



George Bowering and Allen Ginsberg at the Western Front, Vancouver, 1978.
Photo credit: Taki Bluesinger

ROB MCLENNAN / A Shelf of Bowering's Books

On my shelf, Bowering. A whole row, a metre of books: poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Both a physical and mental space. A row of his name: George Bowering. Books, chapbooks, journals, broadsides, and anthologies. He has published well over one hundred books—poetry, novels, short stories, plays, young adult novels, essays, and history—aiming at what he referred to as “George Woodcock’s record.”

When I first discovered the work of George Bowering, it was through a girlfriend gifting me her copy of *Contemporary Canadian Poets of the 1960s* when we were seventeen years old. I discovered poems by Bowering, John Newlove, Al Purdy, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Margaret Atwood, and numerous others. It was 1987. I was writing terrible poems and terrible short stories—surrounded by a small social group who were doing the same—and with very little opportunity to access any 20th-century poetry titles. The high school library had but one contemporary poetry title: Irving Layton, *For My Brother, Jesus* (1976).

By my early twenties, I was scouring used bookstores and library shelves in Ottawa for Canadian poetry, and Bowering’s books existed as both guide and gateway. I based a chapbook-sized long poem magazine *Stanzas* on his *Imago*. His books led me to others: Bowering’s introduction was the biggest reason I picked up Artie Gold’s *The Beautiful Chemical Waltz*, and subsequently wandered Saint Catharine Street for a glimpse of my new favourite Montreal poet. Through Bowering’s books, I discovered the work of Daphne Marlatt, bpNichol, Gerry Gilbert, Fred Wah, Sharon Thesen, Judith Copithorne, Barry McKinnon, Maxine Gadd, David Phillips, Phyllis Webb, and Robert Kroetsch. The book as unit of composition and the book-length poem. I discovered Roy Kiyooka, David W. McFadden, and David Bromige. The way the poem can shape and re-shape how a story is told, the permission to create a literature using material immediately at hand.

I discovered the *TISH* poets, and the *Vehicule* Poets. I discovered Greg Curnoe. Through Bowering and his peers, I learned the role of literary community, exchange, and conversation. I explored back issues of *Open Letter: A Journal of Writing and Theory*. I read and re-read Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*, turning back pages more than a few times to understand what I’d missed. I discovered

titles by Talonbooks, Coach House Press, and House of Anansi. I read Angela Bowering's *Figures Cut in Sacred Ground* (1982), her critical work on Watson's *The Double Hook*. I read Bowering's critical book on Al Purdy. I discovered *The Capilano Review*, *Writing*, and *The Kootenay School of Writing*.

Through Bowering, I moved further out in my reading, and discovered the works of Jack Spicer, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Robin Blaser. The long poem, the serial poem, the short breath-line, and poem as long as a life.

There are countless other examples, as his writing inevitably sent me off in other directions. If he dedicated a poem to another writer, I immediately looked up their work as well. I requested review copies of new titles. I spent days deep in the stacks of Canadian literature shelves at the University of Ottawa, with notebook in hand, scribbling furiously, attempting to absorb decades of material, back through to the start of the 1960s.

It was through Bowering's books that I learned structure, cadence, and rhythm—from the long poems to the extended sequences to the short occasionals, and the line breaks caught up in breath. I heard him read, his right hand conducting the metre of "Do Sink."

From *Delayed Mercy and Other Poems* I attempted quick riffs from lines by other writers, something I extended later on after reading *Curious*. My favourite of Bowering's books remains *Urban Snow*, the first poetry title of his that I purchased new.

Through *Rocky Mountain Foot* I attempted a collage of lyrics on my own geography. From *The Concrete Island* I began composing Montreal poems, and other short poems from travel. His fearless curiosity encouraged mine, and exploring the histories and geographies of his local through language gave me the permission to attempt the same, especially during a period where I saw no one else writing the poems of what I understood of my rural Ontario. Don McKay's Glengarry County was not mine, yet closer to what I saw as familiar than Glengarry works by Henry Beissel and Gary Geddes. Bowering's books provided an alternative to the metaphor-driven lyric narrative used to depict the landscape of my youth.

I trusted his work and I trusted his judgment. Through Bowering's books, I learned that to engage with the work of others—as editor, reviewer, and critic—is often the best way to learn how to approach your own work, and the best way to remain energized, passionate, and involved. I learned to read as much as possible.