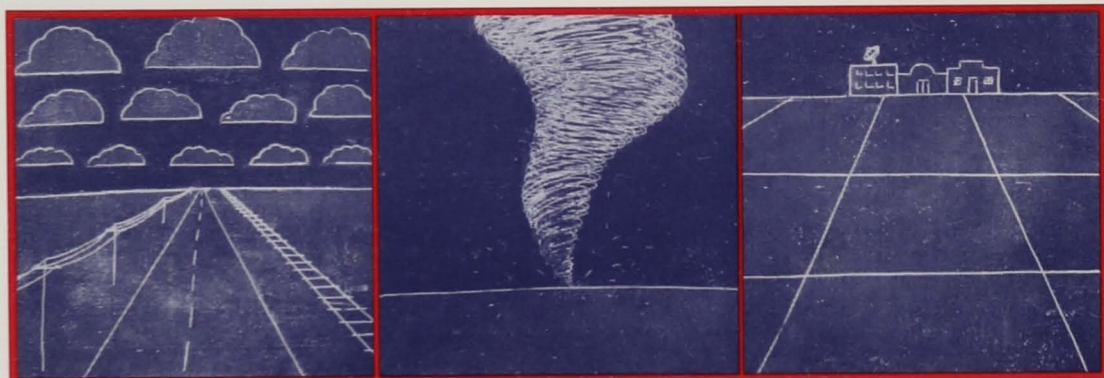


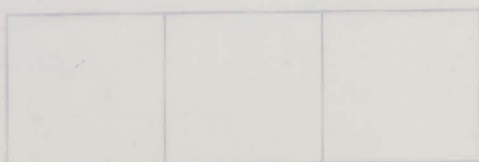
*E s s a y s o n*



# Saskatchewan Writing

*E d i t e d*

*b y E. F. D y c k*



# Essays on Saskatchewan Writing

*Edited by E.F. Dyck*

Published by the Saskatchewan Writers Guild  
Regina, Saskatchewan

# Essays on Saskatchewan Writing



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# Contemporary Saskatchewan Poetry

*Fred Wah (1986)*

## Preface

The dilemma in preparing to write this essay has been to determine who is a Saskatchewan poet and what is a Saskatchewan poem. I always suspected Saskatchewan poetry could be qualified by the number of three- and four-letter nouns (wind, dust, sun, bone, snow, et cetera), but I was a little confused about who, precisely, I should comment upon. I write poetry and I was born in Saskatchewan but I wouldn't dare lay claim to that geographical identity for my poetry. Or should I? Pat Lane was born in British Columbia, where I've spent most of my life, yet, since he's been working in and out of Saskatchewan for the past six or seven years, he's readily identified now as a contemporary Saskatchewan poet. And John Newlove, born in Saskatchewan, was in Vancouver in the early days, Toronto later, and stopped off in Saskatchewan on his way back to B.C. Eli Mandel gave a reading here in southeastern B.C. a few years ago and appropriated the Saskatchewan identity for himself. I was shocked. I always thought Eli was from down east. I've hunted through such recent essays and commentaries as Dennis Cooley's incisive survey of prairie poetry and the ensuing foofaraw from Mark Abley, Dave Arnason, and Anne Szumigalski published in *Grain*<sup>1</sup>, but I have been unable to ferret out any sure sense of boundaries within which I could describe contemporary Saskatchewan poetry.

A few months ago I read a poem in *Grain* by Derk Wynand entitled "Late Entry." The first few stanzas of the poem contained enough of what I considered "typical" prairie references (sheaf,



grains, wind, husks, field, sun, crops, golden) that I asked him (he lives in Victoria, B.C.) if he was from Saskatchewan. He isn't. I've had similar experiences reading through some of the anthologies. *Dancing Visions* is a wonderful collection of the thirty-seven poets Thistledown Press has published. I find I have to keep looking at the author notes to determine where the poet is from. In other words, I can't be sure from the poem itself of its or its author's geographical identity.

Nonetheless, there have been and continue to be persistent attempts from the prairie writers and critics themselves to define the regional character of the writing. The desire and need for regional identity in creativity is certainly not unique to the prairies. There are notable instances of it throughout Canada over the past twenty years. I suspect it is a predictable phenomenon in the growth of any culture. In fact, it seems to me, where there is a strong writers' guild or federation there is a proportionately articulated need to define the regional context. The Saskatchewan Writers Guild has been a model to other provincial attempts at organization and it still is, in my opinion, one of the strongest writers' organizations in the country. And *Grain*, its most public face, has consistently engaged in the dialogue of context: "...the best Saskatchewan writing amidst the best Canadian writing" proclaims a 1980 blurb for a *Grain* anthology. So the actualization of an identity is very apparent; but there are a variety of invisibilities.

Consider these options.

1. There is no "Saskatchewan" poetry. As Anne Szumigalski says in her reply to Dave Arnason, mentioned above, "For me there is no such thing as 'prairie poetry.' There is the prairie, and there is the poetry being written by people living in the region." (*Grain*, May 1981).
2. Saskatchewan poetry is indistinguishable from prairie poetry.
3. Saskatchewan poetry is any poetry written or edited by anyone who has ever lived in Saskatchewan. In other words, Derk Wynand's poem, because it appears in *Grain*.
4. Saskatchewan poetry is poetry that contains a generous number of certain short words. Again, Derk Wynand's poem.
5. It is impossible to define a poetry called "Saskatchewan." It

might be any of the above. It might be something unique, but elusive.

6. "Contemporary" Saskatchewan poetry is poetry written in Saskatchewan during my lifetime. Or, better still, within the last several years.

7. There are particular aspects of poetics that can be said to be suitable in describing contemporary Saskatchewan poetry.

The contemporary landscape of Saskatchewan poetry will help qualify any of the above options. But it is apparent, with all this concern over identity, that a poetry that is vital and energetic has been emerging. This essay surveys, literally, about seventy recently-published books of poetry with the intention of apprehending the terrain rather than comprehending it.

### The Lyric

The lyric poem is still the standard poetic form in English. Its main formal characteristic continues to be the line as the basic unit of composition. It is still, of course, the prototypical poem of feeling, of emotional reaction. But the lyric has also come to provide a point of condensation for story-telling, a narrative of relationships, profiles, daily lives, iconographies, world-views, et cetera. It is frequently the catch-all form for the anti-literary or naive poem since the lyric poem is seen as the traditional form for personal poetry. There are, perhaps, regional tendencies to be noted, but mostly the contemporary Saskatchewan lyric poem typically fits into lyric patterns (almost formulas) similar to anywhere else. The best of these poems demonstrate a skillful magnification of rhythm, narration, and reflective thought.

Elizabeth Allen's first book of poetry won the 1980 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award from the League of Canadian Poets. *A Shored Up House* tentatively balances the lyric voice with the hard, concrete nouns of place. The lyrical prediction of the "I/you" syntax is treated in a clean and uncluttered way. And in Allen's poetry this syntax is usually rooted in things. For example, the last stanza in "jade" (13):



I touch  
 the small jade tiki  
 on my throat  
 smooth rounded  
 warm from my body  
 like the touchstone  
 in your pocket  
 you do not show me

This is typical of the "I/you" lyric with its cryptic clincher. It is good, basic lyric poetry, similar to thousands upon thousands of lyric poems written in contemporary English. The only thing "Saskatchewan" about it is that it happens to be written by someone who lives in Saskatchewan.

The "I/you" lyric, when it works well, offers a complex of solitary, sometimes lonely, reflection. It is the song-in-the-world to oneself while everyone else listens, the subjective as objective, the private as public. It seems most satisfying when the poet anchors the singular voice in things and images. One of the most skillful lyric poets from Saskatchewan is Lorna Crozier (she has previously published under the name Uher). Her latest book, *The Garden Going On Without Us*, was short-listed for the 1985 Governor-General's Award. Another book, *The Weather*, was a winner of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild's 1983 competition for poetry. It contains a range of lyric poems that are mostly generated from the first-person position. A poem like "Riding the Borders of the Land" (30-31) uses the remnants "I hold" and "I think" in what is essentially a description of "Liz," who followed "Steve" from New Zealand, writes poems, and who "wishes / the land in four directions / was ocean." Crozier uses that almost-outside narrator stance often as a way to ground the descriptive poem in a more personal voice. So even her love poems become image-building events. The last two stanzas of "Mid-February" (17) illustrate how the private soul appropriates the things of the surrounding world to extend the song to something tangible for all of us:

Through flowers I watch  
your red mitts following  
the axe, the image of the bird  
held in glass. I cup  
the colours to my eyes  
to wash away the hours  
when I couldn't show my care  
or feel the simple joy  
of flowers and a bird.

As you pile wood  
in the crook of your arm,  
the bird stretches its wings.  
Up from the warm throat  
its song rises in the snow,  
in the slow heart.

One of the most powerful books of lyric poetry to be published by Saskatchewan poets is *No Longer Two People*, a series of poems by Patrick Lane and Lorna Uher (Lorna Crozier). The series is collaborative and juxtaposes a dialogical build-up of poetic flora and fauna, extensions of both a literal and metaphorical relationship. The "I" becomes almost emblematic, de-personified; we aren't sure which voice is which. The craft illustrated by these poems, however, is most impressive at the formal level of the line. The lines are short and notate the play of breath and syntax. In one exchange (25-27), the poets establish some bird-like homogeneities:

...  
And geese wing into silence  
away from the cold that crawls  
towards us, levelling mountain  
into prairie. Our fear lies  
in recognition. For once the thing is  
named, it will not leave  
but hang around your neck  
like every bird you killed  
and track my scent like every wound  
I left behind in snow.



---

...

You will find me  
like this when you return;  
head sewn into belly,  
back broken, and the flesh  
zippered with needles,  
black stitches  
tracks of missing birds.

The line as a unit of composition here is clear and sure. Strong verbs and nouns occupy the important end-line position which, in turn, breaks up and syncopates the syntax of the sentence.

In his recent book, *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie*, Pat Lane points to his own awareness of the importance of the line:

As the line moves. The leap!  
Thrashing there.

This is an engaging book of poetry, though it is not essentially lyric in form. It is, in fact, "rather a composite of the haiku and ghazal. . .," using a two-line stanza in a play of syntax and image. I mention it here in the context of the lyric because Lane has become an extremely adept poet of the lyric and most of his writing is presented in that form. *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie* is a welcome exploration into something new. It is a fascinating and well-written book that extends treatment of the author's obsessive bird images. Though Lane is from B.C., he has made the prairies and Saskatchewan home to most of his poetry over the past seven or eight years. For a look at his more usual lyrical finesse and at work completed on the prairies, the reader should see his book *Old Mother*.

Another writer who has achieved a significant mastery of the lyric is Elizabeth Brewster. Her poems have a classical, discursive quality and they depend strongly on the "I" as a centre for the voice. Her awareness of the subtle nature of the rhythm of syntax and line-break allows, in her recent poetry, the use of reflective and enigmatic short lines (*Selected Poems*, 1977-84, 96-97):



I taste life and death together  
in anything I eat or drink

Success, old Carman said  
is in the silences.  
Nothing I've said here  
exactly what I wanted to say.

Nor did you say it exactly either

Somewhere all words trail off  
the paper  
invisible in margins

Most contemporary Saskatchewan poetry seems content to use an inherited, modern English, lyrical line; that is, a breath-line (pause at the end of the line) pushing off from the left-hand margin. But there are some notable exceptions. Anne Campbell's "Prairie" (93) from her book, *No Memory of a Move*, works nicely in its quick, syllabic movement:

I am native  
    poplar  
no longer searching  
    for solid oak  
satisfied with small  
leaves quivering  
breeze  
    quicken  
my heart  
    is prairie  
wind  
    principle

Brenda Niskala and Victor Jerrett Enns also tend to be uneasy with the regularity of the line. In *Ambergris Moon* Niskala often breaks the expected line length with extra mid-line space (32):

graze her eyes her legs  
 she stands ankles swollen  
 watching until the moist

Jerrett Enns' second book of poems, *Correct in this Culture*, shows a lot of play with line, syllable, and page-space, as in "Further Inland" (13):

we can't see		between
ourselves	dust	
surrounded by		
lightning		flashes
	devils	
silhouette		the flaming
nothing but		swords
bone	on all sides	
		turn
in the		
dust	unearth	full
only the agony	a fall	circle
of the lost		
	garden	

There is, to be sure, a substantial amount and variety of lyric poetry being written in Saskatchewan. Some of it suffers the writing workshop, for which, probably, Saskatchewan provides more support than any other province<sup>2</sup>, but most of what has been published is competent enough and sometimes reflects considerable skill and talent. Geoffrey Ursell's first book of poems, *Trap Lines*, decentralizes the usual first-person focus of the lyric and engages the reader by its imaginative play on the figure of the beaver. The prolific publishing record of John V. Hicks and single volumes by H.C. Dillow and Lewis Horne illustrate the

continuing strength of the traditional twentieth-century lyric when it is handled with skill.

A number of other writers have also published strong collections in the past several years: Gertrude Story, Barbara Sapergia, Doris Hillis, Thelma Poirier, Jean Hillabold, Elizabeth Philips, Gerald Hill, Terrence Heath, Garry Raddysh, and Nancy Senior. Some of these poets sometimes manage to engage a singular voice. There are some hauntingly poignant pieces in Garry Raddysh's *White Noise*, for instance:

iv.  
birds drifted  
on the horizon.  
in the distance they were  
merely black birds, flying.  
  
they did not dream  
and you did not dream  
about them. there was no longing  
to kill them, to take them  
out of their leaden sky.

(41)

Of course, the poems I've pointed to so far can be qualified as more than simply lyric in form. Though they are usually characterized by being personal, they are also poems *about* a subject, they are referential. The great majority of them have something to say, they tell a story.

### **Vernacular and Anecdote**

Any narrative tendency in Saskatchewan poetry in the past five years can best be seen in the continuation of what Eli Mandel describes as "the main trend...toward vernacular and anecdote..." (ECW, Nos. 18/19, Summer/Fall 1980, 88). The poems written in this trend are still lyric in form (short breath-line, stanzaic, centered on the "I") but, rather than a soulful outpouring of feelings and images as the prime content, they describe events, situations, and characters. And the voices are mostly male.



A prolific figure in this anecdotal trend in Saskatchewan poetry is Glen Sorestad, a co-founder of Thistledown Press. He has published six books of poetry in the past ten years, including a new and selected poems, *Hold the Rain in Your Hands*. In a recent review of this book, Stephen Scobie described Sorestad as "a minor writer in a minor mode (the infamous 'prairie anecdotal' school, which can be terminally boring). . ."<sup>3</sup> Sorestad's poetry, particularly the more recent, is a fairly balanced mix of the discursive and the descriptive. The language of the poems is simple and straightforward, as in this stanza from "Rituals":

One Saturday night on the way to a wedding dance  
it turned over its hundred thousandth mile.  
The occasion demanded its moment of respect,  
an impressive string of zeros on the odometer.  
So we stopped there on that country road,  
brought the world to a complete standstill  
while the old Chevy rested, maybe dreamed  
of rolling off the assembly line in 1946.  
We knew nothing of rituals then,  
but sensed the history of the moment,  
knew some special ceremony was demanded.

(90)

This is fairly typical of the common Canadian storytelling poem that might almost be prose but for the line breaks.

Other writers in this mode include Robert Currie, Don Kerr, Dennis Gruending, Jim McLean, Stephen Scriver, and Gary Hyland. In a recent interview, Hyland talked about having "an ear for colloquial speech. . ."<sup>4</sup> This interest in recording the vernacular seems closely tied with an interest in the anecdote. Hyland's poems are invariably vignettes of reminiscence, profiles of characters, notations of speech. Here is, for example, "Mr. Kroski" (*Street of Dreams*, 21):

We swiped his corn whenever it was politic  
"Yewz-boyz-ban-rusalin-diz-corn?" he'd yell across the creek  
"No sir, Mr. Kroski." "Goot-coz-I-Sprayed-her-all-wiz-  
arzanic."

Stephen Scriver's book, *All Star Poet*, is entertaining in its real-life snippets of playing amateur hockey. The voice most used is, of course, the vernacular:

Well, Dickie goes down to block  
and for a second there's no puck  
till he spits it out  
right on the blue line  
with about a dozen teeth

Latourneau? Hell, he takes that puck  
stick-handles through them teeth and scores  
while we stand there crotch-bound  
like a buncha decoys

(72)

A poet such as Jerry Rush, who is more concerned with language and formal considerations, can make the use of the vernacular in a poem a bit more interesting. Though he has only published one book of poems, *Earth Dreams*, Rush's awareness of rhythm and syllabic possibilities show him to have a sensitive ear. Here's "Hill Talk 1" (9):

whole damn hill a jesus forest once  
see them pockety holes clean from  
his coyote head to his slumpin tail-end  
burnouts — all across this grass  
hundreds years ago, some big jesus fire  
took the whole mess — wiped him clean  
smoldered all them big trunks  
down into their own graves  
damnedest thing — not one tree left  
here to the cypress hills — nothing except  
those pockety burnouts — raise hell with a horse  
don't go riding none up there  
come nightfall

Some of the collections of storytelling poetry nearly take on the shape, it seems, of a collection of short stories. Robert Currie's book *Yarrow*, for example, is a series of vignettes directed



at life on the prairie. The images (the sky, the bucket, the field, the grass, "The half-ton Merc" bouncing "through the ruts," et cetera) have become predictable but what is interesting is the incredible push (need, desire) towards telling. The short lyric poem telling the story. A more poetically engaging use of the story, however, occurs when the lyric gives way to the longer and more tenuous structures such as the long poem.

### The Long Poem

A major mode of Canadian poetry in the past ten to fifteen years is the long poem. It is usually narrative, frequently historical, documentary, or biographical, and, formally, wide open. Certainly the majority of poetry produced in the eighties in Saskatchewan has been of the kind discussed above, the lyrical. But I believe the most interesting work that has been done recently is in longer poetic structures. There are multiple aspects to the practice of the long poem<sup>5</sup>, and several contemporary Saskatchewan poets have worked in the form. The primary thrust is to play off of and against the sense of finality and enclosure of the shorter lyric poem. Hence, length.

The major long poem voice in Saskatchewan is Andrew Suknaski. Though he is certainly capable of writing shorter poems, his ongoing formal concern in poetry is a more extensive form that will provide for the mapping of place and soul. He does this in elegiac bursts and summations of invisible geographies, family and ethnic anecdotes, personal cosmologies. His interest in story is fundamental (history as *'istorene*, to find out for yourself). His poems bridge documentary and song. The voices of Whitman and Ginsberg are not far off.

Suknaski's *Wood Mountian Poems*, published in 1976, is well-known and has been a major influence on the vernacular and anecdotal tendencies on the prairies. But these poems, given as they are in the context of the investigation of place, show more latitude than some of the less-skillful story poets. There are indications in this book of not just another storyteller but of a weaver of voices:



in the nearby willows  
a pheasant's rusty cry rasps the silence  
while i walk on this high hill —  
sioux cemetery markers lean like signposts pointing  
to distant constellations  
names read like haiku:

*brown eyes*  
*held at bay*  
*yellow leaf*

wood mountain descends along heat waves to fade  
where pinto horse butte begins  
in the west

wounded horse  
james wounded horse who taught me how to play pool

...

("Poem to Sitting Bull and His Son Crowfoot," 66)

More recently, Suknaski has allowed his poetry an expansiveness that better accommodates his energetic explorations. Four of his last five books have used specific contexts of time and place. *East of Myloona* (1979), for example, is a series of poems that document his observations and imagination arising from a trip to the north. As with most of his poetry, the book is full of voices and stories. The poems don't cling to the left-hand margin but tend to expand across the page, sometimes in a scatter indicative of a layering or collage method of composition.

NORTH of no south  
dreaming of intangible answers  
regarding HOPE  
and HOME  
abandoned

listen to THE KING OF THE RAVENS scowl  
"Man ... don't ask so many questions!"

witness the old man alone  
 revere each moment  
 transfigured by the warmth of lonely coffee  
 in the glow of the miners' mess  
 of the yellowknife inn  
 the old man wistfully watching  
 a girl and boy  
 holding hands

...do they realize  
 that these are the best years  
 of their life?

(17)

Suknaski is not the passive observer or interpreter of secrets. His poems are full of energy because they enact his life. The next three books (*In the Name of Narid*, 1981; *Montage For An Interstellar Cry*, 1982; *Silk Trail*, 1985) are similarly centrifugal — they hone in on the poet's obsession with the use of language as a medium through which a world can be known. He says, in a blurb quoted on the last page of *Silk Trail*, he is "mostly concerned with finding a cipher that will decode a fourfold dream..." His search is his poem, "a scanning of / the world line / ...to glimpse / ones / soul..." where "Light"

rules all  
 co-ordinates  
 of heart  
 earth  
 and ordinary  
 things —

(Silk Trail, 90-91)

This poetry throbs with vitality and vista. Suknaski connects because of the urgency of his perception and because of his genuine "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason..."<sup>6</sup>

There are several other poets who have worked in long forms. Donna O'Sullivan has, since 1983, published a trilogy (*Excerpts From An Anonymous Life*, *Alleged Reflections*, and *Foregone Conclu-*



sions) which uses a mixture of monologue and personal letter in what is a rather oblique "poetic fiction." The third part of the trilogy, the most recent, becomes more rhythmically interesting when the poem moves off a set margin and uses the notation of the page. Helen Hawley's *Grasshopper* is a singular book. It is one of the most linguistically active collections to come out of the prairies recently. Hawley has a sharp ear for precise syllabic connections and line-play that results in a playful, yet reflective, imagery. Working off of an under-rhyme on the word "hop," part of the poem reads:

I was born near here   Swift Current   why now  
do I speed/split my birthright hills/hope  
in this bus enthralled?                      why did I go away so  
for so long: "that's all" is everything!                      to go  
so far              for so long means              I may never return again  
may never again bear blood  
through all that waiting grass

out there

(6)

One of the interesting poetic minds at work in the long form is Ed Dyck. The method he uses is serial. That is, he contextualizes a subject, idea, or shape and composes around it. *Odpoems* consists of thirty-two parts that play on the logic and physics of the "vaguely Norwegian" Od's mental travels. *The Mossbank Canon* is sixty-four stanzas based on the *I Ching*, which is used to provide "a resonance . . . otherwise lacking from my telling of a particular story." The poem engages its reader not only because of that "resonance" but also because of the narrative of the chronologically parallel careers of a Chinese-Canadian immigrant, Jong, and the revolutionary Mao Tse-tung. Each stanza is a fascinating coalition of possibilities:

38. Defeated in Changsa              :annihilated in cities  
the Red Army disproved the red star's theory  
Lure the enemy              :Penetrate deeply  
Jong's boat steamed on through the ruby sea  
to a broken market :to departing whores



to turning propellers :in the White Dove Cafe  
(55)

### The Prose Poem

The tendency to resist closure, to extend the action, has resulted also in a return to the prose poem. Though there are many subtle possibilities when the line is ignored as the basic substance of the writing event, the prose poem, at least as it has operated in recent Canadian writing, has become a significant experimental form. Quebecois writer Nicole Brossard, for example, eschews the formal divisions in favour, simply, of the text. Though the prose poem is not limited to a feminist poetics, that has seemingly been a moving factor in the recent shift to this form. Two Saskatchewan women have shown particular adeptness.

Brenda Riches' *Dry Media* is a palpable juxtaposition of texts (journal, poem, dialogue, and so forth). The book is intriguing in how it gathers oblique connections and posits them at the level of the image. Riches subordinates reference to the practice of *phanopoeia*, "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination."<sup>7</sup> She allows fragmented perceptions, something easily admitted into a poetic structure, to occupy the normally message-centred prose sentence and paragraph:

Snow is falling; its thin flakes are ashes blown from  
burning paper. Grey against a paler grey sky. White,  
only when I look down at his hallowed winter floor,  
where his marks lie covered and birds have pencilled  
their footfalls with thin strokes.

I must be alone with my walking. I must avoid the  
twiggy prints of birds.

(45)

Anne Szumigalski's *Doctrine of Signatures*, short-listed for the Governor-General's Award for 1983, is an outstanding collection of poetic writing, much of it prose poetry. Like Suknaski, Szumigalski's writing is enactive and proprioceptive; it arises from the resonance of being alive. The poems are more intense than Suknaski's, however. There is a lot of play in the minute syllabic

rhythms of the language, particularly in the lyric poems. Her prose poems extend the intensity to narrative, the minute rhythms she registers in a prose tongue:

albert is haranguing his mother about his name  
complaining as usual about how unsuitable it is she  
knows that then why for godsake? she tells how once  
there was a royal prince but when he came to be king  
he was suddenly george like the rest

(76)

Rather than extending out to the referential, using the language to refer to the world out there, these prose poems draw the energy and attention to themselves. Certainly the writing is "about" something (motherhood, war, the imagination, and so forth) but what makes it so engaging is the interplay of narrative detail *in* the poem. It's not just the connections and image-building that stand out in the first stanza of "Fennec," for example, but the speed and compactness of the juxtapositions brought about by a disjunctive syntax:

my nibs and quills arranged before me on a stained deal  
table I am designing the alphabet for a new language  
called in that tongue *speech of the foxes* because the  
consonants fall on the ear like the yipping of reynard in  
the henrun because when a woman enunciates the  
vowels they sound the human cry of a vixen in heat

(23)

One aspect of Szumigalski's writing that makes it so vital is its potency to generate further material. Prior to *Doctrine of Signatures* there are two books that show her pushing beyond the limits of the lyric form in her earlier poems. *Risks* (1983) is a narrative poem that fractures the narrative by serializing the story. *Wild Man's Butte* is a collaboration with Terrence Heath, "written for stereo radio." Her most recent book is *Instar* (short-listed for the 1985 Governor-General's Award), a collection of poems and stories. Here, in an exploration of the psychic arena, she uses a mixture of stylistic approaches to narrative. The distinction be-



tween the prose and the poem gets lost in the range of voices Szumigalski is able to explore; first and third person, narrator in/narrator out, normal concerns of stance in fiction, are as important as the play of syntax and image:

the girl thinks about this for some time *your imagination*  
*is your own* she tells the man at last but don't forget that  
 you are bound to let me know all your dreams and  
 conjectures the rule is that I can see everything but I  
 am not allowed to change it this seems fair and the  
 man agrees

(21)

### Publishing

How the writing is made public, how it is shared within the community, is usually a good indication of the writing life. In the past ten years Saskatchewan has supported one of the most substantial literary publishing programs in the country. The shelf of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry I have been working with measures nearly a metre.

Most of this writing is from several small writer-originated presses. Besides Turnstone Press in Winnipeg, the major national literary press on the prairies and a significant presence for a number of Saskatchewan poets, and Longspoon Press in Edmonton, there are two prolific publishers of contemporary poetry in Saskatchewan. One is Coteau Books. Suitably, Coteau Books is part of the Thunder Creek Co-op of Moose Jaw, "registered with the Saskatchewan Department of Co-operation and Co-operative Development." The other press, Thistledown Press, located in Saskatoon, began publishing chapbooks in 1975, at the same time as Coteau started up. Another press that has responded to the recent surge of prairie writing is Fifth House, also located in Saskatoon.

By far the most significant publishing event to come out of the prairies in the past decade has been the magazine *Grain*. This magazine is a signpost of prairie sensibility to Canadian writing. Since its inception in 1973 *Grain* has had several editors: Ken Mitchell, Caroline Heath, Ed Dyck, and, currently, Brenda Riches. Published by the exemplary Saskatchewan Writers Guild, it is

a non-polemical, consistently 5½" x 8½", well-designed, now quarterly, that has provided a solid base for western Canadian writing and a shining possibility to other provincial writing associations. *Grain* has provided a context for dialogue, shown a variety of Canadian writers to one another, showcased a broad and tasteful editorial window, and been "crucially instrumental"<sup>8</sup> in the development of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry. Two other prairie periodicals important to a view of this poetry are *Prairie Fire*, a Manitoba literary review, and *NeWest Review* published out of Saskatoon. As well, Andy Suknaski's magazines, *Elfin Plot* and *Three Legged Coyote*, have had some influence.

Coteau and Thistledown have also been responsible for several anthologies that reflect some of their poetic concerns. Coteau has published *Number One Northern*, an anthology of "resident" Saskatchewan poets, and a collection of humorous poetry and prose, *100% Cracked Wheat*. Thistledown published two anthologies in 1985: *Dancing Visions*, "new poetry by poets published during Thistledown's first decade of literary publishing," and *No Feather, No Ink*, a collection of poetry "evoked and provoked" by Batoche and Riel.

A couple of lyricists have published more of their work in self-published poetry chapbooks. Mildred Rose has put out several slim volumes of light verse through Music House Press. The last two have been mainly haiku and other short Japanese poetic forms. Though not self-published, another and much-published writer of poems in Japanese verse forms is Catherine Buckaway. A very prolific chapbook publisher is Mick Burrs. His Waking Image Press has distributed sixteen titles in the past fifteen years at farmers' markets and arts and crafts shows around Yorkton. He has also had published three books, the most recent of which, *The Blue Pools of Paradise*, was a winner in the Saskatchewan Writers Guild poetry competition. His poetry is a mild mix of first-person lyric and anecdote.

### Finally

Finally, the boundaries of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry do extend beyond the horizon and, perhaps, are not as much a dilemma as I first thought. There are also those of us poets who



have appropriated something Saskatchewan because we lived there once and because we encounter the spirit of that place rising to the surface of an image or clinging to the roots of a word now and then. And there are also the new poets of Saskatchewan, young writers testing the craft through the nurturing of numerous teachers and workshops.

As I suggested at the start of this essay, there are several writers who might be considered on the periphery of Saskatchewan writing. Lala Koehn lived in Saskatoon for twenty years and she has published a number of books since moving to Victoria in 1977. A major Manitoba-Icelandic poet, Kristjana Gunnars, lived in Regina for a time. Dennis Cooley, another Manitoba writer of consequence, has firm roots in Saskatchewan. His long poem *Fielding* is an expansive meandering text that "explores the two essential geographies of place and blood as he responds to the death of his father" (back cover blurb). Cooley, a co-founder of Turnstone Press, has also been an acute critical presence for prairie writing through his editing *RePlacing*, a collection of critical essays on prairie writing, and *Draft*, an anthology of prairie poetry.

Two major Canadian poets who have ties to Saskatchewan are Eli Mandel and John Newlove. Both of these poets are more a presence in prairie writing than active participants in it, at least during the last few years. Though Mandel was born and grew up in Estevan and speaks with authority about prairie writing,<sup>9</sup> and though some of his poems locate themselves in Saskatchewan, his poetry has ranged through a variety of materials and formal concerns not that widely recognized in the context of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry except by a few of the more experimental poets. Mandel's poetry is imbued with a wide range of mythopoeic voices and images that is more in line with the use of poetry as a psychic exploration than as simply a way to talk about something. Newlove has lived in various parts of Canada and returned to live in his birthplace, Regina, several years ago. Since 1982 he has lived in B.C. and recently has moved to Ottawa. His poems, "Ride Off Any Horizon" and "The Pride," are probably two of the best-known prairie poems in the country. His poetry is essentially a model of the finely honed and

crafted lyric, full of feeling and soulful honesty.

That Newlove's presence is still considerable in the contemporary Saskatchewan poetry community is indicated in a poem by eleven-year-old Leo Havemann of Regina in the most recent issue of *Grain* (May 1986, 56):

To start at the end,  
arriving at the start,

doesn't make the end  
the beginning —

(from "Yellow Bear" by John Newlove)

Opposing Forces (a response to the above fragment)

start at the beginning  
the end is behind you  
end at the end  
the start is before you  
thus is the law

you have many things to learn  
opposites are relatives, the closest kind  
end of the dark to start the light  
start the forward to end the backward  
a push on one side is a pull on the other  
thus is the law

to go up you may push down  
to go down you must push up  
to go left you must push right  
to go right you must push left  
or you may pull  
this is not physics, only the law  
thus is the law

In this issue of *Grain*, editor Brenda Riches has included a number of poems by Saskatchewan children. These young poets show the usual children's openness to play and experiment and, if they are to be the new generation of Saskatchewan poets, they show some new directions for Saskatchewan writing. References to



place and story have given way to imaginative figments, abstractions, and concerns with forms. There are rhymes, limericks, villanelles, centered lines, and, with acknowledgment to Pat Lane's *A Linen Crow*, *A Caftan Magpie*, a lot of ghazals. Here's a striking one by Neil Kapoor, age eight:

Jump to God  
Your bones fall down.

(41)

### Conclusion

In surveying the landscape of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry I realize I have defined, now, a particular view. I have tried to focus on the writing of the most recent texts. In doing so I seem to have defined "contemporary" as roughly within the past ten years. I also see that I have given more consideration to the poets who actually participate in the community of Saskatchewan writing than to those on the periphery (those who never have or no longer do participate). These two parameters are, obviously, relative and are not meant to be exclusive. So "contemporary Saskatchewan poetry" has turned out, in this essay, to be no one of the options listed at the start but a composite of them.

The poetry itself is varied in form and content and not as qualified by the landscape as I first thought. Some of it, particularly the anecdotal, is derivative and repetitious. Some of the lyric poets (Newlove, Lane, and Crozier, for example) have provided masterful models for that form much beyond a regional use. The most engaging poetic energy to have come out of Saskatchewan is the more experimental one of the long and prose poem (let me suggest a Mandel-Szumigalski-Suknaski track). There is no easy qualification of the range of poetry being written in the province. There is a lot of it and, whatever the style, it has an irresistible vitality.

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For fuller information on Saskatchewan writing referred to in this article, consult the bibliography.

<sup>1</sup> Cooley's essay, "RePlacing," is the introduction to a special "Prairie Poetry Issue" of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Nos. 18/19, Summer/Fall 1980). Mark Abley's "Laying Down The Law" is a reaction to that issue published in *Grain* (Vol. VIII, No. 3, November 1980). Arnason and Szumigalski extend the reaction with letters to the editor in the February and May issues (Vol. IX, Nos. 1 and 2).

<sup>2</sup> See E.F. Dyck's "Workshop Poetics — Where Art Thou?" in *FreeLance*, Vol. 14, No. 8, April 1985.

<sup>3</sup> *The Malahat Review*, No. 73, January 1986, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> *NeWest Review*, February 1986, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> The most important, and suggestive, survey of this form is an essay by Robert Kroetsch, "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," *Essays, Open Letter* (Spring 1983, Fifth Series, No. 4). See "The Proceedings of the Long-liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem, York University, Toronto, May 29-June 1, 1984," *Open Letter* (Summer-Fall 1985, Sixth Series, Nos. 2-3).

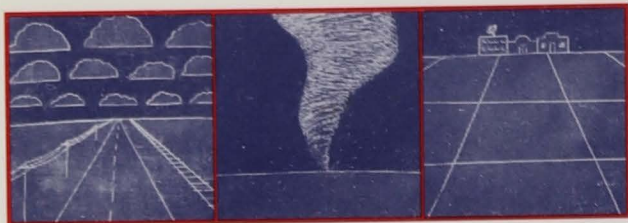
<sup>6</sup> *The Selected Letters of John Keats* edited by Lionel Trilling (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New Directions, 1960), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Lane, "The Saskatchewan Presses," *Grain* Vol. IX, No. 4, November 1981, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> See the "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78" in the *RePlacing* issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Nos. 18/19, Summer/Fall 1980).





## **E**ssays on *Saskatchewan Writing*

*Mark Abley • David Arnason*

*Diane Bessai • Dennis Cooley • Susan  
Gingell • Dick Harrison • Michelle  
Heinemann • Henry Kreisel • Robert  
Kroetsch • Patrick Lane • Eli Mandel  
Edward McCourt • Ken Mitchell • John  
Newlove • Laurence Ricou • Fred Wah*

*Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* is a collection of critical essays examining the diversity of fiction, poetry, and drama, past and present, written in Saskatchewan. The book also includes a history of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild and a selected bibliography of Saskatchewan writing. It will be of use to anyone interested in Saskatchewan's literary heritage.

E.F. Dyck, the editor, is a critic, poet and the author of *Odpoems &*, *The Mossbank Canon*, and *Pisscat Songs*.

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