

## Coffee and a Donut On the Side \*

My home town made it onto *Morningside* last year. Peter Gzowski marvelled at the fact that no strip malls cluttered the outskirts of Sackville, New Brunswick and that the town's main street still had a corner drugstore called The Corner Drug Store.

Now, that store doesn't hold the kind of time-honoured memories for me that it seemed to elicit for Gzowski – other than the occasional visit to the soda fountain, which isn't there any more. The one that lives on for me went the way of a bulldozer, or something, long ago: The Little Store, which as I recall was a small set-up in someone's garage, well off the beaten track. Its lure for me was the incredible selection of penny candies, and most of my forays into that tiny shop were on the sly since my parents, worried about my sweet tooth, had declared it out of bounds. It was like an underground society of sorts, the folks who frequented that place, and the atmosphere prompted my first dream of running a little store of my own. Always a few people hanging around, passing the time of day. Indulging in much maligned sweets.

One of my favourite fantasies now is to open a store full of another much-maligned item: poetry. A whole store of it, maybe even with a small coffee-and-dessert shop off to the side, where browsers could relax and chat. I'd feature Canadian poetry and have a performance space where poets could give public voice to their works. Some events would be music and poems intermingled; others, one poet for an evening, gala readings, dramatisations of a range of poets' works ... all kinds of possibilities. I'd have my store near a busy intersection (I've already picked out the spot) and for advertising, I'd have a huge computer screen billboard at the corner that would display a different poem every day or so. Poetry in lights. There are those who tell me such a venture is bound to fail. After all, people don't like poetry.

I think there's an attitude problem about poetry. It emerges every now and again in a statement along the lines of *gee, I hated poetry in high school, never read it since*. Poems, according to this line of thought, are something you have to analyse to death at school or university because they're on the required reading list. They're those

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mysterious things that don't rhyme any more and are published in little literary journals that no one but other poets and a few English professors read. They're written in garrets somewhere by weird strangers. In short, they are inaccessible, universally suspect, and not much thought about outside a small circle of friends. Call it poem anxiety. But how widespread is it, really?

Back in Sackville, my junior high school English teacher celebrated Robert Burns' birthday every year. Mrs. Beale came to class garbed in unfashionable tartan, undaunted by what she must have known were her students' snickers. I think she kept up the tradition, not only because she loved those poems, but because she knew something about many of us that we wouldn't admit: we loved them too. Poetry at its entertaining best, she read Burns' poems to us in the marvellous Scottish brogue they were meant for and held us, fascinated, for the duration. Come to think of it, I think she should give us a repeat performance at our next high school reunion. Anyway, the point is, I'd venture to say she's not the only teacher to instil in teens a love of poetry.

Still, I can't deny that poetry's public presence is found mainly in literary journals, individual book collections and anthologies, very few of which are widely available. Just walk into pretty well any bookstore in search of poetry, and you'll see what I mean. You'll be lucky to find much of a selection. Just a few weeks ago I had in hand a list of nine collections I wanted and found only one after checking several of the Vancouver bookshops that carry any amount of poetry. The chain stores, I've given up on – at best they offer the collected works of Alexander Pope, a handful of other non-Canadian texts, and possibly one book by Margaret Atwood or Earle Birney. I don't even inquire at the counter any more. Every conversation with store proprietors unleashes the same defence: poetry doesn't sell. Store owners say they respond to demand, they don't create it. Of course, poetry won't sell if it's not available. So, catch 22 and the poems lose.

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Backstage at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre the room is running out of air as we try to deep-breathe our nerves back to normal. The woman who will introduce us appears for a moment from the other side of the curtain, the other side where, we think, if we're lucky fifty people are seated in a theatre that holds more than 300. "Full House," she intones, then grins.

It's Mayworks, 1988, and five poets with two singing groups have scripted a performance of songs interspersed with poems, each enhancing the other. Then, it was a novelty, only the second time we'd worked this combination. Four years later, we've done it over and over again in a variety of incarnations. A great way to give poems a larger audience, I think. But always this nagging doubt: do people come more for the music than the poetry ...

Saturday night, fall, 1991. The one night of the week I'd never dare schedule a poetry reading, but here it is, the Annual Poetry Bash. As I approach the Granville Island location, I wonder whether I've mistaken the place, the line of people waiting to get in more like what you'd expect for a blockbuster movie. It turns out this is one of the Vancouver International Writers' (and Readers') Festival's most successful events. It sells out every year, and this year's capacity crowd numbers 350. For that matter, I discover, tickets for all the poetry readings at this festival are the first to sell. This is a welcome surprise. But one that makes sense, when I think about it, and question the now almost automatic assumption that poetry just isn't popular. For instance:

- Increasingly, poets are invited to read their work not only in various literature classrooms but at political rallies, on alternate and mainstream radio shows, and at various conventions and conferences;
- Numerous non-literary periodicals and other publications include poetry. Here's a short list, off the top of my head: *Women's Education/des femmes*; *Canadian Forum*, *This Magazine*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, *The Fisherman*, *The Guardian*, *Canadian Dimension*, *Saturday Night*, *Herizons*... Others that might not publish poetry pay attention to it with thoughtful reviews and/or features on poets (*Kinesis*, *New Maritimes*, *Between the Lines*...)

- The range of poetry published is improving – at least beginning to include more by women, first nations people, Acadians, lesbians, gays, people of colour, Québécois, people of various ethnicities.

Poetry could use more exposure like this, as it could do with a much wider variety of, and far greater focus on, Canadian poets in universities and schools. And more Mrs. Beales in the classrooms unabashedly displaying their love of all kinds of poems.

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It's a beautiful spring day in Vancouver, and I'm celebrating this year's International Women's Day at the annual march, along with 500 or so other women. I run into an old friend and we get to talking. When I ask her what she's been up to these days, she recites the usual (work, kids...) then, casually, mentions writing. We chat for awhile and she adds that she's in a writing groups with several other women. Sure, she says, they'd like to be published, but even if that doesn't happen, they'll keep writing for the sheer love of and need for it. More proof for me, I tell her, that lots of people not only read poetry but are, themselves, writing it. Taking it seriously. More proof, because I often talk to people who have the same story, the same love. All kinds of writers out there, writing all kinds of poems.

Poetry in Canada today? Exciting. Exhilarating. Unjustly maligned. And eclectic, with something for everyone. Whether, for instance, you lean more toward social realism or post modernism, lyrics or narratives, you'll find plenty to choose from. Not, of course, that everyone is a potential poetry enthusiast. But I am convinced that a lot of people care about poetry, and that many more would actually buy the books if they could just get their hands on them.

So, how about we set up a lot of Little Stores, just for poetry, all across the country. We could establish these in true Canadian fashion, as a public poetry enterprise, along the lines of the CBC. Not underground stores, tucked away in places impossible to find by

anyone who isn't 'in the know' – but front and centre, spots that can't be missed. Places where everyone interested or curious can saunter on in, indulge themselves.

The lure would be irresistible. Every store would feature weekly poetry events and some performances could even be funded to travel through their home provinces or territories, some across the country. We might call the series *Eveningside*. It would become a national institution so intrinsic to life no government would dare cut it. Just imagine: Canadians everywhere, heading to their local Little Store to stock up on poems. Maybe coffee and a donut, on the side.