

The writers that I've always been associated with -and mean a lot to me- are Faulkner and Tolstoy.

Wiebe talks about writing and Riel

L.A. Trofymow spoke with Governor General award-winning author Rudy Wiebe. He now teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta.

by L.A. Trofymow

Is it possible for a Canadian novelist to write for a living — without university patronage?

Oh sure. Margaret Atwood does it all the time.

Yeah, but she's still connected to universities.

Atwood is completely independent — connected to no institutions. Mordecai Richler is another (independent). Robertson Davies. It's perfectly possible.

And what about poets?

I don't think poets anywhere in the world can live on the income of their poetry — except in the Soviet Union. Yevgni Yevtushenko sells 150,000 copies there.

Why such a lot of poetry there?

It's an interesting reflection of society. Yevtushenko says, "The only limit on the number of books of mine that are published is that they won't give me more paper." It's quite wonderful, in one sense. It's a particular kind of society and there are only certain kinds of poets published. You have a market of 250 million people, and almost no literature from the West is allowed into the country. In a restricted society, every writer becomes a gem if the state only allows him to publish. But if the state won't allow you to publish, then you don't get published at all. And so you pass your manuscript among friends — for which you can get arrested.

Maybe a harsh political environment makes a better writer. You once said that harsh surroundings produce better writers.

It often does. The perfect Canadian example of that is a Czech poet I know. He is one of the world's great poets, but all his works come out of the travails of modern Czechoslovakia. He says he loves Canada because the politics are so bland.

Are there any particular writers whose work you admire or even emulate? A mentor?

The two writers that I've always been associated with — and mean a lot to me — are Faulkner and Tolstoy. Mentor... I suppose the person who helped me the most at a very critical stage of my life was F.M. Salter, who taught the creative writing course here. He encouraged me to take a creative writing M.A.

Did the creative writing M.A. exist then?

It's existed here since the '40s. And (Salter) was the man who started it.

Where are some of your former students now?

Caterina Lovero, who was in one of my first writing classes, is teaching here. (Lovero has published one novel and many short stories.) Katherine Govier is now a novelist and short story writer living in Toronto. She's just published a book of short stories. Lovero and Govier are probably the best-known writers of that first writing class. Have you

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read any of Govier's books? She's written very well about growing up in southern Alberta.

You think a writer's born with "it"?

Well, a writer is born with a certain amount "it". (Laughs)

Whatever "it" is...

Talent. Ability. Have to have some talent, y'know. You can't hope to be a singer if you can't recognize a melody, can't carry a tune... although nowadays, that's another question (laughs). Leonard Cohen is the perfect example — can hardly sing, but is known as a singer. But a lot of "it" is sticking with it, not giving up.

What inspires your fiction?

Oh, come on.

What would you say? What would you say you use as inspiration?

Hmph. "Inspire". The idea of telling a story is what inspires fiction.

You used to hand us newspaper articles in class.

That was just to get you going. But basically what you want to do is tell a story — that's what inspires fiction. You feel you want to make a story.

You think that's what binds storytellers together, that obsession with telling?

To a certain extent. Some fiction writers can't verbally tell a story. I know several who are superb writers, but they can't tell a story the way you do sitting around a campfire. Keep the distinction between oral storytelling and writing. The invention of writing comes very late in human history — the invention of letters. The Indians of the prairies didn't have writing until the white missionary came.

With the publication of *War in the West*, it seems you are following an historical trend (in your writing).

Yes. I got the ideas from writing about the smaller people involved in the rebellion. A novelist always would be attracted to the ordinary people rather than the so-called "great" people.

Which explains why there is comparatively little about Riel (in *War in the West*).

Yeah. Riel was deliberately cut out. We know plenty about what Riel thought, but we know very little about what happened to the ordinary man, woman, child.

Bob Beal mentions in *War in the West* that the white man had a very distorted view of the natives and the Metis.

Most of the records we have in the book that we have on the Metis are interviews done around the turn of the century, 15 years after the conflict. These interviews are very questionable as historical documents — how much were the interviews doctored before we see them?

What I wanted to do in *War in the West* was to get the ordinary person's reactions as close to the time of the events as possible. Some of the accounts were letters written home to mom and dad. The sons, I suppose, would tend to make themselves perhaps a little more heroic, or more involved in the action than perhaps they were. It depends on their characters. But that was our (Beal's and Wiebe's) idea: to get close-at-hand accounts, as personal as possible. We read thousands of pages of very dull stuff. But some of them are very fine natural writers.

Just as fine as the artists who did some of the illustrations in the book.

Exactly.

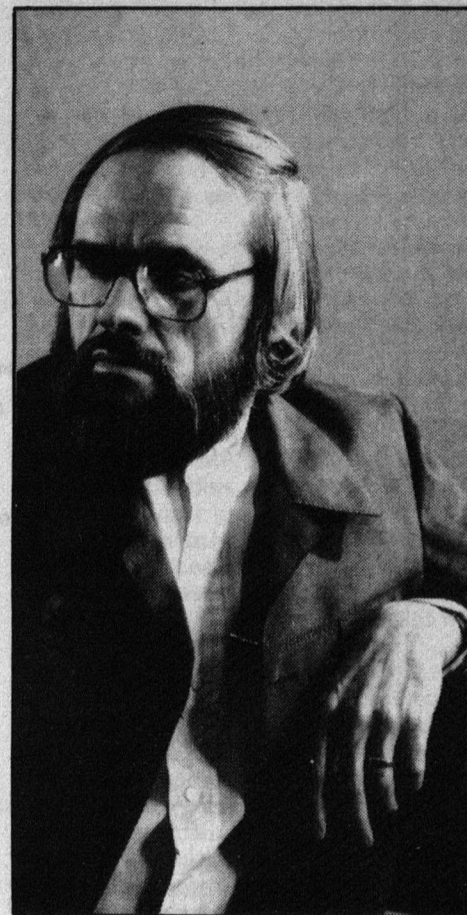
You have empathy for the Metis because — it seems that the prairie frontier is a haven for all sorts of groups: Hutterites, Mennonites, Metis...

Eastern European peasants, basically used for generations as feudal serfs, who found here freedom and relative independence.

Would you say Riel was fanatical? Monomaniacal? "Touched"?

One of the reasons Riel is so interesting is because you can read his writing in a dozen different ways. He was a saviour — a man who truly saw the problems of western Canada. He said he saw Ottawa as doing to the West what London did to Ontario a hundred years before. The other explanation is that Riel was nuts, a crackpot, a religious fanatic. I mean, he is the father of Manitoba. There is a statue of him on the Winnipeg legislative grounds — which is right. Without Riel, Manitoba would not have existed.

I suppose if I came to any conclusions (about Riel and the Metis), it would have been in *The Scorched Wood People*. What the people of the West felt during the Rebellion was not reflected very well in the eastern newspapers. These papers had strong eco-



Author Rudy Wiebe

photos by Jorge Frascara

nomie and political bases in the East.

The basic misconception is that Canada's never had a civil war. This is not true... we haven't been spared this. We did have a war of conquest in 1885: 85 people died for certain reasons. It was a war fought by the Canadian Defense Department against a group of people in Canada.

Is there a "prevailing ideology" in the book?

Of course there is. Beal and I are particular kinds of people. We try to be honest and show different sides of events. We find certain things more interesting than others.

The fact of the matter is, if you stick to the ordinary people... like the women's accounts. Elizabeth Maclean writes about the Indian women protecting the Maclean girls during their captivity. It's very contemporary, the kind of story you never hear about: the Indian women hiding the Maclean girls from the men. The women stick together, they're all human beings. That was quite a marvelous thing...

Rudy Wiebe is one of eight writers who will be reading at the NeWest Institute benefit ("The Bards of March") at 8 p.m. on March 15th at the Jubilee auditorium. Your favourite Canadian authors — including former U of A students Aritha Van Herk and Robert Kroetsch, and present professors Henry Kreisel and Doug Barbour — will read from their own works, chit-chat, eat food, and sing songs with you. A limited number of tickets are available.

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- assume on call duty when H&F's offices are closed, i.e., 4:30 pm - 8:30 am on weekdays (winter session); 4:00 pm - 8:00 am on weekdays (summer session) and on a 24 hour basis during weekends.
- respond to emergency maintenance concerns.
- let in tenants who are locked out.
- distribution of letters, etc. to tenants from H&F administration.
- other related duties as assigned.

QUALIFICATIONS: The Student Housing Assistant must live in HUB; must have some experience with simple maintenance concerns; and must have good interpersonal and communication skills.

APPLY TO: Canada Employment Centre on Campus, 4th Floor, SUB or to Robert Lamb, 44 Lister Hall, tel. 432-4281 or 433-5633.

Proposed Amendment To The Code Of Student Behaviour

S. 43.3.5 Specific Faculty Offences

Current

Faculties and administrative Units will be required to define and publicise any academic offences which may be unique to their Faculty or area, together with attendant penalties, both of which must be filed with, and approved by the Campus Law Review Committee

Proposed

Unchanged

Add

Such offences and penalties will be considered by the Campus Law Review Committee and if approved by the Campus Law Review Committee and General Faculties Council will be incorporated in an official appendix to the Code of Student Behavior and will have the same force and effect as if part of the Code.