

# Listening/over and over

*Laurie Ricou*

**M**y childhood and public school education had little Canadian literature in it. The absence of Mrs. Bentley. The absence of *Wild Geese*. The absence of both Gabrielle Roy and Archibald Lampman. The absence of green gables, not to mention a good seed catalogue. But in Grade Six, every day, just after lunch, our teacher and school principal Bill Peden would read aloud from Ernest Thompson Seton.

I don't remember much else of what we studied in Grade Six, but I do treasure the memory of the unusual hush, the attentiveness, the tears (sometimes) as we listened, maybe twenty minutes each day, all year long, to what surely must have been our teacher's favourite writer. I remember the sense that we were on the lam each day from real school work. I think that's when we learned.

Seton's stories carried that group of twelve-year-olds into some rapt empathy with what I've since been taught to call the other. We entered into unlikely pre-pubescent reflections on ethics and morality; we held tight to Seton's narratives of chase and suspense. The stories were written in books, but we learned them that year only by ear (although sometimes we would huddle around the book to look at Seton's quickening illustrations). And Mr. Peden had a great sense of timing, often leaving us caught in mid-leap, wondering, waiting for the next day's telling. He tried gleefully to mimic Seton's transcriptions (sometimes with musical notation) of the sounds of the wild.

Through Seton we began to learn the birds and beasts of that stretch of prairie (with its surprising sandhills) that lay between our school grounds

and the village of Carberry. But we also followed Seton to the Don Valley, the Yorkshire Moors, and New Mexico. About maps and landscapes we learned what foxes teach us: "Never leave a straight trail if a crooked one will do."

If I may say so, however nostalgically—and I quite realize that Mr. Peden may have had a different view—we were good listeners. We were *made* into good listeners by Seton, and by our teacher's sense of intonation, emphasis, and timing. These thoughts about listening surfaced as I was reading admiringly through the essays, poems, and reviews that appeared in our last issue, *CL*#180. Behind them, I thought, were attentive, involved, responsive, questioning listeners. I trust that future issues of the journal will contain similar examples of *good listening*.

**O**ur schoolroom introduction to Seton took place about the same time that Roy Daniells, Inglis Bell, Stanley Read, and Basil Stuart-Stubbs were beginning to talk about creating a journal dedicated to Canadian literature. Back there in Brandon, Manitoba, three years before the first issue of this journal appeared, we didn't even know that something called Canadian literature existed. We were, I think, amazed that a sandhill stag roamed so close to home. Nearly fifty years later, I imagine some crooked trail linking Seton, Peden, and George Woodcock, first editor, runs through the maps our contributors have been drawing.

I've noticed recently that the almost forgotten Seton is showing up in many places: in Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, in Rod Preece's *Animals and Nature*, in Betty Zyvatkäuska's *Naturally Ontario*; and in some odd places, such as Molly Gloss's novel *Wild Life* and the *Autobiography of John Macoun*. And certainly Seton's stories echo, if not overtly, in J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Yann Martell's *The Life of Pi*. Canadian literature (including its tradition of the animal story) has gone global: in prizes and honours, and in its multiple languages—both those in which we write and those which our writing remembers and incorporates in its stories and settings. At *Canadian Literature* we will listen for good listening, we will look to reflect and develop this happy evolution and broadcasting of Canadian writing. Our aim is to listen as intently as possible to as great a range of writers as possible, and to heed what scholars and writers from around the world tell us about what's worth listening to. The good listener leans toward you, as our good reader leans toward her writer, receptive to all the everything she can tell him. The writing that's good listening will also encourage us to listen a little more closely to the talking inside our own heads.

How do you (continue to) grow a journal?

Love is an amplification  
By listening/over and over

*For the past two years, Acting Editor Susan Fisher has provided day-to-day editorial guidance for Canadian Literature. Susan's scrupulous attention to detail and sensitive judgement are equalled by her imaginative sense of possibility and new direction. Her dedication has allowed two editors to have very precious study leaves secure in the knowledge that we would return to our office to find a richer, stronger journal, fresh with the growing of work nurtured and accepted for the next several issues. Bookshelves full of thanks to Susan for an exceptional contribution. We are grateful to the University College of the Fraser Valley for having made Susan available to us.*

*In September 2003, Eva-Marie Kröller ended her sixteen-year term as Associate and then Editor (since 1995) of the journal. It is fitting that her retirement as Editor coincides with the completion of her Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature, a giant task that reflects Eva-Marie's career-long commitment to seeing Canadian writing, in the official languages, and in its multiple languages, read within social, historical, and multi-genred contexts. The Companion, like its editor, always looks to understand Canadian writing beside and within the literatures of the world. Eva-Marie stayed true to the international perspective established for the journal by George Woodcock and promoted with vision by W. H. New. But her comparatist training expanded and enhanced that direction in so many ways. She established a distinguished international panel of readers to become our Editorial Board; she imagined and then tirelessly pushed to completion interdisciplinary focus issues on (among other topics) travel writing, Asian Canadian writing, autobiography, and archives. She brought Quebec writing and a francophone editorial voice more prominently back to the journal. Eva-Marie is an indispensable companion to Canadian literature. I will need to consult her regularly. She will continue, I trust, to contribute to this journal regularly.*

*Readers will notice that this year's winner of the Governor General's Award in Canadian Studies returns to the masthead. Killam University Professor W. H. New retired from regular teaching in 2003. As Editor Emeritus, he will serve as reader, consultant, and senior advisor to all of us.*