

State of the Art

March 12, 2016

Why is it that our province is the last one to have a provincial book awards?

A dream has been realized. On April 27 the very first New Brunswick Book Awards in English will be presented at the Atlantic Book Awards Gala as part of the Frye Festival. The possibility of creating these awards has been talked about for years, various stabs have been made at it, but now it is a reality.

New Brunswick's Acadian community has the annual Prix littéraire Antonine-Maillet-Acadie Vie, founded in 1998. Two literary awards are associated with Nova Scotia: the East Coast Literary Awards and the Atlantic Book Awards. I find it a little confusing that Nova Scotia has two groups of awards. Both are open to all Atlantic province books. The Thomas Raddall award has twice been won by David Adams Richards, once by Herb Curtis and once by M.T. Dohaney.

Another first is that this will be the first time the Atlantic Book Awards Gala is held in New Brunswick.

The awards are being co-sponsored by the Writers' Federation of New Brunswick and the Fiddlehead under chairpersons Rayanne Brennan, former president of the Federation and Ian LeTourneau, secretary of the Fiddlehead. Also on the awards committee is Rosalyn Hyslop, a Federation director and co-chair of Saint John's Fog Lit Festival, and Ross Leckie, editor of the Fiddlehead, professor of English at the University of New Brunswick, and organizer of its poetry weekend.

The shortlist of the nominees for poetry are Phillip Crymble for *Not Even Laughter*, M. Travis Lane for *Crossover* and Michael Pacey for *Electric Affinities*. Lane's book was also on the shortlist for the Governor General's Award.

The nominees for fiction are R.W. Gray for *Entropic*, Mark Anthony Jarman for *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa* and Beth Powning for *A Measure of Light*.

The nominees for non-fiction are Nicholas Guitard for *The Lost Wilderness*, Donald Savoie for *What is Government Good At?* and David Sullivan for *Boss Gibson: Lumber King of New Brunswick*.

An innovation for these awards is that self-published books are eligible. When LeTourneau was asked on the CBC how the committee found the books to be considered, he said they sent out notices to all the publishers to ask them to submit books. I asked him how self-published *Boss Gibson: Lumber King of New Brunswick* was discovered, and he said he heard Sullivan being interviewed on the radio, the book sounded interesting, so LeTourneau himself submitted it. The committee asked the Writers' Federation to put out a notice to its members to submit self-

published books. The Writers' Union of Canada has recently established a policy whereby writers of self-published books will be considered for membership. The literary world is turning.

LeTourneau was recently named the first cultural laureate of Fredericton. At his induction he said that two of his dreams are to have a literary festival created in Fredericton and to have the New Brunswick Awards ceremony come to it one year. Moncton has the Frye Festival, established in 2000, now well-known across Canada. Saint John has the newer but successful Fog Lit Festival. In the past the Maritime Writers' Workshop served as a literary festival with readings every night and lectures during the day, both open to the public. The annual University of New Brunswick Poetry Weekend in October has a festival-like atmosphere. The Alden Nowlan Literary Festival was held for four years on a weekend from 2001.

I've mentioned several of the books in this space. I even bragged a little that Michael Pacey's *Electric Affinities* was dedicated to me.

Why is it that our province is the last one to have a provincial book awards? Part of the reason is financial. None of these award winners will receive any money. The other provincial awards bring money with them. The Thomas Raddall prize winner receives \$25,000. Other prizes are smaller—two or three hundred dollars. The Prix littéraire Antonine-Maillet-Acadie Vie winner receives \$4000.

I will speculate—perhaps wildly--that part of the reason may be a hesitation to blow our own horns. If this is so, I wonder why. Selective migration? Our sports heroes come back home when their careers are done, but they don't swagger around. If I found myself at an event with Matt Stairs, I would feel free to introduce myself and shake his hand. David Adams Richards is one of the most famous living Canadian writers, but he too came home and does not swagger around. Maybe this is a ridiculous generalization, but New Brunswickers seem to be gifted with humility.

I love the story our former premier and former Canadian Ambassador to the United States Frank McKenna told about living in the embassy in Washington. He had to get used to not taking his dishes out to the kitchen after a meal.

The books up for awards are not inferior books. They have been highly reviewed. They would hold their own in any province's book awards competition.