

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF THE WGA

In 1980, when I attended the founding conference of the Writers Guild of Alberta, I had been back in Alberta for only five years, after a decade away. It astonishes me now to think that those five years had proved sufficient to graft me on the Alberta literary tree, for I had spent the best part of them lamenting my degrees of separation from Toronto. Toronto is where I was first published (in magazines), where I met the literary colleagues who would be lifelong friends (even after I left), and where I rubbed shoulders with established literati in national writers' organizations such as The Writers Union of Canada and the Professional Writers Association of Canada.

Yet there I was in Red Deer, in 1980 along with a small roomful of Alberta-based writers of all genres, of varying distinction and accomplishments and from a variety of communities, engaged in the task (as happens every couple of generations) of organizing writers into an entity that could be wielded on behalf of our collective interests. And there I was, saying "we Alberta writers" and including myself in the pronoun.

I wonder now when I first grasped that there was such a creature as a writer-in-Alberta? As a kid I read a book by Kerry Wood of Red Deer, although since this was a gift from an elderly British couple who up to then had given me big British books of fairy tales and Arthurian legends I was a bit nonplussed: could I take it seriously? I must have done, for all these years later I am still haunted by something I learned in reading it – that, if you are a kid living in Alberta during the winter, you must never ever lie down to rest in the snow, because you will get comfortable, fall asleep and *freeze to death*.

Some years later, at summer camp as a youthful counsellor, I was reading the bodice-rippers of G.W. Hardy, a perfectly respectable professor of Classics at the University of Alberta who seemed to have a sideline in writing steamy historical novels set in Ancient Rome. I recall reading them under the covers in the bunkhouse, but, again, I was not aware that they constituted Literature, which was a product of the enterprising businesses in the USA who sent packages of Books of the Month to homes in Edmonton. Literature was James Michener and Leon Uris.

In high school I took an elective English course from Elsie Park Gowan, but I failed to register that she was the real thing, a writer whose current work was being published and broadcast and produced, because she was after all only my teacher. Besides, she made fun in class of a "beatnik" poem I had written only partially tongue-in-cheek; in fact, I thought it rather clever and I did not forgive her her insensitivity to budding genius for a long time.

Then, in first year university, in English 200, I once again had the "real thing" as my teacher, the poet and playwright, Wilfred Watson, and this time the fact

registered deeply with me, so deeply I was utterly terrified of the man. When I was no longer his student, however, I did take some bewildered pleasure in his weird, McLuhenesque dramas that were presented at the appropriately off-beat Yardbird Suite. They made me feel daring.

And that was Alberta literature, until I returned a decade later and discovered it popping up all over the landscape. I mean both the writing that had passed my notice earlier (W.O. Mitchell, for instance, and Henry Kreisel and June Bhatia-Helen Forrester) and the writing that was pouring out of my generation. A typical moment was the launch party (at my apartment) for the collection of short stories, published, incredibly cheaply, by the newly-fledged NeWest Press (only one of George Melnyk's made-in-Alberta literary enterprises) and featuring work by what we would now call "emerging" writers: Candas Jane Dorsey, Aritha van Herk, Caterina Edwards, Elvina Boyko, Terese Brasen, Helen Rosta and myself, "selected" by Rudy Wiebe. Rudy was already an established figure – I had been assigned to interview him for a review in *Saturday Night* magazine while I was still living in Toronto; his book was *The Temptations of Big Bear* and I wrote the review fortified by a bottle of wine, I was so gob-smacked by the amplitude of his re-envisioned Alberta of the 1880s – and he and his family subsequently became hosts of inaugural meetings of the NeWest Institute and its forums at their lodge on Strawberry Creek (with Robert Kroetsch, another established not to say patriarchal figure who made frequent appearances in Alberta, famously hiding communal packs of beer in the woods whenever we gathered at the Creek, which was Mennonite and "dry").

Edmonton had its own "city" magazine, edited by Gordon Morash who would move to the *Edmonton Journal*, writers also delivered copy to Candas Dorsey and Reg Silvester at *The Bullet*, Ken McGoogan at the *Calgary Herald* would edit one of the best books pages in Canadian newspapers for awhile, the feminist movement had its magazine **[help! I cant remember what it was called]** edited by Sharon Batt, and its own co-operative bookstore, *Common Woman Books*, Mel Hurtig had his eponymous company HQ just north of the 105 street underpass and under one of the largest Canadian flags ever hoisted up a pole, Grant Kennedy's *Lone Pine Publishers* was, unbelievably, making money, Tree Frog Press was publishing children's books and the Edmonton Whole Earth Catalogue, the ideal introduction to the subversive possibilities of Edmonton's "alternative" arts scene, although we didn't think of it as alternative: it was the only scene. The artist-run galleries, the small theatres premiering Albertan playwrights (Calgarian Sharon Pollock's latest play was always a de rigueur theatrical event even in Edmonton), the local NFB production studio along with independent film companies such as Film West engaged local screenwriters, and, *mirabile dictu*, the provincial government dispensed funds to artists under the aegis of what we thought of as our very own cabinet minister, a Minister of Culture.

I lived in Edmonton and my reminiscences are necessarily mostly of that city, and I've only scratched the surface of own memories, let alone what everyone else remembers from their own particular experience of that era that Fil Fraser, himself an important "player" as a film producer at the time, called the "Camelot years."

It is exciting to recall those times in this anniversary year of the Writers Guild of Alberta. For the first time in several years I attended its AGM, and although only a fraction of its 1000-strong membership attended, the mood of "let's get on with" it was palpable, after a few enervating years of lost direction. I was reminded again of what the WGA, even more than The Writers Union of Canada, means to me: a purposeful in-gathering of writers and would-be writers from the big cities as well as from towns and farms who share the same "ecology," a society and economy and landscape and politics called Alberta. No one has to take the same responsibility for this place – this collective act of imagination, if you like – as we do, as every generation has (the Canadian Authors' Association Alberta branch, for example, will be celebrating its 85th anniversary next April).

But this is also a sobering thought. Twenty-five years ago, that "collective act of imagination" seemed to be shared with Albertans who weren't writers or artists but did seem to enjoy the fact we were in their midst (those of us who hadn't hived off to Vancouver or Toronto). The Peter Lougheed government simply assumed that there was a social consensus around the public benefit of the arts, and planned accordingly. Of course the Tories did come to their "enlightenment" thanks to the prodigious and persistent labour of artists operating on shoe-string budgets, but the point is I don't remember feeling, twenty-five years ago, the kind of "cultural cringe" I often feel in the current political climate: you know, that wince and shrug of an Oliver Twist with his porridge bowl held out in front of the Capo di Capi: "Please, sir, could I have a little bit more?"

This is a hard time to be an Albertan with a conscience. Have Albertans ever before lived in a time when there was such an indecent gap between the prodigious wealth of the few (I'm including the Tory caucus in this privileged minority) and the hardship and distress of the many? I don't just mean poor and homeless and unemployed and invalid individuals, I mean the "many" represented by our common goods such as agricultural lands, river basins, Crown forests, not to mention school boards, public libraries, publishers and literary festivals. As Calgary-based writer Andrew Nikiforuk wrote recently in the *Globe and Mail*, "When a society greedily eats its children's future, the social indicators generally look bad.... Alberta has the highest rate of car crashes and fatalities, a divorce rate that grew by 357 per cent in the last 40 years and one of the worst gambling records anywhere. Albertans now spend more on gambling (\$2-billion) than the province earns from oil revenues."

And we artists get to skim some nickles and dimes from that lucrative and shaming hoard.

Well, we in the WGA are not fair-weather Albertans. Looking back, I can see that it was pretty easy work to cobble together an organization of writers when the literary arts had their own publicly-funded Foundation, writers had home-town audiences (writing *All of Baba's Children* about the people of Two Hills kept me in Alberta), and the chilling planetary currents of neo-Con and globalistic arguments and mythologies had yet to circulate in our own back yard. The mettle of Alberta's writers will really be tested in the *next* twenty-five years.