



George among books in his study at 2499 West 37<sup>th</sup> Ave., c. 1981.  
Photo credit: Paul Little for SFU

## COLIN BROWNE / George Bowering: The First Fifty

*The following conversation took place in Vancouver in the kitchen of Jean Baird and George Bowering on the afternoon of Saturday, August 16, 2014. Prior to turning on the recorder, I asked George, given the theme of this special issue of The Capilano Review, to consider building a library from scratch. With this undertaking in mind, what would be the first fifty books, and why would we make this library?*

George Bowering: Oh, in the hope that archaeologists far in the future will dig it up and say, “Oh! This is what they had before they imprinted things in our foreheads!” No. I guess I’ve always been fascinated with libraries. I built one in my house and then got rid of it and then built another one. When I was a kid every time I read a book I’d give it away. I’m now starting to do that again except with very certain authors, like you, for instance. [Laughter] But I always did that up until I was 22, or something like that, which meant several hundred books I just gave away—magazines and books—and whatever I read I would give it away when I was finished with it. Except for sports magazines which I kept and still have.

Colin Browne: Was that because you didn’t have a place to keep them?

GB: I think I had a sense that I would try to get through life with nothing but a briefcase. This was when I was thirteen. I didn’t want to have things. I was never going to smoke, I was never going to drink, and I was never going to have things. It was partly because I was like a personal, private Jesus freak, and He didn’t have anything, right? I thought, “That’s really cool,” because it’s the opposite of what most people are urged to do—get a car, get a house, etc. Nobody had to teach me to be different from everybody else.

*There is a copy of Hesiod’s Theogony and Works and Days on the table between us.*

CB: I see we have a copy of Hesiod’s *Theogony and Works and Days*. These two works are almost always included in one volume. Is this the first book that you’d include in the library?

GB: Yes, because that's the first book. And not because of my personal experience and all that stuff, but because that's what my teachers always said. Not my college teachers but my real teachers, like Robert Duncan, said to read that, or even Olson said to start off with that, and everything Hesiod says you say, "Yeah, that's right!"

CB: Maybe that's because it's such a thin book? It takes us back to the agricultural round. You can see why Olson would be so interested in this pre-urban, pre-industrial life.

GB: And the same experience happens—oh God, here I go, I'm like 91 years old and I can't remember names any more—that Roman guy who travelled to Sicily, who wrote the book that explained the whole universe. Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*. A Roman writing a treatise on Epicurean philosophy.

CB: So these would be the first books. We can imagine a shelf, but we don't know how that bookshelf would be organized.

GB: There'd be Hesiod and the Bible.

CB: Which translation of the Bible?

GB: The King James translation with an explanation or with a justification. The writing is so much better, even though there are some things that modern Bible scholars would say are mistakes. Have you ever picked up the modern ones that southern Protestants get? It's just so awful. It's like *The Poppy Family*! And the question would be: would you throw in a Concordance to a Bible? I'd say no, because we've only got fifty books.

CB: And should we restrict ourselves, for the sake of simplicity, to books written in English or in English translations?

GB: Yes. Well [laughter] I've got to tell you Rimbaud sounds better in French than it does in English! But I'm not putting Rimbaud on that shelf.

CB: You're not?

GB: No. I'm sorry. Because if you do then you have to put all the other French poets on. You can't just say okay, he represents....

CB: You can't go right to Mallarmé?

GB: Well, Mallarmé. If I was going to add one he would be the one I'd put on.

CB: Okay. So we've got Hesiod, the King James Bible, and Mallarmé. We're starting from the beginning, aren't we?

GB: Not necessarily, because remember, that's how they organize classes in our universities. They would say okay, we're starting with Chaucer or Dunbar or something and going up to, I don't know, Browning. But after a while I thought that's kind of stupid. Maybe you should start with writers from your own period, in your time, and find out what they read. So I thought okay, T.S. Eliot's not necessarily from your own time, but you go to T.S. Eliot and you ask who T.S. Eliot was reading, and then you say, Oh yes! Rimbaud! Or Mallarmé. Then you ask who's he reading? Oh, he was reading Edgar Allan Poe. What was Edgar Allan Poe reading? Thucydides, and do it that way. That made a lot more sense to me. But to leap over a thousand years of literature and read some writing from the year 1000, and then come from there up to here? That's stupid.

CB: When you said *leap over* I thought you were about to add Li Po to the list.

GB: No drunks on my list.

CB: Well, we should pack up and go home. [Laughter]

GB: Oh yes, the new American poetry.

CB: Okay, we have three.

GB: Shakespeare. That could be one book. *Complete Poems and Plays of William Shakespeare*. That would be a book. You can't just say okay, we'll take *Hamlet* and *Pericles*.

CB: So explain why you'd want our ideal reader to read Shakespeare.

GB: Because everybody else who wrote after Shakespeare had read Shakespeare. A lot of my writing is fooling around with previous writing. And in a less straightforward way that's what most, or a lot of good writing is. How many times in the twentieth century did a major poet write in such a way that you had to check out that Greek guy Heraclitus?

CB: How about the Greek who wrote about a guy named Odysseus?



CB: *Tender Buttons*?

GB: Yes, I was just thinking of *Tender Buttons*. *Three Lives*. It's such early stuff, though. Both of those are early.

CB: There are also her essays.

GB: Maybe the book that I keep coming back to, *Geography and Plays*. Yes. I think *Geography and Plays*. Or *Everybody's* or maybe the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

CB: But then you're not getting the kind of syntax...

GB: Yes. *Geography and Plays*. Yes. So that takes care of the twentieth century pretty well. [Laughter]

CB: But did you want to put Blake in there?

GB: Nah, not necessary. I'm telling you something. I'm not putting Neruda in there. That Stalinist! That murdering Stalinist! There, I said it.

CB: Would you put Marx on this list?

GB: No, because I've hardly read Marx. I've read very little Marx. I'm not going to put Freud on either. Screw them. They might be on the list of poets, writers, we don't put on.

CB: Freud's an interesting case. People like to have a sense of what he's written but very rarely do they read him. When you do, you suddenly find a proud and vulnerable character.

GB: We've got H.D. in there so at least we've got Freud's rival. H.D.'s book on Freud is a great book. That way we can get Freud in, right?

CB: *Trilogy*, or *Tribute to Freud*?

GB: No, *Trilogy* is more important.

CB: So we're talking about books that have influenced writers.

GB: See, Milton's a giant poet but I ain't putting him there. Hell with him. Fuck Milton! [Loud laughter] Can I put on a book that I haven't read, *Don Quixote*, because of the tradition Cervantes started, which I would like to adhere to?

CB: So now we're moving to novels?

GB: What did we do with Sorrentino?

CB: Sorrentino's on.

GB: Yeah, but that's just a name, that's not a book.

CB: *Mulligan Stew*?

GB: I guess *Mulligan Stew*. Except it's funny to have *Mulligan Stew* without having the novel that *Mulligan Stew* was a deconstruction of. But on the other hand that's not like a giant novel in the world. It's for us cult-type people.

CB: We can't include everything.

GB: I haven't read Tasso either. I just recently acquired a translation of Tasso.

CB: What about *Tristram Shandy*?

GB: I was just thinking of that. That would pretty well cover the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. But if you're going to put in *Tristram Shandy*, why wouldn't you put in *At Swim Two Birds*?

CB: I'm putting it in.

GB: [Laughter] People are going to say, "You don't have anything by any Indian writers, or any Chinese writers, Japanese writers, or Finlandic writers."

CB: That's a big question for us, isn't it? But Flann O'Brien we do need.

GB: It's not your fucking list.

CB: Okay, I'm crossing it out.

GB: No, put it in. Put it in. And put Robert Kroetsch, *What the Crow Said*. How many have we got so far? Is that fifty? Are you putting a number beside them or are you just scrawling them down and counting them later? And what if you count them and we come to fifty-four? Then we've got to start subtracting.

CB: Fifteen so far.

GB: Let's see. I wouldn't object to Borges. *Ficciones*.

CB: It's got Pierre Menard.

GB: Yeah, that's right. So you get his method as it pans out.

CB: And again you get writing on writing.

GB: And we had *Don Quixote*, so you can see what's happening! Okay. *Ulysses*. Yes, of course.

CB: It's the funniest book written in English.

GB: It's pretty funny. I read it in a basement room two blocks from here. I still have that copy here.

CB: Flann O'Brien and Joyce—maybe you're telling me something.

GB: How many Irish do we need? It's a small country.

CB: What about Sam Beckett?

GB: Sam Beckett! Would a trilogy be one work?

CB: You have to read all three. *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*.

GB: I don't know how to handle that. Because *Waiting for Godot*—we don't have that many plays, but *The Unnamable* is my favourite book of that whole era.

CB: Then let's put it in.

GB: No, let's put in *Waiting for Godot*.

CB: What would be of interest to someone reading this list would be to say, "Hah! He could have included *Waiting for Godot*, but...."

GB: I see what you mean, yeah. Wait a minute. Are you supposed to be influencing me?

CB: I'm just listening. [Laughter] What's interesting to me is the developing distinction between the books you love and cherish and the books you perhaps believe *should* be on the list.

GB: Okay, we're leaving both of those out and putting in *Ill Seen, Ill Said*. No! I'm only kidding! I'm going with *Godot*. I'm keeping *The Unnamable* for myself.

CB: It'll be in the supplementary or shadow list.

GB: Okay. Hey, I get to not put in Frost! And I get to put in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and, while we're at it, um...

CB: ...more Hardy?

GB: No. *Vanity Fair*.

CB: Oh, *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray. Okay.

GB: *Moby Dick*.

CB: At last. But then the big question is...

GB: ...no *Clarel*.

CB: No *Clarel*. But the big question really is what about *The Confidence Man* or *Pierre*?

GB: *The Confidence Man* is his most interesting book, but...

CB: *Moby Dick* you want?

GB: Yes, and I actually have read *Typee*. I think I read *Omoo*. In fact I recently re-read "The Encantadas."

CB: There's also "Billy Budd." There are those marvellous short fictions. Or, we know who....

GB: Yeah, I'd rather not. I choose not to remember!

CB: I've got *Moby Dick* then.

GB: Okay. We're finished with that. We're pretty well done. Have we mentioned Whitman?

CB: Are we going to?

GB: I'm reserving opinion on that. Could I mention Jamie Reid? No. We've already got Mallarmé. Actually, Jamie was our young, drunken boat, in the good old days. Hmm. I'm not putting in Neruda. He's out for sure.

CB: So that may also cancel out Aragon and Paul Eluard.



GB: Yeah, they're out. Besides Beckett, what French writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which neo-novelists, would I put in? I guess probably Claude Simon. Now, which book? *Flanders Road*, I guess. Claude Simon. He's so good.

CB: Now, what about contemporary work you think readers should look at? It could be exemplary, or it could be one you love and admire.

GB: Something by Toni Morrison. I am so impressed with her as a writer. But what? I really like *Jazz*, but *Jazz* is not really one of her main...oh, one of her slavery ones...is *Beloved* the one about people trying to get across the Ohio River into Cincinnati? I think it is. Yes, I would put in *Beloved*. And you know who else can really write is...this is a guy who's never won the Nobel prize, and he's a couple of years older than me and he's published like thirty-five books of fiction...

CB: ...and his initials are P.R. and he writes the best sentences in...?

GB: I think *Patrimony* might be the one. Is it *Patrimony*?

CB: *Patrimony* is the memoir of his Dad.

GB: I don't want that one. I want the one...

CB: There's *I Married a Communist*, there's *The Counterlife*.

GB: *American Pastoral*!

CB: That's the one you like?

GB: Yes, that's the one I like. Now we haven't mentioned Faulkner. Or Hemingway. On the other hand, we haven't said anything about Euripides. Now, I'm a Euripides fan, if you can say that. I guess *Ion*. It's funny because I hardly ever see a Greek play and I don't read ancient Greek so I'm reading these plays in English, so I don't know what comes through, but—and it sounds really corny—he seems to me to be the most human. That's not very good, is it? See, we used to get impatient with readers who would try to identify with Lear or with Othello, right? It's a *tragedy*. What's important is your whole fucking world is going to be cut off above your head! You and your whole family are going into the abyss! It's got nothing to do with you sympathizing with some poor guy in black tights. But Euripides, his stories have moments that you could write poetry about.

CB: It looks like we're at twenty-five. We might not fill this bookshelf.

GB: *Absalom Absalom*.

CB: What did Faulkner mean to you?

GB: You see, before Faulkner I'd read all Hemingway. I still like Hemingway. I still really like his writing except those things that were published after he died. They were awful. *Farewell to Arms* is probably the book I've read more often than any other book, and I still think highly of it.

CB: Are you going to put it on the list?

GB: Yes. I'm going to put it on because it's so representative, somehow or another, of the situation that people found themselves in in the relationship between the intellect and the social order. Like, shit, is this what it's going to be like from now on? And yet it's beautiful. Is there something wrong with that? To go to places where there are wars and terrible things are happening and end up writing beautifully? So I read Hemingway, and okay, yes, good clear sentences with not many adverbs if possible and hardly any adjectives unless they're a colour or something, and recognizing that nobody talks the way they talk in his books anyway, and then along came Faulkner and it's just the opposite. The world finds itself winding round his language—oh! Dante! *The Human Comedy*! If you don't allow me to have all three of them I'll take the first one. How did we almost forget Dante? I even mentioned Tasso!

CB: Should I include Tasso?

GB: No, because I haven't read him properly yet. I think maybe *Huckleberry Finn*.

CB: Okay. What about women writers?

GB: Not a lot so far. The only Canadian we've got in here is Kroetsch, so, I'm thinking, which one of Nicole Brossard's books should I put in?

CB: One of the early ones, maybe with the beautiful blue covers?

GB: *Sold-Out*, or, in English, *Turn of a Pang*. That takes care of Canada and women. [Laughter] How many is that now? About thirty? Thirty-five? Later on we're going to think, "Why didn't we think of... it's so obvious!"

CB: What were the books that were milestones for you?

GB: The first time I ever read a novel by James Farrell. It wasn't *Studs Lonigan*, it was the other guy, his other more intellectual, autobiographical hero. I can't remember which one it was because there was a sequence. Danny O'Neill. A character named Danny O'Neill. And he had to change names because he changed publishers, so he had to change a lot of the names in his books. That was a nuisance. I was reading him when I was in the Air Force and he became a guy I wanted to be like. They always take place, the stories and novels take place in Chicago and the rugged Irish streets of Chicago where I'd never been or anything but I felt like he'd penetrated my soul, right? That was a big deal. The book that—I've told the story many times—made me drop it on the floor, on the concrete floor of the library and made the sound resound all over the place, was *The Desert Music* by Williams. That's the one that turned my life around in terms of what I thought poetry should be.

CB: I'm putting that on the list.

GB: That was so important to me. See that's important to me more than it's important to somebody in the future.

CB: It's still important and I'd say worthy of being on the shelf of books that meant something to you. So if I came to that shelf I'd say, "This is a portrait of George, these are the books he thought I should know, and these are the books that touched his heart."

GB: Yes. Okay. Well, then I'd probably have to get a Conrad book in there, probably the one about the Central American war. *Nostromo*. It stands out for me the way *Absalom Absalom* stands out in Faulkner. Conrad wrote a whole pile of novelettes. And there are a lot of them yet to read, like forty-five page stories, right? So every once in a while I go and—I know where I can buy some.

CB: What about Henry James?

GB: That thought passed through my head a minute ago. And went right out again. But, you know what, when I was reading him I would read one every six months when I was in my 20s and 30s. And I would say why aren't I reading this all the time? And when I did get rid of that huge library I got rid of all my Henry James



books, including several I hadn't read, *Princess Casamassima*, *The Golden Bowl*, and so on. Hadn't read them. Brand new! But they're gone.

CB: George, do you read while you're writing? I mean you're writing all the time, but when, say, you're working on a novel?



Wearing famous Georgie Hat in hills east of Oliver, c. 1949.  
Photo credit: Bill Trump

GB: I read whatever I happen to be reading. I'm reading a book of poems right now by Tom Clark called *The Truth Game* and I'm reading Lawrence Sanders's *Hit Man*. It's so funny. Whatever I happen to be reading I just keep reading it. I don't say I can't stop reading while I write, or I'm not going to read a novel that fixes up this novel, but I did, when I was going to write my two westerns—I had read a thousand westerns when I was a kid but I hadn't read a western for fifty years—I went and read a whole pile of westerns, mostly by authors that I knew from olden days, just to get me back in so I'd remember what a remuda was. And so on. And so I could steal a bit of stuff, too. Both of my westerns steal; one steals a story from Louis L'Amour—that's in *Caprice*—and the other one steals a couple of characters from David Markson, the guy who wrote *This is Not a Novel*. One of my very



favourite authors. Died four years ago, from New York City, didn't write enough books but wrote the Dingus McGee stories. I stole him. In the novel he's only 18, a killer cowboy, but in the movie *Dirty Dingus McGee* Frank Sinatra plays the part, Frank Sinatra at the time being about 55. So they screwed that up. Markson also wrote *The Last Novel*.



George on Mr. Zarelli's lawn, Oliver, c. 1948.  
Photo credit: Sally Bowering

CB: I'm wondering about poems and books of poems.

GB: Well, the best non-book-like poem that I know is Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, which I have understood three times and now don't because you have to work and work and work to understand it—it's like climbing the mountain—then eventually you say, of course, now I remember, having figured it out before. But right now I can't, so I'd have to go and study like crazy and read all the philosophical background to get there, and I'd get it again and say, "This is bloody amazing, that some twenty-five year-old mind could do this!" Ah, Christ! So that's the best poem I know, but one of my very, very favourite poems is Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." When it was first published it had another title. I forget. But "Asphodel" I thought

was just amazing. He was really an old guy then, but I'm older now than he was when he wrote it!

CB: I'm going to put that in. I'd wondered why you hadn't mentioned that.

GB: There have been other poems that have really knocked me out. It's happened. Duncan's done it, Creeley's done it and H.D.'s done it, and so forth. Poems that just—shwee—exploded with their power!

CB: Do you think you would put Olson on the list?

GB: I'm toying with it. I always used to love going up to Ralph Maud and saying, "Ralph, a hundred years from now this will be known as the Age of Beckett." Also, as you probably know, I think very highly of the the *Four Quartets*.

CB: Let's add that.

GB: I'm not going to put in any of Winston Churchill's books.

CB: So far we've had literary texts...

GB: I'm going to include Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook*. *The Double Hook* is my happiness. It confirms me in my beliefs. Back east the few who notice it say that it is a regional fiction. Writers who are hip and/or western know its centrality (due to its marginality). It appears in texts by others, such as Ondaatje, Kroetsch, and me.

CB: It's on the list.

GB: That's three women now. [Laughter] Another book that I thought was interesting—but is it as big a deal as say, Milton, who I'm leaving out—would be Pico Iyer's *Falling Off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World*. It's about six or eight places on the edge of the world that hardly anybody ever goes. One of them was North Korea. It's really something. It's really good. Oh. Kawabata. I'm very big on Yasunari Kawabata. I think probably *Snow Country*. Some of my favourite writers are not on there because I don't think it's right, just because they're my favourite writers.

CB: Why not? They could be on there *because* they're your favourite writers.

GB: Like Jerome Charyn. I haven't read his new book but I've got it. *I Am Abraham*. What's my favourite book of his? He's written some wonderful non-

fiction. He wrote a wonderful book about ping-pong, *Sizzling Chops & Devilish Spins*. But my favourite novel of his is probably *Pinocchio's Nose*. What a sense of power I'm feeling! I guess I want to put Margaret Avison on. Yes. I mean we've got to have Canadian content. Margaret Avison. *The Dumbfounding*.

CB: Do you think it's a fact of Canadian literature, at least in English, that many writers' first books are the memorable ones?

GB: There used to be a thing that happened quite often in Canadian literature that a person would publish one novel and then publish a second novel thirty-five years later just before he died.

CB: We've got a lot of American literature in there.

GB: We've got Conrad, we've got *Nostromo*. My favourite Australian writer is Murray Bail but how many people know about him? There's a book of his right there that I haven't read yet. Now which of his books? I guess, probably, *Homesickness*. He's wonderful.

CB: We don't have any German writers.

GB: We don't have Garcia Lorca. We don't have Rilke. What about the giants I'll think of later? I've got to put in Heraclitus.

CB: We have Homer, but which book? Which poem?

GB: The *Odyssey*. Yes. Then we've got *Ulysses*, too, right?

CB: We could think of more women writers who have shown us what we didn't see because we were so wrapped up in ourselves.

GB: Okay. George Eliot. But not the stuff we usually get from her. The one I like is about Renaissance Florence, about 900 pages long. *Romola*. And Emily Brontë.

CB: *Wuthering Heights*?

GB: *Wuthering Heights* for sure.

CB: What about contemporary women? And Emily Dickinson?

GB: Yes, I was thinking about her. Yes, put in Emily Dickinson. *Collected Poems*. So you're going to put her in and you're not going to put in Whitman, eh?



CB: I'd include Whitman.

GB: Okay, Dickinson and Whitman. We don't need Emerson. We don't need *The House of Seven Gables*.



Michael Ondaatje reads the *TV Guide* and George reads William Carlos Williams, posing for the camera in the Bowering apartment, Montreal, c. 1969.  
Photo credit: Angela Bowering

CB: I've been thinking about Audubon, Whitman, Melville, Edward Curtis—artists creating encyclopaedic studies of what they thought of as a vanishing America. It struck me a while ago that Ishmael wrote *Moby Dick* by the light of a kerosene lamp; American oil wells were beginning to gush as he sat at his desk.

GB: What about whale oil?

CB: It was all over for whale oil. Epic stories take place during epic transformations. Okay, Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*.

GB: I'd like to promote Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo*.

CB: Were you affected by Cortázar's *Hopscotch*?



GB: I thought about him, actually. He was on my mind. Let's do that. Let's do *Hopscotch*. Of course you know that's not its name in Spanish. It's *Rayuela*. I really like his story about the guy who every time he opens his mouth to say something a frog comes out of his mouth!

CB: Were you sold on the idea of "magic realism"?

GB: A little bit. And I guess probably...gee, some people would give me shit for not having certain authors in here. I'm going to put in a book that's not fiction. It's Émile Zola's *The Experimental Novel*. But then, you see, oh boy. That sets up a whole tradition. Like what about that French hyphenated guy from the new novel?

CB: Alain Robbe-Grillet?

GB: Yes. And what about Nathalie Sarraute? Yeah. Because Robbe-Grillet has a wonderful book that's in the tradition of *The Experimental Novel*, a book about fiction, about writing fiction. Okay, that's fifty-two and that's my unlucky number, so...

CB: Should we drop Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute then? It means we'd finish with *The Experimental Novel*.

GB: Have to. And then people can set up their own goddamn lists. But they don't get fifty, they only get forty. We didn't get Zane Grey! When I was a kid Zane Grey really turned my head around. Then Max Brand. And that's when I first learned something. There were two writers, Max Brand and Luke Short. Short was the realist and Zane Grey was the romantic, and my leaning was towards the romantic in the cowboy stuff. Max Brand, the big hero, was a guy who had a wolf for a companion and a horse and a special weapon and—Silvertip, his name was! You know, Max Brand, he wrote about 500 books and he died before he was 50! You know how he died? Sitting in a chair on a mountainside in Italy during the Second World War. He got shot. He was a war correspondent. He was just sitting on a chair.

I always wondered, do you think Luke Short knew Rex Stout? They must have known each other. And...we didn't include Mickey Spillane!

CB: These are the names I expected.

GB: They are not!

CB: Well...

GB: I actually was a snob about Mickey Spillane. Yes. I looked down on Mickey Spillane, although I read him assiduously until he became a Jehovah's Witness, then I quit.

CB: What about Dashiell Hammett?

GB: I didn't read Dashiell Hammett until a couple of years ago, but I did read Raymond Chandler about twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago. And before that—see, this is what I'm talking about. Before that I read John Ross Macdonald. Ross Macdonald was called the new Raymond Chandler, and Raymond Chandler was his hero, so I went back and read Raymond Chandler, and people said Raymond Chandler's rival was Dashiell Hammett, etc., etc., right? When I was a kid, though, it was Murray Leinster and Ray Bradbury and those guys. Curt Siodmak. The science fiction guys. I read westerns, then I read science fiction novels. Every once in a while something else would seep in. When I was in Grade 11, I read *1984* which had just come out in drugstore paperback, and I did a book report on it, and got shit for it. "You should be doing serious books instead of science fiction," my Grade 11 teacher said. Now they teach it in school, or at least they used to, back when they did books in school. Gosh! Jeez! Names tumble through my head now. Not so much names as guys whose names I can't remember tumble through my head now. [Laughter] What about Lady Murasaki? We didn't even mention Dhusvam Sayami.

CB: We're slyly sneaking in more names here at the end.

GB: Yes. Georges Perec! Italo Calvino! Gosh! What's his name that starts with Q? There's so many of them. John Berger—the list just goes on and on and on. If I was allowed to have seven hundred then I could just put everyone on...Gerry Gilbert.... But it's a start. It's something.

CB: It fills the first shelf.

GB: Incidentally, everything I've said so far was a lie.