

AFTERWORD

WRITING IN ALBERTA – UP, DOWN, OR SIDEWAYS?

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In 1967, when I was fifteen years old and living on a farm in Twin Butte, Alberta, I wanted to be a writer. About the only thing I knew about becoming a writer was that, if successful, I would not be the first one in my community. Andy Russell, who lived near Waterton and occasionally bought grain from us, had written the book *Grizzly Country*, which was a major success. I had attended a film-talk by Andy at the Twin Butte Hall, where he described speaking to the Explorers' Club in New York – and how much easier it was to impress the New Yorkers than the Twin Butte locals who were so much more inclined to argue on the subject of bears.

Besides Andy, there was Scotty Freebairn, a tiny bald man with a white fringe above his ears, who in my childhood used to visit his way around the clothing stores where he had formerly worked as a sales clerk. Scotty had moved to Pincher Creek from Scotland around 1900 and had written two books of poetry. He also wrote a memoir of Pincher Creek's early days, which his family published under the title *60 Years in an Old Cow Town*.

There were still more writers. Across the Waterton River were the Mormon villages of Hillspring and Glenwood. Herbert Harker, author of the novels *Goldenrod* and *Turn Again Home*, was born in Glenwood.

Though my own ambition to be a writer was tied to 1960s pop culture, and was excited into being by authors like Leonard Cohen, Ken Kesey, and J. D. Salinger, I was still aware, from the evidence of my own community, that writing was a possible career for a rural southern Albertan. Without the local practitioners, I may have felt I had to leave Alberta. Maybe I would have moved on to a different dream.

While pursuing a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Calgary, I was not shy about telling people I planned to be a writer. I had already, during high school, penned my first novel, a not unfaithful facsimile of *Catcher in the Rye*. My hero Ben Hollinger had been sent to a boarding school by indifferent parents, just like Holden Caulfield. I had seen one boarding school, the St. Mary's Catholic Residential School on the Blood Reserve. My friend Charlie Weaselhead of the St. Mary's Warriors had given me a tour during a basketball tournament. But, for my novel, Charlie's school did not seem right. I created one that was in a city. It had cruel prefects (whatever those were) and a girls' boarding school conveniently just across a park, so you could sneak over at night.

In 1972, when I graduated from the University of Calgary with a BA in economics, I still intended to be a writer and saved money for the backpack journey to Europe that I was sure would turn me into one. Less than a month before leaving, I went to a library in Lethbridge to look at travel books. I saw a poster advertising the Search-for-an-Alberta-Novelist Competition put on by the Alberta Government. I decided to enter it.

The existence of that contest was remarkable – in ways I did not understand at the time. I knew the Social Credit Party of Alberta had been defeated by Peter Lougheed's Progressive Conservatives in 1971, but I did not know how the look and content of government had changed. Lougheed's Conservatives created Canada's first provincial environment and culture ministries. In the culture ministry was a Literary Arts Branch under the direction of John Patrick Gillese. Mr. Gillese had raised a large family in Edmonton as a short story specialist in the era before television. The novelist competition was John Patrick's idea. Macmillan of Canada would publish the winner if they thought it good enough.

I did write the novel – a new one after the *Catcher in the Rye* one struck me as, well, unoriginal. I wrote *Lonesome Hero*, on trains, in youth hostels,

and in pubs. Understanding the impossibility of going further on my own, I bundled up the mass of scribblers and airmailed them home, begging my family to get it typed. Amazingly, heroically, they did.

Six months later, I received the news that my novel had not won the competition, but was one of two finalists out of 98 entrants. Jan Truss's *Bird at the Window* was the winner. Cecelia Frey's *Breakaway* was one finalist; *Lonesome Hero* was the other. The three novels were to be published by Macmillan in 1974.

When I returned to Canada in the summer of 1973, I heard that the Literary Arts Branch was putting on a weekend writers' workshop at Lethbridge. Of course I went. I met John Patrick Gillese and his assistants, and a nice fuss was made over me. I made another discovery that was not so much to my liking. In the first room full of people I entered, I was the youngest by two decades. However age-ist that may sound, any 21-year-old would have felt the same. I was hoping to make new friends who were writers; maybe even writer girlfriends. I did meet two people near my age: Donaleen Saul, an Edmonton film writer, and the playwright, Gordon Pengilly, from Stirling.

Over the next few years, I saw many of these weekend workshops. They had a style that no longer exists: patriotic, monarchist, always positive and hopeful. John Patrick Gillese's generation of writing friends were the speakers. They introduced one another flatteringly and at great length. For a budding satirist, it was a bit too nice, a bit square – like a fowl supper or a silver wedding anniversary.

But I *was* amazed by what the speakers at these workshop weekends had done in their lives. Dr. George Hardy, a U of A professor emeritus, had written popular historical novels about Ancient Rome. I was blown away to discover that Dr. Hardy had been with Sir Arthur Evans when Evans excavated the palace of Knossos on Crete in the 1920s.

Another writer I met was Lovat Dickson, former publisher of Macmillan UK. Dickson had published my childhood hero Grey Owl in England and had introduced Grey Owl to the Queen.

I met Rudy Wiebe in Red Deer. Rudy had just caused a fuss by breaking the positivism rule. He had told a packed house that, out of the whole bunch of them, maybe one would publish a book. He invited me to visit him at the University of Alberta English Department. A nice coincidence was that, when I did visit Rudy at U of A, he had just received the phone call telling him

that his novel *Temptations of Big Bear* had won the Governor General's Award for Fiction. It was a novel I would soon read and love, and be changed by.

These meetings were the best part of my experiences at the Literary Arts Branch writing workshops. But I was also growing irritated and frustrated by them. The lack of current examples was a problem; the absence of reference to Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Robert Kroetsch. The advice on how to write emphasized something called the family short story: Christian values and likeable characters. Meanwhile, I was reading *The Ginger Man*, George Macdonald Fraser's Harry Flashman series, *The Alexandria Quartet*. I wanted bawdy stories and unreasonable madmen in lead roles. I wanted black-humorous laughs and wrenching unfair sadness.

Lonesome Hero was published by Macmillan in 1974. Toronto was about the only place in Canada that an Alberta writer could be published in 1974. Macmillan of Canada and McClelland and Stewart were the giants of Canadian publishing, followed by a handful of branch plants and small experimental presses. But the big time was M&S: the domestic superstar upon whose list everyone wanted to be. Macmillan was almost as good, but Jack McClelland's company was always more in the news because of his flamboyance.

Even in 1974, the power of these two English-Canadian giants was under threat. M&S was losing money. The Canada Council was propping it up and getting annoyed. Canadian presses were under pressure to be more viable, which meant safer and more commercial publishing. A good reader of tea leaves could have seen that publishing new writers from the regions was something they were likely to lop off. I had arrived at the height of the good times, about a moment before the decline.

Our Alberta trio of contest books was reviewed all across Canada. Fool that I was, I thought that was normal. Kildare Dobbs said nice things about *Lonesome Hero* in the *Globe and Mail*. The novelty of the competition caused this interest. When the Seal Books first book award came along a few years later, the Alberta contest looked instantly puny. It would be a very long time before I had a *Globe and Mail* review again.

After 1974, I wrote like mad. I taught creative writing at Drumheller and Bowden prisons and tried to squeeze a novel out of it. When I came to Macmillan with the novel, it was declined. Douglas Gibson, who was with Macmillan back then, said something indicative of the state of change. The time when big Canadian publishers could nurture baby careers at a loss was

over. My kind would have to go away and learn to write finished books before they could be published. I went away and continued to try, but it was a time of darkness and despair. The better part was that I shifted gears and became a freelance writer of documentary and educational films: a living that would support me for decades.

It was also a time of meeting writers. In 1976, I received a letter from Robert Kroetsch, inviting me to join The Writers Union of Canada. Soon, I was attending TWUC AGMs in Ontario. All around me were Canada's finest writers: Atwood, Lawrence, Berton, Shields, Matt Cohen, Alistair MacLeod, Jane Rule. I probably made a social gaffe an hour, but the benefits outweighed making a fool of myself. I met Alberta writers there too: Merna Summers, Robert Kroetsch, and, after a couple of years in the union, Aritha van Herk. Aritha and Robert Sherrin were the first TWUC members to come along who were younger than I was. Aritha had recently won the SEAL award for *Judith*, with its astounding \$50,000 prize. I was no doubt envious, but also pleased that an Albertan had taken the plum.

By meeting these fellow Albertans, I discovered that there was a process in the works to see that Alberta's government presence in the literary arts became more literary. I heard about plans for publishing companies in western Canada. The feeling was that the federal publishing structure was holding us back, slowing us down, defining Western Canadian literature by the process of publish or reject. If we had our own presses, the future could be different.

An early result was NeWest Press, founded in 1977 by George Melnyk. NeWest Press was part of the NeWest Institute. This family of cultural vehicles sought to bring Western writing and thought more into visibility, with more independence from central Canadian editorializing of our content. Saskatchewan and Manitoba were ahead of Alberta. Coteau Books of Regina and Manitoba's Turnstone Press had started in 1975. These presses, along with Thistledown, Red Deer College Press, and Queenston House, were destined to give a new vitality and freedom to writing and publishing in Western Canada. They were important reasons why a powerful surge of literary activity took place.

In 1980, the Writers Guild of Alberta was founded. The founding meeting was in Calgary, in October. That summer, thirty-five Alberta writers had met in Edmonton to hammer out the concept of the guild. They donated the money that allowed the founding meeting to happen. Those involved included Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Merna Summers, Jan Truss, Miriam

Mandel, Chris Wiseman, Ted Blodgett, Edna Alford, Doug Barbour, Monty Reid, Aritha van Herk, Warren Graves, and Larry Pratt. My apologies to the rest, whose names elude me now.

There were 150 writers at the guild's founding meeting in October 1980. Rudy Wiebe was elected first president. It was a time of excitement and wild fun. That weekend I completed the circle of friends I had long been looking for. Among others, I met Wade Bell, Diane Schoemperlen, Mary Riskin, Joan Clark, Monty Reid, Candas Dorsey, Reg Silvester, and Rhona McAdam.

One of the first projects of the guild was "The Travelling Nude." The name was that of a Henry Kriesel story about a woman who travels from town to town to pose nude for art classes. Our traveling nude would be a roving writer-in-residence. The first one was Gloria Sawai and she went to the town of Killam.

The guild was a force: a blend of senior, mid-career, and beginning writers, all committed to community and improvement of our literature and our lives as writers. From the first, we wanted an Alberta literary foundation at arm's length from government, where writing grants could be decided by peer juries. The idea began its grudging progress through government.

I was on the second board of the guild when Edmonton poet Ted Blodgett was president. It was the year the WGA awards program was initiated. It was Ted's idea to name the awards after famous literary pioneers. It was humbling that Ted, an immigrant from the U.S., had names in mind for every award: Stephan Stephansson, Ross Annett, Howard O'Hagen, George Bugnet, and Wilfred Eggleston. The first four presidents of the guild were Rudy Wiebe, Ted Blodgett, Joan Clark, and Chris Wiseman. The first executive director was Mary Riskin (now Mary Walters) who many credit with enabling the guild to survive its early years.

The Alberta Foundation for the Literary Arts was founded in 1984. Culture Minister Mary LeMessurier had created a steering committee to work on the foundation concept and many guild members sat on that committee. I was on it for a short while, with Rudy Wiebe and Doug Barbour. John Patrick Gillese was present at the meetings, and it was clear that his vision of Alberta literature and his power over Alberta literature were being curtailed. Much as I liked John Patrick, and much as I had benefited from his arts branch programs, this was a necessary change. The founding of AFLA was a revolution, and like all revolutions was at times messy, unkind, and gloating. John Patrick's fondness for digging in the rural lands for

writers was an important counterbalance to the university-based approach to building our literature. But the guild was better at understanding that literary writing was the respected writing of the world, not some pointy-headed closet activity. The guild brought everyone together; respected everyone; listened to everyone.

The first executive director of the Alberta Foundation for the Literary Arts was George Melnyk. Based on lottery funds, the foundation was almost everything we wanted. It was well funded. It would decide grants by peer jury. Was it arm's length? About as arm's length as such a body can be. The composition of the board was determined by government, but we did manage to get poet Chris Wiseman appointed to the board in its early years. Eventually, in 1991, the government wanted and took tighter control. AFLA was rolled into one big arts foundation called AFA (Alberta Foundation for the Arts). There would be an erosion of the literary arts budget and an absence of writers on the board. But the basic peer jury principle has survived, albeit through many challenges.

This thirty-year story has made it only as far as year ten. But, from my vantage, those first ten years do seem to have been the crucial ones. The WGA, AFLA, and the first prairie presses were the institutions that allowed us to grow. My life as a writer has been an Alberta career first, a Canadian career second. The Alberta writing institutions, government and civil, have nourished me more than federal and central Canadian ones. The Writers' Union of Canada has been an important factor in my life, but no more so than the Writers Guild of Alberta.

When I did start publishing again after my first novel, the next four books of fiction were published in Alberta and Saskatchewan. I edited two anthologies of Alberta writing: *Alberta Bound* and *The Road Home* (both published by Alberta presses).

I remained active with TWUC and the WGA. I have over the years served on three TWUC councils and four WGA boards. I was president of the WGA in 1996. The popularity of the provincial guilds was occasionally seen as a threat and impediment to federal writing institutions, and I remember a tremendous argument I had in the Toronto airport with an Ontario TWUC person who felt something should be done about that. I remember saying, "You leave the prairie guilds alone. It's none of your damn business if we prefer them and feel better served by them." It still makes me mad. A whole literature was flowering out of our regionalism: Sawai, Summers, Hollingshead, Walters, Dorsey, Bell, Bishop, McAdam, Silvester, Jakober, Alford, Wiseman,

Clark. I could go on for several lines more and not run out of names. Saskatchewan had, if anything, a longer list of writers that its provincial guild had fostered. To have all that perceived as anti-national, un-Canadian was truly infuriating – as if we were to blame for the fact that the rest of Canada wasn't as interested in reading us as we were.

But if writing careers were being fostered regionally in Alberta and on the prairies generally, it begs the question, "What kind of writing careers?" It did seem at times that we were doomed to small careers and readerships, but that too began to change with the years. Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe had led the way for Albertans into the winners' circle of national awards in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the parade resumed and lengthened. Looking at the Governor General's Awards for Literature, Rudy Wiebe and Robert Hilles won in fiction and poetry in 1994; Greg Hollingshead won for fiction in 1995; Ted Blodgett won for poetry in 1996; Gloria Sawai won for fiction in 2002. All of those people were living in Alberta at the time of their awards.

In the year 2000, my own novel *The Trade*, fifteen years in the works, was nominated for the Giller Prize and won three Alberta awards. *The Trade* was my eleventh book. In 2008, my novel *The Great Karoo* was nominated for the Governor-General's Literary Award.

The current generation of Alberta writers and artists has a different sense of identity. The young writers I work with at the Banff Centre, where I direct the Wired Writing Studio, write about their adventures and work in places like Thailand, Guatemala, and the Hindu Kush. They wish to be global writers, and I wish them well even if I will never perceive of myself that way. Writing about my region, past and present, is what works for me.

Finally, on a note of humility, I recognize that this history must be rather like the ones I listened to at the Alberta Literary Arts Branch weekend workshops of the early seventies, the ones I found so pointlessly autobiographical and square. Maybe all I really have to say to younger writers, critics, and theorists is that tradition is important. Whether the tradition you choose is local, regional, national, continental, or global is up to you.