Rebel With A Cause: The Religious Landscapes of David Adams Richards

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The past few years have been a golden period for those who like bashing religion and its claim to be an important dimension of human life. Discerning a public eager for such denunciations, writers, and publishers have raced where angels genuinely fear to tread, enlisting big names like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in a relentless attack on religion’s myriad forms and expressions.


And now comes David Adams Richards’s God Is: My Search for Faith in a Secular World (Doubleday Canada, $29.95, 166 pp). Neither a theological refutation of atheism nor a philosophical exposé of the shoddiness of the “New Atheism,” Richards’s book is a deeply personal, visceral affirmation of the divinity’s “isness.” As he declares in his introduction, his book “simply states God is present, and always was and will be whether we say we have faith or not, whether we observe His presence or scorn His presence.” God Is proves bold, combative, and original.

But who exactly is David Adams Richards? Canada’s most demonstrably Catholic writer, and increasingly a fixture on lists of Nobel nominees in literature, Richards is the author of a number of award-winning novels—Nights Below Station Street, Mercy Among the Children, and The Friends of Meager Fortune—as well as several celebrated nonfiction works, including Lines on the Water: A Fisherman’s Life on the Miramichi. A Canadian hybrid of Thomas Hardy, Leo Tolstoy, and William Faulkner, Richards is a prolific writer whose work conveys a haunting mix of fatalism, moral gravitas, and tragic heroism. His fictive landscape is the naturally idyllic, economically ravaged, and morally contorted world of northern New Brunswick.

Born in 1950 in Newcastle, Richards retains a deep attachment to the people and places of his youth. His fiction brims with outrage over the economic devastation visited on the rural population of New Brunswick—one of the “have not” provinces in Canada—and with contempt for the corporate
mandarins whose mining, forestry, and fishing investments rule the region. Richards's biographer, Tony Tremblay, calls the early Richards a social realist, a regionalist who “desired to present his people to the larger world,” bringing “their wit, their self-reliance, their resolve and decisiveness” to his pages.

Elected to be a full-time writer in spite of the financial hardship that would bring his family, Richards spent several years studying at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, but left without a degree, taking a variety of menial jobs while sharpening his persona as rebel and nonconformist. Out of this period came Blood Ties (1976), a work the eminent critic, poet, and editor Fred Cogswell once called the greatest novel ever written in New Brunswick. It captures a world caught in the vortex of radical change with all its disruptions, uncertainties, and social casualties.

Since then, the prolific Richards has written dozens of novels, short stories, poetry, and screenplays, amassing an ever-mounting commercial and critical success in Canada. His pinnacle achievement—in terms of complexity of vision, stylistic sophistication, and character portrayal—is the Miramichi trilogy: Nights Below Station Street (1988), Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace (1990), and For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down (1993). These are dark works in which the moral outrage of the social realist has given way to the psychological and philosophical explorations of an ardent outsider—one inveighing against the spiritual nihilism of prevailing ethical and aesthetic codes.

The success Richards enjoys has made him “something of a problem” to the university-dominated literary establishment of Canada, comments J. Russell Perkin, professor of English at St. Mary's University in Halifax. Though his championing of a “marginal” region of the country and its working-class inhabitants would seemingly recommend him to the liberal-leftist outlook of the academy, he has also authored “some fairly unflattering representations of liberalism and feminism,” Perkin notes, “and he is preoccupied with the theme of individual moral integrity.”

This preoccupation has undergone several mutations over the course of Richards's career—his earlier fiction is more markedly concerned with social justice and the efficacy of the social gospel, his later work with the need for personal redemption—but the mystique and the moral corrosiveness of power have remained a constant. Tony Tremblay notes that “Richards is obsessed with the menace of power in society, a menace which he sees as perpetually conspiring to destroy the individual's interior search for God.”

The quest for God—a credible God and not the construct of an academician ill at ease with the Incarnation—sets Richards's purpose in God Is. Establishing at the outset his habitual animosity toward the powerful, he reminds his readers of the demonic record of villainy set down by the likes of Nero, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin. The last enjoys a special place in Richards's inferno. “Stalin's war was fought against the very presence of God,” he writes. “Goebbels might have said that Hitler was too great a man to be compared with Christ, but we think of Stalin as the man who needed to obliterate him.”

The divinization of Stalin—and the eradication of alternate deities—represents for Richards the public horror that visits humanity when the individual qua individual is annihilated. Stalin embodies the supreme negation of the other, the perfect representation of power as the evacuation of all personal meaning and dignity. Stalin, then, isn’t just a historical figure, but a philosophy—one of ruthless control over the individual and contempt for human freedom.

Though a work of nonfiction, God Is is best understood in the context of the author's fiction, which shares its animus against this philosophy of contempt for human freedom. The enemies in Richards's novels, however, are not gulag apparatchiks or KGB henchmen, but rather the wounded dreamers and disappointed romantics of the North American academy. In his latest novel, The Lost Highway (2007), Alex Chapman—failed professor, intellectual manqué, and champion of moral libertarianism—illustrates the self-deception and snobbery that Richards sees as the damning qualities of an inauthentic and self-serving professoriate: “He was, like most men who have never really stood on their own, frightened of being disapproved of, while pretending radical theory that was really the standard theory of a coddled academia.”

Such pretensions, in Richards's contemptuous view, are nothing more than “the theories of many who never worked a day with their hands.” Unspiring in his dismissal of a professoriate that would foment rebellion yet abdicate personal responsibility, he derides the fake authority that would substitute for a genuine one grounded in wisdom and faith. The figure of the fraudulent radical dates to Richards's undergraduate experience. “Back in 1969, the world of the university I went to writhed in popular dissension against everything,” he writes in God Is. This writhing, in his account, was inflamed by pseudo-Nietzscheans urging students to denounce their roots, mock their parents, and abjure the social and religious values that shaped them. Richards writes that “half the professors I met my first few years at university were stupid,” adding that he never again “witnessed so much conformity among those who postured freedom.”

As a college student Richards was eager to assert his independence of thought vis-à-vis his more conformity-inclined peers. “So much atheistic and social activism wasn’t based

A quintessentially Catholic writer, Richards incarnates rather than reifies; he identifies sin for what it is, understanding that genuine freedom is spiritual at heart.
on truth as much as compliance to the rather strict rules of
social etiquette," he writes. But he found himself in a spiritual
bind. "Though I believed in the blood of the saints as true
and sacred, nothing about religion pleased me either." And
so for years he struggled with a faith he could neither fully
embrace nor categorically abandon. It was a turbulent time
in his life, one that led him toward dark corners of deprav
ity. "There wasn't a writer in the country any wilder than I
was at twenty-four," he confesses in his book. "And my wife
and family paid for it." Slowly he came to realize that "only
faith could save the desperate.... And by thirty-one, I was as
desperate as any."

The account of this part of his life in God Is
includes tales of macabre depravity and wanton violence. A man knifes
a piglet on a dance floor. Another savagely beats his pit bull,
then turns it loose on anyone who dares to intervene. Arson,
rape, and murder touch Richards's circle of acquaintance,
creating both victims and perpetrators. Violent depravity
would inform his fictive world as well—and in his novels as
in his life, he was eventually able to draw from desperation a
mature faith. Persuaded, like Dostoyevsky, that murder is the
supreme act of human pride, the ultimate sin of arrogance, he
came to connect it with the crimes of a Stalin. But no one,
great or small, is free from sin. "The best of my characters,"
he writes, are "plagued by sin."

Richards sought freedom from his own sin, and in the throes
of despair, and having drunk himself half to death, he chose
what he came to see as the only way out: "to write what I knew
I must." And he has, with merciless honesty, ever since. His
writing is his redemption. Indeed, the novel The Friends of Mea
ger Fortune (2006) reads like a modern Passion. Set in classic
Richards territory, during the dying days of the logging industry
in New Brunswick after World War II, the novel portrays
characters powered by a volatile mix of homesickness and lethali
ty, their vengeful tribalism expressed in outbursts of crude xe
nophobia. They are a motley crew of damaged heroes who face
their destiny with defiance, bravery, and saintly tenacity. It is
a story of innocence that pays the highest price, and of self
sacrifice that goes unreckoned until it is too late.

But most important, it is the Passion, complete with all
the ingredients: Holy Thursday, Calvary, Good Friday, kenos
sis, betrayal, Gethsemane; the abuse of authority, the lust
for blood, and finally the redemptive power of love. The
novel's hero (the "Meager Fortune" of the title) is a minor
figure who plays his part in the larger drama of the Jameson
brothers, Will and Owen, their rivals, their lovers, their log
ning companions—and ultimately their tragic deaths. The
dramatis personae of the Passion are here: Peter, Judas, Mary
Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, the schemers, the
mob, the broken, and the desperate. But the novel is not an
allegory. The Suffering Servant can be found in the simple
and yet profound acts of self-giving that surprise the reader
with their love and recklessness.

The Friends of Meager Fortune has the emotional punch
of Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure, and the novel's clos
ning line—"All is cut out, muted, torn away"—throbs with a
despairing sense of finality. Richards has acknowledged his
debt to Hardy, even as he points to a crucial distinction: "the
difference between me and Hardy is that he stopped at the
threshold of the church." Richards did not. A quintessential
Catholic writer, he writes the history of salvation from within;
he incarnates rather than reifies; and he identifies sin for what
it is, understanding that genuine freedom is spiritual at heart.
Faith in his own life, he confesses, has never kept him safe
from sin or personal failure; but it has led him away "from
what I once believed in, that liberty was bought with power,
and toward a more astonishing recognition of the sacred in
our midst."

In the end, David Adams Richards's search for the sacred
in our midst—for faith in a secular world—brings him back
to his fiction. It is fiction that will save him, he knows, not
metaphysics, not theology, not argument or rhetoric. As for
his characters, scorched by the fires of their own personal
hells, they too will taste something of the life-restoring water
which is the Life, Richards writes, that "made the lame walk,
and, yes, the blind see."