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Volume 43, numéro 2, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062924ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062924ar>

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Éditeur(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Cann, E., DesRoches, D., Labenski, A., Parkes, A. & Peters, M. (2018). “Keep in Touch”: The All-Stars’ Tribute to Herb Wyile. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 43(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062924ar>

# “Keep in Touch”: The All-Stars’ Tribute to Herb Wyle

EMILY CANN, DAVITA DESROCHES, AMELIA C. LABENSKI,  
AMY PARKES, AND MERCEDES PETERS

**A**T THE 10<sup>TH</sup> RADDALL SYMPOSIUM in honour of Herb Wyle, Sue Goyette told a story before her poetry reading about meeting a woman on a plane and striking up a conversation with her about the James Joyce novel she was reading. This stranger proceeded to tell Sue a story about her daughter, now a graduate student in English, who had started out as a biology major but switched into English because of a course she had taken at Acadia with Herb. I (Davita) was sitting in the audience and knew immediately that Sue must have met my friend Amelia’s mom. When I asked Sue, she had forgotten the stranger’s name, but a quick text to Amelia confirmed my suspicion.

When I contemplated writing a reflection about Herb’s impact on my life as an undergrad at Acadia, I could not imagine an adequate expression of the short but profound time I spent as Herb’s student. Sue’s story reminded me, however, that part of what was so special about Herb was the way in which my memories of him are inextricable from my memories of the contemporaries, the colleagues, and the friends I met in his courses. In the spirit of the community that Herb fostered in his classroom, I asked four of my contemporaries at Acadia to join me in reflecting on what Herb meant to us individually and what he meant to us collectively. What follows is an account of Herb as teacher, mentor, and champion of an unlikely band of students, who are now forever bound by our collective memory of and our collective love for Herb.

## **The Classroom Stunts (Amelia C. Labenski)**

As a lowly biology student taking an introductory English course in my first year at Acadia (for no particular reason besides not knowing how to navigate the course selection website), I found myself seated shyly in Herb’s class, wondering if it was too late to get out of it.

One of my most vivid memories of this class is our reenactment of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Herb walked into class carrying a large cardboard box and, without saying anything, let one person from each table group choose a ballot. The representative from my table, of course, chose the marked ballot, so each of us had to subsequently draw our own ballot from the box. I sighed with relief upon unfolding my blank ballot but then heard a soft-spoken "oh no" from the student sitting next to me. With unrelenting seriousness, Herb asked her to stand at the front of the class and told the rest of us to crumple up our ballots in preparation for the final act. And then, chuckling, Herb revealed that the real lottery prize was having to give a detailed synopsis of the story to the class, and he asked us to lower our paper stones. At the end of my first year at Acadia, with Herb's encouragement, I made an appointment with the English department head so that I could change my major.

I recall a moment when a friend and classmate approached me in a panic about a paper she was writing for Herb. "Can you *please* tell me how to get an A in Herb's class?" she said in frustration. "I'll let you know when I figure it out." By fourth year, at least in one paper, I had figured it out. For Herb, it wasn't about a grammatically flawless and structurally perfect paper; it was about ambition, and pushing yourself, and the implications of your ideas in a broader social scope. It was about making literature matter and finding your own voice.

In my fourth year, I felt honoured to be included in what Herb called "an All-Star roster" for his course on historical fiction; he did not reveal how happy he was with us and the course until after we had submitted our instructor evaluations. Every day in my continued studies — on a path I never would have tread by my own accord — I strive to embody Herb's teachings and reach the high standards he always set for his students. Herb's lectures, which were always more like conversations, and the heated discussions they engendered, made for some of my most memorable experiences at Acadia. His knack for always asking for more from his students produced some of the most ambitious and talented writers I know, and the camaraderie fostered in his classroom produced many unlikely friendships. Being in Herb's class, for me, turned out to be like winning the lottery — the kind you want to win.

## The Stare (Davita DesRoches)

I still remember the first time I summoned the courage to answer a question in Herb's literary theory course, probably because I remember viscerally the feeling of inadequacy that took root in the pit of my stomach as I faced Herb's stern and quizzical stare. Somewhere between that terrifying moment in my first year and the last course that I took with Herb at Acadia, I developed the audacity to frequently brave the stare. Toward the end of my final semester, I raised my hand in his Atlantic Fiction course to express my discontent that Herb had assigned a novel (Michael Crummey's *Sweetland*) that made me cry when I had much more pressing things to do than feel. Over the course of four years, not much had changed about my perception of Herb. As a professor, his intellect, posture, and razor-sharp wit were intimidating. However, by fourth year, the difference was I now knew that Herb believed in me and, dare I say, liked having me in his courses, so I took that belief as license enough to cultivate my own scholarly audacity, sometimes in defiance of his syllabus.

Even in those first daunting days in Herb's theory course, I quickly learned that the audacity of thinking for yourself and developing your critical voice in an undergraduate classroom was something Herb valued deeply. Every essay assignment had a "Choose Your Own Adventure (i.e., Essay Topic)" option, and every time he assigned an essay, Herb reiterated his encouragement for us, his students, to think outside of his parameters. As a young and ambitious upstart, I chafed at the thought of regurgitating the same essay as any of my peers and yearned to carve out my own voice. From my early and admittedly unrefined essays, I learned to trust Herb to look beyond the imperfections of the finished product and see the ambition and the potential that informed it.

More important than his mentorship of and advocacy for my voice as a critic, though, was his insistent curating of my voice as a citizen. In Herb's courses I learned about citizenship, first in the more symbolic sense of encountering a different vision of Canadian identity, and the tensions and fractures that exist therein, and second in the more local sense of realizing how deeply our language, our communities, and our narratives are informed by the symbiotic forces of power and exclusion. And so, in Herb's classroom, the critic and the citizen within became one voice, and the intellectual exercise of reading, discussing, and writing became deeply personal and political.

At the end of that first theory course, I stopped by Herb's office to drop an assignment off, and as I turned to leave, Herb stopped me, saying, "Davita! I found out this week that you're a math major?! And here I was thinking you would make an excellent candidate for honours." Herb's words to me that day were prophetic because three years later, I completed my double honours degree in math and English. I had a lot of help along the way, but, in those first years, it was unquestionably Herb's consistent and relentless encouragement that broke through my stubborn disbelief that somewhere lurking beneath my math major alter ego, there was a literary critic. Herb modeled a scholarly community and a scholarly practice that opened up a future for me in the field of literary studies that I had never entertained. Now, having just completed a Master's degree in a discipline that started as a secondary major, I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say, with one final outburst in defiance of that stern Herb stare, that so much of this is Herb's fault. Like that time *Sweetland* made me cry, I certainly don't hold it against him; in fact, I could never thank him enough.

### The Shoes (Mercedes Peters)

Herb wore red Chuck Taylors to the first class I ever took with him. Come to think of it, he wore red Chuck Taylors to *every* class I had with him after that. At one point, when they were new, I figured they would have been obnoxiously red, but years of wandering around with them on had worn them down to a much quieter shade, and that's what popped into my mind when I sat down to write this. It's a funny thing to pull up, but with those ratty sneakers come memories, and with those memories come reflections on the impact Herb had on me as a student and the things he taught me that I've carried as I've moved forward.

He was wearing them the day he stopped me in the stairwell where I was putting up posters and asked me when I would be defending my honours thesis. It's probably important to note at this point that I was not an English student. I had taken quite a few of Herb's classes and, through an interesting series of events, had ended up fairly involved with the department, but the question still caught me off guard, mainly because I wasn't expecting him to show interest in my work. Looking back, I shouldn't have been surprised. Herb treated me the same as all of his other students; he was just as engaged with us as we were with him in the classroom and in the many conversations we all had with

him outside of it. When we spoke, he was listening, not passively, but weighing every word like what we were handing him was of utmost importance. And when you're that age and someone with that level of knowledge takes you seriously, you notice. I didn't end up telling Herb when my defense was. I didn't know at the time, and when I did find out, I had forgotten that he asked.

But there were red Chucks in the audience the day I defended, and I caught him in the hallway when it was all done and told him that I hadn't thought he'd meant to come watch when we had spoken two months before. He grinned at me in that wry way of his and said, "I take my threats seriously." I laughed, but I don't think he knew how much his being there meant to me. It was the first time I remember having someone I respected that much go out of their way to show that they respected me, too — that they cared about what I had to say.

Herb wore red Chuck Taylors the last time I saw him. He had come to watch us all graduate, and when I hugged him, he told me he looked forward to seeing what I would do in the future and to make sure I kept in touch. And because he took his threats seriously, in a way, I do keep in touch. Now, just into the first year of my doctorate, I draw on Herb often when I'm teaching my own students and try to emulate the ways in which he challenged us and demonstrated that he believed in us. Aiming for the level of scholarship he achieved in my own field is one thing, but if I could be a fraction of the mentor that he was, then I will have done something great. I only wish that I could thank him in person now.

### The Questions Asked (Emily Cann)

I spent a long time trying to come up with the perfect moment that could completely capture what being one of Herb's students was like. My first time in one of his classes? My last? One brief interaction that my memory had sharpened after years of repetition? I couldn't find one single instance that would suffice.

There were, for example, the times he'd lean back in his chair and nod and say, "Okay . . .," like maybe you were onto something incredible or maybe your interpretation was so far off you may as well have been on the moon. I could never be sure which it was.

Or there were the times he would toss a question into discussion, smile slightly to himself, and either wait for the class to crumple under

the existential weight of the question before moving on, or wait for the brave few to raise a hand and answer before triumphantly rephrasing half-thought-through remarks to the class as if they were gold.

There was the first time he made me feel brave enough to answer, brave enough to try, to win that triumphant glow and have a lowly undergraduate comment held up to the light to be admired and celebrated, not for its content but for its effort. It didn't seem to matter what kind of crazy garbage you came up with in those moments: it was the bravery that mattered to Herb.

That was in class, however. Essay writing was a completely different story. The first paper I wrote for Herb earned a decent A-, but in the margins where he'd penciled in thorough commentary, there were subtle (and sometimes outright) suggestions that I could have done better. That was another thing about Herb: you didn't want to settle for the A- when he knew (and you knew) you could have earned the A. It wasn't just that you wanted to do well for yourself; you wanted to do well for him, too. Making sure I didn't disappoint Herb was the only reason I've ever lost sleep working on a paper. I couldn't disappoint him, not when he expected so much from me, not when I knew how much he believed in me.

And that, I think, is what was so special about Herb. He believed in people to an extent that not many other professors did. He didn't give you much slack, because he knew you didn't need it. He could push you to do better in such a way that you didn't even notice you were being pushed until all of a sudden you were an A student working on your thesis in your third year.

One of the last personal interactions I remember having with Herb was in the fall of 2015. He'd been selected to review the honours thesis proposals, and he pulled me aside after class to say that he'd seen mine, thought it was excellent, and that I should send him a copy when I was finished. Unfortunately, the copy I sent reached him just a little too late and is probably still cluttering an endless inbox of unanswered emails. But it wasn't reading it that mattered; it was sending it. It was the fact that he asked and that he'd given me the confidence to answer.

In the spring before Herb's passing, I registered for all of his courses, including his honours seminar. I had saved these for my final year, hoping to make my last year at Acadia the best one yet. I wanted all the time I could afford to be spent learning from Herb. I was the only

one registered for his seminar. It was what I was most looking forward to come fall.

I guess that's the last lesson Herb offered me, and it was compounded by all the times we'd been let out of class early to enjoy the nice weather, or the free passes we'd been given for not having time to finish the book, or the casual conversations at the Farmer's Market on Saturday mornings: You can't spend your life waiting for the right time. You have to raise your hand even if you don't know the answer. You have to try before you're ready. You have to be brave.

### **The Voices Recovered (Amy Parkes)**

It was Herb who brought me back to myself when I was lost in the wake of my father's death. Today marks three years since my father's passing, and in the vine-like way of memories I cannot think about my father without also thinking of Herb, tangled up as they are in associative grief. My father had little formal education and — maybe because of this — a deep respect for those who committed themselves to learning. I had taken a gap year in the middle of my undergraduate degree, and with no plans to return to school, my father was furious with me. He was already in failing health then — his cancer the reason I had left school and returned to Nova Scotia. To ease his mind, I applied to the school in the town where my mother lived and was accepted to Acadia just days before the semester started.

I dreaded that it was undergraduate studies in general, not just political science, that had turned me from a glowing high-school student into an anxious and apathetic wreck. So much of my identity was bound up in being an exemplary student that my disastrous first two years at another school had nearly brought me to surrender entirely. But my father called me daily. *Have you made any friends? Are your readings interesting? Please don't start arguments with your professors.* As October opened and preliminary grades trickled in, both my father and I heaved sighs of relief. My marks were fine. I was engaged in my classes. I was back on my feet, back to myself, after three years of deep unhappiness. My father went back into the ICU with complications from his last surgery but was improving steadily. My sister called early in the week to say he was due home by Sunday. She called again on Friday morning. She called again more than a dozen times before I could bear to pick up the phone and hear what I knew she would say.



All the things that made me the student I worked so hard to become again felt worthless in a world where my father wasn't there to bear witness. The depression that weighed on me since my father's death insisted I couldn't have a single insightful thing to say, that I was wasting Herb's time — this phenomenally intelligent man — just by showing up. He was laying the groundwork for a class discussion of the week's novel and he said *something*, I cannot recall what, but it caught my attention. Immediately the thoughts that I wasn't good enough to contribute plagued me. I remember I was scowling at my lap, in the middle of convincing myself to get up and leave, to write an email apologizing to Herb for taking away a seat from a student who mattered, when Herb interrupted himself and said, "Amy, are those stern brows going to amount to anything?" I was so startled that for a suspended moment my grief couldn't catch my thoughts. I was myself again. Herb gave me the floor while I ran roughshod over his careful introduction, countering every argument of his with one of my own, convinced he'd missed something vital in the text. He was patient. He listened. He responded to me thoughtfully. Thus began a pattern: if I was silent too long, too in-my-head, Herb would name me, gently goad me, draw me into hot debate. When I was at my weakest, quite literally ready to walk away, Herb convinced me to try just one more time.

It was Herb who convinced me to aim for admission to Acadia's undergraduate honours program. He passed away before I completed my thesis, but it was him to whom I dedicated it. It is Herb's voice, on my lowest days, that reminds me I have the worth to be in my competitive graduate MFA program in the United States, writing poems about Atlantic Canada. On my final paper for him, Herb's familiar scratch reads: "We didn't always see eye-to-eye, but you did always make it interesting." I've torn off that scrap of paper, and I still have it. I have for many years kept a bulletin board tacked full of small mementoes. It is neither out of sight nor mind, but in an unobtrusive place in the way that small, tender things must be kept. Postcards, ticket stubs, a strip of silly portraits from a photo booth, scraps of poems. There are photographs of my late father as a younger man than I ever knew him. And from along the upper edge, just off-centre, I have a picture of Herb, smiling like he's about to say *Hello*.