

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon TJ-Saturday May 28, 2016

For the people in the pews, time at church is precious

I'm on the worship committee of my church. One morning before the monthly committee meeting I got to wondering about the purpose of the contemporary Sunday morning ritual. Each denomination has its own style, but each minister of the denomination tweaks it.

The members of the congregation have their preferences. Many parts of a service are traditional, but some are unique to a particular congregation. I watched a video of the Methodist funeral of my friend's husband. The minister announced that they would sing all the verses of the two hymns because Doug was adamant it was proper not to omit any.

All ministers have their own style of preaching. One of our ministers whose sermons I treasured was a scholar with a PhD in religion. Members of the congregation complained that he used words that were too big. I was amused by this minister's attempt to choose simpler words. He wasn't trying to impress with big words—it was just that those were necessary to discuss complex thoughts. When I read the description of the word “numinous” in Rudolf Otto's book *The Idea of the Holy*, my spiritual life was enhanced. Thinking about possible venues for the new Fredericton literary festival, I imagined the Wilmot sanctuary at night with its lights dimmed. Numinous is the word to describe that ambiance—perfect for listening to poetry.

For the people sitting in the pews, the time spent is precious. They're spending an hour in the company of others who are trying to come to grips with the most important aspects of their lives. My aunt once complained that her new minister gave her nothing to contemplate in the week following the service. Nowadays there are many ways to discover essential complexities to ponder, but in the past church was the central conduit.

Millie Yeomans sent me six of her paintings so that I could choose one for myself. I'd seen some of them while Skyping with Millie. She'd done three of the same scene—cliffs and ocean. One of them, her favourite she writes, is done in a Lawren Harris style. The more I look at it, the more I like it too. She has eschewed realism to paint the essential geometry of the place.

She tells me that the act of painting makes her happy. She renders places she knows, but also she makes up places, and these give her the most pleasure.

Riverview poet Danny Jacobs won first prize in the Prism literary magazine creative non-fiction contest. His piece, “Ghostly Transmissions from John D. Rockefeller”, is an account of his teenage years as a gas station attendant. As I have been going on, perhaps ad nauseum, about the virtues of non-fiction, I was mightily interested in reading his piece. What does his essay have going for it? Plenty. First of all the voice of the writing uses the high-spirited jargon of the

young man but tempered with the perceptions of the older man now settled down, the language of a poet.

The details of the piece are vivid--about the job and the people he encounters. "We'd rock-paper-scissors to see who'd do the dips, dreaded in winter: first task for the seven-to-three shift to check the levels in the station's subterranean holding tanks." I'd never thought about where the gas is housed. If I had, I would have realized that it wasn't stored in the pump itself. Jacobs gives a detailed description of where it does come from, made lively by the language, by the drama of him himself doing this unenviable job. Details like "The dipstick was pole-vaulter high and notched off in quarter inches" tells you that these tanks are deep. He thinks about the gas itself: "Esso's bread and butter was transubstantiated over eons—zooplankton dying in shallow pools among the dinosaurs, falling like dust in sunbeams then buried in sediment and ground by Earth's mortar and pestle, its prodigal tectonic plates."

The judge, Russell Wangersky, has a thought-provoking introduction to creative non-fiction. "I like the explanation that the form is a case of using fiction's tools—and sometimes poetry's tools--to shape and deliver facts." You can't invent or embellish. "You're stuck with what really happened."

Wangersky writes about Jacobs' piece: "'Ghostly Transmissions' manages to capture emerging adulthood from the inside, while offering a scientific rendering of the same experience by metaphor—you'll see." About his battle with the mayflies, Jacobs writes, "The mayfly has a midlife phase called the subimago, a developmental limbo between naiad and adult."

I wrote about Jacobs before after I'd heard him read at Odd Sundays and bought his book. Creative Writing Professor Brian Bartlett, visiting me, spotted the Prism with the prize-winning piece. He reminded me, praising Jacobs' work highly, that he had been his student at St. Mary's University. Jacobs is the head of the Riverview library.