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Review of *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* By Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson

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Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch. By Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982. Notes, bibliography, index. xii + 246 pp. Cloth \$17.95, paper \$7.95.

Some years ago, in an interview with fellow prairie writer Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch remarked, "You and I, because we are western Canadians, are involved in making a new literature out of a new experience." Kroetsch's published works (seven novels, a volume of collected poems, a book on Alberta, and a host of stories, critical essays, and interviews) are now a vital part of this new literature, and anyone interested in the life of the imagination in prairie Canada must read and savor—and sometimes contend with—Robert Kroetsch.

It is good, therefore, to have *Labyrinths of Voice* available in the Western Canadian Literary Documents series for it allows us to overhear Kroetsch speaking candidly about the kind of writing he sees himself engaged in—its sources, its aims, its challenges and difficulties for both writer and reader. The book is divided into four main sections: Influence, Game, Myth, and Narration. Kroetsch's conversations with interviewer-editors Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson meander freely through these regions, revealing along the way the influence of game theory and other writers—Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett, Borges among them—on Kroetsch's work, his devotion to anecdote and

the primacy of storytelling, and his deep distrust of traditional notions of character and any closed system (critical, political, psychological, or moral) that tempts the writer to "coerce the world." We hear, too, of his intense interest in the generative possibilities of myth and language and what he terms the "healing" power of narrative.

But beware: these conversations *are* labyrinthine, circuiting through tortuous paths of abstraction ("Embedding in meta-narrative creates comedy, whereas tragedy arises from the absence of meta-narratives"), and encumbered with a critical dialect ("intertextuality," "deconstructionism," "signified/signifier," "narratology," "mythemes," "a grammar of erotics") in which the reader is assumed to be entirely fluent.

The way is further complicated by the book's eccentric structure. Conversational flow is interrupted insistently on every page by fragments of other voices, a veritable chorus of glosses (or glossers) that "allude to other discourse and further possible discursiveness." The chorus, distinguished though raucous and inharmonious, includes among its principal soloists Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Gertrude Stein, William Gass, Borges—and Kroetsch himself. The purpose of this device, these "echoes in the maze," is to remind us "of the directions we [Kroetsch, Neuman, and Wilson] and others have followed and of those that, unfollowed, are still before us." When it works, one finds oneself teased into viewing the richness of an intellectual landscape one might simply have ignored in an attempt to push ahead in a straight line (a dubious procedure in any labyrinth). When it fails (and it will succeed or fail in varying degrees from reader to reader), one may wonder whether a quick confrontation with the Minotaur might not be a preferable fate.

Kroetsch has repeatedly stated that "I work a reader pretty hard." *Labyrinths of Voice* is no exception. If one enters the book, however, with a genuine curiosity about how and what one of western Canada's most significant, seminal writers thinks about his own work and the

general enterprise of writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, one will be rewarded repeatedly with amazement.

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