

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon TJ-Saturday June 4, 2016

## Enjoyable spring reading

About forty-six years ago a young man in his late teens hitch-hiked down from Newcastle to attend a writers' group in McCord Hall on the grounds of the University of New Brunswick. The second time he came, he began to read, "Blood had dried to his hands by mid-morning, thin streaks of blood on his fingers and knuckles. He cradled his rifle, walking slowly over wet gully leaves, his jacket opened, his blond hair in sweaty knots. The stench of a headless yearling partridge, foot-strung and dangling, a splatter of its dried blood on his pants." Those of us there were awe-struck by this authentic voice. The young man was David Adams Richards and the novel became *The Coming of Winter*.

A few days ago Bob Gibbs, who also was there that night, went with me to hear Richards read from his new novel, *Principles to Live By*. Its main character is John Delano, also a character in *Coming of Winter*, and appearing in several other novels. On the way home from the launch, Bob and I were reminiscing about that long-ago night. Bob said, "He certainly has fulfilled his promise."

At the reading, Richards said that one of the principles he is writing about is humility. The successful man Delano is also a noble human being because he is humble. In a Salon interview Wayne Curtis, also a product of the Miramichi, says that what he admires about New Brunswick is that its people are humble. In other of Richards' novels, physical courage is a central principle. Once I heard him say that there could be no moral courage without physical courage. As a well-cared-for female, I haven't had much opportunity to demonstrate physical courage although when I was ten, I did attack the playground bully who was beating up my brother. But no bully has presented himself in the intervening 70 years.

The launch was held in one of the renovated sections of the library with standing room only. One of the advantages of being an old lady with a cane is that I always get a seat. New Brunswick men, young and old, are not only humble but gentlemen.

I'm only a little ways into the book. I know from experience that Richards doesn't write page-turners, but that I will be rewarded by reading it slowly. His novels do however have plenty of narrative thrust. *Principles to Live By* begins, "In March of 1999, sometime after work, after the lights came on in the houses and the fog came in on the snow, Bunny McCrease was chasing a boy across a field in Saint John, New Brunswick. It was in fact the first boy he had ever chased. He was a big man with a heart generally kind, and a kindness generally, but this was a special circumstance."

After 46 years and 16 novels, here is the same cadence, the same distinctive voice created partially by an unusual construction of interspersed phrases and clauses. The same vision of the province and its people.

Another reading I attended was also about a splendid New Brunswicker, this time an actual woman. Joanne Findon has written *Seeking Our Eden: The Dreams and Migrations of Sarah Jameson Craig*, a biography of her ancestor. Sarah was born in 1840 and grew up in a place that doesn't even seem to have a name, referred to as the "Whitter's Ridge, Rolling Dam, Pleasant Ridge, and Clarence Hill" area, about 20 miles from St. Stephens. Sarah's father had cleared the land and built a one-room log cabin. The father and mother taught their children to read and write, prizing education. Although there was no school in the area and only the bible for literature, Sarah learned to write well enough to publish both poetry and prose in the wider world. What is more, she became a practitioner of various trailblazing nineteenth century causes: women's dress reform, water cure, and phrenology among them.

The struggle to educate herself was heroic. She scrounged paper and cherished the few magazines and books that came her way. "In the summer of 1858 Sarah and her brother George and cousin Joel walked twenty-five miles to Calais, Maine, to hear lectures by the renowned phrenologists L.N. Fowler and Dr. S.R. Wells, whose books and magazines they had been studying."

She adopted the controversial reform dress—a woman after my own heart—and endured much hostility and derision because of it. She even made her wedding outfit in the style—a short tunic-like dress with bloomer pants.

Sitting on my back porch, enjoying the New Brunswick spring, I read a few pages of Richards, a few pages of Findon, and then re-read two poems Brian Bartlett brought me. I write in my journal about humility and about the miracle that brought me here to the province. It doesn't get any better than this.