

# A HOUSE WITHOUT BOOKS

## *The Writer in Canadian Society*

*Tom Wayman*

**A**N INCIDENT THAT BEST sums up for me what it means to be a writer in Canada occurred in the summer of 1986 when I was on holiday at the north end of Vancouver Island. I was taking the ferry from Port McNeill to Alert Bay, to visit the Indian museum there. On the deck of the ferry, standing by my car, I fell into a conversation with another driver. He was a fisherman, maybe in his mid-fifties, headed over to Alert Bay to pick up a net. He mentioned that his home port is Pender Harbor, on the Sunshine Coast north of Sechelt. Now Pender Harbor is not a large place, and happens to be the home of my friend, publisher and fellow poet Howard White. So I asked the fisherman if he knew Howie.

Howard White is somewhat of a legend in the B.C. literary world. By trade he is a heavy equipment operator, and still has the contract to manage the Pender Harbor dump. This means besides spending most of his time at his computer pushing large amounts of words around, he spends several hours a week at the controls of his bulldozer pushing large amounts of garbage around. And in addition to running his vital and thriving publishing house, Harbour Publishing, Howie edits the highly-successful magazine about the B.C. coast, *Raincoast Chronicles*. On the side, he is a well-received poet and his oral history books routinely appear on the B.C. best seller list.

But standing then on the deck of that ferry, I watched the eyes of the fisherman darken as I mentioned Howie's name. "Howie White?" the fisherman said, recoiling away from me. A certain tone entered his voice, the tone people reserve for talking about in-laws they despise, or child molesters. "Sure, I know him. Doesn't he *write*?"

This attitude of utter disdain expressed by the fisherman toward writing encapsulates for me the relationship of Canadian authors to their society. At best a Canadian writer is a marginal figure. But that marginality leads a majority of Canadians to view writers as people engaged in a socially unacceptable, if not perverse, activity.

Before I continue, though, let me quickly define my central terms. When I speak of a Canadian writer here, I mean writers of prose fiction, drama, or poetry. Also, when I speak of Canadian society, I refer here to mainstream English-language society. In my experience, literary authors associated with ethnic minorities have a different relationship to readers within that minority than they do to English-speaking Canadians as a whole. For instance, Andrew Suknaski is a nationally-recognized writer who has detailed in his poems the lives of Ukrainian settlers in rural Saskatchewan. Because of this, Suknaski's work has been received with enthusiasm by many members of the Ukrainian-Canadian community. But when Suknaski turns to address the general Canadian population, not as a representative of a minority but simply as a *poet*, he faces the same unease and scorn that greets the rest of Canada's literary practitioners.

Now since cultural values are transmitted by education, I believe a root cause of the marginal status accorded Canadian authors is our school system. One of the triumphs of mass public education in Canada is that we have been able to teach the overwhelming majority of people to read while simultaneously so turning them off reading that, once they are out of school, most never read a book again.

In my experience, a majority of people who endure our high school or university English classes do not afterwards regard reading books — and especially literary titles — as a means of enhancing their lives. Those few who do continue to read, mainly see literature as entertainment, fantasy, escape. I sometimes hear poetry mocked at as irrelevant because “hardly anyone reads poetry.” As far as I can see, hardly anyone reads any kind of literature. In the course of my life, I go into house after house where there are *no books*. In the homes of many of my friends, although most of them at least finished high school, there are *no books* — of any kind.

WHEN I TAUGHT in the early 1980s at David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C., we set a little quiz for students entering the writing program in which, among other things, we asked if they could name three Canadian writers. Almost none could. And these were students who not only were interested enough in learning to seek post-secondary education, but were presumably interested enough in literature to enter a creative writing program. Most recently, I have been teaching at a community college in a Vancouver suburb. One of my assignments asks each of my students to give a presentation to their classmates on something they learned about how to write from their reading of a contemporary novel, book of short fiction, playscript or collection of poems. I find the response depressing. “But I don't *read*,” is one protest I hear *every* term when I announce this assignment. Most students eventually choose to discuss the work of authors like the popular U.S. horror writer Stephen King. One student last term came up

to my desk clutching a newspaper clipping of a personal advice column by Ann Landers. The student inquired: "Is it okay if I do my presentation on this?"

I am convinced that by what we teach, we teach a system of values. If the majority of our population decides the reading of good literature is irrelevant to their lives, and looks with indifference or suspicion on those who produce literature, these are value judgements which Canadians have acquired through their schooling — since school is the *only* place most of us ever meet people whose job it is to try to show us the worth of literature.

When we examine most high school English curriculums, it is not difficult to see why students might conclude literature is pointless, boring or escapist. I worked some years ago in a suburban Vancouver high school as an English Department marker. The students whose papers I marked were bothered by the usual issues facing adolescents — and the rest of us — today: sex, drugs, family breakup, the uncertainty of long-range occupational goals, immediate employment opportunities in a province where the official unemployment rate is 10 per cent, and — if any work can be found — job conditions. The assigned novels for Grade 11 in those days were *The Lord of the Flies*, a science-fiction tale about a group of English schoolboys marooned on a tropical island during World War III, and *A Separate Peace*, about some boys at a private boarding school in rural New England during World War II. If you set out to *design* a reading curriculum more removed from contemporary suburban Canadian high school students' lives, you'd be hard pressed to come up with better titles. Plus, these students would write in their essays over and over again — presumably echoing or mis-echoing what they were taught in class — how *The Lord of the Flies* portrays a microcosm of human existence. I'd patiently scrawl across their papers: "But there are no *women* in that book."

**F**OR IT WAS THE women's movement that showed us that if in our teaching of literature we omit an accurate account of the experiences of women, we teach that those experiences have no value. My own mission as a writer has been to add that if in our teaching of literature we omit an accurate account of the experiences of daily work, we teach that such experiences have no value. Generations of Canadians have grasped that when the literature we are taught omits the experiences of Canadians — as a people who share a history and geography, as well as individuals who must function in a society and workforce organized in a particular way, then this literature teaches us our own experiences — past, present and future — have no value.

English classes where this literature is taught thus obliterate who we are and what we have so painfully managed to accomplish and to discover about our world. It's no wonder a majority of us don't want to pursue reading any further, except for

whatever escape from daily cares some reading offers. And no wonder we look with disbelief and contempt at anyone who wants to actually write *more* stuff that says we and our lives are worthless.

Let me hasten to acknowledge, however, that here and there in the educational system are English teachers who work very hard to right this great wrong. These marvellous women and men approach even the authorized curriculum with tremendous imagination and energy and often succeed in inspiring readers from among their students. Unfortunately, as house after house without books in Canada incontestably reveals, such teachers are definitely the exception. This very Monday, in educational institutions all across Canada, most students will be back learning that literature has nothing to do with them. Their only *possible* revenge is to have nothing to do with literature.

But the marginalization of Canadian writers is not solely caused by the schools. Canada in its twelve decades of existence has managed to transform itself from a colony of Britain into a colony of the U.S.A. Since one of the hallmarks of every colony is a lack of self-confidence, even if we *were* a nation of readers, we would be mainly readers of British and American books.

I can still get a rueful laugh in high school classrooms I visit when I talk about how when I was a young student I thought poetry was something written by dead Englishmen. My sense is that the curriculum in poetry hasn't changed all that much. Many of my literature professors at the University of B.C. were live Englishmen, or Canadians who thought like Englishmen. I can still remember the comment of one when a fellow student raised a question to do with U.S. authors. "*American literature?*" the professor sneered. "Ah, yes. I really must sit down and read it some *afternoon*." You can well imagine this professor's attitude toward *Canadian* literature.

And to demonstrate the present economic and cultural power of the behemoth we live beside, one anecdote should do. On the same holiday trip I referred to earlier, I was camped for a time on a beach on northern Vancouver Island's west coast, at San Josef Bay. After about a week, we had to hike out for more food, and so headed for the nearest store, at Holberg. Holberg, though nominally a village, really is a large logging camp, but the camp commissary serves as the grocery for the region.

Looking for something to read, I discovered in the Holberg commissary a wire rack of novels, such as is found in urban drugstores or supermarkets. Inserted into a holder on the top of the rack was a computer-generated printout listing the current week's best-sellers as compiled by the *New York Times*.

Such is the awesome might of U.S. industry, that they can supply the Holberg commissary, many kilometres in the bush at the northern tip of Vancouver Island, with the list of what someone in New York City has determined *that same week* to be the latest best sellers. What's more, most of these U.S. best sellers were available

in the commissary. I don't have to tell you that the list did not include any Canadian books, nor that a list of current B.C. or Canadian best sellers was not posted at Holberg. I don't have to tell you that there were no Canadian books of any kind for sale in the Holberg commissary.

PEOPLE ARE SOMETIMES shocked by the economic consequences of this marginalization of the Canadian writer. Sales of Canadian literary titles are for the most part staggeringly low. A novel typically will sell about 2,000 copies in hardback over a couple of years. If the novel sells for, say, \$22.95 and the author gets the standard royalty of 10 per cent, the writer earns about \$4,600 from his or her creation — over two years. “But what about Margaret Atwood?” people sometimes object. “She gets six-figure advances.” Okay. But according to a 1985 *Financial Post* survey, out of the dozens of novels by Canadians published in Canada each year, only *five* will reach sales of 5,000 copies — the mark of a Canadian best-seller. Priced at \$22.95 those 5,000 copies will net each of those five, extremely rare, best-selling Canadian fiction authors the glorious sum of \$11,500 before taxes. That \$11,500 is not much for the amount of time, thought and energy a novel takes to produce. And it certainly isn't adequate to live on.

The numbers for poetry sales are of course worse. An ordinary Canadian book of poems will sell about 400 copies a year. At a retail price of \$8.95, that brings the author the grand total of \$358 for her or his creativity, sweat and tears.

In fairness, I should mention that the determination and know-how that enables the U.S. book industry to service the Canadian hinterlands where the Canadian book industry apparently is unable to go does not mean the average American author is better off economically than a Canadian one. *Publishers' Weekly* reported in 1981 a survey of U.S. literary and non-literary writers that concluded “figures for authors from households of varying size suggest that writing income places most authors below the poverty line.” In fact, despite the articles on rich and famous writers in *People* magazine, *Publishers' Weekly* reported only five per cent of U.S. authors can support themselves from their writing. This is partly because, although the U.S. population is 10 times larger than the Canadian one, most books in the U.S. do not sell 10 times better than their counterparts in Canada. For example, a book of poems in the U.S. usually sells about 1,000 copies and can sell as few as the equivalent book in Canada. Most novels, also, don't do much better in the U.S. than here. A 1980 survey of U.S. children's book authors who had been writing for 20 years or more found half of them earned less than \$1,000 a year from their writing, and two-thirds earned less than \$5,000 a year from their writing.

As in Canada, writers in the U.S. have no safety net of income indemnity plans, extended health care programs, or other job benefits. Concerning pensions, James

Lincoln Collier, who wrote the 1981 *Publishers' Weekly* article I mentioned, makes a ghoulish observation. He points out that a successful writer's best hope for retirement is to fall face down over his or her keyboard from a heart attack while his or her markets are still holding up.

In the U.S., as here, most authors must support themselves by working at another job as well as writing. Like anyone in the workforce who moonlights, authors who have two jobs often seriously damage their ability to relate meaningfully to other human beings — threatening both family and social life, and negatively influencing the message of what these authors write. In Canada, as in the U.S., a network of public and private granting agencies provides some additional writing-related revenue for authors. But none of it, save an occasional grant providing subsistence income for up to 12 months, fundamentally alters the writers' economic status. In this country, the Canada Council provides support for public readings by authors, and organizes payment to writers for the use of their books by libraries. Yet both of these programs have financial caps: readings are limited by the Council to seven a year, or \$1,400 maximum annually, and the library use payment is capped at \$3,000 a year. Very few authors receive the maximum in these programs. Once again, the economic marginalization of the Canadian writer is in no way changed by such government aid.

**I**F THINGS ARE SO BLEAK for writers in Canada — sociologically, culturally, economically — why do any of us continue to write? I think each of us finds a satisfactory answer, or stops writing. For myself, I observe that although only a few people make a living and/or are considered culturally significant because they can dance, nevertheless millions of Canadians enjoy getting out on the dance floor. A similar observation can be made of people who, for example, fly kites or play guitar.

I believe writing, for at least this Canadian author, is no different than kite-flying or guitar-playing is for someone to whom kite-flying or guitar-playing has become a central part of their existence. In such circumstances, building and flying kites represents more than a hobby, although not a livelihood either. Rather, the challenges and sense of accomplishment kite-flying provides approach being an obsession. I have written elsewhere of why I am convinced what I have to say as a writer is important — even if no one is listening. I am fascinated, too, by the difficulty of trying to express myself in a manner that delights a reader while it acquaints that reader with information I believe is crucial. This is a task that seems unquestionably worth a lifetime of struggle, of small achievements and large defeats, even if this is a battle about which a majority of my fellow citizens couldn't care less.