*Ol’ School Girl: Perdidos y Olvidados* (The Lost and Forgotten.)

“You know who *Madonna* is, yes?” I asked while Vogue played on my tape deck.

“Who??” my 12 y.o. granddaughter replied.

Celebrities become *perdidos y* o*lvidados (*lost and forgotten*)* as obscure as a slip of paper floating down the sidewalk or the scribble on the back of an envelope in the recycling bin. There are poets, authors, performers, musicians whose work perhaps you haven’t heard of. Relegated to the junk drawer of pop culture. The recycling truck came yesterday. Memory is the mind’s junk drawer.

Limited to what I had been exposed to I hadn’t read Robert Hayden’s (1913-1980) poems until I immersed myself in Black American literature. I met a man who told me Black Life in America was not the same as white life in America. Reading Hayden’s poem “The Whipping” I could see the boy running to his room, see him crying on his bed, feel his fear.

Limited vision, restraint, or constraint blot out other lives, their lives, their work. Majority rule points to the harbingers of pop culture. We don’t trust what we’ve never heard of, but it’s also been proven that if I heard it it must be true. Ergo what else exists beyond my sphere? II.

The Best seller list is to a writer what statistics are to a professional athlete: proof. A best seller is promoted, becomes popular. I don’t always like what’s hot and I wonder, “Is it me?”

Barry Lopez’ non-fiction essay, “My Horse,” is pitch perfect. Every time I read it, any time I read it, I want to write as well as Barry Lopez does and I want both his mechanical acumen and his never-say-die truck he wrote about.

I’ve analyzed Monica Wood's short story, “Disappearing” line by line, word by word taking it apart like a toaster to see how it works, dissecting it like that tapeworm in biology class or the Medical Examiner performing an autopsy to determine cause and effect.

John Grisham and Tom Cruise were household words to one generation of Americans, George Orwell and Albert Camus to another, but when I ask, “Have you ever read Orwell’s The Hanging or Camus’ The Guest?” people say, “No.” Their best sellers are the known works.

I read Building a Fire to my 11 y.o. grandson. He sat still, he listened. “Remember Jack London,” I said. “At one time he was the most popular writer in America.” “But people are writing new things now,” he replied.

Len Dighton and Kent Haruf are worthy of our regard, our respect and our reading time. Authors outside our popular realm can and do broaden our horizons. Take the Martin Beck series out of Sweden, or Paul Theroux’s world travels to see how people live, or Slavenka Drakulic on Croatia or Alice Munro out of Canada. Donna Leon’s Commissario Brunetti series set in Venice, Italy was a word of mouth find. I read Peter Hessler to learn.  He has not only lived in China (and Egypt) but learned the language. I read about humans. Reading Roddy Doyle’s The Commitments of Ireland came out of watching the movie. Per Petterson’s Norway and Dottir's Iceland are places I will never go, but reach by reading outside my sphere.

III.

Fads come in, swell, then break like waves. Culture seems a fault-line. Pop culture seems arbitrary; progress exalted *except* for the young mom who told me, “I hate it! You can’t go anywhere you gotta’ jump in the car!” Suburbs with a young family cause car dependence even to buy groceries.

I look back and gasp, “Why did I tease my hair? Pluck my eyebrows? Pierce my ears?” Why? Everyone did. Word-of-mouth can create popularity and celebrity. *Word of mouth* can tell you this peanut butter is better than that popular peanut butter, but it’s the advertiser’s job to manipulate you, to convince you that their product is better.

“Oh, Elizabeth you’re so Old School!” the young soldier said when he tried to dissuade me from my music library of audio cassette tapes. Forty years ago a friend told me someday music would be read by laser beam. "Why are we making such a fuss about [the artist known as] Prince?” a man asked, “This isn't Sinatra or The Beatles or Elvis we're talking about." Frank Sinatra and Johnny Mathis were household words to one generation; Bonnie Raitt and Linda Ronstadt to another. Not so Paul Rodgers’ sultry “Muddy Water Blues.” (*Who is Taylor Swift?)* I listen with care to Stanley Jordan’s cover of Michael Jackson’s 1982 release, “Lady in my life,” the latter a known; the former, not so. James Ingram who partnered with the Doobie’s Michael McDonald, but it was the Doobie Brothers we cheered in concert recently. Grammy award winner Buddy Guy wrote that he was in awe of Wayne Bennett (1933-1992) a studio musician, but it’s Guy who got the Grammy, Bennett didn’t. I listen for Bennett’s guitar work on “Stormy Monday,” background to the better known Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland’s foreground.

# The Beatles were a household word; not so, Kenny Rankin (1940-2009.)

# When John Lennon and Paul McCartney were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, McCartney asked Rankin to perform his version of Blackbird. \*Source: Tribute to Kenny Rankin: Why Paul McCartney loved him.

# Pat Metheny’s cover of “Blackbird” and Metheny’s recording of Burt Bacharach’s “Alfie” are clear and clean, worth my time and attention, but it was only because a co-worker pointed me that I heard Metheny’s As Falls Wichita so Falls Wichita Falls forty years Word ago. of mouth brought me Metheny and I’m the better for it.

Charles Willeford’s (1919-1988) Hoke Moseley Miami series show little old ladies clustered around a TV. set in the same run-down hotel as Castro’s Marielitos playing cards a few feet away. I don’t remember who turned me to Willeford, but if people don’t read his books the library will cull him from the herd. Lost and Forgotten. “But Grandma, people are writing new things now.”

# \*[Michael Posner,](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/authors/michael-posner/) Toronto, Published June 10, 2009.