

BOOK REVIEWS

*Making the News:
A Times Colonist Look at 150
Years of History*

Dave Obee

Victoria: *Times Colonist*, 2008. 174
pp. \$31.50 paper.

KENTON STOREY
Dunedin, New Zealand

DAVE OBBE states in the introduction to this book that his purpose is to “give you glimpses of the people and events that shaped our community and our province” (1). In this goal, Obee succeeds admirably. Through well-chosen historic articles and photographs, *Making the News* demonstrates how the *Times Colonist* interpreted local and international events from its inception in 1858 until almost the present day. *Making the News* is organized chronologically into sixteen sections. Each section is prefaced by a short essay and a profile of a historic figure. Obee utilizes these introductory remarks to contextualize the key persons and events that epitomize each decade in question. Following Obee’s signposting, each section then features a series of historic *Times*

Colonist articles. These historic articles are the book’s greatest strength. They facilitate an encounter with the writing style and diction of yesteryear, and they allow readers to engage with the people and events that exemplified the past one hundred and fifty years. Obee is to be commended for the amount of labour that has gone into *Making the News* as the articles chosen represent only a fraction of the material that may be drawn upon. In addition, *Making the News* is particularly enhanced by its collection of historic photographs, which are displayed to good result by its large coffee-table format.

I anticipate, then, that *Making the News* will appeal not only to readers with a particular interest in British Columbia but also to history instructors across Canada. *Making the News* is a perfect supplementary text to the University of Victoria’s online edition of the *Times Colonist* and could be utilized as an introductory text to focus students’ exploration of the *Times Colonist* database. However, I stress the book’s supplementary quality. It does not offer an in-depth analysis of either the *Times Colonist*’s particular role within Victoria’s press or how that newspaper *made* rather than simply *reported* the news over time. While it is

important to recognize that *Making the News* was not written primarily for an academic audience, it is useful to reflect on some of the assumptions implicit within it and its position within the historiography of British Columbia's press.

Obee's choice of historic *Times Colonist* articles implicitly stresses a progressive vision of Victoria's civic development. While tragedy and hardship are chronicled in *Making the News*, their purpose is to illustrate citizens' triumphs over adversity. Considering just one historical silence within this book, Obee's choice of historic "highlights" appears to excise British Columbia's experience of colonialism from the *Times Colonist*. Hence, the book studiously avoids articles that would illustrate the *Times Colonist's* own role in marginalizing local Aboriginal peoples or in articulating the racial biases of a particular era. I imagine that Obee must have struggled with the question of what historic topics to include in *Making the News*. What is missing from it are examples of historic articles that display attitudes and ideas antithetical to contemporary values. Yet they, too, are part of the *Times Colonist's* legacy.

Certainly Obee's conclusion is correct: that "contemporary newspapers give us history on the fly. They are essential to our understanding of the past, and are used by professional researchers and amateur historians – and everyone in between – to flesh out the skeletons of history" (1). Yet, despite the importance of newspapers to historians, they have been under-examined as topics of analysis. *Making the News* implicitly reflects this lack of critical scholarship on the BC press. It is no coincidence that Obee's description of Amor De Cosmos's editorial manifesto in the mid-nineteenth

century is more detailed than are those of other editors and owners of the *Times Colonist*. De Cosmos's idiosyncratic character, important political career, and role in facilitating British Columbia's federation with Canada have encouraged historians to analyze his use of the press as a political tool. This interest is reflected in the historiography, with analyses of De Cosmos and the press appearing in works by Margaret Ross, Roland Wild, and George Woodcock. No doubt other editors and owners used the *Times Colonist* for similar purposes, but their preoccupations and aspirations have not been subjected to critical scrutiny. Notwithstanding my comments regarding what *Making the News* is not, I recommend it for what it is. Obee has crafted a valuable contribution to Victoria's historic memory, which will be a useful supplementary text to the *Times Colonist's* online edition. Best of all, *Making the News* will inspire its readers to explore further the *Times Colonist* itself.

The Man Game

Lee Henderson

Toronto: Penguin, 2009. 528 pp.
\$18.00 paper.

The Chief Factor's Daughter

Vanessa Winn

Surrey: TouchWood Editions, 2009.
288 pp. \$19.95 paper.

MARK DIOTTE

University of British Columbia

AT FIRST GLANCE, Lee Henderson's *The Man Game* and Vanessa

Winn's *The Chief Factor's Daughter* could not be more different. While Henderson's novel revolves around predominantly violent and obscene loggers in 1886 Vancouver, Winn's novel, at just over half the length of Henderson's, revolves around the five "still-at-home" daughters of Chief Factor John Work and their attempts to find marriage and happiness in 1858 Fort Victoria. Each of these novels, however, makes an important contribution to the understanding of BC history on the one hand and to the writing of historical fiction on the other.

Winner of the 2009 Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, *The Man Game* demonstrates a dialogue that has an uncanny dramatic, or stage, quality to it, while the omniscient description, especially that of landscape, has a poetic, alliterative quality. The novel is split into two intertwined narratives. The dominant narrative is that of 1886, the story of feuding loggers and of Samuel and Molly Erwagen. It is Molly who drives the narrative by developing the Man Game, a form of entertainment that is, in the words of Henderson, a "hybridization of sport, theatre and Mixed Martial Arts" as well as ballroom dance. The contemporary narrative follows the encounter of Kat and his unrequited love interest Minna with Silas and Ken, devotees of the Man Game, the latter of whom is a descendant of the Erwagens. The Kat and Minna plot consumes little space in the novel, and, at times, I wished that these characters had been given the strength and development of those in the historical narrative.

The strength and success of the novel, in my opinion, comes from the incorporation of Chinook Jargon – a trade language of the period – and an unflinching vision of 1886 Vancouver. While the book is populated

by historical figures such as Joe Fortes and R.H. Alexander, it is the race conflicts of 1887 and 1907 as well as the rampant, unwavering racism of the characters and general society that create the most significant impact. By confronting the linguistic, violent, racist, and even entertaining realities of a particular period of Vancouver's history, Henderson registers a frustration with Canadian historical fiction and effectively challenges how history is told, interpreted, and written.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting and listening to Lee Henderson at the University of British Columbia when he spoke about his novel as a part of the Robson Reading Series. What I appreciated most about the event was the passion and excitement Henderson so clearly expressed for his work – a passion and excitement that fills his novel.

In the Spring 2010 edition of *BC BookWorld*, Joan Givner in "Shades of Jane" compares *The Chief Factor's Daughter* to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In terms of tone and style, I agree completely. The novel is populated by historical figures such as Lieutenant Charles William Wilson, Governor James Douglas, and the Work family itself. Told through Margaret Work, a "spinster of nearly 24" (4), Winn's novel focuses on the daughters of the English gentry and their dependence on marriage to attain social position and privilege – except, in contrast to Austen's narratives, the English gentry has been replaced by the Irishman John Work, who has married "the daughter of a [First Nations] chief" *à la façon du pays*, and London has been replaced by Fort Victoria.

What impresses me most about Winn's novel is how she uses the characters of Margaret Work and her sisters to unobtrusively foreground the

injustices they faced in terms of race, class, and gender. The family favourite, Lieutenant Wilson, is overheard to remark upon “*les belles sauvages*” (32). Margaret’s reaction to the meeting between Mr. Jackson, her future husband, and her mother is that she “dreaded that he might respond to her warmth with cold civility, or perhaps worse, that he might fawn over her,” considering those who had “ridiculously romanticized her Indian Blood” in the past. The established “gentry” is bifurcated into a class system in which naval officers are often favoured over the sons of fur traders and in which the Work daughters are in close and constant competition with the “Douglas girls.” Their father, representative of the patriarchal society to which they belong, “banishes” them from Fort Victoria due to the influx of miners, and, as early as the first page, we are told that “even riding about the surrounding country now required a male escort” (1). Thus, on the one hand, Winn’s novel is one of manners and marriage in which a subtle glance across a ballroom floor can convey everything from social ostracism to marital intentions, while, on the other, it is just as unflinching as Henderson’s novel. In fact, it is in Winn’s examination of the intersections of race, class, and gender, and in the unstated bravery of her characters, that I find her work to be most superb.

Native Peoples and Water Rights: Irrigation, Dams, and the Law in Western Canada

Kenichi Matsui

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009.
243 pp. Illus. \$29.95 paper.

JENNY CLAYTON
University of Victoria

MAKING THE jump from studies of static property such as land to the fluid resource of water, Kenichi Matsui’s *Native Peoples and Water Rights* explores new territory by examining the intersection of Aboriginal rights and control over water in western Canada. Situating his study within North American histories of land, water, and Aboriginal rights, Matsui demonstrates how water rights evolved in different ways in British Columbia and Alberta; how American precedents influenced Canadian legislation, such as the North-West Irrigation Act, 1894; and how shifting weather patterns affected the success, failure, and relevance of irrigation projects on reserves. Matsui argues that Aboriginal peoples, settlers, irrigation and hydroelectric companies, and different levels of government formed unexpected alliances to achieve their competing goals. In this way, he connects his work to the philosophies of colonial theorists, such as Edward Said and Nicholas Thomas, by showing how “intertwined relationships” affected water conflicts at the local level (7-8). These configurations were shaped by a provincial desire for control over resources and the federal goal of creating successful yeoman farmers on and off reserves. Although these arrangements could result in the marginalization of Aboriginal voices

and interests, their persistent claims are central to this study.

The first three chapters deal with the evolution of water rights in North America and the jurisdictional conflict between federal and provincial governments over control of water in British Columbia. Chapters 4 and 5 explore specific case studies in British Columbia and Alberta, beginning in the 1880s: agriculture and irrigation projects by the Kamloops and Neskonlith bands in British Columbia, and by the Tsuu T'ina and Siksika peoples in Alberta. The rise of hydropower and its role in western urbanization is central to Chapter 6, which examines negotiations among the Stoney Nakoda, the federal government, and hydroelectric developers in Calgary over dams within a reserve on the Bow River (1903-38).

Extensive research into court cases and statutes passed by various levels of colonial, Canadian, and American governments allows Matsui to provide a clear and detailed explanation of the legal complexities of water rights history. He also makes excellent use of files created by the Department of Indian Affairs (RG 10). For a more thorough explanation of local events and decisions in British Columbia, Matsui could have complemented his skilful use of national records with a deeper investigation into provincial records available at the British Columbia Archives. For example, GR 1991, British Columbia – Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division, “Neskonlith Lake Recreation Area, Sept 1953 – Dec. 1974” may have explained how an estate that the Department of Indian Affairs planned to purchase became instead a provincial campground (85).

This study of water – and who had the right to use it for agriculture and electricity – suggests ways in which water law history may be fruitfully

connected with a broader environmental history literature. For instance, Matsui states that “farming was not part of the precontact economies of the Secwepemc people” of Kamloops and Chase (67). Yet he notes that the Secwepemc harvested native potatoes and grew and sold introduced potatoes to the Hudson’s Bay Company fort in the early 1840s (67, 175n6). Future work may explore the continuities and adaptations of Aboriginal cultivation in the Interior Plateau with reference to studies of traditional ecological knowledge such as Sandra Peacock and Nancy Turner’s “Just Like a Garden” (in *Biodiversity and Native America* [2000]). Furthermore, scholars may link the chapter on hydroelectric dams in the Stoney Nakoda Reserve on the Bow River with Canada’s early twentieth-century conservation movement. Information on the Alpine Club of Canada’s opposition to the Calgary Power Company’s proposals to dam Minnewanka and the Spray Lakes is presented in Pearlann Reichwein’s article in the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1995).

This book will be valuable for scholars of Aboriginal rights and resource history in British Columbia because it contextualizes the struggle to control water within the larger framework of North American water law and shows how resource conflicts in this province had different outcomes from those in Alberta, which did not control its land or resources until 1930. Throughout, Matsui does an admirable job of disentangling provincial, federal, settler, industry, and Aboriginal interests. Overall, he succeeds in creating an impressive “account of the intertwined stories that both Natives and newcomers created,” thus taking the study of Aboriginal water rights history in new directions.

Wicibitowin: Aboriginal Social Work in Canada

Raven Sinclair (Otiskek-wapiwskew), Michael Anthony Hart (Kaskitemahikan) and Gord Bruyere (Amawaa-jibitang), editors

Halifax: Fernwood Publishing,
2009. 263 pp. \$29.95 paper.

SHELLY JOHNSON
Thompson Rivers University

“WICIBITOWIN” is a Cree word that describes the collective processes involved in helping/sharing with one another, and that is what the eleven First Nations, Métis, and Inuit social work educators across Canada have done with this groundbreaking Aboriginal social work offering. The Aboriginal authors contend that this book is an anti-colonial project, a critical step in the long-term decolonization process for Aboriginal peoples living on the northern territories of Turtle Island (North America) and the “first of its kind focusing our present understandings of social work in an Indigenist and/or Indigenous-centred way” (236). Written from the authors’ unique Aboriginal worldviews, *Wicibitowin* begins with a thought-provoking foreword by distinguished Secwepemc social work academic Richard Vedan, who cautions that “their teachings are recommended not as ‘recipes or formulae’ for work with Indigenous individuals, families and communities but as a reference upon which each individual can develop an understanding and appreciation of what their role can and should be” (16). This position is reinforced by Gord Bruyere, who states: “to consider the chapters

as all-encompassing, definitive or authoritative is to make the modernist mistake of assuming there is only one answer, that there is only one way to look and to walk” (17).

Twelve chapters are divided into three sections (historical and theoretical aspects, practice, and traditional knowledge) that reveal sometimes very personal stories about how the contributors, their families, communities, and diverse nations were/are involuntarily forced by the Canadian colonial state to receive cross-cultural services (adoption, foster care, counselling) from the primarily Eurocentric social work profession. As Indigenous academics, the contributors are critical and assertive in the legitimate need for the social work profession to acknowledge, recognize, and reconcile Indigenous-centred social work processes at all research, practice, policy, and theoretical levels – and in both communities and the academy.

The three sections are introduced by Bruyere as “thoughts make dreaming, dreaming makes action and the spirit of dreaming,” which reflects the holistic Indigenous spiritual worldview infusing all aspects of Indigenous life and differentiating it from the Eurocentric worldview, which encompasses distinct concepts of theory, action, and knowledge. The first section introduces, reviews, and defines the historical and theoretical aspects of Aboriginal social work from the perspectives of Cree/Assiniboine/Saulteaux academic Raven Sinclair, Cree academic Michael Hart and Labrador Inuit academic Gail Baikie. Care is taken by the contributors to clearly define such terms as “Aboriginal social work,” “colonialism,” “colonization,” “anti-colonialism,” “Indigenism,” and “Aboriginal approach to helping.” Baikie asserts that the theoretical framework

for Aboriginal-centred social work is “enabled by an anti-colonial stance” (47) and offers responses to the question “what is Indigenous or Indigenous-centred social work?”

The next five chapters describe Aboriginal social work practices through experiential examples. This section includes chapters by Niha’kapmx Nation member Rona Sterling-Collins, who advocates for holistic approaches to support children with special needs and, specifically, living with autism; by Raven Sinclair, who discusses critical racial issues in Aboriginal transracial adoption; Métis educators Cathy Richardson and Dana Lynn Seaborn who discuss unique Métis historical and contemporary needs as well as future Métis service provision for children and families; by Mi’kmaw/Irish academic Cyndy Baskin who discusses holistic Aboriginal healing approaches with Aboriginal adults; and by Michael Hart who discusses the movement towards an Aboriginal research paradigm.

The final section contains three chapters that deal with unique traditional knowledge that is relevant to Aboriginal-centred social work. Kathy Absolon’s Anishinaabe stories about her healing and self-care practices, connections, and relationships with elders, land, and community enable readers to gain an understanding of what is meant by traditional knowledge, as do Michelle Reid’s reflections on her child welfare practice in the community and the leadership lessons learned from her Heiltsuk father and her Swedish mother’s belief in, and valuing of, traditional Heiltsuk laws. Jacquie Green’s Haisla identity-strengthening and best-practices awareness, gathered from traditional Haisla oolichan-fishing processes, informs readers how Aboriginal-centred social work needs to be an extension of central tenets of

everyday Aboriginal life. It also helps the reader begin to contemplate the significant ramifications for Aboriginal identity development, health, and well-being when the oolichan are absent from seasonal fishing.

Hart and Sinclair conclude with the story of a river journey taken by four friends in two canoes, which at times are voluntarily joined by two paddles and at times are not. “I ... realize that as a paddle I am initially based in one canoe or the other. I know where I am based and what role I am to play for Indigenous peoples. In reality, I would have minimal difficulties being dropped by academia or the mainstream social work profession, but if I am dropped by my nation for not fulfilling my commitment to our people, I am truly without a base. After all, the social work profession does not significantly influence all aspects of who I have been, who I am and who I will be, but my Creeness certainly does” (238). This statement reveals the crux of the issue of indigeneity in continuing to shape the Canadian social work profession and lays bare the Aboriginal struggle to reclaim our ways of helping, our pedagogy, and our practice of social work in our Aboriginal communities and in the academy.

Wicibitowin is a momentous social work achievement for Aboriginal peoples in Canada as well as for our allies and collaborators. There is no other book with which to compare it. In order to build the understanding and change needed in Eurocentric professions, every one of them in which Aboriginal peoples receive, develop, gain access to, or deliver services or policy requires such a book. For the first time, the collective voices of Aboriginal social work educators have come together to redefine, re-story, and reclaim their places at the forefront of

healing, practice, theory, and research. This book must be included in every social work program in Canada and acknowledged for what it represents – a seismic transformation, new life, hope, and understanding for the social work profession.

*Bannock and Beans:
A Cowboy's Account of the
Bedaux Expedition*

Bob White

Victoria: Royal British Columbia
Museum, 2009.
176 pp. \$18.95 paper.

MARK DIOTTE
University of British Columbia

TWO THOUSAND and nine marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Bedaux expedition, the failed attempt of Charles Bedaux to cross the wilderness of northern British Columbia in five half-track Citroën vehicles supported by a host of cowboys and over one hundred packhorses. Yet, White's account of this expedition is less about Bedaux than about vividly describing and encountering a wilderness, a landscape, and a cowboy lifestyle more commonly associated with the United States than with British Columbia. Indeed, in terms of the cowboy, White's narrative is imbued with an ethos of hard work, perseverance, and humour. The figure of the cowboy comes alive in White's personable, comforting, matter-of-fact tone, which is similar to that of Eric Collier in *Three against the Wilderness* or M. Wylie Blanchett in *The Curve of Time*. Interspersed with historical photographs, the narrative is written in two sections. The first is based on the 1934 Bedaux expedition;

the second is based on the attempted creation of Bedaux's Empire Ranch by Bob Beattie and Carl Davidson.

Bob White – packer, wrangler, and company hunter – begins by chronicling the difficult and extensive preparations needed to undertake the expedition. Having been hired from a pool of “over 3500 applications,” White and his trading partner Bob Godberson formed part of the six-man, fifty-seven-horse freight group led by former British military officer Edward (Nick) Geake. Preparation included selecting and sometimes breaking over fifty head of horses and making up the packs – some of which included items such as folding beds and twenty awkward, ten-gallon gasoline containers.

Despite the difficulty of the expedition, White narrates disaster and delight in the same calm, practical tone. Faced with a flood, White's perseverance and good humour are evident from the understatement, “we were very concerned about the horses for it appeared that the meadow would be flooded” (72). At other times, humour prevails. Wry remarks on various blunders or the latest “cooling off” someone received from falling into a river are both effective and enjoyable. Often it is Floyd Crosby, Bedaux's filmmaker, who is the source of the comedy. Staged scenes such as “the shooting of the gray horse in Goat Gulch” (98) or a sun-filled, daytime “night herding” scene are frequent in the narrative, and White seems to enjoy Crosby's propensity for staking out the most difficult parts of the trail in the hopes of encountering action and comedy.

The “Empire Ranch” section of the book is less eventful than is the first, and it details multiple trips to “the location” of the proposed ranch along the Sustut River. The highlight of this

section is White's experiences with the wilderness and the winter landscape. Remarks such as "we had a difficult time getting the toboggan up through the canyon" (154) or "the weather had turned much colder" (157) understate the thirty-five- to fifty-five-below zero temperatures, the arduous terrain, and the enormous endurance it takes to pack supplies over the "800 miles" White and his companions travelled from 26 February to 3 May 1936 (143). White's attitude towards the wilderness is best summed up by his remark in a snow-camp in thirty-five-below weather: "George turned out some good bannock, and with the rice and caribou meat ... we had a pretty good meal, not to mention good old tea" (157).

In "A Tribute to Trapper Bob," White's niece Edie Dean remarks that White "was most at home under the open sky, whether astride a horse, rounding up a herd of cattle, stalking big game along a rocky hillside, or piloting a raft down a swift northern river" (232). I find White's narrative compelling not only for its description of the cowboy life but also for how he sees and encounters the BC landscape and how he makes his readers a part of it.

*Trauma Farm:
A Rebel History of Rural Life*
Brian Brett

Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009.
352 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

KENNETH FAVRHOLDT
Kamloops

BRIAN BRETT'S BOOK certainly has a catchy title. Even better, the

book lives up to it, providing a unique interpretation of the dying art of the family farm, which has been a common institution in British Columbia for a century and a half. Brett's "long day of storytelling," a blend of philosophical commentary and amusing anecdotes – "theory and worms" – is a unique tale of the rural/urban fringe.

Trauma Farm is a real place with a real name – Willowpond Farm – located on Saltspring Island at the vanguard, as Brian Brett puts it, of living, eating, and acting locally. "If anything," Brett states, "the small, mixed farm is a hymn to the lush achievement of our complex work and to ecological entropy – the natural process that creates diversity" (1). Here, surrounded by primaevial cedar forest, Brett, his wife Sharon, and their younger son and friends moved into a large house eighteen years before he conceived of this quirky natural history of their farm. The book is written as a walk around the farm on the longest day of the year – an eighteen-year-long day that "includes both the past and the future of living on the land, tracing the path that led hunter-gatherers to the factory farm and globalization" (3). The book thus goes beyond the parochial to the universal. Brett, disrobing himself in the warm summer night, sheds thoughts on every imaginable subject.

The book has twenty-four chapters, really vignettes, that cover a wide variety of topics, from sleeping in a teepee to raising poultry, watching sheep and deer, making breakfast, walking, gardening, chopping wood, discussing *The Origin of Species*, and critiquing the perils of factory farming: "It's clear that factory farming is dangerous, but it has fed many people economically. We have to learn how to harness it and reduce our addiction to its defiled products" (365).

Better known as a poet and fiction writer, Brett writes in a style that is both postmodernist and 1960s beat. A constant theme is his rant against globalization: he predicts a return to the hunter-gatherer state – more Trauma Farms where people can return to a place where ecology can be understood: “Our minds can’t encompass the multiplying intersections of a farm’s diverse interactions; it’s a mystic star map whose interconnections are larger than human imagination and certainly beyond the reductionist mind trap of the logic that led to the thrills of globalization” (211). Brett offers wonderful perceptions of and humorous angles on the world around us.

He intertwines many different stories and sources that shed light on his personal world. Some of the notable authors he lists – including Americans Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, E.F. Schumacher, and, of course, Henry David Thoreau – are essential reading for people like Brett and for the people Brett hopes we will become.

Trauma Farm is an eccentric but important contribution to BC bookshelves. The beauty of the book is that there are people like Brett living in the province and making a living on the edge, yet finding their centre in the mundane. For the reader who wants a historical portrait of the small farm, this book will not fill the bill; however, for those open to the ramblings and ruminations of the eccentric farmer on British Columbia’s economic and social fringe, *Trauma Farm* captures the meaning and message of West Coast existence.

Seaweed on the Rocks

Stanley Evans

Victoria: TouchWood Editions,
2008. 240 pp. \$12.95 paper.

Seaweed in the Soup

Stanley Evans

Victoria: TouchWood Editions,
2009. 232 pp. \$12.95 paper.

West End Murders

Roy Innes

Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2008.
366 pp. \$12.95 paper.

CHAD REIMER

Chilliwack

MURDER MYSTERIES – books, TV shows, movies – have always been a not-so-guilty pleasure of mine. I remember my early days as a novel reader, inhabiting the English country society of Agatha Christie. Today, pretty much the only reading I do for pleasure is focused on mysteries. I’ve even tried my hand at writing bits and pieces, awkward chapter drafts that sit collecting electronic dust on my hard drive. It was, then, somewhat daunting to be faced with the task of reviewing the works of writers who actually know what they’re doing. The only approach I knew how to take was a subjective one – to say how the three books reviewed here struck me.

So, in a wholly subjective and arbitrary manner, I’ll start with the book I enjoyed the most. Stanley Evans’s *Seaweed on the Rocks* opens with an act of reckless, and selfless, humanity. Silas Seaweed – Victoria

Police detective, member of the Warrior Reserve – is called to an abandoned house, where he finds a Native woman clinging to life. The woman is an old friend of Seaweed's, from his own people, and he knows of her crack addiction and work as a prostitute. He starts mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on her while waiting for the ambulance, heedless of the open sores in her mouth. After a lecture on his own stupidity from the paramedic, Seaweed drags himself to a local clinic for an HIV and Hep C test.

This was my introduction to Evans's Seaweed: engaging and sympathetic, a character who never surrenders to the detached cynicism that is an occupational hazard. Nor does he see himself as some kind of heroic saviour. He is a Native Everyman – navigating the gritty streets of Victoria, attuned to the suffering around him, and connected to the Coast Salish traditions that root him in place.

Overall, the plotting, characters, and resolution of *Seaweed on the Rocks* is unforced, flowing naturally. By comparison, Evans's sequel, *Seaweed in the Soup*, was something of a letdown. Seaweed is less engaging in this book. He and the other characters seem oddly detached from the events they witness. Even the half a dozen or so murders – horrific, grisly killings – don't touch the detective, or the reader. Also, shifts in the plot are jarring at times, the dialogue more awkward than in *Seaweed on the Rocks*. I still enjoyed my time with Seaweed, but I hankered for his earlier incarnation.

Turning to Roy Innes's *West End Murders*, the reader moves from the dankness of Victoria's underworld to the rarefied air of Vancouver's West End. Greasy bacon and eggs, black coffee, and mouldy lasagne is replaced by croissants, cappuccinos, fine dining,

and tome-like wine lists. This is the world of Vancouver City Police detective Mark Coswell, who, with RCMP corporal Paul Blake, works to unravel an intricate plot that involves a secretive group of homophobic murderers.

What makes *West End Murders* stand out from other mystery novels is the quality of Innes's writing. In most mysteries, the writing is functional, in service of the plot. But Innes's prose is a step above. His characters and scenes come to life and stick in the reader's mind. His plotting is tight and largely uncontrived. If there is one major fault, it is that Innes's description of Vancouver's West End – and particularly its gay community – is too precious. These gays are to a fault witty, educated, successful, and so darn nice. There has to be a jerk or two among them: it's only human.

Overall, these three books give us some idea why mystery novels have become extraordinarily popular over the past decade or more. They satisfy a need that, I believe, the interior, psychological world of "literary fiction" does not – the yearning for stories with plot and narrative, and with characters inhabiting an outside world. And, of course, the desire to read just for good fun.



The Box

George Bowering

Vancouver: New Star Books, 2009.
169 pp. \$19.00 paper.

MARK DIOTTE

University of British Columbia

FOLLOWING THE reissue of George Bowering's *Burning Water* in 2007 and *Shoot!* in 2008, New Star continues its dedication to local authors with the publication of Bowering's *The Box* in 2009. Promoted as a "series of ten stories" that break "with the conventional short story" to weave "together biography, autobiography, parable, and drama" (back cover), *The Box* works to place the reader into various "boxes" while often simultaneously breaking them down. The ubiquitous Bowering narrator is constantly setting-up, manipulating, and pushing against the assumptions, prejudices, and perceptions of his reader, all the while interjecting the narratives with wit, humour, and sarcasm.

"A Night Downtown" centres around the narrator's encounter, years earlier, with a Japanese woman named Eiko. Highlighting the assumptions that are built into language and communication are Eiko's first words to the narrator. In response to her "I am sorry if I disturb you," said in the stereotypical clipped-English expected by a native English-speaking, white Canadian, the narrator states: "Not a disturb ... no, you don't ... don't sorry, it's perfectly." This exchange indicates the narrator's struggle to communicate with Eiko but, more importantly, works to parody or satire the false and belittling assumption that, by mimicking Eiko's words, by "dumbing down" the language, she will be in a better position

to understand the narrator. Later, Eiko uses the word "prease" and explains to the questioning narrator, in perfect English, that "people like to hold onto their illusions of the exotic East."

Bowering continues to play with assumptions and language in "Belief." The narrator's incessant questioning and interrogation of the words and phrases he chooses for his story suggest the difficulty (or impossibility) in bridging the gap between intention on the one hand and understanding and interpretation on the other. Foregrounding the construction of meaning, Bowering's narrator demonstrates how the assumptions of the reader are equally, if not more, important in the telling of a story than the craft of the author. To this end, Bowering ultimately leaves his readers to finish telling the story on their own.

Told in the guise of a social experiment to determine what happens to "the youth who moves from the iniquitous city to a bucolic setting" – namely, from Vancouver to the south Okanagan Valley – the playfully titled "An Experimental Story" is broken down into sections headed by scientific categories such as "materials," "procedure," and "results." In this "coming-of-age" narrative that revolves around the character of fourteen-year-old Drew, Bowering seems to work harder to seduce his male readers than he does to come to any firm conclusions. The idealized, fruit-laden countryside is coupled with the romance of learning the rhythms, cadences, and knowledges of labour in the fruit orchards. The narrator, observer of the experiment, cannot help but notice Drew's attention being drawn to the rustically beautiful orchardist Mrs. Van Hoorn as "a bead of perspiration descend[s] between her tanned breasts." Inaccurate though it may be, Bowering ultimately succeeds

in enveloping his reader in an eroticized Okanagan landscape and the magical time of growing up.

In “Don’t Make Him Mad,” a story told in the format of a three-character play, an angel and a lawyer take turns trying to entrap, or “box in,” the other while the lawyer defends his life from the charge of “Wrath.” Of similar format is the final story of the collection, “The Home for Heroes: A Parable.” Here, Bowering creates one last box for his readers. A junior executive for a confectionary organization, Mr. Aligari is both figuratively and literally locked in a box. Trapped by his desk job, and labelled a “flop” and a “daydreamer” by his wife, Mr. Aligari awakes in confusion to find himself in a small room, bare of windows and furniture. Through the visitation of heroes such as “The Man of Steel,” “The Sultan of Swat,” and “Papa,” Mr. Aligari comes to represent the struggle and heroism of the average individual. At the same time, this story advocates the breaking down of the self-limitations, authority structures, and social conventions – in other words the “boxes” – that can blind us and hamper our dreams.

Ranging from a baseball narrative to a detective story, the various stories in *The Box* have been published elsewhere in various forms; yet, when put together, they make a fascinating and successful study of what it means to inhabit different boxes, what it means to operate under illusion, and what it means to escape into another place – if just for a short while.