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## Chapters And Verse

### Go West Young Girl

Several times of year I make a ritual and much needed pilgrimage to my homeland, a place called Saskatchewan, for a refresher course in community, family and the prairie version of common sense, a phrase that was ours before it was usurped and put to work as a campaign slogan to elect Mike Harris.

To get a sense of place before you begin your literary journey through this prairie nirvana, have a look at the Millennium Edition of the Atlas of Saskatchewan. It is chock full of the requisite maps and all manner of fascinating facts. Did you know that 157 kinds of butterflies thrive there; there are “extremes” of climate with temperatures varying from -40C to 40C; and in Estevan, in the sun-soaked south, residents enjoy a record 2,500 hours of sunshine annually surpassing Rome by nine hours per year? And there are also stories of the changing prairie landscape. In 1975, there were 2,309 grain elevators dotting the horizon and sadly, some twenty years later, there were juts 656 left standing. Progress? Maybe, but these lonely prairie lighthouses have always made a beautiful sunset, spectacular.

Saskatchewan is, as the cliché goes, a state of mind and I can best share my sense of home by offering the words and wisdom of Saskatchewanians. Of course W.O.Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind* is a must. And if I don’t mention the prolific political outpourings, some of which are actually insightful and humourous, of Hearne’s lone literary genius, Allan Fotheringham, I’ll be banned from his supper table for decades to come.

But for those of you looking for a primer, try a funny little book called *The ABC’s of Farming* by Terry Chamberlain of Smeaton, Sk. It is, quite literally, a dictionary to help you understand what farm life is all about. Look under “P” for example and you’ll find this definition of prairie: “A large tract of treeless, grassy land. Early explorers (e.g. John Palliser) reported that the summers here on the Canadian prairies were so hot and dry, the winters so long and harsh, that the area would never be suitable for agriculture. That was a realistic and reasonable conclusion. Therefore it would only be the most unrealistic and, unreasonable, incorrigible, pigheaded and perverse people who would even try to farm here. So that’s who came. And they are still that way. They just won’t listen to good advice. God knows I’ve tried.”

Or this little gem that explains grain: “The main product of prairie farms. Wonderful stuff: you can eat it in a thousand different forms, fatten up animals or birds with it and eat them, make it into beverages and get drunk on it, refine it to fuel your car, process it into chemicals, plastics, and fibre products. Or you can just watch a field of it wave in the wind and paint pictures of it or write poetry or songs about it.”

And many have done just that. Much of W.O. Mitchell’s prose is poetry. *How I Spent My Summer Vacation* is called the dark side of *Who Has Seen the Wind*. W.O., who grew up in Weyburn, Sk., stands alone in his ability to capture the shimmer, that barely visible to the eye heat, that once ignited by the penetrating prairie sun starts to rise back up to it. He can make you hear the hum of the prairie harp, the high pitched music you can hear when the wind skirts along the miles of uninterrupted electrical wire. His son and daughter in law have crafted a wonderful portrait of their much loved father in their biography, *The Life of W.O. Mitchell*, that was released last year, after his death.

Guy Vanderhaeghe, of Esterhazy, Sk. is a wonderful story teller whose disparate characters are each, as completely convincing as the next because of his clear vision. The schoolteacher turned award winning writer, offers several collections of short stories, including my favourite *Man Descending*, and his novels are bestsellers simply because they are so compelling. Sharon Butala’s is truly an evocative writer and her award-winning memoir *The Perfection of the Morning* is a personal favourite. But her short story collections, like *Luna* (just released in paperback) are a beautiful read. Even when she takes to the pages of a newspaper, as she did recently with an eloquent plea to save the family farm and the men and women who are the stewards of the land she did so, she said, because “beauty is a requirement of the human soul.” Her new book, *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice In The Fields* is out in August.

You can also find both Vanderhaeghe and Butala in a lovely and intriguing compendium called *The Middle of Nowhere* - a shot at those who claim that’s exactly where Saskatchewan is! Dennis Gruending, a former journalist and now an NDP MP has patiently scoured the archives, as well as contemporary bookshelves, to distill the “heart and soul” of Saskatchewan. This collection of historical essays and current writings touch on everything from homesteading to the birth of Medicare, and from the history of the great north to the transformation of rural community to urban culture.

Many of these writers still make their home in Saskatchewan despite the hot trend in CanLit that focuses on the big city and the urbanization of our perspective and definition. And while its true we no longer carve our identity out of the north or the bush or the land, it is the harshness of our climate that has allowed- perhaps forced – our writers to mine the interior realm for material. We are, in that sense, still very much a product of where we come from.