

He Wrote

Learning to write by



Back in the long-distant 1970s, when writers such as Diane Schoemperlen, Lynne Van Luven, Joan Clark, L.R. “Bunny” Wright and I learned our fiction craft from W.O. Mitchell’s “free fall” workshops, there was no separation between the boys and the girls. Nor was there a “life-writing” genre, or sexually politicized issues about voice. The writing we did in courses at the University of Alberta and the Banff School of Fine Arts (as it was then called) was *all* life-writing: as creative writing neophytes we were told to work with what we knew, and we supposedly knew nothing more than ourselves. The idea was to allow the creative process to pull us through, kicking and screaming, to some conclusion that would eventually embody a completed short story, fiction cycle, or even—if we played our lives right—a novel.

In the more formalized programs of the eighties (hosted by Rudy Wiebe at the University of Alberta and Aritha van Herk and Fred Wah at the University of Calgary, and attended by students such as Peter Oliva, Thomas Wharton, Hiromi Goto and Myrna Kostash) works-in-progress were the coin of the realm, to be placed on trial in roundtable discussions. In these courses, you started somewhere, and that place tended to be the memory-laden crucible of your own life, but your gender was not felt to be a significant difference. Voice was voice, story was story, and ever the twain would meet.

Things began to change in the still-prehistoric days of 1990, when men were men and Minnesota poet Robert Bly’s just-published *Iron John* had sent them into the woods to bang on drums. When Edmonton actor, playwright and teacher Ken Brown spoke to his father and brother about a Bly workshop they attended in Seattle, he got the idea that a men’s writing workshop might be a viable alternative to conventional writing courses. Brown thought that by employing the “vocal masque”

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technique he’d learned in his three years at the National Theatre School, in Montreal, he could help men open up to each other—and more importantly, to themselves—to discover their inner stories and commonalities. Brown, who by the nineties was known mostly for his successful one-man show *Life After Hockey*, hoped he could pull nuggets from male experience and enhance not just the students’ writing but his own.

Brown’s course, offered in 1991 through the theatre arts department of Grant MacEwan College, was titled, naturally enough, *Telling Men’s Stories*, and it drew eight men to its fold. This story-circle did not head off to the woods in Bly-like tribal fashion but instead sat in a room for three hours each week, using an improvisational approach that was designed to develop writing and journaling skills. “I noticed there was a lot of pain,” Brown explains, “among the young men, particularly. And *Telling Men’s Stories* was a way of talking about that, and in a sense, exposing that and addressing it.”

The *modus operandi*, he says, was as basic as starting a conversation. “We would start with, ‘Alright, what do you want to talk about?’ and out would come these truly amazing stories, many of them involving unhappy marital situations, unhappy family situations—a lot of what I like to describe as radioactive material, stuff that is just socially hot. Though the course was not intended as therapy, there was a lot of therapy that went on.”

One would have thought that such a forum for unwrapping the male psyche—such as it is—could ride a wave of popularity. But despite offerings at both Edmonton Public Schools continuing education and The MacEwan Writing Works at Grant MacEwan College, there have been no further takers among introspective men.

Don Fisher, who offered a men’s writing course through Grant MacEwan in 1996 and had no takers, believes such courses could succeed. “Given the





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right context, men will come together,” he says. For nine years, Fisher was a member of the Arts and Ritual Group, a male discussion roundtable, which recently disbanded. “This one really had some legs to it. The objective was not just discussion, but to frame that in more artistic ways such as music and artwork. But, by and large, it was writing, because that was the natural avenue to turn to.” Fisher, like Brown, has just entered his 50s, and he wonders if an institution like Grant MacEwan College, with its student demographic of 18 to 25, is the best place to host a men’s writing retreat. “I’d love to have younger men who are willing to do this, but it’s not an age where they’re willing to open up,” he says. “To them, at that age, everything is fine.”

Women’s courses, meanwhile, have flourished. In Edmonton, Grant MacEwan College and the University of Alberta faculty of extension have led the way with repeated offerings of women’s voice workshops, programs and one-on-one sessions. Currently, U of A offers courses not only through the winter/spring Women’s Writing Program but also through a special summer series, Women’s Words Summer Writing Week. This summer’s course featured an 11-member faculty, including several Alberta writers: 2002 Governor General’s Award-winner Gloria Sawai, poet action figure Sheri-D Wilson, Governor General’s Award-nominee memoirist Judy Schultz and award-winning speculative fiction writer Candace Jane Dorsey.

Eunice Scarfe, the founder of the summer workshop, is Edmonton’s gendered-writing *grand-mère*. She began offering a women’s writing course in 1990, through the women’s program at the U of A’s faculty of extension. Back then, the program offered mostly courses with a business slant—counselling for young women, business mentorship for women, and the like—but Scarfe was asked to handle something new: creative writing specifically for women. Her courses were so successful that by 1998 she had established a women’s writing company, Saga Seminars, and she now tours throughout North America with her program (in addition to Edmonton and Calgary, her 2003 itinerary has included New York City; Saratoga Springs, New York; Santa Barbara, California; and

Abiquiu, New Mexico). “I have developed a process that meets goals I have set for myself as a teacher—one of which is, ‘Do no harm’—and it is a process that works with either gender, all ages, any level of experience and all levels of education,” she explains. “I have taught students who range in age from 17 to 75. The only requirement is a desire to write. Published writers work side by side with new writers. A bit of a miracle, I must admit, and one made as much, or more, by the students I have taught as by the teacher.”

One of Scarfe’s former students, Mary McNamee, says writing classes like Scarfe’s are successful because they validate women’s experiences. “It was there that I grew to value even more the depth and beauty and honesty of self-revelation in women’s life-writing, as well as the sense of community that eased the solitariness of writing,” she says. McNamee says Scarfe encouraged her to take her own writing seriously, and to teach her own women’s writing workshops, which she now does at Grant MacEwan College.

MARY MCNAMEE BELIEVES that the success of life-writing workshops rests on their gender-segregated approach. “Many of us have had negative experiences of judgment by men, particularly around the expression of emotion,” she says. “I doubt that my classes would achieve the depth of emotional honesty that they do if there were men present. This is not to say that all women understand each other, or can even accept each other. There just seems to be an agreement to listen, to be open to the others’ pain, to suspend judgment, to support each other, to criticize constructively.”

Don Fisher, who has had less success attracting students, is not as confident as he once was about the value of the gender-segregated courses. He concedes that a better approach might be to knock away the gender divisions completely, so that the men’s or women’s journey represented in voice development workshops becomes more of a “human” encounter. “I teach English at Grant MacEwan College, and I do deal with gender issues in my first-year English classes, almost coming in the back door. But the human context needs to be examined, and perhaps it

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won’t be as threatening in an academic context as in a workshop that is touchy-feely.”

Other writers are downright critical of the gendered approach. “The women’s courses are simply good marketing,” says Edmonton-based freelance writer Dana McNair. “I don’t see the need for them. I see a need for better-quality creative writing classes, if anything, taught by published authors, rather than these bullshit pay-a-stunning-amount-of-money-for-a-weekend-workshop-that-‘teaches’-you-how-to-mine-your-deplorable-‘journal’-writing. The world does not—I repeat, *does not*—need another ‘memoir’ of some woman’s—or man’s, for that matter—tale of harsh potty training. Get over it already. Therefore, no, I would neither take nor teach any of these types of courses. If Joyce or Shaw were to somehow be miraculously brought to life—or even that bullshit-detector extraordinaire, Hemingway—I would reconsider a weekend for them.”

In April, McNair was one of five Edmontonians to publish an essay in *Dropped Threads 2*, the follow-up to the best-selling 2001 anthology—80,000 copies and counting—of women’s memoirs and reflections. Edited by Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson, the first book, subtitled *What We Aren’t Told*, became so unexpectedly popular that plans for the second collection, as well as foreign editions using American and British writers, were quickly made. The books echo Scarfe’s classes in having published writers cheek by jowl with the novices. *Dropped Threads 2* showcases work by

known quantities such as Elizabeth Hay, Sandra Birdsell, Jane Urquhart and Susan Swan next to lesser-knowns such as Edmonton writers Lisa Gregoire, Karen Houle, Shirley Serviss, Debbie Culbertson and McNair. The afterword in *Dropped Threads 2* is the final published work by Shields, who died from breast cancer on July 16.

In McNair’s view, though, the essays in both anthologies are the result of living and being able to write about it, rather than examples of time logged with writing coaches who specialize in voice. Many observers, in fact, suggested that the first *Dropped Threads* anthology forced some women to wonder if what they were thinking and writing was literary work at all, or merely wordy ramblings along the garden path.

Though she was ecstatic over the acceptance of her first draft from a writer as iconic as Carol Shields, McNair says she came to the project almost kicking and screaming. “I was asked to submit something and I complied, albeit reluctantly, but not because I had a voice or gender issue but because I am very wary of ghetto-izing voices—for example, this is gay writing, this is lesbian writing, this is romance writing. I also didn’t feel that I really had anything to say of any interest about being a woman and the *More of What We Aren’t Told*, the subtitle of *Dropped Threads 2*. Who cares what I have to say, and how could I say this in a way that people would want to read it? Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons—my writerly voice literally being one of them—the piece was chosen and now the book is published. The initial draft was crap and I’m not sure now how



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I feel about the final piece. It seems like it was written ages ago and it makes me cringe. ‘Self-examination’ seems painfully self-indulgent to me, and frankly I’m a little uncomfortable about the whole thing. Am I being bitchy? No, I’m just not used to writing non-fiction about me.”

For people like Scarfe, though, this kind of “non-fiction about me” is both valid and politically necessary. On her Saga Seminars website, she notes the silencing of women—“how they silence themselves, and how they break their silence”—and emphasizes the necessity to write the “truth in the lie of fiction, or address (and redress) the lies they have lived or have been told in a text of memoir.”

It is a view echoed by Nanton-born-and-bred novelist Hiromi Goto, who is now writer-in-residence at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Burnaby. In her three novels, *The Kappa Child*, *Water of Possibility* and the award-winning *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto has long engaged the issue of gender in her writing, from the point of view of a woman, a feminist, a Japanese-Canadian and a Westerner. “We still live in a sexist world where one gender is privileged over another,” she says. “In Canada people are more aware, perhaps, of the right and wrong things to say, but their underlying belief system remains fundamentally unchanged. Of course, women are in more positions of power et cetera, but one look at our government, heads of corporations and high-level administrative positions shows you where the majority of the power is being held. As long as these imbalances remain, there is a need to nurture women’s writing voices. In particular, Aboriginal women and women of colour remain the most disempowered in Canada.”

Goto’s discovery of her own voice was an evolution similar to that experienced by many students in the women’s and men’s writing workshops. “When I started writing, I wrote in a voice not my own,” she says. “I was imitating the Eurocentric Western tradition of the objective, disengaged third-person narrator. My stories were tortured, awkward pieces that were over-laden with symbolism. When I switched to the first-person, I was suddenly free to spill out of learned narrative boundaries. The distance between the

first-person narrator and the writer is rather blurred at the beginning, but there was a sense of that voice ringing true. There was a life there, active and vital, that breathed its own existence.”

She adds that one should only write memoir, she says. “I don’t want people to mistake my chosen writerly voice or voices as indicative of an essentialist position that only a woman can write a ‘woman’s story.’ Does the term suggest men would not find it interesting or relevant? Why or why not? Or that only a Japanese-Canadian can write a Japanese-Canadian character? What I end up writing is the result of careful consideration as well as a leap off a high cliff. Yes, I’m politically engaged with my world and creative practice. I’m interested in exploring the diverse, fraught experiences of women. I imagine I will be doing so for quite some time.”

If a writer’s authorial voice is deemed to be the ultimate form of expression, then plundering one’s life is a viable road to the destination of self. Ken Brown had no difficulty in turning the non-fiction of his life into several one-man plays. While initially disappointed over the lack of a follow-up course in *Telling Men’s Stories*—“It was a really positive experience, a great time,” he now says—he was able to mine some gold himself.

The teaching experience opened Brown to the prospect of telling his own man’s stories at Edmonton’s Fringe Theatre Festival in the early nineties. One of the plays, *My Father’s House*, “is the product of several years’ grappling with some of the issues that are confronting men at the end of the 20th Century,” he writes in the introduction to the play. “It is a personal document, but attempts also to be a universal one. Men are going to have to take control of their own emotional well-being, and this piece represents part of the movement towards doing so.”

It’s a sentiment that could apply equally well to either gender.

Gordon Morash is the former books editor of the *Edmonton Journal*.