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“LOOKING FOR PERFORMANCE”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT KROETSCH

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**ROBERT KROETSCH** is an author, editor, literary critic, professor, and one of Canada’s most celebrated writers. He was born in Heisler, Alberta in 1927. His numerous works of fiction and poetry include *But We Are Exiles* (1966), *Words of My Roaring* (1966), *Gone Indian* (1973), *Badlands* (1975), *Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), *What the Crow Said* (1983), *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch* (1989), and *The Man From the Creeks* (1998). His novel, *The Studhorse Man* (1969) won the Governor General’s Award for fiction. In 2004 he was made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

**The Puritan:** Considering the numerous works of fiction and poetry you’ve written since the 1960s, are there any that you consider as definitive or representative of your career as a whole?

**Robert Kroetsch:** I read my published works, on the rare occasions when I read them, with a curiosity about who the writer was. Writing in a way erases the writer.

**The P:** What was your most enjoyable experience in the actual process of writing? Which element of a story’s composition do you find the most pleasing or rewarding?

**RK:** Rewriting. After the challenge (the anxiety?) of facing the blank page comes the pleasure of rewriting; the discovery of what it is you’re trying to say; the wonder of creating something that didn’t exist until the now of the completed draft.

**The P:** How would you describe your writing process? How has it changed over the years, as you’ve aged and grown more experienced? Is there a major difference in the way in which you approach a series of poems as compared to a work of fiction?

**RK:** I would describe my writing process as slow. I pester a story idea until it tells me what to write. The nice thing about writing novels is that you only have to get an idea once every few years. Perhaps my being attracted to the long poem is the same thing; I get an idea, then let details and implications multiply, and then listen for a shape.

**The P:** Which contemporary writers do you find most exciting, inspiring, or challenging? Who are you currently reading?

**RK:** Here lately I've been watching weather reports. Weather might be the key to the Canadian epic. I marvel at the knowingness of writers like Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Marquez. Here lately I've been rediscovering Virginia Woolf. She writes out of English weather.

**The P:** What are your thoughts on the state of publishing in Canada, and in particular, the role of small press publishers and independent literary journals? Which publications do you find most compelling?

**RK:** I find hope in the recent resolution of *The Puritan* into print. Print itself begins to know new versions of desire.

**The P:** In 1988, Gary Geddes asserted that you perceived a "puritanical and conservative streak in the Canadian consciousness". To subvert the expectations of this general conventionality, you are often known to espouse a "Dionysian aesthetic". How has your understanding of the Canadian consciousness (and writing) changed (if at all) throughout forty years of reflection, reading, and writing?

**RK:** Dionysius, recently, has fallen on hard times. The victory of celebrity is a victory of sobriety; the Dionysian threatens to become a fake posture. Consider Hollywood. Consider politics. And the government liquor stores keep raising their prices.

**The P:** *The Man From The Creeks*, your last published novel, describes the events surrounding the death of Dangerous Dan McGrew—an incident recounted famously by Robert Service in his poem, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" (1907). The novel is narrated by Peek, an elderly man recalling events that took place in his childhood over one hundred years in the past. Peek is unsatisfied with Service's version of the story, and wants to give an accurate account. The novel is thus a text based upon the correction or revision of another text. What other fictional or non-fictional texts inspired the novel? Can the reader expect to hear reverberations or echoes of other writers who have similarly engaged with the notion of textual revision?

**RK:** On one hand, I like to think my novel is unique; on the other hand, I see every novel as a revision of prior texts.

**The P:** In *The Man From The Creeks*, the narrator claims to be attempting to set the "record straight", that he isn't "afraid to face the facts". However, Peek (himself a fictional character), is ultimately concerned with a fictional event. What does this say about the role of fiction in our society? Do you believe that fiction has a corrective capability in real-world terms? Or does fiction merely amend or re-order other works of fiction, engaged in discourse with textual versions of reality alone?

**RK:** A novel is not simply about experience; it is experience. Who are we to judge a narrator? Is it really possible for the facts to speak for themselves?

**The P:** In *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (1995) you wrote that the North offered you "an escape from the authority of tradition and hierarchy, an escape that would allow [you] to become a storyteller". Your narrator in *The Man From The Creeks* never returns home once he arrives in the Klondike. Is Peek's journey north a reflection of the same escape you made? Or is Peek's preoccupation with the irrevocable past—and the physical and emotional stasis that follows—reflective of a failure to remake or re-imagine tradition?

**RK:** Yes, you've nailed it: the question of stasis haunts the printing of a story. There is also the question of the stories that were never written. The North accommodates both interrogations. We, most of us, long to return home. Why were we so busy escaping?

**The P:** Many critics and readers perceive a highly physical and sensual tone to your work. As in some of your other novels, *The Man From The Creeks* is laden with descriptions of work—manual labour and toil. To what degree is writing labourious? Are your rich descriptions of labour reflective of your personal writing process?

**RK:** To sit alone in a room staring at a computer screen is, if we define labour loosely, labourious. But the retreat (?) into imagination might merely be laziness. When I first went North I hired out to be a labourer on the Fort Smith Portage. I wanted to exercise, to experience, my young body. Because I had a university degree in English and philosophy I was promoted to working with a pencil. Perhaps, then, I began at once to imagine and avoid labour.

**The P:** Throughout *The Man From The Creeks*, plans are continuously referred to as "schemes". Lou, Peek's mother, uses this term most frequently, but soon Peek adopts it as well. Is this word merely a colloquial term, or does it reveal more? Should Lou's scheming point toward a class-conscious quest for social or monetary betterment, taking into consideration the rabid gold-lust of the late nineteenth century Klondike?

**RK:** My novel, in a way, can be read as a treasure hunt, a boyhood story, a mythological quest. "Scheme" is a word I treat seriously in my consideration of

adulthood. Consider today's lust for gold and the shapes it gives to society.

**The P:** As in some of your earlier works, such as *But We Are Exiles* (1965) and *Badlands* (1975), *The Man From The Creeks* is structured upon a river journey motif. What is your fascination with this recurring plot element?

**RK:** Somewhere in my youth I read Heraclitus and tried to understand that I couldn't step into the same river twice. I seem to have written three novels in my continuing effort to understand. And yes indeed, the river journey, with its built-in time metaphor, invites the elaboration of plot.

**The P:** In an Afterword to *The Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), Ron Smith writes that you have a "preoccupation with the need to 'uninvent' the old mythologies and invent or create a new mythology". To what degree is *The Man From The Creeks* fueled by this preoccupation? Considering Peek's attempts at "setting the record straight", would you say that the novel is not so much concerned with *uninvention*, as it is with *reinvention*, seeing as how Peek's story is concerned with a re-imagining of a preexisting work that has achieved a sort of traditional or even mythological status in Northern consciousness?

**RK:** We can only re-tell stories; we attempt, in doing so, to tell new stories. Is there a way out of this bind? I think the trick is to enter into it completely. Avoid purity. The idea of perfection sounds awfully boring. I see I'm not answering the question. But maybe I am. For that matter, do we ever answer questions?

**The P:** At the end of *The Man From The Creeks*, Peek never reveals the truth of the famous shooting to the "randy tourists" who come to hear him play the piano. Does Peek's decision to "face the facts" in text, but perpetuate the myth in performance, at all reflect your ideas of stories and storytelling? Who are Peek's readers, if they are not the tourists he continues to fool? What might this distinction in audience reveal about your own?

**RK:** The story-telling act involves a conspiracy between teller and audience. As a story-teller myself, I am, paradoxically, on the side of the audience. The audience isn't looking for something called truth. It is looking for performance. How are the three of us doing?

**The P:** *The Man From The Creeks* was published in 1998. Can we expect to see a new novel in the near future? If not, what are you currently writing?

**RK:** Yes, I like to think I am expecting. The old birth metaphor is hard to avoid when you're writing. But we have no writing tests that tell us what the offspring might be. Am I about to give birth to a novel? Or to a monster? Or to a couplet?

**The P:** Peek says he plays to “join two partners, who, once they were together, were never really apart again”. For you, does writing seek to join disparate elements? Or in your push toward postmodern deconstruction and *uninvention*, do your narratives resist totality and the instinct to unify?

**RK:** The Western tradition has it that we long for versions of unity. The plural form of the longing calls the longing into question. That plurality invites my participation. I don’t want to escape from time. I like juxtaposition. I like the openness, the indeterminacy. As Wallace Stevens put it, death is the mother of beauty.

**The P:** Is retirement from the craft of writing an option you’ve considered? Or, like Peek, will you “simply go on playing”?

**RK:** A serious reading of your word, *play*, is the clue. That says it. At least for now.

**The P:** Winnipeg or Calgary?

**RK:** For a writer obsessed with notions of place, I am singularly intimate with the philosophic notion of not-at-homeness. I keep trying to reduce the size of my library. Winter is my favourite season.

*Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon and Tyler Willis  
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[ Photograph uncredited ]*