

[Back to Article](#)

Why we should toast Northrop Frye's 100th birthday: Knelman

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There will be no parade and no fireworks in Toronto on Saturday to mark the 100th anniversary of Northrop Frye's birth. You won't find his name on the Walk of Fame, and the government of Canada has not issued a stamp in recognition of his contribution. Indeed, the tone of understatement surrounding this occasion reflects the shy, somewhat awkward self-deprecating style of the man himself.

And if we conducted a random poll of people walking past the University of Toronto's Victoria College, where he presided for half a century, regularly delivering dazzling lectures without notes, I suspect a discouraging number of respondents would admit they had never heard of him.

Yet Frye looms in Toronto's history as the greatest oracle of our age. He had an intellectual mission and his theories about literature dominated the academic community all over the world. He also had a huge and revolutionary impact on Canadian society, way beyond the confines of the scholarly community.



It's the 100th anniversary of the birth of Northrop Frye, Canada's most distinguished literary critic, who died in 1991.

FRED PHIPPS PHOTO

For those of us who had the pleasure of attending his lectures and catching him in full rhetorical flight, the experience was a consciousness-expanding game-changer. Speaking in a subtle, nuanced, deadpan manner, Frye gave performances as thrilling in their way as the feats of great actors, musicians and athletes — merely by revealing what was in his head.

So why, two decades after his death, isn't he getting the kind of respect he deserves? Maybe it's because he never courted popularity, never tried to exploit his prestige and was never really comfortable with celebrity status.

Herbert Northrop Frye was born in Sherbrooke, Que., the son of a hardware merchant. When he was 8, the family moved to Moncton, N.B. Myopic and small, he had a lonely childhood. He became a voracious reader and dedicated pianist. He also took up typing, and arrived in Toronto in 1929 for an Underwood-sponsored contest. (He came in second.)

Frye became an ordained United Church minister, but before long took what he described as a permanent leave of absence from the church, of which he was extremely critical. By the end of the 1930s, he had become a lecturer at Victoria College.

At the peak of his career in the 1960s and '70s, Frye was a key figure in a golden age of big ideas in this city. Marshall McLuhan, another U of T English professor, had become an international celebrity with enigmatic revelations like "the medium is the message." Meanwhile, Jane Jacobs moved here from New York and brought her radical theories about urban planning to the front lines, leading a successful fight to stop the Spadina Expressway from being built.

Frye earned renown as an intellectual giant for *Fearful Symmetry*, his breakthrough book about the prophetic poet William Blake, and for *The Anatomy of Criticism*, which spelled out his big ideas about world literature: how every poem, play and novel had to be seen in terms of myths, legends and archetypes encompassing all languages and periods of human history. All of literature, in his view, was unified, a self-contained universe of the human imagination drawing from the same well of myths, metaphors, hopes, dreams, fears and symbols.

"No human society is too primitive to have some kind of literature," he explained when he delivered the Massey Lectures on CBC in 1962. "The only thing is that primitive literature hasn't yet become distinguished from other aspects of life: it's still embedded in religion, magic and social ceremonies. But we can see literary expression taking shape. . . . Stories are told about gods, and form a mythology. . . . Every form in literature has a pedigree, and we can trace its descent back to the earliest times."

The Anatomy of Criticism (1957) became the Bible of literary criticism, selling more than 100,000 copies. It made Frye an internationally revered guru, widely quoted, and it brought worldwide intellectual respectability to Toronto and Canada.

But for ordinary people who were not students of literature, this book was impenetrable, and Frye's ideas weren't as easy to simplify and popularize as those of McLuhan and Jacobs.

Consequently, Frye's insights into literature seeped through the entire culture in ways that most people weren't aware of. Shakespeare, Greek myths, inspirational poems and science fiction all had a place in his carefully orchestrated literary universe. But to Frye, the most dominant literary work of all was the Bible, to which attention must be paid if you hoped to understand anything at all.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Frye was more responsible than anyone else for transforming Toronto from Hogtown to Idea City, a centre of enlightenment. More than that, he was a pioneer, as was publisher Jack McClelland, in establishing that English Canada had a mythology of its own, which led to the rise of cultural nationalism and the astonishing explosion of literature and other forms of cultural expression.

For those who are not literary scholars but want to understand why Frye matters, the book to read is a slim, clear paperback, *The Educated Imagination* (his Massey Lectures).

In one brilliant passage, he compares the Tower of Babel story in the Bible to contemporary civilization, which he sees as a crazy ramshackle building that could come crashing down at any time.

We are reminded that in the Babel myth, before there were many confusing languages, there was only one universally understood language. And in Frye's universe, where every piece of literature is connected, that elusive common language is the language of human nature: "the language that makes both Shakespeare and Pushkin authentic poets, that gives a social vision to both Lincoln and Gandhi."

That's the kind of blinding insight that should make us light 100 candles and sing "Happy birthday, dear Norrie."

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