

arts & entertainment

Hunting down David Richards

by Richard Lim

Gentle anticipation spices the air in this room where we sit awaiting the words of David Adams Richards. We are here, on a chilly Friday evening in January, eighty or so people shoulder-to-shoulder at SMU, gathered for a reading by one of Canada's finest authors, and I make that claim based on his reputation, because I've never read any of his writings.

Tonight, David Adams Richards will be reading from *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*, the third novel in a trilogy that began with *Nights Below Station Street*, for which Richards received the Governor-General's Award, Canada's literary Pulitzer Prize. David Adams Richards has seven novels and a collection of short stories to his name. Later, he will tell us that he read *Oliver Twist* when he was fourteen and decided to become a writer, and that he tried poetry but wasn't very good at it. Despite this claim, we will hear rhythms and meters and motifs quietly asserting themselves in the background of his prose as he reads to us.

When we arrive, we see on the table at the front of the room a glass of water and a hat resting upside-down. The author is introduced, and then he stands before us, casually dressed in a smart shirt, tie, and slacks with a brown leather belt. His face is like a sharp rock whose edges have been smoothed in a fast river. He strikes an aggressive pose, one foot ahead of the other, his body turned to one side, one hand on the open book resting on the table, the other hand back, resting on his far hip.

David Adams Richards begins to read. His words tumble rather than

flow, like eager beads in a stream, jostling their way from the page and from his lips, sliding through the air, striking the air, roughly caressing our ears. His voice is like a flat-toned bell, strong and hollow and resonant. The words come in rhythmic rushes, with quick silent stops for breath:

"Then-he-would-walk-around-amidst-them ... turning-around-every-now-and-then-to-glare-at-them-growling-under-his-breath ... he-talked-about-killing-the-priest ... it-never-seemed-to-matter-what-priest ... whenever-anyone-was-going-to-make-their-first-Communion-Buddy-would-talk-about-shooting-the-priest."

His manner is unpretentious, self-effacing. When he reads, his eyes never leave the page, his body is planted and these are the thoughts and imaginings that he wishes to share with us. That is all. He reads four passages, pausing between each only to look for the next one, offering us brief introductions to each new circumstance.

The third selection is a man telling a bedtime story to a child in the presence of another man whose respect and approval the story-telling man seeks. The story is about a hunter seeking food for a hungry wife and their child, and a buck protecting a doe and their fawn. The battle of wits between hunter and buck is fought day after day, night after night, until the buck leads the hunter onto the fragile surface of a river, and the buck turns here to face the hunter and to smile. Fast rivers never freeze all the way through, and the thin ice gives way beneath them.

"And this story was passed down, it's a passed down story. Now the



Forty whacks with his axe: Wild T and the Spirit shook the Grawood last Friday night with their (spirited) brand guitar-driven blues rock.

PHOTO: ANDREW SMITH

end is going to come in one fashion or another... We all know the end will come. You either face your hunter or you run from them."

Wordless understanding of our own frailty seeps through this room of listeners, and when the author finishes reading to us, there is a moment before anyone can think of a question to ask him. Then there is a wide range of subjects which we want David Adams Richards to talk to us about: The poetic quality of his prose, his love for hockey and whether he will ever write about it, the American civil war, which book in his trilogy was his personal favourite (the one which got the worst critical reviews, he says), and, ultimately, why he writes what he does.

"I don't write to expose people, I write to admire people," Richards explains. "The whole aspect of life is one for a kind of spiritual affirmation of the human existence or the human endurance. I know it's crazy but that's what I kind of believe. I do believe that in my work." David Adams Richards has many fellow believers.

Flick fizzles

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But Taylor gives the most convincing performance of the film. We see her progress from an indoctrinated child to an anorexic teen to a young woman with delusions of sainthood. Eventually she meets Jesus while ironing shirts and gets sent to a Carmelite nunnery.

Household Saints tries hard, but it ends up too slow and ponderous. Lili Taylor almost carries the last half of the film, but there's too much buildup to scenes to keep your attention, despite some interesting surreal touches (how would you like your mother-in-law floating over your marriage bed?). The plot and dia-

logue are too slow and the jokes too far between. There are talented actors here, but Savoca won't let them take their lead, and a promising film fizzles out while waiting for something to happen.

On January 16, 1924, the Gazette had a big story on a "Negro" winning 2nd place in an American national poetry contest. The student was Countee P. Cullen from New York University, his poem "The Ballad of a Brown Girl" won him \$250.00 in prize money. Almost as an afterthought they mentioned the first place winner's name and that he was white.

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