

Calgary's Cowboy of the Page Wears Many Hats

By Will PATE

Some forty people braved the bitter cold to attend Fred Stenson's reading at the Confederation Centre Library last Tuesday night. It was his first visit to the Island since a Milton Acorn festival an untold time ago. Everyone from English majors to Philosophy professors, PEI's first poet laureate John Smith and even my own two parents filled the seats.

With 11 fiction and nonfiction works and 130 film and video scripts over a 25 year script-writing career it's no surprise that Stenson is a natural storyteller. He seems the very definition of a prairie writer. He's dressed in a standard literary-type black turtleneck, under a casually unzipped moss green hiking vest. He carries himself with the quiet and understated confidence of a man well-situated in his profession.

There is something essentially Albertan about Stenson. Even his visage seems to tell the story of what an eastern boy might imagine the mythic Alberta to be: his hair is the colour of prairie dust on a lightly overcast day, his moustache sprinkled with white like light snow on fallowed farmland.

"I love Europe but if I stay there too long I have a terrible homesickness for something wild.", he later says.

Dr. Lemm gushes with praise through his introduction. Stenson was on the long list for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, "the most prestigious in the English language", and is described as one of Canada's funniest writers. Books, of course, were available for sale on the library study table.

As the crowd applauds in anticipation, he assuredly steps to the podium and begins to read from his latest novel "The Trade". The book is set amongst the 19th century fur trade in western Canada. His voice is warm and consis-

tent, commanding with its softness. The language is much like the man himself, eloquent yet without pretence. The careful wording reveals heavy historical research; his claim it took 15 years to write this work is completely believable.

Small, detailed descriptions illustrate much larger conflicts - two hands held together under the folds of a dress hide a secret that could tear the community apart. It is a story of tragic conflict between politics and human desire.

The second selection was from an upcoming book "Lightning," about the open range ranch era in his native stomping ground. The story takes place during two years on the original big ranch, the ill-fated Cochran Ranch, where the city of the same name sits north-west of Calgary today. It was populated by American cowboys that drove large herds of Montanan cattle north. The cattle didn't last and the enterprise was for all intents and purposes a major bust. It's funny, but properly subtle. When he finishes the crowd again applauds with gratitude.

After the readings have finished, the obligatory question period begins and after the book signings, I

snatch a quick interview. What follows is synergised from both. Stenson explains, albeit with much digression, his simple philosophy of writing.

"Character drives fiction, on some level plot and

character are synonymous. If you know your characters well, the story will have its own momentum, it will write itself.

[Where the character come from] that's the most mysterious process. The easy answer has got to be that they are amalgams of me and people I've known. I think the truth is they're also drawn from literature as much as from life. By reading a lot you learn an array of possible characters, just as you do in life. I can look at my characters in my fiction and honestly say that not one of them is me and not one of them is anyone I know. A lot of times when I'm reading fiction and people say 'well that's actually my uncle', the characters, oddly enough, tend not to be as alive as a character that's not based on a real person. It's an extremely hard and maybe impossible thing to recreate an actual living human being in fiction. They really are more like voices in my head than people I meet on the street." he says.

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-Fred Stenson

Agree with him or not, his philosophy of realistic characters is most likely borne from some very rich experiences. Still, he recognizes the paradox that writing is both a solitary act and part of the entertainment realm.

"Writing will always be strange because on some level it's show business, and on another level it's anything but. It doesn't feel like show business when you're in your room sitting in front of your computer for weeks on end. Those two ends of the spectrum are never going to become comfortable with one another. On the show business end; very good looking writers that are glib, who are not stuck for words when you put them on tv or radio, who can be flamboyant; they can exceed their talent with their careers."

The emerging phenomenon of the young telegenic writer has led to the largest book advances for young writers in Canadian history does not escape his wisdom. He questions the financial soundness of publishers paying advances that they are unlikely to see back in profits and shares the view of some veteran writers that they are being snubbed. Regardless, he's not bitter.

"I know a lot of writers in the autumn of their careers that feel that they

have honed their skills and when they see young writers scoop the big contracts they're plain old simple envious. There's something in business terms I don't understand about the big advances. I think most of them must lose money, if you're a publisher how do you go on doing that? In terms of the arithmetic I don't get it. Maybe they are losing money, maybe they are out of control. I wonder sometimes. They're still stiffing older writers and that's what's bugging me. I've heard some older writers criticize younger writers for getting these contracts. Well, what are they supposed to do, turn them down? It's not their fault - I'm glad, if it means they don't have to suffer that's great."

While much of the media coverage of the books themselves centres around book award races, they may help books find their audience through nomination but they are not absolutely necessary for commercial success.

"A lot of us began to fear that these awards contests had become the only show in town. If you didn't get nominated for these things you were just dead. The book would die, years of work out the

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