

Weekend reading: New Brunswick's poet shares her creative process

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M. Travis Lane.
Photo: Stephen Mac Gillivray

From the glint of sunlight peeking through a window, to the curve of the road in the far-off distance, M. Travis Lane sees poetry in everything. Inspiration comes to her from just about anything. It's a gift that has made her one of New Brunswick's, and Canada's foremost poets, and an icon among women writers.

"I was visiting a friend at a party, and she brought her new baby. It was a very new baby, and the baby kicked up at her and licked its lips... and I thought, 'You know, that's going to turn into a poem,'" Lane said. "Once I was walking on Portobello Drive, and looking at all the trash in the ditches by the road, and I was thinking this is a very beautiful road with an awful lot of trash, and that turned out to be a poem, too."

That fruitful walk in Maugerville turned into 2001's "Portobello," a poem that both highlights the stark beauty in nature, and showcases the oft-forgotten places between the rural and urban worlds. "Winter to come: the snow, the ice/ stacked up against the reeds/ with slanting, cracked, and rattling panes/ and, at our usual halting place/ the water, running."

In this incisive look at nature and how humans fit in the natural world that identifies an M. Travis Lane poem. Though she gathers inspiration from many things, her poems often highlight themes of environmentalism, feminism, and politics. Now, after more than 70 years of writing, the Fredericton-based poet has earned the Lieutenant-Governor's Award for High Achievement in English Literary Arts in November.

"I'm supposed to say I'm humbled. (But) I'm proud as a peacock," Lane said with a laugh. "It's delightful."

Born in Texas in the 1930s, Lane was an army brat, who never considered anywhere in particular her hometown. But when she and her late husband moved to New Brunswick in 1960, something clicked. The family found themselves drawn to Canada, and became citizens in 1973.

"I think home is where your friends are, and your family are, so New Brunswick in that sense is home," said Lane.

And New Brunswick certainly claims her as a hometown talent. Ross Leckie, the director of creative writing at the University of New Brunswick, considers Lane to be one of the most influential feminist poets to come out of the Maritimes.

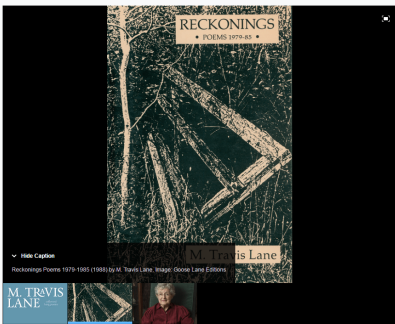
"She's maintained a remarkable standard of excellence through all of that time. So, you can pick up one of the early books or one of her recent books and see different kinds of poems," Leckie explained. "But you can see the same kind of careful attention to language in all of her work."

One of Leckie's favourite Lane poems, and one he's taught to his students over the years, is "Portobello," because it's so evocative of a sensation many New Brunswickers know well.

"She creates a good feeling for me of how easy it is to walk out of a city in Fredericton and be in nature very quickly. And she also creates a feeling for how many of the now somewhat wild places in New Brunswick were once inhabited, were once farmed," Leckie recalled. "She has a sense of how walking through nature in New Brunswick... one can have a sense of what life kind of was like was like in the past, by reading it in the present."

Since the 1960s, Lane has created more than 15 solo books and chapbooks, and has appeared in more than 30 anthologies. Though New Brunswick has a plethora of talented fiction writers, Leckie believes that Lane fits into a pattern of prominent poetry carving out a specific identity in the province.

"My sense is that, unlike most places, New Brunswick's literary and cultural history has been written by poetry primarily," Leckie said. "Travis is contributing to a long tradition here in New Brunswick, which I think is something that people value greatly, that sense of continuity. That New Brunswick is a place with a long history, and that somebody can come from a place like the United States, and find their home both in the province and also in the literary and cultural history of the province."



For Lane, she never wavered from poetry. For her, the point of her poems is to evoke emotion from the reader. Sadness, joy, or even just a deeper inspection of something they thought they understood. Though it's hard work, "It's fun to try," Lane chuckled.

One of Lane's skills is keeping the pacing and tone of a poem that is dozens of pages in length. When she's writing, she measures poems by how long it takes to read them.

"The longest I think is 45 minutes. Anything that takes at least five minutes to read is a long poem. I have several five-minute poems," explained Lane. "You have to spread the pages out across the floor, across the bed, and sort them out. That's a more complicated thing to write than a short poem."

While a poem of that length could fall apart tonally, Lane keeps everything on track by writing them as if they are one-act plays, complete with characters and settings. It helps her to hear the rhythm of how the poem might be read aloud.

"I find characters to give voices to different things, so there (are) these different characters saying different things to each other," Lane posted. "I would say that I often invent a character for every poem. Because they're just parts of me or something I've imagined."

Lane is currently editing a collection of poetry, and hopes to release it in 2017.

PORTOBELLO

a poem by M. Travis Lane

Walking the railroad-right-of-way

by Portobello Creek, in spring

among the squirrel-tail willows

thick with birds, in summer,

by beaded buckwheat vines,

wild rose, wild flag, anemones,

cow lilies like dogs' lost tennis balls,

and water meadows, rarely hayed—

Each spring the rain sorts out the sand:

links, hooks, spikes, lawn chairs,

general debris. The froggy ditches

fill with trash—a dead horse, once, its hooves

fox-gnawed, its head in a roll of carpeting.

Past the red quarry a hunter's path

leads down from the track-way to the bush—

a cabin barely visible. Was it his horse?

I saw it once, among the trees, white,

awkward, unlettered, a shade in shades.

Floods have taken the bridge away.

Below the piers black water flows

with an unhurried violence.

On the other side

the white sand ridge of the right-of-way

moves crescent into the darkneses.

This fall we come again to watch

our shadows tremble in the creek

among the floating, tarnished leaves.

The meadows have bleached, dissolved in mists.

Winter to come: the snow, the ice

stacked up against the reeds

with slanting, cracked, and rattling panes,

and, at our usual halting place,

the water, running.

Next winter, will we come so far? The brittle trees,

spruce with their browning needles, stars

glimpsed through the metal-speckled nights,

the snow, the rabbits' dash to ground,

the browning soot of cat-tails—all

seem much or more or less the same

each year, though our

reflections on that mirror flow

grow feebler, fade.

Sometimes,

I see you as you used to be: thigh deep in brush,

retracing the old buggy paths, lost trails

for moccasin or fox—you read them

on the clambered earth, crisscross

beneath the loggers' ruts, or the hive-mound

logs left out to rot. Now

even this razed and graveled way

seems long, its end unreachable.

Will we walk to that broken bridge again,

or, dreaming, find it whole?

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