

State of the Art

Salon, Saturday May 7, 2016

## Between reality and fiction

I've been haranguing my writer friends with the necessity of making a distinction between reality and fiction. Between "stories" and "short stories." The distinction is evolving for me day by day, but I do know that I want my fiction to be fiction, not disguised non-fiction. I want my non-fiction to be as real and true as it can be made, with no tricks of the fictional trade. I've persuaded (brow-beat is more like it) my friend M.T. Dohaney (AKA Jean) that her anecdotes about life in her Newfoundland outpost in the thirties and forties deserve to be presented as the straight-out reality that they are. I know they are real because I've sat in my living room listening to her recount the stories, complete with details and dialogue. Some were told to her by story-telling relatives who couldn't read. It's my opinion that the stories need no fictionalizing, in fact are spoiled by it.

On the other hand, my friend Chuck Bowie just launched the second book, *AMACAT*, in his series "Donovan: Thief for Hire." These are unabashedly, unashamedly fiction. They do use all the tricks of the fiction trade. No one for a minute will think that Bowie is a thief. I learned some names of fine wines, but little else that will aid me in living my life. *AMACAT* does not document a life or a place. It's entertaining, a page turner, but because it's part of a series, you don't worry that the main character is going to die. Although it goes without saying that he will get beat up. I enjoyed it and its predecessor, *Three Wrongs*, immensely.

Contemporary poetry is by its nature real. Not fictional. Poets observe a scene which for some reason holds meaning for them. They make comparisons—analogy, metaphors. They choose compelling details. Phillip Crymble in his book *Not Even Laughter*, nominated for a New Brunswick Book Award, writes, "The checkout girl has lined her eyes with kohl, wears homemade/fishnet gloves, a studded choker. It's sweet. She scans my yoghurt/".

This is such a vivid image. It captures a moment in Crymble's life, and documents a moment in the history of civilization. "Homemade fishnet gloves." How do you make fishnet gloves? Why? What do they look like? Why is Crymble drawn to them? Is that detail documented anywhere else? Probably not.

He creates a Spenserian sonnet, "The Bird Cage" from a scene in a geriatric home. It takes work to make such a sonnet. Why bother? Why document such an unimportant occasion in so elaborate a fashion? The rhyme scheme uses slant rhymes; the couplet at the end rhymes "feel" with "keep". These prevent the poem from sounding too contrived, like doggerel. He writes that the bird cage in the home "stands as the centerpiece, adds colour, brings/the invalids and children face to face/with birds of paradise. 'The pleasure I take/feeding them,' says one old man....The children hold/out sunflower seeds, he coaches, and I feel/a kind of wonder. Is there nothing that can't keep?"

Jeffrey Bate Boerop commanded the stage of the Black Box theatre at St. Thomas University all alone for 85 minutes, entertaining us. The stage had only a table, two chairs, a stein and beer bottle, a briefcase holding a manuscript, book and newspaper. In a one-man play, the actor must pull off a great feat--memorize an amazing amount of material, get no help from any other actor, while keeping the audience engaged for a long while. The play itself has to have different moods, can't be all philosophizing talk. A play in which Karl Marx is the only character could be just that, but "Marx in Soho" is not. The writer Howard Zinn has Marx telling anecdotes--funny, sad, romantic--about his wife, daughter, friends Engels and Bakunin.

But I know that an actor and a writer can't hold the audience by themselves. A clever director has to be involved, has to know how to move the actor around without making him seem too ridiculously restless. Must give the actor appropriate "business" to do so the play isn't static. John Ball pulled off this job marvellously.

I noticed that Lynn Addleman is listed as the costume designer and also thanked in the program's acknowledgement section. She must play an enormous role in the theatre scene in Fredericton because she is often thanked, her name often on a list of donors. I've never had a conversation with her, but the next time I see her I must ask her about her activities. Boerop's costume was excellent and in a one-man show where the audience stares at the actor for a long time, this is important. Boerop wore a black long formal jacket, with a red vest and tie. It was dignified, but a little worn looking as befitting a dignified but poor scholar.

Boerop's tour-de-force performance earned him a standing ovation.