

The Oxford Book of English Verse is a selection of poetry written in the English language between 1250 to 1918. There is a copy in the Castlegar and District Library which is vital because in addition to a good diet and exercise, poetry is the foundation of a healthy life. Poetry is no less important in lowering bad cholesterol and enhancing the immune system than a daily dose of oat bran and a trot around the track. Insure that someone reads poetry to you every day!

A book of Verses underneath the bough,  
A jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread - and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -  
O, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

In high school, I truly enjoyed English. However, I had one English teacher, Bill Bennett, who stands out for endearing in me a deep and life-long love for poetry.

In fragments, he told his story of adolescence during the depression. There was no work so he stayed on the family farm in southern Ontario. He mowed and baled hay and rode beside his father in the wagon. Together they recited poetry to pass the time.

He chuckled to me, "our fathers seem like the greatest heros when we're young, but when you get to my age, you'll wonder how the old souls ever got as far as they did."

As a teen, he was bored silly, credulous, and unknowingly fortunate. When World War II started, he saw it as a gateway to adventure. It was promoted as a jolly little outing across the pond with three square meals a day to a population that wasn't always getting three square a week. He went to the air force recruiting office where he was told that the minimum term of enlistment was three years.

He guffawed, "the war won't last that long. I don't want to waste my life pushing a broom in a hanger once the fireworks stop."

He went to the navy and was told that the minimum term of enlistment was two years. Again, he scoffed at the idea.

So he went to the army where he found a special deal. He would only have to enlist for as long as the adventure lasted. That was in 1940 and the war wouldn't stop killing until 1945. Afterwards, veterans were granted free university or vocational training. Bill became an English teacher and I became one of his students.

In his class, we read poetry: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Kipling, Fitzgerald, poetry, poetry, poetry. When we weren't reading poetry, we were listening to recordings of Shakespearean plays.

We followed the plays in our school-issued texts. We discovered that the Provincial Department of Education had cut sections of particular interest to adolescents. Earthy bits that had been savoured for the past four hundred years and that still elicited mirthful salivation had been deemed too morally unsettling for the youth of the seventies.

Was this an unstated lesson that Mr. Bennett had learned in the infantry? "Don't trust the authorities to tell the whole story."

We didn't dissect or analyze poetry that year. We read, we listened and we romped in poetry. When Bill Bennett recited Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach, we were on the French coast looking across the channel to the chalky cliffs as had Mr. Bennett, he revealed, several Christmases earlier.

That poetry had coursed through the centuries carrying its own wisdom. Mr. Bennet knew that the lessons were there to quell our thirst for knowledge. He had brought us to water by sharing his unabridged love for that wonderful literature. We had to choose to drink.