

Rhyme and reason: Celebrating the great poets (06,04,13)

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My father often recited poetry that he had memorized, particularly poems written by Robert Service, “the Bard of the Yukon.” As a kid, I never tired of hearing about “Yukon Jake, the hopeless rake,” even though I didn’t know what a rake was.

Service is known for “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” and “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” the latter we had to memorize in grade 9 English class. His first book, “Songs of a Sourdough” were humorous tales in verse, considered less than weighty by the reigning literati.

In Whitehorse, a frontier town, Service absorbed the rough hewn stories of the gold rush, and as was popular at the time, recited at concerts. When I was in school during the Paleolithic age, we were asked to do a lot of memorization. Alas, there were no smart phones, and recitation socially was a prized skill.

E.J. White, editor of the Whitehorse Star, suggested Service write some local poems, and his career took off. Returning from a walk one night, Service heard the sounds of revelry from a saloon, and the phrase “A bunch of the boys were whooping it up” popped into his head. Later, he heard a gold rush yarn from a Dawson mining man about a fellow who cremated his pal. He spent the night walking in the woods composing “The Cremation of Sam McGee.” Other verses quickly followed.

When I entered grade 10, I already liked poetry, but there I met my favourite all-time teacher, Brother Mathew, a skinny, bespectacled academic-looking fellow who was a Christian Brother. He was also a passionate lover of literature and poetry, and he had a unique way of making those pursuits come alive for me. He didn’t care if I was a jock, addicted to football and hockey. He took me under his wing, and suggested that I join the school newspaper staff where I wrote my first column, entitled “In This Corner.” Soon, I had material published in no less a publication than the Catholic Register. With Brother Mathew’s help, I learned to revere poets and saw them as courageous truth tellers, usually the first to be dispatched whenever a tyrant arrives in town.

Another teacher who had a huge impact on me was Sister Mary-Ellen in grade 4. I had a habit of finishing work ahead of my peers, and I would sit glumly while the others worked away. One day, she said, “Michael, why don’t you find something to read?” I responded that there was nothing available to read. “Nonsense,” she blurted out, grabbed a dictionary, and she placed it on my desk. She was like a great magician, unleashing for me the power and majesty of words. I devoured the dictionary, and thus grew closer to the poets.

This happens to be National Poetry Month celebrated each April in the United States and Canada. Poetry has a long history, dating back to the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. What I came to love about it was its precision, always utilizing the most apt word, and then I discovered such wonderful devices as assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm which gave words life.

There are many poets who literally knock me out, and whenever I need a boost, some extra pep, I grab a book of poetry by Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003. He is the Bobby Orr of poetry. Smooth, simple, yet profound.

It’s interesting how children have a natural appreciation of poetic verse. Whenever I read anything to my grandson William written by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel), we have a blast, and the neat thing is that all the stories can easily be repeated over and over again and remain great fun.

I keep threatening the Mens’ Book Club that I will soon introduce poetry into our curriculum, and they collectively groan. I would start with Billy Collins. It’s sad to see children’s natural inclinations dry up as we age!

