

State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon TJ-Saturday January 30, 2016

Eric Weiner has a thought-provoking article in The Wall Street Journal, "The Secret of Immigrant Genius." It begins, "Scan the roster of history's intellectual and artistic giants, and you quickly notice something remarkable: Many were immigrants or refugees, from Victor Hugo, W.H. Auden and Vladimir Nabokov to Nikolas Tesla, Marie Curie and Sigmund Freud."

Weiner's point is that the United States should embrace immigrants and refugees. Their presence is stimulating because their lives have been turned upside down, and so they can see things in an original way. I think of the burgeoning of the arts in New York City where World War Two drove refugees from Europe.

I think too of my own experience. Being brought up in Massachusetts, just a day's drive away, was different from being brought up in New Brunswick. After 50 years I'm still wrestling with the differences: children learn a second language instead of studying their first language, apathy is shown toward politics. The most stimulating difference for me has been that Canadians have a global view rather than as do Americans a narrow national view.

Depression kids came to New Brunswick in the 60's to teach at the university. They weren't refugees, they were immigrants. Poet and fiction writer Kent Thompson became a motivating force in literature. He came because he was offered the possibility of fulfilling his every goal at once: teach creative writing, edit a literary magazine, and publish. Poet Ted Colson came because he read an article on the salmon fishing. Poet Bill Bauer came because he had an almost mystical vision of the place. None of them had ever been here.

When the American baby boomers immigrated to the province in the late 60's and early 70's to protest against the Vietnam War, they also brought an influx of creativity: Beth and Peter Powning, Ann and Russell Hunt among others. Many of them were indeed refugees, fleeing from being drafted into a war they thought wrong.

Because their reason for immigrating was protest, they also brought a more belligerent character. Norman Strax led the protests against certain practices at the University of New Brunswick. Russ Hunt edited the alternate magazine, "The Mysterious East".

At the time these protests embarrassed me; it didn't seem polite to come to another country and then complain. I probably shouldn't have been bothered.

From post-war Great Britain came poet and publisher Peter Thomas, artists George Fry, John and Kathy Hooper.

What will the influx of Syrian refugees bring to the arts and culture of New Brunswick?

In my novel *The Irrational Doorways of Mr. Gerard* I pondered the question of refugees. Frank McKenna's idea that we force these refugees to stay here seems Draconian. What is needed to persuade them to stay here, I think, is a large group in one area where they can buy their own food, speak their language, practice their form of Islam. The largest community of Yazidi

refugees in North America live in Lincoln, Nebraska. That surprised me. They chose Lincoln because it has a low crime rate and affordable rents. As does New Brunswick. Above all the refugees need us to appreciate and to seek out what they can bring to us.

How will they create literature? In their first language, Arabic? Or in English? The late Liliane Welch told me that she wrote poetry in English because it served her better than her several other languages. At the open mic section of Odd Sundays poets read in other languages as well as in English even though Spanish, Farsi, or French is their first language.

I don't know much about Syrian art and literature, not about its ancient roots nor its contemporary practices, but it would make sense for the government to seek out writers and artists and settle them in places where literature and art flourish but polemical politics are not as important; New Brunswick is a prime example.

I'm impressed with the enthusiasm with which New Brunswickers have embraced the sponsoring of Syrian refugees. One of the motivating factors must have been "there but for the grace of God go I." That is a humble thought--our good fortune is not entirely of our own making. New Brunswickers in general have the gift of humility in spades. I don't know why this happened historically, but it's a most endearing trait.

The churches have been especially eager. Paul was converted to Christianity on the road to Damascus, Syria, receiving the revelation that he should stop persecuting those who worshipped differently from him.

I hope I meet some of the refugees. I want to ask them about their art, crafts, and literature. What form does their contemporary poetry take? Has their visual art been influenced by western art and if so which school? How are their contemporary houses and public buildings designed?