

CHILD ADDICT IN ALBERTA

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BORN SO MANY CENTURIES AGO (1904 to be exact), I fell an early victim to the reading habit. Until I was seven, an only child on an isolated bush-ranch in the Albertan foothills, I saw other children only on feast days or at church on the Sundays when the wagon-road to the Morningside flag-station was passable and my mother added me to the half-dozen kids in the Sunday School she ran there. In the long winters we two were alone for many stretches while my father was hundreds of miles away working in the bigger towns at his trade — he was a painter and decorator — to get the cash constantly needed to develop our surrounding woods and swamps into at least a marginal farm. Until he returned, my mother cared for the horses, cows, pigs, poultry and me. From spring to autumn my parents were busy through the daylight hours with planting, clearing, woodcutting, cultivating, harvesting, marketing. With no TV or radio to turn on, no movie house to be dumped in, no high-fi, no telephone, no sitters, I slid early and with parental encouragement into self-entertainment, learned my letters from father's sign-painting celluloids, and my counting from a card-deck.

Whenever housebound by snowdrifts and arctic temperatures, or bedded by a series of childhood diseases from mumps to scarlet fever (picked up no doubt at Sunday School) I worked at learning to read, and to play solitaire. Soon I was skimming, a mindless waterbug, with growing speed over great surfaces of the Bible, and Robbie Burns, and anything else in print and within reach. It seemed there was a lot of country beyond Morningside and even Calgary — where my father sometimes went looking for work and where he said I had been born — a world almost as splendid as Heaven on the Sunday School posters, and more reachable. Vices can begin virtuously enough. Through trying not to be a bother, I had become a compulsive reader and a card-shark. By May 1911, when I turned seven and my father sold the ranch and moved us temporarily back to my birthplace, I had developed as well a greed for travel, to wander and wander until I'd seen everything I'd read or heard about.

It appeared, however, that I would first have to attend schools and grow up. In Calgary I was deposited in a term-end holding-unit, ordered to sculpt with plasticene, and frightened out of my bushed wits at recess by a schoolyard full

of strange, shrieking and evidently hostile kids. I escaped, in two weeks, by contracting whooping cough. "Keep him in the fresh air this summer," said the doctor, so my father bought a tent and moved us to the banks of the Bow River in Banff. The prescription was right on. I soon stopped whooping, learned to handle a fly-rod, gut my own trout, and scramble up mountain slopes with my dad.

When September came we rented a house in town and I reported to the one-room Public School. This act was a cultural shock both to the girl-teacher and to me: Grade One was plasticene again, though there were also crayons for colour-books, and even a slate to start learning letters and later maybe sums. Fortunately the Albertan schools had not yet been martialled into what Sir Edward Beatty later called "the convoy system in education," all ships proceeding at the pace of the slowest. When it was discovered I could understand maps, was presently stumbling through my mother's copy of *The Heart of Midlothian*, and could calculate sums with the speed of a hardened cribbage player, I was kicked up to Grade Three.

There I had to be cured of writing only with block letters, and disciplined to do homework in the School Reader before being allowed to borrow another Everyman from the school library. But I went on reading anything in sight until my eye-muscles at last rebelled, and I was saddled with spectacles (for life, as it turned out). My spirits drooped; I was having enough trouble learning to make friends with Banff's native sons, who rightly considered me a freak, a teacher's pet, and a total loss for even the peewee hockey team, since I hadn't yet learned even to skate. Moreover, because I was redheaded and built like a lath, school-ground wits had dubbed me Matchstick. By Christmas I escaped into measles and bed; but bed was misery too, for the doctor forbade reading.

I WAS RESCUED FROM GLOOM by my father's announcement he could now fulfill a promise made to my mother when I was born, to send the two of us back to her birthplace in the Shetland Islands, to visit my grandmother. The cash from selling the farm was enough both for the passage and for my father to lease a lot in Banff, and start building us a new home while we were away. Moreover he had gained my teacher's consent to my leaving in January, so long as I was back in time for the May exams. (It would seem I was going to be passed anyway.)

It was a memorable trip and for the first month or two just the thing to hatch a bookworm into a boy. Six days in a train to Montreal, across a Canada not in any of my books, and nine more on an ocean. I proved to have sea-legs, as befitted a fisherman's grandchild, and by now a literary eye. In Edinburgh my

mother, lapsing a little more into Scottish each day, took me to walk Princes, “the werrold’s bonniest street,” and gaze up at a tower taller than any I’d thought possible. I thought it fitting it was a monument to Sir Walter Scott and that we now proceeded to St. Giles to stand on the spot where Jeannie Deans crouched and hurled her stool. My mom had brought me straight into a real Heart of Midlothian, still beating. Even better, next day, I climbed into a huge and truly ancient castle where there were suits of armour, great stone cannonballs, and a cemetery for officers’ dogs. I was now swallowing gulps of history without optical damage.

Shetland, of course, was something quite different; it was dropping back into history itself. We arrived in Lerwick, the port town where my mother had been a serving-maid, in time for Up-Helly-Aa, the end of the old Viking Yule. From my uncle’s stone house one night my two schoolboy cousins and I gazed at a dragon-headed Norse galley being towed down their street in torchlight. There were bearded men in it with great axes and horned helmets. We rushed out and followed them in a shouting crowd to the docks, where the Vikings leapt from their ship, tossed their torches into it and launched it to flame to death in the harbour. This was the real thing, better even than G. A. Henty. Travelling was even more fun than reading. I resolved never to stop doing either.

Next day my aunt drove up in a Shetland pony cart to my grandmother’s. That night another boy-cousin and I climbed a ladder by the kitchen fireplace to sleep in straw under the thatch of an ancient croft. There were days then of pony riding and exploring traces of old stone-age forts in the windswept heather. I forgot all about books till a wind straight from the Arctic ice drenched me. Soon I lay with double pneumonia, fighting for air in grannie’s own bed, with nothing to read but the Guid Buik again. In my grandma’s croft that, officially, was the only book. When she wasn’t in view, however, cousin John would slip to my bed with the Deil’s Buik, a dog-eared deck of cards, to abet the second favourite vice of my childhood.

Back in time to be passed into Grade Four, I revelled in a second summer at Banff, now without whooping cough, learning to swim in the old Cave & Basin, selling subscriptions to *Canadian Pictorial* (reading every word in every issue first), starting piano with a maiden lady, and carpentry with my dad. When September came, and school, I looked no doubt the same dumb spectacled kid, a little lankier. But inside I felt vastly aged, a man of many parts, student of history, traveller between two continents, cardshark. I soon found, of course, that any betrayal of these inner personalities got me less than nowhere on the school ground. There I was still a dub at games, except marbles, I was Four Eyes the swot back again, the Matchstick who couldn’t hang on to a hockey stick — and now some sort of travel-snob as well.

So I came down with chicken-pox, and followed that with something really exotic the doctors called "mountain fever," acquired from a wood-tick. I was back on a reading binge again, once the fever sank. Fred, the neighbour's boy, two years older, brought me his *Treasure Island*, and more Waverley novels from the school library. Back at school I found *Hereward the Wake* and *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and Rider Haggard's *She* and R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Sea* and . . . and . . . Is there ever a time of life when reading is more exciting, more utterly compulsive, more trusting? No one told me I was on a diet manufactured by British imperialists. So long as they were *stories*, with unmistakable heroes who could do everything I couldn't yet, and heroines, if any, only there to be rescued, I loved all books. Propaganda I never noticed, unless it was the religious sort; piety I was still stuffed with at Sunday School, and raced past on other occasions. I put up with Ralph Connor's only because he wrote about country my dad had been a cowpuncher in.

THE NEXT SUMMER I TURNED NINE and almost kicked the reading habit. Dad took me on weekend camping trips trolling for lake trout, and bought me a No. 2 Box Brownie to take shots of the wild Park animals: bighorns, porcupines, deer, marten, and the like. But by now what I wanted most was a bike. I began to save for one by selling newspapers and curios to tourists, and sachet powders to housewives after school hours when winter came. I was a little heftier now, and less of an oddball in the schoolyard, and permitted at last into the scrub hockey games on the river rink. But I was still so lightweight I'd go flying into the boards at every check, and survived only by learning to move always faster than the others. For this I was made Rover — it was the old seven-man hockey days — and began to get around so nimbly I came to the notice of Lou Crosby, the town's speed champ. He began encouraging me to train for speed-skating.

News of this quickly raised my ratings with schoolmates, and I was invited on toboggan runs and snowshoe tramps. (Skiing had not yet arrived in Banff.) A happy redneck, I was practising "Speed" one night at the rink when the temperature dropped suddenly from a mere fifteen below F. to minus 35. I got another chill, another bout of pneumonia, and sank back into reading.

When I recovered, later that winter, Luxton's Lux Theatre began showing movies, and opened up a whole new story world for Banff kids. Two of the first films I ever saw were, as it happened, scripted from French novels, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Toilers of the Sea*, which I'd not even heard about. Seeing the films sent me to their Everyman translations. There, though suspense was gone, I found still more excitement. The films had clearly defined the dim

bounds of Dumas' prison, and the length of Hugo's cephalopod. Reading, I could imagine even gloomier fortresses and far more dreadful sea-creatures. A heroin junkie doesn't easily switch to pot. I've never really changed, still tend to avoid movies with plots from Great Books.

I remember, however, that I remained willing to consider somebody else's devilfish, and later that winter got out a library book titled *The Octopus*, by Frank Norris, only to bog down in what seemed to me an incomprehensible affair about railroads and capitalists and wheat farmers, all happening on dry land. I was really much dumber than most nine-year-olds. It was another twenty years before proletarianism drove me to try *The Octopus* again and learn there was a drowning in it after all — in wheat. Meantime I returned to the tried if not so true adventures of *The Boys' Own Annual* and *Chums* and *Tom Brown's School Days*. And my father put me on the track of the most exciting tale-tellers of my boyhood by giving me Kipling's *Kim* for my birthday. That led me to *Stalky & Co.* and *Soldiers Three*. The public school imperialisms I took for granted now, but there was some magic in Kipling's story-making that held and still can hold me.

Those early silent movies in the Lux Theatre had begun to wake me to the separate world of American literature, about which I'd been taught virtually nothing. In all the grades from one to nine in that Banff school I can remember being introduced by a teacher to only one American novel, *Tom Sawyer*. It was *Huckleberry Finn* we boys found for ourselves, and Tarkington's Penrod books, and *Peck's Bad Boy*, privately owned and circulated from boy to boy till they fell apart; they were read and avidly quoted by kids who never read anything else they weren't compelled to. Our teachers surely read them too but they were not about to feed our appetite for practical jokery by letting them into the school library. Horatio Alger, Jr., was not stocked either, or O. Henry or Jack London. Perhaps that was just for lack of money. We read them by the barter system after they'd been lifted from parental libraries or, as with *A Slow Train through Arkansas* and any of the mild girlie magazines before World War One, by nickel rental from Bully Fulcher, who had an "allowance" big enough to handle such underground distributions.

I remember liking London and O. Henry most of all these; they were direct and compact; they practised what I would later learn to call "the art of the short story." Also they made me feel in contact with the North American world I lived in; they were writers still alive, who had worked on San Francisco docks or among New York's "four million" or in the small towns of the U.S.

The only other American author I'd begun to read, Cooper, was long enough dead to be allowed into our school library, though never referred to. For some North American juveniles like me, living in a western frontier village, his characters were still alive. Hawkeye and Nattie Bumppo were the self-made and for-

ever bachelor heroes I hoped to become, if I could find the pluck to match their luck. Cooper was long-winded, true, but Scott had already seasoned me to skipping, leaping over the rhetoric and the insipidities of heroines to concentrate on the manly melodrama. My father had run away from home at sixteen and ridden across the prairies with other bronco-busters, depending on his trusty Winchester for food, and arriving in Calgary even before the railroad. He still sometimes wore his old beaded buckskin shirt and a stetson hat. I believed in my father and, for a while, in Cooper too.

THEN IT WAS THAT SUMMER of 1914, when the world began to spin a little faster. I'd been able by the end of school to buy the longed-for bike, and was at once busy selling more and more newspapers when I wasn't guiding tourists along trails to fishing holes or up mountains to viewpoints. I was reading little beyond the headlines in the papers I sold till the *Calgary Herald*, for the first time to my knowledge, ran a headline one morning in red. It was the fourth of August and the heading: BRITAIN DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY. I began to grow up more quickly. When school resumed I joined the cadets and discovered I was a good marksman despite my specs. By spring my father had enlisted with a Field Ambulance unit, against my mother's pleadings, and was in Calgary for training.

After a while my mother rented the house and lived with friends, and I was sent to her childless sister, Chrissie, on a farm beyond Three Hills. I was just turned twelve and still spindly; my uncle, however, a tough Cape Bretoner, ruled I was big enough for man's work. I was of course flattered, and put my guts into the haying, learned to drive a four-horse sweep, operate mowers, rakes and a disc-harrow, in between pitching hay and cleaning stables. I was inclined to flake out, however, by mid-afternoon and since I was wanted for milking after supper, my aunt decided I should have two hours after lunch to lie about in the tiny unused parlour. Here I found, among the old seed catalogues and almanacs, two broken-covered books by somebody named H. G. Wells, *Tales of Space and Time* and *The Country of the Blind*. They'd been left behind, my aunt said, by a lazy Sassenach farmhand my uncle had fired. She was going to throw them out, so I was welcome to them. I read those stories many times in the blissful rests between drudgeries on that lonely farm. From then on till college days Wells was my favourite science-fantasy writer, a modern fusion of Verne and Poe.

The winter that followed was a bleak one for my mother and me; my father was a stretcher-bearer at Ypres and on the Somme. To supplement the corporal's allowance from my father's pay, we took in roomers, mother did midwifery and I endured through a cold winter the five-dollar-a-month job of church janitor, confirming my secret atheism.

By summer my father was in an English military hospital, and I was a butcher's boy, delivering meat on my bicycle, learning to cut it, and learning too from a set of photographs treasured by Bert, the number two butcher, what fellatio and fucking-a-trois looked like. Perhaps because I was a virginal thirteen and had never seen a naked female, Bert's pictures have remained bell-clear in my memory to this day. No doubt they were fortified by my own rascality, for I persuaded Bert to lend me one set of his *feelthies* for a week, in return for my staying an extra hour a day doing his clean-up chores while he went swimming. I then charged a quarter for a five-minute look at my shockers, choosing customers from reliable school pals in town that summer.

Dad returned to us in the autumn of '15 — none too soon, it would seem, for providing me with paternal guidance. He was a sick man now, with trembly hands and rheumatism, though no less my adored father.

In September I was one of five who made it into Grade Nine, into High School. I now studied French, taught by a man who avoided pronouncing it; Algebra, my favourite; Ancient History, including a prose translation of the *Odyssey*; and so on. The English "reader" offered nothing later than Tennyson's "Maud." All this that teachers called Literature seemed never to be written by men alive, or even by dead Canadians. Nor was it ever as much fun as *Puck* magazine or *The Boy's Own Annual*.

I liked writing essays, however, and was getting A's on them. This approval, coupled with pressure from Joe and Wally, two schoolmates who had been customers for Bert's porno-packet, led to the three of us starting an underground school newspaper. The news for the first issue consisted solely of a somewhat vague but suggestive account by Joe, who had successfully shadowed an unnamed girl in our class and a bugler from the Internment Camp, and witnessed a stand-up fornication against a riverbank poplar. Wally, the school artist, drew a scribbler-size actuality of the scene for our cover. My job was to look after circulation, which would consist entirely of one copy, rented out. Unfortunately Wally, true artist that he was, thought of an extra visual touch, and began reworking the cover during a geometry lesson. He was nailed by the Principal. Our first and only issue disappeared forever, and we three became perhaps the last schoolkids in Banff to encounter the cat-o-nine-tails. It was a mere ritual flick, however, and our parents were not informed, presumably because the honour of the cover-girl, or rather of that of her socially important parents, was best preserved by general silence. There were enough underground reverberations, however, to shake down at last any image of me as a teacher's pet. I was elected president of our Boys' Club and sent, with Joe and Wally, to a provincial conference in Lethbridge of delegates from the Christian-Boys-in-Training Clubs. On my return I gave up writing and went back to the reading kick.