

COMING FULL CIRCLE

By Richard Taylor

Courage, Curiosity, Teapots and Snakes: Stories of Teaching at Carleton University, 2019

Forty-five years ago, I arrived at Carleton a hopeful, dreaming 19-year-old, fresh from a euphoric summer spent surfing in Hawaii. Each day, I got off at a lonely bus stop along Prince of Wales Drive, hiked on a dirt road through golden fields and tight roped over the wooden locks of the Rideau Canal. Like most new students, I was scared and excited. And even though I had no clear scholastic direction, my options seemed limitless.

Back in 1972, I wasn't interested in reading books, let alone writing. But now that I have published four books and have been teaching writing since 1995, when I was Carleton's writer-in-residence, I realize how my experiences at this university and the professors who inspired me have profoundly shaped my life.

The first English course I attended was *20th-Century Literature*, taught by Keith Wilson. Because Keith was from England, he brought James Joyce's *Dubliners*, D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and the poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath so passionately to life it may, in fact, have sparked me into becoming a writer.

Michael Gnarowski's own version of the history of Canadian literature revealed a teacher so possessed by the power of words that early Canadian writers seemed to speak directly through him. Gnarowski also knew Leonard Cohen personally, which led to my best friend Frank Cole - another Carleton student, filmmaker and surfer - and I to drop in on Cohen's house in Montréal (with our writing) one wild autumn weekend on our way down to surf Cape Cod.

I remember taking a summer class in American literature with Jack Healy. His darkly beautiful (Irish) interpretations of *Huck Finn*, Melville and Hemingway were so adrenaline-pumping I'd race out of class on hot nights and ride my bicycle to swim under the stars at Mooney's Bay.

In Ray Morrison's demanding class, he made us believe the study of literature was godly. We had to read 12 novels, among them Davies'

Deptford Trilogy, Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Laurence's *The Diviners*, Monroe's *Lives of Girls and Women* at Atwood *Surfacing*.

In David Bernhardt's course, *Psychology of Freud and Jung*, he encouraged me to write a research paper on Hemingway and psychoanalysis in literature. I got completely seduced by Hemingway's romantic notion of what a writer's life and writing could be. The paper influenced me to write a book about swimming with writers around the world (swimming in the same waters deceased authors swam in is supposed to allow you to better understand them). Recently I swam 15 km with Hemingway in Cuba.

I took mind-bending courses with Roger Wells, who was the Kurt Vonnegut of the psychology department, and joined a Men's Consciousness Raising group with Roger and a few other professors. Eleanor Burwell's *Psychology of Women* where I was the only man was extremely influential because my last book, the Australian travel memoir *House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and Surfing Life*, is about many things, including my decision to stay at home to be the caregiver of my two daughters.

Through another professor and poet Chris Levinson (who just published his latest book of poetry), I met my mentor, Prof. Tom Henighan. Tom helped me get my initial gig as Carleton's writer in residence. We are still close friends and recently I sent Tom a very enthusiastic email about how much I loved his 20th published book *Storm Warnings: Stories of Love and Sorrow*.

Since that sunny fall of 1972, I've never really left Carleton. For 22 years, I've been on the other side of the podium, teaching and giving back a little of what I received when I was a young, idealistic student. I've had thousands of amazing students. Hundreds have gone on to publish poetry, short stories, novels, memoirs and articles, and many of those students - and their manuscripts - are still in my orbit. You can Google some of the more successful writers like Andrew Forbes, Saleema Nawaz, Joanna Goodman, Jeff Ross, Sanita Fejzić, Mark Foss, Susannah Heath-Eves and Brett Popplewell. At present, I have 23 students in my *Fiction Workshop* and 20 in my *Creative Nonfiction Workshop*. And this winter I'll be writing, open water swimming and surfing in Australia, Tahiti and Hawaii.