

Library interview with Dr. Richard Merritt

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Library Board Member

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library board and staff are interested in exploring the special place books, reading, storytelling and libraries hold in the hearts of our community members. The power of the written and spoken word, the enchantment of libraries and childhood memories of time spent with books, creates a profound tapestry of emotions and experiences.

This questionnaire prompts introspection and reflection, offering a unique lens through which to examine the bond between readers and their connection to books, storytelling and libraries.

Watch this space for interviews with an array of interesting community members.

This week's Niagara-on-

the-Lake Library questionnaire is with local historian Dr. Richard D. Merritt, the author of *On Common Ground* and *Training for Armageddon*.

An ophthalmologist by profession, he has had a lifelong interest in Niagara's history. He is currently writing a narrative biography of Six Nations Chief George Henry Martin Johnson, Teyonhehkwon, father of celebrated poet Pauline Johnson. In 2017 he was named a Living Landmark by the Niagara Foundation for his contributions to heritage preservation in Niagara.

Q. What kinds of books are you reading now?

Usually I read a book connected with my research, and at the same time something completely unrelated. Right now it just happens to be *Tecumseh's Bones* (by Guy St-Denis. I just

finished *Dead Man's Wake* (by Paul Doiron), a murder mystery set in Maine. I'm also enjoying *What I Wish I Said*, by local author Jaime Watt, a columnist for the Toronto Star. The various chapters begin with what he wrote on a particular subject, followed by his 'second thoughts' about the same subject.

Q. Do you remember what it was like when you learned to read?

I grew up in London, Ont., but my family was originally from the Niagara area. Later I returned to my roots, practised medicine and raised a family with my wife, the late Dr. Nancy Smith. I first became interested in local history as a young boy while visiting my great-great aunts and uncle who lived in the family home in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and

they would fill my imagination with stories of the old days.

I have very early memories of my mother reading to me a little book with sewn words on cloth pages called *Three Little Kittens*. Later, I was enthralled by my maternal grandfather reading out loud, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* as well as *Treasure Island*. When I started reading on my own I enjoyed Enid Blyton's adventure books, and of course the Hardy Boys series. I especially remember *Paddle to the Sea* by Holling B. Hollings — I really loved that book and I still do!

I also recall some books my father liked — the *British Chum's Boy's Annuals*.

My dad had enjoyed them in the '20s and '30s and happily passed them on to me. They were big books, on cheap paper but they had some colourful illustrations and wonderful stories that boys could relate to.

Q. What do you remember about going to the library?

There was a large downtown library in London, Ont. However, I don't remember going to the library so much

to take out books as there was a lending library in our public school. At about 12 years of age, an aunt gave me a family tree and that really piqued my interest in family and local history. I started visiting the local history section of the local library — the first of many such expeditions to reference libraries in Canada and the United States since. Of course, the Internet and digitized records have revolutionized such research practices.

Q. Where does your love of reading come from?

I have to say that when I was growing up, the education system in Ontario was pretty remarkable. When I think of the literature we were exposed to — Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway, Conrad and so forth as part of the high school curriculum — I still read them over again. However, when I got into pre-med at Western U, I simply had no time to read anything other than scientific/medical textbooks through my 10 plus years of post-high school education. Occasionally I'd pick up a James Bond paperback just for diversion, but

quite simply I didn't have time for casual reading.

After I finally finished my formal education and became a practising ophthalmologist, I had a bit more time to pursue further my interest in the rich heritage of the Niagara area. In the meantime, my late wife, who was also an ophthalmologist, joined a book club. She would come home with recommendations which I would occasionally read as well.

Q. What do you like about libraries?

I use the inter-library loan service, which allows me to obtain books and microfilm tapes from other libraries. This has been extremely helpful. I have also spent many hours on our library's microfilm reader to review the library's extensive collection of microfilms on local subjects. Fortunately, Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa has now digitized many of their old microfilm tapes as well as many other records in their collection and these are now readily available on the Internet, which I can access at home.

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