

William Ormond Mitchell - The Art of Writing

By Mason Green

As an aspiring writer in Alberta, Canada, I was thrilled to come across W. O. Mitchell, an Albertan writer that truly inspired and influenced me. He has been renowned as one of the best Canadian writers of all time, and to this day is still selling copies of books that are almost as old as he was. Mitchell lives on in the hearts of writers and readers, and schools and institutions have been assembled in his honour.

The themes that are often portrayed in W. O. 's many works come from his early life, during which he went through some very difficult things. Mitchell was born on March 13, 1914, and his father passed away 7 years later. Mitchell gained an understanding of the concept of death from this experience, which was one of the events that fueled his drive to write. At 13, he became ill of bovine tuberculosis of the wrist and missed the majority of a year in school; during this time he wandered the prairies and developed a deep sense of emotion for the Saskatchewan land. These things would later lead him to write his first (and best-selling) novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947). During the time W. O. had tuberculosis, he spent the cold winters in a warmer climate, Florida, to combat the illness and better his chances of recovery. In the summers he returned to Saskatchewan and his family's cottage on White Bear Lake. There he met Sheepskin, a First Nations chief, and in this experience he grew to care for the First Nations peoples, leading him to eventually write his third novel, *The Vanishing Point* (1973).

From 1931 to 1934 Mitchell majored in philosophy at the University of Manitoba. Then at the University of Washington, he spent two years in courses of journalism and playwriting. W. O. didn't arrive in Alberta until the middle of the depression and had to spend 4 years working uninteresting jobs to stay alive; one of these was selling encyclopedias door-to-door in Edmonton, during which he met Merna Hirtle. Two years afterward, in 1942, they married. Merna introduced him to Professor F. M. Salter, who became his creative writing mentor for his first serious works. He published two short stories in that same year of 1942, and got a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1943, along with a teaching certificate from the University of Alberta. With these degrees, Mitchell worked as a school principal until 1945, then moved to a foothills town called High River, south of Calgary. Apart from the years 1948 to 1951 in Toronto as an editor

of Maclean's, he stayed in High River until 1968 to raise his and Merna's 3 children. From there he moved north to Calgary.

Along with *Who Has Seen the Wind* and *The Vanishing Point*, W. O. wrote six other novels, including a sequel to *Who Has Seen the Wind* called *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* (1981). While in Toronto in 1950 he started the *Jake and the Kid* radio series, which would run until 1956 producing hundreds of episodes. It was later televised, and turned into a short story collection, and there were even stage performances made from some of the stories. *Jake and the Kid* takes place in the fictional town of Crocus, based off of the Saskatchewan prairie and Mitchell's hometown, Weyburn. He wrote a musical, *Wild Rose* (1967), based on the Queen's visit to this fictional town of Crocus.

W. O.'s works were so popular and well-received that he gained a good deal of awards from them, and his commitment to helping others earned him some very prestigious positions. He discovered a love of teaching creative writing, and was head of the Banff School of Fine Arts creative writing program from 1974 to 1986. Mitchell held five writer-in-residencies across Canada from 1968 to 1986, and wrote a total of 9 stage plays; one of them, *Back to Beulah*, winning the Chalmers Award. W. O. also won the Banff School of Fine Arts National Award, Sir Frederick Haultain Prize, Great Canadian Award, Writers' Guild of Alberta Golden Pen Award for Lifetime Achievement, 2 separate Stephen Leacock Awards for his humour, and the Lifetime Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Saskatchewan Arts Board. He received honorary degrees from the University of Alberta, University of Calgary and 9 others; Mitchell was even made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1973 and named to the Queen's Privy Council 20 years later in 1993.

As listed above, Mitchell made such a mark in Canada that a school in Calgary, Alberta, and in Kanata, Ontario, were both named in his honour. He passed away on the 25th of February 1998, and was mourned by people across North America. Mitchell marked a new era in Canadian writing. W. O. Mitchell's dying wish was that, like the message on his father's gravestone, he would be "Loved by all who knew him". I believe he has not only achieved his wish, but surpassed it. W. O. Mitchell was a strong leader, a beloved teacher, an expert with humour, and a survivor with a deep love of the land.

William Ormond Mitchell's impact on me:

NOVEL INSPIRATION: I've been trying to write a novel since before I was in grade 2, and each time I tried to write it I couldn't finish. I scrapped and re-wrote the first few chapters of the book over and over again for another 4 years before finally giving up. After many, many attempts, it seemed like all hope was lost. This was before discovering W. O. Mitchell. I found inspiration after reading about Jake and the Kid, because he demonstrated the incorporation of a real setting in a novel. Before, I had written about an entirely fictional setting, based on nothing in particular - and it wasn't working. Mitchell used the Saskatchewan prairie to build his small fictional town, Crocus, in a place that he had actually been. This inspired me to place my setting in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta. I could make a fictional mountain to set the story in, but I could base it all off the place I had been like Mitchell's Crocus. I even bought the Jake and the Kid story collection to read so I could use his story as a mentor text. I have already begun planning my new novel!

WRITING FOR AWARENESS: I have a passion for protecting turtles and restoring the environment, which originated from my time spent vacationing in Hawaii. This played a part in a short story I recently wrote called Ocean and Speedy. It was written from the perspective of a turtle. A major theme in my story involved raising awareness about illegal poaching and pollution in the ocean. The Vanishing Point, by W. O. Mitchell was written out of his concern for the First Nations peoples, even before the Canadian government admitted there was ever a problem. His time spent connecting with First Nations peoples encouraged him to write about them - and their injustices. My experiences observing turtles in Hawaii led me to develop an extreme sense of purpose surrounding their safety. In the future I plan to write a novel, or series, based on the injustices of turtles and sea life.

NARRATING STORIES: Before Mitchell, I had not heard about another author narrating their own stories. Recently, through my participation in the Hopscotch Stories Summer Writing Contest (2023), I was offered the chance to read my story for an audiobook. I tried to record my story, but after listening to my voice, my confidence fell apart and I made the mistake of refusing. I turned down the offer because of my insecurities. W. O. Mitchell had a radio show, where he would consistently read and record his stories on a weekly basis. I watched some recordings of him speaking live, and was given a newfound sense of capability and potential. I often feel inadequate or unable to read something I've written out loud, whether it's that I'm not

proud of it, or I don't trust myself to make it sound right. But Mitchell showed me that I can do what I couldn't do before. If Mitchell can continue to amaze and inspire others with his narrated works long in the future, then so can I.

William Ormond Mitchell has shown me just how influential writers can be, and made me better because of it. I am grateful to W. O. Mitchell for my newly discovered knowledge and excitement to read, write and learn. Thank you, Mitchell, for giving me inspiration and passion, for being the reason I write, and for building the path that all authors aspire to hike.

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