

“The City as Anthology”

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1

In his column in the *Globe and Mail*, novelist Russell Smith has been campaigning for the urban novel as a more accurate reflection of contemporary Canadian society than its regionalist counterpart, and his view that the alleged small-town preoccupations of Canadian literature threaten to alienate young readers have apparently made their way into a government report entitled *Reading Canadian: Youth, Book Publishing and the National Question 1967-2000* (Heritage Canada). (I say “apparently” because I take my information from an angry rebuttal in the same newspaper by Peter Gzowski, who like me had been unable to lay his hands on a copy of the report.) Smith’s description of the urban novel suggests that he has a cloning of his own and perhaps Douglas Coupland’s books in mind, that is, novels pre-occupied with the semiotics of “cool.” Such fiction may indeed be in short supply, but in other ways the urbanization of Canadian literature is well underway.

Gabrielle Roy’s characters in *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945) and Hugh Garner’s in *Cabbagetown* (1950) were members of an impoverished urban population whose lives, for all their frantic walking through all parts of town, remain circumscribed by the invisible borders of the social ghetto they inhabit. The maps in *Vancouver: A Visual History* (1992), Bruce Macdonald’s unsurpassed historical atlas of one city, show just how sharply defined and insular areas with specific ethnic concentrations were even as late as 1981 (the last year covered by the atlas) and that major changes occurred only when adjustments in immigration policy facilitated the influx of a new group with little previous representation. Thus, a new Indo-Pakistani quarter in the Ross Street area appears in the 1981 map, whereas the 1961 version shows no such

development. The great achievement of Sky Lee, Wayson Choy and Joy Kogawa is to have honoured their parents' and grandparents' lives by drawing an imaginative map of the Vancouver they inhabited, and to have written their books at a time when that map was about to change irrevocably, or had already done so.

By contrast, the Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto that contemporary writers, both Canadian and non-Canadian, describe are permeable and hybridic in unprecedented ways. Travel-writer Pico Iyer, describing the Toronto Harbourfront Writers' Festival in *The Global Soul: Jetlag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2000) calls the resulting books an "unlegislated power, hymning into being a new cultural order." Their setting of choice is "the city as anthology," an encyclopedic region that may be Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver—or, as Gzowski insists with reference to Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry, "downtown Bombay."

2

In her wildly successful thriller *Déjà Dead* (1997), Kathy Reichs helped to popularize Montreal as a setting with international flair. Cutting a wide swath through Montreal neighbourhoods and social *milieux* in the course of her work as forensic anthropologist for the Laboratoire des Sciences Médicaires et de Médecine Légale de Québec, Reichs's protagonist and *alter ego* Tempe Brennan also enjoys the sidewalk cafés, ethnic restaurants, jazz festivals and parades. Reviving the traditional allegory of the city as body-politic, Reichs is as punctiliously detailed about the cityscape as she is about the bodies Brennan dissects:

We rode in silence for a couple of minutes. Following her instructions I went west several blocks, then turned south onto St. Urbain. We skirted the easternmost edge of the McGill ghetto, a schizoid amalgam of low-rent student housing, high-rise condos and gentrified brownstones. Within six blocks, I turned left onto Rue Ste. Catherine. Behind me lay the heart of Montreal. In the rearview mirror I could see the looming shapes of Complexe Desjardins and Place des Arts challenging each other from their opposite corners. Below them lay Complexe Guy-Favreau and the Palais des Congrès.

The book jacket displays a silvery negative of Montreal's map, with coloured pins marking strategic spots within the killer's scheme, the spatial components of which gradually begin to dawn on Brennan during her own peregrinations. Indeed, the cover suggests both map and x-ray, with streets, canals and parks blurred into the semblance of a complicated organism.

Reichs, who shares her position at the Québec Laboratoire with an appointment to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, State North Carolina, may be forgiven if she reserves her enthusiasm for Montreal during the summer months. Her second book, *Death du Jour*, alternates between Montréal and various settings in the Carolinas, presumably to alleviate the appalling limitations imposed on Brennan's impromptu outdoor investigations by the Québec winter, although Reichs gets as much mileage as she can from a description of the 1998 icestorm. To Brennan, who comes from a climate where seasons blend into one another, summer in Montréal presents itself as a "vernal rebirth" vivid enough to give the city a face and a body: "[summer] flounces in like a rumba dancer: all ruffles and bright cotton, with flashing thighs and sweat-slicked skin."

Energetic movement, miles away from Roseanna Lacasse's weary wanderings in search of affordable housing for her family, also characterizes the personification Benoît Aubin has chosen to embody Montreal. In the essay justifying the newsmagazine *L'Actualité's* choice of Montreal as "personnalité de l'année 2000," Aubin casts the city as a sexy young truck driver of multi-ethnic origins and working-class roots: "un gars qui s'appelle Amhed, Kristos ou Gino autant que Gaétan ou Frank, et qui 'chauffe un truck'. Il accélère aux feux jaunes, stationne en double file, perd son chargement dans les bretelles d'autoroutes, klaxonne dans les embouteillages, siffle les filles l'été, fait gicler des déferlantes de 'sloche' l'hiver, et se fout pas mal du reste du monde."

Citing the city's dramatic recovery from economic decline caused by the post 1976-exodus of anglophone business and industries, Aubin asserts that this young male who storms about the place with enough energy to spare is a far more accurate depiction of the city's "combativité et . . . vitalité" than its more common image as a flirtatious woman of discriminating tastes, although he diplomatically admits that Montreal is colourful enough to be both "[u]n costaud et une coquette." (There is a whole research essay in this gendering of Montreal.) Its bilingual swagger makes Montreal less a *Canadian* city (Aubin uses the italicized English word to make it look as alien as possible) than "une petite New York." While it has been something of a tradition to confer status to Canadian cities by comparing them to large American ones (a whole film industry has flourished based on this premise), Aubin also draws another, more problematic, parallel when he sets Montreal side by side with Sarajevo, Belfast, Jerusalem and Beirut because it too is "bilingue, divisé, compartimentée." For all its intensity,

however, linguistic warfare does not match the bitter combat that characterizes these cities, and to say that “Montréal n’est pas arméé, et cela fait tout son charme” does not begin to address the inappropriateness of the comparison.

Inappropriate, even scandalous, analogies, this time between Jews under the Holocaust and Quebeckers under anglophone rule, have of course also been at the heart of the recent Michaud affair, which significantly influenced Lucien Bouchard’s resignation as Premier of Quebec. On that occasion it became clear, however, that Montreal’s youthful multi-ethnic image is much more than a journalistic conceit and that it extends well past the city into the province as a whole. Fifteen young nationalists addressed an open letter to *Le Devoir* (I am citing a translation), challenging Michaud’s views and those of his supporters: “They emerge out of an ethnocentric and out-of-date nationalism. As such they stand opposite to the Quebec in which we want to live, based on respect, inclusion and openness . . . [Quebec nationalists] must put aside, once and for all, this attitude of victimization and chase away intolerance, now embodied by French-Canadian nationalists, toward other Quebeckers.”

3

Although Pico Iyer sees “Toronto’s identity . . . formed by being Canadian [but] equally determined by the fact that it [isn’t] Quebec,” his descriptions of the city are sometimes virtually identical with Aubin’s of Montreal (or, for that matter, with Coupland’s of Vancouver): “in Toronto, often, a mongrel, many-headed exile was surrounded by a mongrel, many-headed city—a community of exiles looking for itself as he was—and so could find himself central to a city as floating as he was.” Iyer’s enthusiastic coverage of the Harbourfront Writers’ Festival, Toronto’s multi-ethnic schools and department stores echoes the celebration in *Canadian Geographic* of Canada as “the most spectacularly diverse country in the world,” with special emphasis on Toronto as “a global village.” Here, for once, New York is outnumbered, with a mere 28% of foreign-born residents as compared to Toronto’s 50%. A city map indicates that, although certain concentrations remain in place, Toronto’s old ethnic ghettos have largely dissolved.

Canadian literature too requires re-mapping, and the speed of developments can be gauged in some measure from the currently more than usually wide gap between literary production and the reference works describing it. I was recently asked to produce an outline for such a work by

a non-Canadian publisher who, referring to Ondaatje, Mistry and Findley, wanted to know under what heading I planned to discuss these authors who were “more international than Canadian,” presumably because much of their work does not dwell on Canadian geographies. The answer, which I offered with some belligerence, is that these authors are international *by virtue* of being Canadian. To quote Iyer one more time: “Writers, of course, by their nature, draw upon the past—it is, almost literally, the inner savings account from which they draw their emotional capital. But in Toronto, this force of memory had a particular charge because, for so many of its newest novelists, the past lay across the globe, and some of them had come here expressly to abandon it, come to play out its sentences.”

4

Douglas Coupland’s *City of Glass* (2000), a book combining the author’s impressions of Vancouver with photos taken by Una Knox and others, presents its reflections in alphabetical order. The result is more Barthes than Baedeker, because Coupland transforms even the few tourist landmarks he includes into personal discoveries. Thus, the item on the Lion’s Gate Bridge appears, out of alphabetical order and in a different typeset, between the items on “salmon” and “Seattle.” The piece, a wistful essay rather than a guidebook entry, was previously published elsewhere, but it contributes ingeniously to the ragged *flâneurism* of Coupland’s book. Shots of the sort of light playing on the water that are dear to manufacturers of scenic calendars (and that, if the truth be told, leave even hardened Vancouverites gasping with delight), lose much of their cliché when they appear buried among photos of industrial sites, close-ups of drug-users’ discarded syringes, and of pedestrians hurrying along, so much in a rush that only their backs have made it into the picture. Despite the occasional contemplative moment, Coupland imitates their pace as the scrambled order of the book obliges him to dash from “Backlot North” to “BC Ferries,” from “Main and Hastings” to “Monster Houses” and from “Wreck Beach” to “YVR” (that is, Vancouver’s airport logo). There is much walking, as befits a *flâneur*, lots of driving (two of the photos are point-of-view shots through busy windshield wipers), and roller-blading by “Japanese teenagers, jet-lagged . . . all of them dressed to the teeth in outfits of breathtaking hipness.” The style of the book veers as wildly as its subjects, from the lyrical to the banal, the humorous to the maudlin. Some of it, especially the reprinted “My Hotel Year,” I could have done without. But the encyclopedism of the book, which

is both affectionate and principled, puts it light-years ahead of the preposterous generalizations in Robert Kaplan's influential *An Empire Wilderness* or Jonathan Raban's *Passage to Juneau*. The former sketches a dubious picture of Vancouver as bucolic and trans-racial paradise, while the latter trots out the old canard that "Vancouver's low specific gravity [is] its most Canadian attribute." I'm with Coupland, who concludes *City of Glass* with quite the opposite observation: "[Vancouver] is a fractal city—a city of no repeats. It's unique and it's my home."

