

Meager Picking

David Adams Richards' fortune swings with his latest book

Have you ever been part of a conversation on a fairly mundane topic—say, I don't know, carrots. You think that there isn't much to say about the veggie, but then everyone around you starts going off on how terrific carrots are, and how complex their flavour structure is, and how brilliantly the packaging alludes to their subtle yet poignant texture, and how they (rightfully) have been long-listed for the Giller Prize. And you're thinking, "Wait a second. Are we still talking about carrots? Really? What the heck am I missing here?"

That's pretty much how I feel about David Adams Richards' new novel, *The Friends of Meager Fortune*. With all of its rave reviews and award nominations, I'm sitting here scratching my head, thinking, "Huh?"

When she was pregnant with her first boy, Mary Jameson was told that he would be great and her second boy greater, yet he would destroy the family legacy. This prophecy haunts the rest of the story (and makes it pretty clear how it is going to end), which follows the decline of the Jameson forestry business at the end of the World War II. Owen, the youngest, returns to his small town New Brunswick home and attempts to save his family's business by orchestrating a dangerous cut on Good Friday Mountain. Some nasty rumours about Owen and his supposed married lover causes the town to gossip for a winter and ruins some nice peoples lives.

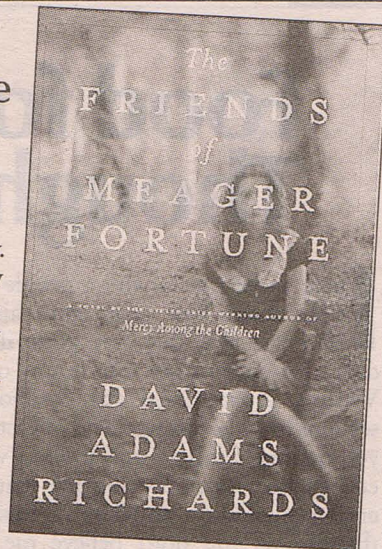
It sounds like I'm being flippant, and I'm not trying to be. Really. It's just that the far-removed, hands-off feel of the narration makes it difficult to get to know any of the characters, and become involved in their lives. You get a brief bit of the story, and then some exposition on what it means or why it's important. *Meager Fortune* is full of poignant phrases and insights that get lost within each other and takes the

reader out of the story. Take, for example, how the narrator is constantly pointing out how the woodsmen are the brutish underbelly of a society that depends on them for their product but would never accept them into their refined worlds. It is an interesting observation the first time it's mentioned, but sadly loses all meaning after the 10th or so reiteration.

The story does gain some momentum halfway through, and is almost enough to barrel on through the reflections and profound statements to make it to the end. And what an end. Everything comes together in such a way that it could have been a real doozy. But the characters, having been kept at arms length for the whole story, are so vague and obtuse that their struggles and outcomes leave me indifferent.

If Richards had avoided the walking metaphors that constantly hit the reader over the head with their "truths" and focused on the story, this could have been an amazing novel. Instead, *Meager Fortune* is an interesting story caught in so much meaning that it becomes meaningless. But maybe I just don't get its poignant texture.

—Sarah Gignac



David Adams Richards
(with Ivan Doig)

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