Willa McDonald

“...the most vivid way to get an idea across was to lay oneself bare in the knowledge that others would identify with the bareness, the sometimes painful truth.”

Neil to Scott Young, quoted in Neil and Me (1997).

It goes against all the rules to write a book about someone without at least one interview with him. It’s even stranger to write a book about your hero and neither want to meet him nor have him read it. But that’s how Canadian author Kevin Chong felt when he wrote Neil Young Nation: a quest, an obsession (and a true story). Chong got away with breaking the rules because his story is as much the recounting of a road trip, and a meditation on ageing, as it is a book about Neil Young.

In 2004, when Chong was turning 30 and Young 60, he rounded up three buddies for a car trip that would mimic the journey Neil Young had taken four decades earlier that had led him to the United States, a reunion with Stephen Stills and the birth of Buffalo Springfield. Many of the details were different – the hearse became a Suzuki Grand Vitara, Young’s guitar was swapped for a tape-recorder and notebook - but the route of the trip was honoured (from Winnipeg to Los Angeles via Chicago) and so was its spirit (a “hatbox worth of space cakes” helped fill the boot).

The friends took three weeks to cover 14,000 kilometres, through five provinces and fourteen states. They visited places that were important to Neil Young - and met an array of eccentric characters along the way to whom Young and his music were meaningful. The journey finished in Auburn, Washington where the friends saw Neil Young play at Farm Aid 2004.

Chong, who published his first novel, Baroque-a-Nova when he was 25, had just had his second novel rejected by publishers – “…I had turned out something like the prose equivalent of anchovies”. Each birthday was beginning to feel like a door being slammed: “Even my twenty-eighth birthday had been a stinging rebuke. For me, it meant I could no longer be a dead rock star who had died at twenty-seven. My chance to choke – gloriously – on my own vomit had come and passed…” Chong, a fan of Young’s since adolescence, felt he needed Neil Young, or at least his music, to save himself.
He was drawn to Young, Chong says in this book, because of his screechy voice, his shrieking guitar, his trippy songwriting style, his melancholic vision, his sense of melody, “the peculiar, sometimes begrudging way he confessed feelings…” Above all, to Chong, an awkward kid, Young was the embodiment of “a type of anti-beauty”. He “sought beauty in frayed edges and worn-out patches. He revelled in bum notes, in buzzing guitar strings. Even his album covers had a rough, unfinished quality.”

Chong’s first published piece of writing was a song-by-song review of 20 Neil Young tunes in a fanzine. He owns many of Young’s 31 official albums and he describes himself as a 7.5 or 7.51 on a scale of rabid fandom (fans being known as “Rusties”).

The following interview was done by email with Chong in Winnipeg after his visit to Australia for the Sydney Writers’ Festival in May, 2006. Chong’s inclusion in the Festival was sponsored by the Media Department, Macquarie University.

On the day of Chong’s festival session, Neil Young was receiving an honorary doctorate from San Francisco State University.

SCAN: How long did it take you to research and write this book?

KC: I started reading up on Neil Young a few months before I went on my trip and continued reading about him after it. I started making notes for the book a couple of months before I left. When I returned from my trip, I started writing the next day and didn’t take a day off—except for a trip to New York for a wedding—until I had finished a draft. I believe the draft took a little more than two months. There were a couple of rounds of edits that followed.

SCAN: Although your writing is personal, you never bore the reader by being self-centred. What techniques or approaches do you use to manage that?

KC: I’m glad you don’t find the writing self-centred, though I’m not sure everyone—some reviewers—felt the same way. It was a risk I was prepared to run. If you’re going to write about yourself, you’re always going to be accused of being egotistical. I accept that.

When people think of Neil Young’s best music, they normally refer to three albums—Time Fades Away, On the Beach, and Tonight’s the Night—where Young’s most despondent about being famous. Young’s been called self-indulgent for those albums and others, but even though most listeners can’t empathize with being dissatisfied with one’s fame and wealth, they still recognize something true in Young’s despair. The important thing is, according to Young, laying one’s self bare. And yet I also wanted to pay close attention to the people around me - to portray them in the most honest, yet sympathetic, light.

SCAN: This is a very funny book. What did you do to make the humour work?

KC: I suppose I attempt to be funny out of necessity. I’m aware of how much the book centres around my own anxieties and grievances and, for me, self-deprecation is the most palatable, apologetic mode of self-obsession. And I suppose that humour’s an element of my personality and the way I see the world.

SCAN: The road trip gave this book a natural structure. Were there other structural issues you had to solve in the writing?

KC: I did a lot of interviews before going on the trip and I had to incorporate that material throughout the book. Otherwise it’d be page 78 or something in the book before I set out. Also, I had to figure out when it was best to write about Young’s music and when it was best to write about the trip I was on, and what the right balance was.
One of the features of this book is the cast of characters you present along the way. How did you go about making those characters real for your readers?

KC: At readings, I often read from our night in Cleveland, where we met some very friendly locals at a place called the Sidebar. It was one of the best nights of our trip, the people we met there were truly wonderful originals—a notary who lived permanently in a hotel, a lawyer who once worked for Larry Flynt—and it was totally unexpected that we’d have such a good time.

It was quite a nerdy road trip, in many respects. We were very well-behaved and didn’t get involved in any car chases or orgies. But it was still a lot of fun and I think (or hope) readers feel that way, too.

What special challenges did it raise to include your friends as characters in the book?

KC: The big challenge was that I wanted to keep my friends, and respect their privacy, while at the same time write about them honestly. To turn a friend into a character in a book requires a degree of distortion—you have to skip over one trait, exaggerate another one.

How useful is dialogue to you as a non-fiction writer? Are there times in a story when it is most useful?

KC: It gives a flavour to the writing and returns me to the world of fiction where I started. It creates character and establishes a scene and a relationship very efficiently. I think it also provides a nice break from passages of exposition or inner monologue. When I do readings, I always choose passages with dialogue because they break up the rhythm of the reading.

How crucial to the writing are the details and descriptions you have included

KC: You’d like to think they’re important and that the reader will find everything you see fascinating. Writing about this little road trip I took with my friends I wondered how much detail to include and how much to leave out. In the end, I decided to write about all the minor details of the trip—the hot dogs we consumed, the quiet, boring passages of the trip—because I think these moments will make the book feel authentic to anyone’s who’s been on a long car ride. With writing and music, moderation and good taste can prove stifling. Only too much is enough.

Is the re-creation of setting crucial to your writing in this book? How do you make setting real for readers?

KC: When I read a non-fiction book, it always amazes me how authors can recreate places in such precise detail. I’m not sure how they do that—maybe they take better notes than me. I’m not sure if the settings I recreate are true to the actual places, but I try to make them true to my perception at the time. Insofar as setting can reflect the mood of the trip I think it’s important. At times, for instance, I wanted to convey the wonder and newness of seeing some places—like the Canadian Prairies—for the first time; at other points, driving across certain barren stretches of highway, I wanted the setting to indicate desolation.

How important is it to you to choose the precise words for what you are trying to say?

KC: I think it’s very important that my words have the music and rhythm of one’s natural voice. I prefer to write quickly for this reason and when a book gets copy-edited, I’ll have to fight to keep certain idiosyncrasies in my syntax or phrasing that seem strange or clunky to the copy editor. That said, copy editors have saved me from plenty of embarrassment. It’s something that comes from writing quickly and preferring, as Neil Young does, passion over precision.
SCAN: Where can the line be drawn between fact and fiction in a work like this?

KC: No essential events were changed in the book. I haven’t invented a meeting with Neil Young or any gunfights with the police. But I changed or omitted some details to protect the privacy of my friends and the people I met. I also moved around minor events or observations to give the story some more flow. I guess the biggest bit of fictionalizing I did was to recreate some of the dialogue among my friends and myself. I couldn’t resist using all the one-liners I dreamt up months later. I guess that’s when writing becomes vindication.

SCAN: Is memoir a way of breaking silence and claiming authority over something in which the writer may have no expertise?

KC: I think so. I think the memoir comes closer than, say, a book of essays or a cultural history, to recreating a consciousness and a set of experiences in the way a novel does.

SCAN: What are you hoping you have said in this book?

KC: Um, that one can find new inspiration in old loves; and that one can see new places and meet new places with all your oldest and dearest friends in tow; and that one should allow for a certain amount of chance in one’s life.

SCAN: Is there an underlying purpose to your writing in general? To your role as a writer?

KC: I don’t think so. Not anymore. As I get older, I shed more pretensions. I do a lot of freelance writing that, at times, can feel like customer service—suiting a piece to a publication. Simply put, with my books, I’ve always wanted to write the books I want to read.

SCAN: Are there writers who have greatly influenced you and the course you have taken as a writer?

KC: I have a lot of favourite writers. Paul Auster, J.M. Coetzee, Denis Johnson, Haruki Murakami, Joan Didion, Tobias Wolff, Willa Cather, Donald Barthelme. The ones I love the most have a touch of humour, a little stylistic flair, and a voice. I always find great writers are like memorable loves—they have to be a little torturous, otherwise they’re forgettable.

SCAN: If you could give one piece of advice to up-and-coming writers, what would it be?

KC: Don’t make any excuses. Start writing now. It’s hard to resume writing after a long break, so, if possible, don’t stop. And as Neil Young says, don’t be denied.

Neil Young Nation: A quest, an obsession (and a true story),

Links:

Human Highway (lyrics & discography) http://human-highway.com

HyperRust Never Sleeps http://hyperrust.org

Thrasher’s Wheat www.thrasherswheat.org
Sugar Mountain  http://members.cruzio.com/~tah/sugarmtn.html

Traces  www.angelfire.com/rock2/traces

Neil Young Appreciation Society  www.nyas.org.uk

Biographical Texts:


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