Book Reviews

DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS OF THE MIRAMICHI
BY TONY TREMBLAY
TORONTO: U OF TORONTO PRESS, 2010. XVI. 355 PAGES. $32.95

David Adams Richards of the Miramichi is a critical biography of the celebrated New Brunswick writer by Tony Tremblay, Canada Research Chair in New Brunswick Studies at St. Thomas University in Fredericton. It's hard to think of anybody better suited to the task of writing this first book-length study of Richards and his work: Tremblay grew up in the same region as Richards, is an expert on Maritime literature, and has written numerous astute appraisals of Richards's writing and career, as well as editing the 2005 collection *David Adams Richards: Essays on His Works*. This latest tome is, first and foremost, an exhaustive work of scholarship: not only has Tremblay seemingly read everything Richards has ever written, but he has also interviewed many of his family, his childhood friends, his teachers, and his literary mentors, as well as Richards himself. Thus we are the beneficiaries of Tremblay's substantial immersion in Richards's world, but also of his acute understanding of Richards's accomplishment as a writer.

As the title suggests, Tremblay explores the figure of Richards against his home ground, the Miramichi region of northeastern New Brunswick, which Richards has made the focus of his fiction as resolutely as William Faulkner trained his sights on his fictional Yoknapatawpha. Tremblay accordingly begins his study with a succinct overview of the history and culture of the Miramichi, emphasizing its status as one of the most storied regions of the country. He then devotes a chapter to Richards's family background—the intermingling of Protestant and Catholic, working-class and upper-middle-class roots that has had a defining impact on Richards's sensibility. Tremblay's forays into Richards' personal and familial history shed a good deal of light on both Richards and his fiction; this chapter is especially valuable because of Tremblay's chronicling of the history of Richards's grandmother Janie Richards, a determined pioneer of the motion picture industry in eastern Canada whose story provides the background to Richards's 2003 novel *River of the Brokenhearted*.

The bulk of *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi* chronicles Richards's apprenticeship as a writer, delves into his relationship with various mentors (including his close but at times prickly relationship with poet Alden Nowlan), and examines his growing body of work against the background of developments in his life and his career as a writer. In the process, Tremblay deftly intertwines the critical and the biographical, throwing much light on the influences and impulses behind Richards's work while steering well clear of reductive biographical interpretations. Tremblay's chronicling of Richards's development as a writer, though, may be a trifle too thorough; he spends a good deal of time on Richards's early, youthful work, so that when we get to his first novel, *The Coming of Winter*, we are close to half-way through the book. As someone with a long-standing interest in Richards's work, I can appreciate Tremblay's diligence, but that appreciation might not be shared by those with a more passing interest. That aside, thanks to Tremblay's deep knowledge of the Miramichi background and his erudite articulation of Richards's evolving aesthetic practice and philosophical ethos, the readings of Richards's fiction are a key accomplishment of the book. Especially valuable is his exploration and explication of Richards's dark, sprawling 1981 novel *Lives of Short Duration*, to my mind Richards's masterpiece but also, as Tremblay describes, elliptical and uncompromising in conveying "the vast unedited hash of the collective unconscious of place." He also ably highlights the significant aesthetic and spiritual turn Richards took when writing *Nights Below Station Street* toward what has proved to be an abiding preoccupation with the dignity and strength of the ostracized in resisting "the bullying of progressive thought."

The biographical side of the ledger doesn't disappoint, either. To take a metaphor from hockey (one of Richards's pet subjects), writers are the goalies of society—aloof, introspective, not like the rest—and Tremblay's book is an absorbing study of a writer who stands out even among writers. Tremblay describes the formative effect of the circumstances of Richards's birth—his pregnant mother's fall left him partly disabled, doggedly determined as a child to keep up with siblings and friends but also keenly attuned to the politics of difference, ostracism, and cruelty. He chronicles Richards's precocious understanding of the power inherent in the role of social observer, the galvanizing effect of reading Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, his take-no-prisoners determination to be a writer, and the complicated triumph of publishing his first novel at the age of twenty-three. "There's only one way to do something, and that's to burn your bridges," Richards says at one point, and there are

more than a few flare-ups in Tremblay's account. A key theme throughout the book is Richards's discomfort with the circumstances of his apprenticeship as a writer and the critical reception of his work. Richards's disgruntlement about being marginalized as a regional writer and about (especially central Canadian) readers' and critics' misunderstanding of and disdain for his fictional world has had a pronounced influence on his career. As Tremblay shows, it certainly contributed to Richards's extended battle with alcoholism, a demon he finally wrestled to the ground in 1982. Tremblay charts Richards's turbulent struggle for national recognition up to his novel *Nights Below Station Street*, which won the Governor-General's Award in 1989, a belated annunciation that David Adams Richards could be ignored no longer. Despite this seeming vindication, Tremblay emphasizes, Richards has continued to be a contrarian on the national scene, stubbornly challenging the orthodoxies of a largely middle-class, progressive literary establishment.

For anybody interested in Richards's work or in Maritime literature, this is an indispensable book. Its examination of the impact of Richards's life and his Miramichi background on his work provides an invaluable foundation for critical examination of Richards's fiction. It also positions Richards as perhaps the preeminent Maritime writer of his age and tells us much about the critical politics that shape and define what it means to *be* a Maritime writer. But this is indeed a book to be read by anybody invested in Canadian literature, because Richards's career as a writer—with all its intriguing tensions and contradictions—poses some significant and valuable challenges to the certainties of a now-institutionalized and perhaps overly comfortable CanLit.

HERB WYILE
ACADIA UNIVERSITY

LIGHT LIFTING
BY ALEXANDER MACLEOD
EMERYVILLE, ONTARIO: BIBLIOASIS, 2010. 219 PAGES. $19.95

PEOPLE WILL BE READING *Light Lifting*, passing it onto their siblings, their friends, their kids, their barbers and bartenders, their pupils and their parents for many years to come. Nothing will get in the way of this book, so you may as well hop on board.

There is a lot going on in the seven short stories that make up this book. The stories are long—by short-story standards—but compact, or, as they say in writing workshops, tight. The language has a pace to it. If you open to a random page and begin reading, you will most likely find action: "A brutal diarrhea in Belleville. Green splashing over the sides of a fold-down change table in the guy's bathroom at the rest stop. Liquid shit blasts out of her diaper, runs all the way up her back to the neck. Poop in her hair. Lines of men waiting for the urinals, watching me" ("Wonder About Parents," 54). It is fast: confident and controlled with no meandering (except for a two-page digression about the various nicknames of the Detroit Pistons). MacLeod does not let description get in the way of a story: these are violent, deeply personal, sometimes jocose, sometimes graphic, but they do not go out of their way to be.

These stories have been described as "darkly urban," which feels to me like a knee-jerk reaction. MacLeod's characters do live in cities, and a couple of the stories end morosely, but there are an equal number of scenes that have a serene quality to them. MacLeod writes about parenthood, brotherhood and hockey, teenage love and swimming. It is not easy to find an underlying theme that ties these seven stories together, but MacLeod seems interested in the spaces that humans occupy. "Miracle Mile," which appeared in the 2009 Journey Prize anthology, has a few spaces of note. In the first scene, the narrator and his friend, fellow mid-distance runner, Burner, are sitting in their hotel room before a race, when Burner, who has been silent for hours, hops out of his bed and turns on all five taps in their room as part of a focus-inducing ritual.

> There was a lot of steam at first and we had our own little cloud forming up around the ceiling, but after a while, after we'd used up all the hot water for the entire hotel, the mist cleared away and there was only the *shhhhhhh* sound of the water draining away. It was actually kind of nice. You could just try and put yourself inside that sound and it would carry you some place else, maybe all the way to the ocean. (13)

Like this motel room, many characters in *Light Lifting* can be accused of expropriating spaces. One character takes over a portion of the 401 so that he can walk home; a young couple curls up on a hospital chair next to their sleeping daughter. MacLeod has a way of presenting situations and spaces in ways that you might not have considered. Often his characters use spaces in strange ways, or better, in ways for which the space was not originally

intended, but that has become routine. The front cover—railroad ties and a track fading away into darkness with a single dot of light in the distance—was possibly inspired by the best example of this. In "Miracle Mile," the narrator and Burner run under the Detroit River, racing ahead of the trains, to Windsor. The element of fear that the tunnel provides intensifies their training, and this space gives the reader some insight into what kind of people these athletes are.

In "Adult Beginner I," Stace and her friends are at their favourite after-work spot, the top of the Waterfront Holiday Inn, where they run and jump off into the river, careful to avoid a mound of sunken shopping carts near the water's edge. Bleeding and sore, Stace waits in the river, holding onto a rope, as her friends call down to see if she's okay after her botched first jump. After realizing that she is, in fact, all right, an almost tranquil period of relief sets in, as she slowly takes in her surroundings: "She looks up at the hotel bedrooms, shakes her head, and wonders if any insomniac business travellers or romantic getaway couples caught a glimpse as she plummeted past their windows" (115). This is one of many moments where MacLeod satisfyingly orchestrates the convergence, or collision, of different worlds into one place.

Light Lifting is preoccupied with desperation, with desperate people being pushed to the edge of their ability to cope with their feelings and urges. In "Wonder About Parents," an infant's doctor misinterprets the loving father's exhaustion as delinquency, and threatens to call child services. The doctor has stepped over the line, and there is a moment when the reader is unsure if the father (the narrator) is capable of holding back and letting the event pass without further incident.

In "The Loop," the young narrator, a delivery boy for a small pharmacy, has a keen and mature understanding of his shut-in customers, which ones to lend a hand to and which to be wary of. He is cautious of Barney, whose house is out of bounds, until one afternoon when he sees that the man has collapsed in front of the television. With the help of two paramedics, Barney comes to, and, in a moment of distress and confusion, grabs the boy's arm: "There was so much power in him, even then, so much strength in just one of his hands that I knew right away I would never have been able to fight him off. That was the only time we touched" (167). MacLeod shows the reader, over and over, that humans are unpredictable, powerful creatures.

MacLeod's fiction cuts back and forward in time and seems effortlessly to shape the characters' lives. There are also strong moral and political

undertones in these stories. While many could be described as raw and suspenseful, "Wonder About Parents," "The Number Three," and "Good Kids" showcase MacLeod's full repertoire, with flashes of humour, self-deprecation, and affection in slightly more subdued, or even domestic contexts. In every story, *Light Lifting* brings familiar yet brilliantly fresh characters and images to Canadian readers.

JEREMY WHISTON
HALIFAX