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Calgary and Banff, October 2007

Somehow, during my four years as an undergraduate in central New York state, I never made it to Canada. So attending the Wordfest international writing festival, in Calgary and Banff, Alberta, was my first visit to the country. It was a strange combination of being in a foreign country and having to remind myself that I wasn't in America anymore. There is a slight accent to Canadian English: they really do pronounce "about" as *aboot*, they really do say "ay" every once in a while. Their currency – the coins familiar and often mixed in with our own – is more coin based with a \$1 and \$2 coin; they were rather proud that recently, the value of the Canadian dollar surpassed the American, for the first time in about thirty years. Making cash purchases was one of the times that I remembered I was in another country.

While other members of our group mentioned other cities I haven't seen – San Francisco, Portland – to me, Calgary strongly resembled New York City. From within the downtown, where we stayed, the tall buildings and gridded streets seemed quite familiar. From within, you couldn't see that the downtown was only about twenty blocks across, that every day when we walked from our hotel to the conference location, we were walking more or less the width of the entire downtown. I would also look down an alley between buildings and, rather than see the dim, grimy alley expected in New York or Boston, I saw light reflecting off polished marble! Calgary was quiet too, not in a ghost-town way, but it didn't have the constant white noise I have come to expect in cities. Trains ran by along 7th Avenue every few minutes, but traffic, people, etc. weren't overbearingly loud. We went out one night after midnight and it did feel then that the city itself had gone to sleep.

Learning a new city takes a few days. As soon as I began to really know my way around Calgary, to have seen more than the route between the hotel and conference halls, we were on a bus to Banff after three days (where we would only spend two). Driving west across Alberta took us past the location of the 1988 winter Olympic games, through the region where Edward Zwick filmed *The Legends of the Fall*, and into the Canadian Rockies. I couldn't stop watching the mountains approach; as soon as I thought we must be almost there, they can't get any bigger ... they did. The small ones, the ones that didn't break the treeline, the one we hiked, were a mile up; the snow-capped peaks, which surround Banff on all sides, approach two miles high. These mountains made Calgary's skyscrapers look like, well, Phoenix. Banff is ultimately a tourist town, but it's small, cozy, very log-cabin and aware of the wilderness. One nice thing was that it was cold, almost fifty degrees colder than Tempe: in the thirties at night, low fifties by day. And yet a waitress told us that you don't really mind the forty-below during winter! I didn't believe her.

The difference between a conference and a festival like Wordfest is that the former is for writers, the latter about writers, a celebration of them. I didn't expect the

difference, and was actually referring to Wordfest as a conference until I got there. But it makes a difference. Ultimately, Wordfest is six days of readings by authors from Canada and around the world, but there are not workshops for attendees, or craft talks; the Q&A sessions and panels are more about an author. I wouldn't say one is better than another, but as a writer, the conference style seems more useful. Though at the same time, hearing brilliant writers read from their work can be just as inspiring as a workshop. The only negative aspect of this trip for me, other than having so little time in each city, was that some of the authors weren't great, and the evening readings were mostly two hours long, four, five, sometimes six authors in a row. Of course, when you have this many authors in one festival, they aren't all going to be brilliant, and listening to the bad ones has its own kind of inspiration, and they make the good ones even more brilliant.