

"Fictional" Revelations

By Jonathan SMITH

On January 28, 2003, I had the pleasure of attending a reading by Canadian author and screenwriter Fred Stenson. Prior to the notices going up that advertised the event, I had never even heard of Stenson or his work. However, being an avid fan of literature and a wanna-be writer, I decided that an opportunity to hear a Canadian writer share his work and thoughts in person was too good to miss. I was both impressed and entertained, and as a bonus gained the start of a new appreciation for Canadian literature.

I have always liked reading, particularly fiction but I must admit that my tastes have been mostly in the spheres of "escapist" fiction - that of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Aside from the occasional dip into what I personally, and perhaps naively, considered "mainstream" (i.e. firmly rooted in reality), my exposure to the varied world of Canadian fiction has been limited.

Most of what I was familiar with has come from the few times I have listened to CBC radio programs such as "Between the Covers." I had all but decid-

ed that mainstream Canadian fiction was for the most part about a protagonist's involvement with his or her dysfunctional family, a subject that I found quite boring. After hearing Stenson read from his published novel "The Trade," and his work-in-progress, "Lightning", my opinion has changed for what I assume will be the better.

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Good fiction can always be escapism of a sort, regardless of the genre. The author can take you from your reality and drop you into a fictional one, whether it be based in our world or an entirely imaginary one. This fictional reality can be one that is more idealized than your own, or it may not be. Regardless, you are only being asked to visit, not to stay permanently.

Some fictional worlds you will

want to visit repeatedly, others you wouldn't mind never hearing of again. Some characters you might like to know in real life; others you wouldn't want to associate with even within the confines of the book's pages. Either way, has the book not accomplished one of its purposes - to get you involved?

In a society in which television and film do most of the work that our imaginations used to, there is still room and still a necessity for the form of escapism that only a good work of fiction can provide. Television, in its simplest form, tells us what is funny, tells us what is dramatic, tells us what we need to think and feel at a certain moment. We, the viewers, accept this as part of the medium and usually don't even think about it. A book can do all television does and more, if only one makes the effort to read it. Usually a book can provide a much more individual and rich experience. This is one reason why movies based on books are never usually as good as their sources.

Stenson's work took us, the audience, to the Alberta of the 1800s, and introduced us to protagonists who are quite different, yet likable in their own ways.

The prose didn't overload us with details concerning the historical period, and it certainly didn't need to. I felt I could, in some way or another, identify with the characters, and that alone kept me interested in what was happening. The world may have been based in our historic past, but the work itself still allowed me to "escape" into the lives of fictional people and be entertained at the same time.

That is what I consider to be a major part of fiction, regardless of genre. If a book can entertain you, that in itself is good, but if a book can challenge you, make you react, as well as entertain you, then that is even better.

Not only did Fred Stenson's reading introduce me to the work of a fine author, it also helped me see past self-imposed stereotypes about mainstream or "non-escapist" literature, particularly Canadian.

One of the most interesting bits of advice on writing I've seen is to read everything, no matter the genre. I'd like to think that I had been following this advice, but now I see that I have a long way to go. Perhaps last Tuesday evening will be a good start to traveling that road.

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