

Entertainment

Robertson Davies: humorist speaks

interview by Susan Sutton

Robertson Davies led many lives on his way to becoming one of Canada's finest and widely acclaimed writers. Born into a newspaper family in 1913, Davies grew up in Ontario and was educated at the most prestigious schools in Canada and England, including Upper Canada College and Oxford.

His varied experiences led him to three successive careers: first as an actor with the Old Vic Company in England, then as publisher of the *Peterborough Examiner* and until his retirement in 1981, as a professor at the University of Toronto.

Davies has written over thirty books, including *Fifth Business* and *Rebel Angels*.

He has also collected the praise of his many fans and authors like Anthony Burgess. Davies was the first Canadian to become an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and was made a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Affable and astute, Davies took time to speak to the *Gateway* prior to the Nov. 28 reading he gave of his latest novel, *What's Bred in the Bone*.

Gateway: In both books, you deal at length with the morose nature of Canadians. Do you think that nature reflects a lack of identity?

Davies: That is an identity, that morose character. It's very much like the Scandinavian identity, and they are not thought to lack identity. They just don't have an ebullient, brilliant, laughing sort of Mediterranean identity, and neither have we.

Gateway: Is that something we are stuck with?

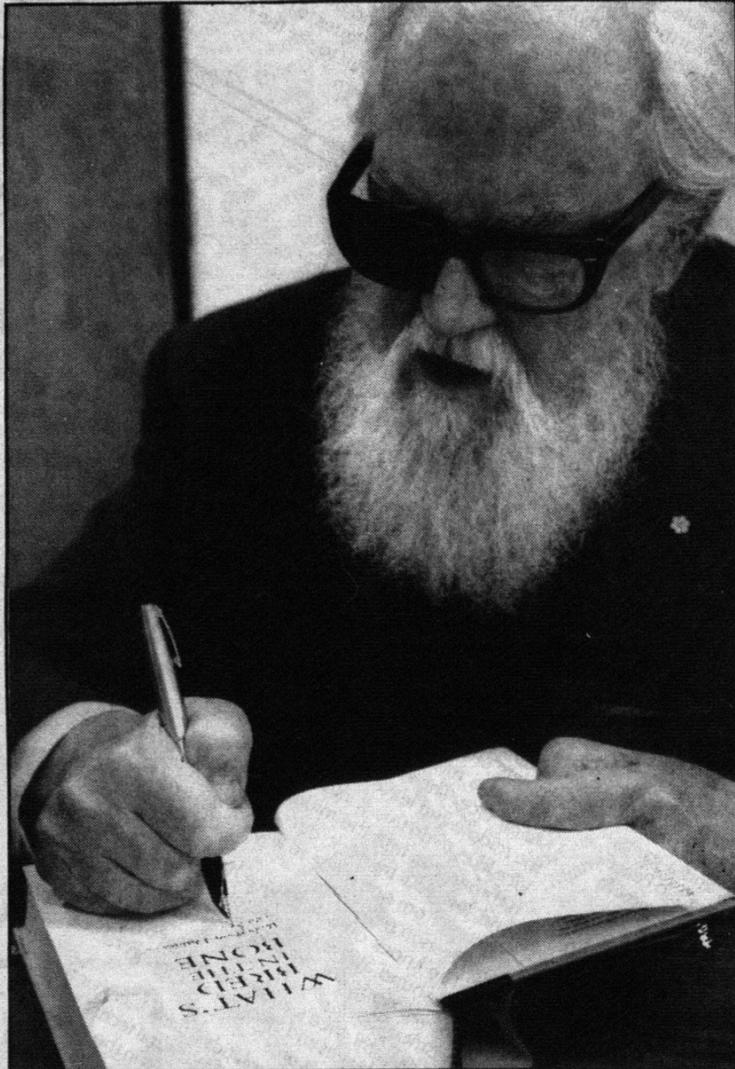
Davies: Oh, yes. I think it is a result of our climate. Look at the climate today — that's not going to make for a jolly, laughter-loving, dancing and singing people. It may make for humorous, interesting, sharp-minded people, but not a merry people.

Gateway: So Canadian authors basically reflect the character of the people?

Davies: Well, I think that it (their seriousness) is because of the background and temperament of the authors, a great many of whom are of Scottish descent and of a somewhat morose temperament. My background is Welsh, and it is much livelier and more disposed to make a sort of pattern out of life, to look sideways at life instead of straight ahead.

Gateway: Do you find that Canadians do not seem to appreciate particularly their own artists?

Davies: Well, I'll tell you where the Canadian literary scene is enormously appreciated, and that is in Europe. There are more than sixty centers of Canadian studies in Europe, so you had better start finding out what it is



Robertson Davies: "The supernatural is perfectly natural."

about us they like.

Canadians do not become excited about art. They become excited about politics and hockey, but not about art.

Gateway: Is that something we are stuck with, as well?

Davies: No, and we are not stuck with it now, because you see we've had an enormous immigration since 1945 of people from the old world who are interested in art and literature and things of that kind, and they are making an enormous difference to the national feeling.

One group alone, and not by any means the largest group, is the Hungarians, who are tremendously concerned with literature and

who were fascinated to discover that we had some, but didn't pay much attention to it.

This is the case with a great number of people who come here from other countries — they can't understand why we don't see what we've got. But the Canadian way has always been a sort of heavy, lead-bellied, grouchy sort of way, and it will change because the people will change. The composition of the population is changing. We're getting some new blood and it's not quite as slow as the old blood.

Gateway: Your books are much more humorous than many other Canadian books...

Davies: Do you study any of the work of

Mavis Gallant? You should, because it's wildly funny. Brilliantly funny. It doesn't make you laugh "ho-ho-ho"; it makes you shake with laughter inside. It's all about the Canadian city-dweller, and very funny indeed it is. She's been writing for the *New Yorker* for twenty years, and it's only recently that people have woken up to the fact that she's a Canadian writing about Montreal. We've got to get rid of this gloomy image and just say we're not going to put up with it any longer.

Gateway: There aren't a lot of people who really rave about Canadian books, though...

Davies: But you know, the books sell enormously, and they sell in many foreign languages. They must have some qualities. You mustn't write them off. You're being very Canadian: "Oh, it's Canadian, it can't be any good."

Gateway: You incorporate the supernatural into *What's Bred in the Bone* in a very realistic way. Do you think people ignore it, that it's really there?

Davies: The supernatural is perfectly natural. People just call it supernatural because they won't pay any attention to it. It's there. They should just look again and they'll find it's as natural as anything else. People don't see what's in front of their noses. That's my great quarrel with them, you know. They just will not see what is there. They should look more carefully, and that's one of the things I hope my books may persuade them to do.

Gateway: Who do you read?

Davies: I won't talk about Canadians because they're my colleagues. But...the people that virtually everybody does read: John Fowles, Anthony Powell, and a great many American writers. I greatly admire and read and re-read Isaac Singer's work. I think he is a great realist and, you know, he writes about the supernatural a great deal.

I also read a great many old books because I find them enormously satisfying. They're very rich books and a lot of modern books are not particularly rich. They're rather thin, which is something that I can get tired of very quickly.

For example, Evelyn Waugh is marvelously rich and wonderfully economical, too. If you're going to be a writer, you should always remember that you should be as economical as you can. The reader hasn't got a lot of time for ornamentation.

Gateway: So you find modern authors often don't offer much to think about?

Davies: Well, they seem to be so exceedingly gloomy. I think that one of the reasons my work is popular where it is popular is that it is not gloomy. So many modern writers are gloomy for no particular reason that you can discover except that it's fashionable.

This is particularly so, too, on the stage. Modern plays are so exceedingly gloomy that, really, it gets awfully depressing.

But people want to write about gloomy things, about "disillusionment" and "sexual disillusionment" and "nobody ever really loves anybody" and "everybody's a concealed homosexual" and "marriage is a lot of garbage" and a lot of things like that. It's fashion, largely, which makes people talk that way.

Gateway: So suffering for one's art is a bit of a myth?

Davies: People who are professionally unhappy are phonies. People who have a hard life are frequently exceedingly cheerful. These people who are faking gloom in order to seem important are phonies.

In fact, if you are not happy it will harm your writing. A lot of writers who seem to have been unhappy from their writing were really very cheerful fellows in private life. One of them was Eugene O'Neill. He was apparently a most genial fellow.

Gateway: What would you say to aspiring young writers today?

Davies: Well, there's everything to be said and the thing is to try to combat the thing you have just been complaining about, the dullness and the heaviness and that sort of gloomy outlook. Don't do that. Try to change your sights. It's awfully easy to be gloomy, you know. There is nothing that confers so much prestige as a negative opinion. And yet, what good is it? What's it do?

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