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## Memories of Mudtown

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Source: ANDREW ARMITAGE

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"Everywhere is beyond Mudtown except Mudtown itself which doesn't exist anymore"

Over the past four decades I must have passed through Mudtown 10,000 times or more--and never gave it much thought. For those who may not know, it's that line of houses nestled under the escarpment, overlooking what was once Owen Sound's eastside factory district.

A now legendary place, it was once the home of Metis fishermen, docks, foundries, factories and poor working stiffs. A wishfully forgotten corner of town, neglected, awash in clay brought down by rains, it is also home to Rob Rolfe, a retired Toronto librarian, labour leader, and poet.

Rob and Patti live in what must have been a manager's house in the heart of Mudtown, an old home surrounded by overage spruce trees. Rob writes there, Patti paints. In 2011, I reviewed Saugeen, Rolfe's second volume of poetry, a collection so striking that much of it stayed in my mind.

Beyond Mudtown (Quattro Books, \$18), Rolfe's new third volume of poetry also includes some prose poems. I read the manuscript several times over the course of a long day sitting at a picnic table, no one around, chanting many lines aloud to hear how they sounded. Rob largely writes in triplets, five to a poem. Gentle, wise, observant, they are about memory, individual and collective, not just of Owen Sound's east shore but the Peninsula, a place where the poet is intimately connected.

Now, let's taste Rob Rolfe's poetry. Branningham Grove, a large Victorian mansion on the eastern outskirts of town was once a "sporting house" run by Meg Matthews. Imagine a sailor leaving the docks in Mudtown:

"he climbs  
the east hill  
and walks  
to a grove  
of butternut  
trees for  
two hours  
of effortless  
sex back  
on the ship  
the faint

memory of  
her flesh  
will unravel  
his mind"

I have a particular fondness for the old Grey County courthouse, a sadly aging place where for the past many decades, artists have worked alone in silence and pleasure. This is Rob Rolfe's poem (or is it a paean?) for that place.

"The courthouse and jail slumber in the sun south of St. Mary's Hill. Judges once issued verdicts from the dais at the front of this courtroom, sealing the fates of inmates who entered from jail through that padlocked door. Its walls are foreboding, but the jail has been shut down and the inmates are gone. The courthouse, with its high ceilings and echoing halls, has a full docket of ghosts of its own."

Rob's partner, Patti Waterfield, works out of a studio in the old courthouse. It is the same one that Stan Gadziola once occupied in the 1970s, a time when he often reported hearing footsteps, clankings and chains being dragged up and down stairs.

Now, you too can spend an evening with Rob Rolfe. The poet will be at the Ginger Press on Thursday at 7 p.m., reading from his new book, *Beyond Mudtown*. Rob will be joined by singer-songwriter Larry Jensen. See you there!

On a recent day, when I dropped by Rob and Patti's to pick up a manuscript, Patti Waterfield had just come back from a chanterelle hunt with Bill Proud, one of Owen Sound's noted field foragers for wild mushrooms. At just about the same time, Langdon Cook's *The Mushroom Hunters: On the Trail of an Underground America* (Ballantine Books, \$30) came in for review.

For nearly three decades, I lived with a mycologist, a botanist with a deep and abiding love for fungi. Before meeting Lorraine Brown, I didn't know a puffball from a morel. But I quickly learned and so did many people in Owen Sound and Grey and Bruce counties. Soon, Lorraine was leading forays while becoming a mentor to a whole new generation of fungi fans-- people like Bill, Freeman Boyd, Russ Hamilton, Deane Atherton, et. al.

We forayed from coast to coast, picking psilocybe in the maritimes, tracking down morels in the wild around Whitehorse, hunting matsutake in Mexico, roaming the fields and forests locally for *Lactarius deliciosus*, King Boletes, and Old Men of the Woods. For many years, each fall brought us back to a spot in an old growth forest where I would bravely sample *Gymnopilus spectabilis*, "Big Laughing Jim," one of the few Ontario mushrooms that will put a grin on anyone's face brave enough to digest it.

As the years passed, a large collection of field guides, mushroom magazines and memoirs took more and more shelves. And Langdon Cook's new book has its honoured place among them. Cook, who lives in Seattle and is the author of *Fat of the Land: Adventures of a 21st Century Forager*, has written a book that is equal parts a trip through the eyes of commercial collectors, a good natured history of fungi, and a gonzo travelogue.

Fungi are the fruit of fire and rain, a complex world that includes the planet's largest living thing, an Armillaria. And Cook's

book is about those who search them out, itinerant mushroom hunters, a rough lot who live on the road and in the wilderness, picking and filling five gallon plastic pails full of boletes, morels, matsutake,

chanterelles, and their like--some \$40 million worth in the 1990s.

Cook's guide is Doug, a circuit picker who follows the wild mushroom trail year-round, from Washington State to northern California, up to the Cascades and often into the Yukon. Yet, there is another side to the book, one of a culinary nature, offering us wise advice on how to pick, clean, prepare and cook wild edibles. The author also takes his readers on a visit to the Boyne City Morel Festival, a spring time affair in northern Michigan which we once attended. And adds a few words on the "Tragedy of the Commons," the loss of public land where 'schrooms grow. Don't pick in a National Park unless you want a large fine and loss of your mushrooms.

Frost has not yet come to Grey and Bruce. The woods are still alive with fungi and Mudtown comes to the Ginger Press this coming week.