



## Portraits of Canadian Writers

### Bruce Meyer

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*What takes the collection to an exceptional level is Meyer's devotion to and passion for Canada's literary legacy.*

Bruce Meyer's *Portraits of Canadian Writers* compiles nearly two hundred photographic portraits of literary notables from Canada's various provinces, combining intuitive camera work with short anecdotal or biographical profiles.

Though Meyer is primarily a writer, poet, arts advocate, and educator, his photographic skills are enhanced by his own knowledge of the writing life, as well as an insight into the complex, often evasive nature of his fellow wordsmiths.

Meyer began work on this collection of portraits and their accompanying interviews in the early 1980s, using a Pentax camera and black-and-white film. Natural light prevailed over the brightness of flash, with the resulting photographs varying from striking to somber, warmly candid and intimately accessible to determinedly detached and distant. The portraits are paired with brief yet distinctive pages of text by Meyer, generally a personal connection to or memory of meeting each particular subject.

Among the more famed names are novelists Margaret Atwood and Joy Kogawa, poets Dorothy Livesay and Elizabeth Smart, and troubadour/author/musician Leonard Cohen. Cohen graciously offered "a spread of schnapps, matzah, kosher dills and Montreal smoked meats" and played a song he was working on at the time. This "pop song about holiness," as Cohen described it, would ultimately become the haunting ballad "Hallelujah." Cohen posed for three portraits, offering glimpses of his deeper artistic side along with a somewhat more jocular showmanship.

From Lorna Crozier's standing before a fruit and vegetable stand in honor of her erotic poetic parody "The Sex Life of Vegetables" to Austin Clarke's fondness for London gin martinis, *Portraits of Canadian Writers* brings life and intriguing detail to these contemporary literary figures. Meyer notes how Neil Bissoondath had the tenacity to wake before dawn and methodically craft a first collection of short stories before heading to his day job. The intense poet Milton Acorn often stayed at a run-down Toronto transient hotel, his room unusually "bright and sunny" amid the otherwise hellish corridors. Catherine Owen's smile seems serenely untroubled, yet her work is expansive and mystical.

*Portraits of Canadian Writers* could be described as an admirable project, but what takes the collection to an exceptional level is Meyer's devotion to and passion for Canada's literary legacy. His impressions of and meetings with these portrait subjects are memorably joyous, quirky, respectful, and poignant by turns, with his ultimate goal being to bring well-deserved recognition to such a diverse group and all "the dreams they put into words."

MEG NOLA (May 11, 2017)

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