

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon, TJ-Saturday, May 21, 2016

A new literary festival is brewing

Are more people writing and painting than ever before or is it just that producing this column has made me more aware? Johanna Bertin, author of the well-received book on Don Messer, sent me two chapters of her manuscript about her experience with cancer. It's written in a no-nonsense style with details that ring true. I'd read a few chapters of the work a year ago. Johanna was a social worker at the Chalmers Hospital for many years and so knows the ropes. I can be confident that she'll be telling me the straight story.

Jane Spavold Tims brought me her book of poetry, *within easy reach*, published by Chapel Street Editions. I've written before about this newish publishing house run by Keith and Brendan Helmuth out of Woodstock. The book is beautifully designed, its typeface the handsome lowan Old Style. Jane has created many full-page delicate drawings to accompany the poems. I'd heard her read her work at Odd Sundays and was impressed with it.

The book is a rich, charming collection of prose poems about gathering edible local foods. I call them prose poems because they have that double feel--anecdotes succinctly told, information about the plants, but also metaphors and emotions. Many are followed by footnotes. The poem "persuasion: Sea-Blite (*Sueda maritime* (L.)Dumont)" is followed by the footnote, "Sea-Blite is a low-growing plant, often forming mats on the coastal shore." The note goes on to describe its other aspects and to tell us what uses can be made of it. Accompanying the poem is a drawing made at Oak Bay.

What makes these offerings poems rather than just prose is their crisp language, the emotion behind the hunt, the apt metaphors. In "along the woodland path", the poet tells us "follow the trail, tread lightly-/leaf-whorls of Bunchberry are cobblestones." But other plants in the vicinity make platforms that are "elevated ways for fairy-folk". The berries are "pudding for dinner, or winter-fare/gleaned by a gatherer.../a nibble to cheer a hiker/lost in the woods".

The inspiration for the book was her discovery of blackberries on her property. "on the mowed road/above the lake/we are astonished /blackberries/precocious/sinister/delicious". They pick berries for three Saturdays but then: the last day/we are uneasy/(indigo bear droppings/still steaming)". Astonished, delicious, sinister, uneasy, the duality of life.

In the poem "twin-berry, two-eyed seeing" Jane writes about partridge berries: "leaves opposite/paired along the vine/two world-views/two ways of knowing". My mother and aunt gathered these berries for their berry bowls. I'm grateful to Jane for giving me a new way of seeing them. My folks also used trout lilies in the bowls, and Jane writes that their young leaves and the corm taste like garlic.

To fulfill part of his vision as the Cultural Laureate of Fredericton, Ian LeTourneau called a meeting at the public Library to discuss the establishment of a literary festival. Sixteen people showed up, and a more capable bunch has never shown up for any such artsy endeavour: Program Managers, Fund-raisers, a CPA, Event planners, all I guess from Generation X (my children's) and the Millennial generation (my grandchildren's). I, from the Silent Generation (sometimes named Lucky Few), am much more in tune with these than I am with the Baby Boomers. I'd never quite realized it before. I understand that these categories are wild generalizations, but there is something to them.

The University of New Brunswick English Department is involved. Screenwriter Rob Gray was there as its representative. Julia Stewart, the head librarian, seemed to be the secretary—perhaps she became it unofficially because she is so enthusiastic about the idea.

Moncton has its Frye Festival and Saint John its relatively new Fog Lit Festival. Fredericton has had various mini-festivals: a short-lived Alden Nowlan commemoration and the robust University of New Brunswick Poetry Weekend. When the Maritime Writers Workshop was in full-swing, its lectures and evening readings had a gala atmosphere.

The festival will be held the weekend of September 23-25. If you want to be in on the beginning of something exciting—either as a volunteer or as an owner of a possible venue—get in touch with Ian LeTourneau (ian.letourneau@bellaliant.net).

Angela Birdsell is leaving New Brunswick tomorrow to take up a new position at the Australia Council for the Arts as Director of Arts Practice: Orchestra and Opera. It's a position she is unusually well-qualified for, having had a similar job at the Canada Council of the Arts. Here in Fredericton she has been an arts consultant to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the provincial government, the Saint John Theatre Company, New Brunswick Sistema, the New Brunswick Symphony as well as consulting all over the country. She's a singer by trade, giving concerts and lessons, organizing singing groups. One of her most stunning accomplishments is my brilliant granddaughter Louise Birdsell Bauer. Once when my husband was introducing Angela, he referred to her as "our daughter-in-law emeritus."