

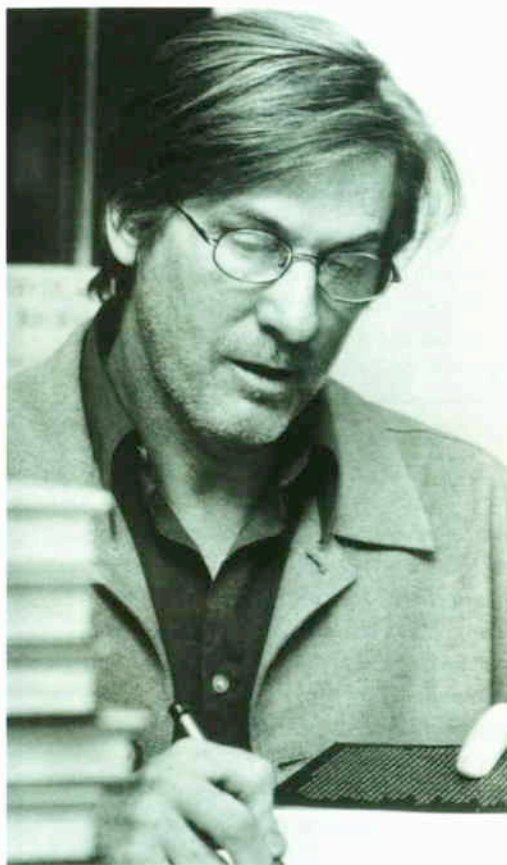
The Man from Miramichi

Prolific Canadian author **DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS** has been showered with awards and prizes in his homeland, but is little-known elsewhere – so far. CLAIRE SCOBIE talked to him on his recent visit to Australia.

If ever there was an accomplished writer struggling for his art, it is David Adams Richards. The Canadian author tells me: 'I've never been in fashion and don't intend to be. I have things to say about the nature of human nature ... [and] I will say them.'

Richards, 53, speaks in a measured muffled drawl. His books, among them *The Bay of Love and Sorrows*, *Nights Below Station Street* and *Mercy Among the Children*, have an archaic, Dickensian lilt with unusual syntax. 'How I fought to keep that in my books,' he says. 'I don't know why the words fall into that pattern, but there's not an editor who hasn't tried to change me.' Such idiomatic style is entirely in keeping with his magnificent novels, which have been compared to those of Tolstoy, Hardy and Faulkner. They are set in New Brunswick, on the 'great sad' Miramichi river. The latest, *River of the Brokenhearted*, is based on Richards' grandmother, Janie King, 'a very tough lady' who ran the local cinema and had a bitter, long-standing feud with her competitor, Joey Elias. The cinema is then taken over by Janie's son, Miles, an exuberant, eccentric alcoholic based on Richards' Uncle Harry – although Richards says there are aspects of himself in both Miles King and his son, Wendell.

So while *River of the Brokenhearted* is fiction, it is 'based loosely on fact', and Richards waited until after his father had died before he started writing it. His father had been 'beaten half to death' by his Irish stepfather because he had English blood; this communal hatred between the English and the Irish is a running theme in the narrative. By turns bleak, endearing and tragic, it is a tightly crafted and soulful masterpiece with a raft of characters often driven to do terrible things less out of evil than out of desperate survival. Richards says he has always been fascinated by good and evil 'as



exercised by human beings, not by an omnipotent force'.

Richards grew up in Newcastle, in New Brunswick, a close-knit 'wintry' place on the working Miramichi river. He has personally known seven murderers, and their victims – 'It's a very small place, that's why it is considered so tough'. On reading *Oliver Twist* at the age of 14 he resolved to become a writer. This was a terrible thing for his parents, he says. 'I resented that from them and felt I had a right to, because my mum was always trying to tell me what a nice life I would have as a lawyer ... but in the end I think she was proud of me.'

A poor student, Richards was expelled five times from various schools 'for fighting and sneaking rum into class' and still has difficulties with spelling. At 21, determined to pursue his dream, he dropped out of university despite mocking derision from the

professors, 'because the best thing was to burn my bridges and kill my options so I would have no way to go back and take advantage of something that I thought would ruin my writing.'

For the first 15 years of his career he was in a 'literary wilderness' – there were few Canadian writers given media exposure – and Richards depended on his wife Peggy to pay the bills 'or else we both would have starved ... One year I earned about \$500 and we paid the rent by selling the car and I sold my motorcycle, even worse.' (Richards' 'one weakness' is Harley Davidsons.) He did not take part-time work: 'I was a terrible, terrible drunk. For years I almost drank myself to death. I had a lot of fun with it. But if I took a drink I had no idea when I would stop.' He took his last sip of alcohol when he was 32, after he had been 'drunk for three months, ending up in the hospital. That convinced me, if nothing else.'

In 1989 David Adams Richards won the Canadian Governor General's prize, but it wasn't until a decade later that he started to get an international following. Did that change the way he wrote? 'No,' he replies, 'but I had changed dramatically ... *Mercy Among the Children* was really a breakthrough book in that I was able to begin to analyse the nature of human nature ... before, it was done with a subjective leaning.' Critics may say that he over-analyses, but Richards says that he is happy with the way he is writing now. Richards' current novel is about the New Brunswick lumber industry of the forties, the rugged life the men lived, galloping with teams of horses 'pulling 20 tonnes of logs down ice-slick roads'.

It's been said that Richards has inspired younger Canadian writers. 'I suppose after 18 books, I hope I have inspired someone,' he laughs. 'Even if it is just to write in a different way.'