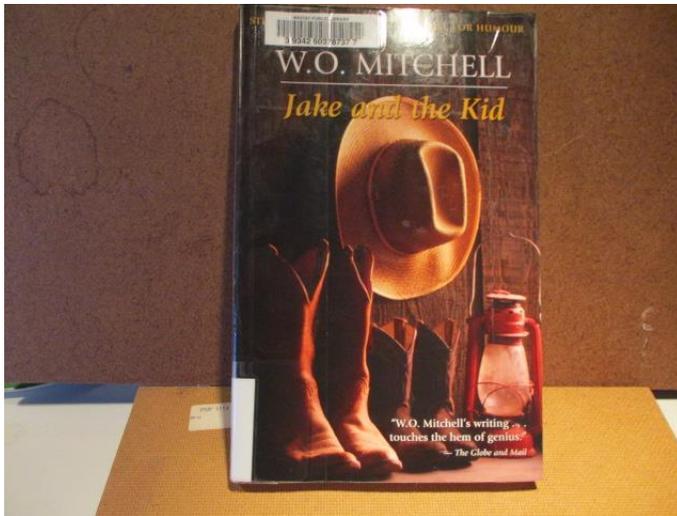


Jake and the Kid

By Rod Fraser



W. O. Mitchell, a writer of humorous stories about life in the west, was born in Weyburn, Saskatchewan in 1914. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree and a teaching certificate from the University of Alberta in 1943. Then he taught high school for a few years, while writing short stories and novels.

In 1948, Mitchell moved to Toronto to become the fiction editor for Maclean's magazine. His literary reputation was built on the novel, *Who has seen The Wind*, which was published in 1947. It sold over a million copies. *Jake and the Kid* followed a few years

later. It was initially written for radio broadcast in the 1950s. Then in 1961, Mitchell published many of the stories in a book. It won the '*Stephen Leacock Award*' for humor.

Mitchell later served as a professor of creative writing and writer-in-residence at various Canadian universities, finally moving to Alberta in his later years, where he died in 1998.



I was aware of W.O. Mitchell in my younger years, but I never read his books. What a pity. His stories are delightful, beguiling and humorous.

My error was remedied recently, when walking through the stacks at my local library, I came across *Jake and the Kid*. It looked promising. I decided to give it a try.

It didn't hurt that it looked like a novel. If I had known it was a book of short stories, I might have given it a pass. It's often too much work to learn a host of new characters, all for a story of ten to twenty pages.

In this instance, it wasn't a problem. W.O. Mitchell wrote the stories with all the same characters. Jake, the Kid, his Mom and a number of colorful locals were a part of each and every story.

The setting remained constant as well. All the stories took place on a farm in Saskatchewan (during the 1940s and 50s), or in the nearby village of Crocus. The local school at Rabbit Hill was often a part of the narrative as well.

The book has 191 pages, divided into thirteen different stories. I will tell you about one of them, and leave you to read the others when you buy the book (or borrow it from your library).



The Kid's father was away in the army during the war years, so he does not show up in any of the stories, save one, when he briefly speaks to his family from Europe by short-wave radio.

Interestingly, as the stories continued on into the 1950s, the Kid's father was never mentioned. The war was over. The father should have returned home. What gives? An explanation was warranted, but none was provided.

The only man on the farm was Jake, who is the hired hand, as well as a close confidant and father figure to the Kid. Jake was too old for the army. He tried to enlist, but they turned him away

The Kid's mother played an important, but minor role in the stories, which largely revolved around the relationship between Jake and the Kid. With that as

background, I will now move on to tell you about one of those interesting tales.

The Golden Jubilee Citizen

A constant theme in this book of W.O. Mitchell's stories is the friction between Jake and Miss Henschbaw, the local schoolmarm at Rabbit Hill. As the Kid told it, Miss Henschbaw "was a stickler for the truth." Even Jake said, "She stickled worse than anybody in Crocus."

You see, Jake didn't see history as series of well-known facts, but rather stories that enlivened the past. And that bothered Miss Henschbaw. She got her history from books, which showed the dates of events, and who did them. Here is an example of how this played out.

Jake told the Kid he rounded up "Looie Riel" in years past, and forced him to "say uncle three times—once in English, once in Cree and the third time in French." All this to save Canada and make it what it is today.

Now Miss Henschbaw didn't hold with Jake's version. She allowed that the Canadian government sent 8,000 soldiers to the West in 1884 and easily defeated Riel's ragtag followers. And anyhow, Jake wasn't born when all this happened.

Well the Kid liked Jake's version better, and even

more so as it was embellished as it was repeated. Who could blame him? Jake was his hero, his surrogate father and constant companion around the farm, while they did chores and chatted each day.

With this as background, Miss Henschbaw organized an essay contest in town to celebrate Saskatchewan's Golden Jubilee, this being fifty years as a province of Canada. Participants were to write their essays, pick out their choice for *Crocus' Golden Jubilee Citizen*, and explain the reasons why.

The Kid was working on his essay, but "it's not so easy to get your words to pull together in harness, just the way you want them." In short, he was stumped. Who should he choose? When he asked for help, Jake told him, "when they tell you to pick your Golden Jubilee Citizen, I figger they mean somebody a person wouldn't think of offhand."

Around about March of that year, after thinking about his choice for a month or two, the Kid found the perfect candidate—Jake Trumper:

"The essay just rolled like tumbleweed. I put down how Jake could tell the weather and witch water wells. I told how he could call mallards and geese, moose, deer, and pigs. I wrote how he could play the mandolin and sing 'My Wild Rose of the Prairies' so you had a lump in your throat—how he was the fastest runner in the whole

Northwest in his socking feet."

"It took five pages to tell the way he saved Chief Weasel Tail and his whole band of South Blackfoots from starving to death."

"I had her crackling and the pages scorching with the awful prairie fire of 1910 when he lost his horse 'Buttermilk'. The time he killed the Grizzly in the Kananaskis Lakes ... [with] his bare axe.... I filled a whole scribbler with Jake."

The Kid copied the essay out twice, one for Miss Henschbaw and another copy for *The Crocus Breeze*. He sent it to the newspaper first and then submitted the other copy to Miss Henschbaw.

At the end of the next school day, Miss Henschbaw told the Kid he would get full credit for his essay, but Jake Trumper "had been barely born by the time Louis Riel was hanged. He could hardly be a dignified symbol for our fifty years of history."

As she started to elaborate, the Kid stopped her cold, "He sure as aitch could! Maybe he doesn't smoke House of Senate cigars an' eat Winnipeg goldeye three times a day, an'—an' spit into gold goboons an' wipe his mush with a silk napkin—but he is the greatest livin' human bein' I ever knew in my whole life."

When *The Crocus Breeze* published its Golden

Jubilee Edition a month or so later, the Kid's essay wasn't included. Instead, there was an editorial penned to honour the 'hired man', the foundation on which the West was built. *The Crocus Breeze* went on to say:

"This man sits at the same table as his employer, and his employer's family, enjoying a social equality unknown in other parts of the world.... He is a haywire mechanic, veterinarian, stock man... who answers to the name of hardtail, sod-buster, stubble-jumper, hoozier or John."

"You know him. [The] Crocus' Golden Jubilee Citizen is Jake Trumper."



Jake and the Kid visited *The Crocus Breeze* the following Thursday so Jake could thank Chet Lampert for the kind words in his editorial. After the usual pleasantries, Chet told him:

The idea for you being Crocus' Golden Jubilee Citizen came from the Kid. Then Miss Henschbaw thought about it and took the matter in hand. She wrote the editorial, so if you want to show your appreciation, you'll have to thank her.

April 30, 2019