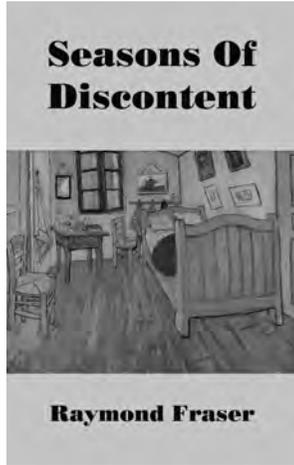


**Trevor Sawler**

***Seasons of Discontent***

by Raymond Fraser. Lion's Head Press, 2015

297 Pages



I am perhaps a bit ashamed to admit it, but despite spending the majority of my life in New Brunswick, and despite having a deep admiration for Maritime artists, I have somehow managed to avoid reading any of Raymond Fraser's novels, poetry, or books of non-fiction. This is even more deeply embarrassing considering that Fraser has written thirteen books, six collections of poetry, and three works of non-fiction. That's no less than twenty-two books—one might be inclined to think that I made a conscious effort to avoid him, but I assure you that is not the case. It's just one of those things—sort of like living in New Brunswick your entire life, but never actually taking the time to see the Hopewell Rocks (I haven't), or living within an easy drive of Cape Breton, but never actually going there (I'm guilty on that front as well).

So when I found myself with a review copy of his latest novel, *Seasons of Discontent*, I decided that I simply had to read this author about whom I had heard so many good things. Despite my enthusiasm, though, I admit to some trepidation when beginning this book. This was not in the least because I was concerned with the quality of the writing—after all, Fraser has won the Lieutenant-Governor's Award, and his work is much celebrated in

Canadian literary circles—but instead because this novel features one of his most well known and well-loved characters: Walt MacBride. My apprehension stemmed from the concern that I would be encountering this character, who is so well-known to those familiar with Fraser’s body of work, for the first time. I was worried that it might be like beginning to watch a popular television series part way through the seventh season—the storyline might be wonderful, and the characters might be engaging, but I would be like that one student in a literature class who did not do the required reading, and would quickly be left behind.

I needn’t have worried. The novel stands on its own with no problems whatsoever. Yes, I would probably have found it even more enjoyable if I knew more about Walt’s background, but I was quickly drawn into MacBride’s world, and it took only a few pages to realize why this character is so popular among Fraser’s readers. Set in New Brunswick in 1963, the novel begins with Walt MacBride returning home after a year spent in Montreal. The novel is presented as a series of journal entries, where we follow along as Walt finishes his BA, then spends the summer in the fictional town of Bannonbridge, and finally begins his first teaching job.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this book, at least from a technical standpoint, is that it works even though it is in many ways a variation on the epistolary novel—a format that was supposed to have died out a century ago. Bram Stoker managed to make it work in *Dracula*, but very few recent books have used this format successfully. Yet it works in *Seasons of Discontent*, and it works very well. MacBride is at times philosophical, such as when he muses on the nature of art:

The fundamental reason for all art is that every man sees himself in every other man. All mankind is a family, and you can’t be an artist without realizing that all people are your brothers, and sisters, and the final good is the good of the family.

This kind of introspection suggests a deep contemplation of the sublime, or perhaps a lengthy consideration of the role of the artist in a world where art has become commoditized (where it exists at all), or transformed into nothing but escapism or enter-

tainment. Hard on the heels of this somewhat maudlin consideration of art, however, MacBride gives us this:

You may write off some of them, or even most of them if you're misanthropically inclined, but as an artist you work on the assumption that because it's a family there are people you've never met who will benefit from what you do. As for the others, you know they *could* benefit if they weren't so goddam stupid.

(Just couldn't resist that).

It is this seamless transition between philosophy and humour, between the sublime and the earthy, that makes Walt such an engaging character, and that makes this novel so enjoyable. Yet it is the third part of the book—where Walt begins his teaching career—that really appealed to me. I have spent much of my adult life teaching English literature, and I recall my first days in the classroom very well—I walked into that first classroom on that first day with a mixture of enthusiasm, and with no small amount of terror. There was the fear that I might run out of things to say (I never did; it turns out that I am inordinately fond of the sound of my own voice), that the students might stage some kind of revolt when I wasn't looking, or that my fellow faculty members would find the quality of my instruction somehow lacking. None of those things happened, of course, and my experience does not exactly parallel the trials that MacBride goes through as he begins to teach, but watching him as he grows into his own as a teacher took me back to those early days in the classroom almost instantly, and with perfect clarity.

I have already ordered two more of Fraser's books which feature Walt MacBride: *The Bannanbridge Musicians* and *In Another Life*, and I look forward to reading them. Perhaps I'll do it after finally visiting the Hopewell Rocks, or while lounging on a beach in Cape Breton. You never know.