

November 16th 2017

For Avie Bennett,

This is an event to honour the life and achievements of Avie Bennett. And what a life it was. I'm sorry I can't be with you today as what we like to think of as "in person," but as I am a writer, and as Avie was a publisher, we are and were believers in the power of the word, so I'm sending some words instead.

Avie was not only a publisher, he was my publisher, as he was the publisher of many; and he was not only my friend, he was the friend of many. And in both capacities, he always said what he thought, pretty much straight out. No one ever accused him of being suave, but suaveness was not a quality he would have wanted to be credited with. Cards on the table: that was Avie, in poker as in life. A lot of you will have spoken of his achievements, which are many and impressive, so I would like to frame Avie a little differently.

Long before he became my publisher – and long before he even thought of such a thing – Avie and his family lived in the same area of the city of Toronto that I did. Oddly enough, my older brother used to do some baby-sitting for Avie – encounters that Avie used to describe to me with some drollery.

Avie was young then – young enough to have babies -- and the area was a young area – Bennington Heights, a small corner of East York, south of Leaside. It was not far from where Avie would soon build one of the first shopping malls in the city, on Eglinton across from the newly constructed Leaside High School; the very mall, in fact, where I as a high school student was soon to drink cherry cokes and stuff coins into the table-top juke box after school. Yes, Avie was the builder of my teenage hangout! Imagine that!

Bennington was cut off from the rest of East York by the Don Valley which was not yet the Don Valley Parkway. In the late forties and early fifties it was sprouting postwar

housing, and did not at all resemble the stereotype of establishment Toronto – blue laws, stuffy, WASP-dominated, and so forth. It was ethnically mixed – many different kinds of people had fled Europe and had ended up in Canada, and were living side by side in Bennington. Poles who'd escaped the Russians and Nazis and who's pioneered fur-bottomed uphill skis, a Dutch family in the diamond business, Czechs, Jewish families, Irish ones, Londoners, South Africans – all of them mingled with more standard-issue Canadians at the Community Centre, where amateur dramatics and puppetry classes and ceramics and Saturday classes for kids and who knows what else were going on. Opportunity was in the air, do-it-yourself was the order of the day, and eccentricity was tolerated, which was probably a good thing both for Avie and for me.

So that is one way of seeing Avie: part of a dynamic time and place, open to everyone, willing to listen to any kind of life story – he must have heard a lot of those in the construction business. I like to think we might have crossed paths during those years: me as a pre-teeny-bopper eleven-year-old, Avie as a young family man on the upward ladder. If so, neither of us noticed then. But I'm noticing now.

Avie, it was great that you were in the neighbourhood. You added to it, as you added to everything you did, and to everyone you helped. I'm happy I finally knew you, so much later.

Margaret Atwood

