

Comment

Farewell to a great bookstore

The loss of Bryan Prince leaves a hole in the local literary landscape



Opinion

PAUL BENEDETTI

The little shop was bustling with people — packed, in fact — but the mood was off.

I had stopped in to buy the new novel for our book club and was caught off guard by the crowd.

I knew the store was closing. I had heard about it online, but I thought it would be a slow wind-down over the next few weeks or even months.

I wanted to visit Bryan Prince Bookseller one more time and thank the folks who ran it and worked there.

Before I could open my mouth, Andrew, the irrepressibly cheerful and enthusiastic staffer, beat me to it.

“Hi,” he said. “Thank you for all your support over the years.”

“Are you kidding?” I said. “Thank you guys. Your support has been unbelievable this past year.”

If you are lucky enough to get a book published, you’re really lucky to have someone like Kerry Cranston-Reimer, who ran the bookstore, helping you along the way. The little shop in Westdale not only hosted a reading for me, but they did the book sales at my launch and staffed the book table at readings in Hamilton and Burlington. It’s hard to sell books in Canada, and it would be impossible without help from a shop like Bryan

Prince.

But I wasn’t there just because of the past year. I’d been going to the shop for decades. I love books and I love good bookstores. Not big, shiny outlets in malls or sprawling operations that sell coffee and napkins and candles and knicknacks and, oh yeah, books. No, I mean real bookstores like the old Britnell’s in Toronto, Munro’s in Victoria, a Different Drummer in Burlington and, of course, Bryan Prince Bookseller. A place that is about one thing — books. Not a place where the clerks (though they are perfectly nice kids) really couldn’t give two hoots about books and wouldn’t know Tom Wolfe from Thomas Wolfe from Michael Wolff. No, I mean a shop where the people actually READ books and can talk about them and want to talk about them.

I like real bookstores because they are always a sea of quiet calm in an increasingly busy and buzzing world. And even more than that, like libraries, they are a treasure trove for the truly curious. In a good bookstore, like Bryan Prince, you can stop in on a sunny afternoon or a rainy morning and just browse the shelves, scanning book spines, not looking for anything in particular, just waiting for a title to pique your interest and open you up to a time or a world or a story you didn’t know existed. I’ve been doing that since the shop opened in 1989, whiling away an hour now and then just looking through the books. When internet shopping arrived, I purposely bought books there, preferring to spend my money

at an independent bookstore instead of going online and clicking “Buy”. No matter how fast and convenient, searching online is no substitute for the serenity and serendipity you can find in a good bookstore. And, yes, I have an e-reader, but there’s really nothing like flipping through a real book, rifling its fresh-cut pages and inhaling the scent of paper, book glue and anticipation that emanates from them.

So, I did that one more time. I scanned the now half-empty shelves and a long table covered with books for sale. I found some gems, a biography of baseball great Ted Williams, a beautiful little volume by Diane Schoemperlen, a novel I thought I would take a chance on. I paid, with some guilt (the books were only a few dollars each), and said goodbye and thanks to Andrew.

On Thursday, the bookstore’s final day, I went back to see Kerry to thank her for the store and for her help and for fighting the good fight as long as she could.

She was standing by the front counter, greeting the throng of customers who came to say goodbye.

We chatted briefly about books and bookstores. I told her how sorry I was to see the shop close.

“Everything changes,” she said, with a resigned smile.

“I know,” I said. “And not always for the better.”

Paul Benedetti is proud to say his book, “You Can Have A Dog When I’m Dead,” was on the shelf at Bryan Prince Bookseller.

READERS WRITE

LETTERS WELCOME, 250-word maximum, full name required.
Send to letters@thespec.com

Save the cost of charity trinkets

RE: CHARITY APPEALS

I would like to appeal to charities that insist on sending out trinkets like cards, stickers, recyclable grocery bags, and pens etc. to please stop! The world doesn’t need any more of this and I suspect most gets tossed anyways.

When I donate it is with the expectation that funds will be used for the cause I’m supporting, furthermore, the inclusion of this crap doesn’t make me want to donate more, in fact, it usually results in less money less often. The other problem following donations is the increasing frequency of appeals for more money both through the regular mail and the computer’s mailbox. Sending out a yearly calendar is more than enough for me and knowing the funds were being used wisely might result in an increase in donations.

Bob Panchyson, Burlington

Ageism unnecessary and disgusting

RE: FIGHTING AGEISM (MARCH 27)

Very nice to hear certain people higher in our local leadership are starting to realize that, no different than weight, age is only a number. No matter whether you’re two and a half or a hundred and anything, you can contribute toward society, have happy, positive relationships and in good physical condition. May anyone who needs to learn that lesson do so as soon as they can since, no different than any other kind of discrimination on earth, ageism is unnecessary and disgusting.

Amy Soule, Hamilton

Every Ontarian should be afraid

RE: MARCH 29 EDITORIAL CARTOON

I have just read a portion of the 2017 Ontario Auditor General’s Report. One excerpt from this document should scare every voter in this province.

In referring to the province’s accounting practices, she says, “As such, they obscure, or will obscure, the true state of the Province’s annual deficits and net debt reported on its consolidated financial statements at a time when Ontario already has the highest subsovereign debt in the world.”

Knowing this, the present government continues to buy our votes with our own tax dollars with no consideration as to how the next generation is going to pay this debt off. I applaud Mr. MacKay’s editorial cartoon. It really tells it like it is.

Ron French, Hamilton

Trudeau ‘persecuting’ vulnerable young

RE: FEDERAL JOBS PROGRAM CONTROVERSY

I just finished reading the comments under the title “Anti-abortion funding denial is correct.” Personally, I don’t believe the issue is abortion, since abortion is legal throughout Canada. The issue is about the federal government’s introduction of Thought Police into Canada — persecuting those who disagree with the government’s stance by cutting off crucial funding to young people for their education, an education which will ultimately result in good for Canada’s future.

I have always been taught that all Canadians, as citizens of one of the world’s great bastions of freedom, have the inalienable right to have and to express their own personal beliefs. It is ironic that the son of the prime minister who gave us the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is the one who has introduced us to Thought Police. Will this become the future norm?

Don George, Burlington

Teachers already working at capacity

RE: TEACHERS SHOULD PROVIDE TUTORING (MARCH 29)

I find this letter disheartening. Leaving aside the unfortunate patronizing tone, the message within is misguided. The perception alluded to is that teachers have much spare time and are perhaps paid too much for few working hours. It is unfortunate that school hours and working hours have been confused. Forget the fact that teachers are not meant to solely be educators anymore — that we are expected to be mindfulness coaches, life coaches, sport coaches, club leaders, counsellors, dispute solvers, entertainers, bullying-identifiers, role-models, trip co-ordinators, fundraisers and first-aid administrators, among other roles. Forget that teachers attend to the needs of 20-30 diverse learners daily, some with Individual Education Plans.

If you know a teacher, you know their day never ends at the bell. The amount of time that marking, planning, creating and prepping materials, lessons and activities takes cannot be overstated. The extensive curriculum expectations needing to be covered, the technology to be integrated, the resources and unit plans needing to be created, the constant evolving direction in education; these do not come together by magic. I hope the author can understand how much teachers care for and invest in their students. I would love to have time to do more.

Cassandra Mizzi, teacher, Hamilton

Our democracy has been sold out

RE: WHY BOTHER WITH FAKE ELECTIONS? (MARCH 27)

Gwynne Dyer questions why Putin and other dictators bother having elections. I question why I bother to continue voting in our so called democratic elections.

Let’s face it: Political parties of United States and Canada are bought and sold by big business. Between the banks, investment firms, oil companies and other multinational corporations manipulating the stock market and special interest groups lobbying senators on both sides of the border nothing ever changes. United States has had four presidents shot to death but the NRA still dictates gun laws. I admire what the students of Parkland High school are trying to do but it’s important that they remember, one per cent of the population controls 90 per cent of the wealth of the world and regardless what that Nigerian Prince tells you, no one wants to share.

Patrick House, Hamilton

Release fear, life’s sweet symmetry awaits

‘Go and let go’ of worry



Opinion

THOMAS FROESE

HALIFAX — Today’s rumination is about the flags of the world and the hope of the world and the fears of the world, (or at least some fears in Canada), even as it’s about how the children’s mother helped me get over some of my own fears.

We live in a world that’s somehow naturally saddled with fear, true.

But Canada, it seems to me, for all it has going for it, is a particular place that can easily let its fears get the better of it.

We’re afraid of the lawyers (we’ll get sued!), afraid to let the children go alone (they’ll get abducted!), afraid, even, of unhappy and unhealthy hands (so those crazy hand dispensers now everywhere).

Certainly we’re afraid of underachieving and not keeping up with whoever or whatever: this, maybe, the biggest fear whipping this culture’s galloping rate of anxiety disorders.

No, don’t run, don’t dive, don’t even throw a snowball anymore. We do mind our manners, though. (Because we’re afraid not to.) It’s here in the Maritimes where I recently stood amid those world flags, and the people underneath, where I was reminded, again, that much of the world doesn’t live this way.

The people, about 500, gathered in a public university, Mount St. Vincent, to work through similar issues regarding global mission. They met for several days to consider their skills and passions and how they might offer themselves for the sake of others in less fortunate places.

“Go and let go,” is what these Maritimers heard repeatedly in one way or another. Let go of your fears. Most are blown out of proportion. Let go of your preconceptions. Most are wrong. Risk, because the truth is this: at the end of your life you’ll regret the things you didn’t do more than the things you did.

You, after all, are the hope of a hurting world, even if you’re called to



THOMAS FROESE

Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese interacts with children on a street in Sana’a, Yemen, in this photo from 2002.

simply go across the street.

“What I notice returning home is this growing preoccupation with safety,” is what Christiane Fox said to me. Back and forth for nine years, the Nova Scotian offers her teaching and life skills to Mabaan women in South Sudan. We talked in a corridor. She’s right, even if South Sudan is not the first yardstick many of us would use to measure these things.

So consider someone like Blair Grier, my airplane seatmate, a Canadian engineer from Lethbridge who lived in New Zealand for five years. “Canadians have no idea,” he told me. “Here, my children really notice it.” That is, they notice the hand-wringing that often drives Canada’s culture. Blair talked at length. I shared my own family’s experiences abroad.

Which brings us to the children’s mother and the summer day we drove down a country road, so long ago now, more than 300 columns ago, before she was the children’s mother or Darling Doctor Wife or even Babe. She was a friend, a young woman going to, of all outrageous places, Yemen. And on that quiet Ontario road she asked, “Would you ever consider going overseas?”

Naturally, I knew myself and my Canadian home and I was very se-

cure in it. (I also imagined myself carrying water in some dusty Yemeni village.) So with honest conviction I said, “No.”

But her question became like bread to a starving man and I somehow knew this too. So before long, for this unique woman, Dr. Jean as she’s known in many places, I was willing to carry that water.

I shared this in Halifax with those people under those flags. Later, I boarded a plane — Jean had to leave days earlier — and thought about it more: how life, when you hold it with loose hands, does give these moments of sweet symmetry. The day I flew home to my bride happened to be her birthday. Home.

Writer-theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way. “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I wonder, then, if the place where you’re afraid to go is the place where your deep anxiety and the world’s deep disappointment meet. I think it is.

There is this other way, though. There always is. Sometimes we just need help to find it.

Thomas Froese writes about family, travel and life. Find him at www.thomasfroese.com