

Arts & Entertainment



JAN DEGRASS PHOTO
The Quintessential Writers, also known as the "Founding Mothers," describe the early years of the festival. (l to r) Rosella Leslie, Maureen Foss, Betty Keller and Gwendolyn Southin.

FESTIVAL OF THE WRITTEN ARTS

Making history — 30 years of festival

Festival celebrates
30 years

JAN DEGRASS
Arts & Entertainment Writer

The 30th annual Festival of the Written Arts (FOWA) last weekend had a celebratory feel to it, rejoicing in three decades of the most popular literary festival in Canada. It also showed a respect for Canadian history, witnessed in the works of many of this year's authors.

The festival excitement began earlier than usual — on Wednesday with a special preview of *Northwoods*, a film produced by broadcaster Shelagh Rogers.

She had organized a select group of five Canadian writers to fly to a national park in the northern tip of Labrador and write about their experiences. The documentary opened with clichéd expressions of excitement, but quickly evolved into a telling glimpse of a remote part of the country. The spectacular scenery upstaged the writers as they journeyed to a ghost town once occupied by German settlers, and they learned about the land and culture from the Inuit still living and hunting in the area.

Author Noah Richler, one of the five writers to visit the north, was on

hand after the film to read his masterful prose poem inspired by his trip. Richler also delivered FOWA's Bruce Hutchison lecture on Saturday evening. His book, *What We Talk About When We Talk About War* does not mince words.

The Thursday evening launch of this year's celebrations was handed to Wayson Choy, five times a speaker at this festival and always a sentimental favourite.

Choy stayed for the remainder of the weekend often listening quietly to the other writers from his preferred spot, a shady nook in the Rockwood gardens.

Many authors took time on stage to say how much they enjoyed this particular festival. Author Jane Urquhart, now on her third visit, praised it, and Newfoundland/ Ontario writer Michael Crummey called it "the jewel of the literary festivals."

The smooth sailing owes much to festival director Jane Davidson, the consistency of its board and its hundreds of volunteers. But accolades for a job well done came to the fore at the Quintessential Writers' event on Friday afternoon.

Festival founders Rosella Leslie, Maureen Foss, Betty Keller and Gwendolyn Southin described its early years, recalling the first ever Saturday evening speaker, writing

icon Jack Hodgins, (who appeared again at 2010's festival) and describing their labours in cleaning, food preparation and fundraising for the new project. The construction of the festival's home, Rockwood Pavilion, was accomplished during their tenure, and it was possible to sit in the audience on that sweltering Friday afternoon and fully appreciate the shady, rustic building, now so much a part of the event.

Other highlights included author Charlotte Gill, the retired treeplanter, whose second book, *Eating Dirt*, is winning awards.

"You travel 16 km a day and bend over 200 to 300 times an hour to put a tree in the ground," she said.

Then there's the rain, the insects, the grizzlies and the sharp, jagged slash.

"Are you doing good?" asked an audience member.

Gill's feelings were mixed; she realized the trees were being replanted only to be harvested again. They were not replacing the ecosystems that had been lost.

Quirky stories seemed to be in vogue. Michael Crummey read a few outlandish ones from his latest book, *Galore*, tales that drew the audience in immediately.

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Three of the founding mothers of the festival—Gwen Southern, Rosella Leslie and Maureen Foss