It's a great honour to have been asked to deliver this year's Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture. When Judith Silverthorne sent me copies of the speeches of my predecessors, I must admit, I had a moment of panic. Even the names on the list are daunting; among others, Adrienne Clarkson, Pierre Berton, Stephen Lewis, Mel Hurtig and the best teacher I ever had, Carlyle King, have spoken to you.

In accepting your invitation, I decided to take a leaf out of Mary Donaldson's own book and refuse to be daunted. As our first Provincial Librarian, she was both a visionary and a pragmatist. She believed in getting the job done, so that's what I'm going to do.

The SLA contract for this lecture specifies that I choose a topic consistent with the theme of the annual conference or related to libraries. I thought long and hard about a perspective I could use. As you all know, Dr. Carlyle King was the first chairman of the Saskatchewan Library Advisory Council. Under his chairmanship, the Council recommended the formation of a Provincial Library to promote library service to the entire province and in 1951; it made the appointment of its first librarian, Mary Donaldson. Because Dr. King still looms large in my pantheon of heroes, I was tempted to talk about the history of Saskatchewan libraries. It's a fascinating subject, but I thought you might have heard a few words on that particular topic before. So I decided to talk about something I was certain you hadn't heard about. Me—specifically, what libraries have meant to me as a reader, a writer and a citizen.

The genesis for this very personal perspective came about when I remembered an encounter I had at the Vancouver Writers' Festival with the British mystery writer, Ruth Rendell. It was the year the spiffy new Vancouver Public Library opened, and someone had the very sensible idea of inviting three mystery writers, Ruth Rendell, Earl Emerson and me, to sit down with a small group of readers at the new library to talk about the state of the mystery. CBC TV would film our chat for the arts segment of their supper hour news. The writers would meet at CBC, so the cameras could get some nice shots of us walking to the new library together. Good news all around.

But as Robbie Burns famously said, 'the best laid schemes o' mice an' men/Gang aft a-gley.' The first problem was the weather. Even for Vancouver, it was bad—rain, wind, and fog, more rain. My publicist managed to get us a cab, so we were at CBC on time. A word here about publicists. Writers call them 'minders' and that's what they do. They take care of us. They make sure we're fed and watered and delivered to our destinations. If we have the sniffles, they feed us Fisherman's Friends and juice. If we're cold, they get us sweaters. If we've forgotten to buy presents for our loved ones they know the location of the closest Discount Warehouse. Minders are like the best mother you could imagine, and the one cardinal rule of publicists is they never ever, ever leave their writers alone because publicists know that writers, like children, can get into all sorts of trouble if they're not properly supervised.

Now back to my story. My publicist and I were in the waiting room at CBC waiting. People came and went. Time passed. No Ruth. No Earl. Finally, a producer came out to tell us down to tell us that Earl Emerson's flight from Seattle had been delayed because of the weather. The producer said, ominously, 'well at least we can be thankful Ruth Rendell isn't being kept waiting. That would make everything about a thousand times worse.' At that very moment, as if at the direction of a malign deity, a cab pulled up and Ruth Rendell burst through the door with her publicist in tow. The publicist was very young, very pretty and obviously terrified. Ruth Rendell turned and fixed her with a look. The publicist burst into tears and ran out into the rain—never to be seen again, at least by us. The producer said she would check with Earl Emerson's people; meanwhile, we should all just make ourselves at home. She might as well have suggested that we walk three blocks down Robson Street without spotting a Starbucks. For
As we set out for the library, the producer and the publicist led the way. Ruth Rendell and I followed behind. She still hadn’t spoken a word. Her jaw was clenched and her beautiful boots were getting very wet. Finally, she turned to me. “I suppose if we’re jointly committed to this endeavour, we should introduce ourselves. I AM RUTH RENDELL.” I drew myself up to my full height. “AND I AM GAIL BOWEN,” I replied. She did not seem impressed. The situation was desperate. I racked my brain trying to think of any conversational topic that might melt this iron lady striding so purposefully and so miserably by my side. Finally, by Divine Intervention or Dumb Luck, I remembered our destination: the shiny new Vancouver Public Library. I took a deep breath and turned to Ruth Rendell. “Do you remember the first time you ever walked through the door of a library—the very first time?”

She stopped. Her face softened, and for a split second, I glimpsed the girl she had been. “Oh yes,” she said. “It was wonderful. Life-changing.” During the rest of our walk, she reminisced happily about that long ago day when she’d been given the keys to the kingdom. By the time we got to the steps of the shiny new Vancouver Public Library, we were—not buddies—I don’t believe Ruth Rendell actually has buddies—but we were friendly acquaintances who had discovered they shared a common passion. Just as we were about to go through the front door, she turned to me. “Libraries are essential,” she said. “Don’t you agree?”

Well, as it turns out I do, and that’s what I’d like to talk about today.

Ruth and I never got around to talking about my first library, but I’d like to mention it. It was the Earlscourt Public Library in West Toronto, a working class district. In those days, children in our area didn’t have a lot of books. I used to get one book every Christmas—it was always my best present. So you can imagine what the Earlscourt Public Library meant to me. In its own way, the Earlscourt Library was almost as forbidding as Ruth Rendell. There was a stone horse trough outside and two stone lions flanked the main doors. The ceilings were high, and the floors were marble. Scary, but I didn’t care because the Earlscourt Public Library had books—so many books.

Every Saturday morning my grandmother and I would walk 10 blocks up St. Clair Avenue to visit the library. She’d send me into the children’s library, and then she’d go off in search of her own books. In my memory, we stayed there for a couple of hours. No one ever bothered me. I just roamed around, choosing a book, sitting at one of the long wooden tables to read a page or two, finally making the big decision about whether this book was worth lugging home when home was ten blocks away. The prospect of that long walk home made me a selective reader at a very early point in my life. That said, I don’t think even Keats’ stout Cortez looking out over the Pacific could have felt more excitement than I did on those Saturday mornings when I walked through the front door of my house with my satchel jammed with un-read books and illimitable possibilities.

Think for a moment, please, about what the public library meant to us—a working class family who loved books and valued learning, but who had to somehow stretch two modest incomes seven ways. Think of the pleasure it brought us and of the worlds it opened to us. And think, please, about what that same library meant for the families who moved into our neighbourhood after the war—families who had to learn a new language and make new lives with even fewer resources than we had. I remember seeing the children of those families crowded around the long oak tables at the library, hunched over their books, filled with a voracious hunger to learn, to find in those endless shelves of books the key that would unlock the secret of making a good life in Canada.

A lot of those kids started university the year I did. Like me, many of them were the first children in their family ever to get to university. None of us, I think, would have made it had it not been for the public libraries in our neighbourhoods. Those libraries were the great equalizers—they gave us wings, and those wings took us to surprising places.

My grandmother was a great monarchist, and one of her favourite books was The Little Princesses, Marion Crawford’s account of her life as Nanny to the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. She and I must have read that book twenty times. Neither of us could ever have imagined in those days that one day I would have dinner with one of Elizabeth’s sons and lunch with the son who some day will be King—but I have.

Andrew Carnegie may have been a robber baron and a thoroughly unsavoury character, but I never walk by the
Carnegie library in Chicago without whispering a quick thanks to him for the Free Library—a radical idea that changed the world of so many of us.

There have been many, many libraries in my life since Earlscourt. At the University of Toronto, I encountered for the first time the dreaded stacks, the filling out of dozens of requisition slips, the waiting and the smirk on the face of the student helper as she told you the book you wanted was not in. The book I wanted was never in. A friend my age who remembers filling out those interminable, futile requisition slips says she finds it interesting to remember that, during the heyday of the stacks, Canadians also had to fill out requisition slips to purchase liquor. Obviously, someone in authority believed that books, like Demon Rum, posed a threat to young Canadian minds.

At any rate, I finally gave up on the university libraries and drifted back into my local public library, where the librarians were kind, where they still used those magical pencils with the date stamp on them, and where, luckily, because I was studying English Language and Literature, I could find most of the books I needed.

But there’s more to life than need—as Bob Dylan noted when he had the bad girl in one of his songs taunt her boyfriend about his relationship with a debutante. “She knows what you need,” said the bad girl, “but I know what you want.”

I don’t remember any bad girls in the Yorkville Public library, but I remember being seduced by some stunning books: The Forsyte Saga, C.P. Snow’s ‘Strangers and Brothers’ series; everything by Nabokov and Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann. Intoxicating stuff all, and then one day I discovered Canadian literature.

Now that our libraries are bright with the little red and white emblems that identify books by Canadian writers, it’s difficult to imagine a time when Canlit didn’t exist—at least not as a force. But that time was not so long ago. When I was at the University of Toronto, Robertson Davies was there, so were Northrup Frye, Ned Pratt and Marshall McLuhan, but the only class in Canlit was a pass course for engineers or science students. Canlit, in those days, was simply a Mickey Mouse course.

That our literature is now mature, established and renowned is due, in no small measure, to those who worked so hard to keep Canada’s library system healthy and responsive. You, the librarians, choose the books that go on the shelves, and on behalf of all Canadian writers, I thank you for choosing us. My first book—written with Ron Marken of Saskatoon— is called 1919: The Love Letters of George and Adelaide. It was a first novel by two writers of whom no one had heard; yet when I go into libraries around this province I see it on the shelves. You chose it because you knew that when people read that book they would see a reflection of themselves, of Canadian people living Canadian stories. In her seminal work about Canadian literature, Survival, Margaret Atwood chooses a telling metaphor to underscore a nation’s need for its own literature. “What,” Atwood asks, “would happen to a person who looks into a mirror every day and saw a reflection that was not her own?”

Every time you chose one of those books that now has the little red and white emblem on its spine, you gave Canadian readers a mirror in which they could see themselves. In doing so, you helped us shape our identity.

This seems a natural point for me to move into a discussion of the role libraries have played in my life as a writer. By the time my husband and I were doing our Ph.D. studies, we’d moved here to Saskatoon, and the Frances Morrison library was, depending upon how you look at it, either the instrument of my undoing or the making of me. It was at the Frances Morrison library that Ted and I discovered the mystery novel.

I started with Nero Wolfe. I have no idea why. I took my first Nero Wolfe off the shelf and this large, brilliant, irascible man who grew orchids, drank prodigious quantities of beer, knew everything that mattered about cooking, weighed 1/5 of a tonne and changed out of his yellow silk pajamas only under duress, leaped out at me. I was hooked. Ted and I hoovered up the complete Nero Wolfe and then we moved along. I can still close my eyes and remember exactly where every mystery writer sat on the Frances Morrison shelves. Oh how happily Ted and I grazed in those aisles and how much I learned.

When I began writing my own series, I drew on what I had read. I knew what I liked: a strong central character, realistic but not perfect; a book that was driven not so much by plot as by character; secondary characters who were not, in the parlance of medieval romance, purely local things but who were fully drawn and engaging; a narrative that moved swiftly but that took time to explore some of the issues that draw us as human beings: poverty, the abuse of children and the elderly, racism, extremism, corruption. All of the decisions I made about my own writing were reached after I had read widely, indiscriminately but enthusiastically in the mystery section of my local public library.

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While I'm with the Writers' Guild, our libraries invite writers into their communities. The evenings I spend doing library readings have been among my happiest. That said, only by tortured geniuses in New York or London or Paris but by Saskatchewan people, by people like them.

In my real pensioned life, I teach at a university, and sometimes I teach Creative Writing. My first advice to my students is always the same: get a library card. Read widely. Discover the writers who speak most directly to you. Look at their works as if you were studying them in English class. Ask yourself questions about how your writer creates characters, uses setting, develops plot. Then go home and do it yourself. And don’t forget to take your library books back.

While I’m wearing my teaching hat, I need to say a word about the role libraries in Saskatchewan’s smaller centres play in enriching the lives of their citizens and their communities. In cooperation with the Saskatchewan Writers’ Guild, our libraries invite writers into their communities. The evenings I have spent doing library readings have been among my happiest. That said, I still believe that the most important work a writer does at a library reading takes place after she leaves. This is when readers get together to talk about what they have heard, to talk about reading, to talk about writing. A final point. The fact that you invite people like me into your libraries de-mythologizes writing. It shows potential writers, especially young potential writers, that literature is written not only by tortured geniuses in New York or London or Brussels—but by Saskatchewan people, by people like them.

Librarians in our smaller communities perform another essential service—one that, alas, calls for yet another anecdote. Twenty-three years ago I taught my first class in Canadian literature. It was an extension class for the University of Regina—my first senior class, so I was nervous. The class was to be held in Whitewood, Saskatchewan, and I comforted myself with the fact that a girl with degrees from the University of Toronto was hardly going to be given a run for her money by people who had gone to school in Whitewood.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. They were a brilliant class. They’d read everything. They knew everything because they had a library and they had Elise Hall, a librarian who had two passions: literature and her community. A quick story about Elise because I think this anecdote illustrates what so many of you—particularly those of you who work in libraries in our smaller centres do.

Elise was a war bride. She was and is a very sophisticated trilingual woman from Brussels. When she met the man of her dreams, a Canadian soldier from Saskatchewan, he told her that Whitewood was a lot like Brussels—just
smaller. They married and when they got on the train to come west, this nervous young husband began to ungird the lily as far as Whitewood was concerned. There weren’t quite so many opera houses as there were in Brussels, he said, nor quite so many art galleries or theatres. By the time Elise arrived in Whitewood she knew she wasn’t coming to Brussels West, but from the day she was carried over the threshold as a bride, she made up her mind that she would do everything she could to make Whitewood a place in which her new neighbours could have access to the books that bring beauty and meaning to human lives and allow us to realize our potential. And so she did what any sensible woman in her position would do — she became the town librarian.

Like Ruth Rendell, Mary Donaldson and everyone of us in this room today, Elise Hall realized that libraries give heart to the communities they serve. The nature of your work is evolving. In addition to providing us with books, you now offer us tools for research, Internet access and training, literacy programs, fine children’s programming (about which I have said far too little), videos and the chance to see films that are splendid but not commercially appealing to theatre chains. Perhaps most important, you offer us all a clean well-lighted place in which our new neighbours can come together to talk about books and to dream our dreams.

Thank you for the work you do, and thank you for allowing me to spend time with you today.

*SALE* Saskatchewan Library Association Book Bags...

In honour of the Association’s 60th Anniversary, attractive and affordable SLA book bags are now available at a reduced price of $8.50 for members and $10 for non-members (regular price $15.00). You’ll have a great cloth carrying bag and assist the SLA in raising funds for the association. You may purchase them through the SLA office or via board members. Get yours today!

Digitization – Concepts and Hands-on Practice

Greg Salmers presented the Digitization workshop on Friday, April 11th during SLA’s 2003 Spring Seminars. I attended the session hoping to gain some hands-on experience in digitization – I wasn’t disappointed!

Greg began the workshop by discussing various aspects of digitization that should be considered before delving into a project:

(1) Why bother?
Greg pointed out a few reasons why digitization is worth the “bother”: to preserve fragile material; to make materials more available to a wider audience; to support education or community interests; to improve the library’s image through a more in-depth online presence; and to develop staff skills and take advantage of available youth employment initiatives and funding.

(2) How to select materials
Once you’ve decided that digitizing materials is worth the bother, you have to think about what you’d like to digitize. Your thoughts on this will likely be driven by the type of library you’re currently working in and the types of information your patrons often look for. Those working in public libraries may decide that digitizing local history and local content would benefit not only surrounding communities, but people from all over the world who may be doing some online genealogical research. Academic Librarians may choose to digitize rare or easily damaged material that is in demand for educational purposes. Special Librarians might decide to digitize publicly available company reports, strategic content or promotional materials published on a local level. Of course, one’s thoughts on the selection of what to digitize are vast and not at all confined by library type.

(3) Copyright and historical integrity
Of course, during the planning process one must consider copyright issues. Some materials may be considered public domain, others may be publications from the organization of which the library is a part,