

Ken Norris Spotlighted



Poetry Quebec: Are you a native Quebecer? If not, where are you originally from? Why did you come to Quebec?

Ken Norris: I was not born in Quebec, but I was born in Quebec. That is, Ken Norris, poet, was born in Montreal, in an apartment at the corner of Prince Arthur and Durocher, sometime in the fall of 1972, when he wrote his first poem worth keeping. For the record, it was “In the Supermarket,” and I/he was twenty-one years old.

But, biographically speaking, as a human being, I was born in New York City in 1951.

Why did I come to Quebec? Good question. Many answers. One answer: Leonard Cohen. I was reading his poetry in NYC at the age of seventeen, and he made Montreal sound like a magical, mystical place.

I first came up to Montreal in the summer of 1971. A friend of mine had been busted for drugs, panicked, and ran across the Canadian border. A bunch of my friends out on Long Island commissioned me to go up to Montreal and bring him back, when it became clear that the police had been involved in illegal search and seizure. His case was being thrown out of court. So I was in Montreal for a week, wandering around, doing my last acid trip, falling in love with the city.

In 1972, I was graduating from college and applying to graduate schools. Because I had been in Montreal and liked it so much I put in an application to Sir George Williams University (now Concordia). When the schools in England didn't offer me any assistantships, I decided to go to Sir George where they were offering me a small research assistantship. I was then a student of American literature, and I didn't study any Canadian literature while I was working on my Master's Degree.

So. . . why did I come to Quebec? For all those reasons, and others. I was tired of being an anti-American American in the Nixon era, and coming to Quebec (and Canada) gave me a positive agenda, gave me something positive to be. I became a Canadian citizen in 1985. As much as I loved and love New York, when I arrived in Montreal I felt like I was coming home.

PQ: When and how did you encounter your first Quebec poem?

KN: That would have to have been a Leonard Cohen poem, in 1968. The one I have the clearest memory of is “Owning Everything,” which I believe was in The Spice-box Of

Earth. That's the poem that made me want to go into the poetry business. I wished that I had written it, and wanted to write something that was equal to it.

PQ: When and how did you first become interested in poetry?

KN: I think I got to poetry by way of the movies. In the early sixties there were all these technicolor movies based upon the works of Poe. The Masque Of The Red Death. The Pit And The Pendulum. The Raven. Liking the movies so much, I decided to start reading Edgar Allan Poe. I must have been around eleven.



The stories were fantastic, much better than the movies, though I probably had to wrestle with vocabulary a little bit. Having read a ton of Poe stories, and wanting more, I read "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven." Those were the first two poems I really got hung up on, especially "Annabel Lee." I imitated Poe a lot, and there are a couple of poems in my high school literary magazine that demonstrate that I was still imitating him at the age of fifteen.

PQ: What is your working definition of a poem?

KN: That it be writing that contains an element of "the poetical." What "the poetical" is. . .that's what you wrestle with for fifty years. It changes. It goes in and out

of focus.

I drive my writing students crazy by telling them that they have to establish for themselves some personal sense of the poetical. Often they just don't know what it is that I am talking about. They understand forms, feeling, sentiment. But not much in contemporary American culture addresses itself to the poetical. You have to delve into poetry to find the seeds for growing it.

PQ: Do you have a writing ritual? If so, provide details.

KN: Yeah, there are elements of ritual. I write poetry in notebooks. I use Bic pens. I always write poetry by hand.

Based upon where I am, I write at different times of day. When I'm in Maine teaching I write from seven to eight in the morning. If I'm in the Caribbean or in Asia I write between one and four in the afternoon. I set that time aside for writing.

When I was living in Montreal I used to write poetry between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. There seems to be an optimum time in different places.

For the past twelve years I edit poetry at the computer. I usually let the work “cool down” for at least a year or two. With *Asian Skies* I let it cool down for ten. That was unusual. Though there is often a rather substantial time lag between when books get written and when they get published. Right now in 2010 I’m editing for publication a book that was written in 2002-2003, to be published in 2011. In the early days books used to happen much quicker.

PQ: What is your approach to the writing of poems: inspiration driven, structural, social, thematic, other?

KN: By now I have written poems in all of the ways you suggest. Most of the time I’m just waiting for a first line. I usually write poems not knowing where they are going. But I have certainly written poems that have been driven by structure, social concern, an important idea to put across.

I think my approach right now is to not have an approach. You write each poem the way it needs to be written.

PQ: Do you think that having been a part of a minority in Quebec (i.e. English-speaking) affected your writing? If so, how?

KN: I think living in Montreal taught me to love being surrounded by another language, because I tend to seek those situations out. The languages change—French, Spanish, Czech, Thai, Chinese—but I tend to favour being in situations in which English is the language of the inner life, and the social language is something else. I think it helps me to focus.

PQ: Do you think that writing in English in Quebec is a political act? Why or why not?

In 1977, in our introduction to *Montreal English Poetry Of The Seventies*, Endre Farkas and I wrote the following:

Language is the most powerful of all political realities in Quebec. To write in English is to take a political stand. That political stand is for the survival of an Anglophone culture in Quebec, a culture that, inevitably, must benefit both Anglophone and Francophone.

In 2010, I think anything that contributes to the continued existence of Anglophone culture in Quebec is inherently political, whether the author intends for it to be political or not. Non-assimilating minorities, in whatever ways they do not assimilate, are involved in politics.

PQ: Why do you write?

KN: I can’t draw.

PQ: Who is your audience?

KN: Jennifer the waitress. Though she has stopped waitressing.

PQ: Do you think there is an audience, outside of friends or other poets, for poetry?

KN: Yes. Every now and again I meet someone who is a genuine lover of poetry.

I don't think the audience for poetry in Canada is very big. Maybe three thousand people in English Canada. I think most of the poetry books in English Canada that are bought are bought by those three thousand people. They probably all buy ten books of poetry a year. I think there are maybe another 30,000 people who, under a special set of circumstances, can be persuaded to buy a book of poetry. But they will only buy one or two a year, and for very specific reasons (like it's a new book of poetry by Leonard Cohen or Michael Ondaatje).

I don't think it matters much, ultimately, if the audience is large or small. Poets will write what they need to write. Whether it is treated like something we must absolutely have or as esoteric human research is entirely up to the readership.

PQ: Does your day job impact on your writing? How?

KN: I am sitting in my office, between classes, answering these questions. In my last class I was teaching William Blake. In my next class I'm teaching Leonard Cohen.

Being a university professor allows me to stay immersed in literature, if I want to. I think it helps the writing.

For twenty years there was absolutely no conflict between teaching and writing. For the past five or six years there is some conflict. I find that I have to choose sometimes. That's why I started getting up earlier and writing poems at seven in the morning. I write poems before I go to my day job now. When I was younger it didn't matter so much. Now that I'm approaching sixty I have more of a sense of the limitations of my energy, so I give to poetry first, then to teaching.

PQ: How many drafts do you usually go through before you are satisfied/finished with a poem?

KN: If I can't get a poem in five drafts I am probably not going to get it. And most revisions are tinkering with word choice and punctuation. If I don't like the original execution of a poem, chances are I will just scrap it. I still throw out 95% of what I write.

PQ: Do you write with the intention of "growing a manuscript" or do you work on individual poems that are later collected into a book?

KN: Probably the last book of mine that was "a collection" of poems was *The Perfect Accident*, which was published in 1978. I gave Artie Gold the one hundred best poems I had in the house and he selected the best fifty. Ever since then I've been working on "books" of poetry.

PQ: What is the toughest part of writing for you?

KN: Lately? Finding good titles. The manuscript I just finished working on probably had 25 different working titles as I was writing it. I'm still not willing to tell you what the title is now, just in case I decide to change it.

Also, endings. This manuscript with the tough title took me four years to write. The first three years and eleven months were an absolute joy; the last month was an absolute misery. I thought the book ended twelve different times. But it kept getting up and walking around, like a murder victim in a comedy that refuses to stay dead. The book refused to stay finished. There was always something further to say. And it was the book saying it—it wasn't me.

PQ: What is your idea of a muse?

KN: A beautiful woman with a creative spirit. If you don't know her too well you can just imagine that she has a creative spirit.

Part of me is surprised that all of my poetry isn't about beautiful women and love. In the beginning, I thought it was going to go that way. Along the way I discovered other subject matter, which I think we can all agree was a fortunate thing. Maybe only 10% of my poetry is love poetry.

I have, perhaps, written almost as much about natural beauty, the beauty of nature, as I have about women. And nature is a beautiful entity with a creative spirit too. So sometimes Nature is something of a Wordsworthian muse.

PQ: Do you have a favourite time and place to write?

KN: I talked a bit about time before. My favourite place to write is in hotel rooms. I like both the displacement and the comfort.

PQ: Do you like to travel? Is travel important to your writing? Explain.

KN: I love to travel. It is one of my five great passions.

And I would say that travel is extremely important to my writing. Having a low boredom threshold, I don't care much for writing out-the-window poetry, unless I'm in Bora Bora. Then what's out the window is just fine with me.

I've been writing for forty-five years, and travelling for forty. Often, they seem to go together. There are three books that were written in the South Seas, one in Europe, one in the Dominican Republic. I think my last five books have all ended in Asia. I was never much of a stay at home writer. Which doesn't mean that I haven't written about North America. I have written about North America A LOT. But I find the rest of the world appealing too.

PQ: Do you have a favourite Quebec poet? If yes, who and why?

KN: In English, A.M. Klein. In French, Nicole Brossard. If they hadn't written before me, I would have had to write a completely different kind of poetry. And I like being able to write what it is I'm writing.

PQ: Do you write about Quebec If so, how and why?

KN: I write a lot about Montreal. I always have. It is one of the cities I love, and I lived my young adult life there. I will probably spend the last years of my life there. My “longish” poem “Boulevard Saint Laurent” kind of explains why.

PQ: What poets are you reading these days?

KN: Although it was published in 2006, I have just gotten around to reading Leonard Cohen’s *Book Of Longing*. What a crazy book. I like it a lot.

Also, Garry Thomas Morse’s more recent *After Jack. Ditto*.

And Jennifer Moxley’s *Clampdown*, which is a very beautiful sane book.

And I am starting to read *Poet Be Like God*, which is a biography of Jack Spicer.

Ken Norris was born in NYC in 1951 and emigrated to Canada in the early 1970s. He was one of the early editors at Vehicule Press and one of the Vehicule Poets. He currently teaches Canadian Literature at the University of Maine, and has been known to travel a lot.