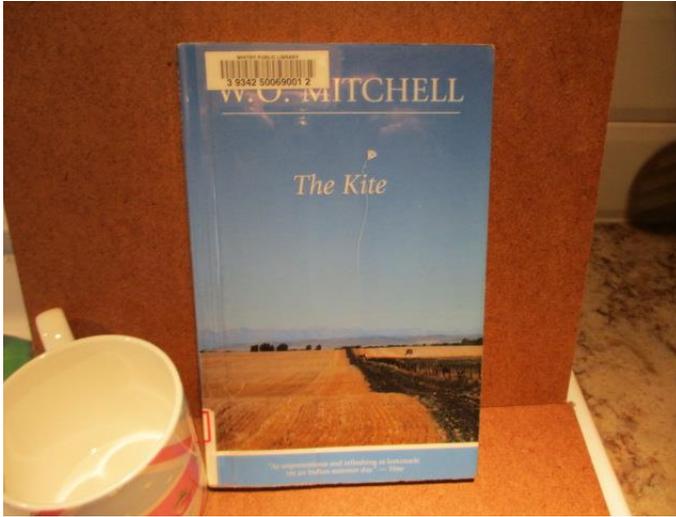


# The Kite

By Rod Fraser

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AFTER MY EARLIER review of W.O. Mitchell's book of short stories called *Jake and the Kid*, I decided to try one of his novels. I chose *The Kite* because the dust jacket looked promising and it was only 215 pages.

For those who are regular readers of my articles, you will know I am drawn to shorter books. It has to do with age. My eyes get tired easily and holding a heavy book in my lap cramps my hands after an hour or two.

I should also point out that longer books (and

articles) tend to have a lot of filler. Since getting to the point can be a virtue, writers should eliminate unneeded pages from their books, and unnecessary paragraphs from their articles. If this sounds like advice from *The Elements of Style* (reviewed earlier), you have guessed correctly.

I USUALLY START my book reviews with a few paragraphs describing the author's life. I did so for W.O. Mitchell earlier when I reviewed *Jake and the Kid*. There wasn't a lot to say.

Unlike other authors, such as Farley Mowat, where there are hundreds of articles to celebrate and denigrate his books, character and antics, it seems W.O. Mitchell lived a quiet life, often at universities where he tread with a small footprint as writer-in-residence.

I suspect it's partly a difference in personality. Farley was a shameless self-promoter and W.O. Mitchell wasn't. Still it's a pity. Mitchell is a fine writer and deserves far more recognition than he has received.

*THE KITE IS* a novel that tells the tale of a jaded journalist from the East, David Lang, who travels to the foothills of Alberta to write a story about the oldest man in Canada. The subject of the article is John Felix Sherry (generally known as Daddy

Sherry), who lives in Shelby, Alberta. He will be one hundred and eleven years old at his upcoming birthday.

This story takes place in the early 1960s, a few years before Canada's Centennial. Everyone in town knows Daddy is older than Canada, and they intend to make his birthday a memorable occasion.

Daddy was born in 1849. He was alive at the time of "the Red River Rebellion, the Saskatchewan uprising, the Klondike gold rush, [and] the Boer War". David Lang hoped for a good interview. With a bit of luck, Daddy might be lucid, talkative and informed on key events from his past. If so, David's article would be a success, his readers happy and his publisher pleased.

On the days following his arrival, David introduced himself around town and met Daddy for a brief, but inconclusive interview. Those in town who knew Daddy well, told David not to expect too much. Daddy had his good days and bad days. Sometimes he was lucid and interesting; other times not so much. It often depended on whether he felt engaged with life on any particular day.

David soon moved from the local hotel to a boarding house managed by Mrs. Clifford. This was more comfortable. Mrs. Clifford lived there with her widowed daughter (Helen Maclean) and her young

grandson (Keith Maclean). Helen was a high school teacher in town and Mrs. Clifford took in boarders to have an income of her own.

One of the reasons Daddy wasn't keen on David's article, or his upcoming birthday celebration, was his frame of mind. He had decided to give up on life altogether. He became melancholy, arranged a meeting with the undertaker and soon had a touch of bronchitis. The doctor became concerned about possible pneumonia.

Strangely it was Daddy's young friend, Keith Maclean, who explained to David that Daddy planned to die deliberately, out of stubbornness. Keith told him, "I figure most of the time he will do anything he sets his mind to."

Keith and David decide on a plan. On their next visit to Daddy, they would talk up the beauty of spring and the promise of a lovely summer. Keith told Daddy, "This isn't the time of year I'd pick [to die]. I'd wait until harvest—fall—when the frost had killed everything. I sure wouldn't pick spring."

"Look at all the stuff you get with spring," Keith added, "Chicks and calves and colts—gophers coming out again and crocuses." Daddy perked up and considered Keith's comments.

Then David told Daddy about the trip he, Helen

and Keith were planning to Paradise Valley, Daddy's favorite place.

The next morning, Miss Tinsley, Daddy's caregiver phoned Helen Maclean. She told her how Daddy was out of bed early, irascible as ever. "Where'd you put my pants and my shawl," Daddy demanded, "She's spring out! Spring! ... Man can't go and die in spring.... Ain't decent."

On Saturday, with Helen, Keith, and the miraculously restored Daddy in the car, David drove to Paradise Valley. Helen directed him up to a small cabin "in a clearing high with cured grass and the stalks of wild delphinium, here and there a stand of black birch or cottonwood."

Daddy had a good look at the cabin and said, "Ramrod and me built her in the fall of '85—God he was good with an axe—couldn't get a cigarette paper between his mortises."

"A few hundred paces back of the cabin, they came to ... a small plot embraced by a low rail fence ... [with] two small crosses within." Daddy was visibly moved and took a moment "to commune with his dead".

Later Keith walked to the creek to do some fishing and Daddy went to the car, crawled in the back seat, placed a pillow under his head and had a

nap.

Helen and David were left on their own to chat and make sense of it all. Helen told him Daddy owned the land in Paradise Valley and Keith would inherit it when Daddy passed. She said, "Beyond loving Keith [as a friend and companion], Daddy has another reason for leaving it to him."

Daddy lived with a woman for a time, by the name of Victoria Binestettner. She was half Indian and died in childbirth. Her baby, Sally, eventually married into the Clifford family.

"All that makes Daddy ... Keith's great-great grandfather ... and my great grandfather," Helen told David. She added this was not commonly known in town, "Daddy told me when I was Keith's age .... He made me swear ... not to tell my mother." That explained the crosses, Helen continued. One was for Ramrod and the other for Victoria, Daddy's love from long ago.

WITH THE UPCOMING birthday celebration for Daddy only a week or so away, Keith asked David what kind of a present he should get Daddy. David suggested Keith try and make a present with his own hands.

Soon enough, David and Keith were working one evening making a large kite which Keith presented

to Daddy on his birthday. A few days later, Daddy was out in a field behind the power house with David and Keith, to try out his new kite.

“Quit your running boy,” Daddy said, “She’s sailin’ good now.” Daddy took the string. The kite climbed “persistently with no altitude loss whatsoever, yearning ever upwards.” Daddy said, “That there, outa all the birthdays I ever had—an’ outa all the presents I ever got on `em—is the nicest one of all. Thanks.”

THESE ARE JUST one or two of the lovely anecdotes that form part of this book. It is a wonderful eclectic look at the elderly, the young and small town life. I don’t think it will spoil things if I tell you David Lang and Helen Maclean are in love by the end of this novel. David isn’t going to remain in the East much longer. I expect he’s planning to make Shelby his home.

September 30, 2019