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Preface

— HOWARD WHITE

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT *BC BookWorld* is an indispensable reference for readers of books by BC authors and a certified West Coast institution, but something that may not be as well known and which this book proves, is that this self-described “populist newspaper” has published much original writing that is engaging and memorable.

BookWorld's promethean editor, Alan Twigg, is himself a writer of numerous BC books, and as BC Lit's chief cheerleader he has made it his business to sneak in well-authored essays on a mind-boggling array of subjects whenever he's had the chance. And he has had many chances over the 25 years that *BC BookWorld* has been serving as the publication of record for everything that appears under the rubric of BC literature.

The list of contributors to this book includes many of BC's most distinguished writers, including the venerable poet Lionel Kearns; the groundbreaking lesbian novelist Jane Rule; the literary boulevardier Stephen

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Vizinczey; the Leakey's Angel Biruté Galdikas; the "Chomsky of Kitsilano," Joel Bakan; the Coast Lit maven Charles Lillard; the Field of Dreams originator W.P. Kinsella; the First Nations statesman Chief Joe Gosnell; the immaculate punster Eric Nicol; the twin towers of Canadian bestsellerdom Pierre Berton and Peter Newman; the gentleman of letters Robin Skelton paying tribute to the colossus of letters George Woodcock, as well as the colossus himself in his own write.

The range of topics essayed by these worthies is charmingly random. Kearns relates a remarkable anecdote in which he, as an unassuming student on a work visit to Cuba in the 1960s, ended up as catcher in a game of pick-up baseball in which the pitcher was none other than Fidel Castro himself. Castro, he reports, had good stuff but refused to obey signals. Jane Rule talks about her lifelong struggle to establish herself as a writer free of the labels "American," "Canadian," "feminist," "lesbian," and indeed, even "writer" in a funny and brilliant piece that is worth the price of admission by itself. Fearless Stephen Vizinczey uses a volume of Vladimir Nabokov's letters as a springboard to ambush the great man himself, pronouncing Nabokov petty, artificial and narrow. Biruté Galdikas, who has spent much of her life in the jungles of Borneo enlarging our knowledge of orangutans, decries the global economy's reckless plunge into the future "like a high-speed locomotive with no one at the controls," and explains why humans should care about saving their great ape siblings. Joel Bakan, the sober and civilized UBC professor who wrote the bestselling polemic *The Corporation*, contributes a hair-raising tale of venturing into the tinsel jungles of the film industry.

Twigg's approach to criticism is apparent in the rich texture of this collection. He sees books as so many windows on the world, and he reviews them by evoking the worlds they contain, sometimes more vividly than the original authors. This saves his own numerous contributions to *Undaunted* from any hint of repetitiveness. Their one thread is that they are all inspired by books written by someone who lives or once lived in BC, but beyond that they tackle every topic under the sun. He shifts from a reconsideration of Malinche, the Indian woman behind Cortés' conquest of Mexico, to a little-known Tsawwassen woman named Louise Jilek-Aal whose books are about working as a bush doctor in Tanzania and serving

as an assistant to Albert Schweitzer. His review of a book by historian Barry Gough gives new life to the legend of Juan de Fuca, the 16th-century Greek pilot who may have discovered BC; his reading of Jim McDowell's *Hamatsa* provides a fascinating summary of the argument about whether or not aboriginal groups along the BC coast practised cannibalism before the coming of Europeans, and his examination of Becki L. Ross' *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* provides an eye-opening expose of No-fun City's hidden history as a mecca of erotic dancing.

In all of these articles, the editor and his contributors open the covers of significant BC books and let them speak for themselves. In that way *Undaunted: The Best of BC BookWorld* is a rich tasting menu of some of the most compelling books written by British Columbians over the last 25 years.

This is a very robust mixture that makes clear, whatever real and imagined challenges the book business may face worldwide, here on the West Coast writers forge ahead undaunted.

— HOWARD WHITE, president,
Pacific BookWorld News Society

The Day I Caught Fidel

— LIONEL KEARNS

- Teacher and poet Lionel Kearns is, among other things, also the only British Columbian to have played a full game of baseball with Fidel Castro in Cuba during the 1960s. Here, Kearns describes how, on a student work trip to Cuba only three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, he found himself playing ball with Castro, a skilled pitcher who cared little for taking direction from others, including his catcher.

“YOU CAN’T PLAY BALL with the Commies” — that’s what they used to say when I was a kid growing up in a little town in the interior of British Columbia. They weren’t really talking about baseball. It had more to do with Igor Gouzenko’s defection in Canada, Joe McCarthy’s witch hunts in the US and that big shift in attitude that went with the Cold War.

But there I was, a few years later, squatting behind the plate, squinting through the bars of a catcher’s mask, the sweat running down into my eyes, as Fidel Castro fired the old *pelota* down on me from the pitcher’s mound in the sports stadium of Santiago de Cuba.

It was the summer of 1964. I was en route to London on a Commonwealth Scholarship, with a few stopovers along the way. Some weeks

earlier I had been staying with my old poetry buddy, George Bowering, in Mexico City. He and his wife Angela had rented a little apartment on *Avenida Béisbol*. Baseball Street! How was I going to top that one?

I had come to Mexico to join a group of other students from various parts of Canada. We had all signed up to participate in a work project in Cuba, but there were no direct flights from Canada at that time. Three years after the Missile Crisis and two years after the abortive US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuba was not a popular tourist destination. However, we found the island full of students from all over the world. Some of them were studying at Cuban schools and universities, and some, like us, had come for shorter visits, invited by the government to witness the Revolution first hand, in order to counter the bad image it was getting in the Western press.

The American blockade of the island was still in effect. We could see the US warships on the horizon when we walked down the Malecón on the Havana sea front. US fighter jets buzzed the city every day or two just to shake things up, and U-2 spy planes flew high overhead. On the ground there wasn't much food or luxury, but there was great enthusiasm.

Our group spent a week in Havana and then began moving east through the island, sometimes in a green Czech bus, sometimes in the rusty bucket of a big Russian dump truck. Other international student *invitados*, including a group of Americans, were doing the same kind of thing. We would meet them here and there along the way. Everywhere the Cubans welcomed us, and told us about what was happening and what they were experiencing and expecting. I was glad that I could speak Spanish.

As it turned out, we did not make it to the cane fields. Instead, we spent a week doing manual labour on a school construction site in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. It was not easy. It was very hot. We worked and lived side by side with the Cubans, most of them regular labourers, a few volunteers from urban areas, a few students from other countries. The menu at the camp was basic: fruits and vegetables, sausages, nothing fancy, not large rations, but enough to work on. At night we socialized and tried to get enough sleep to prepare us for the next day's exertions.

By the fourth week we had reached Santiago, Cuba's second largest city, in the eastern part of the island. We arrived in time for a traditional street carnival that coincided with the anniversary of the Fidel-led insur-

gent attack on the Moncada police barracks, a national holiday celebrated as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. The carnival activity in the streets was intense, with dancers and musicians everywhere, everyone in crazy costumes.

We were staying with the other international students in the residences at the University of Santiago. One morning a jeep roared into the plaza beside the cafeteria. Something was happening. I grabbed my camera. We all crowded around. Fidel's younger brother Raúl Castro was driving, and Fidel was standing up shouting a welcome to us. Then, in English, he said: "I understand there are some North Americans here, and I understand that North Americans think they can play baseball. Well! I challenge you to a game!"

Later that day a combined team of Canadians and Americans were playing baseball. The opposition was the regular University of Santiago team with Raúl Castro inserted at second base and Fidel pitching. I was catching for the North American team.

The Cubans, of course, were much better players, and by the second inning they were far ahead. To even things up, the teams switched pitchers, with Fidel coming over to our team, and our pitcher going over to them. For the rest of the game I caught Fidel. I had not worn catcher's equipment for a few years, but I held my mitt up there in the right place and



"I always thought I'd be fired for my beliefs, not my incompetence."

managed to hang on to whatever Fidel threw at me. He did not have excessive speed, but he had plenty of control. His curve broke with an amazing hook, and his knuckleball came in deceptively slow. However, he paid no attention to my signals.

At one point I called *time* and went out to the mound to confer. I thought for sure that someone would snap our picture as I stood there in my dusty catcher's outfit, glove in one hand, mask in the other, while Fidel told me, quietly, "*Hoy, los señales no están importantes.*" Apparently he did not take direction from other people, not even from his catcher. And as far as I know, that photo, famous only in my imagination, was never snapped. Even so, with Fidel's help, our team managed to hold down the opposition to one or two more runs.

Near the end of the game Che Guevara put in an appearance. He stood there in his olive green fatigues, smoked a cigar, and watched. As an Argentinean, he was not such a committed baseball aficionado.

I had once seen a CBC television documentary on Cuba that featured Che extolling the theory and practice of voluntary labour. The camera had caught him standing amidst the high cane, machete in hand, answering the interview questions in halting English. Che had defined Socialism as the abolition of the exploitation of one person by another.

That had made a lot of sense to me. I too was ready to swing a machete in the tropical sun to further such ideals. In fact, that was the reason I had applied to come on this student work visit to Cuba. I had not guessed that Che would be standing over by the dugout watching me play baseball with his pal, Fidel.

The night before the game I had been in the bleachers of this same stadium watching the Cuban National Ballet performing *Coppélia*. The day after the game I would listen to Fidel make an impassioned four-hour speech to a throng of almost a million people standing and cheering in the 98 degree sun. At the end, we would all link arms and sing *The Internationale*.

A few years after that game in Cuba, I was back in Vancouver playing ball with George Bowering on the infamous Granville Grange Zephyrs, scourge of the Kosmic League. But that is a tale for another day.