

Revolution, anyone? Going to the barricades for literary nonfiction

By Ken McGoogan

Who knew that Edmonton would become a North Star? Certainly not this ex-Calgarian, his expectations diminished by subjection to years of inter-city rivalry. But a literary Polaris, I realized in the heat of a September panel discussion, is precisely what the Alberta capital has turned into as a result of LitFest. That's the name of the only book festival in Canada devoted to nonfiction: LitFest.

The theme this year was "Hot North." Three authors had said their pieces, and now audience members were rushing to the microphones, bursting with questions to ask and statements to make. The scene brought me back to a recent Melbourne Literary Festival. There, three panels treating history and biography inspired such enthusiastic skirmishing that I could hardly believe it. Audience members challenged speakers and presented arguments. By crikey, they had come to participate.

Both events made the traditional Canadian festival look pallid. And at both I found myself reflecting that, in turning our backs on literary nonfiction, we in Canada have made a serious mistake. We have become a nation of spectators, detached from our own history, our own issues, happy to leave engagement to others while fawning over fiction writers, preferably come from away.

Am I the only one grown tired of listening to fictioneers read to me from books I can read myself? A cabaret of six-minute readings can entertain if the drinks are flowing. But to the conventional, twenty-minute fiction writer's drone, I vastly prefer an on-stage conversation or interview, or better still a no-holds-barred panel discussion. And for that, nothing works better than fact-based literature.

Yet a few days after LitFest ended, a Toronto newspaper reported that Geoffrey Taylor, the artistic director of the International Festival of Authors, was taking flak for opening up a tiny bit of space to nonfiction. And I found myself thinking: this problem is larger than I realized.

October brought supporting evidence. The horse-race mentality pervading the Giller Prize is famously deplorable. But then came the announcement of the finalists for the Governor-General's Literary Awards – and here, again, you would swear that the only GG that matters is the one for fiction. Best illustration: *The National Post* devoted almost half a page to the fiction finalists, and for the rest, referred readers to a website.

The disparity reminded me of CBC Radio's annual *Canada Reads* competition. Why, year after year, does it focus exclusively on fiction? In the real world, fiction accounts for less than 35 per cent of the Canadian book market, even if you throw in thrillers and Harlequin romances. Clearly, Canadian gate-keepers have bought into the notion that fiction is the Heavyweight Division and the literary novel is the Main Event.

Sad, sad, sad. In the international arena, no less a figure than Nobel Prize-winner V.S. Naipaul has insisted repeatedly that nonfiction can be just as "literary" as fiction -- just as imaginative, just as important, just as profound. And I smile grimly at the unhappy precedent, from an adjacent realm, of English painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), who created countless masterpieces yet received no commensurate recognition because "history painting" was the only high art, don't you know, and he painted merest landscapes.

Quick now, list the ten most important Canadian books of the past twenty years. All done? If your list does not include *Frozen in Time: The Fate of the Franklin Expedition*, by Owen Beattie and John Geiger, you have proven my point. One hundred years from now, when most of today's prize-winning novels have been consigned to the dustbin of literary history, people will still be arguing about that book. And *Frozen in Time* is just one example from the field I know best.

Again, if it's a body of work that counts, consider Charlotte Gray's: *Mrs. King, Sisters in the Wilderness, Flint & Feather, Reluctant Genius*. Few contemporary fiction writers have produced any comparable run. As for matters of literary craft, well, I refer you to a forthcoming book by Heather Robertson called *Measuring Mother Earth: How Joe the Kid Became Tyrrell of the North*. It's a narrative nonfiction that will stand, for sheer artistry, against any novel published this season.

Where am I taking this? To be blunt, I am calling for a revolution. LitFest is a beginning. Going forward requires a slow-motion, two-step action plan. First step: we divide fact-based literature into two broad categories -- narrative nonfiction and polemical nonfiction. The first includes biography, memoir, travel, popular history, true crime, you get the idea; the second comprises thesis-driven works, artful jeremiads -- political, scientific, philosophical. Along these lines, we reorganize our book-world.

Second step: we abandon "nonfiction." Yes, you read that correctly. We cease to define countless literary works by what they are not, and in relation to some other genre. As a corollary, recognize that, as a concept, "creative nonfiction" has taken us as far as it can. Let it go. End result: we will be left with two fact-based literary genres, Narrative and Polemic, both on par with Fiction.

Again: where today we have two main categories, Fiction and Nonfiction, tomorrow we have three: Fiction, Narrative and Polemic. And that should translate into three GGs of equal prestige, three Giller Prizes, three Main Events -- and ten times the engagement.

What, am I dreaming? Have I gone mad? I know, I know: we face resistance. Vested interests abound -- entrenched, institutionalized, ubiquitous. Ah, but not omnipotent. Revolutions have to start somewhere. Anticipating a long struggle, I offer a battle cry: Viva Narrative! Viva Polemic! Viva LitFest!