ROUGH CANADIAN POETRY: TWO NOVELS BY DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS

The Coming of Winter. David Adams Richards. McClelland & Stewart, 1992(1974). 323 pp., $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-7710-9885-5. **Blood Ties**. David Adams Richards. McClelland & Stewart, 1992 (1976). 362 pp., $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-7710-9887-1.

The Coming of Winter is Richards' first novel, written when he was in his early twenties. The central character, Kevin Dulse, is an immature young man who, among other things, has a skittish trigger finger and bad judgment. The result, in the opening scene, is that he shoots a cow, mistaking it for a deer. Similarly, in hunting down his story and voice, the young Richards appears to have been trigger-happy, using all the ammunition at hand, with the result that what he has bagged is a casualty rather than a trophy. The book is a curious hybrid of styles, themes and direction, all of which adds up to something less than the sum of its parts.

The novel spans two weeks in Kevin's life, during which he shoots a cow, gets drunk often, goes to work and finally, with little enthusiasm, gets married. So thin on plot as to lack drama of any kind, the novel presents characters and intimate detail as a substitute. Yet the characters, besides doing nothing, often lack a distinct voice of their own. Kevin and his father, for example, unlike each other in temperament and character, nevertheless speak with a similar voice, their interior monologues evidencing similar rhythms and the very sentence structures echoing one another. The result, with these and other characters, is that the individual voices become amorphous and tend to sound more like a narrative voice striving to find itself. Thus the potential richness and drama of exploring the human psyche or the human state is diffused and weakened.

As it is, the novel achieves very little in itself. We read simply of scenes of a kind of moribund rustic activity that goes nowhere. Young men drink in bars and shacks; old men smoke and ruminate; women clean house. All is told in a self-conscious style which aims at a kind of poetic intensity but only occasionally mines phrases or paragraphs that ring true.

It is difficult to ascertain, finally, just who is Richards' intended audience. A novel full of obscenities and drunken revelry is hardly the stuff for children. Conversely, a novel empty of real thematic strength and shining like a magpie's nest with borrowed and laboured style, cannot withstand an intelligent adolescent's focus. Ultimately, the book is Canadiana but it is not strong literature. It is a journeyman work, lauded, it seems, simply because its topics are deemed so thoroughly Canadian and because its young author made a brave effort.

In his second novel, however, Richards has created both a tone, language and group of characters which cohere and work together in a nice choreography. The self-consciousness of the first novel is disappearing from the style and real,

significant characters emerge, people we can care about.

Richards takes us inside his characters more effectively, allowing the psychic environment of each to grow naturally. From the first page, for example, Richards introduces the young Orville with a deftness and simplicity that is forceful but not forced: "Mass was over now and they started up the road together with the heat coming down on them, pressing down, except Orville stayed ahead of them, his young spindly legs moving as quickly as they could. When they were halfway Allison stopped and offered them a drive. Orville kept on walking—a little quicker as if to get home before the car." Immediately we understand something of the determination which makes up Orville's character—a determination and doggedness made all the more poignant as we learn later that he has only one eye, a fact over which he feels some shame.

The novel moves through the characters' different perspectives with a more balanced sureness because the action described and the very style are more firmly anchored in reality and, just as importantly, in a sincerity and tenderness which is palpable. The characters and their plight evidently matter. Richards relates the story of a clannish people living a hard life in the Miramichi Valley. They have small dreams, if any, and their vision stays close to home, close to their skin and bones and the toil of mundane life. Despite the roughness of their lives, which sometimes climbs to violent levels—one woman is continually abused by her husband and, finally, raped by him—we find tenderness in the loyalty between relatives. The young Cathy, for example, obeys an unquestionable sense of duty, accompanying her mother through torrential rain to her grandmother's house where she helps to care for the old woman. The ritual is described in sensual detail from Cathy's perspective and not only the act but the history of the family and its loyalties is evoked effectively.

As in *The Coming of Winter*, not a lot happens in the novel. It is the personal minutae of life which binds the story together. The depiction of life from within individual perspectives is accomplished with care for the integrity of the characters and their individual combat with the world. Combat is the right word here, since everyone in the novel suffers and strives in some way. They suffer to retain dignity and home, like the mother Irene and the father Maufat, with silent pride and determination. Or they struggle, as do Orville and Cathy, to understand the world about them and to maintain, in their witnessing of a harsh world, a sense of joy and what might be called poetic meaning. This sense of meaning pervades and strengthens the book. Its implicit lessons about dignity and love would, I think, impress many adolescents and not a few adults.

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