

# New Brunswick author Raymond Fraser found that writing made life worth living

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**Raymond Fraser:** Writer. Poet. Storyteller. Singer. Born May 8, 1941, in Miramichi, N.B., died Oct. 22, 2018, in Fredericton, of cancer; aged 77.

Ray was a writer all his waking hours. A small scrap of paper on his kitchen table might have been his grocery list or a list of synonyms. He was always looking for the right word. The scribbled notes in the margin of a sports magazine might have been a sudden insight, a solution to some literary conundrum that couldn't wait. After his death, we found notebooks and pens in the pockets of all his jackets – nothing left to chance. It was a gold-mine to the archivist from the University of New Brunswick library where Ray's papers are held.

Ray grew up the youngest of three, in a family of modest means. He was educated by nuns in elementary school and by priests in high school and university. He was



Raymond Fraser.

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a scholar and an athlete, playing both baseball and hockey. At St. Thomas University, he played hockey with the acclaimed St. Thomas Tommies. In later years, he was also a golfer, a cyclist and an enthusiastic walker.

Ray's two sisters were older and had left home while he was still young. On his own a lot, he became a prodigious reader. It was when he discovered the work of poet Alden Nowlan, another New Brunswicker, that he realized you didn't have to be British or American or dead to be a writer. He wrote to Mr. Nowlan, a letter which began a correspondence and close friendship that lasted as long as they did.

Ray was a teen when his mother died, a personal loss that he never really got over. He was left alone with his father, an emotionally distant man. At a certain point, Ray discovered that alcohol was a warm source of comfort. They would travel a long road together before a strong wish to survive intervened and, with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, saved Ray from himself.

Before that happened though, he lived a life of literary extravagance. He founded *Intercourse: Contemporary Canadian Writing*, a literary magazine which published work by Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton, Elizabeth Brewster and Al Purdy, among others. Ray had moved to Montreal in 1965. In 1971 he, along with John Metcalf, Hugh Hood, Ray Smith and Clark Blaise, established the Montreal Story Tellers Fiction Performance Group, which did readings in high schools.

Ray was my former spouse. We had spent our young adulthood together, moving in literary circles in Montreal, travelling in Europe and living on a boat on the Miramichi River. We separated in the early 1980s after nearly 20 years together.

He was not a guy who revealed himself in person but his books were a window to his soul. Walt Macbride, the protagonist in several of the novels, is understood to be Ray's alter-ego. This past summer, at the time he told me he was dying – “I seem to have come down with cancer,” as he put it – Ray had 22 books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry published, with more to come. His work was acclaimed and, with only a trace of irony – Ray was firmly non-establishment – he had accepted the Order of New Brunswick and an honorary degree from St. Thomas.

Alcoholics Anonymous saved his life; writing made his life worth living. The ability and the talent and the inspiration to pour that life into his books created the legacy he wanted and earned.

*Sharon Fraser is Ray's former spouse and his literary executor.*