Remembering Canadian Author Richard B. Wright

Between Friends

By Colin Gordon Brezicki

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Fiction writers are hard to pin down—something I learned in my thirty-year friendship with Richard B. Wright. The celebrated Canadian novelist died in February, aged seventy-nine, and I’m still trying to figure out who he really was.

He never gave much away. Of his relationship with his wife, Phyllis, it was enough for people to know he dedicated nearly every one of his fifteen books to her, and they were together for a lifetime. Of his sons, Christopher and Andrew, he said little beyond how proud they made him and how he loved their families.

Of himself he said less.

“What people don’t know about me is no one’s business,” was his initial response when I suggested he write his memoir.

Richard was also elusive, because as a writer he wasn’t always *where* he physically happened to be, and he was never entirely *who* he happened to be; often he was imagining someone else, in a place that was elsewhere. For him, living in the moment didn’t necessarily mean the here and now.

Instead of acknowledging ‘what is,’ he was more likely to ask ‘what if?’ He preferred questions to answers anyway.

Finding out what was really going on inside his head usually meant having to wait for his next book.

When he eventually decided to write his life story, *A Life with Words* (2015), he invented another character to stand in for himself. Even with that, he wrote mostly about writing and shared few of his own intimate thoughts and feelings.

A curious detail he did reveal was his love of graveyards, and how he read Camus's *Outsider* as a student, propped up against a tombstone. Death is where all life's questions are finally resolved, I suppose, so maybe that's why he was comfortable there.

He also admitted to bouts of anxiety and having *to get out and walk the red dog*, as he put it.

A surprising disclosure was his webbed left hand, something he kept tucked away inside his jacket. My daughter saw him periodically over twenty years and only noticed his hand the last time they met.

He kept a lot of himself tucked away.

Like his middle name, Bruce, which annoyed him slightly, though he added the initial to his appellation so as not to be confused with the American author, Richard Wright.

Bruce was a name he might have reserved for a fictional character, as he did Freddie Landon, Howard Wheeler and Charlie Farris.

Bruce Wright.

Names began to escape him in later life, as names do. I remember at lunch once, we discussed the film, *The Dresser*. Tom Courtney, in the title role, attends to "Sir" who plays Lear and Othello with a traveling theatre company in wartime England.

We couldn't remember who played "Sir," just as "Sir" himself couldn't remember if he was Lear or Othello on any given night until his dresser had finished making him up. We went through a list of likely candidates—Guinness, Hopkins, Olivier, Burton, McKellen—but none rang a bell. Running the alphabet got us nowhere either.

After going through a dozen great films and actors we conceded defeat. "Do you know," I said, "we'd have got the answer straight away if we had a smartphone?"

He smiled. "And what would be the point of that?"

Why miss out on a delightful stroll down memory lane—amnesia lane in our case—by looking up the answer?

"Sir" was Albert Finney.

Judge a man by his questions, not his answers, said Voltaire. Richard only liked answers that led to more questions.

Far from the rhetorical kind, with answers embedded, he preferred questions that drew a bead on some kind of meaning in experience. Like how do we deal with loss, or disappointment,

or betrayal? I believe he was drawn to write literary fiction, because it enabled him to mine the imponderables—and tell stories as a way of addressing them.

An old photograph once caught his eye—a young man in a rowboat sitting opposite a pretty young woman wearing a fine summer dress and hat; the man was pulling at the oars, having removed his tie and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. The setting was a small lake on what looked to be a Sunday afternoon in the ‘forties.’ Who are these people and what’s their story, Richard wondered. So he wrote a novel to find out, a story about a rather lost, middle-aged man named Howard Wheeler whose parents were courting in that long-ago photograph. The photo eventually appeared on the cover of *The Age of Longing*, Richard’s favourite among his books.

All of his protagonists somehow end up finding out who they are, even though that wasn’t always a question they asked. Unlike King Lear who did ask, in Richard’s favourite Shakespeare play—“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”

He taught *King Lear* to generations of high school students while continuing to write and publish. He was good at teaching literature, because he knew what questions to ask, and he was especially good at it because he knew there was never just one answer.

What do you suppose attracted Jay Gatsby to Daisy?

In what ways could you consider Jane Austen a feminist?

Who or what do you think is Holden Caulfield’s worst enemy?

He liked asking his students questions whose answers he didn’t always know, because he understood that collaborating increased their chances of finding them. He did what good teachers strive to do—help students discover that they’re more intelligent than they imagined.

Richard made no claim to distinction as a high school student himself. “I was a typical adolescent, easily bored and a smart alec,” he wrote in his memoir.

He could be a bit of a smart alec in his adult years too and reserved his sharpest words for those who pretended to have all the answers: disingenuous politicians, bureaucrats, and what he loosely termed “snake oil salesmen.”

He disapproved of their empty buzzwords, meaningless bromides, and weasel words that betrayed the whole point of a language. Instead of connecting words to meaning, they separated the two, reducing communication to mere stratagem. “You can always tell the villains in Shakespeare,” he said once, “their speeches are full of words.”

His teaching tools were a blackboard, a piece of chalk, and a book, and he was able to escape the classroom altogether before electronic devices became *de rigueur*. That was a blessing—for him *and* the devices.

But far from fearing technology, he was merely skeptical of it, because its proselytes claimed to have all the answers, even to questions no one bothered to ask. He distrusted new trends in education that were predicated by a tool rather than a need. And he was impatient with the artificial constraints of binary thinking itself, where the correct answer had to be either ‘this’ or ‘that.’ He understood that teaching poetry and fiction isn’t a question of black or white—there’s a good deal of *grey matter* involved.

The shift from words to pictures in a technological age concerned him. “It seems to me,” he said in his convocation address at Brock University, “in a culture that is becoming increasingly dependent on the visual, the reading of stories and the value of the narrative imagination are under siege.”

While machines could do much to entertain and inform us, he believed they had few answers to questions about our emotional and spiritual wellbeing. As the London *Times* essayist Bernard Levin said, way back in 1978 with computers still in their infancy, *technology will eventually transform everything, except everything that matters, and the rest will still be up to us*.

Richard applied this same skepticism to the business of being a writer. As a solitary activity, writing suited his temperament, but it led to public appearances, interviews and—a word he came to dislike—*profiling*, which could poke the red dog.

“I didn’t want to be a writer,” he said, “I only ever wanted to write.” He didn’t write to become famous, but he also knew the anxiety that comes with eking out a living on royalties alone. Sometime in the ‘seventies’ he received a royalty cheque for two dollars and eighty cents; he framed it as a reminder of where he had once been, should he ever make it to the big time.

Two decades later he did just that.

Clara Callan (2001) sold 300,000 copies, won the prestigious Giller Prize and Governor General’s Award and made Richard a celebrity. His picture was on the front pages, and he appeared in TV interviews across the country. But he enjoyed the limelight with reservation, as he did everything else. He knew it was his for that moment only.

On the Monday following his glamorous Giller weekend in Toronto, he was back home in St. Catharines, his tuxedo hanging in the closet, when the CBC phoned for an interview.

“What might the celebrated author be doing this afternoon?” the reporter asked.

“He’ll be raking leaves,” Richard replied. “Nothing more exciting than that, I’m afraid.”

After Phyllis passed away, a mere three months before Richard died, I finally learned something about my friend that I never imagined. How utterly dependent on her he was for all the things he wasn’t very good at doing himself.

I remembered a moment in *The Age of Longing*, where Howard Wheeler as a small boy overhears a conversation between his mother and a neighbour about Howard’s father, who had flown the roost. His mother relates how she had to manage everything for their wedding, because her husband didn’t have a head for such things.

Howard continues, “*My mother made all the arrangements: letters of reference, train tickets and hotel reservations. She even bought my father’s wedding suit. It was she who consulted the schedules and bought the train tickets. It was she who booked the hotel and forwarded the certified cheque that they couldn’t possibly ignore. It was she who knew where to board the streetcar when they came out of Union Station to the noise and traffic of Front Street.*”

Phyllis managed the business of this world, including the digitizing of his manuscripts, while Richard immersed himself in other worlds. She was also his first reader, the one who checked his facts and told him what had to be fixed. She made the reservations, purchased the tickets, paid the bills, and arranged the transportation, while obtaining three university degrees and working as a research librarian at Brock.

Phyllis answered questions that required immediate and non-negotiable answers.

Richard was more comfortable with questions that superseded their answers. Those were his specialty, because he was a writer and a teacher.

So, who better to know that side of him than his readers and students? I was both for thirty years, and am forever grateful for that.

References

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- Wright, Richard B., *A Life with Words: A Writer’s Memoir*, Simon and Schuster, 2015.
 Wright, Richard B., *The Age of Longing*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995, p 84.
The Dresser. Director: Peter Yates. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1983.