

Bards chase away Ides of March

by Tim Kihn

It was the evening of the Ides of March. The shielded back-lights threw macabre shadows on Don Kerr's face as he stepped up to the podium in the Jubilee banquet room. Kerr, the chairman of the U of S English department, paused and then announced the title of his first poetry reading: "In Praise of Drinking."

Beware the Ides of March? Not on this night.

So began the readings of the Bards of March last Saturday night in a benefit for the NeWest Institute for Western Canadian Studies. Seven writers presented their works including Don Kerr, Henry Kreisel, Smaro Kamboureli, Birk Sproxtion, Doug Barbour, Aritha van Herk, and Rudy Wiebe. bpNichol read for Robert Kroetsch.

Despite the *Dr. Caligari*-like setting, the evening began in an upbeat way with MC Shirley Neuman praising the variety and vitality of western Canadian poetry and fiction. "The days of gloom and doom are over," she enthused. Neuman is a founding member of NeWest Press, which is in its tenth year of existence.

First among the invited speakers was Don Kerr, reciting poems such as "In Praise of Drinking," a lighthearted rebuttal of temperance advocates in Saskatchewan during the late 1960's.

Told in anecdotal style with frequent dramatic pauses, Kerr's poetry was at once thought-provoking and humorous.

Henry Kreisel's first reading examined how a person may describe Canada to those unfamiliar with its nuances.

Customs officers in India, for example, are unable to comprehend what temperatures of -20 F. are like. "Is it 100 times colder than here (80 deg. F)?" one official asked.

Kreisel's next reading dealt with the imposition of hunting regulations on native groups. If the Indian is confined, then so too must be the bird. Kreisel's reading demonstrated his well-crafter writing style and his natural gift for story-telling.

Leaning forward slightly and speaking earnestly, Smaro Kamboureli read from her

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poetry/non-fiction work *In the Second Person*. In an intense, ten minute reading, Kamboureli spoke about a Greek immigrant to Canada and her struggle with writing, speaking, and thinking in a foreign language. Even when one is able to speak the new language, "the accent accentuates the difference."

Birk Sproxtion was next. He is from Red Deer, and is president of NeWest Press. Sproxtion related portions of his recent novel *Head Frame*, the story of a boy growing up in Flin Flon, Manitoba. Flin Flon, according to Sproxtion, is a place where "the only people I know who live there are either hookers or hockey players."

Included in his reading was a depiction of two boys "pissing on a lake" and forming intricate and artistic patterns on the water. He cited the mythical story behind the town's name as proof that Flin Flon is a literary place, full of meaning.

U of A professor Doug Barbour read three poems. An example of sound poetry sandwiched between two straight poems. Most memorable was his sound poem, "That Gone Tune," inspired by listening to jazz at the Yardbird Suite. Barbour became the "bradd, bass, and percussion" for five minutes as he expressed his poem. As the words/noises progressed, one blending into the next, Barbour demonstrated the "smooth" and "fantastic" appeal of his jazz poetry, from the soulful bass "notes" to the shrieking brass blasts.

Reading for Robert Kroetsch, bpNichol articulated well Kroetsch's style of poetry called "a dispatch of silences," and "the destruction that allows the new." Nichol emphasized the unorthodox rhythmic pattern of

the readings with a staccato vocal delivery and expressive arm movements.

"Sonnet 1" dealt with the "primordial nothing... North of America," a.k.a. Canada, that "resists the temptation to (be given) form." Kroetsch's other sonnets included moving accounts of the poet's attempt to deal with the death of his mother and his loss of part of his nature: "In the fall of snow I hear my mother/... In the weight of the snow I hear her silence... where are you?"

From her latest novel *No Fixed Address*, currently in press, Aritha van Herk presented a selection that relates how the picara (female form of picaro) of the novel encounters a vain and egotistical poet who is flogging his latest collection of poetry. By coincidence, the picara has breakfast with the boorish poet. She observes the poet as a curiosity while eating, "watching his performance from a distance as though he were an orchestra hired to accompany a meal."

Van Herk read in a witty and lively way, poking fun at self-centred males like the poet in her novel. As with her previous novels *The Tent Peg* and *Judith*, the protagonist is a female, with male figures portrayed as insensitive brutes. Why is this the case? "Because I don't understand men," said van Herk jokingly.

Rudy Wiebe was the final reader of the evening. Wiebe selected readings from his novel *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in particular, Big Bear's eloquent defence of himself and his people after his conviction. The room almost shook as Wiebe narrated Big Bear's powerful statement, documenting a lost way of life. If Wiebe became Big Bear, then the 200 or so in attendance became the



Poet bp Nichol

all-white jury at the trial. One could not help but feel a sense of guilt for the circumstances which lead to Big Bear's conviction. Wiebe, dressed completely in black, symbolized a dark memory in Canada's past that will not be forgotten.

According to Shirley Neuman, the success of the Bards of March "surprised even ourselves, those connected with NeWest enterprises." Even the fellow who grumbled about losing his place in the bar line to claim his door-prize left the room impressed with the quality of western Canadian writings. It was an Ides of March that Julius Caesar himself would have enjoyed!

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