

Book Knowledge

THIS YEAR IS the centenary of the birth of Northrop Frye, perhaps best-known as the author of *The Educated Imagination* (originally delivered as the CBC Massey Lectures in 1962) and *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), which examined the Bible as a literary work and code—the great code—for understanding Western culture.

Frye also posed the question, well known to students of Canadian literature, in his conclusion to Carl Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*: "Where is here?"

Frye showed that our understanding of the world could be opened by our reading, and a knowledgeable reading of the writing of others who were themselves steeped in a rich literary inheritance.

But it's easy to lament the state of reading today and people's tastes. Twenty years ago, the poet Robin McGrath observed in a course I was taking at the University of Alberta that people had largely forgotten how to read folklorically. We were increasingly unable to recognize (let alone understand) the motifs and themes informing and running through the scriptures, legends, folksongs and nursery rhymes foundational to our understanding of our culture.

The recurring tales of mysterious strangers, wanderers and noble outcasts, the labours separating lovers from their beloveds were fundamental ways of teaching us about life, guideposts that helped us understand (with apologies to Frye) where our here is, where each of us stands in the world.

It's easy to imagine that things have deteriorated further over the past two decades. A friend recently remarked that his church group struggles to understand the Bible it venerates. He observed that the titles my reading group tackles—novels by George Eliot, Vladimir Nabokov and other writers one might consider canonical—would be even less manageable

among those without at least a bachelor's degree. Our imaginations are, if not less educated, without common points of reference.

But no generation has a monopoly on cultural illiteracy: Nova Scotia's Gaspereau Press styles its staff "literary outfitters and cultural wilderness guides." Its books follow in the tradition of J.M. Dent & Sons' popular Everyman's Library, which offered its books with the words of the character Knowledge from the medieval play *Everyman*: "Everyman, I will go with thee, & be thy guide / In thy most need to go by thy side."

Trained in urbane optimism, with all manner of information available at a keystroke, we easily forget the importance of sinking roots into our cultural inheritance and carving a life out of the wilderness of ideas, words and data surrounding us.

This issue of *Amphora* takes a look at some of the personal roots and pursuits of printers, book artists and readers that have made the world less of a wilderness for themselves and others. Ottawa's Paul Jay reflects on the toy printing presses that kindled his enthusiasm for letterpress printing, drawing him into a tradition from Gutenberg to 19th-century job printing. Gary Strachan discusses the challenges of balancing the printed library he's accumulated with the wealth of titles available in digital formats.

Perhaps most significantly, Kelly Houle talks about her mission to illuminate Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), a work that informs contemporary understandings and discussions of ourselves and the world. Houle's project speaks to the potential for a book, and the book arts, to create opportunities for the sustained contemplation of a particular perspective, and in turn a point of reference that facilitates our own response to the world in which we live.

~ Peter Mitham, editor