

W.O. Mitchell : “Loved by All Who Knew Him”

By Harris Miller

William Ormond Mitchell was arguably one of the most influential writers of all time. The Saskatchewan born writer was the first one to put the Saskatchewan prairie on the literary map of Canada.

The childhood of Mitchell may seem a bit overcast or depressing once you find out that his father passed away when William was only a child, seven years of age. But Mitchell, as hard as this must have been, turned this into a positive experience in the future by using the tragic event as an ingenious spark of inspiration for his most famous book, the very book that put the Saskatchewan prairie on the literary map of Canada, “Who Has Seen the Wind?”. “Who Has Seen the Wind?” is described with vivid detail and takes place in the vast prairie of Saskatchewan.

If being an exceptional writer wasn't enough, his sense of humour alone could have gotten a school named after him. I was lucky enough to meet his son. If you were unsure about Mitchell's humour just take a look at “Jake and the Kid”, a well thought out novel full of quirky and eccentric characters. Though all of his stories are different they usually have one concept in common, what it means to be human.

Mitchell was a great man with a rather optimistic outlook on life. Over the years, W.O. Mitchell developed a rather sympathetic feeling toward the natives after meeting “Sheepskin”, a native Assiniboine chief he met on the reserve near his cottage at White Bear Lake. This sympathy later inspired the inspirational yet controversial book “The Vanishing Point”.

Mitchell liked to think of himself not only as a writer but as a teacher too. He held many writing and drama workshops, seminars, and more. He loved to talk and be around people. This is not a surprise seeing as how he described the province he grew up in as the “energy of death” and “lonely”.

A man of such great skill and compassion should not have had to endure more suffering after losing his father at seven, but unfortunately he contracted Bovine TB in his wrist. He had to fly to Florida and California in the winters from 1927-1931 to cure his Tubercular wrist. Still he marched on through and studied Philosophy from 1931-1934 at the University of Manitoba. He also later took courses on journalism and playwriting.

William landed in Alberta in the middle of the depression. He survived four difficult years by selling magazine subscriptions, encyclopaedias, insurance and more, but believe it or not the optimistic yet humorous William even did a high-dive clown act for a carnival. Later on he received a teacher’s certificate and began writing seriously.

He wrote many more novels and in turn received many awards including two Stephen Leacock awards for humour and eight honorary degrees. He was made an officer of the Order of Canada 1973 and named the Queen’s privy and more. Throughout his life he always remembered the words on his father’s gravestone. A motto to be the person he was. He too wanted to be a caring honourable man “loved by all who knew him”. When he died on February 25, 1998, I think he definitely accomplished that and more.

I feel privileged to go to a school named after him. It’s people like him that truly makes me proud to be a Canadian and I think we could all learn something from William.

William Ormond Mitchell truly was “loved by all who knew him”.