

Book review

Morningside radio show works on paper

By ALEX BARRIS

Regular listeners to CBC Radio's Morningside have become familiar, over the past five years, with the warm and perceptive reports of Stuart McLean, who has a knack for finding fascinating people and talking about them in an appealing way.

Some 30 of these pieces have been translated into print and assembled into the Morningside World of Stuart McLean (Viking,

236 pages, \$24.95) and the best news is that, for the most part, the transference from sound to reading matter works.

McLean's listeners may be startled to learn that his weekly "conversations" with host Peter Gzowski are more or less scripted, because McLean had long since mastered the art of getting the words "off the paper" so that they sound impromptu. Also, the easy receptive manner of Gzowski adds

to the feeling of spontaneity. But McLean is enough of a professional that he goes into the studio well prepared, with quite detailed information, and the resulting reports have justifiably become among the Monday morning highlights of Morningside.

But for those who are not familiar with his radio work, what McLean has done is revise slightly his broadcast formula, committing to paper all the information contained in those verbal reports without jeopardizing the informality of his radio style. And, valuable though Gzowski is to the success of the radio version, his absence in the printed version in no way diminishes its value. On the air, Gzowski serves as a combination audience and cheering section for McLean, reacting with wonder or delight at the results of McLean's pursuit of this or that arcane topic. In print, McLean works alone, eliminating the middleman, communicating directly with the reader and, somehow, he seems more confident that his message is getting across. He's right - it is.

What makes McLean's appeal so irresistible is his natural curiosity - the innate curiosity of a good journalist. He is interested in people and their pursuits, from a woman who is a country pedlar to a high school teacher who delivers newspapers, early each morning, from two old friends who walk around sandy beaches pushing metal detectors to an Ontario family that started a flag-making business.

POIGNANCY

To get these stories, McLean wanders about Canada with his tape recorder and his radio reports usually include the taped voices of the people on whose activities he is

focussing. The excerpts, however brief, often add both authenticity and poignancy to McLean's pieces. So it is with the printed versions. The story about the two old-timers who comb beaches for lost jewelry or coins is titled *Something About Buried Treasure*. It includes this quote from one of the men, which is kind of buried treasure in itself:

"I'm 74, you know, but I don't feel my age. I figure as long as you've got something active to do, like a good hobby, you're okay. In the spring, summer and fall, I'm alive because of this hobby. In the winter, I die."

Interspersed with these word portraits of interesting people are some of McLean's own musings on a variety of topics - from his nostalgia about old-fashioned rubber boots to *The Shocking Truth About Household Dust*. He can become almost rhapsodic about the "art" of shovelling snow and he can make you appreciate his own enthusiasm for visiting an old-fashioned hardware store.

But mostly it is his boundless interest in people and the work they do that makes the Stuart McLean book so enjoyable. He finds romance in the manufacture of wooden pencils, in the attractions of barber shops, in the history of the yo-yo and the popsicle. He has the curiosity to wonder what it's like to climb a construction crane, the courage to attempt it, and the honesty to admit his failure.

One cannot help but be impressed by the range of his interests. A baseball addict, he explores and explains the ways in which ground-keepers can effect the fortunes of the teams they serve. A dedicated defender of things past as opposed to things present (although his age is only somewhere around 40), he

sings the praises of Meccano (metal) toys as against today's plastic building toys.

NOSE

He also has the reporter's nose for the unusual. He sets up a monopoly game with the man who is regarded as the best monopoly player in Canada. He joins a milkman on his early morning rounds. He observes and reports on the competition between two hot-dog vendors outside Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (in Toronto), where McLean teaches broadcast journalism. He listens to the story of a woman alcoholic at the Scott Mission and the skaters at a roller rink reunion.

Apart from his natural curiosity and his acquired skills, what makes McLean a successful journalist (on air or in print) is his compassion. He often finds humor in the world around him but he does not laugh at the people he writes about.

As you go through his book, you may very well decide that you have found - quite early on - your favorite essay in it. But you will probably change your mind again and again, as another story and yet another succeeds previous favorites. A reader can hardly ask more of any collection of light essays.

-Alex Barris is the author of several books on films and television.

Grey Lady still preys

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one murder (no one knows to this day how many victims there were; estimates range from 13 to 30) and he died on the scaffold in January 1829. Hare went to England, and Burke's body was given over to the students for dissection. His skelton is at the Medical School, a ghoulis exhibit for anyone interested. A small purse made from his skin was recently sold at an auction for a good sum; our Cadies tour guide was the buyer!

Leaving Edinburgh and its gruesome tales, we find a countryside well supplied with ghosts. Glamis Castle, mentioned last week in this series, hosts no less than nine ghosts! The most famous is Lady Jane Douglas, who as the beautiful widow of a late Lord of the castle was courted, unsuccessfully, by William Lyon. He later accused her of trying to kill King James V by poison and sorcery. She was brutally tortured until she confessed, and in July 1537 she was burned on Castle Hill, in front of her son and second husband, who were being held prisoner in the tower nearby.

She is now known as the 'Grey Lady' and has been seen praying in the lovely little chapel in the Castle. The Queen Mother's sisters have seen her, although the Queen Mother has not and is said to be quite envious. There is also the legend of Earl Beardie, who played cards with the Devil on a Sabbath morning, and was walled in for his pains. The room has not been opened for several centuries.

On Skye, near Harta Corrie, ghostly soldiers in kilts have been

seen on a spot known as the Bloody Stone, where the MacLeods and MacDonalods fought a vicious battle 300 years ago. Another Skye phenomenon is a phantom car, a 1934 Austin that careens around the roads without a driver.

How about Meggernie Castle, in Bälgie, Perthshire, where the upper half of a woman has frequently been sighted. The graveyard in the park houses the lower half. A long ago laird supposedly murdered his wife and cut her in two, and was in the process of burying the bits when he died, either of shock or murder.

At Castle Douglas in Kirkcudbrightshire there is a small bridge on the Kelton road where the cries of murdered baby buried there can be heard. Around Carleton Castle in Lendalfoot cries and screams can be heard. It seems a baron killed seven wives by throwing them over a nearby cliff, but wife number eight managed to get him first. And of course there's always Scotland's number one mystery - the Lock Ness Monster.

There are many tales like this to be found, seen, heard and shivered over in Scotland. Those of us living in a country so short on history, especially supernatural history, can be forgiven our fascination with these ghastly, grisly stories. No one can promise that you will see or hear any of these manifestations, but there's always the chance. And don't we all want a little shiver down our spine now and then? Happy hunting.

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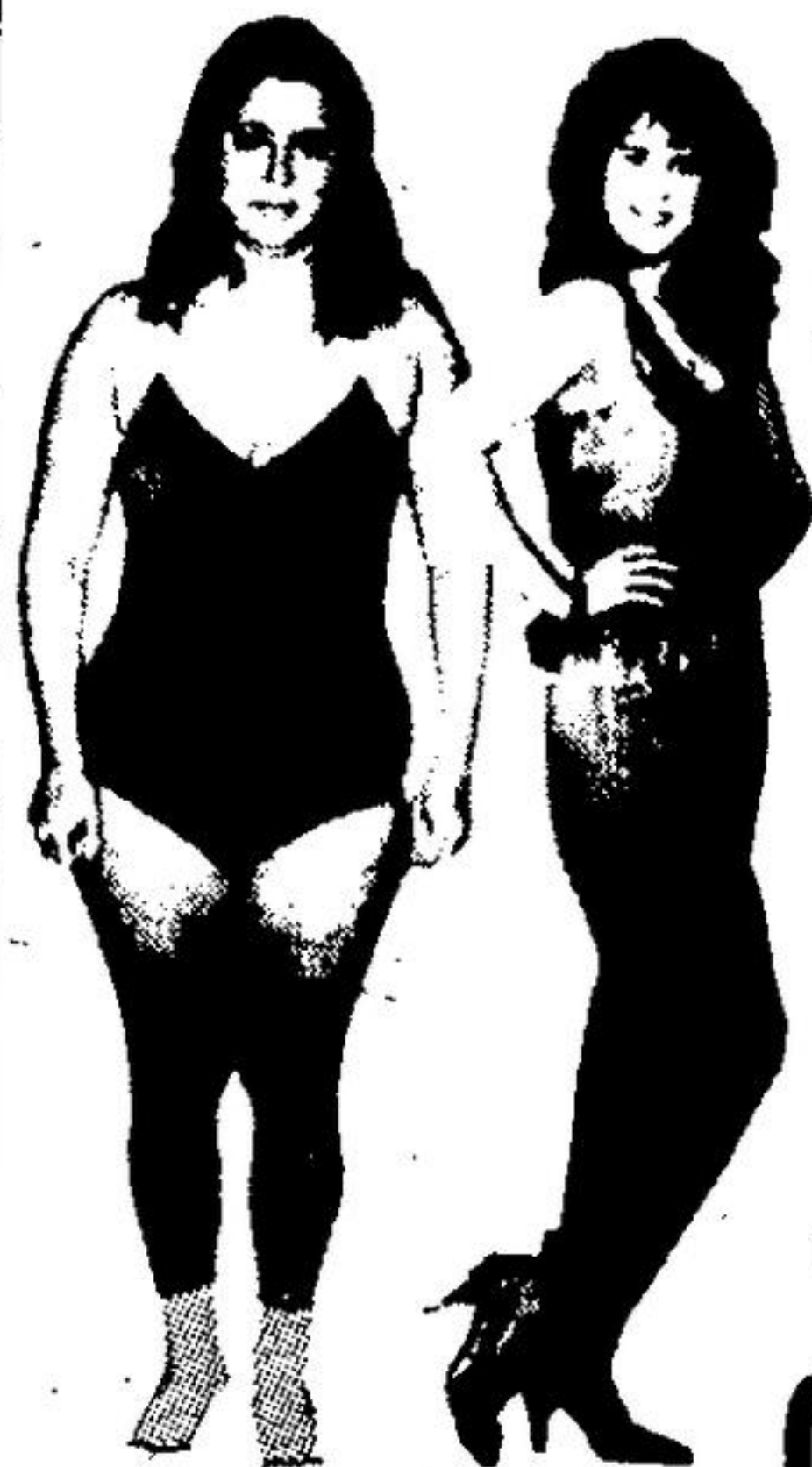


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