

FESTIVALS

Why write?

THE GLAMOUR AND romance attributed to the life of writers has long attracted my suspicions. Though the ability—nay, power—to convey ideas in words sufficiently well to capture the imagination of others is remarkable, especially for those to whom it's not a regular practice, writers are really no more talented than many other skilled craftspeople or artists. This is not to be dour.

Ask an author, "Why write?" or more specifically, "Why do you write?" and you'll likely get a variation on the answer Québécois author Gaétan Soucy gave during a discussion with three fellow Quebec writers during the 19th annual Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival in October.

Soucy, whose latest novel *The Immaculate Conception* stirred some controversy when it was shortlisted for last year's Scotiabank Giller Prize, said "How can I not write?" is the more common question for him. Writing itself is not so much a choice as a vocation. Soucy compared his work to that of a mathematician, who explores the world and its phenomena through formulas, theorems and proofs. While a mathematician describes the world with numbers, a writer uses words.

When not guided by an artistic impulse, however, Soucy believes the necessity to write too often results in something short of true literature. It's the difference between Britney Spears and Béla Bartók, he quipped.

Alberto Manguel also highlighted the role and importance of discrimination in speaking of the making of his own library, and libraries generally, during a conversation with the festival's artistic director, Hal Wake. Books, and by extension libraries, encapsulate what we remember (and choose to remember) about ourselves, Manguel said. "Libraries are the repositories of memory," he said. "We are creating a space that defines itself and defines the world in a certain way."

Reading and one's choice of books consequently define the reader as much as the call to write differentiates a writer from those with other skills. Manguel pointed out that what a library excludes also points up the limits of one's understanding.

Perhaps because of the potential space constraints almost all libraries ultimately face, Manguel said the impetus to develop and cultivate a library also speaks to the importance one assigns to memory. The desire to know who we are both individually and collectively as a society through books is manifest

in our support for libraries and the type of libraries we create. Archetypal libraries such as Alexandria were intended to hold everything, for example, but Manguel noted that the online repository of the Internet (which he doesn't use) holds anything.

Although the Internet has helped loosen the physical space requirements that have limited past collections, Manguel lamented the role this has played in degrading the experience of texts. The experience of the container is frequently integral to the experience of the text itself. The result is a style of reading that acts as an accumulation of knowledge rather than an exercise in memory, or an act of sustained contemplation that builds a relationship with texts, their physical beings and the history that has accumulated around them.

Noah Richler brought together the act of writing and reading during a conversation with author and all-round personality Bill Richardson regarding *This Is My Country, What's Yours? A Literary Atlas of Canada*, Richler's latest book, published by McClelland & Stewart. Returning to Canada in 1998 from England, Richler reacquainted himself with his country of birth (he is, of course, the son of Montreal's own Mordecai Richler) and eventually began to explore the current literary psychogeography of the country.

While many are comparing Richler's work to Margaret Atwood's classic study *Survival* (1972), Richler told festival-goers that multiculturalism has helped Canada push aside the myth of survival in a wilderness. Though much of Canada remains far from the centres of global decision-making, an emphasis on multiculturalism has put it at the forefront of a phenomenon which all developed nations will sooner or later experience.

How Canada retells its story of itself in this context is the focus of Richler's so-called atlas, which features conversations with 100 literary figures from across Canada. Bridging the question of "Why write?" and Manguel's emphasis on the importance of books and libraries as vessels and arbiters of memory, Richler believes the most vital elements in our contemporary literary culture come from the lack of a common past and our inability to be certain of the future.

The gathering and mingling of cultures in Canada has given us uncertain, at times conflicting, memories of ourselves. Wrestling with where we are going, Richler contends we often have a single viable option—to live in the present reality, which our stories make more vivid for us, more bearable.

Peter Mitham

The deadline for the 2007 Alcuin Book Design Awards submissions is March 31. See www.alcuinsociety.com for details.