

Notable AX
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Jane Simpson, Executive Director, AX

Choice Cuts – AX’s Monthly Open Mic Readings

Thanks to Dr. Gerard Collins for this week’s guest column – AX is fortunate to have an active Literary Committee, with Gerard as committee co-chair along with fellow author, Beth Powning. Gerard is an award-winning author from Newfoundland, whose first novel, Finton Moon, was nominated for the 2014 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and won the Percy Janes First Novel Award. His short story collection, Moonlight Sketches, won the 2012 NL Book Award. Gerard teaches English at Memorial University of Newfoundland, by distance, and is an occasional lecturer at UNB, and he offers writing workshops, retreats, and mentorships to many other writers and poets near and far. Thanks for hosting our first of many open mic literary readings, Gerard, and for writing this column.

The gallery at AX was packed on the evening of August 3, 7:00 pm when we held our first-ever Choice Cuts open mic readings. I was fortunate to be the host, with the easy tasks of making everyone feel comfortable and emphasizing our goal that everyone is to be treated with respect, regardless of what they write or how much they’ve written. Since no one on the literary committee had hosted an open mic in Sussex before, we had no idea what to expect.

With an optimism I admired, the student employees at AX set out forty chairs. We had a podium and a microphone, and were good to go. When Janie (AX Executive Director) and I walked in, there were already a few people having supper at Knocks Café, waiting for things start. We ordered drinks and chatted for a while. Already, we had more people than I’d dared to hope for.

People began to trickle in. Some even put their names on the “Sign Here to Read” sheet I’d placed on the desk in the foyer. Then I spotted a group of four or five from a Quispamsis writing group. Then another group arrived from Saint John. A bunch of Sussex folks came, too, and three travelers fresh from Connecticut. By the time we began the readings, we had a full house, with thirty-seven of those forty chairs occupied.

What impressed me most was that two-thirds of the audience came just to listen and to watch. That means a lot of people around here want to support the literary arts, and also have a yearning to hear intelligent, funny, poignant, and well-written short pieces of fiction, memoir, and poetry.

Nights like this one change you, somehow. There was a palpable good feeling in the air during the entire event and, after, a smile on every single face. We had a lot of good moments – like when Alison Davis, Beth’s mother, read sublimely, got up (with a bit of

help from me and Beth) to take her seat in the audience, and we accidentally tipped the microphone over, sending it crashing to the floor. Our first official mic drop.

We had a dozen or so readers of all ages – the youngest was a teenager – some of whom were published, others who were hoping to be, and some who were just starting out, had never tried to publish, and didn't care to.

Every reader was received warmly and respected the five-minute time limit, and every one of them made us feel something – mostly, though, it made us feel united, as a part of something quite wonderful: the human race, complete with interesting observations about the world we inhabit and a variety of emotions. Most people there had never read in public before and had never attended a reading of this kind. Yet, every person I spoke to afterwards said they'd be coming back again and again, on the first Thursday of every month, some of them bringing something fresh to read.

In all, the evening was less than two hours, and a night well-spent in the company of fine writers, good people, and fellow New Brunswickers (and our three visitors from the US!).

The next Choice Cuts will be on Thursday, September 7, 7:00 pm at AX (12 Maple Ave.) and Beth Powning will host. Come join us and help keep this good thing going.