

Facts and fiction blur in politics, science

Panelists debate as Chautauqua celebrates its keynote weekend

BY ANDREW WAGNER-CHAZALON

Secrets and guilt were on the agenda, but it was the difference between facts and truth that drove the discussion when some of Canada's most distinguished journalists met in Muskoka last weekend.

A panel of five noted writers and broadcasters met at The Rosseau resort in Minett on Saturday morning. They were there for the opening weekend of Muskoka Chautauqua, a series of workshops, seminars and other events taking place at The Rosseau and other venues throughout the summer.

The theme of this year's gatherings is secrets and guilt, a theme captured perfectly in the novel of keynote speaker Linden MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*.

The novel is one of six books on this year's Muskoka Chautauqua Reading List.

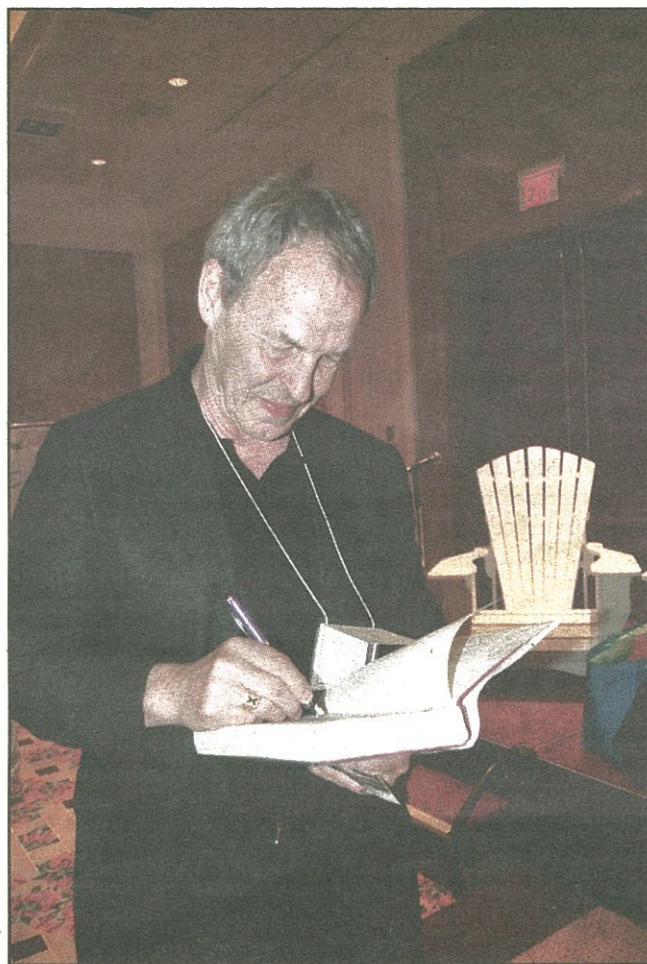
MacIntyre discussed his novel and its theme of secrets, morality and faith during an afternoon session at The Rosseau on Saturday.

Earlier in the day, he joined Jay Ingram of the Discovery Channel, Carol Off of CBC Radio's *As It Happens*, the *Globe and Mail's* John Ibbitson, and moderator Steve Paikin of TVOntario's *The Agenda* in a discussion of whether it's possible to find the truth in today's media.

The discussion was observed by a hundred or so guests, some of whom had travelled from as far afield as Ohio to take part in the weekend.

Most members of the panel agreed that it is possible to find truth in the media. But not all were optimistic that would continue to be the case. MacIntyre — who is best known as the longtime host of the CBC's investigative program *The Fifth Estate* — suggested the quest for political truth is becoming increasingly difficult federally, thanks to the Conservative government's insistence on controlling and manipulating the message. The Harper government, he said, runs "the most awesome propaganda machine that I've ever seen."

Several panellists offered examples of politicians who are becoming increasingly unwilling to answer questions or present facts. Carol Off referred to Conservative MP Julian Fantino, who refused to listen to data that show crime rates are declining, saying that he knows the opposite to be true because "I feel it in my gut."



SIGNING. Linden MacIntyre signs a copy of his Giller Prize-winning novel at last weekend's Muskoka Chautauqua event. The annual festival of ideas, books and art continues on June 17.

Photo by Bev McMullen

She added that it isn't just right-wing thinkers who seem to disdain facts, noting that documentary filmmaker Michael Moore has been widely criticized for presenting fiction as fact. She also quoted Farley Mowatt, who, when confronted with falsehoods in his writing retorted "[screw] the facts. I was after the truth."

Paikin, who recently moderated the leaders' debate during the federal election, said it is becoming increasingly

difficult to get politicians to agree to answer questions. He noted that one of the very few exceptions is Tony Clement, MP for Parry Sound-Muskoka and president of the Treasury Board, who is known for being accessible and even engaging in discussions on Twitter. Indeed, as the session wound down, event host Patrick Boyer introduced Clement who had slipped into the back of the room.

Ibbitson, a Gravenhurst native who now heads the *Globe and Mail's* Ottawa bureau, said Harper's undemocratic approach would seem to be an undeniable fact that should have cost him the election. But it ran up against other undeniable facts, including Harper's ability to focus almost exclusively on the economy and job creation as the theme of the election, a theme that resonated profoundly with "Canadians who don't drink in bars where beer is nine dollars a bottle."

Navigating the way through those and other facts is essential if people are to arrive at the larger truth, he said. Unfortunately, several panellists noted, it is increasingly easy for people to seek out only those opinions that correlate to their own.

"People are going shopping in the blogosphere for what they want to hear," said MacIntyre.

Ingram, one of Canada's most respected science journalists, said it isn't just in the field of politics that people seek out opinions they already agree with. Much of the debate over climate change can be linked to "confirmation bias," the tendency we all have to agree with those who agree with us. "It contributes significantly, if not overwhelmingly, to the resolution of the debate over climate change," Ingram said.

The best way to overcome it is to be skeptical about those whose opinions you agree with. "Don't trust anyone who's telling you what you already hear or want to hear," Ingram said.

Ibbitson added a second warning: "beware of certainty," he said. "In that contradiction between belief and uncertainty is the place where insight lies."

Another approach, he suggested, is a bit easier to apply. "On all matters Canadian, trust everything you read in the *Globe and Mail*, especially if the *National Post* and the *Toronto Star* disagree. On all matters international, trust everything you read in the *Economist*, especially if the *Globe and Mail* concurs."

Week two of the Muskoka Chautauqua takes place June 17-21, with an aboriginal festival featuring art workshops with Gord Miller and performances by Debajehmujig Theatre Group.

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