



Frederick Millet Salter (1895 - 1962)

Literary Genealogy

Exploring the legacy of F.M. Salter

BY GEORGE MELNYK

How do you grow a poet?" Robert Kroetsch was asking how a new land, like Alberta, nurtures literary creativity, what a colonial society needs to do to grow its own stories. Kroetsch asked the question because he wanted to write those stories. In 1945, just a kid out of Heisler, Alberta, he signed up for a course in creative writing at the University of Alberta. It was taught by F.M. Salter, easily the most influential figure in creative writing in Alberta. Salter was committed to helping his students become successful writers. Single-handedly, he coaxed two generations of writers out of the Alberta soil.

In his memoir, *A Likely Story: The Writing Life*, Kroetsch recounts how he felt out of place on the first day of Salter's class; returning war veterans were talking about their very adult war experiences and he felt completely inexperienced as a kid fresh out of high school. "I had been nowhere, I felt. I had done nothing, I felt. After class, I went and dropped the course and registered in a course called Victorian poetry." Kroetsch preferred to use the province as a psychic reservoir for his writing rather than a place to live. After graduating from the U of A, he chose to go north to gain the experience he felt he needed to become a writer. It was 20 years before his first novel, *But We Are Exiles*, the story of his northern adventures, was published. With works such as *The Studhorse Man*, which earned him the Governor General's Award in 1969, he went on to an illustrious literary career; but what if he had stayed in Salter's class?

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Frederick Millet Salter (1895-1962) first came to the U of A in the 1920s to lecture in the English department, returning at the end of the 1930s. Originally from Chatham, New Brunswick, he helped shape a department whose context was primarily British literature, part of Canada's colonial heritage. But Salter, himself an early English scholar, challenged this emphasis on the old country by launching in 1939 the first creative writing course offered by any Canadian university. He was able to get it approved by calling it English 65 or composition.

Salter grew writers the way gardeners grow roses. A short, stocky man with a distinctive little moustache, Salter enjoyed reading Shakespeare aloud as he paced around his office. He loved the English language, the very sound of it, as well as its writing. "He had a wonderful reading voice," Rudy Wiebe, one of Salter's students, remembers.

"In the classroom he read to us from our own work or from other sources either good or bad, and through comparison and example he passed on to us his love of the right word and accurate detail, his ear for apt expression, his impatience with anything shoddy," says Robert Blackburn, another of Salter's students. "He used to say that our university on the northern frontier was the last which could enrol some students who had never before seen electric lights; he knew that most of us had never seen palaces or pirates or skylarks or maple trees or many other exotic things we had read about, and he taught us that the most important things to wonder at and write about were those within our own experience."

Salter knew how to motivate students. If they wrote something excellent he read it over the university radio station — the forerunner of CKUA. The work was brought alive by that impressive voice for all the world to hear. Salter was instrumental in launching the career of Alberta's pre-eminent postwar novelist, the



November 23, 1941

Dear Mrs. Mitchell,

I am ashamed not to have answered your letter earlier. It was very kind of you to write and I appreciated your doing so very much.

Bill is simply a good boy with real talent for writing. I have done nothing for him that it was not pure pleasure to do - and you must also realize that the Government of Alberta does pay me to live a very happy life among these lads and girls! There is a university in Saskatchewan also - and I suppose you have paid taxes before now. If all our students were like Bill, the University wouldn't need to do anything but stick out its chest and tell the tax-payers what they are getting for their money!

Bill was here this afternoon with Chet Lazbertson, both of them suffering from colds and both presenting new manuscripts for discussion. And both manuscripts were worth discussing.

I hear golden reports of Bill in the College of Education. This year I have a little one hour job of teaching there myself, so that it is possible to know something of what is going on. Bill has also told me some of his experiences in practice teaching. I think he has "found himself" at last - he seems to have a real gift for teaching. What pleases me is that if we can get some good teachers in the schools, the whole level of education will rise. At any rate, until he came down with this cold, Bill was absolutely regular and very much on the job. I am most anxious that he keep out of the dreadful mix-ups that dogged him last year, anxious also that he should come through the year so well that he may be able to get the best job going with the solid recommendation of the whole College of Education behind him.

Writing is better as a hobby than as a job. When he gets into teaching, I hope he will have time for the hobby, and there will always be plenty of material to write about. A lad like Bill just naturally picks up ideas everywhere.

I feel confident that Bill's progress from now on will give you nothing but happiness - and you may be very sure that I share your pleasure.

Sincerely yours
W.O. Mitchell

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late W.O. Mitchell. Originally from Weyburn, Saskatchewan, Mitchell had enrolled at the U of A in 1940 to become a teacher. His future wife, Merna, was then a member of the original group of CKUA Players who did radio dramatizations. Salter took an interest in the work of local dramatists performed by the CKUA Players, and it was through Merna he met Bill, who had been working on his writing since the late 1930s.

After reading some of Mitchell's short stories, Salter was convinced the young writer had tremendous potential. He wrote to Jack Patterson, fiction editor of *Maclean's*, encouraging him to publish this outstanding new western talent. In the fall of 1941, Patterson wrote

to Mitchell accepting one of his stories (he was paid \$85) and ended the letter with "best regards to yourself and your sponsor, Mr. Salter." *You Gotta Teeter* appeared in *Maclean's* August, 15, 1942, the very day of Bill and Merna's wedding, at which Salter gave the toast to the bride. Next, Salter wrote to Edward Weeks, the editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, to suggest that the stories being published by the illustrious gentleman were of a lower quality than those being written by his students. The editor wrote back asking to see this work and subsequently published Mitchell's *Owl and the Bens* in April, 1945.

Mitchell acknowledged his indebtedness to Salter's promotional efforts when he wrote to Weeks that he

appreciated the confidence *Atlantic Monthly* showed in his work and “in Mr. Salter’s judgement, which I have never questioned for the five years that he has helped me.” The closeness generated by the mentoring role Salter played was evident July 11, 1943. “That night,” Merna Mitchell recalls, “Bill was sleeping on a couch in Salter’s home not far from the University Hospital, and Salter woke him to tell him that he had a son.”

Mitchell’s venerated classic, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, was published in 1947. With its combination of humour and insight, its ear for the spoken word, and its embracing of the essential drama of human life, *Who Has Seen the Wind* is one of the great works of Canadian literature, the male equivalent of *Anne of Green Gables*.

Mitchell valued the close protégé/mentor relationship he had with Salter, and he used that model in his own career as a writing teacher. In the 1970s, Mitchell taught creative writing at the Banff School of Fine Arts, where he introduced Mitchell’s *Messy Method of Writing*, or freefall in which writers mine their memory for landscape, images, stories, characters and situations.

Salter died in 1962, while only in his 60s. His book on writing, *The Way of the Makers*, was published by The Friends of the University of Alberta in 1967, followed by a trade edition, *The Art of Writing*, in 1971. The book was dedicated to his creative writing students. “If I really have blazed a new path toward excellence in writing, others will be able to make the path easy and straight,” Salter wrote in the preface. It was not only W.O. Mitchell who carried Salter’s legacy forward, but the equally distinguished novelist, Rudy Wiebe.

Wiebe is the winner of two Governor General’s awards for fiction and a professor emeritus of Canadian Literature and Creative Writing at the U of A. As a student of Salter’s in the mid-50s, he wrote a short story that won a national contest and was

published in *Liberty* magazine. Wiebe was furious when the story was published. “The title was changed from *Eight and the Present* to *The Midnight Ride of an Alberta Boy*, he recalls. “It wasn’t even set in Alberta as far as I was concerned, it was set in Saskatchewan. Anyway, Salter said: ‘Just calm down. Take the \$100 you got paid and buy a Canada Savings Bond.’ I did buy the bond because I listened to him a lot in those days.”

Wiebe listened to Salter in many ways. For his master’s, he talked to Salter about doing a thesis on Shakespeare. “You could probably do a good thesis on Shakespeare, but so could many others,” Salter replied. “Only *you* could write a good novel about Mennonites.”

“That made a lot of sense to me,” Wiebe says. So he wrote *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Salter was sufficiently impressed by the novel that he told the young student to send it to “the very best publisher in the country.” Along with the manuscript, Salter sent a letter to publisher Jack McClelland, of McClelland & Stewart, praising the work. *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the first novel about Mennonites in Canada, was published in 1962. The more conservative element in the Mennonite community was unhappy with the book’s frank discussion of community conflicts, but this didn’t stop Wiebe from embarking on an illustrious literary career. His 1973 novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, which dealt with the second Riel Rebellion and the tragic figure of the Cree chief, Big Bear, won a well-deserved Governor General’s award.

Wiebe’s achievement as a writer is based on the view that writing is a hard slog. “You end up struggling with one thing at a time, one story at a time,” he says. Without Salter, “a guy like me living out in the boonies would never have had the nerve to do this.”

Wiebe began teaching Canadian literature and creative writing at the U of A in 1967, inheriting the mantle bequeathed by Salter. Numerous students went

SALTER, MITCHELL, JAKE AND THE KID

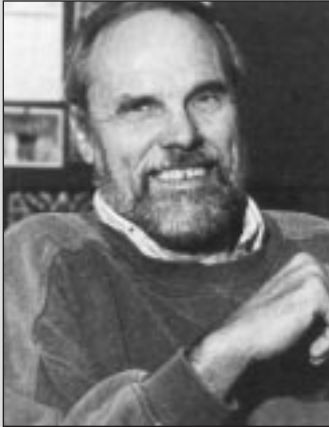
“Alice Frick, who did a master’s thesis under my direction two years ago, has written to ask me for radio scripts,” F.M. Salter wrote in a letter to his protégé, W.O. Mitchell, in 1942. “She says that everything that CBC does in Toronto is selected by her. There is no reason why you should not turn the Jake series into radio. You may have to alter the stories a little. The main thing to remember is that the radio audience is blind.”

As usual, Mitchell heeded his mentor’s advice and adapted the stories for radio. Jake, the Kid, and the colourful characters of Crocus, Sask. were a weekly highlight on CBC Radio from 1950-56. In 1961, the popular series was successfully adapted for an equally appreciative television audience.

The national mourning that surrounded Mitchell’s death was a tribute both to Mitchell’s immense talent and to F.M. Salter’s great ability to recognize genius.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF BIG BEAR

By Rudy Wiebe



He stood where her head furrowed into the torn grassy ground, and he prayed, asking forgiveness of the Great Buffalo Spirit, thanking for what had been given, for the tongue, for the blood, for fat and bone and meat and hide, for sinews and the hollow cups of her hooves. In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete. Then he bent to her front leg, wrestled her onto her side. His arrowheads from her shoulder, painted blood side by side. He heaved over her hindquarters and she settled her mountainous body down for him with one long sigh. He knelt beside her, cut off her teats one by one, slowly drank the warm blood and milk that came there. Her warmth upon the earth, the heat of life and happiness overcame him then and he had to sit down there, feel her heat mould him, curl him up within itself against the fulfilled dome of her belly shining against the sun.

on to literary success under Wiebe's tough guidance. In 1977, NeWest Press published its first fiction title, *Getting Here*, an anthology of women's fiction edited by Wiebe. Most of the contributors were or had been students in his classes. Among them were Caterina Edwards, Helen Rosta, and Aritha van Herk whose lead story was *A Woman of Moderate Temperament*. "Often you can't tell if a person sitting in a class with you may turn out to be, in the long run, a much better writer than you are," Wiebe says.

If Salter launched Mitchell and Wiebe on a trajectory to the pantheon of CanLit, then Wiebe in turn launched van Herk, the first woman writer in the Salter tradition to make it to the top of the CanLit charts. Under the supervision of Wiebe, van Herk's creative writing thesis, *Judith*, won the Seal First Novel Award in 1978. The prize was \$50,000, at the time the most valuable literary prize in Canada. The novel was published in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Set in rural Alberta, *Judith* is a powerful expression of the feminist consciousness that captured women in the 1970s. At age 23, van Herk became an instant celebrity. She drove about in a white Porsche bought with the prize money, *Judith* on its vanity licence plate.

Looking back to 1978, when her career took off as

fast as Donovan Bailey in a 100-metre dash, she realizes that, as a young woman and writer, she was sitting on a volcano. "In some ways it was the best thing that could happen to a writer and in other ways it was the worst thing that could happen. Everyone looked at the money and the fame and thought I was becoming a spoiled little ingenue. All I had really done was to be a studious kid who read everything I could and wrote a novel under Rudy's guidance." In 1983, van Herk joined the English department at the University of Calgary as a professor of creative writing, replacing W.P. Kinsella, who had decided the academic life wasn't for him. As the mover and shaker behind Canada's first PhD in creative writing, she committed herself to the Salter tradition. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of new writers, especially in the area of publishing. In the 1980s, she and Wiebe edited two anthologies of stories from Western Canada. In the 1990s, she edited three further collections of fiction — *Alberta ReBound*, *Boundless Alberta*, and *Due West*. "We have responsibilities as writers," van Herk explains. "I'm not just a writer out to write books and be famous and make money. I have a responsibility to my colleagues and to my readers and to my culture. I owe something to this community."

That sense of obligation and sharing is evident in the number of new writers she has shepherded since

she began teaching at the university — Joan Crate, Rosemary Nixon, Suzette Mayr and Hiromi Goto. Looking back on her apprenticeship with Wiebe, she realizes that mentoring is not always a gentle process. “Rudy was my teacher and he was wonderful to me. He was an excellent supervisor but I had incredible fights with him. You have to fight with Rudy. That’s the only way to have a relationship with him. He won’t respect you if you don’t fight with him.” Although Wiebe was her *de facto* mentor since he was her official supervisor, she considers Robert Kroetsch, the writer who fled Salter’s class, to be her “spiritual mentor.”

While acknowledging the influence of Wiebe and Kroetsch on her, van Herk is modest in her assessment of her own influence on the younger generation of writers. Younger writers, she says, are not going “to see me in the same kind of power as my generation saw Rudy and Robert.” Her modesty may be endearing but not accurate. In the past decade, she has nurtured a whole new generation of Alberta writers, including the acclaimed Calgary novelist, Hiromi Goto.

A Canadian of Japanese descent, Hiromi Goto won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1995 for the best first book in the Caribbean and Canada region. Her novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, went on to win a second international prize, The Canada-Japan Book Award, the following year. The jury described *Chorus of Mushrooms* as conveying “an authentic sense of the difficulty experienced by a young Japanese-Canadian woman caught between the pull of assimilation and the hunger to come to terms with her Japanese heritage.” Born in Chiba-ken Japan in 1966, Goto immigrated to British Columbia with her family at the age of three. They later settled in southern Alberta, where her father operated a mushroom farm. After taking her bachelor of arts at the U of C, she began taking creative writing classes, first with Fred Wah and then with van Herk. Goto considers this a time when her writing became politicized in terms of racial and feminist politics. “Taking those courses was a big influence,” she says, “because suddenly I was working in a group and a community of writers.”

Goto began *Chorus of Mushrooms* in the last fiction writing class she took with van Herk. Like *Judith*, it reflects the formative experiences of the novelist in which place, cultural identity and gender intertwine in a psychological drama. Like Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Goto’s first book has the author’s ethnic background as its subject. And just as Salter helped Wiebe get published, van Herk was there for Goto. “I ended up with about 50 pages that I could actually

JUDITH

By Aritha van Herk

Awakening while the house was still quiet, daylight not yet arrived, Judy crept downstairs in her stocking feet, feeling her way along the railing in the semidarkness. Through the kitchen window



it glowed with a pale phosphorescence, a radiant invitation. She tied her running shoes, zipped up her hooded red parka and slipped out, closing the door behind her softly, so softly. Anticipating the clean expanse of yard she stood breathing lightly, quickly, already

the sting of windless cold on her cheeks. Then with a sudden, soundless cry she flung herself into it, heedless, flat on her back, arms flailing and legs scissoring. Carefully she got up and, standing on one leg, jumped away from the imprint there to an unmarked spot. Again she flung herself down, again flailed and scissored the shape, already feeling the dampness creeping through the seat of her pants to her skin. Again and again, jumping from one angel to create another, she pressed them into the mold of the snow with her body. Until they were everywhere, hardly a square yard of untouched snow left. Angels, robed and winged, lifting themselves magically in the smooth bluish layer. Wet and shivering then, she ran to the door, looked back once to make sure she had done it, that it wasn’t a dream. And crept inside, so quiet, so cold, her wet feet tracking, to fall asleep on the kitchen floor until she felt her father’s arms around her lifting her up against the heat of his body, carrying her back to bed.

“Did you see?” she mumbled into his shoulder.

“Yes.” He pulled the blankets up to her chin. “I saw a million angels.”

ICEFIELDS

By Thomas Wharton



Byrne dreamed of flowers.

He breathed their scents and read the names that ran in orderly columns down the pages of his botanical notebook. Names of the flowers he had been collecting. The seeds and bulbs he had stored with their native earth in the tin specimen box he carried in his rucksack. He walked among them, he breathed and named, not knowing or caring if the scents matched the names he gave them. Flowers of snow melt, of early and full summer, of dry August.

Western Anemone, or Chalice Flower. Glacier Lily. Wild Blue Flax. Four species of violet, three of Orchidaceae.

Flowers of the lush valleys and the high, wind scoured slopes.

Yellow Mountain Avens. Bluebell, *hedysarum*. River Beauty and Grass of Parnassus. Indian Paintbrush.

keep from the manuscript when Aritha's class was over," Goto says. "Then I was talking to her outside of class and she said there was a deadline for NeWest coming up and why don't I hurry and finish it and hand it in. So I did, and they liked it."

In Salter's day, promising writers had to turn to Toronto for their first step on the road to fame, but now Alberta writers can garner international recognition right here at home. A case in point is Thomas Wharton, who studied writing at the U of A and is now a PhD student at the U of C. Wharton's 1995 novel, *Icefields*, about a turn-of-the-century mountaineering expedition, won a bevy of honours: the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in the Caribbean and Canada Region; the Writers Guild of Alberta Henry Kreisel Award for Best First Book; two awards at the Banff Mountain Book Festival; and a 1997 nomination for the Boardman-Tasker Award for mountain literature. *Icefields* sold well in Canada, the U.S., and Britain. As a native Albertan raised in the Rockies, Wharton's writing represents the Mitchell side of Salter's legacy in the same way that Goto's work and Wiebe's are symbolic of the ethnic and immigrant identity. Salter looked to both polarities for creative energy and literary achievement. In this sense, he was very much a Canadian

seeking to define the distinctness of our character.

The nurturing of Alberta writers in university creative writing classes that Salter started in 1939 is still going strong nearly 60 years later. The U of A and the U of C have nationally renowned programs that produce talented writers. Both universities have writer-in-residence programs which bring nationally and internationally known writers to Alberta, enabling the tradition to be continually refreshed with new perspectives. The university's association with creative writing may bring the theoretical and ideological concerns of academia to bear on the writing. But this may also be a way of keeping the writing current and contemporary. The large number of award-winning writers to come out of both universities are a sign of the excellence of the work done there. The fundamental vision of how to grow writers through university programs — brought to Alberta by F.M. Salter — remains unchanged. The seeds that Salter sowed have grown into tall trees that continue to bear magnificent fruit generation after generation. Salter believed passionately that enthusiasm and good work went hand in hand. That his own enthusiasm for the written word continues to resonate after so many years is a tribute to his passion and the literary achievements of his students, their students, and students to come. ✂

CHORUS OF MUSHROOMS

By Hiromi Goto



She breathed in great draughts and followed the scent ripe with fungal ecstasy. She stood before a door marked Number 9. Stretched out a hand and pushed it inward on the noiseless hinges. Heard the timeless murmur of mushrooms hush. She had to bend low, tuck her head into her chest and enter sideways to fit her giant body through the frame of the door. And finally she stood among them.

Vast rows upon rows, beds of peat and darkly, richly wet. And mushrooms. Such mushrooms. They gleamed like newly hatched sil-worms, like jellyfish and oysters. The only sound the drip drip of moisture condensed on the ceiling, plipping into tiny puddles on the damp cement floor. Welcome, welcome into this world of moist. She walked between the long rows of beds, through puddles warm as blood and stood naked in the centre of the room. The fungal silence as thick as the moisture around her.
