

Speaking with Saul

By Vivian Moreau - Victoria News

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Black Press reporter Vivian Moreau had a chance to speak to, or rather listen to, John Ralston Saul speak at length about the writing process, Canada's insecurities and how we need to look at our past. His new book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, addresses the notion that Canada got to where it is by relying on and learning from First Nations. That communal relationship needs to be cultivated, not with apologies but with acknowledgment, he says.

VM: Where are you right now?

JRS: In Toronto, in my office, in my study, whatever, on a sofa. I have five windows, it's a turret on the top floor, about 12 feet across.

VM: Is that your sanctuary?

JRS: I don't write here. I kind of organize here, you know. I've never written at home. I either write up on an island in Georgian Bay... We have a little island with no electricity, outhouse. The cabin I write in has oil lamps. Each stay is about three days long. You sort of throw yourself in the water when you're tired. I go canoeing, chop wood. Georgian Bay is one of the few places in Southern Ontario that hasn't been beaten back. We have rattlesnakes and six-foot long constrictors and endless loons - it's quite wonderful.

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VM: How does it play into this book?

JRS: (Being brought up in a mobile military family) I always had a sense of how complicated the country was and how big it was and how cities were great and there was also something else that was great. It wasn't romantic, it was real. Georgian Bay is a continuation of that. I love downtown and the city, but I also love the opposite, you know. Everybody on the West Coast understands that. Sometimes in Central Canada you have to explain that.

VM: I did want to ask you about the book, because I did have to put it down at times, walk away from it, consider it and come back to it.

JRS: Quite right. That's good to hear, but not because it's hard to read, right?

VM: I think you were asking Canada to consider the sum of its experiences and that, if Canada is maturing, are you asking the country to simply grow up?

JRS: In a way. Really at a certain point you know you can't go on if you keep thinking you're somewhere you're not. If you actually think that Queen Victoria chose your capital all is lost. Because it's so fundamentally passive and self-loathing and colonial and untrue of course ... I really believe that what I'm writing about here is this is a country with four centuries of experience - in some sense it is in its current form, its current form starts to appear around 1600 and so it is not obscure - and no other country thinks that it is peculiar and boring to go back to your roots. The United States is built on that, France is built on that, England is built on that ... all built on some sense of where they come from and who they are. Canada is the only place, only western democracy, industrialized country, which insists on not understanding itself. So it can't have a conversation with itself except in the most frankly childish or colonial way.

VM: In the book you take a lot of shots at different institutions, universities, foreign policy and this elite that you talk about. And some people reading your book might think that you are part of the elite, philosopher king, accomplished wife-

JRS: -Well so are you, so are you. You've got pages published in the newspaper, you're part of the people who have a chance to shape what we're thinking and talking about. It's not about me being right, its about looking out there and saying, look at the section on health care. I can describe, as can other people, precisely why the crisis was created. Therefore you can prescribe precisely how to end it within three, four years. This could have been done 10 years ago. It could be over - why is it that we're incapable of that? You could say well John is taking a lot of easy shots, but the other way of looking at it is if we're not capable of being honest with ourselves...

VM: What is next for you?

JRS: Oh don't ask me that, I'm in the midst of this. When you spend almost a decade thinking about something and working on it, researching, talking with people, and now you get to this new stage which the cynic calls the PR stage but I've always felt was the chance to turn it into oral... it's not as though I went away to write this book and I'm putting it out there. That would be very egotistical and all writing is in a way, (but) if you look at who I'm quoting and who I'm acknowledging ... I'm looking for some sense of (that) what I'm saying makes sense.