

The Books That Mattered Most

Vancouver Sun

Saturday, August 19, 2006

Page: C8

Section: Weekend Review

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Source: Vancouver Sun

I was 17 years old when I read *Cat's Eye*, by Margaret Atwood. It was one of the first novels that kept me engrossed from the first page to the last. With deceptively plain language, Atwood nails the brutal complexity of young girls' friendships -- that intricate dance of love, hate, envy and obsession.

What's the most unforgettable book you've read? It's a question I recently posed to a group of both established and up-and-coming Canadian writers.

Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*; *jPod*) discovered the Pop Art movement at the tender age of 10 and says *The Diaries of Andy Warhol* continues to inspire him today. "I'm very bored with most fiction on the shelves, CanLit or otherwise," says Coupland. "Looking at most of it is like looking at a bunch of colonial furniture in a showroom in, say, Sacramento. Sure, it's okay and all, but it doesn't take you or me or the world to any place new. It didn't matter what Andy Warhol did, he always took us to some place new."

Vancouver writer Jen Sookfong Lee, whose novel, *The End of East*, will be published by Random House in March 2007, still remembers her first encounter with *The Stone Angel*, by Margaret Laurence. L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* books had been her only prior experience with Canadian fiction, but Laurence's story of 90-year-old Hagar Shipley taught Lee that "a woman could write things that were dirty or obscene or disgusting, and that was as powerful as the pretty things. I learned that women were limitless."

Newfoundland author Alison Pick (*The Sweet Edge*) points to *Evening*, by the American writer Susan Minot. "I basically didn't eat or sleep for the two days it took me to read it," raves Pick. "The book's marriage of plot and language, of emotion and action, grabs me as tightly every time I return to it, despite the fact that I already know how things will turn out."

Joshua Then and Now, by the late Mordecai Richler, deeply influenced Vancouver writer Timothy Taylor (*Stanley Park*; *Story House*) when he first cracked its spine in university. "In a way, I was reading that book and imagining what it was like to be a writer," says Taylor. "There's a real sharp critical, judgmental intelligence behind the narrator."

If my conversations with these writers are any indication, it's not easy to pare down your list of standouts. I agree with Pick's assessment: "There are as many books that have changed my life as a writer as there are days of the year. Ask me tomorrow and my answers would be totally different."

What book rattled your world and never gathers dust on the shelf? I'd love to hear about your favourites.

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Speaking of reading lists, debate continues to swirl in the U.K. over the Department for Education and Skills' English curriculum for 11- to 14-year-olds. The Guardian newspaper reports that while Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens and the Bronte sisters will remain on the list, more "modern" writers such as Maya Angelou, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, John Steinbeck, Nadine Gordimer, James Joyce and Doris Lessing might get the boot. In a recent op-ed piece, John Sutherland suggests that the curriculum exemplifies "Dead White Man (with some token feminist inclusion)" and "Lit, with no living connection to 2006."

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