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Review of *Magic Lies-; The Art of W.O. Mitchell* Edited by Sheila Latham and David Latham

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Magic Lies: The Art of W. O. Mitchell. Edited by Sheila Latham and David Latham. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. Photographs, preface, introduction, works cited, contributors, index. xi + 359 pp. \$60.00 cloth, 24.95 paper.

Western Canadian novelist W. O. Mitchell died in March 1998, dramatically punctuating the appearance of this handsome book that sets out to determine the significance of his life's work. For fifty years W. O. "Bill" Mitchell has been a dominant icon of writing in Canada. This thick collection of literary essays, reminiscences, and anecdotes attempts to redress

the relative absence of critical commentary the writer has received.

The book is uneven and often contradictory, as one might expect from an assembly of academics, relatives, former students, and theater colleagues. But as the Lathams say in their introduction, "The popularity of W. O. Mitchell as a literary figure who has bridged the divide between academic art and popular culture is a remarkable phenomenon" and needs to be assessed. As many essays reiterate, Mitchell himself was torn between the ambitious, visionary statements of the literary novel (*Who Has Seen the Wind*, 1947) and his more instinctive (and perhaps commercial) commitment to popular storytelling, such as the Jake and the Kid stories, first published in 1942. The intent of the book is "to provide the kind of debate that makes for the good company of a lively cultural community."

On the basis of the evidence in these twenty pieces, there is not much debate about what will last. Literary scholar W. J. Keith evaluates Mitchell's career in the volume's best essay, "The Litmus Years': The Early Writing of W. O. Mitchell." Like others, he is full of praise for the "prairie classic" *Who Has Seen the Wind*, dismissing most of the rest (eight novels, fifty-odd stories and about ten stage plays) as the "sentimental romanticism that is bedrock W. O. Mitchell." Keith is harsh but insightful—and precise in his critical observations.

In fact every essay acknowledges the supremacy of the first novel, about twelve-year-old Brian O'Connell's quest for spiritual insight in a world of benign nature and corrupt civilization, set in Mitchell's native town of Weyburn, Saskatchewan. Several go on to defend (or apologize for) Mitchell's later novels, which generally feature a failed writer as the central character. One exception is Terry Goldie's provocative and persuasive article, "W. O. Mitchell and the Pursuit of the Homosocial Ideal."

Most commentators like to remember the (self-described) "folksy old foothills fart" who was such an effective performer on radio, film, and stage—a twentieth-century incarnation

of his hero, Mark Twain. If Mitchell's literary reputation has declined since 1947, public rapture for the iconoclastic old storyteller soared. In later years, as books poured out of his word processor, W. O. became a star of literary events and popular culture, a living practitioner of the "magic lie" that he claimed was at the center of all culture, whether high or folk. He was also a gifted mentor of writing students.

Mitchell's fourth (or fifth or sixth) career as a major stage dramatist was a disappointment to him. He wrote a number of serious plays, but it is a comedy that has survived the scrutiny of theater history. *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon*, a tall Faustian tale that first appeared as a CBC radio sketch in 1951, employs as its central metaphor Western Canada's pre-eminent pastime, curling. Later revised as a stage play (and twice for television and finally in 1993 as his last "novel"), *Wullie* achieved both a critical and commercial respect denied most of Mitchell's later narratives. One essayist suggests that the "Damn Yankees" team stole Mitchell's comic premise outright, but there must be many Faustian legends in folk culture. In the collection, two stage directors present competing claims as to who actually mounted *Wullie*'s first production.

A more generous commentary is offered by David Gardner, a veteran actor and director who provides an insider's account of early radio and TV stagings of Mitchell material. In his memoir, "Whiskerbits," he recounts hilarious adventures with Mitchell in the studio and the constant fights the author enjoyed with directors, co-writers, producers, and "the system" in trying to reach the public through the mass media. This unscholarly reminiscence has everything: tragedy, comedy, pathos, and absurdity; of all the contributions to *Magic Lies* it comes the closest to defining W. O. Mitchell's character and legacy.

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