

BOOK SECTION

WHAT FOLLOWS IS an account of 25 writers from all over the world converging in Toronto last week, and something of their work, their lives and thoughts. Observation and conversation reveal, for example, the charm and intellect of Indian novelist Salman Rushdie (and his appetite for potato chips), the almost animal attraction of English poet Ted Hughes and his own fascination for the bizarre — such as the apparent connection between saliva and love potions. The Fifth Annual Harbourfront International Festival of Authors also afforded a peek inside Morley Callaghan's mind as well as his Rosedale home, a dowager of a place. If it's harder news you want, there were fisticuffs at one reading during the festival, but they were quelled rather quickly and in a Canadian way: by talk.

It would not be fair to say that scalpers made a killing hawking tickets outside the festival, which ended Oct. 22 and which consisted of 24 readings of poetry and prose spread over six evenings. But there were indeed scalpers selling \$5 tickets for \$20, there were sellouts of more than 500 people, and a general air of excitement increasingly marked the evenings. "Close personal friends" of writers called Harbourfront begging for tickets. The fight, if one can call a single roundhouse right and broken glasses that, was a matter of a stolen seat, not a matter of fans run amok. (Musicians and athletes are superstars; writers not yet.)

Now a journalist may parachute into such luminous literary company, rub shoulders with these internationally ranked and prize-winning writers as they carve into their prime rib steaks; he may walk and talk with them for hours on end, play tourist with them (even ride *The Maid Of The Mist* with them), hobnob and backslap with them; but he remains on the periphery where he belongs, his contact with them ruled by constraints which tend always to the artificial. Mavis Gallant, in the course of an interview, makes the point more precisely.

The hack and the poet need each other, but the wise writer curbs his speech when the tape recorder runs. Cell-size border guards patrol his brain: this gets by, this is stopped. What the observer gets finally are words, impressions, details of habit, that in sum do little to illuminate the writing but put flesh on the writer. Most important, he hears them read from their work, in English and in their own language, an essential, delightful human act, as any child who has been read to knows.

Consider the range at this festival: Joseph Brodsky reading in the Russian style and in that language, gave overpowering recitations from memory. It was like Eastern music with deep, rich octaves: Father Brodsky saying High Mass in the Vulgate. Austrian poet Ernst Jandl gave us poet as performer and played linguistic tricks with his sound poetry, testing the Harbourfront sound system with his "Germenglish." Ted Hughes,



English poet Ted Hughes with a posing admirer, Caitlin Hicks of Toronto

AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

Story and photos by LARRY SCANLAN

The Fifth International Festival of Authors in Toronto was marked by a momentum that built as the week progressed. Part politics, part poetry, the festival linked the city and 25 writers. Each held surprises for the other.

an awesome poet whose relationship with his late wife Sylvia Plath has unfortunately taken away from his own genius (forgive me if I overuse that word), cradled poems in his resonant Yorkshire accent. He is a sheep farmer whose journal of real and unusual events has produced some of his finest poetry, in which ravens pluck out the eyes of newborn lambs and a shepherd's hand bloodies itself in the birth and death of his flock. When he had finished his reading, he sat and for more than an hour autographed copies of his books for patient venerator. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in his fisherman's sweater and broad American dialect, gave us such underwear insights as "Do not go naked into that good night."

In the reading of their prose and poetry and in interviews, writers from Brazil (Ivan Angelo) and Poland (Stanislaw Baranczak) gave us human details of oppression: that the printing of wedding invitations in Poland is a state matter. That in Brazil at this moment five million peasants face death by drought. (One wonders

at the caste system implicit in news wires and the resulting conditioning: I cannot even conceive of five million Americans dying of drought for the simple reason that I cannot imagine such a headline.) Dutch writer Mischa de Vreede reminded us that during the Second World War 90,000 Dutch nationals in Indonesia were interned in camps under hideous conditions. Gladys Thomas, a South African writer, was scheduled to appear at the festival but declined when her family was threatened with violence if she went to Toronto. And so it goes.

Of course, even censorship has its lighter moments: in Pakistan Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is apparently banned, since the play culminates in the assassination of a general. As a solution, the censors decided to dress *Julius* in the uniform of a British general, a decision with ominous implications for any British generals travelling through the East.

In this account, then, the reporter assembles the comments of prominent writers at the festival as well as

those whose obscurity exists only in this country. In their own countries — where, ironically, such Canadian writers as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are widely read — and in many others they are well-known. My blinkers off, I was reminded that literature flourishes, sometimes under bizarre conditions, everywhere in the world.

For six days last week, these 25 writers from the global literary community gathered in a Canadian city whose architecture, whose space, whose possibilities and whose book stores (especially) dazzled them. Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch summed up precisely what the conference meant to him: "Here you got a great sense of a community of people who are engaged in story-telling, involved deeply in language. One of the scariest things in our world is the dominance of English. It's going to become a gigantic business language, and I want it to be a language of poets and not just a language of commerce."

It seems natural to begin this account with Roy McDonald. He did not read at this or any other international festival, and a good bet is that he never will; what he perhaps represents is the humbleness of beginnings, the doggedness of literature and the cultural distance we have come in this country, the distance we must go.

First the beginnings: Harbourfront as a centre for the reading of poetry and prose is very much the brainchild of a poet and editor named Greg Gatenby, now the centre's literary coordinator. But nine years ago, when I was still living in Toronto, he was the organizer of sad and amusing weekly readings held at Harbourfront before the facelift. Those first readings, in bleak and black warehouse ambience, assembled between 10 and 30 people, a grab-bag of curious onlookers, published poets so minor that even the word *minor* sounds like praise, and darker beings whose specialty was psychopathic fantasy. Everyone who wanted to read, did; afterwards there were beer, burgers and post-mortems, maybe even psychiatric diagnoses, at a place called the Selby Hotel, which now also has a facelift and a new clientele.

It wasn't until years later that Roy McDonald began to make an appearance at these weekly readings. Perhaps he wore then what he wears now. White trenchcoat, heavy with buttons. Prophet-length beard. Arched eyebrows and a smile of anticipation. He never sits but stands, between his feet a canvas bag heavy with his own books of poetry, for Roy McDonald, poet, is also Roy McDonald, publisher. I am told that one book features an introduction by his mother, but whether his work has merit will be for someone else to decide; what matter are the 200 miles he travels weekly and without fail to attend the readings and the fact that he never missed a single reading during the six-day festival. He caught the midnight train every night. This is doggedness.