

# Can Pandora Open The Public Library?

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Librarians and English teachers share a unique responsibility: introducing young people to the magic of words. They also share the same enemies--materialism, indifference, television, transistor sets, addiction, sensationalism--in short, the whole technology of mind pollution and all its unlovely attendants.

They need not despair. There is not yet a sufficient case for ending it all in the rare book room--or worse, resigning one's self to being merely and safely a corrector of comma splices or a mailer of past-due notices. Human consciousness can always break through its institutions, especially when it is young and insatiable for wonder. By working with that power, librarians and English teachers can be formidable catalysts. But "working with" the power of youthful imagination may require some drastic changes of perspective and style. "Working with" imagination is the gentle art of "letting be", a process which is totally opposed to "making fit." It's the difference between letting grass grow and laying out lawns. "Letting be" is not "letting alone." Wild grass needs water and sun; we must consult with it to learn how much and when, and then provide. Similarly, 'the sensitivity of young people needs encouragement and worlds to explore. The public librarian does not meet these needs if he keeps the food out of sight, encased on shelves marked only by the unappetizing labels, "Poetry" and "Fiction". Like the English teacher who really cares, the librarian has to devise ways of consulting with and tempting youth. A youngster wandering into a public library is not served by being referred to a card catalog. Perhaps without even knowing it, he is there because of some vague craving for a higher consciousness, and the librarian has the delightfully human responsibility of heightening that craving and showing it a range of adequate directions.

I am addressing the public librarian now rather than the English teacher because the neglect of "letting be" is so visible in public libraries. We can see the neglect in the blank walls, the mere information dangling from the bulletin boards, the glass case of untouchables--all proclaiming that here is a repository, a place where literature and art are property available only under contract. Another reason the public librarian comes first to mind is that the neglect can be so easily overcome when the repository becomes also a show place, when the library realizes that promoting culture is at least as important as keeping it in custody. At that point, the librarian can put on the English teacher's best hat. And the librarian can wear it with a special advantage: the young people who come to him do so freely, with curiosity and time to invest on their own terms. He escapes the dilemma of the English teacher who must somehow draw authentic and spontaneous responses to literature from an audience held captive by school bells, truancy laws, parental pressure, and grades.

Those in charge of the children's sections in public libraries must know what I mean. Normally, the children's rooms are places where wonder and color reign supreme. There, imagination is prompted in every nook and corner. In the public library "proper", however, nooks and corners are where imagination is carefully tucked away. The feeling, I suppose, is that when a child becomes a young person, he no longer needs encouragement for his imaginative life. The truth, of course, is exactly the opposite. The magical powers of little children can transform almost any environment; it is the sensitivity of adolescence that needs the most support and cultivation.

What specifically can the librarian do who is willing to grant that support and care to the "young people" --the frail, noisy, graceless and beautiful kids floating from childhood into adult society? How can he compensate for the fact that he is not a specialist in literature or education? The answer is simple, though no doubt unsettling: the librarian must become a promoter--a huckster in the service of the Muses. There is a nicer way of putting it. We could say, with justice, that the librarian should come to think of himself as an active enabler for the imagination. But noble language obscures the practical tasks involved--making attractive displays, getting publicity out to the media and the schools, organizing workshops, and so on. "Promoter" is the word. To indicate its possible substance, I shall begin by introducing another key word: "Pandora."

"Pandora" is the name of what is now becoming a national movement for participatory culture, focusing on elementary and secondary schools, but in Ontario reaching out also to the community through the use of educational television.<sup>1</sup> "Pandora" began as a nation-wide student poetry contest organized by the Canadian Council of Teachers of English. Through the provincial affiliates of the CCTE, English teachers collected over 50,000 submissions from children and young people in every region of Canada, sending the winning poems from each province to a final panel of judges who then chose 100 national winners. The panel included the leading Canadian poets Leonard Cohen, Earle Birney, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Al Purdy, as well as Dr. Emma Plattor of the University of Calgary Faculty of Education, Donald Rutledge of the Language Study Centre in Toronto, and songwriter-performer Cedric Smith. After the contest, The CCTE published the 100 winning poems as a kit of colored posters with an accompanying record by Cedric Smith performing some of them at the Pandora awards ceremony in Vancouver. The kit--called, of course, *Pandora's Box*--was then advertised to schools through the cooperation of some very generous publishers--McClelland & Stewart, Methuen Publications, Thomas Nelson & Sons, Oxford University Press, and Scholastic Services. Net proceeds from the sale of *Pandora's Box* are now assigned to the CCTE Pandora foundation, a registered charitable organization for the development of participatory culture on a continuing basis.

These are the essential facts about Pandora. What is their significance? And what could Pandora mean for the public librarian who would accept responsibility for promoting as well as preserving culture?

Clearly the Pandora project of the CCTE provides a remarkable example of what can be done to lead young people into developing their cultural sensibility. Pandora can also be an excellent vehicle for initiating a program of cultural involvement in the public library. Barren walls could sport Pandora poster poems which no one could resist reading. These could be coupled with displays calling attention to other collections of young people's creativity in the library. And of course the library could add invitations for young poets to join the on-going Pandora contests or perhaps attend an evening poetry workshop where incidentally they might discover in an easy, natural way some of the truly great poetry waiting for them on their library's shelves. It's a beginning--and it requires only a few pins, Scotch tape, and some announcement cards.<sup>2</sup>

But I must warn that the original Pandora also found the beginning easy. She apparently had no trouble opening the box, but closing it again was something else. Similarly, once young people are shown that the library cares for what they think and feel and that it wants to help them communicate -- even perhaps with a chance of reaching across Canada as the Pandora poster poems have done -- they are not likely to let the librarian remain a peaceful custodian. Soon they will start offering suggestions for further projects. And so will their English and art teachers -- and their parents. There may even be pressure on city officials to grant more money to the library so that it can expand its community programs and facilities. The library itself, in short, might become a Pandora's Box-- quite literally so in the eyes of those librarians who secretly wish that adolescents would just go away and take their unpredictable fancies with them.

To underscore my warning, I should describe some of the forces contained in the CCTE version of Pandora's Box. First there is the appeal of the poetry itself. When I showed the poems to the leaders of the Canadian Labour Congress, they were so impressed that they gave \$1,000 to the winning student poets. Labour unions and poetry are hardly forces we normally associate. In fact, this was the first time the Canadian Labour Congress ever rallied to the support of poets, but the poetry here could not be ignored. Organized according to the ages of the poets -- ranging from 8 to 19 -- and also according to the provinces of origin, the Pandora poetry revealed in a fresh, direct way what it meant to be alive and growing in every region of Canada -- the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, the Far West, even the Yukon. The poetry provided primary data that sociology could never present, realities that academic prose could only talk about. Like any persons seriously concerned with what Canada is and will be, the Canadian Labour Congress leaders naturally welcomed this evidence.

They also were enchanted by its charm. So was the Department of Education in Newfoundland which ordered 400 *Pandora's Box* kits for schools throughout the province and found the kit to be so successful that it ordered 50 more. One wonders whether there is any other collection of poetry that could win over the Canadian labour movement, the senior elementary and secondary students of Newfoundland, all the professional associations of Canadian English teachers, and major Canadian poets like Earle Birney, Leonard Cohen, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Al Purdy. A small sample of the poems they saw follows this article.

In addition to the charm of the poetry, there is the appeal of its format. The aesthetic advantages of printing the poems in large type on coloured posters were accidental side-effects of economic necessity. Originally we planned to publish Pandora as a paperback. We soon realized, however, that even if the cost could be reduced to \$1 a copy, we could not attain our main objective, which was to make it possible for every student in Canada to see what Canadian young people can do with words. Schools simply could not afford to buy at any price an "enrichment" book for all their students. Our solution was to print the poems as a kit of posters which could be displayed on classroom and library walls for all to see-- a kit that could serve an entire school at a price every school could afford (\$13.50 including shipping). Once the poems were published, however, we were delighted to discover that economics had led us to an effective combination of aesthetics and pedagogy.

We found, in brief, that the poster format offers the poem what the poem provides for its subject matter: a clearing ground. Just as a poem makes room for an experience to be apprehended and freely contemplated, so a poster gives a poem the space it needs to do its work. Bound books hold bound poems. Pages stitched together are really not happy places for poems to live. They are like apartments with glass walls--while visiting a poem, the reader has always a peripheral awareness of next door neighbors. The poem is also locked in and untouchable. One cannot take it out, offer it new lights and surroundings, or present it properly to friends. On a poster, however, a poem becomes free to be all it can be, both in itself and for those who want to share with it something of their own being.

The poster, in other words, give physical existence to the poem. In the eyes and hands of its perceiver, the poem becomes a real thing, not only as something material but also as an object to be appreciated for its reality. It is like a sculpture calling on us to find a pedestal and a setting to do it justice. These are not just existential speculations. Give a child a poster poem he likes and he will immediately look for a wall to put it on, and the more he loves it, the more carefully he will try to set it off. And, because he can actually handle it, he will also demonstrate the truth of another aesthetic proposition, namely, that art is co-creation. I have seen youngsters pouring over a *Pandora's Box*, passing around the posters as though they were things from a treasure chest, drawing pictures to illustrate the poems, and then making posters and poems which justify their own imaginations.

Working with the peculiar appeal of the poster format is the kind of *connection* that the on-going Pandora project offers. Pandora is not just an annual contest. It is a complex of Trans-Canada highways. One leads the student from his classroom to the eyes and ears of leading Canadian educators and poets. Beyond this road, the prospect of national publication links his thoughts to young people like himself throughout the country. Along these highways, he knows people are pulling for him, people who want his finest thoughts and feelings in as pure a form as he can manage. Nor does he have to feel that the odds are hopelessly against him. There are numerous junctions along the way where his poetry can find an audience-- classroom and library workshops; school newspapers; district, regional, and provincial educational publications;

local newspaper; educational TV channels; community TV channels; and so on (during its first year, Project Pandora stimulated the establishment of at least 29 new students poetry journals). The Pandora poet, then, is not an isolated soul throwing his words to the wind or to an instructor grading exercises in creative writing. He is in contact with a network of care stretching across his country.

The stimulus such connection can give to poetic expression in the schools is now obvious. It was certainly not obvious, however, when the CTE first announced Pandora. I joined all my colleagues on the Pandora organizing committee in publicly deploring our need to use a "competition" for encouraging poetic expression. Poetry is fundamentally a matter of highly personal self-expression; how gross, then, to make it a kind of Olympics. But we were dead wrong. Poetry is just as fundamentally communication. Of course young people want to express themselves but their objective is to be heard. They want someone out there to feel as they do and respond. And why not a poetry Olympics? The Greeks had them, and the result was the greatest literature of the western world. Our error, I think, shows we had all grown so accustomed to the split between the modern poet and his community, that we unconsciously idealized this situation. The overwhelming response of young people to Pandora has corrected our myopia. Personally speaking, however, I still feel rather ridiculous that it took Pandora to open my eyes to what my nine-year-old son shows me every day--the enormous hunger of human beings to communicate and to know that this has been achieved.

My remarks here are not really a digression. They are intended to underline a point that is both the most important to be made about Pandora and the one most likely to be dismissed: if those responsible for the cultural life of our young people dare to take their task seriously, they must enable youth to take part in the *communication* of imaginative life. Developing the "taste" of consumers of culture may seem perhaps to be a more realizable goal than developing creators of it. But even if librarians and English teachers make consumer discrimination their prime objective, they still should provide every opportunity they can for stimulating creative communication. I say this not only because doing leads to knowing. What is most important is that communication in its broadest sense means talk with a community, a dissolution of alienation. Canadian English teachers and librarians are especially likely to miss that larger meaning. For in addition to the general North American assumption that "true" poets are only interested in self-expression, Canadian educators cannot help being influenced by the unusually weak sense of community in this country. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Canada is the only nation in the literate world that denies to the vast majority of its young people access to their cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup> Full courses in Canadian culture are found in only a fraction of our schools; in every other modern nation, courses in the national culture are universal and compulsory. We do not have to live in such cold isolation from one another. Pandora has shown us another way. It is the active process of "letting be" reflected in every aspect of the Pandora project, even the use of posters to free the poems. We must give our young people the space and care they need to reach out to their country and strengthen its dreams. We must help them to help us turn and behold one another.

#### NOTES

1. In cooperation with educational channel 19 in Toronto, the Ontario Council of Teachers of English will be running a community Pandora contest through the Rainer Schwartz "Night Music" show.
2. I suggest that *Pandora's Box* be used for display materials to stimulate interest in poetry. The posters should be used in the general public library since most of them are too mature for the children's library. An additional copy might be kept on reserve for those who want to inspect the complete collection. The box is not suited for general circulation. *Pandora's Box* can be ordered from the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, c/o English Department, Glendon College, 2275 Bayview Avenue, Toronto (price \$13.50 including shipping).
3. Homer Hogan, "Who Cooked the Canadian Goose?", *Quill & Quire*, XL (October, 1974), 15, 25.

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#### COURAGE

Courage is when  
you ask your grandfather to show you his false teeth.

And when he does  
you wish you had never looked into his  
empty mouth.

Katherine Clarke, 8  
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