



Summertime for Winterset

My wife and I drove into Eastport late Friday morning and met all the smiling folks from the organizing committee at the Beaches Heritage Centre. As we were entering the building, there were two young women and a guy leaving and I thought they looked familiar. The organizers gave me a big yellow envelope and explained that everything was in there, all the information I would need for the weekend, including my cheque for participating in the New and Lyrical Voices panel. “They’re paying me up front?” I nearly gasped—my first indication that this would be a weekend like no other. I mean, who pays the writer first?

We went looking for our cabin and were told by the friendly staff that they were cleaning ours and that we should come back after noon. So we drove down the road to Rosie’s restaurant and while we were eating our grilled cheese and fries, Jessica Grant came in with some of her family and greeted us with a warm smile. We chatted for a while before she settled at her table, while my wife and I finished our meal—another brief moment hinting at the grandeur of the weekend ahead.

The Giller Voices panel began at noon and I realized the trio we’d seen earlier were Sarah Selecky, Alexander Macleod and Giller winner Johanna Skibsrud. The panel was a scintillating discussion with the affable Ramona Dearing about writing, marketing short stories and life after a Giller nomination.

There was a lot of talk about the weather, of course, since this is quite possibly the foggiest and rainiest “summer” in the history of summer in Newfoundland. Miraculously, though, the “winter, set in summer” never materialized as Eastport was blessed with three days of sunshine. By the time we got to the afternoon reception, the day had already taken on that special radiance that often accompanies a time outside of ordinary time. Pretty much everyone was there. I’ll have to name some, of course—Noreen Golfman and her husband Stephen, Jessica Grant, fellow panelist Leslie Vryenhoek, who was there with 2011 BMO Winterset Prize winner Russell Wangersky—both smiling broadly, perhaps in part because they’d gotten married to each other several weeks ago. Sam Martin and his wife, Samantha were there, just back from weddings in Ontario. I glimpsed Lisa Moore, Sara Tilley and a host of other writers, but the patio was packed and it was difficult to do more than simply nod, wave and smile to many.

The Winterset Voices panel was later that evening, including Russell, Sam and Craig Francis Power. I overheard Michael Enright say something about getting back early for a sound check, as there’d been some microphone troubles. Sure enough, we used handheld mics for the rest of the weekend. The Winterset panel were so obviously talented in their readings and discussion, but also funny as Hell on a

Saturday night. My favourite moment was when Sam mentioned having had a copy of Ken Harvey's great and hefty novel, *Blackstrap Hawco*, fall on his face and Russell quipped: "You've been Hawcoed!"

Saturday morning, I was at the Heritage Centre by 7 a.m. for a live CBC radio interview with the another genial legend, Mack Furlong. The sun was already hot, and I had this sort of sleepy, grateful feeling going on while sipping on coffee. After chatting with several people, including the committee chair Kathy Hodder, Leslie and I did the interview, which went extremely well (we were so relaxed and comfortably tired). With the day just warming up, wife and I went in search of beaches to stroll—and we found them, as well as a nifty yard sale where my wife bought a handcrafted broach.

The New Voices panel was at 2:30 p.m., before which I chatted with a slew of people, including the lovely Kate Evans (also on the panel), Jamie Fitzpatrick and Shoshanna Wingate, who was excited that her first book was coming soon. Backstage, there were no nerves, not even after the amazing musical performances of Sherman Downey and Andrew James O'Brien. I was introduced first and read an excerpt from *Moonlight Sketches*. People laughed in all the right places and seemed to enjoy it. The host Pat Parsons put us at ease with her ready smile and thought-provoking questions. I don't remember much of what was said, but I recall enjoying it and feeling a little bereft when it was over. Afterward, we each signed some books in the lobby and talked with readers, with the mounting feeling of never wanting to leave Eastport.

Picture, if you will, seven former Winterset winners on the same stage at once. I don't know how host Noreen Golfman managed to keep all those lions tamed, but she did a remarkable job. The first panel had three amazing writers (Michael Winter, Michael Crummey and Jessica Grant), with a joyous, intellectual energy, especially from Michael Winter who seemed to be in a sparring mood, playfully trying to one-up Michael Crummey, who held his own with his usual gentle, thoughtful wit. Jessica might seem reserved, but she enthralled the audience with her powerful reading. The second panel (Joan Clark, Ed Riche, Randall Maggs, and Robert Mellin) were also entertaining and a bit raunchy at times. I couldn't help but snap a few photos when all seven of these literary giants shared the stage at once. Again, I had that feeling of being privileged to be there.

The event that took me by surprise was Lisa Moore's stage adaptation of her novel *February*. There were no costumes yet and they were basically workshopping the play. So, despite it not being a finished product yet, it was a powerful performance that distilled the language of the novel, giving it even more emotional punch. I don't think I'll ever forget it and, in fact, would love to see it again. It was the perfect end to an unforgettable weekend.

As a first-time author, I was honoured just to be asked to be a Winterset panelist. It was a fantastic feeling to be treated like one of the family of generous and gifted writers in this province and I can only hope to be in Eastport again soon for another end of summer nights' dream.

Gerard Collins

