

NICOLE MARKOTIĆ / Sketching the Impossible

Robert Kroetsch (June 26, 1927—June 21, 2011)

Robert Kroetsch was born and raised in Heisler, Alberta. He studied at the Universities of Alberta and Iowa. He taught literature and creative writing at the University of Manitoba, the University of Calgary, and the State University of New York in Binghamton. One of his novels, *The Studhorse Man*, won the 1969 Governor General's Award for Fiction, and his poetry book, *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, was nominated for the same, in poetry, in 2001. He travelled a great deal, and was celebrated in Germany, other parts of Europe, and elsewhere. While in Binghamton, he co-founded the pivotal journal *Boundary 2*, introducing postmodernism and theory to North American writers and critics. In 2004, he was made Officer of the Order of Canada. In 2011, he received the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Distinguished Artist Award and the WGA Golden Pen for lifetime achievement. A tremendous listener, mentor, supporter of the literary arts, an excellent representative of Canada to the rest of the world, his writing reached out to many—emotionally, intellectually, artistically.

Fond of paraphrasing Stein—"If you can do a thing, why bother?"—Robert Kroetsch wrote away from the likely story and into the impish and the uncanny, away from the impositional and into the positional. In his novels, Kroetsch used the tall tale, magic realism, the masculinist narrative, and various serious and hilarious historical up-endings. In his poetry, he interrogated genre, questioning the rhythms of poetry and the prose of narrative, flabbergasting and astounding readers. Kroetsch encouraged thinking *about* as much as *in* writing; he persuaded readers and writers to challenge the expected; and he celebrated the intense and glorious conversations that ensue when the idea, the word, and the story meet on the page.

So much of what I know as a writer, I learned from Robert Kroetsch—in person or from reading his words. Many in the past few months have written about how important this singular writer was to each: as a reader, as a writer. Laura Moss says that Kroetsch's "sense of place and sense of play have permeated Canadian writing." Rudy Wiebe says that Kroetsch made us think in strange and different ways, that he "told

us our stories—our kinds of stories—in a new kind of way.” Aritha van Herk writes to me that “we’ve lost our best voice and our best friend.”

“Sketches of a Lemon” first appeared in *The Malahat Review* #54, in 1980. In this poem, Kroetsch plays off Wallace Stevens and plays with Gertrude Stein: the visual still life, the impossibility of offering more than a “sketch” of any *thing*, the suggestiveness of desire, the assumed narrative that builds through serial pacing. Stopping just short of Stevens’s thirteen, Kroetsch poetically “measures” a lemon, ending on a lyric image that contradicts his own entertaining grammatical interruptions.

In *Seed Catalogue*, Kroetsch writes that, after taking the storm windows off the house, “Then it was spring. Or no: / then winter was ending.” I hear an echo from the final Stevens stanza in “It was evening all afternoon.” But Kroetsch’s poem does more than “look” at a lemon; the poet compares, smells, kisses, prepares, consumes, and muses over the lemon. Up until readers come to the section 4 list of fruits that the poem does *not* sketch, Robert Archambeau says the poem appears as “a kind of attempt at negative definition” which then transforms and “we see that all along, without our knowledge, the list or catalog had been functioning in ways we hadn’t suspected, inciting the appetites rather than providing definition.”

I pay tribute, here, to Robert Kroetsch, who unfailingly incited our literary appetites; his absence compels us to covet just one more lemon-shaped hour.

Works Cited

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