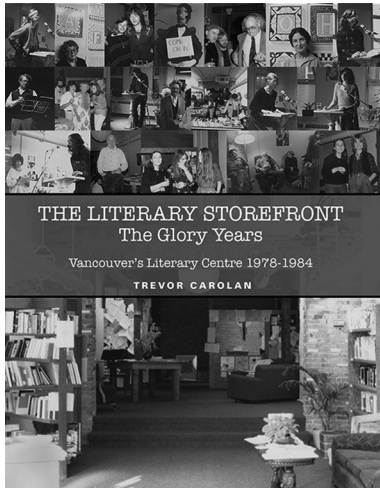


*The Literary Storefront,  
the Glory Years: Vancouver's  
Literary Centre, 1978–1984*

BY TREVOR CAROLAN  
(MOTHER TONGUE  
PUBLISHING, 2015, \$29.95)



ON SUNDAY MORNINGS in the late 1970s, we would leave the church at Gore and Cordova and stroll through Gastown, Vancouver’s reinvented birthplace. The kids liked to greet the statue of Gassy Jack at the intersection of Water Street and Carrall, but I was drawn to the life-size ragdoll named for Sylvia Beach who stared back at us from the window of the Literary Storefront in Gaslight Square.

We were never there during the Storefront’s open hours, but we peered inside and asked people we knew what the interior looked like and what happened there. The decor welcomed one with easy chairs, wooden tables, bookshelves and houseplants. The walls held book-related displays: posters, broadsheets, cross-genre art by Carole Itter, Beth Jankola and Bill Bissett, even an exhibit of rejection slips.

Writers who came in looking for information, inspiration and a listening ear immediately recognized the Storefront as *their* space. They could test their talents in a sympathetic setting

where, even if they were not yet famous, it was “acceptable to be creative,” as historian Jean Barman comments in her foreword to Trevor Carolan’s nostalgic snippet of cultural history.

The force driving the Storefront from dream to reality was Mona Fertig, a 24-year-old emerging poet and semi-employed event organizer. She envisioned a drop-in place something like Beach’s Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Paris or City Lights in San Francisco. She described the Storefront in *The Literary Storefront Newsletter* as “a nerve centre to stimulate interest and development in the literary arts and to promote interaction and support between writers and the writer and community.”

An annual fee of \$10 made one a Friend of the Literary Storefront, with the privileges of a home-delivered monthly newsletter; a membership/library card; personal notice of unscheduled readings, book parties, films and the like; a monthly potluck dinner and meeting “where you can put forward ideas and discuss all the money we’re going to make”; use of the IBM Selectric typewriter (booked in advance); discounts for events and workshops; “plus numerous other untold advantages.”

Many of the drop-ins belonged to the post-war generation of Fertig herself, of Susan Musgrave, Robert Bringhurst, and of Trevor Carolan, whom she chose to tell this story. A journalist, creative writer and media advocate, Carolan gave his first public reading at the Literary Storefront and remained connected with the space from his first bashful drop-in until its closing and dispersion.

He remembers: “For young writers like me, the Literary Storefront was an unofficial post-graduate education centre. It was where a generation of Vancouver writers, surfing between the nationalistic and the as-yet-unformed multicultural waves in CanLit, could learn how the writing and publishing game ticked. . . . It was a chance to become part of a community.”

The writers I had known at UBC grad school and the Advance Mattress Coffee House in the ’60s had become mentors. Audrey Thomas gave a workshop on short fiction. Bill Bissett proclaimed his poetry and added his particular aura. Senior poets Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page and Earle Birney brought gravitas.



Fertig and the Storefront could rejoice in their success in promoting interaction and support between writers, but not so much in connecting the writer and the community. Unlike its inspiration, Shakespeare and Company, not to mention City Lights, the Literary Storefront was not a bookstore, except for the few slim volumes written by members (and these were more readily accessible to non-members in the Paperback Cellar at Duthie's). As a librarian and researcher, more reader than writer, I was charmed by the idea of the Literary Storefront, but I did not drop in.

Without a retail operation, the Storefront was continually pressed to find income for rent and other necessities, and dependent on memberships, grants and sharing space with compatible organizations. Too much of Fertig's time was spent applying for grants and recruiting volunteers. When she stepped back after four exhausting years, the Storefront's emphasis shifted from providing a physical space and nurturing an artistic community to sponsoring celebrity events around town, away from the grassroots and toward academic creative writing departments.

*The Literary Storefront Newsletter*, which in today's terminology might affectionately be described as "funky," turned slick, shrank to a list and died. Carolan gives credit to Fertig's successors, notably Tom Ilves, Wayne Holder and Robert Stelmach, who struggled to keep the dream alive. But the nostalgia ebbs from his narrative.

Nonetheless, that narrative matters. The copious photos, many dark and imperfectly focused, come straight from personal albums. Skimming the book in my living room, a friend sighed, "Brings back so many memories." After

indulging in those memories, one goes on to appreciate with what loving care and diligent research Carolan has documented an era.

The Literary Storefront served as "a stepping stone," its inspiration acknowledged by such later leaders as Ann Cowan, founder of the Simon Fraser University Writing and Publishing Program; Alma Lee, founding artistic director of the Vancouver Writers Fest; and Alan Twigg publisher of *BC BookWorld*. (Twigg has posted the text of Fertig's own "Brief History" of the Literary Storefront on his vital online resource, at [www.abcbookworld.com/view\\_essay.php?id=39](http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_essay.php?id=39).)

I eventually connected with Mona in 2003, when she and her husband Peter Haase visited our bookstore on Gabriola Island to demonstrate their letterpress and celebrate the publication of Sandy Frances Duncan's chapbook *Yvonne*. Sandy served in 1980 as B.C. representative for the Writers' Union of Canada, and, from a desk in the Literary Storefront, oversaw the formation of the Federation of British Columbia Writers. Sandy and I met in the late 1980s after we both moved to Gabriola, and she encouraged us to expand our inventory and sponsor book launches. Fabric artist Elizabeth Shefrin, creator of "Sylvia," the doll who first attracted us to the Literary Storefront and presided over its activities, now lives down the road.

Based farther south, on Salt Spring Island, Mona Fertig more than ever deserves Carolan's characterization of her as "Vancouver's legendary unaffiliated literary force." In 2008 she established Mother Tongue Publishing. Through projects such as the Great B.C. Novel Contest and the Unheralded Artists of B.C. series, and books such as *111 West Coast Literary Portraits* and *The Literary Storefront*, she continues to encourage creativity and vitalize the history of Western Canada's culture. As poet and critic Jean Mallinson testifies, "Changed as we may be, we are still living on the energies of the time."

~ REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS REEVE