

The Writer Reads

I grew up without television. Maybe this explains my voracious juvenile appetite for comic strips – of an elevated kind, of course: Illustrated Classic Comics, those coloured strips of narrative that moved smartly across the page like a film strip. (To this day I've read no other version of *Moby Dick*, *Don Quixote* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.) It certainly explains the fact that I had hours and hours of free time in the evenings and on the weekends not taken up watching television (although I did slip over to the neighbours' occasionally and binged on Ed Sullivan, Roy Rogers and Lucille Ball, so I wasn't entirely a pop culture illiterate). I played a lot of outdoor games, too, but mostly I read.

The bookmobile stopped at the bottom of the street. In winter – a vivid memory – my mother hauled my sister and me on the sled, her fur-trimmed boots breaking the crust of the new snow ahead of the sled runners, our excited breaths puffing out of our mouths, the buttery-yellow lights of the bookmobile's interior luring us like a beacon on Arctic tundra (it seemed that far away). We piled the books up to our chin.

Mother read books to us long after we could have read them for ourselves but that wasn't the point – *Winnie the Pooh*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Women*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Marie Chapdelaine* – sometimes from the soft-leathered, onion-skinned volumes of her own youthful library that were never illustrated. We played the 3-record set of 78s of a dramatic reading of *Treasure Island*, and the movie of the same name was the first one I was allowed to see on my own. My sister and I sat on either side of my mother and read together Ukrainian folk tales in that other alphabet I was learning to write at Saturday School – Cyrillic – and we sat on old Mr. Mason's lap every Christmas Eve for a reading of *T'was the Night Before Christmas*, chock full of pictures that showed us exactly how Christmas was “done” in other people's houses not in Edmonton, just as the series of novels I devoured about a young girl in an English boarding school showed me how other girls got an education. And I wanted theirs, not mine.

On my own I read Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I have Known*, which introduced me to the idea of human cruelty to animals, as did *Black Beauty*, although that story ended rather more happily; Nancy Drew mysteries, although I disdained the Cherry Ames nurse books as beneath my ambitions for myself; Greek and Norse myths but, curiously, never *Anne of Green Gables*.

But reading did not make me a writer until I read *The Black Stallion Revolts* by Walter Farley.

I was in grade four, had read all of the *Black Stallion* books, then produced for one of the writing classes a novel I had written, called *The White Stallion Revolts*. My father had typed it out and my teacher had helped me bind it in green construction paper and yellow ribbon, but it was no use.” You didn't make that up!” my sister announced after reading it. “You copied it!” “I did NOT!” I defended myself stoutly. “My horse is white and the boy is a girl!”

And in that moment, I would argue, this creative nonfiction writer was born.

I have often been accused of not reading fiction. This is not true. I have an entire set of shelves in my library where all the novels sit – those still waiting to be read – and which I visit on a rotating basis with all the other shelves, those dedicated to History, Current Affairs, Essays, Travel, Biography, and so on. Granted, this means I am reading three or four nonfiction books to every fiction title, but this stands to reason: I am often reading nonfiction as part of my research for my own book projects. And so I have built up a library of titles about history and politics in eastern Europe and the Balkans, about culture and civilization of Byzantium, about the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, about the history of the Canadian North-West and the fur trade, and about Canadian social trends. And in and around these books are those I have read just for the hell of it, most recently, for example, Rian Malan’s 1990 gut-wrenching memoir of his life as a South African journalist, *My Traitor’s Heart*.

But it would be disingenuous of me to claim only professional interest in reading nonfiction. The fact is, I’ve always been drawn to accounts of the actual as opposed to imagined world. The very first book I withdrew from the Woodcroft Library when I was given an Adult card was about the Second World War – I have no idea why – and even when I was reading fiction, I de-fictionized it, as with Aldous Huxley’s dystopian *Brave New World* which I read as a literal description of the liberation of women from the curse of compulsory child-bearing. (I was a feminist-in-the-making too.) The affairs of the world whirled around in my head as well as among peoples and nations, and so I wrote essays in my diary about the triumph of Fidel Castro over the swinish playboys of Cuba and about the burden of the “feminine mystique,” and joined the school’s United Nations club, and argued the winning side in a grade eleven debate (during math class) that John F Kennedy should be the next president of the United States. (It would be a few years yet before I took Canada seriously as an intellectual and literary subject.)

When I graduated from high school, I decided on Modern Languages (Russian and French) as my major and minor at university, and fantasized a career in the diplomatic corps: I would be in the Canadian embassy in Moscow where I would meet a titled Frenchman in the French embassy, would marry, and live in a chateau on the Loire. And that was the last time I was seriously engaged in “making something up.”

After that, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a case of deep immersion in movements of all kinds, all of which required vast bibliographies of nonfiction to assimilate. By the 1980s I was a working writer of magazine journalism and full-length nonfiction books, writing a kind of full-tilt boogie prose that I had mainlined direct from *Rolling Stone* and Norman Mailer’s *The Siege of Chicago* and *Armies of the Night*. It was called the New Journalism, and it was what I was put on earth to emulate.

Its practitioners say we “raid the toolboxes” of the other genres for whatever is useful – narrative, dialogue, stream of consciousness, lyricism – but it’s all in the service of the real world. That’s what I read, and that’s why I write.