

Winterset in Summer Literary Festival

August 17, 2010 3:51 PM

Posting and photographs by CBC Network Producer Marie Wadden

Margaret Atwood and her husband Graham Gibson delivered similar warnings about the perils of ignoring the natural world at lively and intimate public gatherings held this weekend at the Beaches Heritage Centre in Eastport.



Margaret Atwood and Michael Enright

The weekend's beautiful weather and the area's fabulous sandy beaches, could not tempt eager readers away from meeting these Canadian cultural icons at the ["Winterset in Summer Literary Festival."](#)

Gibson's book *The Bedside Book of Beasts* is a tribute to the animal world and a cautionary tale about what will be lost if we continue to sever our connection with the rest of life on the planet. In his discussion with *As It Happens* host, Carol Off, Gibson predicts that "nature deficit disorder" will become a public health issue in the coming years if our children do not spend as much time in the natural world as they are spending in the digital world.



Graham Gibson prepares a slide show for the Bedside Book of Beasts

Atwood's new book *Year of the Flood* is also about the need to rein in environmental degradation. Her question period with *Sunday Edition* host Michael Enright turned into a playful sparring match that brought on tearful laughter, even though the message was dire. How much time do we have before the environmental armageddon predicted in this book, and the prequel *Oryx and Crake*?

"Do you have tornadoes in Newfoundland?" She asked. When told no, she said: "Well, when you start to get tornadoes, you'll know."

Modern life is better for some, and worse for others, she said.

"Fifteen million people are now homeless following record-breaking floods in Pakistan," she reminds.

Atwood seems determined to deliver her warnings in as entertaining a fashion as possible. She even agreed to sing a hymn that appears in *Year of the Flood*, delighted to have been asked, she said, as no one has ever asked her to sing it before.

She and Gibson were at Eastport not only as writers, but also as readers. They faithfully attended all the sessions, and all social events, giving attendees generous access. Jack Rabinovitch, the creator of the Scotiabank Giller Prize, was also at the festival this summer. There's a rather dear connection between he and the creator the Winterset literary award, Richard Gwyn. Both men created these prizes to honour their deceased wives.



Richard Gwyn

Rabinovitch was publicly acknowledged Saturday night, just before the panel that featured witty Winterset Award winner Jessica Grant (*Come, Thou Tortoise*), and finalists Lisa Moore, who's latest book *February* is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and Michael Crummey, author of the much heralded novel *Galore*.

The winner of this year's Giller Prize, Lyndon McIntyre (*The Bishop's Man*) discussed the Roman Catholic church's pedophilia problems with host Anne Budgell and *Boys of St. Vincent* screenwriter, Des Walsh.

Yes, there was a large CBC contingent at the festival this summer and if I ever go again, I'm determined to record it for broadcast, as it's worth sharing with a wider audience.



CBC host Jamie Fitzpatrick and author Jessica Grant

I was there to host a panel discussion about the “Lost Voices” of Newfoundland’s extinct Beothuck. Three authors: Bernice Morgan (*Cloud of Bone*), Annamarie Beckel (*All Gone Widdun*) and Kevin Major (*New Under the Sun*) all deal with the relationship between Shanawdithit (1900-1929), the last known living Beothuck, and the Scottish merchant/adventurer, William Epps Cormack who questioned Shanawdithit about the language and culture of her people just months before she died.



Anne and Kevin Major

Gerry Squires joined us on stage with a riveting account of the vision that led to the creation of his sculpture of Shanawdithit that stands in the forest surrounding the Boyd's Cove Beothuck Interpretation Centre.



Postcard of Boyd's Cove statue

Gerry presented me with a talking stick made by Conne River Mi'qmaq elder Misel Joe. The holder of this stick must tell the truth and use the stick to advance understanding between cultures. I am duly honoured and determined to uphold this duty.

Carefully planned thematic discussions like those I have described distinguish the Winterset Literary festival from others, Richard Gwyn told me at the last event, a huge supper for all participants (writers and readers) at a church hall in Eastport. (Fans were delighted to find themselves sitting beside a favourite author or in line with him or her at the buffet table.)



Participants enjoying the festival

Local hospitality is another distinguishing feature. Edythe Goodridge offered coffee at her house in Salvage, while Barbara and Gerry Shortall held a welcome reception at their beautiful heritage house overlooking Eastport beach. Roger Carpenter and Barbara Ryan asked violinist Christina Smith to play during a lunch at their house and Smith's lively playing got Margaret Atwood up to her feet for a scuff.



The Shortall house

Next year the Winterset festival will be celebrating its tenth anniversary. A featured event will be a dramatization of Lisa Moore's book about the Ocean Ranger disaster, *February*. Unless they enlarge the Beaches Heritage Centre to accommodate more people, you're advised to buy your tickets as soon as they go on sale. This is a literary festival that will tempt you inside, even when the weather is at its most alluring.