

For almost 40 years Ron Smith has been quietly contributing to Canada's literary landscape from his home in Lantzville on Vancouver Island. Authors published by Oolichan Books, which Ron founded in 1974, reads like a who's who of Canadian literature and includes award-winning poets Robert Kroetsch, Robert Bringhurst, John Pass, Sharon Thesen, Joe Rosenblatt and George McWhirter and fiction writers Rachel Wyatt, Bill Gaston and Carol Windley. In addition, he has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the province with now classic regional histories such as *Boss Whistle* by Lynn Bowen and *Forever Green* by Hector Richmond.

Ron played a pivotal role as an advisor to Randy Fred in the establishment in 1981 of one of Canada's first aboriginal presses, Theytus Books. For this achievement and the publishing of a series of very important books on aboriginal land-claims issues, which continue to be definitive university texts on the subject, as well as his contributions as a writer and advocate of Canadian literature internationally, Ron was awarded an honorary doctorate from UBC in 2003.

Most recently, Ron has been advocating from a different corner, the BC Arts Council board. In that role, he was instrumental in convincing the government to restore funding in 2010 to this crucial institution. He continues to press for equitable funding for the literary arts through this body.

Ron Smith retired recently as publisher of Oolichan Books but he remains active in his life's work presenting and promoting BC's literary heritage through publishing, mentoring, teaching, advising, writing and engaging in public policy.

Introducing Ron Smith

[Ron Hatch of Ronsdale Press provided the following introduction for Ron Smith at the presentation ceremony for the 2011 Gray Campbell Award to "the publisher who put Lantzville on the literary map."]

It would take all night to list Ron's many accomplishments as a publisher at Oolichan Books and why the Association has honoured him with the Gray Campbell Award. Let me list a few:

1. He has published a whole packet of important authors – a who's-who of Canadian literature: John Pass, Robert Bringhurst, Robert Kroetsch, Sharon Thesen, Joe Rosenblatt, David Manicom, Ralph Gustafson, John Newlove, Marilyn Dumont, Bill New, and on and on. I have it on authority that there is a letter in his files that states: "Ron is the best editor of poetry in Canada today."
2. He has published many important award-winning regional histories about BC: Jan Patterson's *Twin Cities*, *The Albernis*, *Cathedral Grove*, *Journeys Down the Alberni*

Canal; Gladys Blyth – Salmon Canneries of BC; Lynne Bowen – Three Dollar Dreams; and my favourite – Boss Whistle; Hector Richmond – Forever Green – a book about BC forestry practices that my daughter-in-law Tzeporah Berman says she still uses. Also an important Oolichan series of titles on land claims issues in BC – still being used in universities across Canada.

3. The word is that he also (quietly – as is his wont) helped Randy Fred in 1981 to establish Theytus Books, one of the first two aboriginal publishing houses in Canada.

4. He was instrumental in establishing the Ralph Gustafson Chair of Poetry at Vancouver Island University. A chair in poetry at a university??? Not easily done.

5. Ron has promoted Canadian literature overseas. Oolichan titles have been published by Penguin Books in India, and Suhrkamp Verlag in Germany.

6. He has also taken on the difficult job of publishing foreign authors such as Austrian author Marlene Steeruwitz in a Canadian translation.

7. Ron is not only a publisher, he is also a writer. He has published four books of poetry: Seasonal. Sono Nis (1984); A Buddha Named Baudelaire. Sono Nis (1988); Enchantment & Other Demons. Oolichan (1995); Arabesque e altre poesie, Schifanoia Editore, Italy (2002). His collection of short stories has a title that might well win in a contest for the most arresting title ever: What Men Know About Women. Oolichan (1999). And he is the co-editor of Rainshadow: Stories from Vancouver Island. Oolichan 1982)

8. Some eight years ago, in 2003, the University of BC beat us to the draw in awards when it recognized Ron's achievements as a publisher, writer, editor and mentor by awarding him an honorary doctorate for his contribution to Canadian literature

9. More recently still, Ron played an important part in convincing the government to restore the arts funding (some of it) through his work on the BC Arts Council board where he has been a strong advocate for the literary arts sector.

10. Ron has recently sold Oolichan to Randal Macnair, and the press has moved from Lantzville to Fernie. For a moment when I heard this, I thought Ron might be retiring but in taking a quick peek at the Oolichan website, I see that Ron is listed as editor and, indeed, that his wife Pat is there, also – as she has been all along – as consulting editor. Ron is still very much a part of publishing in BC.

And so it gives me great pleasure therefore to present to you this year's winner of the Gray Campell Award – Ron Smith. Ron was born in Vancouver during the war years, studied at Leeds, in the UK, and at UBC, and has taught at Malaspina University College (now Vancouver Island University) for some 28 years in English and Creative Writing. He has been the Fulbright Chair in Creative Writing at Arizona State University. And he was fiction editor at D&M in the late 1980s.

When I was asked me to make this presentation, it started me thinking back all those years (was it really 1970?) when Ron and I were chatting in the English Dept office at UBC and he asked what I thought of his going “over” to Malaspina to teach. Good idea, I thought. Be in on the ground floor. He mentioned he was thinking of starting a publishing house. That was the glimmer of what was to become Oolichan Books in 1974. It’s a good name, as the Oolichan is also known as the candle fish, bringing light to the Pacific Northwest.

Many years later, when I was thinking of starting a publishing house, I asked Ron about how he got started; not just about how he made books, but how he sold them. He said that he started out with a really important author – Robert Kroetsch – and that when Bob stumped around the country giving readings, Ron had followed in his car with boxes of books in his trunk – and sold them – as if books were going out of style.

After that, he never looked back.

**Gray Campbell Award acceptance speech by Ron Smith, Arbutus Club,
Vancouver, April 14, 2011**

I want to thank the Gray Campbell family for their support. And I want to thank Margaret Reynolds and the Association of Book Publishers of BC for this honour. When I received Margaret’s call last month, I was both surprised and delighted. When I look at the list of past recipients of this award I like the company.

I also want to thank Alan Twigg for nominating me for the Gray Campbell Award. To receive this acknowledgement from one of my peers is very special indeed.

I want to congratulate Ralph on his award. I’ve always admired New Star Press, in particular the uniqueness of its vision. And, in particular Ralph’s commitment to that vision in the face of increasingly sinister and compromising market forces. To be guided by your conscience and, I might add, consciousness, is rare these days.

I’m pleased to be sharing this evening with my family; especially with Pat who has been at my side through all the highs and lows of this wonderful journey and who deserves to be up here as much as I do. Her counsel has always been wise and I would be much the wiser had I heeded her advice more often. But then I am male and apparently we rarely take directions! And my two children, Nicole and Owen, now 35 and 30, have lived with my addiction for their entire lives. Sometimes, I fear, I might have let the word get in the way of action.

What does receiving this award mean to me? I want to rant for a minute or two here.

While I have some reservations about prizes and awards for publishing and writing, the fact that these two are given in a spirit of celebration and are not based on competition, seems to me to get things the right way round. I'm always happy to celebrate someone's achievement but I'm a little less comfortable with the spectacle of the horse race mentality that has become the basis of so many of our literary prizes. I'm happy to see writers and publishers receive money for the risks they take but I fear the inevitable loss, creative and imaginative, that come with the sorts of restraints competitions imply and often impose. I fear the width of the track gets narrower and narrower. But this was not a race and has forced me to reflect on how lucky I have been to be a part of this wonderful industry for close to forty years.

When Margaret informed me that I would be expected to make a speech, something longer than thirty seconds she advised me, I wondered what I would say. Then I remembered seeing a Knowledge Network programme on Takao Tanabe a couple of nights earlier. Suddenly I was thinking about how I got into publishing and reflecting on who were some of my early literary influences. I remembered meeting Tanabe but I couldn't remember where or through whom. So if you don't mind I would like to pay tribute to some of the people who were influential, in my role as publisher and writer. You see, I view this as an award not so much for what I've accomplished but for what I've received over the years.

It all began when UBC quite rightly asked me to leave the university as a student. I had spent my first two years on campus as a Phys Ed student and for the most part had only learned the rules of bridge and how to perform a somersault in mid air. Oh, and I also played on the rugby team. As an academic I was a total failure. After a summer of working up north, I returned to Vancouver and through contacts managed to land a full-time job at the UBC Bookstore. I had connections. As the new academic year began, this was 1962 or 63, three rather disreputable characters were assigned to help me. They were temporary staff. They were also better paid but presumably I had security. At the time I was naïve enough to accept this explanation for my lousy salary. Now those three individuals were Claude Breeze (the painter), Jamie Reid and John Newlove. I don't remember if it was through one or all of them that I met Tanabe or if it was through Bill Duthie or later through Dick Morris that I met this remarkable artist and book designer. Connecting all the dots is sometimes difficult. But John and Jamie became very important early influences.

First of all, John and Jamie turned me on to books. I know, there are lots of other things they could have turned me on to, but I'll claim those as self discoveries. John talked about poetry and history, recommended books I should read, and Jamie talked politics and constantly reminded me of the many ways in which I was being exploited. In the basement of the bookstore, I built a little hideaway out of duotang cartons. I piled them up to the ceiling, leaving a small space inside where I hid a chair and ashtray. I could slip a carton out and crawl into my space. Often I would hear John shuffling past, calling Ron, Ron, there's a truck to unload or an urgent order to fill. Where the f... are you? Surprisingly he never saw the smoke winding up and along the floor joists above me. There in my den I would sit, smoke and read.

But John did more than just recommend books, he wanted to talk about them. And we talked. Mostly, though, I listened. And what an education. A few weeks before he died, Pat and I were in Ottawa and spent a day with John—we had remained friends for all those years—and I told him about my little hideout. He laughed and confessed he had never figured out where I had disappeared to. When I told him how important he had been to my growing passion for literature, he expressed surprise. I only published two of John's books but *The Green Plain* remains one of my favourites. He told me he wished he'd published more with Oolichan. At least you wouldn't have put a fucking elevator on the cover, an embarrassing cliché, and certainly not one from Alberta! No, I said, I would have made sure it was from Saskatchewan.

Over the next few years I hung out on the edges of things, going to readings etc, and then going back to university to get my degree in English. I had the good fortune to hear some amazing writers, all of whom "turned me on" to the craft of writing in some way. Leonard Cohen came through with his guitar and gave a concert in the new Education Building. Eventually I would hear Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Basil Bunting, and Seamus Heaney. There were many other writers brought in by Warren Tallman and George McWhirter all of whom nurtured my growing interest in the word. As a doctoral student I met Jon Furberg whose energy and enthusiasm for poetry was infectious, and who along with a few friends had started a small publishing venture, Pulp Press. As early as this, 1971/72, the idea of publishing intrigued me.

About this time I wrote a letter to Robert Kroetsch, whose novel *The Studhorse Man* I had just read. It did all sorts of things other Canadian works didn't do and I rushed to tell him so. One year later I was teaching at Malaspina and he was one of my first guest readers. Over the next four years I arranged fifty-two events at the college, most of them literary, although I did invite Leona Boyd to play her guitar and Maurice Good, an Irish actor, to do his one-man, west end-of-London show based on Samuel Beckett. I had done my thesis on Beckett, so this was an obvious engagement for me. The list of poets and novelists who made their way to Vancouver Island still surprises and pleases me, but I want to mention two who became hugely influential in my publishing life.

Bob Kroetsch and I became good friends and remain so to this day. He is my daughter's godfather but in a curious way also my godfather. At the time he was running an important avant garde journal called *Boundary 2* out of Binghamton, New York. In 1974 he was visiting and, after a few drinks, convinced me I should start a publishing company. As an incentive to get into publishing, he told me he would give me his first book of poetry, *The Stone Hammer Poems*. Little did I realize what I was getting into, nor did I appreciate how lucky I was to have this as a first title. The other person who had been a part of the reading series and who immediately came to my aid and provided me with unwavering support was Robin Skelton. He also offered me a title for publication. I owe Robin a great debt. We spent many evenings over a bottle of Jameson's Irish whiskey discussing the plight and

pleasures of publishing. There were many evenings when I wouldn't have been able to complete that somewhat alliterative sentence.

I took a semester off from teaching and printed the first four Oolichan titles in the evenings on the Malaspina College press. But I had no idea how to bind the books so Robin suggested Morriss Printing in Victoria. Very quickly Dick Morriss became a dear friend and did much to help me learn the printing and publishing businesses. By the way, this is where I first met Margaret Reynolds. Too quickly we forget those who have made major contributions to our culture and I would like us to remember Robin and Dick this evening for all they did for the literary arts in BC.

Writers are clearly the life blood of publishing and I am indebted to all the authors who have submitted manuscripts to Oolichan Books down through the years. Yes, some have been a pain in the ass, but I suspect a few feel that way about me. There is no doubt, though, that Oolichan owes its success to a long list of very talented people. At different times, Rhonda Bailey, Ursula Vaira and Hiro Boga were instrumental in keeping the operation going on a day to day basis. In recent times, David Manicom, Bill New, P.K. Page and John Pass have brought the press national attention. Now under the leadership and guidance of Randal Macnair, Oolichan Books will continue to publish and in the process discover its destiny. Already Randal has brought new life and vision to the press. I feel blessed to have been the recipient of so much good fortune. Thank you for the award, although it makes me feel as though I may have got away with an act of piracy.