

FOCUS

The road to CanLit bliss

At 78, Joan Clark has grown up alongside CanLit, influencing the move away from our provincial pedigree while at the same time being inspired by each new voice also emerging on the scene. Now she aims to do the same as the 2012-13 writer-in-residence at the University of New Brunswick Fredericton. Story by Thomas Hodd

Award-winning Atlantic writer Joan Clark counts herself as fortunate. But she isn't just talking about her collection of honours.

Beginning to write in the 1970s – already in her early thirties, and a mother of a little boy – Clark is indebted to being in the right place at the right time.

"As readers, Canadians finally didn't feel like they were colonized anymore. We began to develop a sense of pride in our own stories, our own arts and culture."

And while readers' interest in CanLit blossomed, Clark was equally inspired to feed their hunger. More than 40 years later, she still is.

For the next eight months, Clark will mingle, mentor and inspire as University of New Brunswick Fredericton's writer-in-residence. She is the latest in a list of prestigious authors that goes back almost 50 years.

"I was excited and delighted when they asked me," she said. "It just felt right to come."

The idea of wanting to develop pride in Canadian and Atlantic stories is something close to Clark's heart, and she plans to make it part of her mission while at the University of New Brunswick.

"One thing I'd like to do is develop more communication between the university community and the town."

"There should be more outreach. They don't call it the ivory tower for nothing," she said with a chuckle.

She also doesn't forget the reason she was asked to come here in the first place.

"I'm a very disciplined writer," she said. "In the mornings, I write at the kitchen table, and then I go to the office in the afternoons. If you are a writer, you should try to do it as much as you can."

Clark certainly has the credentials for the job. She has 15 published books; her work has been translated into Swedish, Italian, Greek, French, German, Dutch, among others; and she has given readings all over the world, from Canada and the United States to Germany and Iceland, and as far away as Malaysia and China.

Her many literary accolades include winning the Canadian Authors' Association Fiction Award, having *The Hand of Robin Squires* listed among the 100 Best Books for Children and Young Adults, and being the only Canadian writer to be recognized for both a body of adult fiction, the Marian Engel Award, and for a body of children's literature, the Vicky Metcalf Award.

If that wasn't enough, Clark received the Order of Canada in 2010 and has an honorary Doctor of Letters from Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in Newfoundland.

Not bad for someone who said she "fell into writing."

Born in Liverpool, N.S., in 1934, Clark moved around as a child. Her father

worked as a labourer and businessman, and her mother was a nurse. At age nine, the family moved to Sydney Mines because her father wanted to get into manufacturing; four years later they moved again to Sussex.

"My mom only worked sporadically after my sister and I were born," Clark remembered. "When we moved to Sussex, Dad tried his hand as a Coca-Cola bottler, at real-estate, he even ran a laundromat for a time. It takes a lot of courage to be a small businessman."

What remained constant through Clark's childhood, though, were her imagination and her love of reading.

"Dad wasn't a great reader," Clark said. "I mostly got it from my mother, who was part of a Book of the Month Club. I remember reading everything I could: Lucy Maud Montgomery, The Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew. It was compulsive for me."

Clark also enjoyed play-acting, and spent a fair amount of time in the world of make-believe.

"It was a good thing my parents were OK with it," Clark chuckled. "I was the kind of kid that was always pretending. I was fine even if I didn't have any friends around."

Clark attended high school in Sussex, and then went to Acadia to study English drama, which was the only program of its kind in the Atlantic provinces at the time. She began writing poetry in her teenage years, but had no aspirations of becoming a writer.

"I published a handful of poems in my twenties," she said. "I even put together a small manuscript, but never really pursued it."

Clark was married in Sussex; she also taught for a year after graduating from university. But everything changed after her first son was born.

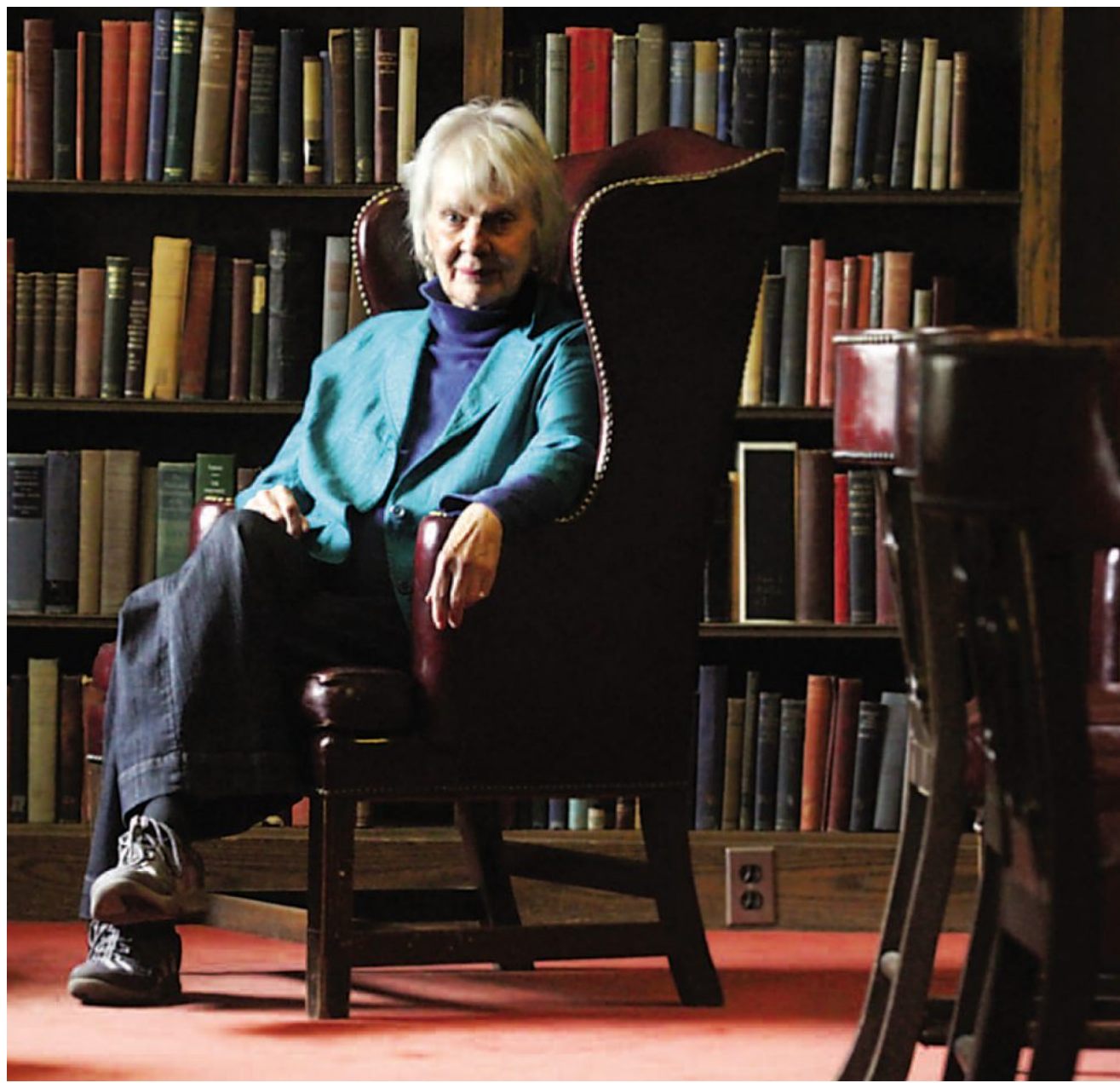
"I didn't associate anything of my life with the literature I had been taught in my anthologies," Clark said. "It was all so colonial in those days. Then one day I just started to write and write. I had never even tried fiction before."

Clark even went out and bought herself a typewriter and taught herself how to use it, although she admits that at first she would write long-hand; and only in the last 12 years has she begun composing on the computer.

"There's so much more flexibility in writing long-hand," she said. "And I think faster than I can type."

What came out of this creative impulse was Clark's first novel, *Girl of the Rockies* (1968), a young-adult chapter book about a girl who rescues a bear cub and convinces her father to let her raise it. But publishing the book wasn't enough. The real revelation came when she received her copy in the mail.

"I started red-lining it right away. And when I got to page 34, I thought 'this is



You can reach Joan Clark most days in her office in Carleton Hall, University of New Brunswick-Fredericton, or contact her at Joan.Clark@unb.ca or 452-6356. PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

terrible! I couldn't go any further. Even though the book had sold out, I refused to sign a contract to have it reprinted.

"I was really upset. I told my sister that what really matters to me is what's between the covers of this book. 'Well, then, you're a writer,' she responded."

Other children's books would soon follow, such as *Thomasina and the Trout Tree* (1971) and *The Hand of Robin Squires* (1977). Then, in 1982, Clark published her first adult work, a collection of short stories, *From a High Thin Wire*. As a tribute to her growing versatility as a writer, Clark would continue this tradition of alternating between books for adults and children for the rest of her career.

"We all have incidents in our lives, kids or adults, and some of them are tragic," Clark said. "It seems to me it's important to try to make some sense of that, to redeem something from that loss."

Loss is something Clark knows. Two of her stories were motivated by grandmothers that she never knew, one from Ireland and the other from Scotland.

While living in Alberta in the 1970s, Clark also became active in cultural politics and the writing community. Early on she joined an art co-op, where she met fellow writer Edna Alford, and the two of them decided to launch a literary magazine – *Dandelion*, which is still running today. She was also a founding member of the Writers Guild of Alberta, along with Canadian literary luminaries such as Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch. When she moved to Newfoundland in the mid-1980s, Clark was instrumental in helping to found the Writers' Alliance of

Newfoundland and Labrador.

"I always want to get in there and see what I can do to change things," Clark said. "I'm proud of the fact I got involved. You're either awake or you're not."

Clark also gave back to the community by sitting on award juries at the regional and national level. She has been a jury member for the Governor-General's Literary Awards twice, for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and for the Writers' Trust Engel/Findley Award, among others. She has also served as a peer-juror for several Canada Council grant applications.

At the same time, readers were waking up to Clark's literary talents, both at home and abroad. In 1988, her novel *The Victory of Geraldine Gull* was shortlisted for the Governor-General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Books in Canada First Novel Award. This was followed by two novels in the 1990s based on the Viking presence in Newfoundland; the second of these books, *The Dream Carvers*, won the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People.

Clark would go on to win a second

Bilson Award for *The Word for Home*, a touching story set in the 1920s about two young sisters forced to live in a boarding house in St. John's, Newfoundland. Her 2000 adult novel, *The Latitudes of Melt*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and long-listed for the prestigious International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her most recent novel, *Road to Bliss*, appeared in 2009.

Clark, who just celebrated her 78th birthday, already has a stack of manuscripts from eager creative writing students, hungry for feedback, in her office. And after nearly 50 years of publishing, Clark is quick to offer some important nuggets of wisdom for aspiring writers.

"Don't let it go, keep it and keep it until it's right – you want to avoid regret," she said. "I also believe that every writer needs a good editor. You can't be precious and sentimental about your work." □

Thomas Hodd currently teaches Canadian literature at the Université de Moncton. He can be reached at tomhodd@gmail.com.

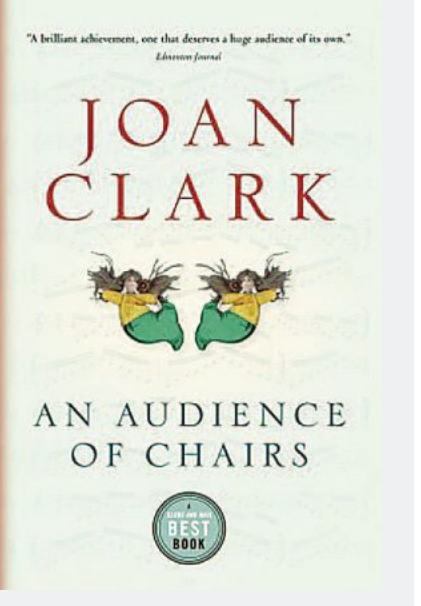
An excerpt from 'An Audience of Chairs'

Picture a woman playing a piano board at the kitchen table on a late December morning. Her hands, warmed by knuckle gloves, move across the wooden keys as she leans into the music. Pedalling a foot against the floor, her strong, supple fingers pound the opening chords of a Rachmaninov concerto. As she plays, the woman imagines heavy velvet curtains drawing apart and lively notes rush onstage, where leaping and skipping, they perform a short, spirited dance. The dancers depart and, swaying from side to side, the woman plays slower notes and hums along, her voice mellifluous and soothing as she imagines herself beside a stream sliding through waving grass. Outside the window, the winter landscape is frozen and drab, but inside the farmhouse it is summer and music shimmers on sunlit water as notes flow from the woman's fingertips, moving outward in everexpanding circles. Except for the fire crackling inside the wood stove and the woman's hum, no sound can be heard in the kitchen, for the painted keys of the piano board are as mute as the table beneath.

The music shifts and now there is

a spill of high notes trickling down a mountain fell. The woman hears the lonely call of a French horn from an alpine meadow and the answering shiver of strings. Lifting her hands from the board, she begins conducting the orchestra, combing and parting the air, keeping time as she leads the musicians toward the finale, which she plays with a burst of energy, thumping her hands on the piano board, bringing the moderato to a satisfying end.

Having concluded the morning's concert, the woman lowers her head and for a few moments rests, hands in her lap. The performance has exhausted her, but not for long, and soon she is on her feet, bowing to an audience of chairs. Over and over she bows to the thunderous applause that always follows a perfect performance. A benevolent smile illuminates her face. You are so kind, she says, attempting to be gracious and humble, but she is far from humble and is merely acknowledging the praise that is rightfully hers. Every audience has its limitations and shortcomings, but today's has been particularly responsive. They know they have been listen-



ing to the gifted playing of Moranna MacKenzie, musician extraordinaire. Tomorrow she will play the adagio. □

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