

# Robert Kroetsch: Essays on His Works



# Robert Kroetsch: Essays on His Works



Edited by  
Nicole Markotić



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*This book is for my mother, Margaret Markotić,  
who loves reading Robert Kroetsch*

*and for all the Kroetsch fans out there,  
thousands and thousands and thousands of you!*

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## Robert Kroetsch: Giving Alberta the Slip

— • —  
Nicole Markotić

**“Already, I find myself straying from the mere facts”<sup>1</sup>**  
.....

In a 2009 talk at the University of Windsor (reprinted in *Rampike*), Robert Kroetsch remarked:

I just don't think you can tell a story of your life. It's a lie. I mean generally you make yourself very good or nowadays you make yourself very bad — that's what sells novels, making it about what a terrible creature you were. Which probably isn't the truth in any case, and it's an imposition on the narrative when it doesn't fit. So I'm against autobiography, partly because I also want to keep my own life secret, I suppose. (“Open Talk” 18–19)

The problem with autobiography, then, is the explicit telling coupled with the implicit task of “unhiding the hidden.”<sup>2</sup> Lee Spinks argues that the idea of identity, in Kroetsch's writing, “is inextricably linked to the function of language as a model of representation and communication” (220). Spinks reads *The Sad Phoenician* as a poetic autobiography within which Kroetsch creates an “aesthetics of discontinuity,” displacing notions of self-identity through a privileging of the plural over the singular (221). For Kroetsch, such discontinuity engenders a generative language, one that expands and complicates his fiction, his poetry, and even his essay writing. Perhaps in



an attempt to guide readers away from the notion that books come only (or even exclusively) from personal experience (as if personal experience was not a set of literary conventions in their own right), he argues for the importance of what he calls the “unfinished book that writers are always reading and never finishing: because every story needs a story to explain, to tell, how come the story was told. The endless beginning” (“Contemporary Standards” 44).

### “How do we fit our time and place?”<sup>3</sup>

.....

Robert Kroetsch has had a tremendous influence on Canadian writing.<sup>4</sup> Kroetsch’s insistence on “local pride” has been taken up by writers from many parts of Canada — beginning in earnest in the 1970s and continuing to this day; so many scholarly papers have been published about his work (in Canada and in Europe, as well as numerous conferences dedicated to it) that it is difficult to represent their breadth in one volume such as this. Kroetsch continues to set out parameters for what it means to write a “story” (even in his poetry).

*Why* and *how* does he continually focus on the autobiographical push, even as he’s sceptical of the possibility of any writers ever successfully telling their “own” stories? Who is this Alberta of whom Kroetsch speaks and what is its connection to the auto-non-autobiographical? Forty years ago, Kroetsch wrote an introduction to the anthology *Creation* in which he says that writers and readers must “enter into the exhilarating and frightening process by which we explain ourselves to ourselves” (n. pag.). And where this imperative to “explain ourselves” starts is with the question of who is the “we” to whom this explaining need occur? For Kroetsch,

the “we” usually stands for a Canada defined almost exclusively by immigrants: “We cannot find our beginning. There is no Declaration of Independence, no Magna Carta, no Bastille Day. We live with a terrible unease at not having begun. Canada is a poem. We dreamt a poem, and now we must try to write it down. We have a gift of languages, and now we must make the poem” (“Canada is a Poem” 33). That particular cultural-naturalist “we” patently excludes the important vibrant literary history of First Nations peoples, even as Kroetsch acquired a larger and larger view of whose stories he wished to “unriddl[e]” (*The Lovely Treachery of Words* 41). In fact, “un”covering, “un”hiding, and “un”naming have become critical terms when speaking of Robert Kroetsch’s work.

Kroetsch’s portrayal of the so-called prairies in his novels (such as *The Studhorse Man*), in his poetry (such as *The Hornbooks of Rita K*), and in his pseudo-autobiographical texts (such as *A Likely Story*), propose and test a fluctuating notion of a writerly “self” in Canada (particularly western Canada). As he says in his essay, “The Veil of Knowing”:

To reveal all is to end the story. To conceal all is to fail to begin the story. Individuals, communities, religions, even nations, narrate themselves into existence by selecting out, by working variations upon, a few of the possible strategies that lie between these two extremes. (*Lovely Treachery* 179)

Kroetsch’s concept of selfhood seems to admit, if not to require, invention in writing, but always one that is tricky, sneaky, self-defeating even (as in a writer deliberately proliferating problems instead of solutions). Pauline Butling remarks in an interview with Kroetsch that, “there’s a lot of self-mockery in your work because you put yourself, the

subject, out there as something that you can then critique” (11). For example, as soon as he mounts an idea (the rakish figure of Hazard Lepage in *The Studhorse Man*, sleeping with virtually every woman he meets, while his patient fiancée Martha expects their wedding to be the final punctuation of his quest), Kroetsch will overturn that image. (Liebhaber, for example, in *What the Crow Said*, persists as the eternally unrequited suitor.)

Kroetschian literature/history/legend stretches the limits of *plausibility*, tangling the narrative layers in which the notion of *self* might fabricate a writerly identity. In Kroetschian terms, the story of “us” does not define a ubiquitous identity. As he says in “On Being an Alberta Writer,” to “understand others is surely difficult. But to understand ourselves becomes impossible if we do not see images of ourselves in the mirror — be that mirror theatre or literature or historical writing” (75). If so, what does recognizing “us” inside story actually entail? Kroetsch derives his sense of place — Canada, homeland, prairies — not so much top down from “nation” — what Kroetsch would disdain as a glorification of centralized authority — but from a memory, a chronicle, a saga, an archaeology that attaches to a particular body living in a very particular place. He has often remarked that the words that so vitally reverberated with his sense of place came from reading the opening of William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*: “a local pride” (2). Though Kroetsch’s first novel, *But We Are Exiles* (first published in 1966), takes place on the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories, and his last published novel, *The Man from the Creeks* (1998) takes place in the Yukon, he sets the majority of his novels in Alberta. Nevertheless, his sense of “home” is not restricted to one province or a singular idea of “the local.”

Kroetsch's first poetry book, *The Ledger* (1975), springboards off his grandfather's Bruce County, Ontario watermill. As Manina Jones points out in her essay on *The Ledger* as local history, Kroetsch telling the story of his aunt handing him his grandfather's financial ledger reveals that writing his poem *began* with that "hand-me-down" (52) moment: one family member literally handing him an artifact from another family member. Here, Kroetsch's sense of "local pride" is scaled down and shaped less by coordinates on a geophysical map of regions of Canada and more by the intimacy of community-shaped family history. Kroetsch's attention in *The Ledger* — which is on the details of a rural and cultivated space within an insular community — led to his next two poetry books, *Stone Hammer Poems* (1976) and *Seed Catalogue* (1977), both of which incorporate official records or logs, at the same time as they celebrate a way of cataloguing found, non-literary material — thus cataloguing a then-absent rural written history. Manina Jones notes that *The Ledger* imports "passages from the inherited ledger, maps, and fragments from a historical atlas, the dictionary, a newspaper, census records, letters, and tombstone inscriptions" (52). By redefining, in *The Ledger*, the page as open not only to found texts, including farming documents, Kroetsch invites readers to territorialize the temporality of history, implying that there is an infinitely fluid quality to local pride.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, not all readers remember a farming past, a freezing prairie winter, or card games that seem to never end, as in *What the Crow Said*, but by bestowing a detailed locality onto each narrative scene, his stories premise themselves on their powers to summon readers to partake in inventing — and often feeling at home in — absurd, puzzling, enigmatic, and illogical worlds.

**“any coherent story has to be a lie”<sup>6</sup>**  
.....

Structuralist literary critic Philippe Lejeune (1989) famously posited an “autobiographical pact” (19) between author, fictional narrator, and subject matter (ie, “self”), a pact that allows readers to assume that these three components are entwined if not identical (so: the author is the first-person narrator of the fictional story and the story is about the author’s life). As do other postmodernist writers in and since the 1970s, and as further evidence of his distrust of the autobiographical, Kroetsch plays havoc with such fixed entanglements. I contrast the use of a first-person singular autobiographical impulse in Margaret Atwood’s 1966 poem, “This is a Photograph of Me,” to Kroetsch’s 2010 poem, “On Tour,” in his book *Too Bad*. The narrating voice of Atwood’s poem interrupts a serene description of a rural landscape with a parenthetical statement that reveals her exact condition in the picture:

In the background there is a lake,  
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre  
of the picture, just under the surface .... (3)

The “I” claims to be absent from the photo, but permeates the poem: her lack of presence is the subject matter wherein her presence as an “I” is fully present. In contrast, Kroetsch’s book *Too Bad* narrates a reverse panopticon: rather than re-establish the individual as confined

(as “drowned,” in Atwood’s terms) and observed on all sides, Kroetsch’s autobiographical impulse in this book splits his persona into doubles or triples, deleting any notion of a stable or secure “me.” In the opening poem, “On Tour,” a radio talk show host bewilders the persona by asking that he “tell us again / who you are” (2). The demand baffles the speaker, and his first “guess” is to announce: “Flesh become flesh.” The host’s clear disappointment throws the persona into a crisis of identity:

... I’ll get you a printout,  
I said, of my DNA. I was clutching at straws.  
My dentist will have on file some X-rays. (2)

The persona’s anxiety at a radio talkshow host’s (obvious and expected) questions is amusing, but the true humour comes from the persona’s panic that he must, somehow, answer the metaphysical question of *self*. In his existential crisis, he leans on the scientific to provide corporeal, impersonal information, not once considering the biographical mode as a suitable reply. In a later poem in the book, denoting an earlier time in the persona’s life, the young adult persona “finally” has a date:

I said to my buddies, What should I do?  
I was nervous. They told me, Just be yourself.

I was confounded. How could I manage to be myself?  
A solipsism. A circular argument.  
A self-proving statement that might be false. (28)

When the persona names his self-reflecting panic “solipsism,” the irony lies in the title of the poem, “Just Be Yourself I”; this poem is immediately followed by the equally

the main character's life. By concentrating on Maggie as autobiographer of her attire, Bates argues, Kroetsch wittily challenges any belief about it being possible to represent (or control) the self in language.

The final "essay" in this collection, I have titled: "A 'Flight' of Lemons." This piece features twelve writer/critics, offering twelve (one for each section of the poem) takes on one Kroetsch poem, "Sketches of a Lemon." These writers peek at Wallace Stevens's blackbird, dig through the archaeology of poem drafts, endlessly swallow the ouroboroses swallowing its own tail, and apporportion its hour-glass nipples. They dissect the lemon-twisted poem, scrutinize its relationship to blackberries, question its lemonicity, explore its cloven line breaks, study its cruel humour, and ultimately lick the poem. The writers of these twelve pieces offer — just a glimpse — of how many diverse readings one Kroetsch poem offers readers, and just how satisfying is that shocking taste of sour at the end.

Finally, in their interview (the very last published interview Kroetsch produced), "How Do You Interview a Poet? A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch," Creative Writing graduate students interrogate Kroetsch on such weighty matters as the function of narrative in poetry, the future of books and literature, and his love affair with an erratic boulder. This discussion not only presents one of the last interviews Robert Kroetsch conducted, but it also demonstrates his amazing facility in the classroom: his eagerness to hear ideas, his pedagogical encouragement, and his constant belief that whomever he was talking with had brightness and intensity to contribute to the conversation. Their questions intrigue.

## “Beginnings and Endings: the Old Confusion”<sup>14</sup>

.....

When Joseph Pivato first approached me to edit this collection on Robert Kroetsch’s writing, I was thrilled and terrified. Attempting to represent the sheer volume of critical writing about Kroetsch was surely a daunting task? Turns out I was wrong: it was an *impossible* task. I am enormously indebted to the authors who have written books or multiple essays on Robert Kroetsch’s substantial body of work. I urge readers to go to the selected bibliography at the back of this book for further critical readings. Difficult to convey the tremendous amount of excellent articles I had to leave out of this collection (it breaks my heart not to include an essay on, for instance, *Alibi*), especially when trying to cover Robert Kroetsch’s incredible fiction, astounding poetry, and intriguing non-fiction writings. The work here spans the period of Kroetsch’s own writing; I include essays that cover (some of) his novels, (some of) his poetry, and even (some of) his critical writing. The authors in this book include writers who knew Kroetsch well and those who only met him on the page; critics at the beginning of their careers and those well established in the Canadian literary field, men and women, writers and poets and critics and damn fine thinkers. I thank you all.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Studhorse Man* (12).

<sup>2</sup> In his essay of the same title, Kroetsch makes an argument for writers to pursue ideas about identity not so much via naming experience, as through the tension that exists between “appearance and authenticity.” His interest lies in “de-mythologizing the systems that threaten to define” writers (and Canadians); to do so, one must “uninvent the world” (“Unhiding the Hidden” in *Lovely Treachery* 58).

<sup>3</sup> In Margaret Laurence Interview: *Creation* (30).

<sup>4</sup> As a telling example, I cite Kroetsch’s short review of Walter Petriego’s book of photographs, *Petriego’s Calgary*, “Kingdom of the Male Virgin.” This short piece took up one page in the literary journal *NeWest Review*, yet has been referenced in countless critical writings. In *NeWest Review*. Volume 1, #4 (1975): 1. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Other Canadian poetry books that reference documented material and play with the page include Daphne Marlatt’s *Steveston* (1974), Roy Kiyooka’s *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine: 18 Frames from a Book of Rhetoric* (1977), and George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* (1990).

<sup>6</sup> In John Marshall Interview (42).

<sup>7</sup> In *Words of My Roaring*, Johnnie Backstrom describes himself, variously, as: cheerfully “good-natured” (16), yet having “a fairly quick temper”; definitely “not by nature a liar, but...” (44), rather, one who’s “always been polite” (11); as someone who tends to “cry very easily” (56), yet also considers it “a bad sign if I cry once in two years” (80); a man who “cannot stand forgiveness” (52), and who yet confesses, “I wanted forgiveness” (98).

<sup>8</sup> In *Gone Indian*, Jeremy Sadness speaks his prairie adventures into tapes that he mails to his former adviser, Professor Madham in New York state, who edits and rearranges. In many ways, each tries to cuckold the other, sexually *and* narratively. As Arnold E. Davidson puts it: “The result is two unclear self-portraits joined in one blurred double exposure.

Each man, half successful at exposing the limitations of the other, also partially succeeds in exposing something of his own limitations” (135).

<sup>9</sup> In the mini-chapbook, *Ten Simple Questions for David Thompson*, (the second section of *The Lost Narrative of Mrs. David Thompson* chapbook), the narrator-persona pronounces to David Thompson that libraries “think you were a book,” and provincial officials “think you were a road” (n. pag.).

<sup>10</sup> *Alibi* (125).

<sup>11</sup> Lazreg coins this phrase to speak about how “Western gynocentrism has led an essentialism of otherhood” (338). The comparison is not exact, but the idea that one can appropriate or subsume an “other” fits well with Kroetsch’s attitudes towards self-revelation.

<sup>12</sup> In the talk given at the University of Windsor in 2009 (published in *Rampike*), Kroetsch says he thinks “questions are much more important than answers. Answers are always wrong. Questions are always right. So I like to ask questions... then we learn to speculate, debate, argue, reason, and feel emotion” (18). As a teacher, Robert Kroetsch was famous for asking “unanswerable questions,” which nevertheless procured the most interesting (anti)-answers.

<sup>13</sup> “Regionalism” 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Words of My Roaring* (102).