

The Friends of Meager Fortune by David Adams Richards

'A profoundly moving account of the honourable few and a damning indictment of the famished many.' – Guelph Mercury

I found this this novel thoroughly engrossing on many levels. It's an epic family story that also paints a vivid picture of the rugged culture of the logger. The plot is suspenseful, the characters are engaging, and there's a moral intensity underlying it all. On the surface it appears to be a gloomy story of gossip, violence, and injustice; but these elements are transcended by deeper themes of purpose and compassion.

Plot

The Jamesons are a prominent family in Miramichi, a timber town in New Brunswick, Eastern Canada, in the 1940s. The brothers Will and Owen couldn't be more different as young men. Will is the 'manly' one, a rough type with '*a shrewd mind and fists to match*' who takes over the family timber business; but the younger Owen is bookish and seen as weak, '*fanciful and into fairness.*' Their mother Mary worries about a prophecy that the Jameson dynasty will be destroyed by the rash behaviour of her two sons.

Will dies on the job, leaving Owen to try and fill his shoes. Rejected by the girl of his dreams, Owen goes off to the war in Europe and returns a local hero. He falls in love with the childlike Camellia, but she's already married and the two become targets of the town's vicious gossip machine. Owen takes charge of a dangerous logging operation on Good Friday Mountain and proves he is his brother's equal. But his life unravels when he's accused of murdering Camellia's husband and one of his workers betrays the business to a competitor. The climax involves a trial, a snow storm and a spectacular logging disaster.

The Engine of Fate

Gossip is a constant undercurrent and driver of the plot. Lula's friends, the 'Steadfast Few', are the conservative gossips who represent the '*opinion of the town*' and those who delight in spreading rumours to disrupt the lives of the main characters. The gossips and back-stabbers act as the engine of Fate, constantly propelling the main characters into testing situations. Richards describes the gossip with a machine metaphor: '*the spokes in the wheel of rumour that now turned by her sweet breath against it's hub.*' (p.100). At times it seems like a clumsy literary device because so many conversations are overheard and people are spied upon, but that's sometimes the nature of small towns.

Besides, it's often the characters themselves that allow gossip to flourish in the first place. Despite his level-headedness, Owen likes to impress his workmates and he initially '*enjoys the notoriety*' of people talking about his romance with Camellia (p.80). But once started, the rumours prove unstoppable, and they morph into dangerous accusations that take on a life of their own. When '*rumour takes on validation*' (p.186) then Owen tries in vain to stop it and violence erupts.

The gossips as agents of the gods also represent another underlying theme in the novel: Fate. Are we in control of our lives, or at the mercy of external forces, events, or other people? The novel is framed by a prophecy by a 'Micmac' woman (Mikmaqs are a Native American people) which accurately predicts the future of the two sons. But Owen actively fights against the events which conspire against him, even when he is put on trial. He believes there is a design in the world, but one which he can influence: "*Even in this terrible miscarriage of justice that he would fight to the end, did he see a design in all the faces of the all the men and women now deciding his fate...Of course, he thought, nothing was foretold, you made your own design.*"

The title cleverly plays with this idea of Fate— Meager Fortune is not only a small but vital character but the phrase also refers to the small but vital part of life which these tough men cling to: those precious moments of hope which help them survive.

A Man's World

The other question posed by the novel is, what does it mean to be a man? At the start of the story Owen and Will are strongly contrasted as tough and tender, hero and outcast. Will knows he must be strong to survive in the timber business; indeed the lumberjacks are regarded by city-folk as 'savages'. The men are expected to be thick-skinned emotionally too: "*If he can't take teasing, he is not a man.*" (p.149) says one. Even their work-horses are imbued with this harsh manly attitude: for example, the remarkable Butch whose existence becomes '*one of brutal work or death.*' (p.165). The more sensitive son, Owen, enters this cold world and has to stifle his emotions in case they '*mocked him as weak*'. Eventually he adapts to the model of the manly leader and becomes hero and a fighter as well.

But there's more to being a man than physical strength. The role of the strongly compassionate male emerges half way through the novel in the character of Meager Fortune. He is as tough as the others in his own way, possibly because he's suffered great loss. As the story progresses, Meager is revealed as the true hero, who not only forgives weakness but also rescues the 'real' men from the storm. Perhaps the most touching scene is where he acts as father-figure to Tomkins, seeing through the man's bullying behaviour to the needy child within. Meager's philosophy tries to explain the reasons for human weakness: "*Men have rid themselves of God, and are famished and therefore do terrible things to make such famine go away.*"

Despite all these challenging themes, the story is curiously hopeful, I think because of the integrity of the characters. David Adams Richards comments: "*Certainly I deal with dark subjects, but I think overall my works are filled with joy. If I didn't believe that I wouldn't be writing. Joy comes from tragedy, not in spite of it.*"

Characters

Richard's writing is character-driven. From the start the story is narrated by a character who has inside knowledge of the family. He has a voice of authority

and doesn't hesitate to insert his philosophy about life: *"the unknown sadness with which we as men and women are forced to live"* (p.30). Only at the end we discover his true identity and the reason for his own sadness. Richards has said that he always begins his novels by creating on a character and allowing the story to flow from them: *"... then you begin to realize what your characters are trying to tell you. It sounds schizophrenic and it might be a little, but it's like Tolstoy said about Levin in Anna Karenina. He would wake up in the morning and before he went to work he would say to his wife, 'Well, I wonder what Levin's going to do today?'"*

His characters are well fleshed-out, rather than shallow stereotypes, even the minor ones. Tomkins, for example, is utterly repellent but we can understand why he's become such a bully and deceiver; and he's even given a moment of vulnerability (which sadly, doesn't change him). Owen Jameson in particular is fully human and the reader sees his values develop and change over the course of his whole life. Richards comments: *"I would consider myself a moral writer. I think what I tend to focus on is the motivations of characters and why things are done."*

The child-like Meager Fortune stands out amongst all the male characters. Meager is a simple man of faith, innocent and trusting, like a child, yet strong too. He reminded me of the eccentric Owen character in John Irving's brilliant novel *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. Both are highly individualistic men, strong-minded and with a sense of unique purpose in their lives.

Camellia is one of the few female characters who is given space to breathe. Like Meager she has not been moulded by her peers and has retained a child-like love of life. But in this conservative pre-liberation society *"Her openness damaged her reputation"*.

Forestry Background

Miramichi is now the largest city in northern New Brunswick, situated in the long Miramichi river valley. Forestry has always dominated the economy in New Brunswick province and its central regions are heavily forested. During the 20th

century the timber industry changed as shipbuilding and timber exports both decreased and were overtaken by pulp and paper processing. Smaller towns still have sawmills and there are large pulp and paper mills in cities and areas such as the Miramichi.

The novel is set in the 1940s when industry was undergoing rapid mechanisation: changing from hand and horse logging to chainsaws and trucking; from sawn timber to pulping. The men in this story are not not facing up to changes: *“They would fight the new world unto death...but the world would not lose.”* There’s also a lack of environmental awareness about removing the very forests they need for work. Many sawmills have closed recently in the area.

Biography

Canadian David Adams Richards has written fourteen novels and five non-fiction books, as well as screenplays for television. He was inspired to become a writer at age fourteen after reading *Oliver Twist*, although he says it was years before he made much money from his novels: *“Sometimes I thought it would be better if I were a plumber...For a long while if I sold 200 books, I’d be saying: Oh, great! And, you know, a \$50 advance!”* He finished his first novel when only twenty and joined the Ice House Gang, a community of established writers at University of New Brunswick. He developed a strong writing work ethic: *“Ever since I quit drinking in my early 30s I work a lot – about five or six hours a day, every day.”*

Richards grew up in the Miramichi valley and the area features in much of his fiction, as he says, *“It’s very important, because the characters come from the soil. They’re like the trees, in a certain respect. They cling to that river and that soil...”* The high degree of detail about the timber industry and the outdoors in his books comes, not so much from research, but from his life: *“I’ve loaded pulpwood, I’ve fished lobster, I’ve been out and baited traps. I know the difference between a conibear trap [for beaver] and a coyote snare. I’ve hunted, I’ve fished.”*

But he’s never felt tied to living in Canada and has travelled the world: *“I discovered a few years ago living in Spain that I could write anywhere.”* He has

won numerous literary awards including the Governor General's Award and the Canada-Australia Literary Prize in 1992. One of his most acclaimed novels was *Mercy Among the Children* (2000). Richards is married and now lives in Toronto with his wife and two sons.

Discussion Questions

1. Owen believes in 'the design of the world'. What might he mean by this? To what extent are people in control of their own lives? How do people respond when life throws unexpected or unfair things at them? Discuss the idea that life might have some kind of 'design' or that Fate is at work.
2. 'They were real men' (p.244) is a major theme. 'Real men are strong'. Do you agree with this statement? What expectations does our society have of how a 'real man' should behave? What pressures are on men today? How can men 'be themselves'?
3. Many of the minor characters are gossips. Rumour and speculation is rife in today's media, especially with instant communication. What limits, if any, should be placed on media (for example, with celebrity news or jury trials)? What can we do when people gossip about us?
4. Meager believes that "*Men have rid themselves of God, and are famished and therefore do terrible things to make such famine go away.*" What do you think this belief means? Is it necessary to have some kind of belief system to live by? Why or why not?
5. What are some other themes or ideas that emerged as you read the story?
6. Which characters in the novel did you relate to closely? Did Richard's succeed in portraying both male and female characters convincingly?
7. Camellia's '*openness damaged her reputation*'. Has this social attitude to women changed over the past 50 years? If so, has this been for better or for worse?

Notes by Raymond Huber