

For 20 years the Writers Guild of Alberta has encouraged and enabled writers to pursue

# The Writer's Life



In the year 2000, the Writers Guild of Alberta turned 20. The organization wasn't incorporated until 1981, but that is a quibble. A rambunctious meeting at Calgary's Southern Alberta Institute of Technology on October 18 and 19, 1980, was the place and time of birth.

Twenty years later, we're in good position to look back and see whether Alberta's largest writers' organization has achieved what it set out to do; also to look around and assess its relevance to a new generation of writers who did not establish it. And it's a good opportunity to remind everyone of the many things that did not exist in Alberta until the Guild worked and fought for them. Alberta produces sterling writers at a clip that hardly makes sense, and the Writers Guild of Alberta (WGA) is an important reason why.

The WGA is a province-wide writers' organization of more than 700 members, whose purpose is to publicize, support and economically better Alberta's writing community. Its aims have never been summed up better than by Robert Kroetsch in his preamble to the official constitution: "Each writer, in order to contribute to the good of the larger society, must be recognized as having and acting upon the highest creative ideals, must be enabled and encouraged to live, in its fullest and most valid expression, a writer's life."

Though we have tended to airbrush the origins of the Guild into something more mellow, the fuel that ignited it was anger. The Lougheed government took many progressive steps upon its election in 1971, including the founding of the nation's first Department of Culture. John Patrick Gillese, a professional writer of magazine fiction and a stalwart of the Canadian Authors' Association, ran the department's literary arts branch in

BY FRED STENSON

a populist, grassroots way. He favoured contests and workshops as a means of helping writers. The novel competition, in particular, was of great help to many—including me. Its purpose was to discover Alberta novelists; among others, it found Jan Truss and the perennial best-seller Pauline Gedge.

The literary arts branch had a rah-rah attitude that took financial success as the sole barometer of literary success. It focused on the beginning writer, plying the always-popular nostrum that "you too can be a bestseller, given sufficient effort and dedication." The branch's attitude toward university writing courses, literary quarterlies, writer/academics, and all those writers whose progress in literature did not include payola verged on hostile.

Not surprisingly, the first gathering aimed at realizing a new type of writers' organization for Alberta took place at a university. At the University of Alberta on June 21, 1980, 35 Alberta writers gathered. Here were Robert Kroetsch, Jan Truss, Rudy Wiebe, Merna Summers, Miriam Mandel, Ted Blodgett, Monty Reid, Chris Wiseman, Edna Alford, Aritha van Herk, Doug Barbour, and a fleet of others. Among them were friends of the affable John Patrick Gillese. While some simply wanted modernization of the status quo and modest change, some were angry.

Significantly, Alberta had a new culture minister, Mary LeMessurier, who followed in the footsteps of the flamboyant Horst Schmid. Earlier in the spring, Ms. Lemessurier had invited a delegation of writers to explain their discontent. One of the concerns was that, out of the department's budget for cultural development, the writers were getting 1.9 per cent, compared to 23.8 per cent for the performing arts and 7.3 per cent for the visual arts. Considering inflation, support for writers was declining.

Novelist and two-time Governor General's Award winner Rudy Wiebe, tells a story about bumping into Horst Schmid in the parking lot of the Alberta Legislature. Mr. Schmid encouraged him to start an organization. The government can't talk to individuals, he intimated, but they can and will talk to an organization. He also suggested that the writers go after lottery funds as a money source.

In an interview for this article, Wiebe confessed he was not always a fan of writers' organizations. When Margaret Atwood came after him for support of a book writers' organization (which became the Writers' Union of Canada), his reply was cheeky. She had used the word "league," having also worked towards the creation of the League of Canadian Poets. "So if we have a writers' league," said Wiebe, "does that mean we all meet down east to play for some kind of cup?" Atwood argued Wiebe to the ground, and he emerged more respectful of what organized writers could accomplish.

Now, fully converted, Wiebe and a committee of others were selling the virtues of a unified voice. At the June 1980 meeting, the group of 35 argued autonomy, funding, purpose, and membership criteria. On autonomy and funding, dramatist Warren Graves argued against seeking funds from government: whoever pays the piper calls the tune. Others felt the government was practically begging the writing community for direction. Wiebe argued that the government had no money of its own and that we would only be taking what was ours. Fine, said Larry Pratt, but don't go "cap in hand."

On the matter of how inclusive the organization should be, Aritha van Herk led the discussion. All kinds of writers should belong, she thought, and whereas the Writers' Union held out for members who had published at least one book, that was perhaps too exclusive for the Alberta group. She thought open membership might be

best. In the discussion, everyone was easily convinced that all types of writers should be welcomed. Ted Blodgett came up with the phrase "polyphonic but harmonic" for how this voice would sing. Though various options were looked at, open membership prevailed. When you're trying to get the attention of government, you need numbers.

A date was selected for a public organizational meeting in Calgary. To fund publicity, the 35 attendees anted up \$10 each. Rudy Wiebe was selected chairperson of the executive committee.

The amazing job done by the various committees with their \$350 budget was proven by attendance at the October event. More than 150 writers showed up. It was an exciting and occasionally unruly affair, and a true beginning of community. The motions passed in the previous meeting became motions again for debate at this one. Open membership was more contentious here. Novelist and short story writer Mary Walters, a beginning writer back then, recalls how her sense of belonging was boosted to hear senior writers such as Chris Wiseman argue down the concept of two-tiered membership. When the open membership motion passed, non-fiction legend James Gray stomped out, muttering that the Guild had made a farce of itself on its birthday. He returned that night for the banquet, having already paid.

Geoffrey Ursell came to Calgary to tell us about the already robust Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, and Greg Cook was on hand to describe the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. In addition, several in attendance were already members of the Writers' Union of Canada. In the end, the WGA picked and chose from the various models.

When Guild executive member Merna Summers looks back at that first year, she remembers how much time it



consumed. As its first secretary, she donated an astounding 50 per cent of her working time. The Guild's headquarters were in Edmonton, and the membership was greatest in Calgary. It was also broke. Then, the Department of Culture gave \$10,000 to the Guild for operating funds. Though several people may have played a part, credit for urging the department from within to support the Guild is generally given to culture worker Ken McVey. Over the years, McVey did the Guild many more good turns, and it was a great sadness to Alberta's writing community when he died in 1987.

Coming out of the first year, the Guild had a newsletter, which ate much of its budget, and had participated in a writers' exchange with Saskatchewan. Then there was the "Travelling Nude." Based on a classic Henry Kriesel short story about a nude model who goes town to town to pose for rural artists, the WGA decided to send a "nude" in the form of a roving writer-in-residence to various small Alberta towns. The first nude was Edmonton's Gloria Sawai, and the first host town was Killam.

At the Guild's first Annual General Meeting in the fall of 1981, the featured speaker was Margaret Atwood. Showing her commitment to the nation's tribe of writers, Ms. Atwood donated her fee back to the Guild and asked for no expenses. That weekend, the Guild started up its AGM tradition of arguing heartily by day and partying just as heartily by night. The robustness of post-banquet dancing is an excellent measure of organizational health, and the WGA was a bouncing baby through its early years.

Governor General's Award-winning poet and professor Ted Blodgett, of Edmonton, presided over the second executive of the Guild. One distinction of this board was that it served for 18 months rather than the customary 12, in order to get the AGM shifted to the spring.

Another was the founding and naming of the Guild's awards program. A member at large that year, I recall being impressed by Ted Blodgett's knowledge of Alberta's classic writers as names were selected for the awards: Bugnet, O'Hagan, Stephansson, Annett, Eggleston.

I remember, too, the feeling of solemn importance that overtook me during the discussion. Previously inclined to sit at the back of any meeting making smart remarks, I was catapulted into adulthood by the thought of how much these decisions could affect the lives of writers. The process for selecting juries and the rules that bound them were squeaky clean from the outset. We always knew the matter of choosing one writer out of the bunch to win anything was potentially dynamite. The standards were kept as high as we could imagine. One means found over the years to reduce the chance of bias was the selection of out-of-province jurors to balance local ones.

In 1982, Ted Blodgett handed out the Guild's first awards—little medallion stickers—from a paper bag. W.P. Kinsella won in the "novel" category for *Shoeless Joe*. The following week, as petty revenge for something, the *Calgary Herald* ran a photo of the winners with a caption that included the statement that Ann Knight had accepted the novel award on behalf of "W. Beaconseller."

A drama award named for Gwen Pharis Ringwood was added to the slate of awards in 1985, and a first book award named for Henry Kriesel in 1993.

When Rudy Wiebe looks back on the first two and a half years of the WGA, he thinks the greatest achievement was the hiring of Mary Walters as the first staff person. Mary resigned her post as secretary of the executive to apply for the part-time executive assistant job, and got it. The job was part-time only in name and wages. Eventually, it became officially full-time and bore the more fitting title of executive director. Mary Walters was

a legend for her efficiency, dedication and patience, and many credit her for keeping the Guild upright in its crucial beginning years. At that time, the Guild's office was in the Weinlos building in downtown Edmonton, above Weinlos Books. The space was amazingly small. Many people dropped in to chat, not all of them Guild members. A notable moment was when a man came in carrying a bundle of newspapers and a match, threatening to do himself in.

Walters stayed with the Guild as executive director for six years, after which she became an editor at Lone Pine Press. Lyle Weis took over in 1987. Six years later, in 1993, Weis handed the baton to Miki Andrejevitch, who just this year passed it to Norma Locke.

From the beginning, a major goal of the WGA was to gain a funding source for the literary arts that was at arm's length from government. Particularly needed were grants to individual writers decided not by bureaucrats but by knowledgeable juries. The Canada Council was the most prominent model. Early on in the life of the Guild, the Government of Alberta started setting up cultural foundations based on mounting lottery funds. When progress was made toward foundations for the performing and visual arts, the Guild took a lead role in lobbying for a literary arts foundation. All the early presidents, Wiebe, Blodgett, then Joan Clark (1983) and Chris Wiseman (1984), spent much time making presentations to Ms. LeMessurier on the need for this foundation.

The result in 1984 was the Alberta Foundation for the Literary Arts (AFLA), created by an amendment to the Culture Foundations Act, to fund not only writers but publishers and libraries, too. The great moment was slightly tarnished when the first board of AFLA failed to

include any writers. Again the Guild roared into action. The government was quick to respond. From a list offered by the Guild, Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van Herk and Mary Walters were added to the board. When this group was coming off its tour of duty, AFLA again accepted the Guild's recommendation to appoint Chris Wiseman. While the Guild did not succeed in the institution of a peer jury system for deciding awards, concern was tempered by the quality of the board members and the number of writers among them. Remembering the first years of the WGA and AFLA, Mary Walters says both organizations were "proud of their ethics" and went "beyond what was necessary" in guaranteeing fairness.

AFLA was an enormous achievement that brought a great deal of new money into literary Alberta. Grants to writers were now substantial and the WGA had more operating funds. The Guild took on all kinds of new programs, too many, as Mary Walters recalls. Retreats. Workshops. Ever more ambitious AGMs. From time to time, AFLA would announce some new policy that infuriated everyone, and the Guild would mount up a charge to see it fixed.

In 1991, the provincial government rolled AFLA and the other cultural foundations into the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA), the "one big foundation" as we tended to call it. Again, the Guild snapped to attention. The fear that the literary arts would again become poor cousin to the big spenders in the performing arts was the motivator. In fact, the percentage of funds to the literary arts remained about the same. And AFA finally adopted peer juries as a method of deciding grants. There was, however, a sense of loss when AFLA was rolled into AFA. It became increasingly difficult to get writers on AFA's board. In many other ways, AFA seemed a more distant planet than AFLA had been.

George Melnyk, author of the two-volume *Literary*



*History of Alberta* and the original executive director of AFLA, makes the point that the WGA was created not to redefine and standardize the relationship between writer and publisher but that between the writer and the state. This is an important distinction. The Guild, in its early years, poured energy into the drive to achieve a foundation. Thereafter, it worked at various things, but kept one eye firmly on what AFLA was doing. AFLA was, and AFA is, the basket in which our eggs are held, and the Guild, as far as writers are concerned, is their official watchdog.

The Writers Guild of Alberta has been very fortunate in its presidents, its boards and its staff. Staff would tend to steer the ship, but the choice of destination for any particular year belonged to the board, particularly the president. In van Herk's presidential year, the Guild took a major step in fundraising, led by Becky Shaw and Andrew Wreggitt. Corporate sponsorship enabled the Guild to give cash with its awards. Myrna Kostash, being a citizen of the world, took us international during her year. André Brink came all the way from South Africa to be our featured conference speaker.

Perhaps the most tumultuous of all Guild annual banquets came in the year of Jon Whyte's presidency. It was an unsettling time because the move from AFLA into AFA was in the wind, and no one really knew what that meant. Then, immediately before our conference, the Hurtig publishing company of Edmonton was denied a bail-out by the Alberta government and ceased to be. As a general rule, culture ministers were invited to address our AGMs and they usually declined, but in 1991, Doug Main said yes. It was like a volunteer appearance before the lions at the Roman coliseum.

The inimitable Jon Whyte introduced the minister. He said the minister came from a family so well known in Alberta that principal streets in a great many towns were named after it. Then, probing the sore point at its very

centre, he brought up Hurtig's *Canadian Encyclopedia*, the junior version said to be responsible for the company's financial difficulty. Whyte had been in Mr. Main's office recently and was pleased to see a set of the *Junior Encyclopedia* on a bookcase. Whyte added that it might do the minister more good were he to remove the shrink wrap.

Perhaps riled by this, perhaps delivering the speech he came to give, Main gave a stunningly abrupt address. After a few preliminary rudenesses, he leapt voluntarily into the Hurtig subject. Hurtig had made a point of having no friends in the Alberta government, he said. Why the surprise that he would get no dough? I'm not sure if buns were thrown, but verbiage certainly was. There were calls of "What about your buddy, Pocklington?" Several writers, Myrna Kostash and Helen Rosta being two, rose to say how much good Mel Hurtig had done for Albertan and Canadian writers.

I tell that story in such detail because it seems to have been a watershed. Not that anything happened because of the things said that night, necessarily, but it does seem to mark a time beyond which the relationship between Guild and government became formal and distant. The spirit of cutbacks was upon us after 1990, and the Department of Culture itself soon fell victim, replaced by the anonymously titled Department of Community Development. It must be said, and with emphasis, that AFA has not shortchanged the Writers Guild of Alberta. In fact, as the government offloaded literary programs that used to belong to the culture ministry onto the WGA, the Guild's budget went up. Eventually, the government invited the WGA to be the Public Arts Service Organization (PASO) for the discipline of writing. There was certainly debate about this move, but, given that the PASO would be the only writers' organization eligible for AFA funding, the Guild felt it could hardly say no.

When he was Guild president, Edmonton fiction writer and journalist Reg Silvester expressed concern that we were becoming old and boring. He feared we might be headed where other writers' organizations had gone when their members aged and they could not interest the young.

George Melnyk, when his turn as president came, inherited a financial crunch owing to the massive program load the Guild was running. With his amazing calm effectiveness, he neatly resolved the problem with charity casino funds.

The same year, Melnyk and new executive director Miki Andrejevitch turned the Guild awards night into an Awards Gala open to the public. The Book Publishers Association of Alberta was persuaded to combine its awards night with that of the WGA to create a bigger, better-publicized affair. The combined gala continues to this day, and the 2000 event featured a presentation of the WGA's Golden Pen Lifetime Achievement Award to Grant MacEwan. That night, we beheld the last public speech of Grant MacEwan's long life. The Golden Pen Award has been given only one other time, at the first gala in 1994—to W.O. Mitchell.

In 1995, Darlene Quaipe's presidential year, the WGA and the Banff Centre co-produced the first Wordfest in Calgary. Administered by Anne Green, Wordfest has become one of the major literary events in the nation. Other recent innovations in which the Guild can take pride are the Writing Project Loan Fund, by which Guild members can acquire loans to complete writing projects, and the institution of the W.O. Mitchell City of Calgary Book Prize. Not long before W.O.'s death, he was able to attend the first presentation of the award to Lisa Christensen. Both developments were spearheaded by George Melnyk.

There it is: a too-brief account of 20 years of solid

achievement and service to writers. At the start of this article, I posed two questions. Has the WGA achieved the goals for which it was created? And does it have relevance for the newer generation of writers who did not find it?

The first question seems to have been solidly answered in the affirmative. The Guild was founded so writers could, in the fullest sense, lead a writer's life in Alberta. In 1995, seven Albertans were nominated for Governor General's awards. A year in which an Albertan does not win one of these awards is an off year. I have lived a writer's life in Alberta and the writers' Guild has had a lot to do with making that possible.

The second question should probably be divided in two. Is the writers Guild relevant? And is it relevant to younger writers?

As far as relevance in general, the Guild's lifetime job of making sure the Alberta Foundation for the Arts plays fair is still there to be done. Given that AFA still has trouble accepting the democracy of the jury system, especially when controversial work is supported, that job remains important. Without the Guild as a watchdog and lobbying force, the path of political least resistance becomes all the more tempting. Alberta writers still need to speak with a unified voice and the Guild, provided it doesn't turn from watchdog into chained poodle, is made for the job.

As for whether it has relevance to younger writers, I am less sure. Every so often, a younger writer will tell me he or she won't belong to the Guild because, what do you really get for \$60 anyway? A little newsletter? With declining energy, I give my little speech about its value not being the cash value of the current services but rather all the traditions and programs the Guild has helped put in place over the years that writers are benefiting from even as we speak....



Just when I had more or less convinced myself that the younger writers of Alberta would never again adopt the WGA as their own, I attended the 20th anniversary Annual General Meeting in Red Deer in October 2000. It was a hugely enjoyable affair, partly because of a fine old commemoration of the past. Past presidents and executive directors were honoured at a reception, and, later the same night, there was a tribute to Martyn Godfrey and Jon Whyte, the two past presidents no longer with us. There were humorous stories and tearful speeches, and, at one point, in honour of Martyn, we flew paper airplanes at one another all over the room. The night also marked the Guild's farewell to Miki Andrejevitch.

If the Guild were destined for the scrap heap, the farewells and the reminiscences would have been merely sad. That they were also joyful had a lot to do with the election earlier that day. George Takach, an able, charismatic fellow, had stepped up from vice-president to president, as is Guild tradition, and two people actually contested the post he was leaving. When the ballots were counted, Suzette Mayr of Calgary emerged as vice-president (and future-president if she so chooses). So many able Calgarians were willing to serve on the board that some had to be turned away (due to a constitutional rule that no more than three can come from either Edmonton or Calgary). The dancing at the end of the day was spirited in the extreme, almost dangerous. At one point, Phyllis Schuell of Red Deer gave me a push out of the way and said, "Look out! Miki's going to kick!"

One thing it all meant was that I had to scamper home and rewrite my earlier, slightly gloomy ending of this article. Suddenly, along with its illustrious past, the Writers Guild of Alberta seemed capable of an illustrious future.

Finally, let us stop to praise those passionate Alberta writers who took time out of their lives 20 years ago to create the Writers Guild of Alberta. For their time and their investment of \$10, they have realized their original wish. Through the work of their Guild, they have enabled and encouraged Alberta's writers to live, in a full and valid way, the writer's life.

**Fred Stenson** is a sterling example of the WGA's legacy to Alberta and Canada. He has published 10 books, including his novel, *The Trade*, nominated for the 1999 Giller Prize. He is also *AlbertaViews'* regular humour columnist .

## WGA: Who, What and When

### FIRST EXECUTIVE OF THE WGA (1980-81)

Rudy Wiebe, President; Chris Wiseman, Vice-President; Merna Summers, Secretary; Beverly Hocking (now Harris), Treasurer; Joan Clark, Jan Truss and William Latta, Members-at-Large

### SECOND WGA EXECUTIVE (1982-83)

Ted Blodgett, President; Tim Christison, Vice-President; Mary Riskin (now Walters), Secretary; Reg Silvester, Treasurer; Rudy Wiebe, Past President; Cathy Reninger, Doug Barbour, Sharleen Chevreaux and Fred Stenson, Members-at-Large

### FIRST WGA AWARD WINNERS (1982)

Merna Summers, short fiction, for *Calling Home*; Monica Hughes, children's literature, *Hunters in the Dark*; Jon Whyte, poetry, *Homage, Henry Kelsey*; John Davenall Turner, non-fiction, *Scurfield Painter*; and W.P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe*

### PRESIDENTS OF THE '80S

Rudy Wiebe (1980-81), Ted Blodgett, Chris Wiseman, Gloria Sawai, Monty Reid, Martyn Godfrey, Aritha van Herk, Myrna Kostash (1989)

### PRESIDENTS OF THE '90S

Jon Whyte (1990); Reg Silvester, George Melnyk, Candace Jane Dorsey, Alice Major, Darlene Quaife, Fred Stenson, Tololwa Mollel, Scot Morrison, Anne Burke (2000)