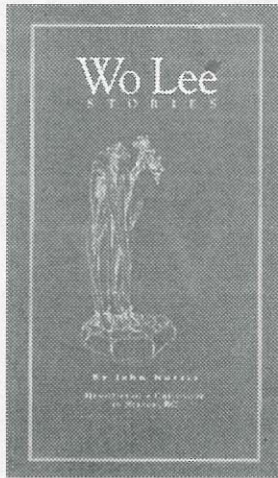


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# Wo Lee Stories

John Norris, *Wo Lee Stories*, Twa Corbies Press, New Denver, 1997.

**N**elson, it seems, is much, more than just a collection of buildings and roads. Like a grey-haired matriarch summoning grand-children to her bedside, the city seems to be drawing the best from her inhabitants for her 100th birthday. In *Wo Lee Stories*, author John Norris writes eloquently of a child growing up in the Nelson of the 1920s and 30s.



Originally self-published by Norris in 1986, the collection sold out two consecutive printings before being re-published by New Denver's Twa Corbies Publishing House in June this year. Norris, a New Denver resident for more than 30 years, deliciously evokes the flavour of early childhood memory, with its mélange of tactile, visual, aural, and olfactory impressions. In the foreword, he reminds us that the act of remembering by definition subtly alters the experiences which form the

basis of memory, as his quotation from Oliver Goldsmith alludes: "O memory, thou fond deceiver..." The resulting childhood anecdotes, both like and unlike what actually happened, form what he calls the 'memory world', in which the events recalled "might just as well have happened to someone else, or be fictional and not have happened at all." Yet it is this very quality which makes memoirs enduringly popular and universal in appeal. Readers are

quite willing to imagine that the memories are their own. In this, Norris persuades us quite successfully.

In the title story, Chinese gardener Wo Lee transforms the simple washing of vegetables into a magical act for a young John Norris and his brother. Norris walks a literary tightrope, sensitively relating the condescension displayed toward the Chinese, reminding us that we were not always quite so broad-minded a community. Then there is Old Mother Mossback, a poor woman living in a Fairview shack who becomes a mysterious character to imaginative children. Norris captures beautifully the childish apprehension and shyness of his first few days at Hume School, whose hallways and grounds introduce him to an intimidating new world. Illustrating how forcefully first impressions often remain in memory, his sketches of teacher Miss Curwen and principal Stallwood

are warm with life and breath. If there's a flaw here, it's in Norris' occasional tendency to intrude his self-con-sciousness into the narrative flow. Still, his prose deftly recreates the aura of mystery so well known to children. "At the top end of Baker were the big houses of merchants... Their yards were perfectly groomed but uninhabited, fenced by stone and iron... Their doors and windows seemed to look out less on the world than to turn lace-curtained backs to it." *Wo Lee Stories* presents a picture postcard of a time when life moved at a more leisurely, graceful pace. When etiquette meant tipping a hat to a lady, or wearing the proper gloves to tea. When Nelson, though just around the Gyro bluff, was another world, the domain of 'Uptowners' ever so slightly more sophisticated than the farming families in Fairview. A time when Fairview was populated by almost an equal number of cattle and chickens as people. To his credit, Norris doesn't shy away from the period's darker secrets, as in the case of a Boy Scout troop leader who molests the boys in his charge. Still, the overall tone is one of fond remembrance. In his own words: "...in spite of the occasional harshness and injustice, the frequent ignorance that surrounded me, it is the pervading gentleness of that world I most remember." ♦♦♦

view

by Arthur Joyce

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## Photo collection a treat for the eyes

Continued from page 9

David R. Gluns, who snaps awesome outdoor scenes, is the principal photographer. Thornton also has some dynamite shots, as well as a number of other talented local artists.

The layout of the book does justice to its content. Tasteful, clean and exquisitely decorated, it shows the exceptional photos to their best advantage and presents the eloquently written accompaniment, by DeGrace, in small, easy-to-read chunks that my eye soaks up.

DeGrace and Thornton have done a superb job capturing all the details that are the most delightful

about this area of the world and don't leave anything out. Not only do they embrace the charming details of so many of the picturesque communities tucked in our valleys, but they present the industrial towns of Trail and Castlegar at their best, and the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre in New Denver is not neglected. Mountains, waterways, wildlife, provincial parks, alpine meadows and even the Kettle Valley Railway attest to everything that is exceptional about the West Kootenay wilderness, in every season.

The book is exceptionally well-priced at \$21.95 and makes a great keepsake for people who live here, or a reminder to those who don't of what they're missing. ♦♦♦

**PETE'S T.V.**

...in spite of the occasional harshness and injustice, the frequent ignorance that surrounded me, it is the pervading gentleness of that world I most remember. ♦♦♦

**Infinity**

**Pete's T.V.**

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