



A Local Perspective

Evolutionary theorists claim humans are wired to take pleasure in their own special places because, for our ancestors, attachment to a place was crucial to survival. And, just as understanding our physical environment enabled us to survive, so our stories enhance our sense of identity and belonging, of pride in our area, province and country. They clarify our understanding of where we fit in.

Alberta is unique and so is the art we produce. Our books, those low-tech, all-purpose windows to the world are no exception. On the most obvious, practical level, try gardening using a reference book from England or even Ontario. Neither will help much in the selection of plants that survive here. Nor will a European hiking guide help us find our way through the Rockies.

At a deeper level, as we chart the landscape of the imagination, knowing our own place becomes even more crucial. Textbooks from elsewhere present neither our local facts nor our perspective on history. And thoughtful writers and readers today acknowledge the crucial role of the local in the world's great imaginative fiction and non-fiction.

Still, with the success of Canadian publishers on the world scene in the last few decades, do we really need an Alberta publishing industry?

"Screw that question!" explodes award-winning playwright Clem Martini, author of *Three Martini*

Do we really need an Alberta book publishing industry?

BY TIM CHRISTISON

Lunch, an anthology of three of his produced plays, recently published by Red Deer Press. "Yeah, sure. We should all move to Montreal or Toronto or Vancouver because they are the only places that should have publishers, or theatres, or musicians!"

Martini and his wife Cheryl Foggo write separately and together in most genres and media. They are published by Alberta presses. Opportunities to work and live elsewhere abound for the Calgary-based couple, but they exemplify how our artists feel about Alberta.

Foggo's response is soft-spoken but no less passionate than her husband's. "Alberta is the centre of my universe. I've lived here all my life and I want all the cultural opportunities here that are in Toronto." She adds, "Arts are an important part of a healthy community. I want for my city, my province, all facets of an artistic milieu to be represented, theatres, galleries—and publishing houses."

Alberta publishers give local writers a start. They enable us to hear our own stories. They counteract the homogenizing forces of globalization and the mass-think of American entertainment. But, to reflect Alberta and its people back to Albertans, Alberta publishers fight many obstacles.

With a population of just three million, Alberta is a small market. Nonetheless, based on sales, Alberta has the third-largest publishing industry in Canada, led by Ontario and British Columbia. Canadian publishing's kick-start came when the federal government capitalized on the rare wave of nationalism aroused by Canada's cen-

tennial year celebrations in 1967. Federal funding for theatres spawned many regional performing companies then. Later, in the 1970s, the federal government launched support for Canadian writers and publishers. The Book Publishers Association of Alberta (BPAA) and many of the publishers it represents have recently celebrated their 25th anniversaries.

In 1995, 32 member companies of BPAA reported \$20-million in sales, the eight largest firms accounting for \$18-million of the total. Altogether, BPAA companies generated \$19.1-million of Gross Domestic Product annually as well as \$13.3-million in labour income and 380 jobs throughout the economy. These companies paid taxes of an estimated \$4.2-million to federal and provincial governments. Yet only \$1-million of funding from all levels of government is available to these publishers. Despite a recent one-off injection of funds, \$1-million remains the amount for which this segment of Alberta's cultural industry annually vies. In fact, once a company achieves \$750,000 in annual sales for three years, it is "graduated out" of Alberta Foundation for the Arts funding.

Even at that figure, making a profit is another matter. Most Alberta publishers have a not-for-profit structure, which means any profits remain in the company, and shareholders or owners receive no dividends.

Dennis Johnson, managing editor of Red Deer Press, formerly Red Deer College Press and now located in Calgary, cites Random House, the biggest publisher in North America, as the ultimate example of the overwhelming odds against making a profit in publishing. "Random House revenues are C\$2.5-billion and, even on that scale, they jump for joy if they can turn a double-digit profit [even 10 per cent]. For Alberta publishers, profitability is in the 3 per cent range, amazing [when] measured against the challenges they face. They are a hardy and talented bunch," says Johnson.

And hardy they have to be. Book publishers are still reeling from the Chapters debacle, the disaster brought about by the big-box bookseller's strong-arm tactics. Inappropriate business methods, complicated by Chapters's insistence that publishers deal with them through Pegasus, its questionable "distribution" arm, quickly turned a sick headache into a life-sapping migraine for the Canadian publishing industry. This, at a time when Canlit's profile loomed large on the international literary scene.

Chapters's bloated book orders—publishers were obliged to fill orders for immediate deliveries of huge quantities of books, most of which would remain unsold "store décor"—and continued demand that publishers grant Chapters deeper percentage cuts set in motion a downward financial spiral. Books were returned by the truckload, often shredded, making resale impossible. Payments to publishers from Chapters, even at the deep-discount rates, were slow or non-existent. In May, Heather



Photo: NEIL SPEERS

Reisman, whose Indigo Books and Music bought Chapters, predicted it would take her 18 months to sort the mess out.

Alberta's regional publishers have weathered the storm because they are canny, tough and resilient. Even before Chapters demolished and demoralized the publishing marketplace, Alberta publishers sheltered themselves from the whims of bookstore buyers by targeting their customers where they shop for related items. In the vanguard of these marketing strategies are publishers that have taken advantage of Alberta's tourism industry with their trade tourism or outdoor recreation books. Altitude, which publishes tourist guides in a variety of foreign languages, displays in hotel, airports and other locations apt to catch the

supports regional educational publishing through its need for learning resources. "Reidmore, Arnold, Duval and even Weigl have thrived on that. [Alberta] is the only province with that kind of backing outside of Ontario."

Alberta educational publishing has attracted the attention of Nelson, North America's largest educational publisher. Reidmore, a leading Alberta educational publisher founded by Pat Reid and Randy Morrison in 1979, sold to Nelson in June 2000.

"If we don't have vehicles to tell our own story, the province is diminished and the country is diminished," Reid explains. "This is particularly important in education and textbooks. Do we want Americans educating our kids, their ideas populating our minds, our future decisions

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eye of tourists, while Rocky Mountain Books delivers its outdoor recreation books to outdoor specialty stores such as hostel shops and mountaineering gear outlets.

Lone Pine Publishing, operated by Shane Kennedy, holds an in-province marketing rights agreement with Red Deer Press for some books in such shared categories as city, gardening and nature guide. Credited in the books as co-publishers, both houses gain access to potential buyers who frequent targeted outlets, say, gardening centres. As for the gardening centres, they welcome one of Lone Pine's major imprints, Hole's gardening books, and take the other, jointly marketed books as part of the package. An added bonus is that both publishers benefit from a long-term professional relationship with the author. (Lois Hole, for instance, is Alberta's best-known gardener and also the province's current lieutenant-governor).

Alberta book publishers are a self-described vibrant, diverse, collegial and cohesive lot. They object when they hear marketing specialists tell them to court international markets by removing all references to Canada and insert what is familiar to American readers. Instead, major Alberta publishers steadfastly adhere to mandates that seek out Alberta's rich stories, Alberta-based writers and Alberta-considered perspectives.

"Alberta is an ideal place to be a publisher because the industry is unusually co-operative," says Glenn Rollans, general manager of Les Éditions Duval/Duval House, who has experience in several Alberta publishing houses. "Albertans are open to their story and take pride in being independent."

A ready market can also spur inspiration. As Rollans notes, Alberta Learning [Alberta's education ministry]

based on their values and ideas? Alberta publishers are more apt to deal with Alberta writers and Alberta ideas and values and history. Only one or two of our authors came from outside the province. Our authors and editors came from Edmonton or Calgary or somewhere in this lovely province and I think that's important."

Phyllis Arnold, a pioneer in educational publishing through her eponymous Arnold Publishing, excels in telling our province's and our country's stories, most successfully through her best-selling Canadian history *Canada Revisited*, printed in runs of 50,000 to 100,000 copies. Her company has expanded into textbooks and CD-ROMs to compete with the multi-national branch plants in Ontario.

Educational publisher Rollans, who might elsewhere seem a natural competitor of Arnold, chooses instead to be collaborative and inventive. Using social studies texts originally developed and published in English by Arnold, Duval has begun to publish in French for schools outside Quebec. Les Éditions Duval/Duval House, in fact, carries several arrows in its linguistic quiver, primarily First Nations language-learning materials, with specific emphasis on Cree and Blackfoot (approximately 100 titles), all backed up by translations and a bestselling series for teachers. Of a new project on the go—English-as-a-second-language texts to be used in a province of China—Rollans observes, "Many have prospected; few have prospered in the Chinese market. [I'm] not sure we are prospering but it is the world's biggest market, with great potential."

As a whole, in fact, the book publishing industry's market reaches far beyond provincial borders. Export brings in new, mostly American dollars, to several Alberta publishers, who report nearly a third of their sales are now from export.

But the first fiercely maintained goal of Alberta publishers is to reach local readers, with no concessions made to international markets. Red Deer Press has been pleasantly surprised, in fact, by the exportability of books specifically designed to fill a void in the west: children's books on the prairie child's experience. Indeed, Red Deer Press's overall best sellers are children's picture books. One of its earliest, Nan Gregory's *How Smudge Came*, has sold 330,000 copies internationally.

The more recent *Eh? to Zed: a Canadian ABeCeDarium*, by Kevin Major, "had zero export potential," says Johnson, "but that did not preclude selling 7,500 outside Canada the first season, mostly in the U.S." Still, he emphasizes, "we do not allow the viability of export to preclude or inhibit these books being typically Canadian, nor insist they be exportable to make editorial decisions."

eration of readers with the new release of *Completed Field Notes*, a collection of 20 long poems highlighting 15 years of creativity.

At the same time, The Banff Centre Press publishes the diverse, cutting-edge output from its writing studio program. *Meltwater*, *RipRap* and *Intersections* include fiction and poetry from outstanding alumni. From the evolving creative non-fiction, cultural journalism and, now, literary journalism program comes *Why Are You Telling Me This?*, *Taking Risks* and *To Arrive Where You Are*. Heads of the latter program have included Alberto Manguel, international editor and writer; Michael Ignatieff, Canadian-born multimedia journalist; and now Alberto Ruy-Sanchez, Mexican art magazine editor and novelist. While in residence in Banff, major national and international writers have completed collections of poetry, novels, non-fiction manuscripts and major articles in magazines, as well as plays for stages across Canada. Significantly, the Banff playRites Colony is run by Albertans Bob White, artistic

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With literary writing, Alberta publishers make editorial decisions on "gut instinct." Our publishers look for the quality of writing that touches readers, whether in intellectual non-fiction, groundbreaking fiction, socially conscious plays or avant-garde poetry. Through books such as Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Myrna Kostash's *All of Baba's Children*, we celebrate our cultural differences as a privilege. NeWest's *Writer as Critic* series gives us an alternative perspective on Canadian literature. Ted Stone's *History Along the Highways* series or the U of A's *Alberta's North: A History 1890-1950* or *Where the Mountains Meet the Prairies: A History of Waterton Country* by Graham A. MacDonald, provide Albertans' interpretations of Alberta.

Non-traditional distribution, ploughing new markets rather than waiting for money to walk in the bookstore door, keeps publishers afloat and able to publish writing that moves them.

The University of Alberta, Banff Centre Press and the University of Calgary are major educational publishers in the broadest sense. An essential undertaking was the U of A's *The Literary History of Alberta, Volumes I and II*, by George Melnyk. The second volume won the Alberta Scholarly Book of the Year award in 2000. Also vital to an appreciation of our literary history is the 30-year-old press's reprinting of Robert Kroetsch's 1966 *Words of My Roaring*. An influential teacher and a Governor-General's Award winner for his 1973 novel *Studhorse Man*, Kroetsch will be introduced to a new gen-

director of Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects, and John Murrell, artistic director of The Banff Centre's theatre arts department. The writing program is directed by Greg Hollingshead, and Rollans is head of the Banff Publishing Workshop, the first program of its kind, now imitated in other provinces. The original workshop decades ago responded to the nascent need for trained professionals in Canada's growing publishing industry.

Not only is the U of C Press book list impressive, but so too is the recent investment of the university-based press in fellow Red Deer Press. While giving it a new home on U of C's campus, the university allowed RDP to remain completely independent as the latter shifted towards literary publishing. The U of C has a "vibrant creative writing program," says RDP chief Johnson. (The university is, in fact, the only one in Canada with a Ph.D. program in English offering the option of a creative writing dissertation.) Fifteen to 20 per cent of Red Deer's publishing program is focused on the expensive development of emerging writers, and the press has plans for an intern program. It was "a symbiotic match," says Johnson. "Red Deer Press found the literary arts scene in Calgary attractive. We were feeling that Calgary vigour, that spirit not afraid to dream big. It has got spunk and is willing to go out there and do it. Calgary stood out in Western Canada. It's got heart."

Publishers recognize heart because their approach is to champion Alberta writers and writing. The talent pool in this province is deep, garnering national and international awards. Fred Stenson was on this year's Giller Award short

list for *The Trade*. Governor-General's Award winners include E. D. Blodgett (1996), Greg Hollingshead (1995), Rudy Wiebe (1994 and 1973), Robert Hilles (1994) and Murray Kimber (for book illustration, 1994). Alberta writers frequently claim nomination for or award of the Canadian/Caribbean Commonwealth Prize, most recently Pearl Luke for *Burning Ground*. Thomas Wharton's first novel, *Icefields*, published by NeWest Press, was a literary phenomenon, winning the Grand Prize of the Banff Mountain Book Festival, the Canadian/Caribbean Commonwealth Award and the Writer's Guild of Alberta First Book Award.

So it is no surprise that McClelland and Stewart outbid NeWest for Wharton's second book, *Salamander*. "Without smaller presses and regional presses, there are not enough venues for all the people who are writing about where they are," asserts Wharton. "There are fewer and fewer big houses. It is wonderful that there are still crazy people out there who will do this on a shoestring just for the love of it. It's wonderful that they are there from the ground up creating a literature, to establish for us and the rest of Canada—including the big publishers—that we do have a national literature."

Ruth Linka, general manager and editor of NeWest Press, says her press is like a farm team for bigger publishing houses that won't commit to developing new writers. "Then, once the first or second book gets recognized, the bigger publishers will be interested. It is not that the writers are not good enough, but they do need exposure and development work. On the other hand, many prominent Alberta writers with large publishers—Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van Herk and Robert Kroetsch—"have gone on to work with smaller presses here in Alberta" says Linka.

Linka is proud of printing the work of controversial and staunchly Albertan playwright Brad Fraser: "He's an example of someone we nurtured and has been courted by other publishers but wants to stay with us throughout his career."

Brian Brennan, former *Calgary Herald* columnist, approached Fifth House's managing editor Charlene Dobmeier with an idea that became *Building a Province*, from which *Daybreak*, CBC Radio One's regional weekend show, is currently running excerpts. A book published ten years ago by NeWest Press, *Those Who Know: Profiles*

of *Alberta Elders*, by Dianne Meili, is enjoying renewed sales from exposure on the same show.

"There is a vital need," says Dobmeier, "to produce books about Western Canada in an era of globalization and American mass entertainment. We need to hear our own stories in order to possess a sense of an Albertan's worth and place if we want to remain a vital and progressive province." Unfortunately, she says, "when times are tough for publishers, the national publishers look for larger and larger markets and lose the smaller stories."

Johnson agrees. "People do want to know about their province and their country. Our anthology of cowboy stories—six in the *Roundup Books* series—has quality writing. Until we published them, [the writing] was not recognized as 'literary worthy' and marketable. Because we were here, we knew [the stories] were marketable and what to do about marketing them."

And what could be more indicative of Alberta publishing's prescience, as the condition of Canada's water hits the headlines, than the recent arrival of Grant MacEwan's *Watershed*, posthumously published by NeWest?

"Quality is what drives this industry," says Paul Pearson, writing and publishing consultant with Alberta Community Development and AFA. "It is only [the publishers'] love of books and the place that keeps them going."

Though our physical survival is no longer dependent on an intimate knowledge of local flora and fauna, our intellect, emotions and spirit still thrive on a local culture. In my talks with those on the ground, publishing was described as "a rich man's hobby" (Reid), requiring "a certain amount of insanity" (Wharton). Yet it continues to attract articulate, educated,

passionate professionals with a love of words and publishing, "willing to work cheap" (Johnson). Why do they do it? For the same reason we as readers dive appreciatively between the covers: to discover, explore and celebrate the literary landscape that is our particular place in the universe.

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