

David Staines Interviewed by Rita Celli

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RITA CELLI (HOST): Three Canadian authors have their hopes set on joining the ranks of Carol Shields and Wayne Johnson. Shields' biography of Jane Austen and Baltimore's Mansion by Wayne Johnson are past winners of the Charles Taylor prize for literary non-fiction. The finalists for 2007 were just announced today in Toronto. David Staines was there. He is a professor of English at the University of Ottawa, and we've reached him in Toronto. Welcome to Ontario Today.

DAVID STAINES: Hi.

CELLI: Hi. So before we get to all the finalists, remind us again: what is literary non-fiction?

STAINES: Well, literary non-fiction means that it's non-fiction, it's not an imaginative work, and it's very well written. It really is an award for belles lettres. It's: that's the genre that we want to honour.

CELLI: Tell us more about some of the other past winners that our listeners might actually know and recognize.

STAINES: Well, as you already said, Carol Shields' last book was her Jane Austen, and it was very fitting that she won this award for a non-fiction work which combines her love of Jane Austen with her own research into Austen's life. Wayne Johnson won it the first year for Baltimore's Mansion, which was his evocation of the Newfoundland he grew up in, and it's a very succinct but a very powerful book.

CELLI: Now it is called the Charles Taylor prize. Tell us more about him and what he wanted to recognize.

STAINES: Well, he thought before his death that he would like some kind of prize for non-fiction awarded. He was the first Western correspondent for the Globe & Mail who ever went to China. He was based in China, and he wrote a lot of columns in the Globe & Mail and then he wrote a lot of books. Probably the most famous, which has just been reissued by House of Anansi Press, was his book Radical Tories, which was his history of outstanding Conservatives, more likely probably Red Tories, who populated the Canadian landscape prior to the 1970s.

CELLI: And why was it important then for him to recognize non-fiction?

STAINES: Because he thought it was a growing genre, very well-written books that could tell us about ourselves, and that's what he felt he needed, we needed, and he also felt that this was the coming genre in Canadian literature.

CELLI: How about, then, these short-listed authors and their books? Tell us about that.

STAINES: Well, there were three nominees today or three finalists for the 2007 Charles Taylor prize for literary non-fiction. First of all, the jury consisted of Senator Laurie LaPierre, who was from Ottawa; Jan Walter, a former publisher and consultant who's from Kingston; and Dr. Margaret McMillan, who is provost of Trinity College here in Toronto, and she announced the finalists, and what's astonishing about this list of finalists, I think, is all three books are very, very good books, and I can see any one of them winning, and there would be nothing wrong with that. In fact, Margaret said this morning when she was talking about it, she said to me, "I don't know who will win. I think all three can win, and I would have no reservations about any of them," and so she said, "I have to re-read all the books now."

CELLI: Uh huh. So must I, actually, and John English was already on my list of things to do.

STAINES: OK.

CELLI: Have you had a chance to go over any of these yourself?

STAINES: I've read two, Rudy Wiebe's book. Well, the nominees, the finalists, are John English for his biography of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, volume one of his biography, called Citizen of the World, and John English is a professor at Wilfrid Laurier in Waterloo, Ontario. Then Ross King, who has already won the Governor General's award for *The Judgment of Paris*, the revolutionary decade that gave the world impressionism, is up again for this book as a finalist, and then the third is a very haunting and beautiful book by Rudy Wiebe called *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, and it really captures what it was like to grow up. It's a very moving memoir. It's a very evocative memoir of rural Saskatchewan, and it's in simple and spare prose. It's an incredibly gorgeous book, so I don't know which of the three you pick.

CELLI: OK, and you don't have to right now.

STAINES: I don't.

CELLI: We'll let the judges go over this. How many books, actually, did the jury choose from?

STAINES: They read a total of 98 books, and they got it down to these three, and I think there was a unanimity among the judges that these three should be on the short list.

CELLI: That's a lot of reading.

STAINES: You have to devote a great deal of time to this.

CELLI: Well, no kidding, and they whittled it down to this list. So what happens next in the process?

STAINES: Well, in the process, all the three people who are finalists are going to be brought to Toronto, and they're going to be here the last weekend of February, and there's a books and brunch sponsored by Ben McNally at the King Edward Hotel for the finalists and those who pay their \$40 to come. That's on the Sunday, and then on the Monday, as you well know, Ontario Today is going to be broadcasting the awards ceremony from 12:00 to 2:00 on Monday, February 27.

CELLI: That's right. So that's just ahead. Of course these three books and others are now on my reading list to get ready for that event. Again, can you give people a little more detail if they'd like to get in on the books and brunch event?

STAINES: Yes, if you want to go to the books and brunch, the fee is \$40, which includes a beautiful brunch at the King Edward Hotel, and you can get there by dialing 416-466-5491. That's the number to phone for tickets, or benmcnally@sympatico.ca, and he can give you tickets that way too.

CELLI: OK. We're going to put that information up on the Ontario Today website as well. David Staines, thank you for your time today.

STAINES: Thanks for hearing me.

CELLI: David Staines is a professor of English at the University of Ottawa, and as he mentioned, Ontario Today will be broadcasting live from the ceremony announcing the winner of the Charles Taylor prize. We're going to bring you conversation with the authors and of course the winner, and that is coming up ahead on Monday, February the 26th at the Windsor Arms Hotel in Toronto.