

The Canterbury Trail for Book Clubs

The Canterbury Trail, Afterword

I was a Medievalist once, for a while. I first fell in love with Medieval Literature in 1988 at University of Regina – a second year course with Dr. Thomas Randal. Or maybe I fell in love with Dr. Thomas Randal himself – a giant hulk of a man, impossibly shy in many ways, but not too shy to lumber around the front of the classroom, repeatedly belting out “*Grendel gangan! Grendel gangan! Grendel gangan!*”(Beowulf 711a). He wanted us to appreciate the onomatopoeic quality of the Anglo-Saxon language. And I did. I appreciated so many things about the literature we studied in that class. I loved the foreignness of it. I loved the childlike mystery of decoding a secret language. I loved the challenge. I loved the fart jokes. I loved discovering that a literary masterpiece could culminate with the antagonist unintentionally kissing a woman’s bearded *queynte* (Chaucer, *Miller’s Tale* 3276).

I fell out of love with Medieval Literature in 1997 at a university deep in Ontario’s muggy heart—during the fifth year of a PhD with Dr.X. Or maybe I fell out of love with Dr.X herself – a giant hulk of a woman, extremely committed to a traditional Oxford approach to the study of Anglo-Saxon literature and perhaps overly convinced of my ability to be committed in the same way to the same approach. There was something almost Grendel-esque about her supervisory strategies. Her only other graduate student would announce, as he shuffled to her office, “Here I go to Grendel’s Mother’s Mere.” So, I knew that finishing a dissertation would be a fight of Anglo-Saxon proportions, but I thought it was a fight I could win. I had completed a full draft of my project called “Speech and Power in Old English Saints’ Lives.” I had included a nice theoretical conclusion on Beowulf. I had been funded by SSHRC. I had presented every one of the chapters at a major international conference. I had even published the chapter on St. Andreas. But suddenly, near the end of my fifth year, Dr.X decided that my Latin wasn’t quite good enough. Not just yet.

The problem here was that I didn’t actually have any Latin. “Not quite good enough” was euphemistic, to say the least. Furthermore, in the fifth year of a Ph.D., I didn’t have the energy, the time, the funds, nor the desire to go about learning Latin.

So, I did what any twenty-six year old would do. I ran away. *Screw the university*, I thought, *I don’t need this*. I moved to the mountains and became the Story-Time Lady at the Fernie Heritage Library. Here I was with ten years of post-secondary education, getting paid eight dollars an hour to sing “The Wheels on the Bus” to a room full of three-year-olds. To make matters worse, I’m a bad singer. Very bad. I sometimes – only occasionally – wondered if setting fire to all surviving copies of my dissertation had been a little rash.

But everyone’s first lost love is a little rough. I survived. So did a bit of the spark for Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Even fifteen years ago, I had a feeling there was something there – something

very contemporary and relevant, something that a modern novelist could do something with (sorry but fifteen years ago, I couldn't have articulated it any better than that).

In 1994, my mother took a trip to Costa Rica. It was an eco-tour guided by Robert Bateman. She joined a group of fifteen travelers from Canada, the United States, and Europe and followed Robert Bateman around Costa Rica's countryside, looking at birds and rainforests and sloths. Everyone in the group had come alone, and she got roomed with a younger, single woman with no kids – a marine biologist from Newfoundland, someone she might never encounter in her regular life. I pictured this group of strangers trekking single-file along a well-worn trail through the rainforest, and the whole experience struck me as very Chaucerian. Wasn't this kind of educational trip with its environmental emphasis really the contemporary equivalent of pilgrimage? Like Chaucer's characters, these travelers were essentially on a holiday but one that was "meaningful" and "worthwhile," one that would make them "better" human beings. Like Chaucer's pilgrims, they would exist temporarily in a space apart from their regular lives, with people who had nothing to do with their day-to-day existence. Also like Chaucer's pilgrims, they would fill their time telling each other stories, but these would be stories about their regular lives – about their children, their spouses, their careers, their passions. I imagined, though, that because these people would likely never see each other again, their stories might have very little to do with reality – they could use these stories to reinvent themselves however they wanted. I would, I decided, write a novel based on such a trip – a contemporary *Canterbury Tales*. I even had a title – I would call it "Cloud Catchers."

I had, at the time, never written – nor attempted to write – a novel. For that matter, I had never attempted to write any piece of fiction at all. I can't even remember what, if anything, I intended to convey with "Cloud Catchers." You probably will not be surprised to learn that I never so much as put pen to paper on this idea. I did, though, talk about it an awful lot.

Thankfully, I eventually got bored of talking about being a writer, and actually took some fiction writing workshops. The first one was with Bonnie Burnard at UBC's Booming Ground in 2000 (just after I'd done a brief stint at University of Nipissing teaching a fourth-year Chaucer seminar). By this time, I'd talked about "Cloud Catchers" for long enough that even I was sick of it. However, I wasn't sick of the idea of a contemporary interpretation of pilgrimage. I still liked thinking about how people seek spiritual fulfillment in this post-religious age. I also liked thinking about what a contemporary pilgrimage might look like. I was intrigued by an event that would bring diverse people together – people who would rarely interact in regular daily life. I liked the potential of a setting that at the same time both was and wasn't a holiday. I still thought there was a contemporary novel there somewhere. And because I had a bit of Stephen Greenblatt stuck in my head from graduate school, I was fascinated with the idea of Chaucerian storytelling translating into people inventing and presenting themselves to others through narrative constructions (self-fashioning, shall we say).

By this time, I was in Fernie and I had a lot of time to think about such things between my painful performances of “Wheels on the Bus.” I began to consider what my Chaucerian preoccupations might have to say about Canadian ski culture (this was a very important step in my movement towards becoming a fiction writer since I know a lot more about Fernie and ski culture than I do about Costa Rica and ecotourism). In the end, ski culture worked well for a reason I hadn’t anticipated. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer takes the *types* from his world so that he has a complete cross-section of his society – the fighters, the prayers, the workers, the rulers, the teachers, the learners, upper class, lower class, women, and men. However, his characters quickly become much more than types. Chaucer was possibly the first English writer truly interested in characterization; as such his Wife or his Knight or his Pardoner cannot be contained with simple, flat stereotypes.

Why do I say this works well for ski culture? Anyone who has ever lived in a mountain town knows that we have our own readymade types: the hippies, the ski bums, the rednecks, the developers. People in mountain towns do readily self-identify with these labels, but can real, complex people be contained within such easily recognizable types? Let’s call that my first book club question on *The Canterbury Trail*. The others are right here (enjoy!)

Questions:

1. Who is the main character of this novel? In what ways does that matter?
2. The *Free Online Dictionary* defines pilgrimage as “a long journey or search, especially one of exalted purpose or moral significance.” Is the novel’s backcountry ski touring trip a pilgrimage? Would all of the characters answer that question in the same way? Does it matter?
3. The novel is set in a fictional town called Coalton. Coalton has similarities to Fernie, BC as it was in the mid-1990s. How important is this nonfictional precedent? Is *The Canterbury Trail* a local book about a particular place? Is it an ultimately regional book or does it address universal concerns? Are those two things mutually exclusive?
4. The characters of this book are flawed. Some of them are deeply flawed. Were you able to identify with any of them in spite of their flaws (or maybe even because of their flaws)? Did you empathize? How did your attitude toward them affect your reading experience?
5. In what ways is (Mother) Nature a character in this book? How do the nurturing implications of “Mother Nature” adequately reflect nature as it exists in this book? How does that notion of nature fall short? What would be a more appropriate way to describe nature as it is represented in *The Canterbury Trail*?
6. What is the purpose of the recipes at the start of each chapter?

7. *The Canterbury Trail* is filled with drugs, vulgar language, and sexual innuendo. Is it all necessary? Any of it? Why or why not?
8. How would the novel be different if it had been told from just one point of view?
9. Most of the characters identify with one particular group (ski bum, hippy, redneck). What distinguishes one group from another? How important are these distinguishing features and divisions? Do similar divisions exist in your own town?

Janet and Heinz are two characters who don't get directly involved in the small town identity politics. In what other ways are Janet and Heinz similar? Different? What would be lost if one or both of these characters were removed from the novel?

10. How would the book be different if there were just one representative of each type (one hippy, one redneck, one ski bum, one developer, one urbanite)?
11. As if there are not quite enough characters in this novel, the dogs are also characters. What do the dogs (and their distinctive personalities) tell you about their owners? Why are the huskies the only dogs to survive?
12. Is the characters' antipathy towards the city justified? How does that hostility towards "the big shitty" shape the characters' attitude toward their town? How does their aversion to city life shape *your* attitude toward their town?
13. How does the novel's ending change your understanding of what has happened earlier in the story?
14. What is the relationship between humans and nature in this story? Would you answer this question differently for the different groups? For the different individuals? Does that relationship change throughout story?
15. What does the ending add to your consideration of the man-nature relationship as it exists in *The Canterbury Trail*?
16. If given a chance, what ending would *you* write for *The Canterbury Trail*?