



Program Report: Stories About Storytellers: An Evening with Doug Gibson and Dozens of Famous Canadian Authors

Speaker: Douglas Gibson

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Since beginning his career in 1968 at Doubleday, famed editor and publisher Doug Gibson has met and worked with some of Canada's greatest writers. On April 25, 2011, EAC members were treated to an exciting evening of "Stories about Storytellers," Gibson's one-man show based on his memoirs, to be published by ECW Press in October. Gibson performed the second act of his show for the appreciative crowd, who laughed, clapped, and had a great time throughout the performance.

The show featured Gibson's anecdotes about his personal relationships with the authors he worked with. First up was **Peter C. Newman**. Gibson remembered when he first met Newman back in 1968 and quickly realized that Newman "was not a saintly fellow, but he was going to be interesting to watch." He told hilarious anecdotes about Newman, including a story about Newman's deal with former Prime Minister **Brian Mulroney** to work as a team on Mulroney's memoirs. "Something went wrong between them; it may have been the word 'team,'" Gibson told the laughing crowd, as he related details of the day he discovered Peter Newman had secretly written a tell-all book about Mulroney. "Peter was delighted that he was the kid who'd built a stink bomb," said Gibson. "He was so thrilled with himself I couldn't stay mad at him."

Mulroney and Gibson ended up working together on Mulroney's official memoirs. Gibson praised Mulroney for writing every word of his book by himself, in longhand. "I enjoyed working with him," Gibson said fondly. "I'm the man responsible if you feel the 1,100-page book is too long."

Next was **Bob Hunter**, the founder of Greenpeace, who died in 2005. "He was a witty, funny guy," Gibson remembered. "Every time you see Greenpeace ... doing something brave, something newsworthy, think of this guy."

Alistair MacLeod's "short stories were so perfect, that when the first collection of seven came out, it was a sensation," Gibson said. He recalled the hilarious extremes he had to go to to ensure that MacLeod's manuscript was delivered on time, from showing up at Union station while MacLeod waited to catch a train, to dropping in unannounced at his home to collect the manuscript in person. "Alistair now describes my magnificent visit as a home invasion," he said. "Despite the home invasion, it's always been wonderful working with Alistair."

Gibson remembered **Peter Gzowski** fondly: “Peter was a remarkable man.” Gibson said the key to understanding Peter was that he was a “romantic,” and attributed his great radio success to the fact that he was such a good writer. Gzowski had a great respect for writers, and publishers knew that if they got an author an interview on “Morningside,” the book would sell thousands of copies.

Val Ross wrote for publications like Macleans and the Globe and Mail, and wrote two children’s books. Gibson reminded us that she completed her only adult book, Robertson Davies: A Portrait in Mosaic, days before she sadly passed away from brain cancer.

When she first achieved success as a short story writer, **Alice Munro** was under such intense pressure to write a novel that it left her unable to write. “I kept Alice Munro writing short stories,” Gibson proudly announced to the crowd, who applauded admiringly. “If I have one accomplishment in my career, it’s that.” Gibson described Munro as being very down-to-earth. He told the story of an American tourist who was having a chicken dinner at a theatre fundraiser in a small town in southwestern Ontario. The tourist told his waitress that he understood there was a famous author in the room. The waitress just nodded and smiled – it was Alice Munro.

W.O. Mitchell’s death in 1998 “marked a watershed for Canada,” Gibson said. “I loved him, though he was a very difficult man to be around. He lived his life at full throttle and full decibel.” Gibson entertained the crowd with hilarious anecdotes about how Mitchell turned the tables on him when Gibson would introduce him: if Gibson spent time lauding and lionizing him, Mitchell would step up to the podium and dismiss it with a curt “Bulls—t,” but if his speech was salty and irreverent, Mitchell would take the stage with the gravitas of a priest.

Then Gibson turned serious, recounting his emotional last visit with Mitchell, who was losing his battle with prostate cancer. But, even on his deathbed, Mitchell made a joke during their final goodbye.

Gibson’s show was followed by a **Q & A session**. EAC members asked him about the writing process, how he achieved his imprint at McClelland and Stewart, and his experiences with being edited. He says it was “very, very hard,” to decide which authors to include in his book. When he was asked what he learned about the process of writing, he replied, “Books don’t write themselves. I should have been ready to write a book.... I had written newspaper and magazine articles, but, somehow, actually writing this proved to be much harder than anticipated.” He noted that he had had a “pleasant experience being edited. The book is better than before it was edited.” He described becoming immersed in the writing process—often writing at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. When his wife said, “I think this is becoming a bit obsessive,” Gibson replied: “I think this is the way books are written.”