

Family

George Elliott Clarke remembers a summer with his father

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Aug. 26, 2011 8:46PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Aug. 26, 2011 8:53PM EDT



William Bill Clarke, right, sometime in the late 1950s in the Maritimes (photo: Clarke family)

Percy Faith's *Theme from A Summer Place* notwithstanding, summer is not only about place, but about time – how fast it goes, how vacations seem to end as quickly as they begin, how the job never lasts long enough to provide enough cash for back-to-school needs.

But summer is also about defying time, via dream and memory. And I've spent mine chasing down my father's ghost.

William "Bill" Clarke died in his native Halifax, aged 70, on Aug. 31, 2005. He left me only his 1959 diary. It is an apt gift, for it records the year of my conception.

When I finally read it in 2006, I wept: Its early-20s author was not the stern and stubborn adult that I had known. Instead, he is unsure of what to do with his life – beyond working at the Halifax train station, motorcycling, reading, painting, listening to music, seeing flicks and, most vitally, skirt-chasing.

I'd always known my father to be witty, charming, intellectual, debonair, industrious and, in his youth, a bit of a Sidney Poitier on a BMW. The diary shows him in his vivid complexity, but it

also reveals the poignancy of courtship in late-1950s Halifax, when segregation was subtle and “family planning” was considered as hush-hush as porn.

My father’s romances, set against this social context, cried out to me for novelization – a project I finally took on in earnest.

Why now? Before becoming a professor, I was a writer, and I remain a writer, and I pray to die a writer. But I earn my keep as a professor, and so I am in classrooms for eight months per annum.

So, for me, “summer,” stretching from May Day to Labour Day, is the time for research forays, conferencing – and extended writing, of essays, et cetera. It is time away from work, but it is work.

To attempt to enter the mood of 1959, the world in which my father dreamed and wooed, I bought a turntable and dug through a chunk of his LP records.

I soon became hip to the devastatingly seductive crooning of Johnny Mathis. Chances Are shows up on the 1950s compilation CDs, and rightly so. But Mathis’s treatment of *Then I’ll Be Tired of You*, backed with Percy Faith and his Orchestra (circa 1958), is a stunning mash-up of silky (almost surreal) strings and velvet voice.

The LPs germane to my research include vinyl by James Brown, The Platters, Frank Sinatra, and Harry Belafonte, not to mention Yma Sumac and The Red Army Ensemble (a purchase that marked my father’s protest against anti-communist hysteria).

My father also bought classical music records and Broadway-show albums – music that was atypical for a “coloured” Nova Scotian to enjoy. I figure he liked the bourgeois bohemianism of whistling Offenbach while carting folks’ luggage. That was his way of doing civil-rights work: to destroy stereotypes.

I’ve also explored some of the literature my father admired: James Baldwin – the most famous African-American writer of the day – sat in his bookcases beside the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming. Yet I’m pretty sure he preferred the wham-bam fantasies of Fleming to Baldwin’s analyses of sex and race conundrums. Why? Fleming is “fun”; Baldwin sings the blues.

Re-reading Fleming made me re-watch the classic Bond flicks, whose scenarios jibe with the “liberated” libido of Hugh Hefner and the “cool” cold-warrior style of John F. Kennedy, and are, of course, utterly antithetical to the preaching of leftist, black radicals Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (whom Baldwin admired).

My father’s predilections were shaped, in part, by men’s magazines, not only *Playboy*, but *True Adventures*, *Male* and *Men*, with their stories of “The Phony ‘Sex Doctors’ – How They Prey on Young Couples,” “Lost Village of Heathen Blondes” and “I Photographed Montreal’s Vice.” This literature was pulp non-fiction, and popular with men whose boyhoods entailed listening to radio news reports of the Second World War and reading comic books.

Thanks to my working vacation in time, I think I understand the novel's milieu – and the protagonist's psychology – better than when I began. And I know that I'm writing fiction, not a biography or a memoir.

If there was one place where I found myself most in tune with my father's sensibility, it was in Paris last June. He attended Labour College in Montreal in the summer of 1967, and studied economics, sociology, political science and history. He later dropped into the Playboy Club, Chicago. For my part, I participated in a leftist rally for the Front de Gauche. Then, I took in a show at the Crazy Horse cabaret. Thus, my socialism includes Champagne.

Before I return to the classroom, I should finish drafting *The Motorcyclist*, undertake a verse-crafting week abroad, and peruse one hefty tome, Ezra Pound's epic poem *The Cantos*. I admit that my choice is odd: Pound's noxious prejudices mar this work. But his economic analysis, cranky as it is, offers profound, poetic resonance nowadays when credit is suspicious of debt.

One of my last conversations with my father was about financial deregulation and how it tends to allow the devious few to swindle the too-trusting many. We disagreed about many things, but he was right about that.

George Elliott Clarke teaches Canadian literature at the University of Toronto. His newest book is *Red* (Gaspereau Press), a collection of poetry.