

THE YEAR IN 1992

NO REVIEW OF 1992 publications in Canada can begin without acknowledging Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel *The English Patient*, an absorbing meditation on chaos and adaptation — not “resolution,” mind, but *adaptation*. Set in a ruined European garden, as World War II winds to its messy end, the novel probes the lives of three central characters — all of which have been disrupted by the war. Yet disruption also derives from the way these individuals have had to live their lives up to this point. A nurse has to sort out her own childhood as she looks after a wounded soldier; the wounded, bandaged soldier turns out to be something different from what everyone, including the reader, expects; and an Indian explosives expert has to reconcile his cultural upbringing with the fact that he is taking part, away from home, in a potentially self-destructive occupation. The novel, however, is metatextual as well as, loosely speaking, realistic. Readers are told, at one point, that a novel begins in chaos. Slowly, each reader separately might discover that this novel deals with chaos as well as with war, with recurrent (but predictable) pattern as well as with seeming randomness, and that the three main characters are metonyms for a wounded (but surviving) postwar generation. It may be that these characters — like the reader, perhaps, or like texts of this kind? — are not in control of the chaos around them; but nor can they afford, finally, to despair.

The fact that this large and sensitive book has already attracted a lot of attention is itself worthy of note; but the fact that it thus casts a large shadow should not hide the year's other remarkable accomplishments in Canada. In fiction, for example, of some thirty books I've managed to read — does that include Nick Bantock's delightful, mysterious, romantic *Sabine's Notebook*? it defies classification systems! — I would single out eleven. Sheila Watson's *Deep Hollow Creek* (written in the 1930s, in a stylish, but still pre-*Double Hook* form, and just released for the first time) tells of a teacher whose first encounter with the Cariboo is also her first encounter with the real lives of other people; it's well worth reading in the 1990s — and it's a salutary reminder of the kind of book that was unusual in Canada in the

1930s BUT NOT UNKNOWN. Patrick Lane's *How Do You Spell Beautiful?* and other stories depicts a world of workers' lives (as in "Mill-Cry") where talk is dangerous, not because it can be distracting, but because it opens up the violence that their usual silence permits them to ignore. M. G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street*, which will likely invite comparison with Mistry's work, though it is quite different in character and kind, records the changes in fortune of a Dar-es-Salaam family, who by the end of the book seek "refugee status" (and all that this term implies). Greg Hollingshead's *White Buick* also crosses cultures to face the unpleasant realities that people find themselves in — and sometimes choose; one story, set on a Spanish island, ends with this cautionary advice: "But you like to suffer, don't you, Canadian?" She put a hand over his mouth. 'No. Don't simply say yes. That would be too boring. When you tell me, tell me how much.'"

Leon Rooke's *Who Do You Love?* examines, among other conditions of being, the comedy of sexual discovery and the therapy of discovering the flexibility of "normal." Brian Fawcett's *Public Eye* (or, "An Investigation into the Disappearance of the World") is a two-tiered text, with a public narrator commenting on fictional texts; in more general terms, the fiction asks its readers how to distinguish public figures from fictional constructs — or to phrase this distinction even more openly politically: how is it that the media in modern Canada have managed to obscure reality from the citizens who are their reader/viewers? Clark Blaise's *Man and His World* (the title an ironic reminder of Expo '67 in Montreal) stylishly probes one of Blaise's recurrent motifs: the connections between a man and his father. Cynthia Flood's *My Father Took a Cake to France* (the title story has Canadian historians all aflutter about what it does or does not reveal about a famous Canadian historian) is another stylish engagement with self-discovery. Steven Heighton's *Flight Paths of the Emperor* collects a series of stories set in Japan, some of them comic. Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Things As They Are?* — the interrogative is this year's objective correlative, I think — reveals that the author's substantial talent continues to grow. Margaret Atwood's delightful, funny, and searingly clever *Good Bones* tells "spare" sketches and tales which devise new angles for old "truths" (Little Red Hen Tells All, Gertrude Talks Back); the phrase "There was once" deconstructs deconstruction here: it's good to see it happening so effectively. And finally, there's John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*: read this book. It's an extraordinary story that faces up to a little-appreciated side of Newfoundland history, and that also works both as a dynamic narrative (how do you put a ghost to rest? you might ask) and as an intricate textual design. This is Steffler's first novel; I look forward to more.

In poetry, I found lines and images to admire in a whole host of books, and perhaps one day it would be interesting to devise a commonplace diary of favourite phrases. I wonder if there will ever be time. For the moment, it's going to have to be enough to point in just a few directions. These books, for example, reward the

reader: Robyn Sarah's *The Touchstone*, Dennis Cooley's *this only home*, Steven McCaffery and bp Nichol's *Rational Geomancy*, Jerry Newman's *Sudden Proclamations*, with its mordant observations of the world: "What Marx left out of the equation / was spite, and despair. There are some / who would rather crack heads / that watch their profits rise." David Donnell's *China Blues* (a collection of poems and stories: angular observations on political and ethical and "logical" truths) likes pleasure and is not afraid to revel in it for awhile. Jesús López-Pacheco's *Poetic Asylum*, containing poems written in Canada between 1968 and 1990, contains some effective critiques of society and bureaucracy. Lorna Crozier's devastating directness of vision in *Inventing the Hawk* is strongly served by her sense of amusement, her often wry observation of animals and family. Gael Turnbull's *While Breath Persist* returns attention to formal matters — clarity, concision, cogency — in which several epigrammatic observations of human idiosyncrasy stand out.

In *Coming to Canada*, Carole Shields tells a personal story, though a nice sense of line rhythm does not always overcome the intellect that seems to have pre-designed an overarching (and sometimes too personal to be accessible) narrative here. Claire Harris's *Drawing Down a Daughter* is an eloquent series of quasi-dialogues with a daughter-to-be; if everyone, these musings ask, is "stranded in the landscape of [one's] time," how do past, self, place, and commitment connect, permitting one to remain faithful to one's origins and experience, and yet provide a living bequest to one's children. George Bowering's *Urban Snow* is another personal statement, though more openly aware of the constructedness of memory; reflections on baseball (a Bowering preoccupation), friends, puns, and pop culture come to a focus in a central, important poem here, one in which the narrating voice reflects on the impact of aging — not in relation to the self so much as in relation to the generation that follows — and reflects, also, on memories of Vancouver in 1958, on an "innocent" and "ignorant" city, and on the poets then for whom language and value still meant something, and mattered.

There were anthologies published during the year, from single authors to multiple enterprises. Brian Trehearne's very fine selection of Irving Layton's poetry, *Fornalutx*, is a fresh and illuminating examination of the strengths of a still-active career. Oberon Press's *92: Best Canadian Stories* and *Coming Attractions: 92* continue the quality already set in previous volumes in these two series. *Six Canadian Plays* makes readily available a range of works dealing with anti-heroes, absurdity, race relations, and fantasy.

Of several reprints, readers should be aware of new volumes from Tecumseh Press and the University of Toronto: Lily Dougall's *What Necessity Knows*, Nellie McClung's *Purple Springs*, Georgina Sime's *Sister Woman*, a new selection of C. G. D. Roberts' animal stories under the title *The Vagrants of the Barrens*, and the massive two-volume account of religion, potlatch customs, stories, and

other cultural practices (long suppressed before its first release), T. F. McIlwraith's *The Bella Coola Indians*. There were also three re-edited releases from the New Canadian Library: Blais's *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* (with afterword by Nicole Brossard), Callaghan's *More Joy in Heaven* (afterword by Margaret Avison), and Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (afterword by Margaret Atwood).

Critics, too, ranged in subject and method, from the familiar individual study (Genevieve Wiggins's *L. M. Montgomery*, for example — or Elizabeth Rollins Epperley's *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass*, an analysis of romance in Montgomery) to the huge survey (such as David Ketterer's *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, a detailed and intentionally judgmental guide to most Canadian writings in this field, with an emphasis on Ontario and a more limited awareness of activities in Western Canada: the book contains a valuable bibliography, and a wealth of data on persons, subjects, journals, conferences, and other matters). Several writers collected their reviews and essays, usually adding a modicum of new work in the process. Tom Marshall's *Multiple Exposures, Promised Lands*, on poetry, is one such example; others include Warren Tallman's *In the Midst* (papers and sketches from a 40-year career), W. J. Keith's *An Independent Stance*, Bronwen Wallace's posthumous *Arguments with the World* (essays, notes, and interviews, on women as mothers, women in the workplace, and women's rights, edited by Joanne Page), and Hugh Hood's *Unsupported Assertions*. W. H. New's *Inside the Poem* brings together 63 writers, writing poems and writing about poems, reflecting on the character of poetry and on the kinds of critical construction that result from different kinds of "reading." M. Nourbese Philip's *Frontiers* is a powerful collection of essays on racism and culture in Canada, necessary reading for anyone interested in contemporary Canadian society or in strategies of literary resistance. Marlene Kadar's anthology *Essays on Life Writing* (with theoretical comments on genre, poetics, and critical practice, for example) is also well worth reading, especially alongside the three most recent works from ECW's Canadian Biography Series (James Doyle's *Stephen Leacock*, C. S. Ross's *Alice Munro*, and Peter Steven's *Dorothy Livesay*), Carl F. Klinck's *Giving Canada a Literary History* (warmly edited by Sandra Djwa), and Joan Coldwell's edition of the autobiographical writings of Anne Wilkinson, *The Tightrope Walker* (containing poems, diary entries, and a beautifully-written life story). Among critical works designed more as unitary books than as open-form collections, Martin Kuester's *Framing Truths* theorizes a relation between parodic structure and historical subject in Findlay, Bowering, and Atwood primarily; Eva-Marie Kröller, in *George Bowering: Bright Circles of Colour*, differs politically from Kuester, writing a textually-based study more sympathetic to Bowering's sense of irony; Karen E. Smythe's *Figuring Grief* reads Gallant, Munro, and the "poetics of elegy" through the heavy drapery of de Man's, Benjamin's, and Miller's solemn professional vocabulary; and W. J. Keith's *Literary Images of Ontario*, with studies of the

picturesque, the North, the small town, Toronto, and ethnicity, tries to define what is meant by Ontario "regionalism" in literary practice.

As in other years, some of the most interesting *writing* occurs in the category "non-fiction," the catch-all that transcends generic enclosure and often escapes critical consideration. I'm thinking in particular of popular history books, such as Peter Newman's glossy account of National Policy and the fashion of excess a hundred years ago (*Canada 1892: Portrait of a Promised Land*), which could be read as a cautionary account of a contemporary pre-millennial Canada; introductory history books, such as J. M. Bumsted's *The Peoples of Canada* (wide-ranging over two volumes, but still oddly old-fashioned about literary canons); and local histories of more than local consequence, such as Barry Gough's *The Northwest Coast* (on British navigations to 1812) or Sally Ross and Alphonse Deveau's *The Acadians of Nova Scotia*. The West Coast also came in for some geographical analysis this year which anyone interested in the cross-disciplinary nature of cultural studies should take account of: Graeme Wynne and Timothy Oke edited *Vancouver and Its Region*, with data ranging from Native habitation to geology, pollution, economics, and social change; and Bruce MacDonald's *Vancouver: A Visual History* is a stunning representation of land-use patterns over a hundred-year history.

Stunning visual design might more readily be expected in art books. Readers will be impressed by the colour plates in *Treasures of the National Archives of Canada*, and by the liveliness and the quality of illustration in Carolyn Gossage's *Double Duty*, the World War II sketches and diaries of Molly Lamb Bobak, which focus less on violence than on canteen, hospital, and living quarters activity. Readers might be less impressed, however, by the fact that so many of the plates in one highly-publicized and one almost-neglected art book are in black-and-white: Ann Davis's *The Logic of Ecstasy* examines Canadian "mystical" painting (by which the author means transcendentalism and theosophy, mainly) between 1920 and 1940 — the book is valuable for drawing attention again to the paintings of Jock Macdonald — and Maria Tippett's *By a Lady*, a welcome (if highly selective) celebration of "three centuries of art by Canadian women." Perhaps it is the word "celebration" that misleads the text here; yes, celebration is in order — but information is also in order, and despite the references to Carr, McNicoll, Clark, Moodie, Cardinal-Schubert, Pflug, Pratt, Warkov, Munn, Desrosiers, Pemberton, and others, the reader/viewer is left wanting more exact commentary.

Out of many others, two books remain: Ronald Wright's *Stolen Continents* and Jack Hodgins's *Over 40 in Broken Hill*. They make an unlikely pair to close this survey: the one is a politically charged account of Aztec, Maya, Inca, Cherokee, and Iroquois culture, closing with an eloquent critique of Oka and a direct condemnation of the Mulroney government; the other, often hilariously funny, is cast as a set of "unusual encounters in the Australian Outback" — it's a personal travel

adventure into the world of utes and bush trivia and stations and sheep-shearing. I bring them together here in this survey because they represent two current sides to the Canadian connection with the world: one is serious, ethically committed, morally enraged; the other highlights the humour in human behaviour, including that of the observer himself. One author discovers causes; the other discovers friendships. HOW DOES ONE OBSERVE THE WORLD, according to these books? Bifocally, it seems. With luck, both eyes are still open — to scenes and subjects and others' sense of priority, and to the sense of self that still affects how one judges and how one sees.

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HERITAGE

Roger Nash

We eat food from fields we did not clear.
 Piled rocks look like unopened
 letters, undelivered in the dry grass.
 Then we moisten and exchange bodies on a strange
 bed. The carved headboard twines us
 together, in an unknown, varnished hand.
 Afterwards, back on the street, the clouds
 are, as usual, illegible, the drains unsigned.
 We do not return to places we left.
 A stranger sips coffee attentively there,
 though the walls can't recall our names.
 But we remember to be thankful, constantly, that everything
 important began with us. The shade
 we sit in so romantically automatically throws
 up the side of a shed, a broken rake
 rotting beside it. We are our own heritage.
 As leaves burn brown in the surprising
 air of spring, may we be consistent
 enough to forget to hand it on.