“O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure! Of no one has less been expected, and no one has had a greater sense of well-being…. For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.”

— Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”

“What else is there but the dream?”

— Robert Kroetsch, Alibi

On 13 February 1947, Eric Harvie became a collector. He had received a telephone call bearing the news that the drilling team at his Leduc No. 1 site had struck oil. Over the years, while working as a lawyer, Harvie had purchased the mineral rights to almost half a million acres of Alberta land, from Vermillion on the Saskatchewan border into the interior of the province, and
stretching beyond Edmonton. The Leduc site happened to be situated on land that he had optioned out to Imperial Oil, and his royalties were substantial. This was the first spurt of what would become the veritable geyser of his oil wealth: when the belly of the same Devonian formation that fed Leduc No. 1 bloated with subsequent proximal wells, he found himself in a financial position where he could satiate his desire for almost anything in the world. Instead of one particular thing, however, Eric Harvie developed a desire for everything in the world.

It is not exactly accurate to propose that Harvie became a collector the moment he hung up the phone after that call from the president of Imperial Oil, for in fact, at the age of fifty-five, Harvie had already been a collector for most of his life. The vast array of Aboriginal artifacts that he had accrued made his basement resemble what biographer Fred M. Diehl refers to as “a 19th century pawn shop.” His sister-in-law Marjorie believed the hobby to be genetic, as other Harvies from his hometown of Orillia, Ontario, had been “pack-rats”; his son Donald claimed that his father was not so much a collector as simply a man who “wouldn’t throw anything away.” Harvie himself confirmed his propensity to hoard in a rare interview shortly before his death with Peter C. Newman, in which he urged the writer to “[n]ever throw away old socks, old underwear or old cars.” While such a statement certainly demonstrates Harvie’s steadfast inclination to salvage, it does not begin to articulate the enormity, in both size and historical significance, of the collections he amassed and eventually left in trust to his beloved Alberta; with donations totalling more than one hundred and fifty thousand objects, Harvie established the foundation for what is today the largest museum in Western Canada, the Glenbow. In Audacious and Adaman: The Story of Maverick Alberta, Aritha van Herk suggests that the spectre of Harvie, “the inspired and inspiring ghost of the ‘eclectic collector,’ haunts the province.” In this essay, I will explore what remains in the wake and legacy of such a collector; on one level the collection’s spectator is intrigued simply by the display—its contents, its assembly, and any affiliated information or commentary. On another level, though, a curiosity is aroused, or an interest piqued, by the spectator’s awareness that the display did not arrange or collect itself autonomously: who/what looms behind the collection? What remains unknown or private about the public collection? I will suggest how this “haunting” is crucial to our understanding that Harvie’s collection—like all collections—has a double meaning as a history of objects that has been shaped and informed by the history of the collector. This layered meaning manifests itself through the resplendent reconsideration of Harvie’s collection (and Harvie as collector) in Alberta-born Robert Kroetsch’s 1983 novel Alibi. But before I discuss how Harvie’s collection is unpacked by this postmodern fiction, I feel it pertinent to provide background on what is known about Harvie as collector.
Faced with his sudden wealth, yet middle aged and determined to die penniless, Harvie decided he would direct his passion for collecting toward “the research, assembly, preservation and display of Western Canadian history and more.” He established the privately funded Glenbow Foundation in 1954, hired a team of local consultants, caretakers, and curators, and contracted scouts all over the world to join him in the considerable task of collecting for this cause. During the inaugural years of the Glenbow, its primary mandate was “to collect, not to exhibit,” until Harvie opened the Glenbow Foundation–Alberta Government Museum to the public in 1964. Two years later, he officially turned the whole Glenbow Foundation—all of its findings, plus an additional five million-dollar investment in the collection—over to the province of Alberta, while his Riveredge and Devonian charitable foundations continued to support the museum.

In addition to consciously preserving the momentous history of Western Canada, Harvie also endeavoured, in no small way, to bring the history of the rest of the world to the West. Diehl quotes Harvie as stating, “I can afford to travel the world and see these things but where is the average youngster growing up in the prairies ever going to see a suit of armour?” Frances W. Kaye lauds the “depth and … greater context” that this global scope produced for the Glenbow Museum’s audiences. She suggests, “Even Harvie’s most eclectic
objects, collected out of any coherent context, served the purpose of bringing the globe to Alberta.”11 For example, in addition to First Nations headdresses, Harvie acquired military paraphernalia, Crown jewel replicas, and even undergarments once owned by Queen Victoria.12 While he stored away taxidermic specimens and minerals indigenous to his own region, mounted butterflies were shipped to him from overseas, and his vast collection of international artwork and antiquarian books grew steadily. In wanting to bring home to Alberta what average citizens did not have the financial resources to go and see themselves, he created a Western Canadian narrative comprising what lay both within and without Western Canadian history itself.

According to Hugh A. Dempsey, the Glenbow’s chief curator emeritus who started working in the archives department in 1956, Harvie’s staff (secretly) had their own categories for classifying their boss’s seemingly incongruous collections: while certain acquisitions could be considered “Canadia,” others, less easily labeled by national or historical adjectives, were regarded instead as “Harvieana.” In Treasures of the Glenbow Museum, Dempsey states:

Harvie’s travels, often on winter vacations, took him to such places as the Mediterranean, Europe, and the West Indies. Speaking of his Caribbean tours, former law partner George Crawford commented that “For a while it seemed every time he went on vacation he’d rape an island.”13

In more recent years, “Harvieana” has proven a complication for curators who have been forced to decide what the museum can afford to keep. Patricia Ainslie, curator of art emeritus and former vice-president of collections for the Glenbow, was part of a management and strategy team that, from 1993 to 2006, developed several initiatives to ensure that the museum could remain afloat despite being weighed down financially by its abundance of artifacts. At the time of this committee’s creation, the museum was beginning to wither under tremendous debt, and the threat of bankruptcy was looming; when Ainslie published her article “Deaccessioning as a Collections Management Tool,” the Glenbow held approximately 1.3 million objects in need of care and attention.14 As the article’s title proclaims, one of the strategies that Ainslie and fellow team members employed in order to regain stability was the deaccessioning of select international collections. Ainslie recognized that “Harvie collected with the passion and enthusiasm of a collector in the true Victorian sense of the word, and not with the professional eye of a curator”; as a result, “[c]ertain collections have outstanding range and depth, while others lack cohesion, focus, and relevance to Glenbow’s mandate.”15 Some regarded the plan as controversial, as it involved selling off the collections that had been Harvie’s gift to Alberta rather than disseminating
the relics throughout other museums and galleries in the province. However, deaccessioning was deemed necessary to prevent the possibility of the absolute diffusion of what was by then renowned as the museum in the West. This approach to saving the Glenbow involved reassessing the coherence of a collection and defining a clear aesthetic that would proclaim, by the rationale of these assessments, which objects belonged under the Glenbow’s roof and which did not.

Ainslie states that museums are not “static, fixed institutions. They must be dynamic and respond to our changing environment.” In a twist of irony, this very flux speaks to Harvie’s ultimate philosophy of acquisition: the constant and effervescent inquisition into what can be collected is a continual process that, in many ways, resists a conclusion. Harvie’s emphasis on process as in some ways beyond product was becoming, by the mid-twentieth century, characteristic of the more general creative processes of collection and narration in the cultural and sociopolitical spheres of Canada writ large. Jonathan Kertzer, in Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada, reflects how—in this same era of Harvie’s collecting renaissance—rather than ascertaining a definitive Canadian voice or consciousness, “several critics were claiming that only a tentative/unending/fruitless quest for authenticity defines [Canadian] literature” and also that it is “[t]he questing itself [that] grants authenticity, even when it is unsuccessful.” If we consider that Harvie’s life as a questing collector, his methods as a collector, and his collections in and of themselves all intertwine to constitute their own historical narrative, his story begins to lack the perceivable fixed borders that govern traditional conceptions of the fixity of things collected. Rather than a completed record or a closed system, the collection is an exhibit in and about process; the collection’s very ability to continue to exhibit the past in the ever-changing context of the present makes it continually relevant.

Emphasizing the interdependence between the search and the sought-after is at the core of Linda Hutcheon’s study of historiographic metafiction in The Canadian Postmodern. She suggests that this literary genre “no longer operates entirely at the level of product alone, that is, at the level of the representation of a seemingly unmediated world, but instead functions on the level of process too.” After all, Harvie was always just as interested—biographer Diehl in fact argues that he was “more interested”—in the race than in the prize.” As a result, the posthumous attempt to know, fully, Harvie’s life as a collector is futile. While the Glenbow’s artifacts testify to this life, their trajectories from their place of origin to their placement in the collection are not all recorded. Even those items that are mentioned in correspondence or listed in inventories inevitably have certain threads and traces that have escaped documentation, a subtext concerning their arrivals and departures that hovers like the ghost van
Herk senses in Alberta’s cultural history. And it is indeed both subtext of the collection and spectre of the collector that haunts Robert Kroetsch’s curiously “fictional” novel *Alibi*.

*Alibi* is about a somewhat maladroit scout working for an affluent Calgary oilman-turned-collector. *Alibi* troubles the concept of collecting because everything and everyone in the story can be considered collectible, or themselves a collection: desire, disguise, and doubling crowd a narrative that refuses coherence and extols chaos. But what Kroetsch’s *Alibi* demonstrates is how the life and work of Harvie as a collector is its own historiographic metafiction and can itself be considered and read as a collection. Accordingly, this essay takes a look at two historiographic metafictions of Harvie’s life as a collector: his correspondence with his scouts contained in the Glenbow Archives and the glorious aggrandizement of that relationship between collector and agent in Kroetsch’s *Alibi*. Both archive and fiction contribute to and reshape testament to Harvie’s larger-than-life persona as a collector. What these historiographic metafictions demonstrate is that Harvie lives on through his collections, specifically because as collections they present an infinite number of narratives. Every subsequent interpretation reorders, and certainly rejuvenates, the past in the context of the present by participating in the continual reconsideration of the objects Harvie collected, how these objects were obtained, and why and with whose assistance.
Hugh Dempsey recalls that one of the first directives of the Glenbow Foundation—and, it seems, the most quotable—was Harvie’s order to his staff in the early years of the organization: "I want you to go out and collect like a bunch of drunken sailors!” The utterance of this command has achieved infamy in its repetition; it is cited often within publications about Eric Harvie. The frequency of its reference renders what might have been something said simply in passing, or out of frustration, or possibly in a rare moment of facetious humour into an iconic statement illustrative of the workings of the mind of the collector, wherein, according to Walter Benjamin, there always resides a kind of madness. Benjamin, who theorized at length about collecting and collectors, notes in his self-reflective article “Unpacking my Library” that

there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership ... to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate.

Therefore, while Harvie’s proposed “intoxicated” acquiring methodology would likely incite initial disorder, Benjamin’s conception of the collector suggests that Harvie invested in things once they were at the stage of being collected, when it would be up to his discretion how they could be reordered. Jean Baudrillard also refers to the collected object becoming abstracted from its original, utilitarian function—a weapon that will no longer be used in battle serves a strong example. Additionally, according to Baudrillard, not only do objects become “property” and are collected according to the “passion” of the collector, but furthermore they are “things of which [the collector is] the meaning.” The meaning of Harvie’s collections is doubled: Harvie collected in order to preserve, and ultimately present, Western Canadian history, but these collections also reflect certain preferences, choices, and desires: that is, Harvie’s agency in the gathering act. The collector, in this way, lives on in his or her collection.

I do not want to blur inaccurately the concept of collection (which has an inherent predisposition to disorder and promotes the possibility for relentless reordering) with that of the archive (which considers the previous disposition of objects and abides to order and regulations). At the same time, the Glenbow’s archive of Harvie’s personal notes, memoranda, correspondence, agendas for meetings, photographs, newspaper clippings, and so on provides a crucial ap-
pendix to his collections on display, one that speaks to not only the objects’ individual histories but also the contexts behind their respective accruals. Consider Walter Benjamin’s invaluable personal archive: while many lament the irretrievability of what was speculated to be his final manuscript, lost along with the briefcase upon his person when he made his fateful trek across the Pyrenees in 1940, throughout his life he strategized the survival of the large spectrum of his writing and collecting life, leaving “manuscripts, notebooks, and printed papers in the custody of friends and acquaintances in various countries.” As for Harvie—born, like Benjamin, in 1892—the continued engagement with his collecting oeuvre has been made possible by the materials preserved within the Glenbow Archives that narrate some important details concerning his collecting practice.

When John Gilroy, a British artist who painted portraits of both the Queen and the Harvie family, sent an unsolicited portrait of Harvie to him, Harvie requested that Gilroy remove this portrait from the collection of paintings that he had commissioned. He insisted, in a letter he wrote to Gilroy on 16 December 1962, “I am really not interested in having the second portrait of myself. One I think is enough, particularly when it is such a good one.” (A digital version of this “good one” can be found on the Glenbow website, alongside the “History of Glenbow Museum.”) One portrait of himself may have been enough, but Harvie did require people to double for him, all over the world, as collecting agents, bidding and acquiring for the Glenbow Foundation on his behalf. As Kaye states, “Eric Harvie was certainly an autocrat, a one-man band, but he did not operate in a vacuum. He had his family, his comrades, and his employees to support and guide him.” This was fortunate, as illness and old age eventually prevented Harvie from putting his own boots to the ground in search of treasure. Peter Cotton, an architect from Victoria, British Columbia, responded with great enthusiasm to Harvie’s invitation to be an agent for him, writing on 15 January 1963: “Were I to take your injunction seriously I could spend all my time, cheerfully, in such a pursuit; to our mutual advantage.” Harvie, the collector with his face on the cover of every provincial paper, thanked by government officials and corporate moguls alike, could never have accomplished his mission were it not for the assistance of his many agents fervently collecting on his behalf.

Despite intense protection of his own privacy and his frequent absence from his home in Calgary on either collecting missions or vacations (and the two often collided), Harvie kept up with professional correspondence to his scouts. His courteous and detailed letters often carried the generous tone of the one he sent to H. Russell Robinson, keeper of The Armouries of the Tower of London, on 22 January 1963: “We don’t care to put any limit on the amount you spend or the time you spend on the individual items. I suggest that as you begin to run shy
of funds, you give us a little warning and we will either renew credit or otherwise." The largesse of this gesture may seem in keeping with the bold gathering methods of "a bunch of drunken sailors," but in the follow-up correspondence with his scouts, Harvie or others in the foundation (such as Vice-President E. J. Slatter) were meticulous with their appraisal of artifacts, should they reach the stage of being considered for his collection. Harvie was acutely concerned with the quality and authenticity of the items that he was receiving, often needing photographs or sketches to preview objects before their acquisition. He regularly negotiated over the price of collections and compulsively checked up on the shipping of these packages. It would seem that, given such fastidious protocols, Harvie was a collector in control. But the collection has a way of becoming more outstanding; Harvie’s dream to create a narrative of Western Canadian history resulted in some collections that were themselves extremely dreamlike.

The Harvie fonds contain over a decade of correspondence with Robert Wotherspoon, mayor of Inverness, vice-chairman of the Scottish Tourist Board, proprietor of several hotels and theatres, and self-affirmed eyewitness of the Loch Ness monster. In a Calgary Herald article from 28 October 1957 that published Wotherspoon’s “Nessie” claim, Wotherspoon is quoted as comparing the sighting to “a hole in one in golf. Once it happens to you, everything else seems comparatively unimportant”—an ironic statement, considering that Wotherspoon used his encounter as a platform to promote what was most important to him, Scottish tourism, informing readers that the current season was “phenomenal—the best we have ever had.” Once acquainted with Wotherspoon, Harvie tested the possibility that he could collect a place itself. While Wotherspoon obtained antique furniture on Harvie’s behalf, Harvie in turn became Wotherspoon’s compatriot in matters of all things Scottish; he fleshed out his warehouses and his city with items of Scottish heritage and implemented regular lectures and film screenings sponsored by the local St. Andrews Society. Perhaps most famously, in 1967, Harvie arranged to have an exact copy of the twenty-seven-foot equestrian statue of Robert the Bruce he had commissioned for the historic site of Battle of Bannockburn near Stirling, Scotland, three years earlier to be erected just below the entrance to Calgary’s Jubilee Auditorium.

In addition to all things Scottish, the transplantation of place plays a large part in who Harvie was and what he was capable of as a prosperous possessor. In 1961 Harvie purchased the entire Frontier Ghost Town, “a carnival and museum of western Canadian History which was based in Vancouver.” The town, once collected, was valued for its contents but also for its tremendous size. Dempsey recalls a Glenbow employee describing the collection as “most interesting” because its “historical value is beyond imagination. I think I have looked at more than six thousand items and there seems no end to it.”
Additionally, on the border of his own city of Calgary, Harvie created Heritage Park. As Kroetsch describes in his non-fiction work Alberta, “the Foundation has helped recreate the West itself in a sixty-acre prairie settlement.” By having the funds and means to acquire buildings such as a blacksmith shop that once existed in Airdrie and a general store from Claresholm, Harvie enabled objects from the past to become part of a fully functioning historical village and literally to take on new life in the present. The resulting narrative of Heritage Park is completely surreal; like the Frontier Town, it is a carnival in which people from the present participate in a ritual of the historical West that has been resurrected, rebelling against the notion that certain boundaries between the past and the present cannot be transgressed.

For Harvie and Wotherspoon, men of wealth and power, nothing was too large to be owned, moved, claimed, and re-established as part of their collection’s narratives. When their authority was threatened by any kind of check, they simply would not acquiesce. Later in life, both men took frequent trips for their health and were often ordered by physicians to lessen their workloads. With reference to this, shortly before his death, Wotherspoon wrote to Harvie on 26 September 1962: “I find all these rules and regulations rather irksome, but I am informed that if I do not strictly adhere to them, a worse fate awaits me.” There is something compelling about the phrasing of this sentence, for of course the fate implied—death—awaited Robert Wotherspoon regardless. But the subjunctive tissue within this statement, the “if,” epitomizes a fascinating quandary for collectors, particularly those endowed with wealth who are used to testing their capabilities: by resurrecting the past in the present, does the collector outwit an end to things and perhaps, in a sense, death? But while the collector may live on in his or her collection, the collected object, according to Benjamin, enters “the scene, the stage, of their fate.” Even if seemingly static objects are given new meaning, and thus figuratively spun back into life by the collector, they are physically put under arrest: if touched only by cotton-gloved curatorial hands, if viewed, usually through the barrier of glass casing. A curator’s label exalts the significance of the object on display, but when appropriated by a collector, objects unavoidably undergo a certain kind of amputation; the removal and repossession of artifacts creates a severance with the past lives of things, with previous owners and former habitats, whether known or unknown.

Where Harvie’s attributes of “avid enthusiasm, boundless curiosity, and the financial backing to indulge his passion” as “a collector in the grand Victorian style” are documented, the capitalist complicities to his collecting have been critiqued less directly—most likely because Harvie’s intentions were benevolent ones, ardently allegiant to the preservation of history. Harvie was gathering artifacts in order to tell a story to, and about, Western Canada. If his priorities
altered the nature of the artifacts at all, it was read as Harvie-as-collector “becoming a part” of the objects’ story; in 1964 Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta J. Percy Page chose the following Francis Parkman quotation to describe the actions of Harvie at the opening of the Glenbow Foundation–Alberta Government Museum: “[F]aithfulness to the truth of history involves far more than research…. The narrator must seek to imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time…. He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or spectator of the action he describes.” Harvie valued objects “as the scene, the stage, of their fate” because he saw the value in this threshold between past and present: he could access things from the past, and have them stand for history by exhibiting them in the present.

For Benjamin, this is the essence of the collected: not an inert product but one that is representative of a scene or a stage within a quest, thus signifying a “fate” only in the sense of a conduit for a new beginning. As Benjamin states, “I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.” For Harvie, as it would have been for fellow collector and scout Wotherspoon, the alternative kind of fate, the “worse fate” to suffer, is the erasure of a life’s work, of all historical testimony. This presents the quintessential predicament of the collector: to fear death, yet to become enticed by, seduced by, if not to eventually commit full-on to, the “if,” the questioning of whether the “worse fate” can be thwarted, outlived, or perhaps just traded for the “fate” of the collection. Extraordinarily, the collector lives two lives: one is a life made manifest through the story of collection that may be continuously reappraised, given a new beginning, even after the other life, the one led in public, has ceased to exist. The former is the life of Eric Harvie that surfaces in Kroetsch’s novel *Alibi*.

**Within: Acquiring an Alibi**

Harvie’s initial connection to Canadian literature was forged when as a boy he mowed the lawn of Stephen Leacock in Orillia, Ontario. In fact, the Harvie family believed that one of the characters in Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) was rather blatantly based on Eric’s father, and they resented his depiction as grim and humourless; since the anecdote is recollected by Harvie’s very impassioned biographer, Diehl, it is difficult to distinguish to whom the resentment truly belongs. What definitely seems to be missing is an acknowledgment of Leacock’s work as not just a dig at a community but a parody of one, and that any resemblances to real people are complicit with the apparatus of fiction. Several decades after the Harvies’ first possible appearance in fiction, Eric Harvie himself materialized in the work of Robert Kroetsch.
Once again, the real life persona was satirized and exaggerated, this time in a carnivalesque fashion typical of much of Kroetsch's writing. It is appropriate that for Alibi, which according to Kroetsch's early hand-scrawled notes for the novel is "the story of a man who is looking for a spa," Kroetsch employs a tradition that goes back to the "baths … of ancient Greece and Rome." The implications of the carnival on literature have been widely theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, whose philosophies have in turn inspired Kroetsch's approach to prose fiction. Kroetsch's novels blend binaries, blur borders, and experiment with the fracturing of a character into two or more often conflicting selves. According to Bakhtin, "everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated, it is, strictly speaking, not even played out; its participants live in it." The carnival—an entity collected by Harvie himself in the Frontier Ghost Town, "a carnival and museum of western Canadian history," and created by Harvie with Heritage Park, a masquerade of "how the West was once"—is itself a collection.

As creator of carnivalesque fictions, Kroetsch is a collector himself; he is a writer who writes prose in fragments, contemplating how they might reappear and reinvent themselves throughout a text. Additionally, Kroetsch frequently incorporates the figure of the collector into his writing: Demeter Proudfoot as biographer collects the pieces of Hazard LePage's disorderly life in The Studhorse Man (1970), while scientist William Dawe collects dinosaur bones in Badlands (1975). Before featuring the collector in his work, Kroetsch had portrayed a collection both literally and literarily in the first 1977 edition of his long poem Seed Catalogue, in which the poems are printed on faint facsimiles of the pages of one of the artifacts housed in the Glenbow Museum, an actual 1917 seed catalogue. With almost a decade between Alibi (1983) and Kroetsch's novel The Puppeteer (1992), the latter picks up (if only to subvert) the identities of the characters and the crux of the storyline of the former; but in Alibi, the trace of Eric Harvie is still perceivable if not recognizable.

The narrator of Kroetsch's Alibi is the libidinous William William Dorfen (who most often just goes by "Dorf"), a former museum curator-turned-agent for a god-like collector. Jack Deemer is this collector, a "millionaire Calgary oilman whose pastime it was to collect anything that was loose." Like Harvie, Deemer is described as a private man, sometimes speculated to be living on a ranch somewhere although no one is certain where. He remains a recluse, hidden away in his Calgary mansion: "He's simply a name. And a legend, of course; the richest of the many rich men spawned in the Alberta oil patch." Although he remains unseen, Dorf states, "Everyone knew about [Deemer], the man who had so much money, the man who made such a fortune in Alberta oil he was collecting collections. Collecting the world, people said. That's the
way they liked to put it; the statement made them part of the conspiracy.”50 Just as Harvie was known to purchase entire collections sight unseen, Deemer “simply collects. It is not a matter of what to collect. He has that kind of money.”51 Deemer never communicates with Dorf in person but rather through written correspondence and the occasional phone call. *Alibi* opens with a telegram from Deemer: “Find me a spa, Dorf.”52 And so Dorf’s mission throughout the novel is to find his boss the perfect naturally flowing spa.

Not only does Dorf’s employer seem to provide a blatant allusion to Harvie, but the narrative also opens at the Glenbow Museum itself. Dorf is attending an art show, where he meets up with Karen Strike, an aptly named photographer and documentary-filmmaker who is a prominent figure in both *Alibi* and *The Puppeteer*. Dorf likens Strike to Deemer: “Like my boss, she’s a lunatic on the subject of history.”53 Additionally, Kroetsch invites comparisons to a member of the crew responsible for the Glenbow through the character Fish; the actual Jim Fish, according to Kaye, was one of the Glenbow employees whose “formidable managerial skills” were “challenged” by Harvie’s less than conventional “tastes and methods.”54 Jim Fish was the Glenbow’s personal accountant during Harvie’s tenure with the foundation, while Kroetsch’s Fish is no accountant but rather a tour-bus driver in the mountains; he used to work for Deemer in some geological capacity, but the specifics of his job and his reasons for leaving are obscured by a conflicting backstory that ebbs away from him as he quaffs beer and swaps stories with tourists at a local pub. But what has perhaps dissuaded any published literary critic of *Alibi* from discussing its allusions to the Glenbow or Eric Harvie is that Jack Deemer embodies Harvie in an obscure and slightly splintered way. Deemer, of course, gestures toward the legacy of Harvie, as an oilman and reclusive benefactor to a collection of considerably ostentatious proportions. However, in his research notes for the novel, Kroetsch considers whether there should be a moment in the novel when Dorf visits “the Glenbow to study the collections of Deemer’s great rival, Harvie,” or when Deemer plans “to make an even greater collection” than that of “Harvie [no]”55 As parody, Jack Deemer embodies and embellishes a representation of Eric Harvie without having to adhere to it rigidly—because Jack Deemer is not Eric Harvie. In fact, a reader might question whether Deemer is also a little bit like one of Harvie’s collecting contemporaries.

Eric Harvie and Norman Luxton were good friends, and their mutual passions for collecting inspired each other. Harvie helped Luxton establish the Luxton Museum in Banff in the early 1950s, while, as Dempsey speculates, “Harvie’s involvement in collecting may very well have been ignited by his association with Norman Luxton.”56 The first curator of the Luxton Museum, John George “Red” Cathcart, who came to Calgary to work for the Glenbow
Foundation in 1959, wrote a report (14 July 1956) entitled “A Museum Is Born.” Cathcart affirms that “[a]long with Norman Luxton’s many dreams was one he had for many years, ‘To build a Museum.’” Here, Cathcart succumbs to a kind of sentimentalism, as, according to him, tears welled up in Luxton’s eyes at the moment he was confronted with Harvie’s question, “Norman, what is going to happen to all this collection of yours?” Luckily, Harvie had the answer: “Let’s build a museum.” While Harvie’s ambition for collection was certainly similar to Jack Deemer’s, Luxton had some Deemeresque traits of his own. According to Mark Simpson, Luxton, a renowned taxidermist in Banff at the turn of the twentieth century, abandoned a sailing voyage across the Pacific in favour of raiding Aboriginal graves on the Queen Charlottes. He asked permission of neither the Native community nor the government before taking these human relics into his possession. There is indeed something about collecting bones, but skulls in particular, that seems partial to the despotic spirit of a collector such as Deemer. But furthermore, on this mission, Luxton contracted a fever that necessitated his moving to a place where his body could heal and also where he could get back to his taxidermic and collecting practices. When Simpson contends, “Where else but to Banff, health spa and wildlife paradise, could he go to make himself new…” his emphasis is on the “revivifying” capital that Luxton could make running a taxidermist’s shop; Deemer was often at the other end of such a trade, as Karen Strike reminds Dorf that Deemer’s request for an exotic taxidermic specimen caused him to desert her at a previous gallery opening—“A white rhinoceros,” Dorf clarifies. Nevertheless, what Luxton and Deemer have in common—with Harvie and Wotherspoon as well—is that they covet a place in which to heal; the spa is the most prominent object of Deemer’s desire throughout Alibi. As well, the very first spa that Dorf visits is in Banff. At this spa, the dense fog hovering over the steaming mineral waters momentarily skews Dorf’s perception, and he believes he is encountering a space “full of floating heads.” In his notes for the novel, Kroetsch debates whether Deemer should turn out, after all, to be just a “floating head; not a man at all, but a woman; the rich man’s wife … or mistress … or even daughter…” The ellipses seem to suggest that Kroetsch himself did not rule out any option but rather kept an entire collection of characters in mind for his collector; in turn, the collector, Deemer, the one who deems what should be gathered, is a mutable character, parodied as one whose intense desire is fueling the operation but whose identity is ultimately unknowable.

Meanwhile, Kroetsch embellishes the possibilities of the collection itself by demonstrating that everything, in a sense, can be considered collectible. Robert Wilson identifies this “concept of a collection,” employed “for absurdist ends,” as the novel’s “vehicle for making serious (or seriously playful) comments upon
the nature, scope and limitations of human conceptuality.” The trunk of Jack Deemer’s vehicle is packed full: with ceremonial masks and walking sticks; with locks and keys and miniature buddhas; with broken stones and skeletons; with shrunken heads and Japanese armour. There are parallels here to Harvie’s collection. In addition, Deemer, like Harvie, faces the predictable dilemma that follows elaborate accrual: finding a place to put and preserve all the loot. However, although Deemer does order Dorf to find him a reservoir, he sets his sights on a container already replete with contents: not just a complete but also an everlasting collection.

Asking Dorf to find him a place does initially invite comparisons once again to the acquisitions of Harvie’s past—to the aforementioned transplantation of all things Scottish, the claim of the carnival Frontier Town, and the establishment of Harvie’s own West with Heritage Park. But the spa is a different kind of collected being; in Alibi it retains agency. It can be collected but not entirely claimed, as it brings the collector to its location rather than the other way around. In a way, it collects and contains the collector, as its property involves the envelopment of the collector’s body, its immersion in the spa’s waters. When Dorf shares Deemer’s request with Karen Strike, she explains, “Water cures were big in the nineteenth century… The mineral hot springs were developed so the well-to-do might suffer their ills in comfort,” elucidating why a spa would be an object of desire for a mature collector. Ironically, as a younger collector, Eric Harvie spent a great deal of time searching for reservoirs of fossil fuels, and so, as Kaye notes, “the very essence that made Harvie wealthy and enabled the collection, also fuelled farm consolidation, the demise of the small towns, and drilling on reserve, sacred, and environmentally fragile lands.” Alibi changes the constitution of the sought-after earthly deposit from non-renewable oil to life-sustaining mineral water, offering more of a parallel to Harvie’s geological mineral specimens, an exhibit that continues to be part of the Glenbow today. In addition to its probability and playfulness, however, the spa in Alibi figures for much more than mineral constituents or waters that heal the body; the spa exists as a metaphor for the ideal collection.

After travelling throughout the novel from Banff to England, Wales, Portugal, and Greece in search of the perfect spa, Dorf finds Deemer’s prize startlingly close to home: Deadman Spring—Ainsworth Hot Springs, renamed and reinvented in the novel—is about thirty miles north of Nelson, British Columbia. Having the ultimate prize in Alibi exist in a dilapidated state appealed to Kroestch, and so in the novel Deadman Spring is a little ramshackle run-down spa with a mineral hot spring that runs from deep inside a cave into a small swimming pool. The whole damned
thing was up for sale, lock, stock and barrel: the owner was going belly up, waiting for customers to drive west through the Rocky Mountains into the next mountain trench, into the next range of mountains.67

It is a spa that has character, yet it has been neglected and, as a result, presents the potential for the kind of rebirth that comes with “discovery.” As a spot yet-unfrequented by the tourists who visit three of the finest hot springs in the country on the other side of the lake, this spa proves to be the quintessential collector’s treasure: it provides opportunity for rejuvenation but has yet to be truly found by the world.

This is not the first time Deemer has sent Dorf on the hunt for an object that represents the literal extension or preservation of life itself; for example, once in Budapest, Dorf found value in a rare collection of “teeth” because teeth “will survive when all else is gone. Teeth … may well be our only immortality.”68 But in addition to collections that might figure for eternal life, at one point quite early in the novel, Dorf directly addresses this very longing in the imagined psyche of his boss:

Jack Deemer, there in his mansion behind its guardian row of spruce, its tall and northward facing windows staring down onto the clustered skyscrapers in the bowel of the city; Deemer, his house and his trees and his privacy looking down from the rich seclusion of Mount Royal, had seen one day, maybe late one evening, instead of his own Midas wealth, his own death.69

While Eric Harvie’s collecting was dedicated to restoration, to enabling the preservation of a historical narrative of the land that would exist even after all the oil had run dry, Alibi extends the concept of restorative and curatorial practice, proposing an embalming not only of the past but also of the motive behind the acquisition of artifacts, the jouissance of Harvie-as-collector. While Kroetsch’s Fish speculates that Deemer’s ultimate (re)quest is for a way “to go on living forever,”70 the collector does find a way to achieve this through the protected existence of the collection.

But what and who lives on in the collection remains considerably more abstract. Baudrillard theorizes, “[t]hrough collecting, the passionate pursuit of possession finds fulfillment and the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse.”71 And here we have the paradox of the collection once again: an organism of seemingly unconscious or lifeless language, yet under the disguise of dormancy, the desire of the collector continues to pulse. The composition of that desire is, of course, not so
stable and in fact becomes more mutable the more the collection grows; it is further fractured by the fact that a collector such as Jack Deemer—or Eric Harvie—does not operate alone. At one point in *Alibi*, Dorf attempts to distinguish himself from the collecting zealot whose requests he has been following. He states, “I am only the collector’s agent. I only act out the collector’s desire. The desire is his.” Yet his very livelihood denies this, as his every move is driven by Deemer’s desire, another example of how, throughout *Alibi*, Kroetsch plays with plurality, with the notion of doubling.

William William Dorfen ponders his own doubleness early in the novel when he explains that he had two grandfathers named William; his “parents, farming people northeast of Calgary in the Battle River country, in a futile hope that I might receive at least one inheritance, named me after both of them. Billy Billy Dorfen. And all I got from my ancestors, it turned out, was the conviction that I needed two of everything…. Two lives, possibly.” Then, at the end of the novel, an ailing visitor who lacks a name arrives at the Deadman Spring that Dorf has found, purchased for Deemer, and temporarily opened for business. Dorf, who leads his life in order to ensure the preservation of someone else’s legacy, decides to give this man one of his names, one of his Williams, and realizes, “Somehow I had two lives. I had one that I could give away. I saw that. Maybe that is the human condition. We have each two lives. We each have one that must be given away.” Here, while Dorf speculates on what could be considered the “human condition,” he speaks to the collecting condition, a division or a doubling of self. This doubling is echoed by a statement made by the object of Dorf’s desire, the seductive and mysterious Julie Magnuson, who tells Dorf that we live “by our alibis…. We were somewhere else when it happened. Or should have been. Or shouldn’t have been.” The etymology of the novel’s title, Latin for “elsewhere,” might indeed refer to the removal, retrieval, and reassignment of a thing’s natural habitat, a sequence implicit within the act of collecting. But it also gestures to Deemer’s absence throughout the novel and to how, in addition to the existence of the collection, it is through the employment of scouts, agents of Dorf—a name that is, as Robert Lecker points out, a play on the anagram for “fraud,” a replica, but not the real thing—that the collector’s life is made multiplicitous. With this cloning of selves, *Alibi* provides yet another incarnation of a motif figured by the objects and lives contained within collections, all of which ultimately gesture back to the plurality, the polyvocality that is the novel *Alibi* itself. In an attempt to epitomize desire over object—process instead of product, quest before treasure, race rather than prize—Dorf wonders, “What else is there but the dream?” After all, it is a “dream” that Dempsey holds responsible for the possibility of the existence of the Glenbow’s “vast collections”; in the acknowledgements of *Treasures of the*
Glenbow Museum, Dempsey declares, "The major credit must go to the late Eric Harvie, whose dream and passion made all of this possible."  

During the opening ceremonies of the Glenbow Foundation–Alberta Government Museum in 1964, Eric Harvie apologized for Glenbow Vice-President E.J. Slatter’s absence from the podium, explaining that, unfortunately, he happened to be without his voice that day. The alibi is polite, one that does not denote too much personal detail, and the apology makes it sound not so much that Slatter is suffering from an ailment but rather that his voice is an object he just happens to have forgotten at home. After reading the transcript, I wonder how closely I would have been able to pay attention to his careful, predictable speech when—from what I can deduce from the photographs—it appears that on that day speakers were positioned behind the enormous hide of a polar bear, which faces that of a ferocious-looking feline creature, draped across a banquet table with a crystal decanter perched upon the bear hide’s back. Once again, Harvie’s artifact speaks to a far different life (one dedicated to collecting from more countries than “[Harvie] could count” an average of one hundred objects a day) than that of the man in the nice suit behind the podium politely thanking his government. 

At the same time, Eric Harvie was both men. If his life as a collector lives on in his collections, demonstrating the flexibility, multiplicity, and mutability of these structures and their contents, can a portrait of that life ever be drawn? For the life that lives within the collections is undoubtedly a shapeshifter, just as history continues to inform the present in new ways. The original incarnation of the collector’s desire becomes marred by the movement and passing of time. But perhaps this is an instance of the form protecting its content; just as the collection preserves the past, the clandestine form of the collector’s desire ensures the obedience of the collector’s wishes for that life to remain private. Empathizing with his reclusive boss in Alibi, Dorf states, “I was sick of having my life described and analyzed and remembered and predicted. I wanted to be left alone.” The collector lives on through his or her collection but also blends into or within it. When Jack Deemer finally arrives at the spa that Dorf has located, an electrical surge suddenly plunges the cave into darkness, disappearing it and them from each other. Walter Benjamin concludes the unpacking of his library by stating, “So I have erected one of [his own, the collector’s] dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting.” This vanishing act tempts one to quest for the person or object lost within the past. What I find myself wondering is this: in compiling a history, can one ever do any more than simply collect? It seems that with my critical consideration and comparison of Eric Harvie’s life as a collector with the fractured, frenetic fictionalization of that life by Robert Kroetsch, ulti-
mately I display another sort of collection myself. If the scholar, critic, historian, or writer is lucky, there will turn out to be not just one but several artifacts available to be retrieved, repossessed, and resurrected; the more the collection grows and the more diverse it becomes, the greater its potential to exhibit the past in the present and to gesture toward how it might be read in the future.

Notes

2 Ibid., 2.
5 Ibid., 173.
6 Aritha van Herk, Audacious and Adamant: The Story of Maverick Alberta (Toronto: Key Porter, 2007), 94.
7 Diehl, Gentleman, 157.
9 Ibid., 14.
10 Diehl, Gentleman, xiv.
11 Frances W. Kaye, Hiding the Audience: Viewing Arts and Arts Institutions on the Prairies (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), 137.
13 Dempsey, Treasures, 19.
15 Ibid., 174.
16 Ibid., 178–79.
17 Jonathan Kertzer, Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 22.
19 Diehl, Gentleman, xiii.
20 Eric Harvie, quoted in Dempsey, Treasures, 14.


27 Kaye, Hiding the Audience, 94.


31 Diehl, Gentleman, 162.


33 Dempsey, Treasures, 30.

34 Robert Kroetsch, Alberta (Edmonton: NeWest, 1993), 180.

35 Ibid.


37 Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 60.

38 Ainslie, “Glenbow,” 19.


40 Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 60.

41 Ibid., 61.

42 Diehl, Gentleman, 11.

43 University of Calgary, 591/96.6 38.14, Robert Kroetsch fonds.
45 Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery, 97.
46 Dempsey, Treasures, 30.
49 Ibid., 13–14.
50 Ibid., 25.
51 Ibid., 13.
52 Ibid., 7.
53 Ibid., 8.
54 Kaye, Hiding the Audience, 103.
55 University of Calgary, 591/96.6 38.9, Robert Kroetsch fonds.
56 Dempsey, Treasures, 17.
58 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Kroetsch, Alibi, 8.
62 Ibid., 10.
63 University of Calgary, 591/96.6 38.15, Robert Kroetsch fonds.
65 Kroetsch, Alibi, 8.
66 Kaye, Hiding the Audience, 102.
67 Kroetsch, Alibi, 200.
68 Ibid., 106.
69 Ibid., 21.
70 Ibid., 57.
71 Baudrillard, System of Objects, 87.
72 Kroetsch, Alibi, 133.
73 Ibid., 13.
74 Ibid., 204.
75 Ibid., 125.
77 Kroetsch, Alibi, 35.
78 Dempsey, Treasures, 9.
80 Kroetsch, Alibi, 98.