

PHOTO: COURTESY RANDOM HOUSE

David Adams Richards

by CAROLYN WEAVER

Whether he is talking to a large auditorium of students at York University, with Fine Print guest readers or quietly with me, I never fail to see David Adams Richards' characters standing behind him.

They are a tight gang and they travel together. Unlike most authors, David does not speak about his characters, but for them. He is both their spokesperson and their advocate. You have to admire an author who is willing to engage in an extended argument, spanning several decades, to attain the respect and dignity he feels these souls deserve.

I am not writing to show people how bad someone is," says David, "I am trying to show that overall the world is both tragic and comic and it's a wonderful world." Writing about the tragic is something Adams Richards does exceedingly well. He creates fictional worlds, which have so much tragedy on the surface that at moments the darkness can become pervasive. The only way to see one's way through the heartbreak that many characters inflict consciously and unconsciously on others, is to use one's own failings to struggle for an understanding, which allows one to stay the course of compassion. Do we not all have in our past a moment of cruelty inflicted on another for reasons that eluded or defied our consciousness. A moment that we later struggled to understand in a desperate need to not be reduced in our own hearts and minds to the person we were at that moment. Forgiving ourselves cannot undo the action but it can allow us to use a new understanding to do things

differently in the future. David asks his readers to use this type of self-knowledge to engage with characters one instinctively wants to swiftly and neatly condemn and thus feel justified in turning away from.

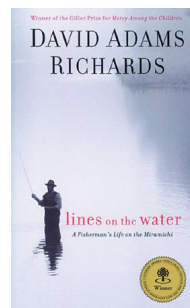
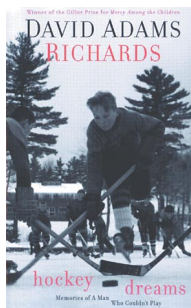
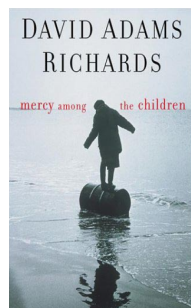
"I loved this book because he made you work," said actor Allan Altman of *Blood Ties*, on the phone to me the night before we taped an episode of Fine Print. I was relieved because I had already had one reader bail on me after chapter three. "Too dark" this guest reader had said, "I have no interest in going there send me a happier book." Perhaps though Host of HGTV's *Savoir Faire*, Nick Manojlovich's comments on Fine Print capture the conflicted emotions that reading a David Adams Richards book stirs in all readers to varying degrees. "I would throw the book - (Giller Winning *Mercy Among the Children*) across the room and say: Good night David, but then I would find it in my hands again." Adams Richards is a writer that wants you to struggle in the hopes that it will make

you a more self aware and compassionate person in life. The beauty of his writing and the intensity of the journey make even the darkest moments shot through with light. If you want a story that will have clearly delineated heroes and villains with a predictable happy ending best to turn on the Hallmark movie of the week. I can guarantee you though that long after you have forgotten the movie of the week you will remember Adams Richards' books.

A high school class in Boston recently sent Adams Richards a letter explaining that the strong but gentle pacifist Sidney, in *Mercy Among the Children*, had provoked such heated class debates that they were now asking him directly the question that I have heard many ask Adams Richards, with the same desperate need, for a final verdict: "Is Sydney's decision to not fight or defend himself in life the wrong one?" His answer is both elusive and telling but again makes the reader do the work; "Over time one must ask oneself: Were Deirdre Win, David Scone, Matt Pitt, Leo McVicer and Constable Moore wrong?"

Even having won two Governor General Awards and The Giller Prize, Adams Richards' motivation to write and to defend his characters, in particular the ones he knows will be most attacked, is to continually challenge his readers not to jump to arbitrary opinions, which are unconsciously driven by the judgments of society and its institutions. One social institution which he has openly criticized for its judgments of both his characters and the many real life people he based them on, are Universities whom he feels have misunderstood many of his characters because of their secular and liberal ideologies. In *Mercy Among the Children* we see how very often Adams Richards' personal life and writing life become intertwined.

Life for Adams Richards' characters is always challenging perhaps because this has been the case for their creator. At forty-eight years of age he had finished *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* and a few times found himself in the painful position of not having enough money to buy milk for his two boys. The sting of those moments still very much



present as he recalls how he knew then that he had to make some changes. Adams Richards and his family moved to Toronto from New Brunswick and he switched publishers from McClelland & Stewart to Random House. The changes were as much an assertion of a new kind of confidence as they were a result of desperation. In either case, it preceded what appears to be a very happy period in his life. Winning The Giller Prize made a big difference. Not only was it a nod of approval from his peers, but it also brought a much wider audience to his books. Adams Richards is finishing his latest novel, based upon the life of his grandmother. "The imaginative reconstruction which is what has allowed the truth of her to come out, would not have been possible if I still lived in New Brunswick and walked by her theatre everyday," he says.

This fall, the book that interrupted his writing of *Mercy Among the Children*, *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*, will be premiered at the Toronto Film Festival. The script is co-written with Director Tim Southam, and the role of Carrie, is being played by Elaine Cassidy of Atom Egoyan's *Felicia's Journey*. "The movie could have taken

many different angles, but it is focused on Michael Skid and the drug deal that went wrong," says Adams Richards. "Things that are essential in the book are not essential in the movie, as it is an immediate art." He hopes that the movie will encourage people to read the book, which contains more of the story than the movie can touch on. With great delight he ruthfully points out the irony of this walk-on role, "I play a professor who walks by when Michael Skid is arrogantly showing his photographs of the poor people of India."

Adams Richards can appear tough to an adversary of his characters, but he is actually a very gentle and sensitive man. Reflecting on a year of conversations and debates with him about his characters, I consider how much energy it must take to not only create them but to actively live with them in such an engaged manner. I asked David if the intensity of his connection to his characters exhausts him and if he can ever get away from them. He quietly quotes a line from one of his favourite novels, "I am Heathcliff."

After the author's 18th book is finished this year, he is going to take a well-deserved break. This is not surprising given how prolific he has been and the intensity with which he works. I take this as a sign that this warrior feels some peace at having his characters finally accepted and understood. I hope that this Canadian cultural treasure will be able to spend more time with his three other loves: his family, fly fishing and hockey. Given that writing is like breathing to David Adams Richards, I feel quite sure that he won't be away from it for long. There will always be new characters to create and defend in his on-going effort to make us all more compassionate and empathetic people. ■