

Marginal Notes

Rick Salutin takes on mainstream politics and culture in his latest book

By RICK JANSON

It seems like Rick Salutin has forever been on the periphery of mainstream life. He describes himself in his new book as having been "a self-hating Canadian in the U.S., a nationalist in a country that has always suspected nationalism, among nationalists a Marxist, a middle-class writer in the labour movement, and within labour a dissenter against the mainstream, a Quebec independantiste in English Canada, a Jew among Gentiles, and among Jews an outsider for criticizing the community and Israel."

Marginal Notes: Challenges To The Mainstream

By Rick Salutin
Lester and Orpen Dennys
1984

The first money he made writing was for a radio programme called *Inside from the Outside*.

As an outsider he defines the currents that soothe and inflict themselves on society with the kind of clarity only an outsider can possess.

Marginal Notes: Challenges To The Mainstream offers a variety of perspectives on contemporary politics and culture. The essays are selected from Salutin's collected journalism over the past 12 years, many pieces originally appearing in such periodicals as *Saturday Night*, *Maclean's* and *This Magazine*.

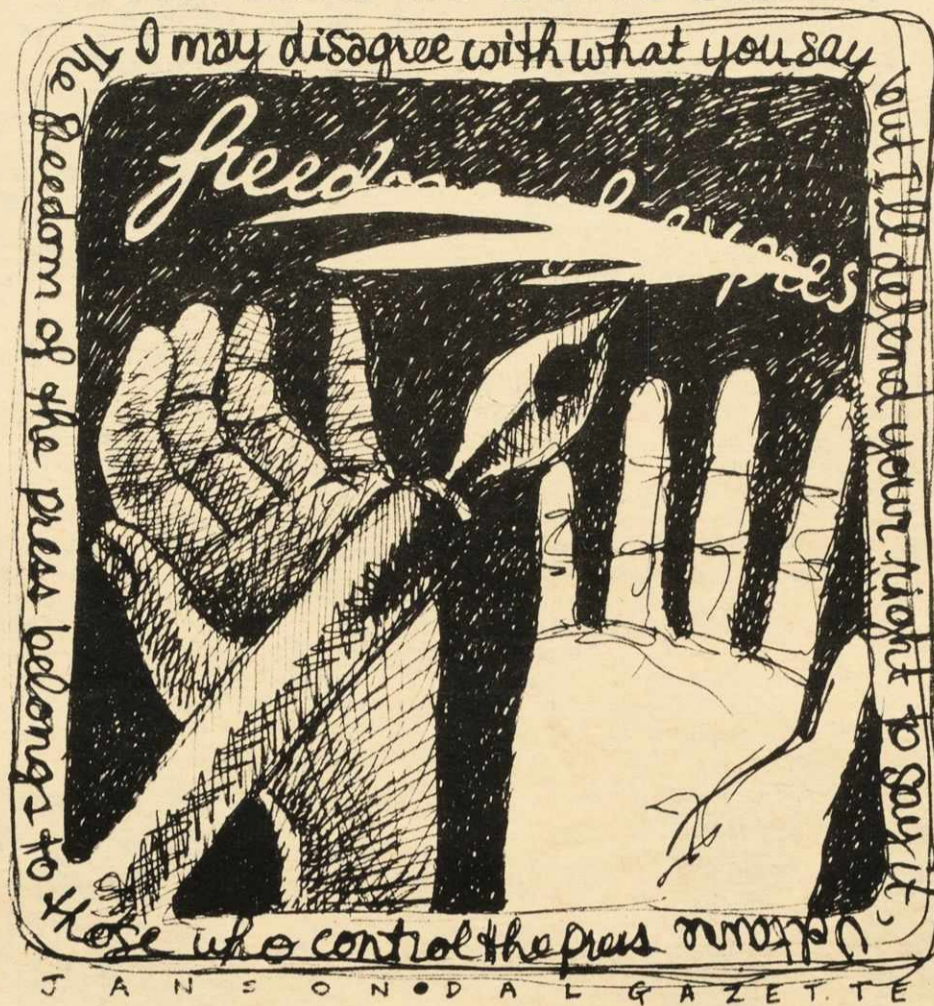
Salutin shucks off any romantic perceptions of being the existential hero, although even his detractors can't help but respect his intellectual tenacity and sense of purpose.

The book takes on the status-quo of Canadian society and exposes much of the flim-flam in the rhetoric of the mainstream powers.

Salutin won a national magazine award for one such article debunking the myth fuelled by *Maclean's* columnist Barbara Amiel that the national media is dominated by the political left.

"Barbara Amiel is all over the media," he writes. "She has been for several years. She was a book reviewer in *Maclean's*, book review editor and more recently, weekly columnist and writer of features centering on 'lifestyle.' She has been a public affairs host on CTV and TV-Ontario and has written a sort of political autobiography which was heavily promoted. She appears frequently on radio and TV.

WRITERS IN STRUGGLE



"What does Amiel use all this public exposure to say? That the left dominates the media! It's practically impossible to escape the din of her accusations that right-wing voices like her own just can't find a platform. This silence of the right is deafening."

Salutin goes on to savage Amiel, illustrating how her ideology supercedes such standards of journalism as accurate reporting, logical argumentation and evidence to back-up her claims.

Attacking such media icons as Amiel does not win you a lot of friends in the mainstream journalism community.

Salutin is therefore surprised by the early acceptance of his book.

"It's all been positive and I'm a bit aghast. I'm having an identity crisis," he said in an interview with *The Gazette*. "Last spring was open season on me for a very small little piece I wrote in a book called *The Writer and Human Rights*—it was an absolutely innocuous piece of fluff.

"It (the attacks) started in the *New York Times* and then it reverberated in the *Globe and Mail* over and over again. At a certain point I had to get an apology from them for red baiting. Maybe they got it out of their system last spring," he says.

Salutin hopes the good reviews are a result, he says conscious of his immodesty, of the quality of the book and the clarity of expression. He sums it up by quoting former labour activist Kent Rowley—"look, we just got to keep on fighting, fighting for our rights and eventually they will come to respect us." Salutin adds in his own words, "this is not an utterly closed society—it's somewhat claustrophobic—but

it's by no means monolithic or totalitarian."

A thread of optimism weaves its way through much of his book. For all the status-quo bashing, Salutin creates a sense of solidarity in struggle rather than leaving one beached in despair.

"I don't know where you can look for hope," he says, "but I don't see any reason to be so overconfident that the future is hopeless. In a larger sense it really doesn't matter what you think the future holds. You just do what you believe in."

Salutin's vision is a very individual one. Just when you think you have him pegged, he surprises you.

"I know lots of people who are very low on the Pope, but he's raised more issues in the weeks he's been in Canada than all the political parties in 10 weeks of electioneering. He's taken a more radical stand on most issues than the NDP—except women. On the economy he's got a much better position," he says.

There are plenty of heroes in Salutin's book, but he says he is wary about creating them in his work. We have a heroic profile of Montreal Canadiens forward Bob Gainey—the star who couldn't shoot. We have the people of Mozambique struggling to set-up a just society out of the ashes of colonial rule. We have labour activist Kent Rowley, Doug and Bob Mackenzie (the anti-heroes), and as much as he would deny it—we gain an overall impression of Salutin as a kind of working-class hero through his writing.

Do we need heroes? Salutin says yes and no. He quotes German playwright Bertolt Brecht—"unhappy is the land that has no

heroes, no, unhappy is the land that needs heroes."

"It depends on the way you define heroes," Salutin says. "If you mean people who people look up to and avoid responsibility themselves—you don't need that. But if it means people who see clearly the challenges of society and take them on in a way that is instructive to other people, that is ultimately for the good."

In the book he writes about how Quebec's national identity got wrapped up with the Montreal Canadiens until it was politically manifested with the election of the Parti Quebecois government in 1976.

"If there is a clear national sense of purpose coming from a more broadly shared sense of social purpose—commitment to a certain kind of society, a certain kind of role in the world—then I think that can be the basis for which you can invest certain personalities and teams with some of those values," he says. "But to expect the team to carry it all alone without the country or the politicians or the artists ... or anybody—without society at large defining what it believes in—it's just bound to collapse. In Quebec when you had that phenomenon of *Les Canadiens* there was also a very strong sense of social cohesion. There was a sense of culture, shared history, and a desire to continue as a nation. The question is what the hell does Team Canada represent?"

In the book Salutin attacks the contrived nature in which the media and Air Canada tried to turn the Canadians on the recent Everest expedition into heroes.

"To hail it as though no one had

Drawing the line

Graeme Gibson speaks on the old liberal tradition of freedom of speech

By P.J. WILSON

Sir, I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

—Voltaire 1694-1778

Many people, from students and former students to casual readers to professional intellectuals, have witnessed instances of suppression of certain writings, either through partial censorship or outright banning. Even so, many of these same people would be alarmed by the list of works Canadian author Graeme Gibson cites as having been either challenged or banned in Canada.

Gibson recited the list as part of his lecture at the Killam library Sept. 21, affirming what he calls "the old liberal tradition of faith in freedom of speech."

Apart from the list's length—and Gibson offered only a sampling to give his audience a sense of the wide-range of pressures on writers—there was an alarming diversity in the titles he mentioned. They ranged from explicitly controversial, such as *What Lesbians Do*, to popular Canadian works, like Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*—even to such standard young people's fare as *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*.

Also alarming is the diversity in the kinds of pressures being brought to bear on writers and their works. Some of the material mentioned by Gibson will not be allowed into Canada by customs officials here, who are imbued with the responsibility of determining what is and what is not permissible.

Gibson is dubious about the authority of such officials. "Giving them (customs officials) such enormous responsibility is unfair to them—and certainly unfair to us," he said.

Other of the works he cited have been banned from high school reading lists, often simply because of instances of "inappropriate language." *The Diviners*, for example, was removed from the Huron County (Ontario) Board of Education reading lists in August, 1978 after parents and religious groups protested its presence in a Grade 13 English course. One line deemed to be offensive was "No, I'm crying for God's sake."

In the case of *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* books, in 1977 these were withdrawn from cirula-

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