Robert Kroetsch:
Essays on His Works
Robert Kroetsch: Essays on His Works

Edited by Nicole Markotić
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert Kroetsch: Giving Alberta the Slip</td>
<td>Nicole Markotić</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninventing Structures:</td>
<td>Ann Mandel</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Does the city give us the poems?</td>
<td>Ryan Fitzpatrick</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or do the poems give us the city?”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Kroetsch's Spatial Assemblages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone Hammer Narrative</td>
<td>George Bowering</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the Crow Said: A Topos of Excess</td>
<td>Christine Jackman</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Shape of All Nothingness”:</td>
<td>Jay Gamble</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Negativity in “I Wanted to Write a Manifesto”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbodying the Bawdy in Robert Kroetsch</td>
<td>Jenna Butler</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography as Decoy in The Puppeteer</td>
<td>Catherine Bates</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## A “Flight” of Lemons

**Even Stevens: Kroetsch Takes a Peek at the Blackbird**
- **Dennis Cooley** .................................................. 163

**Drafts of Kroetsch’s “Sketches of a Lemon”**
- **Nathan Dueck** .................................................. 166

**A Sketch of “Sketches of a Lemon”**
- **Robert Archambeau** ........................................... 169

**What do you give an injured lemon”**
- **Jon R. Flieger** .................................................. 172

**Lines on biting into Kroetsch’s lemon. Again.**
- **Aritha van Herk** ................................................ 176

**You Don’t Say: Voice in “Sketches of a Lemon”**
- **John Lent** ......................................................... 181

**A Rum Analysis**
- **Gary Geddes** ................................................... 186

**Sketch of a Plurivalent Lemon**
- **John Moss** ....................................................... 188

**from The Missing Book of Cucumbers**
- **Nicole Markotić** ................................................. 190

**Sweet and sour**
- **Pauline Butling** ................................................ 191

**Riffs on RK’s Lemon Poem**
- **Roy Miki** .......................................................... 193

**The Unstill Life of Kroetsch’s Lemon**
- **Susan Holbrook** ............................................... 195

---

## How Do You Interview a Poet?

**A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch**
- **Tom Dilworth, Jasmine Elliott, Susan Holbrook,**
  **Brian Jansen, Wiktor Kulinski, Michael Laverty,**
  **John Matias, Brianne O’Grady, and Jeff Pardy**  ........................................ 205

## Robert Kroetsch: A Brief Literary Biography

- **Nicole Markotić** .............................................. 223

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## Robert Kroetsch: Selected Bibliography

*(Primary Sources)* ................................................. 231

*(Secondary Sources)* ............................................. 247

**Contributor Notes** ............................................. 265

**Acknowledgements** ............................................ 273
“Already, I find myself straying from the mere facts”

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.” 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
Robert Kroetsch has had a tremendous influence on Canadian writing.1 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” patenty 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.5

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”

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”; this poem is immediately followed by the equally
Conversely, Fred Wah brands his poetic fiction *Diamond Grill* a “biotext” (ix), attempting to include his family’s prairie Canadian Chinese background within the novel form. The idea, for Wah, is to roam around in prose, without landing on the conventional novel. Whereas in his poetry, Kroetsch teases and harries novelistic conventions by concentrating his narrative disruption onto a seemingly progressing narrative.

Ironically, perhaps, Peter Thomas accuses Kroetsch of writing an “autobiographical record” (54) in the non-fiction travel book, *Alberta*. Says Thomas, “a writer either celebrates or triumphs over his origins, in which he chooses either to authenticate the otherness of his known world or absorb it into the dance of self. For Kroetsch ‘Alberta’ is an utterance in the first-person” (54). Thomas suggests that Kroetsch both celebrates and absorbs, but does so in a way that upends the autobiography: instead of using the first-person format to reveal personal stories, Kroetsch writes his prairies into a non-fiction narrative to champion his origins for literary import. As so many writers understand autobiography as fitting within prose formats, it’s interesting that Kroetsch—who has little interest in confession—turns to poetry for the writerly autobiography. In her book on autobiography and writing, Adriana Cavarero describes a distinct “narratable self”: “Every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a narratable self—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory” (33). Cavarero, in a way, mirror-reverses Kroetsch by suggesting that each individual relies on the idea of “individual self” for the self-story to proceed: “the narratable self is at once the transcendental subject and the elusive object of all the autobiographical exercises of memory.” But Kroetsch vehemently insists that he’s “against the
transcendental” (“Open Talk” 18). He has little interest in divulging secrets about any cryptic self; rather, he wishes the very tallness of the tale to intrigue readers, to bring their very disbelief into the reimagining of place and history (and culture and gender and sexuality and all things physical).

Thirty-three years after Alberta is published, the fictional persona Rita Kleinhart appears (in 2001). She announces, in The Hornbooks of Rita K, her desire to write a “collective biography” (10). Says Dawne McCance of Rita’s fascination with writing on back doors: “Collective biography resists the myth of community as wholeness, the narrative of a (male) unitary being that pre-exists writing and that is made manifest through it” (163). When Rita Kleinhart inscribes words into her neighbour’s back doors, these inscriptions suggest a form of self-expression that envelops the collective, rather than isolating an individual. Hornbooks traditionally were wooden slats into which one inscribed a favourite passage from the Christian Bible. By carving her poems into back doors, Rita Kleinhart recreates the original wood material, while insisting on herself as the subject matter. These hornbooks, McCance says, enact “autobiography as trait,” as trace, as “possibility, the necessity of going outside of oneself” (164) to discover oneself. As Rita says in “Hornbook #7”: “I am attempting to write an autobiography in which I do not appear” (29).

In his essay on play and gaming in Kroetsch’s fiction, Paul Barrett leans on Kroetsch’s use of John Fowles’s notion of a “godgame,” in which the “magister ludi” knows the rules, but the player does not. Writes Barrett: “Kroetsch’s games are not merely metaphors for language and the struggle for meaning; he also conceives of fiction as a game where the structure of the narrative constitutes a field of play and the quest corresponds to a series of moves” (99). I might add that — in Kroetsch’s work — autobiography is itself a version of a godgame, but one where neither the writer nor subject know or understand all the rules of the speaker/self. Kroetsch’s essay “I Wanted To Write a Manifesto” deliberately juxtaposes local and personal anecdotes against refined cultural history. For example, cutting through fields to reach his cousins’ home, the narrator of “I Wanted to Write a Manifesto” passes an erratic boulder that he calls “a composition of pure and erotic curves” (49). He speaks his wish, not to go up, but down (51) into the earth. At age 12, he “became quite literally aroused at the sight of that rock” (50). The scene is amusing, and informs readers of the author’s love affair with the sensual landscapes of Alberta. But the scene also reveals Kroetsch’s notions about art and history, that a boulder transported by an ancient glacier compares (attractively, creatively, imaginatively) to the Venus of Willendorf (50).

In keeping with his arguments that Canadian writers must write a multiple “we” into literary existence, Kroetsch as postmodernist encourages writers to invoke their plural selves onto the page. As Peter Thomas puts it, Kroetsch appreciates “the myth of self-renewing individuals” [such as Frederick Philip Grove and Grey Owl]; though he does not “dismiss” history and the structures of time,” they collectively “represent the adversary to rebirth, to the principle of possibility” (8). Kroetsch wants readers and writers together to cleave the past and present. “We listen for the voice of the visionary, the poet. Against the mere facts, we listen to the men who might have dared to dream. Riel. Aberhart. Douglas. Diefenbaker. Lévesque .... Not the past, but the future” (“Canada is a Poem” 34). Louis Riel who imagined a rightful place
for Métis people or William Aberhart for inventing what his detractors called “funny money”—these are the “poets” Kroetsch puts faith in to invent Canada. In their book, *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that the best approach to life narratives is “as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (1). “Alberta for me is a kingdom in which everything is possible; either it has happened, or it’s going to happen very soon” (Alberta School Library Review 11). Mythic Alberta: not so much a place as a yarn, a fantastical invention. A very unlikely story.

Robert Kroetsch’s novels form an oeuvre within which to explore modes of fiction, from realist novel, to poetic novel, to tall tale. Kroetschian fabrication enters and occupies contemporary Canadian writing not exactly as autobiography, but as an exaggeration that—as Picasso purportedly said—lies in order to tell the truth. Among other feats, the “lyric I” traditionally invites readers to simultaneously accept the persona as an authentic speaking version of the author (the autobiographical pact, in Lejeune’s terms), at the same time as it expects readers to appreciate the deliberate artifice of that persona. In *The Studhorse Man*, Hazard Lepage studs out his horse, meandering through rural Alberta in a perverse homage to the classic Odyssean narrative. Through the picar-esque and its flawed characters, he also becomes a symbol for a disappearing tradition. The studhorse man carries on an out-dated vocation embedded in past times that no longer resonate economically, in an unrelenting present set at the tail end of World War II. As Hazard wenches his way through the province, causing chaos and turmoil (mostly for himself), Demeter Proudfoot, the demented narrator, comments that Hazard’s “only means of livelihood was the white and black dink of that stallion” (60).

But Hazard is also the risk readers must recognize and appreciate, the dare and the fading but not yet diminished lust; yes, lust: that crux (that climax), of lifeblood that propels the narrative. An entire book about masculine “studding” and horse sperm ironically ends with the urine of female horses as birth control. The ending of that novel, then, turns Hazard into the punchline of a joke he’s too invested in to laugh about, though he laughs at a good many other unfortunate episodes.

Kroetsch’s distrust of and attraction to autobiography often seeps into his novels that fictionalize biography. Who writes whose story? In *Alibi*, is the doubly named William William Dorfen Dorf acting as autobiographer by telling the truth to his journal entries? Or has Karen Strike become biographer by adding more than titles and an imposed order? One might ask very similar questions of *Gone Indian*: do readers trust Jeremy’s dictation as purely autobiographical narratives? Or has Professor Madham taken more than a few liberties as distorting biographer? In *The Studhorse Man*, Demeter claims to be biographer, but the novel reveals his frantic desire to write Hazard’s story into his own autobiography. Says Kroetsch: “I suppose the biographer in *The Studhorse Man* slowly usurping the subject of his biography is unwillingly deconstructing the notion of a hero. He starts to see himself as the hero as he sits in the bathtub writing the book” (in Hancock 39). The narrator, telling the story from a bathtub, mocks Hazard for being “terrified of history” (33). Indeed, Hazard is about to become obsolete, a “maniac who peddles horse cock from farm to farm when nobody wants horses” (16). In redefining the story as autobiography, the narrative shifts from
research to confession, from interpreting another’s life to fabricating one’s own life.

“We all live by our alibis”

Kroetsch once said to me in conversation that one can appropriate one’s own life. By using appropriation this way, which both deflates its charged political affect, and turns that charge toward the intimate spaces of family history, Kroetsch expresses his aversion to what he might have called an “essentialism of selfhood,” to borrow a term from Marnia Lazreg (338). His famous repeating question: “How do you make love in a new country?” from his essay, “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space” (Lovely Treachery 72–83), grows from an earlier question: “How do you write in a new country?” (“On Being an Alberta Writer” 70), or the even earlier repetition, How do you grow a garden/poet/lover/prairie town? from Seed Catalogue, published in 1977. Each question hides the other within the writerly erotics of the page, within the textual notions that usurping oneself from one country to another changes the textual process. Kroetsch himself moved around a lot, living away from Canada for decades, “making love” to the prairies every time he left them, re-inventing Alberta with every homecoming. In an article written for the Alberta Writers Guild magazine, West-Word, George Melnyk quotes Kroetsch as saying: “I spent much of my life writing novels that I thought would enable me to give Alberta the slip. Create a replica and enter in. Skin out” (8). Adds Melnyk: “The trail of replicas that he has left behind are scraps of imagination, history, autobiography, and longing that he has followed faithfully page after page back to Alberta ...” (8).

Though Kroetsch tended to eschew answers, he does suggest that a tangential, evasive, and perhaps even fictitious answer to his own question is the frank declaration that “memory is a disguise as well as a recollection” (“On Being an Alberta Writer” 70). Memory as mask, as mask that — in “My Tree Poem” — he perplexingly claims to “hide in front of” (Seed Catalogue 62). Authenticity, then, is just one of many disguises to choose from as a writer. Shirley Neuman points out that autobiography theorists “have, variously, posited the self as individual and unified, as split, as textually produced, and as impossible of production” (214). In discussing the humanist foundations for the category of autobiography, Neuman says that memory is the catalyst of autobiographical “truth,” but it is “also the agent of its impossibility [...] for what is forgotten or misremembered may be at least as important to the ‘truth’ of the sought-for ‘self’ as what is remembered” (214) A modern-day Cassandra in What the Crow Said, Gus Liebhaber is a newspaper journalist tasked to recall and document the present and the immediate past; instead, he remembers the future (9).

Memory, for Kroetsch, operates against official history, even as it invokes the nation as a plural writerly “we.” History offers truth and reassurance; story on the other hand, stories offer the world, and “world” is both delineated by, and is less historically predetermined than, “nation-state.” Hearing for the first time about a buffalo wallow, Kroetsch recalls that, at a young age, he was “secure in the illusion that the land [his] parents and grandparents homesteaded had had no prior occupants, animal or human” (218). Learning that the bison came to drink and roll and scratch around in the damp earth, and finding absolutely no official information about bison or wallowing, he discovered the gap between himself and history to be “growing” (218).
“How do you grow a poet?” (n. pag.) he repeatedly (with some semantic twists) asks in *Seed Catalogue.* Apparently, poets grow via the distrust of maps, and through distrusting the monolithic lists of prime ministers, and not by memorizing the dates when kings were born. Instead, the poet relies on “newspaper files, place names, shoe boxes full of old photographs, tall tales, diaries, journals, tipi rings, weather reports, business ledgers, voting records — even the wrong-headed histories written by eastern historians become, rather than narratives of the past, archaeological deposits” (“On Being an Alberta Writer” 76). To the end, Kroetsch was a sensualist, revelling in the embodied corporeality of language over its technical efficacy at promoting rote learning: “you have to love the names of flowers, you have to love the names of birds, you have to love the mountains, rocks and stones, dust: you have to relate to this world physically” (*Alberta School Library Review* 11).

I shall end this essay with an autobiographical anecdote: in researching Kroetsch’s writing, I searched through many archives and libraries and websites and second-hand bookstores and forgotten boxes in hidden basements. Working on this introduction while in British Columbia, I often checked the Vancouver Public Library database. The last time I did so, when I typed “Robert Kroetsch” into the *author* search engine, 71 entries appeared. But when I typed “Robert Kroetsch” into the *subject* search engine, the library listed only nine books — eight by critics about Kroetsch — and the ninth, to my amusement, his 2010 poetry book, *Too Bad.* Whereas the prose/memoir/essays in *A Likely Story: the writing life* may not be considered close enough to autobiography to feature Kroetsch as its subject matter, apparently his poetry hits the mark.

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**“The texts are never finished”13**

Ann Mandel’s essay, “Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch,” offers a literary context for Kroetsch’s work, especially *Badlands, Gone Indian,* and *The Studhorse Man.* She situates these Kroetsch novels in relation to work by Atwood, Cohen, Lee, Mitchell, and Ondaatje, as well to work by Henry James, Olson, Rilke, Roth, and Yeats. Mandel surveys the complex tensions that occur in Kroetsch’s fiction. She argues that Kroetsch proposes a “decomposition of all systems of language which threaten to define” his writing. This affects the formal choices he makes in his writing. For example, Kroetsch often chooses farce and parody, leading to an “uncreation of the self” (29). By “unlearning” myth and metaphor, Mandel writes, Kroetsch presents readers with a “sensual truth” (36). While his fiction delves into history, he poses the possibilities of a “radical release of the self” (30) from inherited pasts.

In asking, “Does the city give us the poems? Or do the poems give us the city?” in “Robert Kroetsch’s Spatial Assemblages,” Ryan Fitzpatrick embarks on “archaeological spatial considerations” in Kroetsch’s poetry, focussing on a slim chapbook published in Calgary in 2002 and Kroetsch’s iconic long poem, *Seed Catalogue.* Continuing the idea that Kroetsch demonstrates a “distrust of inherited and overarching system[s] or grid[s]” (57), Fitzpatrick argues that William Carlos Williams’s directive about “a local pride” allows Kroetsch to re-examine cultural and literary creation against a national and even global arena. Within the Kroetschian poetics, Fitzpatrick says, “space is topological not typological” (60), and in a constant state of flux and instability. Via theorist Manuel DeLanda, Fitzpatrick proposes that when Kroetsch
invokes Williams, spatial concerns come into play as much as poetic ones.

George Bowering’s essay offers readers a critical/creative reading of Kroetsch’s “Stone Hammer Poem.” Sectioning off his essay in the same manner Kroetsch writes the poem into 11 sections, Bowering begins a close reading at the level of the word, focussing readers’ attention on the possibility of “field” in “Field Notes” as verb, rather than noun. In doing so, he underlines the narrative (and linguistic, and formal) unpredictability in Kroetsch’s writing, of the telling self, uncovering the fresh images that Kroetsch offers; language, as Bowering says, being “the earth of thought” (84). Bowering muses about a stone transformed to maul transformed to paperweight transformed to poem.

Undermining Kroetsch’s undermining of binaries that somehow undermine, Christine Jackman’s “What the Crow Said: A Topos of Excess,” points out that both characters and readers of that novel build “grand fictions to account for things” (98). Recognizing that much of the drive of the novel derives from the binary opposition female/male, Jackman argues that the gender divide is not equal nor even balanced. The men fight the sky (as well as Death, time, darkness, women, the Father) in a war against patriarchy, one which they don’t seem to realize is a war against themselves. The male characters destroy themselves in grotesque irony as they ultimately believe more in language than they do in the experiential. Men, in this world, cannot find escape from their self-created struggles (and, more to the point, perhaps struggles with self-creation).

In “‘The Shape of All Nothingness’: Narrative Negativity in ‘I Wanted to Write a Manifesto,’” Jay Gamble takes on Kroetsch’s biographical “manifesto” as an über-fictional inventiveness. Gamble discusses Kroetsch’s essay through the collection’s title, A Likely Story, as, unambiguously, “the tall-tale of the bullshit artist” (120). When Kroetsch recalls his child self peeing in a bucket that the men working on his parents’ farm will drink from, he permits himself: to sully the water of men who drag him away from play, to absolve his action by “confessing” to them his act, to enjoy their disbelief and subsequent disregard of his warning and, ultimately, to recall the story as fodder for readers’ pleasure. All this “reveals” (in an autobiographical anti-autobiography manner) how and why he became a writer many times.

Taking critics who disparage Kroetsch’s work for gender stereotypes without recognizing that Kroetsch’s notion of the body/bawdy untilt and upset those very stereotypes, Jenna Butler, in “Unbodying the Bawdy in Robert Kroetsch,” contends that Kroetsch’s writing focusses on “the body’s propensity to alienate both women and men from themselves” (130). Looking at The Studhorse Man, Words of My Roaring, The Hornbooks of Rita K, Gone Indian, and Kroetsch’s last published poetry book Too Bad: Sketches Toward a Self-Portrait, Butler identifies a particularly Kroetschian erotic humour in his representation of the body and its absence, of the oral and the written, of textual disembodiment within bawdily admissions. Butler leaves readers witness to “the body unmaking itself” (139).

“Kroetsch is a liar” (147), writes Catherine Bates, in her “‘Autobiography as Decoy’ in The Puppeteer.” This is the novel where Kroetsch has his protagonist, Maggie Wilder, try to write an autobiography of her wedding dress. Kroetsch plunders the “I,” via decoy and alibis and lying and re-interpretation. When readers try to find solutions to identity, Bates points out, they end up explaining away
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 apportion 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”

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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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).

3 In Margaret Laurence Interview: Creation (30).

4 As a telling example, I cite Kroetsch’s short review of Walter Petrigo’s book of photographs, Petrigo’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.

5 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).

6 In John Marshall Interview (42).

7 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).

8 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.

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1 The Studhorse Man (12).
Each man, half successful at exposing the limitations of the other, also partially succeeds in exposing something of his own limitations” (135).

9 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.).

10 *Alibi* (125).

11 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.

12 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.

13 “Regionalism” 164.

14 *Words of My Roaring* (102).

1916 — A raft of men is floating down layers of time toward dead forms of lost life. Below the flimsy prairie society they leave on the present surface, cultures and species have entered the ground in order, and the past moves by as coloured bands of compressed earth and rock. They are using a river to cut this historical flesh, carve down through veins of crude energy to an ancient skeleton of bone. Around the buried white architecture of extinct monsters, one of these men has constructed a dream of fame and honour in the future.

The William Dawe Expedition into the Alberta badlands in search of dinosaur skeletons provides Robert Kroetsch, in his latest novel, *Badlands*, with a story which brilliantly fuses landscape and action, and with metaphorical and mythic possibilities grounded directly in a realized natural setting. Dawe’s zealous hunt could also serve as an apt paradigm for the present activities and pursuits of many Canadian novelists, poets, and literary scholars in their writing: a search for the lost forms of the Canadian past, a digging through history for the skeletons of stories, facts, and legends which return Canadians to their origins.

Margaret Atwood remarks in *Survival* that “there is a distinct arechological motif in Canadian literature — unearthing the buried and forgotten past — ” and notes that a lot of writers are rooting around in the past looking for
Robert Kroetsch:
Selected Bibliography

Primary Sources
(chronologically ordered)

Novels


Poetry


Stories


**Other**


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**Essays About Robert Kroetsch (Selected)**


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**Films About:**


**Contributor Notes**


**Catherine Bates** has worked as an English lecturer at the universities of Leeds, Huddersfield, and Keele. She specialises in Canadian literature, archive theory, autobiography and waste, and is working two book projects: about Robert Kroetsch and life-writing, and focusing on representations of waste in North American literature. She is the Director of the Yorkshire Network for Canadian Studies and the Deputy Director of the Leeds Centre for Canadian Studies.

Governor Award winner (Fiction — *Burning Water*, 1980) **George Bowering** has published many volumes of criticism and other literary non-fiction, most recently *Words, Words, Words*, (New Star Books, 2012), *How I Wrote Certain of my Books* (Mansfield Press, 2011) and *Horizontal Surfaces* (BookThug, 2010). Like a lot of Canadian non-literary writers, he is currently working on a book about
hockey. In addition to the essay collected here, he has often written about Robert Kroetsch, whom he believes to be our most important writer in English in recent years.

**Jenna Butler** is the author of *Seldom Seen Road* (NeWest Press, 2013), *Wells* (University of Alberta Press, 2012), *Aphelion* (NeWest Press, 2010), and a book on cold-climate farming and food security, *On the Grizzly Trail* (Wolsak and Wynn, 2015). Her poetry and ecocriticism work has taken her from the Canary Islands to Italy, from Ireland to the Arctic Circle. Butler teaches creative writing and ecocriticism at Red Deer College and lives with three resident moose and a den of coyotes on a small organic farm in Alberta's north country.

**Pauline Butling** published *Seeing in the Dark: The Poetry of Phyllis Webb* in 1997; co-authored *Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Dionne Brand, Marie Annharte Baker, Jeff Derksen, and Fred Wah* (2004) and *Writing in Our Time* (2005), and has recently completed *The Deanshaven Story*. She has a BA and MA from the University of British Columbia and a PhD from SUNY Buffalo. She taught at Selkirk College, David Thompson University Centre, and the Alberta College of Art and Design. She currently lives in Vancouver, BC.

**Dennis Cooley** lives in Winnipeg where he has been active in the Winnipeg literary world: as writer, as founding editor with Turnstone Press, as founding member of the Manitoba Writers' Guild, and as professor in the English Department at the University of Manitoba. He has published two critical books, *The Vernacular Muse* and *Eli Mandel and His Works*, and numerous poetry books, including *Bloody Jack, the bentleys*, and *correction line*. His latest titles include: *the stones* and *abecedarium*. His most recent critical book is just out: *The Home Place: Essays on Robert Kroetsch’s Poetry*.

**Tom Dilworth** is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has published eleven books and more than 120 articles and chapters mostly on modern literature and romantic poetry. His most recent books include *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson* (co-edited with Susan Holbrook, 2010), *David Jones in the Great War* (2012), and *Here Away* (2014), a book of poetry. His biography *David Jones, Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* was published by Jonathan Cape in 2016.

**Nathan Dueck** is the author of two poetry collections, *king’s(mère)* (Turnstone Press, 2004) and *he’ll* (Pedlar Press, 2014). He is an adjunct professor at St. Mary’s University College in Calgary. He can’t bring himself to delete a single email Kroetsch sent him.

**Jasmine Elliott** is a freelance editor, writer, and blogger living in Toronto. *Completed Field Notes* taught her to love the Canadian long poem. She enjoys pop culture criticism, carrot sticks, and the Oxford comma.

Jon R. Flieger’s creative work has appeared in numerous journals, anthologies, and obnoxious humble rags. He has an article on murder and other poetries in the early fiction of Michael Ondaatje forthcoming in a book from Wilfred Laurier University Press. His own poetry book, Never Sleep with Anyone from Windsor is available from Black Moss Press. He holds degrees from Windsor and Calgary and is currently studying at Oxford. His mother wishes he was a real doctor.

Jay Gamble teaches English at the University of Lethbridge. His research interests include Canadian Literature (especially literature of the prairies), contemporary and innovative poetry, and theories of negation.

Gary Geddes has written and edited more than 45 books of poetry, non-fiction, drama, fiction, criticism, and translation, and won a dozen national and international literary awards, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Americas Region), the National Magazine Gold Award, the Lt.-Governor’s Award for Literary Excellence, and the Gabriela Mistral Prize from Chile. His recent books include: Drink the Bitter Root: A Search for Justice and Healing in Africa, Swimming Ginger, and What Does A House Want? He lives on Thetis Island BC, with his wife the novelist Ann Eriksson.

Susan Holbrook teaches North American literatures and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor. She is author of the poetry books Joy Is So Exhausting (Coach House 2009), Good Egg Bad Seed (Nomados 2004) and misled (Red Deer 1999), and co-editor (with Tom Dilworth) of The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson: Composition as Conversation (Oxford UP, 2010). She has a critical book, How to Read (and Write About) Poetry (Broadview), and her poetry book, Throaty Wipes (Coach House) was shortlisted for the 2016 Governor General’s Award.

Christine Jackman taught English Literature for 19 years at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, BC. Prior to that she taught at Simon Fraser University. She holds BA and MA degrees from Simon Fraser University and has published articles on Robert Kroetsch and feminist theory. A native of Saint John, NB, she is retired and lives in Prince George.

Brian Jansen is a PhD Candidate in English Literature at the University of Calgary with specialization in American Literature and Creative Writing. His critical work has most recently appeared in the volume Literature, Rhetoric and Values (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); his fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous venues, including the Windsor Review.

Wiktor Kulinski is an experimental ethnographer working with the Polish/Canadian 1.5 Generation. His methodology is interdisciplinary, traversing theatre of political engagement and anthropology, and more recently performance studies. Kulinski is a playwright, having produced work that reimagines Eastern European absurdist drama. He has directed adaptations of absurdist works, under his acting company Billy Walsh, and served as dramaturg in others. Kulinski is currently completing his PhD at York University.

Micheal Laverty is a children’s librarian living in Sioux Lookout, Ontario with his wife, Natalie, and their two boys, Isaac and Malcolm. In 2012, he published his first
novel, *Hands of the Tyrants* (Now or Never Publishing), a satire featuring an inexperienced CSIS agent who infiltrates a collective of performance and conceptual artists. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, *Front & Centre*, and *The Windsor Review*. Currently, Michael is composing thought experiments inspired by Jorge Luis Borges and episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

**John Lent** has published nationally and internationally for the past thirty years, including poetry, fiction, and a book of conversations with Robert Kroetsch, *Abundance. So It Won’t Go Away*, was short-listed for a BC Book Prize, and *Cantilevered Songs* was long-listed for the Re-Lit Award in 2009. He has read in France, England, the USA, and across Canada. Lent lives in Vernon, BC, with his wife, artist Jude Clarke, and plays in jazz-roots group, The Lent/Fraser/Wall Trio. Retired from Okanagan College, he is working on a new novel.

**Ann Mandel** is a Professor Emerita at Glendon College, York University. She has taught and written many articles in the fields of Canadian literature, American literature, contemporary world literature, and critical theory.

**Nicole Markotić** is a novelist, critic, and poet. Her seven books include: *Scrapbook of My Years as a Zealot* (Arsenal Press), *Bent at the Spine* (BookThug), and *Whelmed* (Coach House). She has edited a collection of poetry by Dennis Cooley: *By Word of Mouth* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press) co-edited an anthology of essays: *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (Ohio State UP), and has published a critical book, *Disability in Film and Literature* (McFarland & Co.). Currently, she is Professor of English Literature, Creative Writing, and Canadian Literature at the University of Windsor.

**John Matias** works as an editor in Vancouver and Toronto.

**Jhn Mos** failed typinh n hi schol nd spullinh in pubic schul an has ben sinz thehn writinh literrry criticidm an merder miseries nd has moved on to sciens fliction butt no-on raeads low-brw anymor sins dickns nd hminwhyy dyed.

**Brianne O’Grady** holds a Honours B.A. in English from the University of Guelph and an M.A. in English, with a specialty in Creative Writing, from the University of Windsor. She was honoured to meet Robert Kroetsch while studying at the latter and, several years later, still remembers the interview fondly. A signed copy of *Completed Field Notes* sits proudly on her bookshelf.

**Jeff Pardy** lives a stone’s throw from the Island of Misfit Toys on the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland and Labrador. Since completing his Creative Writing MA at the University of Windsor, he still writes from time to time, bottling his stories and casting them into the Atlantic for some poor soul to find and wonder, “who writes this stuff?”

**Aritha van Herk** is the author of five novels, *Judith, The Tent Peg, No Fixed Address, Places Far From Ellesmere* (a geografixione), and *Restlessness*. Her non-fiction includes *A Frozen Tongue, In Visible Ink*, and *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta*. With photographer George Webber she
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