

Eric Gansworth--NAIBA Awards Remarks

Thank you, members of the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association, for supporting my novel with this lovely award. Please accept my apologies for not attending in person, but a family emergency is preventing me from being away. I hope Jonathon Welch accepts my apology for asking him to do me the incredible favor of sharing these remarks with you. It is perhaps fitting, though, that Jonathon is the person delivering my words on this occasion. While we know there are many turning points in the road any writer takes to finally arrive at a professional career, I can trace several of those points directly to moments in Jonathon's amazing store, Talking Leaves . . . Books. Through my youth, the only book store I had ever known was a Waldenbooks in the mall closest to the reservation where I was raised. By the age of 14, I would discover The Book Corner, an independent bookseller in Niagara Falls, where I made some initial special orders, but before that, I distinctly remember looking at the Waldenbooks Poetry section and thinking: "there have to be more poets than William Shakespeare, Robert Frost, Rod McKuen, and Suzanne Sommers." Yet, every month, I would check again, and those were the only names that surfaced.

When I was 18, I was introduced to Talking Leaves. It was as if I had walked into the bookstore of my imagination, including an entire shelf, reaching above my head, filled with the work of poets whose names I was just beginning to learn in college: Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Patchen, Stafford, Bukowski. On one wall, there was a large poster of Charles Bukowski and a woman who was clearly a prostitute nearing the end of her tenure. Below it, was a small, neatly hand lettered sign: Charles and Diana. Suzanne Sommers was decidedly absent from that poetry shelf.

Though the Charles and Diana sign has obviously disappeared by now, I realize, in retrospect, that Talking Leaves was like my very own, private cultural Google, decades before Google was invented. I'd been a fan of Laurie Anderson since junior high, and while in college I saw her film, Home of the Brave, where there's a quote from and an appearance by a man named William S. Burroughs. Anderson noted that Burroughs claimed that "Language is a virus from outer space."

I had no idea who Burroughs was, at the time, but I went into Talking Leaves a week or so later to ask if anyone in the store knew that name. Talking Leaves was the dream job for many of my English Major cohorts but we were all afraid to apply for jobs there because every single person working in the store seems so much smarter than any of us. In the store, I found easily a dozen books by William S. Burroughs. Taking all the cash in my pocket, I bought six of them right then and there. These were the same physical books I would use in developing my graduate work on Burroughs and his language virus theme, the same books, I would later have him sign for me at his house in Lawrence, Kansas. I spent my pocket empty that day because I was always afraid that Talking Leaves really had been all in my

imagination, that I would one day show up and there would only be a brick wall where I was insisting a store had been.

I'm a fair distance beyond the age of 18 these days, but even a few years ago, I got to thinking, out of nowhere, that I would love to see a nice glossy coffee table book about Kenneth Anger and his experimental films. Talking Leaves is a few miles down Main Street from the college where I'm employed, so I stopped in on my way home, having no idea if such a book existed, yet there it was, on the shelf, waiting. It happened again about a year ago. This time I was jonesing for an illustrated history of Wacky Packages.

Where else might you find the illustrated Kenneth Anger, a history of Wacky Packages and most of William S. Burroughs' oeuvre, but in a store with an independent spirit, wildly eclectic, veined with its owner's bold vision of a bookstore's possibilities? Maybe Talking Leaves, and all such wonderful independent stores throughout the country are not like Google. Maybe, each is more like a Magic 8 Ball, but one where every surface of the 20 sided die says the same thing: "You May Rely On It." Thank you for this award and for a lifetime of delivering the best answers floating to the top of the murky indigo liquid that is modern publishing.