

## *Did You Read All These Books?*



Barry McKinnon: apartment sun balcony

2111, 14 A St. Calgary, 1967

I began to collect books when I started writing poetry at the age of 16. I was reading the City Lights Books from San Francisco: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti et.al. – and various other books I'd get from Evelyn De Mille's independent bookshop on First Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the centre of downtown Calgary.

I was inspired to write after hearing T.S. Eliot read on CBC radio. I had no clue about what he was saying, but the rhythm and seriousness captured me and I brashly thought: *I can do this too!* Apropos of Eliot's formal and religious tone, I was reading Norman Mailer's *Deaths for the Ladies Man (and Other Disasters)* – quick, quirky, funny poems as reactions pricking at the social world. *I can do this too!* My other important reading source was the Safeway Dictionary that came in cheap installments with grocery purchases (a dollar a section, I think). My mom would bring the various sections (grouped ABC...DEF...etc) home with our groceries, and I would then slot them into its huge fake leather covered three ring binder that would grow and expand over the months – finally to XYZ and its full bulk of six or eight inches. I would open the dictionary randomly, read it daily with fascination - this world of words and books to become a prime source for a young poet starting out in the craft so long to learn.

I carried these early books with me in boxes, suitcases, and trunks from Calgary, to Montréal, Vancouver and eventually Prince George. They still take a big space on my shelves - books to study and reread with pleasure these 58 years later.

When I got to prince George in 1969 to teach at The College of New Caledonia, Joy and I bought an old heritage home that gave us a sense of stability and permanence: the roving university and one bedroom apartment days were over. I now had a job, two kids on the way (Claire and Jesse), and these 1420 Gorse Street rooms to fill with more books.

My first library was in the basement, but once the kids grew and left, I took one of the upstairs bedrooms as a study/library and in the years to follow added hundreds of books to the shelves, or when out of space, books got stacked on the study floor or stored in the basement.

In my visits to various towns and cities there are usually a three things I look for – jazz clubs, bookstores, and writer or artist friends who like to drink beer. Al Purdy, partly responsible for my thrift store/remainder bin book scrounging addiction, first came to read in Prince George in 1969, and blurted out *his* three things: “Barry! where’s a goddamn bookstore! a goddamn beer parlour!, and a goddamn whorehouse!” We were squeezed into my little Fiat sports car leaving the airport – Purdy twisted into a pretzel in the passenger bucket seat, smoking a cigar and squinting at me with what I read as a suspicious testy scowl, waiting for my reaction to his requests. Choking on my own cigarette (the whorehouse request) I said I could help him with *two out of three!* My response got Al laughing and with a kind of instant understanding, we zoomed downtown to the 2<sup>nd</sup> hand bookstores. After his sweeping and masterful quick eye spotted 15 or 20 hardcover collector items to fill his empty suitcase – which explains why it was so light when I strapped it to the roof - we headed for the Inn of the North bar, yakking, joking, teasing, and testing each other as we continued to do for the next 40 years of our friendship. If I’m smiling when I find another beaten up copy of *Cavalcade of the North* or another Klink anthology *or* as recently when I found a first edition *Circle Game* by Margaret Atwood(\$1.00) *and* a first edition *Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje (\$1.00), it’s because I am remembering and thinking of my happy times with Al Purdy. The day I found two copies of Al’s *North of Summer* for 25 cents each, I imagined *his* smiling ghost entering the room to congratulate me on such a rare and valuable find. Who dumped these beautiful books at the thrift store is another matter.

As John Newlove once said, "memory is a foolish act". For me, there is a serious disappointment in the disappearance of what one seeks and values. Too much now stored in memory. I long for the old days, as they say, when I’d go to Vancouver from Prince George and make arrangements to meet friends at Duthie’s books in the centre of downtown before going to the Cecil or the Railway Club. “Binky”, Duthies’ famous bookseller, managed the downstairs poetry section and a big wire rack full of small press chapbooks and magazines that he took on consignment from visiting and local writers. Much of this forlorn material sat there from year to year, handmade, tattered and out of place next to the glossy prize winners featured on strategically placed display tables.

But in the early 70’s on one visit to Binky’s small press rack, I bought \$100 worth of *blewintments, Talons, Tishes, Gronks, the Georgia Straight Writing Supplements, Iron etc.* and an assortment of literary ephemera. Binky looked at me with a big smile and said “*finally!* I *knew* there was a good reason to keep this stuff!” That day, the reason I’m guessing, happened to be me.

A large part of my library was composed of these small press publications: chapbooks, broadsides, mimeo and Gestetnered magazines and materials that defy the standard book printing, binding and design definitions. Binky kept *his* shelf alive in the bookstore, but

ordinarily this material came by mail either free from writers and friends – say, bp Nichol, Gerry Gilbert, Brian Fawcett, bill bissett, jw curry, Andy Suknaski and rob mcLennan et al - or by subscription. Bill Hoffer, the *infamous* proprietor of Falstaff Books in Gastown, had the best collection of Canadiana and small press material in North America if not the world. Bill had vast bibliographical knowledge and lashing arguments against writers or presses that “sold out” to the Canada Council and/or the other corrupt forces he imagined. He liked my independence as a writer and small press editor (and *maybe* the money I spent that showed my good taste) - so I escaped the ire of his dark intelligent rants and attacks. I liked him a lot. And I loved these odd sized small press publications – the underground literary anarchy of experimental forms versus normal classification, normal shelf sizes, and conventional “straight writing” as bp Nichol called it. .

When I taught college, I made my students choose one of these items from the hundreds of small and rare press books/chapbooks and literary ephemera I ordered for the library over the years. Even if they didn’t read more than one of the poems, I knew the book/pamphlet would have at least one date stamp – and be out in the larger world for at least two weeks. Their incredulousness (*Sir, are these really books?*) increased all the more when I had them do an ABE.com search, to find, for instance, that bp Nichol’s *Bored Messengers* (a chapbook I printed) sells for 200 dollars – or that *Elimination Dance* by Michael Ondaatje goes for over 300 dollars.

I did keep two boxes of my “underground collection” but donated hundreds of items, along with boxes of assorted books I no longer wanted, (and copies of my own Caledonia Writing Series and Gorse Press publications). A truckload went to the UNBC special collections where my first archive is housed, and two other UPS loads went to Simon Fraser University Special Collections. But the donation process was not simple.

As anyone who donates literary archives will know that university libraries issue tax receipts based on the archive’s assessed value. The donor gets a “tax break” of, in my case, about 1/3 of the appraised amount. I was phoned by an agent in Surrey who opened the conversation by saying: “You’re not exactly Stephen King are you!” I began to shake, and continued shaking for several months to come, though admitted at the time that I was *better* than Stephen King! Basically the implication – and not a subtle one – was that I was in collusion with the appraiser, the university – and that my “non profit” press activity, and activity, as a writer with a meager income, and office deductions/expenses, were illegitimate. The amount I received as a “tax break”, I’m sure, did not add up to the expense the tax agents went to to get it back. One phone call that sticks out - and there were many at odd times of the day and night - came from a real-estate appraiser who was hired by the tax department for a week to do literary detective work. He eventually backed off because the librarians at SFU and UBC – bless them for coming to my defense – assured him that I *was* a writer and that the archive *was* legitimate and of cultural value and that the appraisal *was* accurate. The last call from a senior supervisor many months later was to say that their investigation had ceased and that the case against me was dropped.

A person’s library is a useful measure for revealing the proclivities, habits, tastes, and curiosities that say much about that person’s relationship to the world. What does a general inventory say

of my collection? Mostly poetry or poetry related. Or to look at the specific shelves and categories here's an overview of what's there:



*Photo One:* two shelves of American poetry (three feet of Ezra Pound's poetry, and essays), T.S. Eliot, ee Cummings, Charles Olson, Louis Zukovsky, Robert Duncan, Emily Dickinson, Gary Snyder, John Wieners, Jack Spicer, H.D., Denise Levertov, Alan Ginsberg and many others.

Two shelves of modern Canadian poetry including Bill Bissett, Milton Acorn, Raymond Souster, Earl Birney, Phyllis Webb, Sid Marty, Sharon Thesen, Michael Ondaatje, Victor Coleman, Margaret Atwood, bp Nichol, David Phillips, Louis Dudek, Dorothy Livesay, Leonard Cohen, and many many others.

One shelf of world poetry anthologies and a top shelf of writers' biographies and autobiographies.

*Photo Two:* literary criticism, miscellaneous prose, novels, a large collection of Al Purdy, William Carlos Williams, George Bowering and Robert Creeley; a mixed shelf of essays, literary criticism, and books by John Harris, Brian Fawcett, Red Shuttleworth, Paul Nelson, and other writers I'm currently reading; rarer books shelved for an ABE books.com search for pricing; a jazz collection, a mix of poetry, prose and ephemera to be organized and reshelved by category.

*Photo Three:* this is John Newlove's old bookcase containing, encyclopedias, books on writing, mythology, etymology, Dante and assorted classics, a metal shelf of manuscripts and a stack of Gorse Press chapbooks.

*Photo Four:* a top shelf of Norton Anthologies and various oversized volumes, copies of my own books/chapbooks, and the anthologies I've appeared in.

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Just after we settled on Gorse Street, my dad came to visit. When he saw my basement library he asked: "Did you read *all* these books"? Maybe his real query was: *do you have time for a life?*

This was a good question: *yes* and *no*.

Anyone with a working library (writers, teachers, scholars and researchers) develops diverse ways to read depending on immediate requirements. Some books I need as reference sources, some I skimmed or partially read and then shelved for later reading, some I knew would take a lifetime to read and reread for both work *and* pleasure (William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Emily Dickenson, et. al.), some I had to read for exams and term papers in college and because of that pressure didn't really absorb their total weight, beauty or importance. In the last three years, however, I began a project to reread *every* word of the books I earlier found long, intimidating and difficult: Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf*, *The Inferno*, *Moby Dick* and Louis Zukosvsky's epic "*A*" - and a stack of others also sit on the "to read" list.

As I grow older I sometimes think of culling the whole thing down to one six-foot shelf. On other days to grab *only* those few to fill a hobo's knapsack. But given my habit, it's more so, that for now - *I'll keep em all!*

*What thou lovest well remains/ the rest is dross.* (E.P. Canto 81).

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