

BROCK'S BANTER: Paper Trail

By Brock Weir

When it comes to books, people are firm in their convictions. Either they are a hard copy kind of man or woman, or they are staunch in their belief in the power of the iPad, Kindle, Kobo, or any other garden variety e-reader on the market.

Those who promote the pleasures of manually turning a page over flicking a finger across the screen or absentmindedly thumbing a button are often quite poetic about it, spinning yarns on paper texture, the unique crack of the glue when opening up a hardback for the very first time, or the smell of a freshly printed page.

Perhaps not surprisingly for a newspaperman, I fall into the former category. While the words are often the same, I find absorbing a book on an e-reader an experience ? to borrow web parlance ? distinctly ?meh.? It is not tactile, there is less a sense of accomplishment in seeing how deep a dent you've made in a volume after dipping in, and, let's face it, you don't have anything nice on your shelves.

But I'm not one of those individuals sent into fits of ecstasy over the smell of fresh ink or a good spine crack. I like a good used book, something with a bit of a story behind the story ? musty, pages yellowed and browned by time and fingerprints of satisfied readers.

Some people call my accumulation of books borderline ?hoarding,? but they just don't understand. The building of a personal library is a singular pleasure and there is the thrill of the chase in finding that one outstanding volume that is a glaring hole in the collection. And if there is an inscription inside to show its journey, so much the better.

Last week, for instance, I came across a coffee table book by the actress Lillian Gish which provides a pictorial record of her career, and that of her sister Dorothy, from the early days of silent movies through to made-for-TV movies of the 1970s. It is inscribed with the signatures of nearly 20 individuals, actors appearing in a theatre production, a gift to a director who evidently decided to part with it decades on.

Another, a find this past summer, was a book issued by Queen Mary as a charity fundraiser with the following note written just inside the cover: ?Sent from London, England, December 20, 1915, by Ken on his way home to continue medical studies after spending ten months with the 1st Canadian Expeditionary Force in France.?

There is nothing noted elsewhere in the book given a clue to who Ken was, whether he completed his medical studies, whether he eventually returned to the front, and whether he made it out alive. If it could talk, without a doubt, this book would have a story to tell of the relief Ken's family felt once it crossed the Atlantic to his family eagerly awaiting news of his fate, not to mention the trip it took to end up for sale for \$5 in a garage near Trinity Bellwoods.

Not being able to find the answers, I feel a curatorial responsibility until I pass it onto the next step of the journey.

These thoughts were running through my mind as I made my way around Aurora on this past dark and dreary Saturday for Culture Days. Steeled by some deliciously hot soup at the Aurora Farmers' Market, it was time to head over to the Aurora Cultural Centre for presentation from the Centre itself, as well as Theatre Aurora and the Aurora Historical Society.

The latter two groups, although quite different in the programming niches they fill in this community, had similar threads that tied them together. Downstairs in the Library Room, the Historical Society showed off century-old letters recently acquired from descendants of the Hillary Family from relatives at the front. They contain unique vignettes of life in the First World War, some never to be uncovered thanks to the scribbles of wartime censors. One was a snapshot in time, suspected to be the very last letter one young man sent home to his mother before falling at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Upstairs, Theatre Aurora, promoting the current slate of shows, created a salute to their recent production of ?Love Letters? by showing just that: a stack of early 20th century correspondence between an eager travelling salesman and his slightly less eager lady love.

Leafing through these letters was a fascinating, almost intrusive trip through a time when letter writing was an art, and an art that is, with each increasing year, sadly becoming lost.

And it's a shame.

Whenever a public figure ? be it a politician or a celebutante ? makes a misstep on social media, there is a familiar refrain of ?the internet never forgets? when mobs produce screengrabs of the offence, be it a snap of a body part some may wish to have kept covered or a pre-dawn tirade against the unlikely target of Alicia Machado.

But does it? The internet may not forget, but technology does. How many of us have pictures, emails, or other pieces of data preserved on obsolete media like floppy disks or mini-discs unreadable, corrupted, and otherwise inaccessible? How many of us

have had our people take sledge hammers to our 13 discarded Blackberries? Come on, we've all been there. Years from now, when we are roughly the same age as the book Ken sent home, I wonder how much of our own history will be lost in this way now that we're not leaving as complete a paper trail as we once were. What will be our go-tos in finding out where we have been or how far we have come?
What are we losing of ourselves?