Mr. Chancellor: I am honored today to introduce Patrick Lane, that rarest of writers, one who has excelled in not one but in three genres: poetry, memoir, and fiction. Even rarer, perhaps, is the esteem Patrick Lane inspires in his fellow writers. His colleagues here at the University of Victoria, where he taught from 1991 to 2004, describe him as “the best of what we have in this country.” His generosity as a teacher and mentor inspired so many published poems that these were gathered into a 1994 collection entitled Because You Loved Being a Stranger: 55 Poets Celebrate Patrick Lane.

But Patrick Lane is no coterie poet. His lifelong quest to find himself “among the things of the world,” a life-journey that has led him through pain and peril as well as wonder and joy, began in 1939 in Sheep’s Creek, near Nelson, in British Columbia’s Interior. By the time his first collection of poetry appeared in 1965, he had made a living as a common laborer, truck driver, cat skinner, chokerman, boxcar loader, working in sawmill crews and construction gangs across Western Canada.

His was a new, original, even startling voice, breaking into the Canadian literary world of the early 1960s. He wrote from and about a previously invisible Canada, of logging camps and mills and mining towns, of poverty, of cruelty, of ignorance, of what my colleague Nicholas Bradley has called “the bleak remote regions of the heart and mind.” But this bleakness was matched equally by his finely-honed craft and an intense, numinous connection to the natural world and to the landscape.

As a young man, Patrick Lane had looked in vain for evidence of this landscape, this place and its people, in the books he devoured. “The town I lived in wasn’t mentioned, the valley wasn’t, even the mountains didn’t exist,” he wrote. “The Monashee Range an absence, the Cariboo country non-existent. There was no evidence to suggest we were real.”

Patrick Lane has made the Monashees and the Cariboo real through his poetry and prose. He has mapped this place—the landscapes and men and women and the stories of British Columbia—and written us into existence in the great book of world literature.

Patrick Lane’s own dark journey from the interior has touched many lives. His 2004 award-winning memoir, There Is A Season, is set in his North Saanich garden after he spent time in a treatment centre for alcoholism. This memoir, combining Lane’s unflinching self-scrutiny and his meticulous eye for the
natural world, has become a touchstone for thousands of people around the world recovering from addiction and for those who love them. Over the years, Patrick Lane has published 28 books of poetry, 2 novels, 2 works of non-fiction, 3 anthologies, and has edited 5 books of essays and poetry. His works have been translated into many of the world’s languages. His honours and awards—regional, national, and international—fill several pages.

Yet like the carpenter in one of his earliest poems, Patrick Lane continues his work:

“...pushing the floor another level higher/ like a hawk who every year adds levels to his nest/ until he’s risen above the tree he built on/ and alone lifts off into the wind.”

Mr. Chancellor, I am deeply honoured to present Patrick Lane for the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.

Written and presented by
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