



Social Notes

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A literary gem in Eastport

Despite the lack of consistent weather that would appropriately describe this season as summer, we have spent days here and days there taking in new sights we had long wanted to experience.

This weekend was no exception as we attended our first Winterset, the literary festival inaugurated nine years ago in Eastport. We've come to know the Eastport Peninsula quite well over the years, but until now had never combined our visits with the acclaimed event.

We've certainly heard a lot about it, and nominated authors make regular appearances under our Christmas tree or in our birthday packages. This year, with a son old enough to tag along, we decided to make an event of it for ourselves.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but assumed it would be a parade of writers reading from their works, recent or not. As much as I love turning the page of my latest book, I am drawn in to the writer's world in a much different way when I hear them read. Their inflections, their choice of passages, the way they make their words dance in the air is always an experience I enjoy.

Winterset is that and more. Described as a writers' festival, it is really more a readers' festival. It is a celebration of the written word and an opportunity to listen to writers share their work, their process, and their passion for writing.

The best part of Winterset is the opportunity to hear writers discuss their work with moderators in a series of wide-ranging conversations. The stage is set up like a living room with comfortable chairs, and those of us in the audience hover expectantly, eavesdropping on the exchange until we are invited to ask our questions or share our thoughts on what we have heard.

The sessions this year were spread over three days and were organized along themes such as lost voices (i.e., how the Beothuk have captured the imagination of several writers), natural voices (Graeme Gibson on beasts and nature), deep voices (Linden McIntyre and Des Walsh on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church) and iconic voices (the inimitable Margaret Atwood).

The hallmark event is the presentation of readings by the Winterset nominees followed by the conversation. This year, nominated authors Lisa Moore, Michael Crummey and winner Jessica Grant talked with CBC journalist Michael Enright. It was a terrific discussion, and proof positive of the quality and variety of writing that is coming from Newfoundland and Labrador.

Almost all of what we saw this year was stellar, especially the concluding keynote session with renowned author Margaret Atwood. Like a cat playing with a mouse, Atwood sparred — if that's the right word — with Enright, who reprised his role as the conversational navigator, although occasionally he came close to foundering on the shoals hidden by Atwood's marvelous wit and lively intelligence.

What does a festival like Winterset mean in a summer that is now quite crowded with festivals all season long celebrating music, drama, art and food? Winterset highlights storytelling in its infinite variety. It is not just focused on fiction, although this year's authors were primarily novelists. Previous festivals have highlighted non-fiction and poetry, and next year's festival will premiere the dramatization of Lisa Moore's second novel "February," which just made the long list of the Man Booker Prize.

Created to honour the memory of author and journalist Sandra Gwyn, Winterset is a legacy that celebrates the power of imagination to weave stories from our past, our present and even our future. It harnesses the strength of language to paint the panorama of life, rooted variously in the historical, natural or fantastic realms.

I can hardly wait to see what the organizers come up with for next year's 10th anniversary.

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