*, staffs of archives board, public library archives, land titles office, law archives, an institute, and a school district; and a twelve-page Bibliography. In the parlance of the New Journalism, Siggins has performed a consummate act of total immersion.

But there is literary business afoot as well. The narrative opens dramatically, *in medi res* at a farm auction, the inner thoughts of characters revealed along with concrete details of a radio weather report, the time it takes to make an urn of coffee, the number of the highway (39) travelled to get to the auction from Regina. This could be fiction. But all of this has been gleaned, one assumes, from Siggins’s interviews with these characters and her own observations. And the characters are imbedded in the factual - details of Aboriginal history, the progress of CPR construction, items in a landowner’s art collection, a swindler’s purchase of Métis landscrip, a federal election campaign in

Moose Jaw district. Siggins is not present except in tone (“pizza boxes littering Kay Eberle’s garden like mutant weeds”), but by the careful layering of well-chosen detail of conversation and observation, the intimate portrait of a community is built up, from innocuous to suspicious detail. She holds back the punch-line that this farm was the scene of a double murder, just the latest of its revenges upon its exploiters.

The “Prologue” of *Bitter Embrace: White Society’s Assault on the Woodland Cree* (2005) is part of the narrative structure: “I met him at a dinner party...”. He is a Flin Flon lawyer who invited Siggins to travel with him, “to see him in action,” as he worked the northern circuit of his clients, “mostly to Indian reserves” in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. “I replied, I wouldn’t miss it for anything.” Having visited Pelican Narrows, an Indian reserve 44 kilometres north of cottage country, Siggins then decided to spend seven months in her cabin on Jan Lake, easy driving distance to Pelican Narrows, “not to write another dismal account of reserve life, but rather to try to appreciate this unique culture, to sympathize with the Woods Cree plight, and above all, to listen. I concluded that all my white society can do now is stand aside and give what is asked.” The drama of her narrative lies not in its plot, as the conclusion is known at the outset, but rather in how she got there.

Although she tends not to use “I” in advancing her story, it is clear that she has spent much time in the company of her characters. She situates them in their homes and community, but also in language, ethnology, geology, anthropology and genealogy: “Family among these First Nations people is like an intricately plaited spiderweb.” Details of one family stand in for whole groups of people, lending an intimacy to the descriptions. She cites scholarly references but also legends, and uses vivid images: “Early morning. The round silver moon is still shining as bright as white ice.” The style of repeating chapter headings creates an internal rhythm: “One Rules, the Other Resists/ Wanasowēw, Kotak Nīpuhistomasow; One Lectures, the Other Listens/ Pīyak Pīkiskwē, Kotak Nitohtam.”

Her themes are comprehensive and she seems to miss nothing, whether it is a question of the depredations of Cree culture by white power and institutions, or the forever-changed isolation and self-sufficiency of traditional Rock Cree life by imposed compulsory attendance at residential schools 1920-1950. Or by the assault on a traditional culture by the construction of a highway: “In the wake of the bulldozers and

steamrollers came bootleggers, drug pushers and the army of social workers needed to clean up the mess.” She evokes the lost paradise of the trapline in the wood: “When the hydroelectric dam was completed in 1930, acres of the best fur-trapping and hunting land, reserve land, were flooded, without permission from the aboriginal people.” Poverty came to Pelican Narrows with the international attack on fur-trapping. Cree religion “of the forest” has been lost. There is medical history, governance issues, “political malaise,” poor relations with police.

This synoptic vision is backed up by maps of the community and environs of Pelican Narrows in the land of lakes between the Churchill and the North Saskatchewan rivers near the Manitoba border, and maps of fur trade routes; by photos; by the repeated citation of other writers’ poems; and by eighteen pages of endnotes and index . And above all by the witness of her characters whom she inhabits with an “assigned point of view,” including her own: “On this particular day he is not feeling himself. He’s been ill lately, partly a result of too many drinking binges combined with old age.... They [the roads in the settlement] look like the main arteries of some Middle East warzone....” Siggins demonstrates the knack of not being there in the “I” but being there in full empathy.

Better known as a novelist, Lois Simmie (1932 -) applied fictional techniques to the documentary materials relating to a sensational murder trail in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in the early 1900s; the result is what is called a nonfiction novel, a genre familiar since the 1965 publication of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. Following Capote, the nonfiction novel eschews first-person narration or even any mention of the author – and Simmie is true to form. *The Secret Lives of Sgt. John Wilson: A True Story of Love & Murder* (1995) reads precisely as a novel: Simmie does not intervene at all except to announce, before she opens the story proper, that “the John Wilson story is a true one” and its scenes, which read almost cinematically, are based on her understanding of the characters and events “as revealed in letters, statements, police reports and eyewitness accounts.” Her research was thorough, to judge from her acknowledgements, and, although she has used the novel *form* to tell her story, “great care was taken not to attribute to the characters suggestive thoughts or dialogue unless substantiated by evidence,” or formulated from Simmie’s best guess about what they would have thought and said. She reassures us that “all the letters, reports and other documents are genuine.”

This exposé of her method is a crucial element in setting up the nonfiction novel; for otherwise readers may be convinced they are inside an imagined world concocted by the author. Simmie opens the tale with the thoughts of a police Superintendent in Regina; she proceeds by intercutting scenes, includes pages of dialogue, structures the chronology of events for maximum dramatic effect, and not once uses the first-person pronoun: this is a kind of reportage, after all, not a memoir or personal essay. She allows herself a certain amount of bias towards the innocent victim of the murder but, because she has also been “inside” the head of the murderer, she communicates a certain amount of sympathy for him as well. The only self-disclosure she permits herself is to tell us, just before she begins the story, that “this story has fascinated me for a long time, and I finally was compelled to write it.”

Unlike in novels, though, there is an afterlife to real life events, told here in an “Afterword” in which we learn the fate of the characters we’ve come to know so well. In nonfiction, the story does not end in the writer’s imagination.

By the time Sharon Butala wrote *The Girl From Saskatoon: A Meditation on Friendship, Memory, and Murder* (2008), she was no longer torn between history and imagination – they inform each other – so that *The Girl From Saskatoon* is in many ways the most accomplished of her literary nonfictions with all its elements under creative control.

The narrative opens with the fictionalized account of “a girl,” in fact Alexandra Wiwcharuk, the eponymous murder victim, who Butala had met briefly in high school. Forty-four years after the (still unsolved) murder, she realizes she wants to write about Alex and the murder but knows that to understand them she will have to understand Saskatoon and Saskatchewan society and culture in 1962, “where we had all come from, and why,” and also inquire into her own life.

From the beginning, then, the project of investigating an unsolved murder, “as if I were a private investigator,” is embedded in autobiography, which also is woven with many strands of exploration. Butala finds her material in old high school yearbooks, in memories of growing up on a bush farm, in imaginative recreations of Alex’s Ukrainian-Canadian world, in descriptions of 1950s beauty pageants and Saskatoon’s first shopping centre. But she also permits herself haunted retrospection of Alex’s last hours when she

begins to understand “life” as the “unending battle of good and evil,” until she reaches a low point, “such weariness, an immense fatigue, of a kind I had never before experienced.” By the time we get to the Epilogue, we realize that the literary process of constructing such a text has mimicked the autobiography and led Butala not to the knowledge of Alex’s murderer but to the never-endingness of “story” itself.

### *The Memoir*

Memoir is not to be confused with autobiography although they share the use of first-person narration: memoir focuses on select events or characters or themes, not the whole life. Gore Vidal’s remains the best distinction: “a memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked.”

Whether memoir is a less reliable account is debatable, autobiographical narrators tending also to fudge the facts, if for no other reason than that individual memory is notoriously flexible. Several literary scandals have emerged from this fact – fiction marketed as memoir, Holocaust memoirs completely faked (aka “stolen suffering”), autobiographical subjects invented from whole cloth – but this should not put the genuine memoir into disrepute. Its combination of story-telling, reflection, and revelation, which comes accompanied by the knowledge that *this* (or something like it) *really happened*, suggests an intimacy as well as an authority.

Maria Campbell (1940 -) opens her “Introduction” to *Half-breed* (1973) with a thank-you to the Native activist Stan Daniels “for making me angry enough to write it” and to several women friends “for understanding, listening, typing and baby-sitting.” Both acknowledgements are an abrupt reminder of the context in which Campbell produced this ground-breaking book: the movements for radical social change among young Aboriginals in Canada (“Red Power”) and among women.

There had never been anything like *Half-breed* in Canadian letters – the candid first-person account of life from within the Métis nation (or Half-breed as it was then called) – and in retrospect we can see that it was years ahead of the wave of multicultural

writing that would follow from politically-awakened hyphenated Canadians (as they were called) and immigrants (or migrants as they are now called). Aboriginal poverty and racism had arrived as a new literary subject; yet the value of the journey is in the lesson for the reader: it is a social act, beyond bitterness. “I write this for all of you,” Campbell declares, “to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country.”

But Campbell’s book is not just a rallying cry for the nation. It is also a memoir, an unsparing yet compassionate recollection of her life thus far within and outside the Métis community in Saskatchewan, and an elegy for that same community. The opening sentence of the narrative is full of nostalgia: “The house where I grew up is tumbled down and overgrown with brush.” Her language is replete with imagery of dilapidation and poverty: the pine tree is “withered,” the graveyard is a “tangle” of roses, gophers scurry over the “sunken” graves, the Roman Catholic church is in need of a coat of paint but the “poverty” of the congregation precludes the enterprise. This was once a vital village, to judge by what is now recorded as missing: blacksmith shop, cheese factory, the founding Québécois family which ran the grocery store, and, tellingly, “Grannie Campbell’s house.” The road allowance Métis families have moved to nearby towns where “welfare hand-outs and booze” are on offer. Only the natural world is alive and well, the slough and its family of beaver.

“Like me the land had changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself.” And so a memoir is launched: through memory to the self. *This* memoir is launched from the memory of poverty and a generation (her father’s and mother’s) so beaten down by shame, frustration and heart-break that “I never saw my father talk back to a white man unless he was drunk.” But that is not the only memory. Her father may have been beaten but “my Cheechum never surrendered at Batoche”. They all came from a line of accomplished Native and European ancestors. Scottish great-grandfather Campbell, a HBC trader near Prince Albert, married a Native woman, a niece of Gabriel Dumont who told the young Maria stories of the 1885 Resistance and expressed hatred of settlers, Christians and welfare cheques. Her son, Maria’s grandfather, was a good friend of Grey Owl. Her mother, a Dubuque, loved books: Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott. Grandma Dubuque was a treaty Indian raised in a convent. Grandpa was a “Frenchman from Dubuque, Iowa,” grandson of a *coureur de*

*bois* given a land grant by the Spanish king. They were emphatically not Indians, although they had relatives among them on nearby reserves: “They [the relatives] laughed and scorned us [as half people]. They had land and security, we had nothing.” But she learned something of Indianness through her great-uncle, chief of the reserve.

Campbell’s childhood reminiscences are narrated in a matter-of-fact voice unadorned except for the injection of recollected emotion: “I can never forget this,” “how I hated them,” “we were very frightened,” “I will never forget my first sight,” “I can still see,” “we loved weddings,” “I used to believe there was no worse sin in this country than to be poor,” “I hated all of it as much as I loved it.”

This is where Campbell is *from*. But the gist of her memoir is the path she took, away from her family’s destitution and into the cities, Vancouver and Calgary, where she tried valiantly as a single mother to keep her daughter with her. Campbell’s unflinching disclosures of her life on the street, of her suicidal nervous breakdown, and of “blinding hatred” of “drunken Indian men” who she blamed for her and other Native women’s despair is equally unsparing of the reader: “If they had only fought back, instead of giving up, these things would never have happened.” And we are grateful for the turn of events in Campbell’s life near the end of the narrative when she meets the people who *are* fighting back, militants and radicals in community development and the reborn Métis associations, who carry Campbell in on a wave of empowerment: “There was a feeling of pride and hope everywhere....The years of searching, loneliness and pain are over for me.”

A generation later, Warren Cariou (1966-), also of Mixed-blood ancestry, born and raised in Meadow Lake, crafted a memoir of growing up in Saskatchewan: *Lake of the Prairies: A Story of Belonging* (2002). A series of questions launches Cariou’s personal journey of revelation; beneath stories, “what traditions, what secrets, what disasters, what subterfuges and wars and inventions and loves were necessary for me to become the person I am?”

Cariou has quadruple origins: Norway, France, England, Germany, all settlers. He assembles a series of remembered stories, about his childhood but also northern legends and “fanciful” animal tales; historical lore of Meadow Lake and childhood memory of the

town; of the boreal forest and the ravages of fires; observations of today's deforestation, cultivation, fencing and road-building, and habitat loss. All this brings him to a lamentation, which he shares with Trevor Herriot and Don Gayton, of "the coming of farmers and foresters and community builders who pushed so many things out of the way in order to make a settlement....Homesteading stories were the closest thing to our creation myths." On the other hand – and this is the paradox and the dilemma – without the arrival of homesteaders and the changes they wrought on the land, "I could never have called this place home."

But something else obstructs the complacency of homeplace: the stories he *didn't* hear, the ones that the Native people told each other, likewise the Ukrainians, Hutterites, Cantonese Chinese, French, Jehovah's Witnesses, the black man in the pool hall, sick shut-ins. He knew *story* but not history, the fact, for example, that only an hour's drive away at Steele Narrows, the Crees fired the last, hopeless shots in the Resistance to white power in 1885. He heard nothing from the family story-tellers about how their "free" quarter-sections were staked out on what had been Cree territory, heard nothing of how the local reserves had come into being and under what conditions, or of the residential schools. Nor even much about the Great Fire of 1919, which burned continuously for two months in much of northern Alberta and Saskatchewan and destroyed Cree and Métis habitat: "most of them and their descendents eventually forgot what had been there before." In his memoir, then, Cariou tells us how his text is not just about an individual memory but also the recovery of a communal or collective memory.

In comparison with *Half-breed*, Cariou benefits from the evolution of the literary nonfiction genre since the earlier social realism of the Campbell project. In addition to the usual apparatus of nonfiction (library, museum and historical society, archives board and records office are all acknowledged), Cariou makes use of maps, family snapshots, and archival photos to flesh out the tale; employs dialogue as well as quotations from his own interviews with old-timers; proceeds explanatorily by anecdote; places entire "remembered" narratives within quotation marks; expresses a vivid point of view in descriptions; and achieves a high literary effect through language (the "curlicued rococo fonts" of his initials scraped into the frost on his window).

His work also has all the advantages of the discourses that have flourished in Can Lit since the 1970s: "There is a crisis of belonging in the world," Cariou announces. "We



are all restless; we are on the move. It is the age of migration and diaspora, the age of commuting.” No one occupies a fixed position anymore. The post-modern notion that identity is not embedded in socio-economic class or immutable ethnicity but in story/text means that story not truth has become the point, as “truth” can never be finally determined. “I believed I was not so much from a place as a story,” Cariou explains near the opening, “or rather a collection of stories mutually contradictory.” And so he narrates his memoir through other people’s stories as he remembers them, for in their telling he will understand “where I come from.” He hasn’t lived in Meadow Lake for years but that does not mean he cannot “reconnect” with the place. Through story we “discover a more fluid kind of belonging, one that melds memory and voice and sensation into a complex geometry of ourselves.”

The individual *and* collective memory which comes as the climax of Cariou’s story is the revelation of his Aboriginal ancestry shared with those same “sheepish” people he saw in Meadow Lake on the street corners (one is reminded of Maria Campbell’s memory of her family walking in town with their heads lowered), his grandmother, who had lived as a French woman but was descended from the Red River Métis . And what other secrets might be hidden in other untold stories? Where does he come from, really? He had always lived and been accepted as a white man, a choice not open to Maria Campbell: “In Meadow Lake belonging was written on your skin.” Cariou concludes his memoir with an acceptance of his identity as “a little of this and little of that; a child of the heterogeneous multitudes. I come from half the globe and I come from Meadow Lake,” a citizen of hybridity, fluidity, instability, thus leaving open who he may be in his next story.

Robert Calder (1941-), renowned scholar in modern British literature, has published in a broad array of genres, including biography (the Governor-General’s Literary Award-winning *Willie: The Life of W. Somerset Maugham*, 1989), the scholarly article, literary history (*Beware the British Serpent The Role of Writers in British Propaganda in the United States, 1939-1945*, 2004), popular history (*Rider Pride: The Story of Canada’s Best-Loved Football Team*, co-author, 1984) and, also in 2004, a memoir, *A Richer Dust: Family, Memory and the Second World War*.

*A Richer Dust* is Calder’s self-avowedly most personal book, which he acknowledges along with the help of those who are still alive and with memories of the

*dramatis personae* of his story and of the events into which they were plunged, global and personal. The memoir sits inside a larger story of the Second World War as Canada fought it in the Italian campaigns 1944-45. One of those soldiers was Calder's uncle Ken, but the memoir proper is an amalgam of childhood memories of Ken, Calder's parents and grandparents and of Moose Jaw in the 1950s, and of Calder's search in the 1990s for the story behind his much-admired uncle Ken's sudden death in 1945, shortly after demobilization.

As he begins his search, he knows his business: research in military files, coroners' statements, court records, and interviews. He learns much in these places, and this forms the substance of the narrative. But he acknowledges the limitations of research: the enigmatic figure of Ken's wife Margaret, who rejected him on his return from the war, "flits through these pages like a ghost." If he were writing fiction, he could have drawn her in all her psychological complexity, haunted by guilt or defiance. As it is, those who remembered her would not unburden themselves, and her mystery remains unsealed. Calder allows himself some musing and conjecture, about what uncle Ken might have meant, had he lived, to the growing Calder and his brother. And how he might have changed the course of domestic events had he lived long enough to become "old and infirm, but intensely proud" as a war veteran.

With each new corner Calder turns in pursuit of his uncle's story, he is forced to a re-examination of his own life and assumptions. He opens the army personnel file of his father, who had deserted the family in 1946 and who the son has refused to acknowledge even in the *Canadian Who's Who*, and discovers he takes a kind of "disconcerting" pride in his father, the exemplary officer.

But, as he tells us on an early page, he could not have known that "my search for my lost uncle would also become a search for my absent father. And, ultimately, for myself." It is the way of memoir: just *whose* life is really being remembered?

Along with his celebrated fiction, Rudy Wiebe (1934 -) has also produced a corpus of literary nonfiction, including *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (1989) and *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*, with Yvonne Johnson (1998). In 2006 he finally produced a memoir, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, which is an account of his early years on a Mennonite farm in a Mennonite settlement in the then-bush between North Battleford and Meadow Lake. The

family moved to southern Alberta in 1947 but Wiebe's early connection with Saskatchewan was never broken, especially once he learned that his birthplace was not so far from that of Big Bear near Fort Carlton in the North-West, the Plains Cree chief to whom he was to dedicate so much of his literary output.

But the world of *Of This Earth* is the insular and self-sufficient Mennonite family and extended family, church, and bush. The "Prologue" introduces Wiebe's voice in the present. He is aboard a ship on the Black Sea in 2004, either steaming toward or away from the Mennonite "homeland" in what is now southern Ukraine. His voice is warm with reminiscence and saturated with tenderness toward his subject: "Threescore and ten years ago my life began on the stony, glacier-haunted earth of western Canada."

This is not a story that requires research or verification to produce its effect, but Wiebe does acknowledge the obvious, that "childhood memory is always a family affair," and includes his thanks for his siblings' co-operation in his recollection of their shared past. He is also grateful for the work of the committee that produced two large volumes of local history, for the *Mennonite Low German Dictionary*, and for a copy of the application map for a "Pearl Lake School District" made in 1930 – all of which presumably acted as an *aide-mémoire*.

Like the novelist he is, Wiebe opens with a startling scene presented in the present tense, but he soon reveals that he is only reflecting on this memory ("This must have happened...before I turned three") and within a few more pages is including direct quotes from his conversations with surviving family members, citations from a *Maclean's* magazine article of 1932, and an adult's commentary on the very young boy who waved at the wagonsful of Cree and Saulteaux children driving by on the road allowance.

The conscious and vigilant intellect of the adult is another of Wiebe's narrative devices: he tests his memory with the evidence (a rereading of a folktale), he editorializes (a regional school inspector's "cover-your-ass report"), he mulls over peculiarities of Low German, he decodes old photographs ("our father stands tilted sideways [on a wagon of logs], peering down, content as ever to be a labourer on his own land, expecting nothing"). And, as with Cariou's memoir, the centrality of story and story-telling is underscored by the recurrent memory of *listening*.

Wiebe remembers the thought he had "one day," still a youngster, a fistful of earth in his hand: "Every bit of every single thing was always so *particular*...Moist, my

fingers the first ever to touch and squeeze it, like this.” At the other end of his life, now, sheer earthiness yields to the image of wind as “the divine moving within us” and the shivering of aspen leaves as “the long sound of creation, grieving.” Earth to earth?

Like Wiebe, Lorna Crozier (1948 -) comes to literary nonfiction having established herself in another genre, poetry in her case. In *Small Beneath the Sky: A Prairie Memoir* (2009) the book’s structure alternates between plain-spoken prose, her story-telling, and prose poems, odes to “first causes” such as light, dust and wind which, following Aristotle, are the “something beyond the chain of cause and effect, something that started it all,” as she explains in a note before her narrative begins. So, before there is the individual life lived in a particular time and place, the memoir, there are the primal, generative elements without whose force and activity no history or culture can happen, not even, it is implied, the modest story of a working class family in Swift Current, Saskatchewan from the 1950s to the 2000s.

Crozier does not make use of the usual “first cause” of nonfiction – research – except for the ransacking of her own memory. The narrating “I” is forcefully present. But so are the techniques of fiction, dialogue and the narrative arc, so that each chapter stands on its own even while advancing the story chronologically. The reader has an uncanny sense of the whole life while in fact reading only set pieces and character studies: the adventures and epiphanies of killing and cleaning a chicken, watching the double feature at the Eagle Theatre, dancing the first dance at grad with her father, attending her mother’s sick bed. Crozier’s tone in these chapters is high-spirited but rounded out in a series of compressed endings that are intensely felt. The memory of a swim in the bottom of the city pool, for instance, with a friend who would soon get pregnant and married, concludes in an evocation of Crozier’s own emerging erotic life, “though we didn’t know it then. In the game we played, how innocent our wet, almost naked bodies, bloodless and beyond harm.” Or the memory of her mother’s potato patch, which Lorna helped plant, dropping seed potatoes into the prepared holes, working well into the twilight, fills her with a remembered pride, and a pathetic fallacy: “They were *our* potatoes, and I had helped make them. I had seen their beginning in the moon’s frail light.”

As Crozier has commented in interviews about *Small Beneath the Sky*, “class” is not much written about or discussed in Canadian literature – superceded, one might suppose, by postmodern concerns about identity and self-consciousness. But in her

remembrances of a Swift Current childhood, it is precisely the *class* distinction of her family which is so vividly and compassionately conveyed, although it is the adult poet who is underlining it for us. Crozier doesn't go to kindergarten because "in those days, you had to pay for it." Her childhood home has a ramshackle garage and junk-filled yard, but "we weren't on welfare, we weren't *that* hard up." "On both sides of my family," there was a penchant for drink. There is an unapologetic clarity of observation in all such details as though the poet, a university teacher and revered artist who lives in Victoria, B.C., were weaving herself back into the warp and woof of her vastly more modest beginnings.

Crozier completes this account of her life-so-far with the death of her much-loved mother, a death that ravages the spirit of the daughter as it does the body of the mother. And then she returns to the "first causes," or rather the first cause that has set memory in motion: story. Words and land have become indistinguishable, she tells us: "Wherever you go, you speak with the earth on your tongue." And if we hear this speech, this poet's utterance, it is because the wind has brought it in, lengthening the vowels like a drift of dust.

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