THE STORYTELLERS BOOK CLUB PRESENTS

What's Bred in the Bone

Robertson Davies

(Macmillan, 1985, now available from Penguin)

It was comparatively late in his life, at the age of fifty-seven, with the publication of *Fifth Business*, that Robertson Davies was recognized as a major Canadian novelist. Soon, with the publication of *The Manticore* (1972), *World of Wonders* (1975), and *The Rebel Angels* (1981), his reputation had spread around the world and he was regarded as *the* major Canadian novelist.

I was lucky enough to hop aboard this chairlift up Parnassus when I became his editor for *World of Wonders*. Apart from *The Lyre of Orpheus* in 1988, I worked with him on all of his further novels. As I mention in my book, *Stories About Storytellers*, he once signed a copy of one of them to me, describing me with a Dickensian phrase that pleased me greatly as "'My partner frequent' — Sairy Gamp a.k.a. Rob Davies." As always, he signed on the title page of the book, after carefully drawing a line through the printed version of his name, an old-fashioned courtesy that many book-collectors will recall in his case — and which set me twitching, as I stood beside him as his impatient publisher, watching the long queue of autograph-seeking book-buyers swelling as he signed with such deliberate care.

Readers who want to learn more about this fascinating man are directed to the excellent biography by Judith Skelton Grant entitled *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth*, from which I have drawn gratefully here.

But of all the Davies novels we worked on together, I consider *What's Bred in the Bone* to be the best, for a variety of reasons that I hope will emerge from what follows.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. *What's Bred in the Bone* proved to be the middle book in a trilogy begun by *The Rebel Angels*. This meant that, like all authors creating a new book linked with an earlier one, R.D. (which I will call him here, since it took me so long to work up to "Rob") faced the problem of re-introducing characters from the earlier book without boring readers of that book with repetition. Publishers, of course, are very keen to have every book "stand on its own," so that no potential buyers are discouraged because of a feeling that they really need to have read the earlier book.

   The opening chapter here — almost all of it in quick-fire, three-way conversation — is a risky way of handling this. How well do you think R.D. succeeds? Did you go back to re-read the first chapter after you had finished the book, as I did?

2. Judith Skelton Grant describes the Lesser Zadkiel as "a member of the staff of the Recording Angel whose special concern is biography," and Maimas, as Francis's "'daimon' or guardian spirit." This device allows R.D. to have the two angels comment from a supernatural, all-knowing viewpoint on the characters and events below, but does it allow him any other advantages? And did you find your attitude towards these two observers changing as the book went on?

3. "Blairlogie" represents Renfrew in the Ottawa Valley. I made a pilgrimage there in 2012, to try to understand more about R.D. (You can find this journey recorded on my website.) His biographer suggests that the miserable years he spent there, from the age of six to twelve, affected him as deeply as the years young Charles Dickens spent in the blacking factory. R.D. wrote to his New York editor that he was finding the Blairlogie scenes "heavy and exhausting work. It has roots in my own childhood — in the emotions, not in the actualities — and it is painful to drag out of the past."

   What struck you as especially painful among the things

that surface in the book? And to what extent do his experiences in those years — especially at Carlyle Rural — shape Francis's life?

4. We can see that Francis's distant, monocled father, and his distant, beautiful mother shaped him very little, compared with his true mothering figure, Aunt Mary-Ben. What a surprising character, with her attributes including devout (and secretly advanced) Catholicism, the "total dominance of the household," concealed beneath a velvet glove, and yet a genuine and genuinely enthusiastic love of music and of art! What did you make of her? And of her decades-long relationship with the local doctor, Dr. J.A.?

5. How well was the very Catholic Aunt Mary-Ben balanced by the fiercely Presbyterian cook Victoria Cameron? (And remember that in Blairlogie "the best of the town's money and business was firmly in the hands of the Scots, as was right and proper," so she had a religious advantage.) A third parent-figure, of course, was the tolerant coachman-cum-undertaker Zadok Hoyle, who provided the young artist with a surprising number of models. Speaking of models, what did you think of the "rummaging" Dr. Upper? And how were you struck by R.D.'s frankness on the subject of the private sexuality of teenage boys?

6. Another influence on young Francis was his grandfather, the Senator. Loosely based on the head of the O'Brien family in Renfrew, Senator McRory is a fascinating character who manages to succeed in different worlds, and in different eras. The tough young logger (born on the treeless island of Barra) creates a Canadian lumber empire, then becomes a senator and succeeds in that world, then moves into the world of high finance, setting up the Cornish Trust. And all the while he is an artist with a camera who has a huge impact on Francis's education as an artist. How important is he to this novel? And how well did he understand his grandson?

7. The local punk and bully, Alexander Dagg, jeers at Francis that "there's something funny about your house. People see lights where a light's got no right to be. My Maw says there's a looner in there somewhere." How ironic is it that the repulsive Maw is absolutely right? What did you think of the Looner? And what about the fact that in his sad life he sees care and affection only from Victoria, and above all from Zadok, who (we discover, although he never does) is in fact the Looner's father?

   Was that a coincidence too unlikely for you? R.D. was always infuriated by people who complained about the role of coincidence in his plots. As I say in my book, "No criticism angered Davies more than the suggestion by some reviewers that his coincidences were unlikely. "'Those boobs,' he exclaimed, 'can't they see what's going on around them?'"

8. What about the plot requiring the innocent young debutante Mary-Jim (fated to become Francis's mother) to indulge in a night of passion with a nameless servant at the London hotel that results in a pregnancy? What did you think of that? Not realistic enough for you?

9. The last words of part two show Daimon Maimas helping Francis by "getting him out of Blairlogie." The first step is at Colborne College (a.k.a. Upper Canada College, in Toronto, where R.D. spent his high school years). There's a special pleasure here in Francis's caricature of the history master, Dunstan Ramsay, who is of course the narrator of *Fifth Business*. How well does R.D. use references linking his novels with one another? Can you see dangers in these internal jokes?

10. For Francis, his time at Oxford changes his life (as, arguably, Oxford changed R.D.'s own life, where he became a notable undergraduate figure). It introduces him to Ismay, who entraps him in marriage, then deserts him. It introduces him to Colonel Copplestone, "Uncle Jack," who leads him into a life in the world of espionage. And, in a remarkably

natural and easy way, it introduces him to Tancred Saraceni, the most renowned picture-restorer in Europe. Which of them struck you as the *least* admirable? And which was to be most influential for Francis?

11. Schloss Düsterstein ("Dismal-stone Castle") in Bavaria becomes the centre of Francis's world for several years in the mid-1930s as he works there under Saraceni. But as his spy boss explains it, "Less than a mile from the house, or the castle or whatever it is, there is a branch of a railway, and that branch leads to a large compound — a concentration camp, as Kitchener called them, to which freight and cattle cars are taken from time to time, not on any regular schedule but always late at night." The reader sits up straighter. It's the mid-'30s, this is Hitler's Germany, and the spy game's afoot. A full page later the conversation ends with these words:

> "Just a matter of curiosity, Uncle Jack. These goods vans — these freight cars — what's in them?"
> "People."

That's R.D. the great storyteller at work, ending the chapter that way. Coincidence brings Francis to a place where he can track (and record) events that will lead up to a world war. How did the intrusion of "the real world" (and note how Francis resents Saraceni's cynical use of the word "picturesque" to describe the Nazis) affect your reading of this section?

12. "Thou Shalt Perish Ere I Perish" is the Bavarian Countess's family motto. What impact does it have on Francis, not to mention her cool acceptance of the risks of the art-faking scheme aimed at Reichsmarshall Goering that absorbs Saraceni and Francis?

13. Ruth Nibsmith, the governess, plays an important role in Francis's life. First, she is the astrologer who draws up his life chart, then she is his lover, in Germany, then in London

during the Blitz. (Did you admire the dramatic section opening: "'Are you happy? I am.' Ruth Nibsmith turned her head on the pillow to look at Francis." *There's* a lesson on how to advance a plot!) Since we know that R.D. was at least a half-believer in astrological charts (having paid to have one drawn up for himself), how would you compare Ruth's two roles in importance?

14. One of the great pleasures of any Davies novel is how much fascinating arcane knowledge we acquire. In this book the details of picture restoration — of mixing paints with care to produce just the right pattern of craquelure, for instance — take up many pages. Acquiring the necessary knowledge took weeks, even months, of R.D.'s time in the days before electronic searches. Did you enjoy the level of detail? What other books have given you the same sort of entertaining education?

15. The making of Francis's reputation as an art expert occurs in Holland. There he dramatically exposes Letztpfennig's "ancient" painting by van Eyck as a modern fake, because of the presence of a monkey in the picture.

    Hereby hangs a tail, sorry, a tale. I am partly behind this plot twist because I failed as an editor. When I edited *World of Wonders* I did not spot an error in the manuscript, where R.D. had the orang-outang, Rango, hanging by his prehensile tail. Editors are supposed to catch such errors. Wise readers wrote in to complain that only monkeys from the New World (and no orang-outangs) could hang by the tail. In the words of Judith Skelton Grant, in this book "Davies turned an embarrassment to advantage when he used a monkey to establish Francis's credentials in the realm of art."

    As you can see, this becomes a turning point in the book, and a turning point in Francis's career.

    Yet when Letztpfennig's fakery is exposed, his question to the group of assembled experts is eloquent: "You have all praised this painting for its skill and colour and design, and to its power to lift the human heart as only a great picture

can do. At one time or another you have all spoken highly of it, and several of you have professed yourself delighted with it. What delighted you? The magic of a great name? The magic of the past? Or was it the picture before your eyes?" The question remains, and hangs in the air above this book. Looking at the general principle, how would you answer it?

16. Another great delight of any Davies novel is that almost every single page is studded with examples of epigrams about life and the human condition. They are endowed, as I wrote in the flap copy for the first hardcover edition in 1985, "with equal parts wit and wisdom." Two spring to my mind, one dealing with coincidence, "a useful dismissive word for people who cannot bear the idea of pattern shaping their own lives." The other reads, "War is a national and international disaster, but everyone in a warring nation fights a war of his own and sometimes it cannot be decided if he has won or lost." Did any one epigram from this book leap out at you?

17. Saraceni has many remarkable qualities. Not the least of them is his apparent ability to cast the Evil Eye on a victim who displeases him. For those of us inclined to laugh this off, consider the letter to the London *Times* sent by R.D. in 1982, commenting on deficiencies in that paper's recent obituary of the Italian scholar Mario Praz: "The second important thing of which no mention was made is that for many years it has been discussed, half jokingly and half in awe in academic circles on two continents as to whether or not professor Praz really possessed the Evil Eye. Stories went round of visitors to the House of Life who had not pleased the Professor and who, on leaving, fell down the stairs and broke a leg. Other stories told of those who attempted to contradict him in public only to find that their senses swooned and their voices sank to an incomprehensible croak. Unfavourable critics of his work encountered strange misfortunes . . ."

    I owe Judith Skelton Grant's biography for this surprising detail. Another parallel story comes from the court records in Nanaimo, B.C., where around 1930 the trial of Brother

Twelve, a mystic community cult leader reputed to have these Evil Eye powers, was thrown into confusion when the crown attorney prosecuting him collapsed in court under his fierce glare. (An editor picks up many strange stories, as I did from working on John Oliphant's *Brother XII*.) Do you put any faith in the Evil Eye? And in the book does this possible attribute change your opinion of Saraceni?

18. Back in Canada, Francis's time is taken up with financial affairs, but also with following the career of his handsome, brilliant young friend, Aylwin Ross. R.D. is careful to stress that Francis loves Ross, not physically, but for his youth and charm and energy.

    It is widely accepted that Ross is modelled on the charismatic Alan Jarvis, who, like Ross, was appointed director of Canada's National Gallery, then ran into political trouble, resigned, and never recovered. R.D. knew Jarvis well and the two men were known to be intellectual rivals in public. How well does R.D. succeed in evoking the Canada of Jarvis and Diefenbaker's time? And how does Francis's growing fascination with money affect his relationship with Ross?

19. The book raises very interesting questions about art and the proper role of an encouraging patron. (The boys at Colborne College know what their rich parents think of the Group of Seven: "Blue snow! I ask you.") Francis finds that his attempts to devote his very large fortune to "the encouragement of art in Canada" is not a success. Among the Canadian painters "the good ones were independent and the ones who responded with glee to the appearance of a possible patron were not good."

    How sympathetic are you to Francis's insistence on tying his advice to the money he gives to painters? And what do you think of the idea that the book's theme, of the dangers of tying one's art to the prevailing fashion, represents R.D.'s indignant response to criticism? ("One of the things that burns me furiously is that some reviewers say that I'm an old-fashioned novelist and never do anything that's new," he

said.) How well did he succeed in showing his critics that he could write a very different kind of book?

20. R.D. wrote this book about the complexity of a biographer's challenge while being subjected to the attentions of a thorough and dedicated biographer, from whom he tried to conceal some details of his life. How do you see that reflected in the book? How is *What's Bred in the Bone* like a biography?

I should mention that *Stories About Storytellers* has a chapter on Robertson Davies that is subtitled "Man of Letters, Oracle, and Ugly Duckling." I'm very proud that Brenda Davies, R.D.'s devoted wife who passed away in January 2013, was kind enough to approve of my chapter, saying, "Douglas Gibson has written an excellent account of Robertson Davies as the clever, witty, and wise man that he was."

My chapter is certainly intended to be an admiring one. Every paragraph in this book shows that we are dealing with a remarkable Man of Letters.