

# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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## A Quarterly of Criticism and Review

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[Donna.Chin@ubc.ca](mailto:Donna.Chin@ubc.ca)  
Production Staff: Matthew Gruman  
Kathleen McHale  
Beth Veitch  
Design: George Vaitkunas  
Illustrations: George Kuthan  
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# Beyond Boomer Nationalism

Margery Fee

If you type CanLit or Canadian literature into Google, you get our home page. And it seems appropriate to announce at this point that there were 24,000 hits in the last 30 days on the back issues that have been free online there since the end of October 2009. This is incredible, even more so given that it's summer as I write: can all this traffic be generated by panicked assistant professors trying to publish before September tolls? We cannot bask in this statistic, however. Here is a response to our survey asking about how readers use these free PDFs: "I look around in vain for interesting content." What to make of this reply? Here at *Canadian Literature* we realize that we shouldn't identify too strongly with "CanLit," because CanLit is generally taken to be a literature, and we are a critical journal. However, CanLit (the literature) also seems in need of more interesting content. Here is another comment on what would be welcome on our website: "Interesting, NEW content by not yet established writers. The same old Canadian writers are BORING and so are the new that get through." So *Canadian Literature* (the journal), Canadian literature (the literature), and CanLit (either or both) are boring. It is hard not to become a shade defensive.

It is not only anonymous survey respondents who find CanLit (the literature) boring and old-fashioned. Douglas Coupland, in his 2006 article in the *New York Times* titled "Can Lit," writes "One could say that CanLit is the literary equivalent of representational landscape painting, with small forays into waterfowl depiction and still lifes. It is not a modern art form, nor does it want to be." Like Coupland, Steven W. Beattie in "Fuck Books: Some Notes

on Canned Lit" (*Canadian Notes and Queries*) argues that the most popular Canadian writers look to an "idealized past"—and goes on to blame Michael Ondaatje for popularizing a heightened poetic style that Beattie feels has become the norm for any novel likely to be nominated for a major literary award. Under the title "Raging against the Tyranny of Canadian Literature" in the *Toronto Star* in October 2007, Stephen Marche, who detects very little heightened style in Canlit, writes, "In Canada, we are the oatmeal of world literature. We are on the cutting edge of blandness." Remembering the sense of unutterable boredom that came over me when my grade eight teacher extolled Bliss Carman (she came from the first wave of Canadian literary nationalism, dating from the period after World War I), I forgive these young people. Perhaps rage and frustration at the inexplicable success of one's totally boring predecessors is required to drive art (or fashions in art) forward. (Harold Bloom calls this the anxiety of influence, an Oedipal theory that requires the younger generation of poets to kill off its fathers—how this might affect women writers is left unexplored).

Coupland writes "Last year I was flipping TV channels and, on channel 821, watched a live broadcast of CanLit's annual award ceremony, the Gillers, piped in from a Toronto ballroom. It was as if I'd tuned into the Monster Mash—not a soul under 60, and I could practically smell the mummy dust in the room." He doesn't mention that two of the nominees that year were younger than he is—and two others only a year or two older. Indeed, under some definitions, Coupland is that horrid and despicable creature, a boomer (some end the boomer generation in 1960, others in 1964; Coupland was born in 1961, for most the beginning of Gen X). I realize that *New York Times* articles aren't intended to be profound historical works, but what is Coupland going to say when he wins the Giller (he was long-listed in 2006)? Won't this comment seem a shade embarrassing? But perhaps the tyrant of Canadian literature is keeping notes to ensure that this never happens. Or perhaps Coupland will be over 60 by then too. Annoying though it might be that Munro and Atwood and Ondaatje just keep on publishing, readers keep reading them, too. And these same readers also read Coupland (doesn't everyone?).

But the issue is not simply a psychological one. All three critics appear fixated on the Giller (the 2010 short list for the \$50,000 prize will likely be out around the time you read this). Too many old writers (or young writers who write like old writers) are nominated for and win this prize, apparently. Marche comments that "The danger is that the Giller, like the CBC, will

become just another institution for boomer self-congratulation” and asks “whether Canlit as a phenomenon is more than one generation long.” Finally he concludes that “The message for young Canadian writers could not be clearer: If you want success, you’re going to have to find it elsewhere. Wasn’t the whole point of Canadian literary nationalism, begun so long ago, to avoid exactly this situation?” (“So long ago” appears to be a reference to what I will call the second wave of literary nationalism, post-World War II, which one could connect to the Massey Commission in 1951, and yes, even to the founding of *Canadian Literature*). The fear is, obviously, that the “normal” shift from one generation of writers to the next will not take place in Canada because writers won’t be able to find sources of income. Nick Mount’s *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* deals with an early iteration of this problem, when the world depression of 1873 sent Canadian writers to New York in search of income. (John Richardson, the “father” of Canadian literature is said to have starved to death there in 1852: perhaps a portent?)

Coupland dates the end of the subsidies that fuelled the writing of the boomer generation to 1985. He doesn’t say that this was the year after Brian Mulroney and the Conservative party won against the Liberals who had held power since 1963 (Joe Clark notwithstanding). Canadian nationalism was channelled by the Liberals to contain Quebec and to integrate immigrants (although it notably failed to assimilate Native people), and so it’s hardly surprising that in 1985, and now again with the Harper government, the subsidies are cut and cultural producers find themselves reduced to snapping at each other over corporate prizes (it is the *Scotiabank* Giller Prize, don’t forget). In the introduction to *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Sourayan Mookerjia, Imre Szeman, and Gail Faurschou write that Canada’s evolution “between empires” explains its relation to the two “world revolutions” of 1848 (ours were the Mackenzie-Papineau rebellions in 1837 and 1838 against Britain) and then of 1968, against the US, when Trudeau symbolized (for good or ill) cultural and economic protectionism. Globalization pulls nationalisms apart with new trade agreements (for example, NAFTA, under Mulroney) and underlies the Harper government’s dismantling of programs of cultural subsidy. No surprise that Margaret Atwood—that icon of boomer hegemony—has been prominent in acting against both of these moves, for example, in the publication *If You Love this Country* (1987) and in publicly agreeing with Gilles Duceppe’s condemnation of Harper’s cuts to the arts. Described by the CBC as “CanLit Queen,” she said she would vote for the sovereigntist Bloc if she lived in Quebec: Harper’s description of the arts as a



“niche issue” lost him crucial seats in Quebec, where culture *is* politics.

Coupland believes in the subsidization of the arts because Canada has no cultural economies of scale: “I think the Canadian government ought to be hurling 10 times as much cash at literary arts in general, CanLit as much as anything else.” Yet he doesn’t appear to realize the extent to which Canadian identity has been tied to a particular political party and then commodified (although he’s just designed a fashion line for Roots, a global company that began in 1973 as a nostalgic look back at an Ontario summer camp). Other Canadians have attempted to analyze the problem of commodification and corporatization: Naomi Klein’s *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (2000) and the ideas of the Vancouver-based *Adbusters* were recently countered by *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can’t be Jammed*, (2004) by Canadian philosophers Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. How the subjectivities produced in Canadian literature derive from and feed into the political and the economic is a topic that needs more attention, and Katja Lee’s work on Mowat and celebrity culture in this issue moves in this direction. The ways in which some Canadian authors have managed their celebrity (a topic Lorraine York also considers in *Literary Celebrity in Canada*) points to the need to scrutinize binaries such as public and private, making money and making art, popular and high culture.

But it is fair to ask why *Canadian Literature* has published reviews, but no articles, on Coupland’s work (Glenn Deer does give Coupland two pages in “Remapping Vancouver,” #199). The *MLA Bibliography* lists thirty articles with him in the keywords, about twelve of which are focused solely on him. Several reasons occur to me right off. Academic literary critics might not be teaching him much, which means they aren’t writing about him much. (If you like a book—or your students like it enough—to teach it for several years, the article has almost written itself. Or they aren’t sending their papers to us because they are not even in literature departments, but teaching in film, fine art, or communications. Articles in *Canadian Literature* deal with the entire canon, and not all articles are focused on particular authors. It takes a while for authors to become canonical: it’s significant that the ten Canadian authors Alex Good and Steven W. Beattie deem “over-rated” in their recent article in the *National Post*, are not, with the exception of Michael Ondaatje and possibly Erin Mouré, in my view, canonical. (To define “canonical” would take an article in itself, but canonical authors I take to be those most taught in university). Coupland is on this “over-rated” list—which supports my point. (Maybe being over-rated is a stage on the way to becoming canonical.)

Or it could be that his books aren't "Canadian" in the ways typically associated with "Canadian literature." Those of us who cut our teeth on the second-year Canadian literature survey course know how insidious the grip of nationalism can be. We all were working so hard to show how distinctive Canadian literature was that reading American literature for comparative purposes seemed like selling out. As I've written before, the name of this journal was a manifesto in 1959; that it now names boredom for some requires us to scrutinize both words. Once "Canadian" was a void needing in-fill. Then it often became a set of pieties. Now, it requires rethinking, which might mean—among other things—that we write about it from broader perspectives: one of these being that of globalization.

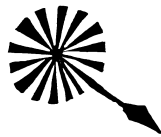
How do definitions of "literature" affect Coupland? What he writes is often seen as pop culture rather than literature. In an interview in the *Montreal Gazette* (4 Jan. 2000), he remarks "Since World War II, high and low culture have been melted together. . . . People think pop culture and literature are separate spheres that should never join together. Well, why?" Heath and Potter (or Pierre Bourdieu) might have the answer: taste demarcates social groups and classes, and so the quest for distinction drives fashion, the arts, and ultimately, consumption in a generational and class-based way. University literature departments tend to uphold high culture (I and many others fought to write PhD theses about Canadian literature, regarded as of dubious importance in the late 1970s, at least at the University of Toronto). Now, however, pop culture is gaining respectability in literature departments. Brenna Clarke Gray, currently a PhD student, in a notice for a presentation titled "Suburban Stories: Reclaiming Douglas Coupland for CanLit" notes that Coupland "is rarely studied in terms of Canadian-ness" and indeed "is often assumed to be American." She argues to the contrary that "Coupland's writing and visual art is informed deeply by his nationality, and to consider him generically North American is to miss out on much of what he does." She acknowledges that Coupland has expressed anxiety about being seen as "CanLit," but sees this anxiety as tied to the lack of urban/suburban stories in the canon. She concludes that our sense of the meaning of CanLit should be broadened—and I agree. Certainly Coupland's definition of it as the literary equivalent of the Group of Seven is disingenuous. Of course, like many, he might resist incorporation into "CanLit" in order to remain in the rebellious outsider pose that has served many Canadian writers well (whether they identify as from "outsider" regions, like the TISH poets, or profess "outsider" identities tied to ethnicity, gender, or sexuality). Indeed, this sort of resistance to

nationalist and stylistic conformity generates useful controversy and leads to publicity for Canadian writers, whatever their “rating.” It also can lead to more critical attitudes to the canon, celebrity, literary prizes, and subsidies for the arts. The conclusion is, then, that we need to broaden our gaze beyond national boundaries and nationalist theories, we need to broaden our conception of literature, and we need to teach and write about a range of genres and authors outside the canon. Then perhaps we won’t be so bored.

This issue contains articles on some literary stalwarts of the older generation (Atwood, Farley Mowat, and Yves Thériault) and on some younger writers (Madeleine Thien and Wayne Johnston). Atwood and Thériault are certainly canonical. Indeed, Mowat, like Coupland, writes for a popular audience, which in Lee’s view has prevented the academy from taking his work seriously. Nor are the approaches to these works limited to those framed by nationalism (or resistance to it). Kevin Flynn looks at Johnston using a theory of secular conversion. Katja Lee looks at Mowat through the lens of theories of celebrity culture. François Ouellet traces the themes of paternity, incest, and fidelity through Thériault’s oeuvre. Lee Rozelle looks at Atwood from an eco-critical perspective. Jeanette den Toonder references linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, semiotician Yuri Lotman, and philosopher Gaston Bachelard in her reading of Thériault. And Y-Dang Troeung looks at Thien using theories of trauma, memory, and mourning.

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Finally, I would like to thank Rejean Beaudoin and Larissa Lai, who are both stepping down as Associate Editors after this issue, for their many contributions to the journal. Rejean’s abilities as an editor and his large network of francophone critics will be impossible to replace. The same can be said of Larissa’s poetic eye and large network of English Canadian poets. We have been fortunate to have them associated with the journal and we wish them both all the best in their future literary and critical endeavours.



# A Moose (Drowning in The Bay)

Early morning—  
While the community sleeps—  
Out in the bay a moose struggles to reach the shore.  
So close—  
It gets confused, turns, and begins to swim back out.  
The watcher—  
As confused as the moose  
Senses its tiredness and a tragedy unfolding.  
Yet there is no help.  
The brown head becomes smaller on the blue bay  
and the easterly sun continues to rise and shine its light  
Across the path it will descend.

# *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*

Wayne Johnston's  
Newfoundland Conversion Narrative

No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men.

—Thomas Carlyle, "Lecture on the Hero as Divinity"

**T***he Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston's novel about Joey Smallwood's ascent to power and Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949, is a slippery book. Like its embattled protagonist, the book strenuously resists easy classification. Is it a love story? A *Bildungsroman*? A mock epic? Perhaps it is a work of historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon). This novel is probably all of these things, and perhaps more. Certainly it is also—at least in the portions narrated by Smallwood himself—a fictional memoir, situating its first-person narrative of Smallwood's life in the historical context of Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949. But it is a fictional memoir of a very particular kind, because its structure and its central theme bear resemblance to another mode: the conversion narrative. Traditionally, the conversion narrative is concerned with a single event in one's personal history: the moment at which one changes his or her religion because of a sudden conviction, as A.D. Nock says, "that the old was wrong and the new is right" (7); or, as William James frames it, the self, "hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes consciously right, superior and happy" (Peters 2-3). Smallwood's transformation from socialist reporter to Liberal politician, and Newfoundland's transformation from island outpost to Canadian province, are themselves suggestive of the theme of conversion that dominates the novel. That a fictive autobiography should concern itself with conversion is not surprising, given that "conversions are prevalent in secular

autobiographies” (Peters 4) and that the conversion narrative is part of the “depiction of the self as a psychological phenomenon” that is generally agreed to have begun with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* in the fourth century A.D. (Peters 33). Many of the themes and structural devices of *Colony* can be found in Johnston’s other works: the troubled coming-of-age of a child with an absentee father; the use of journals, correspondence, and other shared texts to construct characters and their relationships; the presence of a central text or texts upon which the novel’s action depends—all of these are familiar to readers of earlier books such as *The Divine Ryans* and *Human Amusements* and of his subsequent books, *The Navigator of New York* and *The Custodian of Paradise*. And, of course, *Colony* shares with each of these—and indeed with all of his books, *Human Amusements* excepted—a spirited representation of Newfoundland geography and culture. One way in which *Colony* stands apart from these other works is its use of the conversion theme to structure its plot and meaning. In Johnston’s hands, the conversion narrative becomes an apt means of portraying Smallwood not just as the huckster that Sheilagh Fielding would have us believe he is, but as a man whose ambitions and political transformations were bred of his desire to be part of something greater than himself. Johnston’s Smallwood is a secularized version of the Christian convert, a man who seeks political rather than spiritual grace and who wishes to gain admission into the textualized afterlife of History itself.

Conversion is a pervasive theme in the novel, but Johnston’s Smallwood is wholly resistant to religious conversion. When his mother reports that she has converted to Pentecostalism, he responds with horror:

I wanted to keep my distance from this religious fervour for fear of coming down with it myself, losing myself to it. I was terrified that something more powerful than my own will might be moving me along, or would if I gave in to it. (78)

Later in the novel, while in New York, Smallwood meets Tom Hines, an expatriate Newfoundlander who leads “the Pentecostal Church of Newfoundland in Brooklyn” (187). Hines tries to convert Smallwood, telling him that his conversion “‘is inevitable. . . . I see it as clearly as if it had already happened. You shall be immersed in the waters of the Hudson seven months from now and thus shall your eternal soul be saved.’” Smallwood insists that he has “no intention of converting” (196). Later, he attends a service at which Hines reveals an eerily intimate knowledge of arcane details of Smallwood’s life in an attempt to flush him out and convert him. Smallwood bolts from the church, feeling “as though [he] were being pursued and [his] very life depended on not being caught” (201). Indeed, he flees to Newfoundland for

fear of having his life controlled by another: “I was afraid of being pulled further into that weird world of [Hines’] in which there was no telling what was and was not true. And I had no doubt . . . that he would go on trying to convert me” (203-204). Unlike traditional religionists, whose conversion is grounded in a model of “self-fashioning [that] always involve[s] submission to something outside the self” (Todd 71), Smallwood is steadfast in his self-reliance, vowing that “if God himself appeared to me, I would assure Him that I would rather save myself than have Him do it” (82). He rejects a model of conversion based on “human helplessness” and “an abject reliance on . . . the grace of God” (80). Johnston’s Smallwood is not above self-fashioning; he simply wants to be in control of the process.

As averse as he is to religious conversion, Smallwood embraces political conversion with religious zeal, doing so for the first time shortly after his harrowing (and anachronistic) experience aboard the S.S. *Newfoundland*, when George Grimes, a politician, presses a book into Smallwood’s hand and urges him to read it. Smallwood narrates this initial stage of his conversion breathlessly: “After I read the closing paragraph of *What’s So and What Isn’t*, I believed I had found my calling, a way to ensure that the deaths of the men of the S.S. *Newfoundland* might be redeemed” (116). He joins Grimes to spread this new gospel, going “from door to door, pitching socialism to the citizens of St. John’s” (117-18). But Smallwood’s zeal gives way to a kind of pragmatism shortly after his failure to recruit Fielding to join his union of sectionmen (239). He converts to Liberalism because it seems to him “the closest thing to socialism that Newfoundlanders would accept” (263). When he is no more successful at recruiting union members under the banner of the Liberal Party than as a card-carrying Socialist, he undergoes his final political conversion, deciding to champion Newfoundland’s confederation within Canada.

As a newly minted confederationist, Smallwood’s conversion is intended to affirm his claim to membership in something greater than himself—but that something is not a church, nor even Newfoundland nor Canada. It is History itself. Engineering Newfoundland’s membership in a federal structure is simply the means to a self-interested end, and Smallwood admits his opportunism: “. . . I was certain that none of the established ‘names’ would come out in favour of Confederation with Canada, which I intended to do. I decided that I would be its champion in part because it was the one cause that, far-fetched and unlikely to succeed, had no champion” (432-33). In doing so, he enacts the role-switching that Lewis Rambo identifies in his

research on the psychology of religious conversion: “When people become a member of a new religious movement . . . they have a new perception of themselves that often empowers them to do things, to believe things, and to feel things they have not been able to prior to that time.” Consistent with Rambo’s account of the psychology of empowerment that accompanies religious conversion, Johnston’s Smallwood describes the aftermath of his political conversion in spiritual terms: “[I]t was not long after I announced my support for Confederation with Canada that what I can only describe as the ‘interventions’ began. Without lifting a finger, the obstacles that had always stood between me and doing something great began to fall” (433-34). It is almost as though Smallwood’s eventual achievements are predestined.

However, Smallwood’s political transformations are not signs of a genuine conversion experience, because in the midst of these changes one thing remains emphatically unchanged: Smallwood himself. *He* does not undergo a genuine transformation. His ambition, summed up in his desire to do “something commensurate with the greatness of the land itself” (433), is his defining characteristic in the novel, and his political changes are thus superficial rather than fundamental. This is not to suggest that Johnston’s Smallwood is any more or less deficient than a traditional religious convert. Psychologists seem to agree that fundamental change rarely accompanies religious conversion. Rambo contends that “most people do not convert,” and Peter J. Kahn and A.L. Greene, who make use of Rambo’s typology of conversions, might describe Smallwood’s conversion as an “institutional transition”: “a person’s movement from one faith community to another within a major religious tradition (e.g., from Methodist to Orthodox within Christianity)” (238). In Smallwood’s case, he transitions from Socialism to Liberalism to Confederationism within politics, never altering the ambitious creature at his core. As is true of many religious converts, Smallwood’s conversions express “a tendency to adopt an ideology which addresses our prevailing needs” rather than an authentic transformation (Peters 121). The impossibility of his change is articulated in *Colony* by the loathsome Headmaster Reeves, who assigns Smallwood a grade of forty-five for “character.” Although Smallwood’s grades in his academic subjects eventually rise, his grade for character never does:

Its being so low, but fixed, never-changing, was the point. It could not change, Reeves seemed to be saying; my other marks could go up or down, as the case might be, but my character, my fundamental self, would stay the same. I might as well have had forty-five stamped on my forehead. I was what I was, my character was my fate and my fate was forty-five. (52)



Peter G. Stromberg's study of Christian conversion narratives affirms the logic of Reeves's judgment: "[O]ne's character is what one *is*. If one's choices reflect one's character, how can one begin to make choices that represent another character?" (23). "The conversion, then," Stromberg writes, "is not a one-time transformation of self or character but rather a process that somehow enables a person to act differently. . . . [P]sychological change may occur in certain experiences, but such change is not a one-time alteration of an essence such as character or true self" (31). And so it is with Johnston's Smallwood.

In his essay on *Colony*, Alexander MacLeod applies the notion of inalterable character to Newfoundland itself, writing that "it remains, resolutely, a Rock, a 'hard' Canadian place where the forces of environmental determinism continue to shape the subjectivities of inhabitants" (80). MacLeod's appeal to environmental determinism might seem a reductive approach to understanding Newfoundland's diverse cultures and inhabitants, but it does suggest a useful way of thinking about Johnston's Smallwood, whose subjectivity is shaped by an unyielding belief that he is destined to achieve that greatness commensurate with the land itself. By using Newfoundland as the instrument of his ambitions, Smallwood becomes an apt metaphor for, and inextricably linked to, the island's modern history. MacLeod's idea echoes comments made by Fielding in her final "Field Day" column:

It doesn't matter to the mountains that we joined Confederation, nor to the bogs, the barrens, the rivers or the rocks. Or the Brow or Mundy Pond, or the land on which St. John's and all the cities, towns, and settlements of Newfoundland are built. It wouldn't have mattered to them if we hadn't joined. (560)

In the aftermath of confederation, Newfoundland remains fundamentally the same, and so both the man and the Rock undergo incomplete conversions—political transformations that do not change what they *are*. Not surprisingly, it is Fielding who points this out—Fielding, who tells Smallwood of her decision to use her columns to "become an atom of dissent beneath your mattress" (549), and who does so by mocking his hijinks and those of his corrupt Director-General of Economic Development, Alfred Valdmanis. She also mocks an important aspect of Smallwood's character and ambition, his belief that he and Newfoundland need to be written about to be given meaning. She addresses herself to Smallwood's radio persona in her customary ironic voice:

"Dear Mr. Barrelman: It has come to my attention that there are in the world a number of books . . . in which no mention whatsoever is made of Newfoundland. . . . I am myself in possession of several such books, including *A Guide Book to*

*Chilean Songbirds*, the absence in which of the world *Newfoundland* is so inexplicable that I have written its publisher demanding an explanation. (386-87)

Fielding, who resists change again and again in this novel and in *The Custodian of Paradise*, who remains the reclusive, drunken ironist throughout both books, simply does not believe that fundamental conversion is possible—or even desirable. Because of this, she sees what Smallwood cannot: that the alteration of Newfoundland's status and its sudden inclusion in Canadian history will not change what it *is*. Newfoundland remains politically divided and economically dependent, and Smallwood's post-confederation political actions amount more to a series of capers than a serious career. But as much as Fielding is able to run Smallwood down with her irony, in the context of the novel's adaptation of the conversion theme he is a successful convert, because he does achieve that for which he believes he is predestined: a place in History.

We are told on the first page of the narrative proper that Smallwood's mother believed that his "birthdate, Christmas Eve, 1900, predestined [him] for greatness" (8). The idea of predestination has strong religious overtones, of course, because it suggests that God has already determined, for all eternity, who will be saved and who will be damned. In its most rigid expression, the Reformed theology of Calvinism, all people are depraved but some are "wrenched from sin to grace by the predestined, inscrutable will of God. In salvation there could be no cooperation; otherwise God would cease to be supreme" (Pettit 2). Smallwood's zealous pronouncements of his own future greatness are born of his confidence in that future greatness, and again demonstrate Johnston's interest in articulating Smallwood's political conversion in recognizable spiritual language in order to argue for the strength and depth of his conviction. As he crosses Newfoundland by train he imagines the island to be "a landlocked country in the middle of an otherwise empty continent," and decides that "this core that we are passing [through] now [is] the unfoundland that will make us great someday" (141). This ambition for his homeland naturally turns, given Smallwood's robust egoism, into ambition for himself, and he imagines that "the train [is] moving for [no other] purpose but to take me, and only me, where I was going" (142). Later, in the offices of the *Call*, he announces that Newfoundland "'will be one of the great small nations of the earth, a self-governing, self-supporting, self-defending, self-reliant nation, and I will be prime minister of Newfoundland'" (165).

Smallwood's words are an expression of more than just confidence or ambition, because they effectively wrench the notion of predestination from

the spiritual plane to the secular one, putting the power to shape his destiny in his own hands. His unerring confidence in himself and the political destiny he will shape is evident from an early age. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Smallwood sits at his desk and writes down his name, from there projecting his identity far beyond his immediate circumstances:

Convinced . . . that I would myself write a history of Newfoundland . . . , I compiled this list of Newfoundland historians: Judge John Reeves, the Reverend Lewis Amadeus Anspach, the Reverend Charles Pedley, the Reverend Philip Tocque, the Reverend Moses Harvey, Judge Daniel Woodley Prowse, Joseph Robert Smallwood. I compiled a list of Newfoundland's prime ministers, a line of success that ended with me: The Right Honourable Sir Joseph Robert Smallwood, K.C.G.M., P.D., M.H.A. (40)

It is telling that whereas Dedalus imagines his place in the universe in terms of outwardly expanding circles, Smallwood imagines his place in terms of linear succession, as part of a historical narrative of development that culminates in himself. There is not much in the way of Christian modesty in such pronouncements, but if we recall Smallwood's aforementioned rejections of the conversions offered by Garrigus and Hines, his rhetoric is understandable. Johnston's Smallwood believes from a very young age that his future greatness is predestined, but he rejects the idea that he is being moved along by anything other than his own will and efforts. If, as Charles Cohen writes, "[u]nregenerates trust their own energies" (238), then Smallwood is wholly unregenerate—in spiritual terms, at least—because he believes he will fulfill his political destiny through his own hard work. But Smallwood's rejection of religious conversion makes clear that the destiny he seeks is secular, not spiritual. As we shall see, it is the kingdom of earthly history—Newfoundland's history—and not the kingdom of Heaven that Smallwood has his eye on, and it is in the books of History, rather than the Book of Life, that he will be regenerated. In the world of history, faith remains subordinate to works, and Smallwood knows this.

Smallwood's secular ambitions and his rejection of spiritual goals undergird his belief that the fruits of his efforts must be recognized in the here and now, that there must be fulfillment *in* history, not beyond it. This is why, after working tirelessly on behalf of Grimes by handing out copies of *What's So and What Isn't*—a book that describes the socialist, tellingly, as "a man of destiny" (qtd. in Johnston 116)—Smallwood leaves Grimes's camp and preaches the socialist gospel on the docks rather than going door to door: ". . . I was not content, as [Grimes] was, to lay the groundwork for a revolution that I would never live to see. 'Our day will come,' Grimes said,

sounding like some preacher consoling his congregation with the promise that in some nebulous next life, things would be better” (119). In New York, he quits his job at the socialist daily *The Call* for the same reason: “They seemed too Grimes-like to me right from the start, their interest in socialism too theoretical. . . . They saw themselves as advancing the cause of some world-wide movement to whose real-life effects they had not given much thought, while I was mainly interested in how socialism could be of benefit to Newfoundland . . .” (165). Smallwood’s desire to actualize his social and political “salvation” in the real world is rooted in the same instinct that compels him to resist religious conversion. It is only in the temporal world that he can exercise control over fulfilling his destiny.

Smallwood labours in the novel to gather believers into his political “church” of the moment. Indeed, he tries desperately, on occasion, to win political converts of his own. His sense of having been chosen to perform an evangelical mission begins when he parts ways with Grimes and he preaches about socialism with religious zeal, exhorting fishermen to consider “why your children never have enough to eat; why the men you work for pay you nothing; why some of you are risking your lives to keep rich men like the owners of the S.S. *Newfoundland* in smoking jackets” (122). The religious fervour with which he delivers his secular gospel is unmistakable, as it is when he recruits voters for Sir Richard Squires, when he walks clear across Newfoundland in a failed attempt to drum up support for a union of section men, and when he steps up to the microphone as the Barrelman, announcing before each broadcast that his purpose is “to make Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders” (388). Of course, he saves his most powerful evangelism for the cause with which he would be eternally identified: confederation. And so he swoops into outport communities in a Grumman Widgin seaplane and calls out to their inhabitants over the plane’s megaphone: “Citizens of Lamaline, this is the Barrelman, this is Joey Smallwood; I have come to speak to you about Confederation. I repeat, Confederation” (453). If we recall for a moment that Johnston’s Smallwood is recounting these evangelical moments as part of his own narrative of conversion, and that this narrative itself is an instrument of that evangelism, it becomes apparent that he is re-enacting his own conversion experience—or, given his changeable nature, his conversion experiences—and imagining as his ideal reader an audience of other potential converts for whom it may have a meaning. If evangelism is a “principal means ordained by God for instructing people in the great truths revealed by the Scriptures” (Morgan 7), then

for Smallwood, it is the means of revealing to his listeners the great truth that he envisions in Newfoundland's future.

Scripture—the text itself—has an important place in most models of Christian conversion. New England Puritans, for instance, possessed what Patricia Caldwell describes as “a pervasive biblical *sensibility*, a scriptural . . . way of rendering reality in general” (177) that “[grew] out of the idea that men are saved by the gospel” (31). Text and textuality are fundamental to the conversion narrative for two reasons. First, by grounding his or her narrative in authoritative prior texts—and it is important to remember that for Protestants, to give an example, “[t]he word of God in print was . . . a higher authority than any man or institution” (Todd 71-72)—the convert is able to demonstrate his or her full understanding of scripture and thus his or her spiritual *bona fides* for receiving God's grace. Second, references to texts that are familiar to members of the spiritual community that one wishes to join allow the individual to affirm his or her fitness to join that community. In this regard, sacred texts function very much as do the secular texts—newspapers and novels—that Benedict Anderson argues provide “the technical means for representing the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (25). The reading and transmission of shared texts facilitate the convert's common identity with the religious—or, in Smallwood's case, political—community.

This emphasis on texts and textuality is manifested in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in a few significant ways. First, Johnston's Smallwood has an unshakeable faith in the power of books. *What's So and What Isn't* compels him to become a socialist, and *Ten Days That Shook the World* inspires him to move to New York City. As a schoolboy, he has a run-in with Headmaster Reeves, who has seen him walking around with “with a load of books beneath his arm. What's he up to, I wonder, what's he thinking? . . . He must be confused, he must be searching for something in those books” (40). Reeves sneers when he finds that Smallwood has been reading Tolstoy: “‘Leo Tolstoy,’ he read, ‘1828-1910. So where is Leo perhaps-the-greatest-novelist-of-all-time now, Mr. Smallwood? Can you tell me that, where is poor old Leo now?’ ‘Right here,’ [Smallwood says], pointing to the book” (41). Smallwood's response is a powerful statement of his belief that books can preserve people, that what the gospel offers its believers is what any text offers its author and subject: a path to eternal life. Smallwood is more interested in being preserved in secular history than being saved at the end of time. On his long walk from Port-aux-Basques to St. John's, he slings his suitcase around

his neck as a makeshift desk so that he can read D.W. Prowse's *A History of Newfoundland* as he walks. He has a Bible with him, but it "remain[s] unopened in [his] suitcase" (214). Prowse's *History*—not the Bible—is Smallwood's sacred text, containing "not a record of the past, but the past itself, distilled, compacted to such density that I could barely lift it" (46). If we think back to the young Smallwood, Dedalus-like, including his name in the pantheon of Newfoundland's historians alongside Prowse's, the point becomes clear: as Christian converts cling to the Bible, so the Newfoundland Smallwood clings to the *History*, which is for him a powerful totem of the history that he will be written into.

In his book on contemporary Canadian historical fiction, Herb Wylie writes that Prowse's *History* "hangs over the novel as a whole" (*Speculative* 155), and Stan Dragland observes that the novel is "saturated" with Prowse's book (193). The *History* influences the life of Johnston's Smallwood because, in the novel's entirely fictional subplot, a handful of letters cut from its pages are used to create an anonymous letter that changes the course of his life and because it is "a narrative that Smallwood hopes to see himself enter as a historical agent and an accomplishment he hopes to repeat as a chronicler of the story of Newfoundland" (Wylie, *Speculative* 155). The *History* influences the novel itself because, in addition to being a source of some of its historical information, it continually resurfaces in epigraphs to each of the novel's six sections. The first of these epigraphs, constituting the very first words of the novel, seems to perform the obligatory postmodernist gesture toward the irrecoverability of authentic historical experience: "The history of the Colony is only very partially contained in printed books; it lies buried under great rubbish heaps of unpublished records, English, Municipal, Colonial and Foreign, in rare pamphlets, old Blue Books, forgotten memberships . . ." (n. pag.). The reliability of historical narrative would seem to be further undermined by the very structure of the book, in which Smallwood's narration is regularly interrupted by Sheilagh Fielding's newspaper columns, her epistolary journal entries, and, most conspicuously, the chapters of her own, overwhelmingly ironic, condensed *History of Newfoundland*. Yet somehow, despite these disruptions and Johnston's occasional teeterings into pure fiction (Smallwood never lived on a place called the Brow in St. John's; he never set foot on the S.S. *Newfoundland*, although the story of that ship's doomed sealers is true; and he never met Sheilagh Fielding, who is herself entirely a work of fiction), *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* distances itself from the tactics of historiographic metafiction because it is not overly concerned with

“thematiz[ing] its own interaction both with the historical past and with the historically conditioned expectations of its readers” (Hutcheon 65). It would be an exaggeration to say Johnston displays the same faith in historical texts as converts do in the Bible, but he demonstrates a cautious (and necessary) faith in them nonetheless, and the novel is “less profoundly skeptical about historiography, less concerned with fracturing and interrogating retrospection, and [more] rooted in historical verisimilitude and an engagement with the historical record” than is much Canadian fiction of the past twenty-five years (Wyile, *Speculative* 262). This cautious faith in the historical record is vital to Johnston’s construction of a fully integrated conversion narrative because, as Peter Stromberg points out, the conversion narrative is rooted in an “historical, observable event” that is patterned after the example of Jesus Christ (14), a figure who embodies the relationship between corporeal existence and spiritual afterlife that was fundamental to the Christian convert.

The novel’s general fidelity to the historical record also prevents it from quite becoming the “con-game between duplicitous and blatantly falsifying documentalists” that Hans Bak claims (231). Were Johnston’s narrative to be overly suspicious about the reliability of history, it would undermine Smallwood’s passionate demands to be made author, subject, and agent of that history. We have already seen that Smallwood believes Prowse’s *History* to be “the past itself, distilled” (46), and that he seeks the preservation of his identity in the historical text rather than the eternal salvation of a spiritual afterlife. Johnston raises the stakes by suggesting that Smallwood has a Carlylean view of history as biography, and believes that only the historical text can testify to the greatness of his life. This impulse stems, in part, from Smallwood’s sense of his own insignificance in relation to Newfoundland’s massive seascape, which he feels when he “look[s] out across the trackless, forever-changing surface of the sea, which, though it registered the passage of time, was suggestive of no beginning and no end, as purposeless, as pointless as eternity” (131). Danielle Fuller suggests that his awareness of “a lack of physical limits and boundary markers produces anxiety because it evokes the threat of continuity with other spaces and a concomitant loss of place-bound identity” (26). But Smallwood’s anxiety is at least as much about historical identity as geographical (and even cultural) identity. The remedy for the disturbing sense of dislocation wrought by the apparent lack of beginnings and ends is, of course, history itself, which demarcates time so very usefully; to locate himself in history, then, will be to confirm his significance. But Smallwood’s urge to view history as biography is also inherited from his

father, who feels irrelevant when he thinks upon Prowse's *History*, a book he could neither have appeared in nor authored (69-70), and who, upon seeing his name mentioned in the dedication to Smallwood's *Book of Newfoundland* but not in its contents, lashes out with sarcasm and indignation: "A dedication is the only way I could ever get my name into a book like this. He seeks to appease me for deeming me unworthy of inclusion in his book by working my name into the dedication. I am honoured, deeply honoured, and not at all offended as some men might be" (481).

The problem for Smallwood's father is that he is not one of the historical elect. He is not predestined for historical greatness as his son is. The younger Smallwood will fulfill his destiny and write himself into the pages of *History* by taking up the cause of confederation: "It seemed to me that unless I did something historians thought was worth recording, it would be as though I had never lived, that all the histories in the world together formed one book, not to warrant inclusion in which was to have wasted one's life. It terrified me that if it were possible to extrapolate Prowse's *History* past 1895 to the present, I would not be in it" (454). This is a critical moment in the novel, the moment at which history and biography are fused. Smallwood's realization that history may serve as his biography is the final piece of his conversion experience. We have seen that Smallwood resembles the Christian convert in his belief in predestination, his evangelicalism, and his faith in the power of texts. Now, at this moment in the novel and at this moment in history, he professes his faith (in confederation), he acknowledges his own debasement (in his feelings of insignificance), and he submits to a higher power—*History* itself—in order to assure his salvation. His salvation is secular rather than spiritual, but it grants him the everlasting life that he so desperately craves in the form of permanent renown. So important is this idea to Johnston's construction of Smallwood that it is repeated by Fielding in *The Custodian of Paradise*, the sequel to *Colony*: "To be overlooked by history, rightly or wrongly, [is] his greatest fear. To be demoted to a kind of non-existence. His life erased, as if it never happened" (203-04). From the fictional Smallwood's perspective, confederation is vital less because it allows Newfoundland to join Canada than because it allows him to etch his name in the secular grand text of the elect: *History*.

The influence of Prowse's book on Johnston's Smallwood is clear. However, its influence on Johnston's novel is more complex than it might seem at first blush. Its usefulness as a plot device is inarguable, since discovering who cut and pasted the mysterious note from its contents drives the novel's mystery.



Its aptness as an artifact around which to structure the novel's thematic interests in history and textuality is similarly unassailable. Less certain, though, is something else that Prowse's *History* seems to contribute to Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*: a basis for peppering its conversion theme with various recognizable aspects of the Puritan model of the narrative of conversion. The novel does make one oblique reference to Puritanism in its description of Prowse's history as a book that "justified the ways of Newfoundland to the world" (46), a line that echoes one written by John Milton, a devout Puritan who stated in Book One of *Paradise Lost* his desire to "justif[y] the ways of God to men" (1.26). And aspects of Smallwood's transformation from insubstantial man to historical figure are reminiscent of aspects of a specifically Puritan model of conversion, in which the convert must (1) make a public profession of faith and confession of sins (performed here, symbolically, in Smallwood's first-person narration); (2) undergo public questioning (conducted by Sheilagh Fielding in her newspaper columns); and (3) submit to a vote to determine his or her admission into the Church (the referendum that determines Newfoundland's future as part of Canada and thus ensures that Smallwood's name will not be forgotten). Hans Rollman mounts a persuasive argument against the myth of established Puritanism on the island and the "persistent historiographical tradition from the beginning of the nineteenth century that the earliest settlers of Newfoundland were Puritans." He traces this tradition back to very brief stays by Congregationalist preachers, and comes to the conclusion that "a substantial and organized 'Puritan' or separatist presence in seventeenth-century Newfoundland is highly unlikely." How, then, did this "tradition" become "persistent," and perhaps persistent enough even to have influenced Johnston's novel? Enter D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*, the 1895 edition of which contained a supplement, "History of the Churches in Newfoundland," that Rollman argues "popularized from fact and fiction the most comprehensive picture of Puritanism on the island." Prowse's history of the churches, largely derived from a pamphlet by Mrs. G. Ward Siddall and John Wood's *Memoir of Henry Wilkes*, simply gets the facts wrong. It is possible, given its prominence in *Colony*, that Prowse's *History* is thus also the source of the novel's other thematic and structural underpinning: the narrative of conversion, a staple of the Puritan culture that Johnston would have learned from Prowse had thrived in settlement-era Newfoundland. If, as Fielding writes in her condensed *History of Newfoundland*, "Prowse was completely taken in by [William] Vaughan" (83), the Welsh writer whose *Golden Fleece* (1626) advocated the colonization

of Newfoundland, then it may be that Johnston was, however slightly, taken in by D.W. Prowse, although to much more fruitful ends.

Among the earliest American spiritual autobiographies were those written by English dissenters—Quakers and Puritans—for whom the northeastern corner of what was to become the United States of America was their new found land. Puritan spiritual autobiographers laboured to validate their claims to membership in the church community, as Johnston's Smallwood does in the political and historical community, through a narrative of conversion. Descriptions of this process were recorded by Puritan writers who "wished to trace the natural history of conversion in order to help men discover their prospects of salvation" (Morgan 66), an activity that helped to establish the conventions of the conversion narrative itself. Daniel Shea argues, however, that the narrative of conversion usually forms only a small part of the Puritan spiritual autobiography (183), and that these interpolated narratives "hardly deserve to be considered as autobiography" because they are entirely overdetermined: "[T]heir authors' designated purpose was to convince the elders that the presence of grace was evident in their experience. . . . The autobiographical act is [thus] reduced to testifying that one's experience has conformed, with allowable variations, to a certain pattern of feeling and behavior" (91). Of course, all autobiographical acts issue from the desire to impose a pattern on one's experiences, to orient the narrative of a life toward a specific end. But in conversion narratives this pattern is, according to Shea, imposed from without rather than from within.

And so it is in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, in which the pattern imposed on the life of Joey Smallwood is also imposed from without, albeit in a complicated way. If the autobiographical act necessarily distorts its subject, then the life of Smallwood in *Colony* is multiply distorted, and in ways both fruitful and provocative, by pressures exerted not simply by Johnston's selection and manipulation of historical and biographical data, but also by the generic demands of the *Bildungsroman* (Wyile, "Strip-Tease" 97), the memoir, and, not least, the conversion narrative. Ironically, perhaps the most distorting and most fruitful of these pressures is exerted by the book that Johnston's Smallwood would write himself into if he could: Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*.

In *The Mutilating God: Authorship and Authority in the Narrative of Conversion*, Gerald Peters argues that the reason the conversion narrative has continued to find expression in life writing is that our "knowledge that the 'unified self' is only an illusion produced by conventions in writing does

not, in itself, eliminate the psychological need or the social imperative to understand oneself as a totality” (11-12). And this is precisely what Johnston’s Smallwood strives to do in his narration—to understand himself, and indeed construct himself, as a totality in the context of Newfoundland history. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is thus the fable of Smallwood’s reconstruction, one in which Johnston employs conventions of the conversion narrative to achieve this goal. Wyle notes that Smallwood’s “drive to make his mark on history [warps] his relationships with others and thwart[s] his political and romantic dreams” (“Strip-Tease” 88), and Smallwood seems to recognize this as he mourns “the unacknowledged sorrows and blunders of my life” in the novel’s final pages (550). By omitting, or treating superficially, many of Smallwood’s political debacles after Newfoundland joined Canada, Johnston lets his Smallwood off lightly and leaves himself vulnerable to charges of allowing “errors and distortions” to creep into the novel (Dragland 189). Missing are the “details which seriously qualify his rags-to-riches account” (Wyle, *Speculative* 130). But even this apparent fault may be grounded in the novel’s model of conversion. As Caldwell observes, Puritan conversion narratives resist “a literary standard of completeness, wholeness, and roundness” because the conversion experienced on Earth can only be fully realized in Heaven. The author of the conversion narrative is faced with the thorny problem of trying to write persuasively about “the essence of a spiritual event that manifests itself in the material world but starts and ends elsewhere; one that is felt in the temporal bodily existence but can be ‘assured’ only beyond its bounds” (16). And so it is that *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* must omit the judgment of history. It is the story of Smallwood’s *aspiration* to be included in history, not of history’s judgment of him. Like religious converts, Smallwood aspires to live beyond his time on earth, and like their narratives, his is an expression of hope and faith that he will achieve this. Like them, he can never know how that story will end.

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# Goddard v. Mowat

## F\*\*\*ing the Facts Fifteen Years Later

It was almost fifteen years ago that John Goddard's infamous exposé of Farley Mowat's compromised truth-telling in his *Saturday Night* article, "A Real Whopper," ignited a flurry of media activity and prompted a large scale re-evaluation of this much-loved national icon and his texts. It seems appropriate, given the passing of a decade and a half and the recent publication of yet another Mowat autobiography, to revisit this issue and ask, what exactly happened here? When we pause to take stock of the fallout we might be surprised to find that on this front there is little to say: on a national level, Mowat's brush with scandal and his rallying cry "fuck the facts" might continue to feature as an interesting sidebar in media representations, but internationally the news barely registered and *Never Cry Wolf* continues to be a best-seller and to speak with authority. Perhaps only in academic circles has Goddard's article made any kind of lasting impact: while Mowat and his texts had long been consigned to the annals of the middlebrow and treated accordingly—that is to say, either not at all or with a raised eyebrow, "A Real Whopper" has seemingly put him beyond the pale. There seems to be a palpable resistance to teaching Mowat or taking him up in our research: with the exception of a few articles on *Never Cry Wolf* and eco-critical interest in Mowat's "green subjectivity" (Lousley 135), there is a noticeable dearth of critical inquiry into what must be our longest-lived literary celebrity and his forty-odd texts. While the Mowat-Goddard scandal cannot claim sole responsibility for this critical hesitation, it does furnish us with an excellent opportunity to redress this oversight: this paper seeks to unpack the scandal—its roots, its effects and the issues it raises—in

order to suggest possible avenues for taking Mowat, his celebrity, and his texts seriously. An investigation of the issues and assumptions embedded in Goddard's piece and the subsequent responses from the media and public suggests that what is at stake here is not a disagreement about the truth-telling conventions of autobiography, but how the private is constructed to be the ultimate site of truth-telling for celebrities. Both Goddard and Mowat rely heavily on the ideological assumption that the private lives of celebrities constitute a "site of knowledge and truth" (de Cordova 98), but their competing constructions of the private reveal the fallacy of both the public self/private self dichotomy and our continuing investment in the private self as a source of the "real." As we will see, when it is no longer necessary to peel away the public to reveal the private and when we can acknowledge both as constructions neither of which has more truth-telling power, then all performances of self are not only equally worthy of our attention but are all potential sites of truth. It becomes possible, within such a framework, to reconsider Mowat's texts not as the products of or as referring to an interior, real, unconstructed self but rather as the products and the active producers of a performed, crafted, and constructed "Farley Mowat." And when we unpack who and what that "Farley Mowat" is, its ability to accommodate a few "whoppers" is not only unsurprising, it should probably be expected.

John Goddard's "A Real Whopper" was the feature article in the May 1998 edition of the now-defunct *Saturday Night* magazine. Since 1887, the magazine had been a vehicle for the promotion of a national culture and had claimed to represent the interests of Canadians; it is within these traditions that Goddard positions himself. Farley Mowat and his narratives, Goddard reminds us, are not only famous but also foundational to our national constructions of the North, of the environment, and, perhaps, even of ourselves as a rough-and-tumble, quirky-humoured kind of people. Thus when he makes a convincing argument for significant discrepancies between Mowat's autobiographies and other resources such as Mowat's private journals and government documents, Goddard presumes not only that we will care but also that such revelations really do matter. He opens by reminding us of Mowat's national importance, his distinguished peers, and his impressive sales, but quickly turns his attention to the autobiographical works that launched Mowat's fame, *People of the Deer* (1952), its sequel, *The Desperate People* (1959), and *Never Cry Wolf* (1963). Drawing on resources in the McMaster University Archives and the National Archives of Canada and interviews with Mowat, Goddard systematically refutes the claims made

by these texts and posits in their place a biographical counter-narrative. Not only does the article re-story Mowat's Arctic years, but it also suggests that all three texts explicitly posit a careful research ethic that is at odds with the evidence Goddard has gathered. Direct quotations frame Mowat as careless, even irreverent about facts: he is quoted as saying, "outrageously": "I never let the facts get in the way of the truth" (48) and in his personal journals as having written: "on occasion when facts have particularly infuriated me, [my motto has been] Fuck the Facts!" (48). Goddard closes his article by noting that Mowat is fully aware that his texts are full of "factual errors" (64) and, moreover, that he is unrepentant about having invented material in order to draw attention to his causes. This, Goddard implies, is troubling:

What Mowat may not realize is that by selling fiction as non-fiction, he has broken trust with his public. By treating facts as arbitrary and subject to whim, he has not so much served a high purpose as muddied public debate on Inuit and wildlife issues for decades. Ultimately, the Keewatin books say less about the Canadian north than they do about Mowat himself. (64)

When Goddard suggests that Mowat has "broken trust with his public," the trust he refers to is not that between an autobiographer and his reader (Goddard acknowledges that the texts are "about Mowat himself") but between a national icon and his nation. There are, he implies, particular obligations and duties for individuals of national renown and while he does not clarify what these may be, it is clear that the discovery of Mowat's casual disregard for the sanctity of facts constitutes a breaking of that undefined but implicit bond. What is at stake, for Goddard, is not whether Mowat lied (clearly he did) but that his celebrity and his national significance have been built upon a false foundation: his audience deserves to know that they've been "had" and Mowat owes them an apology. The irony Goddard misses is that he has "caught" Mowat exactly true to form—careless, flippant, and "outrageous." The other delightful irony of Goddard's article comes from the conditions of its production. Mowat clearly co-operated with what he had assumed was to be "an article which would amount to a general assessment of my writing career" ("Mowat Replies"). At least two interviews were granted, the first of which was in Mowat's Port Hope home. He also sat for the magazine's cover page portrait, a handsome headshot digitally altered to give Mowat a ridiculous Pinocchio proboscis. All parties involved admitted that Mowat was not informed about the changes they were going to make to his image or the content of Goddard's article. These circumstances are not marshalled in order to elicit sympathy for Mowat but, rather to suggest that



Goddard and *Saturday Night* unwittingly committed the same moral crimes of which they accuse Mowat: the cover page, both amusing and satiric, offers up a truth by liberally distorting the “facts,” and the text, in posing as one thing but providing something quite different, constitutes a betrayal of “trust.” If Goddard can generate a sense of outrage in his audience at having been so deceived by Mowat, then Mowat’s own furious response to these tactics could constitute a kind of fitting retribution: Mowat will have been subject to the same deception that he has subjected his readers to. But Goddard’s attempt to muster an impassioned response from the public does not work as he had anticipated, and instead of putting Mowat on the “hotseat,” he finds himself there.

If editorials can be trusted to represent a useful cross-section of public sentiment, then the public response to “A Real Whopper” might be described as overwhelmingly in support of Mowat:

“[Goddard’s article is an] uncharitable piece.” (Robert Everett-Green, May 6, 1996).

“Saturday Night is practicing Canada’s favourite pastime, bashing great Canadians.” (Gary T. Gallon, President, Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment, May 7, 1996).

“The only reputation likely to be damaged by such a transparently desperate piece of muckraking is what little remains of Saturday Night’s good name since it was colonized by Conrad Black.” (Ronald Wright, May 7, 1996).

“[Mowat] did in deed make a seven course meal out of a light lunch. But then you’ll also know that Mowat admits it and has admitted it for the last 40 years . . . [Mowat is a] victim of a national hero-bashing habit” (Connie Woodward, May 11, 1996).

“It’s not like he faked Hitler’s diaries . . . ” (“The LAST Word,” May 12, 1996).

“If you’ve ever heard or seen Farley Mowat in full flight, John Goddard’s cover story in the current Saturday Night won’t surprise or shock.” (“Tonight in T.O.” May 13, 1996).

Two major trends emerge in the editorial responses to Goddard’s article: claims of an awareness that Mowat’s narrative tactics involve compromised truth-telling and assertions that that an attack on Mowat is symptomatic of disturbing and unsavoury national behaviour. That Mowat is described as a “national hero” or a “great Canadian” is neither remarkable nor surprising—this is the very foundation that Goddard relies on to make his claim for a betrayal of trust—but the suggestion that Mowat’s celebrity is beyond reproach is worrisome. Noting that “the left has circled the wagons around Farley Mowat,” biographer Michael Coren expressed considerable concern that the Mowat-Goddard feud has demonstrated that in Canada, “certain people are beyond criticism. . . . So here you have a situation where *Saturday Night* is attacked

for telling the truth. . . . It's Orwellian" (Grace). Coren's point is well-taken even if his rhetoric borders on hyperbole—Goddard (and through him, *Saturday Night*) bears the brunt of the criticism, and not just from members of the public but even, occasionally, from media representatives who might have been expected to be more supportive of Goddard's well-researched work. George Galt, a former editor of *Saturday Night*, wrote a scathing response that characterized Goddard as the "truth police" and told him to "lighten up." Framing the article's accusations as little more than revelations of "naughty fibs [Mowat] may have told in books published 40 years ago," Galt not only distances the crime so far in the past as to be irrelevant, but will not even commit to certainty that any crime took place at all: "It appears Mowat *may* have fudged some of his facts in early books" (emphasis added). Although Galt's ferocity is not typical, the volume and nature of the responses from individuals like Galt, Woodward, or Everett-Green have the effect of temporarily transforming John Goddard into both a *persona non grata* and a Canadian literary celebrity himself. Thus the pathologizing and nationalizing of criticism by individuals like Woodward and Gallon is uncannily apt; whether it is Goddard's article "bashing" Mowat or the editorials "bashing" Goddard, it seems that no celebrity is safe from the wrath of Canadians.

The other notable trend in public responses to the article, the claim that there existed, "pre-Whopper," an awareness of what and how Mowat wrote, is a claim made by various media outlets that bears investigating, because the structure of scandal only works if Goddard can highlight a genuine gap in our knowledge. It is, however, a claim that is difficult to substantiate: neither the media nor members of the public published statements to this effect prior to Goddard's article. Moreover, it is unlikely that reporters would have risked jeopardizing their relationship with Mowat by doing so. Hitherto, the media (particularly the newspaper outlets) had more or less worked co-operatively with Mowat, and the production of the "Farley Mowat" persona was a collaborative effort that served all parties rather well: for the media, access to Mowat, his antics, and his controversial statements generated interesting copy authenticated by the very proximity of the reporter to the subject. For Mowat, providing a steady stream of controversial sound bites allowed him to construct and maintain a particular public persona. For the better part of a century (save a few early scuffles), Mowat and the media have worked, if not together, at least in service of very similar goals. In fact, media coverage of Mowat for the last twenty years has been particularly congenial, even chummy: almost all articles about Mowat include a direct quotation from

him and more lengthy pieces are invariably set in his home, open with a description of what Mowat is wearing and drinking, and close with a parting glance at how he moves or operates in his domestic sphere. Goddard's article thus not only breaks with this long-standing co-operative tradition, but inadvertently implicates the media's complicity in representing and extolling the virtues of a man who, Goddard suggests, harbours a dangerous indifference to facts. The media's response was swift and decided: rather than defend either Mowat or Goddard, a significant amount of energy and newsprint was devoted to establishing their position as objective commentators.

It is clear from both the media and the public responses that Goddard did not succeed in generating a community united in condemnation of Mowat. It is possible that a pre-existing awareness of Mowat's narrative tactics may have played a role in shaping this response, but we have no means of knowing how much these groups suspected or knew. *If* such an awareness did exist, we can accurately pinpoint where this information came from, for only one group was actively publishing critical responses to Mowat's work—scholars. A quick survey of “pre-Whopper” academic responses to Mowat's books suggests that “A Real Whopper” actually offers very little new information—government bodies, academics, historians, and scientists had, since the 1960s, taken issue with Mowat's representation of Inuit and animal life in the Arctic and it was from them that he earned the sobriquet “Hardly Know-it” (White). John Moss's 1991 article “Imaging the Arctic,” for example, elucidates the repercussions of taking too much artistic license in representing the North. Claiming that government policy and legislation are often influenced by how authors like Mowat have written about the Arctic, he suggests that these texts “shoulder a burden they were never meant to bear” (33-4). Moss argues that the fault lies not in the authors but in the “naïve reader” who “turn[s] to literature for an accurate and authentic rendering of the real.” “Literature,” he argues, “gets at truth by other means” (34). By invoking what sounds uncannily like Mowat's motto “to never to allow facts to interfere with truth” (NCW vii), and by situating Mowat within a long history of writers who take liberties with representations of the Arctic, Moss' article constitutes one of the early defenses of Mowat and his writing. It also establishes that Mowat was known to have worn “the dangerous guise of authenticity which makes created facts seem true” (34) in the very texts that Goddard focuses on.

While it would be challenging to quantify exactly what role the media and public response to Goddard's article had on the long-term effects of this

scandal and on the present market for Mowat's autobiographies, it cannot be irrelevant that neither media nor public appeared outraged or betrayed, and that criticism of Mowat was quickly transformed into criticism of Goddard and *Saturday Night*. If a general awareness of Mowat's tendency to "make a seven course meal out of a light lunch" can be attributed to the scholarly research of those working in government and education sectors *and* this awareness played a role in the responses hitherto discussed, then our current fastidiousness in avoiding Mowat and his texts seems strangely out of place. Clearly scholarship on Mowat has played an important role in the reception of his texts and the reception of criticism of his texts. Yet, of all of the factors thus far explored in tracing the short- and long-term effects of and responses to "A Real Whopper," none were as critical to defusing Goddard's potentially career-killing criticism as Mowat's celebrity. This is not to suggest, as Michael Coren does, that Mowat's fame is an effective talisman against criticism, but rather that a particular kind of celebrity has been carefully crafted by Mowat's publishers, the media, and through Mowat's personal appearances, interviews, and texts that can accommodate a few "whoppers." This collaboratively produced celebrity relies heavily on two consistent elements: the Mowat character and the authorization of that character through recourse to Mowat's private life. From his first forays in the life-writing genre in 1952 to his "last hurrah," *Otherwise*, published in 2008, Mowat has consistently made his person the subject of his study and the object of our amusement. Within his dozen autobiographical texts and countless media articles, interviews, and live appearances, Mowat has worked hard to render the illusion that there is nothing about him that we do not know or that would not willingly be offered to us: from the story of his love affair with Claire Wheeler while still married to his first wife (*Bay of Spirits: A Love Story*), to the idiosyncrasies of his toiletry habits (see *Never Cry Wolf* for toilet paper rationing or Sarah Hampson's *Globe and Mail* article for a representation of "vintage Mowat" urinating on trees), the private sphere of Farley Mowat appears to be an open book. In what Richard Dyer would call Mowat's "total star text" (136), the strategy has been consistently, across all media, one of intimacy and openness, and the stability of this portraiture over time suggests that with *this* celebrity there is no private and public self—there is no "unguarded self" to which we do not have access (Marshall "Introduction" 3).

This illusion is buttressed by the nature of the character put into play. The Mowat persona is not a dignified one that will not admit to moral and intellectual failings (or bodily functions) but is built upon and widely

relished for its irreverence and crassness. Mowat is known by reputation for his exploits involving alcohol, nudity, far-flung places, and crude language even amongst those who have never seen him in person or read any of his texts. It is a brand easily mobilized by the markers of identity that have long circulated in relation to this character: vodka, his kilt, and, especially, his bushy beard. A slightly wild and unreliable public subjectivity is a very useful image to cultivate; it can more readily accommodate bad behaviour such as marital infidelity, public drunkenness, and more to the point, lying. If indeed there had been a general awareness of Mowat's narrative strategies for arriving at the "truth," it would only have lent credence to the rebellious persona already in play. However, Mowat's left-leaning, rural iconoclasm not only has the capacity to authorize and thus defuse trouble, but it also quite often invites trouble. In 1985 Mowat was denied entry into the US for his long history of antics and while this could have potentially remained a private affair, both Mowat and his publisher, Jack McClelland, used this incident to buttress Mowat's trouble-making reputation by brewing up a media storm on both sides of the border and producing a highly entertaining account of this scandal in the 1986 autobiography, *My Discovery of America*.

This text is an important piece for contextualizing Mowat's response to Goddard's article because while both incidents were public battles played out in the media, only this earlier one was successfully absorbed and remobilized in service of Mowat's agenda. In responding to "A Real Whopper," Mowat made a critical mistake in handling the accusations, an error that reveals not only the power of the celebrity persona in circulation but also its critical role in managing the public's response. In his official response published on May 6th in *The Globe and Mail*, Mowat does not rally and cry "Fuck the facts" or offer a scathing satirical assessment of Goddard and his article. Instead, he offers a rational and staid complaint, accusing Goddard of not playing "fair" and causing his first wife "considerable anguish" ("Mowat Replies"). This response was widely recognized as "weak" (Hampson, Worthington) and, as Philip Marchand of *The Toronto Star* pointed out, suggests that getting the facts right *is* important. The criticism surrounding Mowat's response does not, interestingly, take issue with Mowat's failure to respond to either Goddard's specific accusations or his discourses of truth-telling. Their trouble with Mowat's self defence appears to stem from its seeming out of character: its style, tone, and content are, indeed, highly unusual, particularly when one considers how Mowat rallied in response to his border-crossing incident.

Shortly after this official response, Mowat returned to more characteristic responses—in a 1997 round table discussion with John Moss and Harold Horwood (later published in *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative*), Mowat showcased exactly how far he could absorb and remobilize criticism and counter-narratives into markers of his authenticity:

. . . I have nothing to say. This has been one of my great strengths as a writer. I am not here as Farley Mowat; I am here in my proper alter-ego: Hardly Knowit, well-known Arctic entrepreneur . . . [Mowat tells a story of being sent an insulting cartoon which suggested that he invents and exaggerates his experiences to make them sound more adventurous]. I was tempted just for about thirty seconds to tear the thing up, wad it into the toilet bowl, and ram it down with my feet. And then I thought no, this is the true accolade; I have become a tradition, a mythic tradition, in my own country. I am now, as Harold was pointing out, the kind of person that the Inuit had lots of, and have lost most of. I have become the same sort of imaginary mythic person to our society and our culture. So I have that to solace me in my older days. (Moss)

Mowat's opening remarks here are funny but they also reveal a carefully calculated strategic intervention into his public subjectivity and post-Whopper reputation. His confession that his writing is as vacuous as his speech is undone by the politically loaded content that follows this anecdote. By declaring that he inhabits the body of his alter-ego, "Hardly Knowit," he invokes a Jekyll-and-Hyde split self that is quite clearly at odds with his long history of openly professing a crass, unpolished private self. It is in his remobilization of the satirical cartoon, however, that Mowat's genius for co-opting counter-narratives and criticism is most readily apparent. His reading of the cartoon moves away from negotiating its content to examining its wider implications and in such a light, the text not only confirms his national importance but the discourse of mythology neatly ties together both his own vexed history with truth-telling and his celebrity status. Farley Mowat is, he claims, a myth who is a myth-maker, validated by a long tradition in both national and Native cultures.

Thus far, we have seen little to contradict that claim: Mowat's careful crafting of a left-leaning privacy-less persona who kicks up his kilt at government bureaucracy, or anything that smacks of mindless authority, has been taken up and disseminated by the media and his publisher, his live appearances, and, of course, his autobiographies. The mythologies spun by this mythical creature called "Farley Mowat" might rouse the ire of John Goddard but, on the whole, they have delighted the nation. Yet Goddard's article is important not only for its willingness to remind us that Mowat's

mythologies are indeed myths, but also for its attempt to posit in its place an alternate mythology which Goddard calls the “real story.” The subtitle of his article, “Farley Mowat shocked the world with his best-selling accounts of life in the North. Now, from the archives, comes the real story,” invokes discourses of truth-telling that weigh “accounts” against “the real story” and “life” versus “the archives.” The archives, he suggests, are the site and repository of the “real story” but, as Derrida reminds us, the archive is a vexed site of truth-telling power—he who controls the archive, controls memory. Although the archive is a construct that represents the forms of power, memory, and truth, legitimated by and legitimizing the dominant powers and their ideologies (5), the implicit belief in its objectivity and truth-telling function allows us to proclaim that documents are true because they have been archived, and the archives are true because they contain real documents. This circular logic helps defuse the conundrum presented by the exact source of the “real story” in the archives—government paperwork and, more significantly, Mowat’s private journals.

As Goddard’s article substitutes (or attempts to substitute) new markers of authenticity for the old, he fails to recognize that the source of these markers is ultimately the same: Farley Mowat wrote the journals and he also wrote the autobiographies, so why is it assumed that if Mowat lied in his autobiographies, he would not also lie in his journals? This question is never raised in the media frenzy generated by Goddard’s article and the answer is deceptively simple: there is an implicit assumption of truth-telling invested in journals because of their proximity to the private sphere. This invocation of the private sphere as the site of truth and “the real story” creates an interesting dilemma wherein one private sphere is made to testify against another. In the one corner, the journals, in the other, the autobiographies and other narratives offered up by Mowat over the years. Goddard’s privileging of the private sphere as a site of truth can only operate if it is set against that which is less private and thus less truthful; thus in both his title and text he frames the journals as the ultimate site of the private and the archives as the ultimate site of objective record-keeping. Autobiography, in contrast, is transformed into a public representation of self (which it has always been) but as such, is framed as less trustworthy and more artificial. The issue then is not whether Goddard invests truth-telling capacity in life writing, but rather how he invests different measures of truth-telling power in the life writing according to its institutional framing (archives as more legitimate than publishers) and its proximity to the private sphere.

Like Mowat, Goddard is heavily invested in the role of the private sphere to illuminate the truth—his argument that the journals are a viable and reliable resource depends upon it—but where Mowat seeks to offer us a public persona heavily authorized by and thus, seemingly indistinguishable from, the private self, Goddard's discourses of truth-telling suggest that he has illuminated a hidden resource of the private that potentially jeopardizes Mowat's public self. Goddard is not the first to suggest that there is a more truthful, private side to Mowat than we are allowed to see—Margaret Atwood has occasionally suggested that Mowat wears a “public mask” (x). We are cued by these discourses to believe that there is another private self we have not yet seen where we will find the “real” Farley Mowat. These attempts to put a mask on Mowat and establish spheres of public and private behaviour are rhetorically persuasive for they rely on ideological constructs that have long circulated in discourses of celebrity: the belief that there is an inevitable “split between a private self and a public self” in celebrities is foundational to the field of Celebrity Studies (Rojek 11).

In these conversations, it is widely assumed that the public self and private self are not the same: the celebrity's public self is a construct and is produced or configured by the audience, the media, and other institutions and industries. The private self, on the other hand, is perceived to be natural and produced according to one's inherent being and therefore it can be used to explain or debunk “any representation in the public sphere” (Marshall, *Celebrity* 247). Theorists such as Lorraine York, Richard Dyer, and P. David Marshall have offered particularly nuanced readings of the “negotiated terrain” of the celebrity as a public self and how it is produced and configured by various networks through “a form of working hegemony” (*Celebrity* 47, 12). York's work is particularly important for having spearheaded this conversation in a specifically Canadian context, and while *Literary Celebrity in Canada* sadly neglects Mowat, her reading of E. Pauline Johnson and Stephen Leacock does indicate that Mowat's public performances of self borrow from or build upon an established tradition in Canadian letters. Mowat's relationship with the media (not unlike Johnson's and Leacock's), models the very “working hegemony” of which Marshall speaks, although this paper has intentionally given more weight to Mowat's own role in this process than some theorists might.<sup>1</sup> However, these discourses of production and configuration of the public self have the effect of rendering it “untrue,” thus sparking the public's interest in stories purporting to penetrate or peel back the layers of this public self in order to reveal the “real” in the private life.



While it is a useful paradigm for framing a celebrity, the dichotomy of a private and public life and a private and public self is, of course, itself a construction: as far as the public is concerned, there is no real practical difference between the two—as soon as the so-called “private” is made public, it ceases to be private. Moreover, celebrity theorists often discuss the “private self” as if it were an accessible entity but the private self is not the same thing as the private *sphere*: the private self, that is, the selfhood of the celebrity (or any person for that matter), as conceived of by autobiography studies is unrepresentable—it cannot be rendered. When that selfhood is performed, the “I” is born or, rather, manufactured and one accesses, produces, and consumes a mediation of selfhood. Thus performances and representations of the self are arguably *all* within the realm of the public because they are done in the company of others for the benefit of others. It is difficult, in light of the theoretical possibilities that Autobiography Studies brings to Celebrity Studies, to maintain an uncritical investment in the private sphere and private self as a privileged site of truth-telling, which both Mowat and Goddard do. However, rather than use the constructed nature of the public self as a guarantor of its insincerity (by which logic the constructed nature of the private is also implicated), we might try to divest ourselves of any attempt to link construction, production, and configuration with truth-telling. If all selves are constructs and the notion of a public or a private is also an ideological construct, then we might legitimately look to all selves performed by celebrities as potentially truth-telling. In such a light, Goddard and Mowat’s argument about where the private, and thus the truth, lies becomes entirely redundant: when we reimagine the celebrity self as not a surface layer that must be penetrated, but rather one of the many legitimate selves a celebrity might mobilize, celebrities like Farley Mowat can provide us with truth-telling texts issued from and authorized by that well-known celebrity character. Rather than shying away from texts like *Never Cry Wolf* and all the trouble they invite, we might pursue them for that very reason—*Never Cry Wolf* is a fascinating example of a work that creates and solidifies in the public’s imagination the rebellious, alcohol-sodden maverick persona that simultaneously authorizes it.

Even if Goddard’s article was only able to confirm and prove that which had long been suspected (and I find this highly improbable), it is nevertheless an important text. Not only did it permanently disrupt an uncritical and problematic tradition in media representations of Mowat, but it has fashioned a new tradition wherein this disruption must be acknowledged.

As Sarah Hampson notes in an article written some ten years after “A Real Whopper,” “most mentions of Mowat include an acknowledgment of the criticism. It is a burden his legacy will always carry.” Goddard, it seems, was right when he claimed that “this will become part of the Canadian literary record. This won’t go away” (White). Yet, what exactly is this “burden,” this mark on the “record”? Does it simply mark the place of a well-publicized disagreement between two writers or has it materially altered the production and reception of Mowat’s texts and his celebrity? Mowat may not be quite so famous today as he was in the 1980s—a whole generation of students are now entering university without any idea of who Farley Mowat is—but how much of this is due to our reluctance to teach him? We must also give due consideration to the fact that Mowat’s politics on the environment and the Inuit now appear to be quaint forerunners of contemporary attitudes rather than controversial and trouble-making manifestos. Mowat, who will be 90 next year, has of late seemed to retire from active trouble-making. The star-power of the likes of Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and David Suzuki has long eclipsed Mowat in the media, but Mowat’s post-Whopper career contains just as many autobiographies as ever before and they still sell consistently well. Despite the hue and cry “A Real Whopper” temporarily inspired, Mowat *still* relies on discourses of the private to buttress his career and his celebrity, and it would, in fact, seem odd for him to change his *modus operandi* after all this time. While we cannot deny that discourses of the private and the ideological investment in them as sites and sources of truth continue to wield considerable power, it is critical that we remain aware that these constructs limit how and what we think of celebrity selves. If we can dismantle the assumption that the celebrity self as performed in public spheres is a shell that lacks authenticity or authority and, instead, begin to invest some truth-telling power in this widely disseminated and, often, heavily-produced self, we will be well on our way to taking celebrity autobiographies seriously. Moreover, we will have one means by which to recover Mowat as a legitimate site of scholarly inquiry. There are *dozens* of Mowat’s texts that have never been taken up by scholars and, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, there seems to be little reason not to pursue the challenges his texts make to conventional constructions of truth-telling, selfhood, and discourses of the private and public—after all, it is not as though we’ve never heard of him.

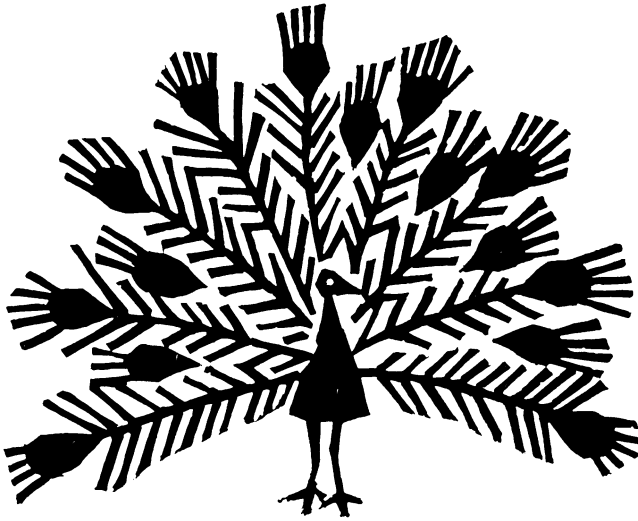
NOTE

- 1 As I have argued elsewhere, I disagree with how much agency and autonomy critics like Dyer and Marshall give to the celebrity within this process. Celebrity criticism encourages reading practices that suggest the celebrity plays little or no role in the production of their celebrity selves or their texts, a position that is clearly contradicted by Mowat's active production and dissemination of his celebrity.

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## “Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta”

If one in every four Americans  
Appears on television in his  
Or her lifetime, and the amount  
Of money spent on ice-cream  
Each year is equal to the  
Amount needed to secure  
The reproductive health of women  
Then 599,000 cattle, 1.8 million  
Pigs, and 500,000 lambs will be  
Slaughtered by the end of the week.  
If the average annual income  
For a cashier at Wal-Mart is \$14,000  
And the average life expectancy  
In Zimbabwe is 31 years  
Then production costs for reality  
Television will be \$800,000 per  
Hour. If Madonna and Guy Ritchie's  
Wedding cost between \$2-3 million  
And total spending on health care  
In Canada is \$3,298 per person  
Then the main occupation for the  
Disabled will be begging. If a child  
Dies of starvation every seven seconds  
And over 150,000 people purchase  
Stomach-shrinking surgery each year  
Then farmers will be subsidized  
\$350 billion. If 24,000 people  
Die from hunger each day  
And Canadians spend \$8,000 for  
A face lift, \$5,000 for a tummy-tuck

\$4,000 for a brow lift, and \$500  
For a Botox injection, then every  
Six seconds a woman will be raped.  
If the same woman earns 77 cents  
For every dollar her rapist earns  
And a single person on welfare  
In Canada lives on less  
Than \$6,000 a year, then 80% of  
Global production will be controlled  
By fewer than 1,000 corporations.  
If aboriginal children in Canada  
Are twice as likely to be poor  
As non-aboriginal children, and  
The total fur production increases  
From 73, 522 pelts in 2002  
To 115, 953 pelts in 2006, then  
The incarceration rate will increase  
From 129 per 100,000 in 2005  
To 131 per 100,000 in 2006. If  
The 900 million people who live  
In the West consume 86% of global  
Expenditures, and 300 tonnes  
Of hazardous waste are  
Produced each year, then the  
Average world income per head  
Will be \$7,530. If printed  
Matter and literature constitute  
14.7% of global cultural exports  
And 179 of the 500 largest corporations  
In the world are located in the US  
Then the Dept. of Defense will  
Employ over 2 million people  
In over 600,000 buildings, on over  
30 million acres of land. If data  
Shows a strong correlation between  
American involvement in International  
Situations and an increase in terrorist  
Attacks on American tourists, and

The number of cars on the road  
Increases three times faster than  
The US population rate, then Canada  
Will rank highest in the world  
For internet penetration. If 81% of  
Those polled agree that exercising power  
Yields greater rewards than exercising  
Compassion, and labour force  
Participation by women increases  
From 37.7% in 1960 to 57.3% in 1991  
Then 286 million hens will be involved  
In egg production in 2005. If the World  
Bank defines the international poverty  
Line as U.S. \$1 per day, and a 90%  
Cut in carbon emissions is needed  
To stop temperatures rising by 2 degrees  
Celsius by 2030, then 50,000 plant  
And animal species will disappear  
This year—*Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta!*

## Tayaout ou la réfutation d'Agaguk

**D**evenir un grand homme par la volonté de s'élever au-dessus des autres et aimer une femme avec qui avoir des enfants. Ce sont, chez Yves Thériault, des passions courantes et complémentaires en raison de leur quête commune : apprendre à devenir père au sens plein du terme, à la fois comme père symbolique et comme père biologique. Agaguk est celui qui incarne le mieux la réussite de cette posture. Son fils, Tayaout, est à peine né qu'Agaguk est promis à la grandeur paternelle. On se souvient qu'après le fameux épisode de la chasse aux phoques, Agaguk est célébré par d'autres Inuit : « Quelqu'un se mit à faire une chanson. Il parlait d'Agaguk, grand chasseur. Et il chantait aussi Tayaout qui serait bien le plus grand chasseur des temps, fils d'un tel père. » (Thériault, *Agaguk* 134) Le triomphe de la paternité symbolique coïncide avec le bonheur de la paternité biologique. En revanche, Ashini incarne l'échec grandiose de cette posture, puisque la mort de ses deux fils, puis celle de sa femme, annoncent et confirment tout à la fois la faillite de celui qui se voulait le « libérateur » de son peuple. Ici s'élabore une loi générale relative à la filiation : de même que les dieux meurent avec leur peuple<sup>1</sup>, les pères ne peuvent survivre à la mort de leurs fils.

À vrai dire, s'il fallait faire d'Agaguk et d'Ashini des symboles exemplaires, force est de reconnaître que le premier est un cas unique, alors que le second est un cas ni plus ni moins récurrent, à tout le moins un cas emblématique d'une difficulté certaine, chez Thériault, à maintenir à terme la quête de maturité et de paternité de ses personnages. L'échec de la paternité et de la filiation traverse toute l'œuvre. Pensons au vieux Moïse qui a « déjà le rôle de la mort au fond de la gorge » (Thériault, *Aaron* 158) quand il apprend que son petit-fils, Aaron, a disparu après avoir changé de nom. Pensons encore à Antoine Régis dont celle qu'il aime, dans *La Quête de l'ours*, meurt entre les



griffes d'une ourse après avoir fait deux fausses couches<sup>2</sup>. Dans *La Fille laide*, Fabien a engendré un enfant infirme : « Il m'a fécondée. Il a été la semence. Il est le père et la cause », accuse Edith (183). Le cas le plus extraordinaire de cette impasse de la filiation est certainement celui de Pierre Huneau (*Moi, Pierre Huneau*), dont la nombreuse descendance disparaît subitement à la suite de l'explosion de la maison familiale.

Dans l'un des *Contes pour un homme seul*, « La faute à Adrienne », Daniel a choisi une solution radicale pour éviter que dorénavant sa femme le trompe : il a attaché Adrienne avec une chaîne. Du coup, il a trouvé une solution à la paternité, comme le souligne la chute du conte : « Il y a de cette chose, trente ans. Hier, Adrienne est morte, après avoir donné huit enfants à Daniel. Et il a fait venir le forgeron pour briser la chaîne, afin qu'on puisse enterrer Adrienne. » (134) La morale de cette histoire? Faire des enfants est une tâche difficile, il faut prendre les grands moyens . . .

### **De Daniel à Agaguk**

Ce qui est curieux dans « La faute à Adrienne », c'est que nous passons sans transition d'une histoire d'adultère à une histoire de paternité, si bien que, par une sorte de raccourci argumentatif, le texte formule un lien de causalité : pour être père, il faut que la femme soit fidèle. L'un des intérêts des magnifiques contes de Thériault, c'est précisément qu'ils offrent de lumineux raccourcis pour comprendre les romans. Par exemple, il faut se rappeler que la première condition de la paternité d'Agaguk, c'est justement la fidélité d'Iriook. Dès l'incipit du roman, la chose est entendue : non seulement Agaguk s'oppose aux prétentions de Ghorok et d'Ayallik sur Iriook, mais il est assez clair que s'il choisit de quitter sa tribu et de s'exiler avec Iriook dans le Nord, c'est pour avoir la femme à lui seul. « Ils vivraient là, lui et la fille, loin de Ramook, de Ghorok, d'Ayallik, de tous les autres. » (10) Agaguk agit ainsi pour fuir la tradition, qui veut que les hommes partagent les femmes, particulièrement les jours de fête. Il déroge explicitement à cette règle lors de la fête qu'on lui fait à la suite de sa chasse miraculeuse : « À l'aube, ils étaient tous couchés avec une femme qui n'était pas nécessairement la leur. Sauf Agaguk qui, apaisé par Iriook, dormait près d'elle<sup>3</sup> » (135). Par ailleurs, il ne fait aucun doute non plus que la volonté monogame d'Agaguk s'inscrit contre Ramook, son père, qu'Iriook est un enjeu entre le fils et le père. À cet égard, Gérard Bessette (1968) a montré éloquemment comment se superposaient, dans l'imaginaire du texte, les figures de Ramook, de Ghorok et d'Ayallik. Aussi la question de la fidélité de la femme apparaît-elle inhérente au rapport

conflictuel qui oppose le fils et le père, rapport qui se soldera par la victoire du premier et la mort du second.

Mais si le père désire la femme du fils, il n'est pas vrai pour autant que le fils cherche à retrouver sa mère dans la figure de celle qu'il a choisie pour femme. Nous savons qu'Agaguk déteste son père depuis que celui-ci a remplacé sa défunte par une Montagnaise : « Depuis que le vieux avait pris une Montagnaise pour remplacer la femme morte, Agaguk considérait que la lignée était rompue. » (Thériault, *Agaguk* 10) Interprétant l'attitude d'Agaguk, Bessette estimait qu'Agaguk « désire remplacer sa mère morte par Iriook » (159). Je suis plutôt enclin à penser le contraire. Ce qui rompt la lignée du point de vue d'Agaguk, et qui l'amène dorénavant à refuser de se considérer comme le fils de Ramook, c'est l'intrusion de la Montagnaise auprès du père, d'une mère remplaçante en quelque sorte. La lignée qui est rompue est donc tout aussi maternelle que paternelle, et rien ne permet de croire, dans le texte, qu'Agaguk veuille retrouver sa mère en s'unissant à Iriook. Au contraire, la Montagnaise inscrit une rupture avec la mère précédente, si bien que c'est en raison même de cette rupture qu'Agaguk peut choisir librement une femme avec qui avoir des enfants, c'est-à-dire une femme qui, dans l'imaginaire du texte, ne se superpose pas à la figure maternelle, de sorte qu'Agaguk évite de se positionner dans une configuration incestueuse. En effet, si la lignée maternelle est rompue, comment craindre de la reproduire<sup>4</sup>? C'est encore pour préciser cette coupure incestueuse que le texte indique qu'Iriook n'est pas de la même tribu qu'Agaguk : alors que celui-ci est « des lignées de la toundra », la femme descend « des peuples du dos de la terre » (Thériault, *Agaguk* 199).

Dans l'ensemble des textes de Thériault, *Agaguk* occupe une place unique par la grandeur de la réussite paternelle du héros éponyme. C'est donc un cas presque trop beau, dirait-on, et il n'est peut-être pas innocent que Thériault ait ressenti le besoin d'en écrire la suite, comme s'il lui était nécessaire de devoir nuancer ou abolir les effets de cette paternité. Encore que *Tayaout* n'est pas à proprement parler une suite, comme Thériault le disait lui-même : « Mais il n'y a aucun lien avec *Agaguk*, sauf un lien de parenté à travers les filiations naturelles, parce que ce n'était pas un roman [*Tayaout*] qui tendait à continuer *Agaguk*. Le seul roman qui a continué *Agaguk* est venu plus tard, il s'appelle *Agoak*. » (Carpentier 166) Le témoignage de Thériault est précieux; il indique, sans les nommer toutefois, que d'autres raisons que la volonté d'assurer une suite commerciale au succès public d'*Agaguk* l'a conduit à écrire *Tayaout*. Or, je fais l'hypothèse que cette suite, qui n'en est pas une,

visait néanmoins, avant tout, à déconstruire la paternité d'Agaguk. Dans tous les cas, comme le soulignait Bernard Andrès, *Tayaout* est « à la fois en liaison et en rupture avec l'inspiration d'Agaguk dont il reprend presque tous les éléments narratifs en leur imprimant un nouveau sens » (851). C'est à ce nouveau sens qu'il conviendra ici de s'intéresser.

### **De David à Tayaout**

Avant d'en venir à *Tayaout*, je voudrais rappeler un autre des premiers contes de Thériault, « Angoisse-de-Dieu ». David Coudois, dit Angoisse-de-Dieu, est ce forgeron qui a fabriqué la chaîne qui servit à Daniel à punir Adrienne. David est un personnage qui est constitué d'un double manque. D'une part, David aime Judith mais ne la possède pas. On le voit feindre d'essayer d'attraper « des filasses de brume » pour en parer Judith, les « lui offrir comme une sorte d'insensé joyau » (Thériault, *Contes pour un homme seul* 94). Ce jeu, qui est pour eux une façon de témoigner de la volonté de donner une forme à leur amour, est silencieux, car « ce matin dans la basse bâtisse bancale, David et Judith pensent des choses qu'il ne pourraient pas dire » (95). D'autre part, David cherche Dieu, sans le trouver. Pour David, Judith (l'amour) et Dieu problématissent une difficulté commune, que nous pourrions formuler ainsi : comment donner forme à ses pensées, incarner ses idées dans la réalité? En effet, David voudrait que Dieu lui soit révélé comme l'amour, dont il a « vu de près la forme ». « Et si l'amour était venu si près de se révéler, serait-ce que Dieu aussi n'attendrait que le moment de se révéler? » (100) Alors, des jours durant, David s'enferme dans sa boutique pour forger son Dieu, pour devenir « plus que Dieu lui-même<sup>5</sup> » (99). À la fin, David devient fou et la machine, accidentellement mise en marche par Judith, se dérègle et met le feu à l'atelier du forgeron.

David Coudois fait une expérience qui me paraît annonciatrice du parcours de Tayaout, le fils d'Agaguk. Ayant la nostalgie des temps anciens, et pressentant en lui un appel insistant, bien qu'encore trop vague pour savoir à quelle vérité il correspond, Tayaout prend la décision de quitter le village, son père et sa mère, qui travaillent pour les Blancs. Il part donc « vers le sens des pistes, vers les glaces, vers la solitude » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 16), sans savoir exactement ce qu'il trouvera. Tayaout ne connaît pas le pays vers où il s'aventure, c'est à peine s'il en soupçonne la signification. Pour l'heure, il est envahi par des pensées et des discours qu'il laisse s'installer en lui, confiant que tôt ou tard il saura en comprendre le sens: « Et il se sentait heureux d'avoir des pensées étranges, et il aurait voulu prendre et les pensées, et le vent, et tout

ce qu'il ressentait en lui pour en créer une forme . . . » (28). Tayaout, on le voit, est à peu près dans la même incertitude que David Coudois. Tous deux cherchent comment donner forme au sentiment de grandeur qui les habite. Et David Coudois, dans le noir de sa forge, faisant jaillir la lumière de son enclume, c'est Tayaout cherchant à voir clair dans le jour polaire : « Dis-moi, mon ombre, dans l'étendue bleue d'un jour de soleil polaire, es-tu de moi ou viens-tu des autres âges? Même si ta forme est la mienne et ta démarche semblable, nès-tu pas ce qui reste des anciens venus avant moi ? Dis-moi, pays . . . Enseigne-moi, lumière. » (29) Cette ombre traduit une forme spirituelle liée aux savoirs ancestraux, mais qui pour l'instant reste inaccessible à Tayaout. Le Dieu de David a pris ici la forme des dieux du primitivisme esquimau.

Il y a pourtant une différence importante entre David Coudois et Tayaout. La quête divine de David semble liée à un désir charnel, comme si la réussite de celle-là devait autoriser celui-ci. Nul désir charnel chez Tayaout, mais une quête spirituelle mise au service de l'héritage de son peuple : « Et un désir qu'il ne comprend pas, de créer ces formes afin que si, un jour, les Inuit disparaissaient du Sommet de la Terre, il en resterait ces images en gage de leurs hiers. » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 30-31) Cette différence entre les personnages les oppose. Car chez David Coudois, la forme qu'il cherche doit lui permettre de donner une forme à l'amour, et par conséquent de mettre éventuellement en place une filiation postérieure à sa découverte; en revanche, Tayaout est tourné vers le passé, car ayant « compris l'importance de chaque homme dans la descendance des ancêtres » (83), la forme qu'il cherche doit valider une filiation antérieure à sa découverte. Or, Tayaout, on le sait, découvrira quasi miraculeusement la stéatite, cette « pierre ancienne qu'autrefois les Inuit formaient patiemment en lampes immortelles, dont jamais la flamme ne s'éteignait » (47). On voit revenir une fois de plus cette métaphore du feu qui habite la forge de David, métaphore-dieu qui fait de celui qui la réalise son égal : la découverte de la pierre fait de Tayaout, de retour parmi les siens, une sorte de dieu, réussissant là où David Coudois a échoué. Il est « l'Homme retrouveur, sorte de Messie, pourrait-on dire, qui a remis aux Inuit l'Instrument de leurs propitiations » (85). Aussi le fils est-il fondé dans sa grandeur par la reconnaissance de son père, Agaguk : « Agaguk tremblait de tous ses membres. Il avait si longtemps rêvé, autrefois, à cet instant même où le fils premier-né, ce Tayaout qu'il avait formé de sa semence et de sa volonté, atteindrait l'âge d'homme et serait reconnu par les Anciens » (85-86). La réaction d'Agaguk cautionne la valeur spirituelle de la découverte de

son fils. Mais il y a plus que cela : par sa découverte, Tayaout a atteint « l'âge d'homme », c'est-à-dire qu'il est maintenant pourvu d'un savoir-faire qui le rend compétent à devenir père un jour, car qu'est-ce que peut bien signifier l'expression « atteindre l'âge d'homme » si ce n'est l'habileté à entreprendre une quête charnelle afin de pouvoir devenir père? Le roman insiste sur ce passage et sa valeur symbolique. Après avoir trouvé la pierre qui permet de donner forme aux dieux, Tayaout a donc entre les mains ce qu'il faut pour se trouver une Judith, si l'on peut dire. Pourtant, malgré toute l'importance que cette question de l'âge d'homme acquiert ici, jamais le roman ne parviendra à en incarner la promesse chez le personnage.

### **Père et fils**

*Tayaout* est un roman pour le moins déconcertant si nous le comparons à *Agaguk*. Trois temps semblent en ponctuer le déroulement. Dans un premier temps, nous voyons Tayaout se déplacer dans une quête qui le dépasse et qu'il ne maîtrise pas. Au terme de sa quête, il atteint l'âge d'homme. Cette réussite constituerait le deuxième temps du roman. Mais pas plus que Tayaout n'a maîtrisé sa quête il n'a recherché cet âge d'homme, dont il ignore pour l'instant ce qu'il doit en faire, si ce n'est qu'il comprend vaguement que le temps est venu pour lui de prendre sa place parmi les siens. Le troisième temps du roman est constitué, bien entendu, du conflit entre Agaguk et Tayaout, qui se soldera par la mort des deux personnages. Ce qui a frappé tous les critiques, c'est combien Tayaout est « agi » au lieu d'agir. Comme le résume Bérubé, « chacun de ses gestes est commandé par plus haut que lui, par ce qui le dépasse. Ses gestes ne sont pas ses gestes, mais bien ceux de ses dieux. . . . Tayaout ou l'homme qui n'a aucune prise sur son destin » (35). C'est aussi dans cette optique qu'il faut saisir le personnage de Tayaout par rapport à celui d'Agaguk.

Tayaout ayant ramené la stéatite à son père, celui-ci acceptera bientôt la proposition des Blancs de sculpter la pierre pour la commercialiser. Agaguk, qui sera rapidement imité par d'autres Esquimaux, est ainsi perçu comme un traître à l'égard des dieux, car en mettant la pierre au service d'un « art esquimau », il en désacralise la valeur et l'usage millénaire. Mais il y a une raison plus profonde à le désigner comme traître : c'est que la pierre sacrée ne supporte pas qu'on lui donne une forme volontaire; au contraire, il faut que le sculpteur laisse la pierre elle-même suggérer la forme qu'elle peut produire. L'artiste doit donc en quelque sorte *être agi* par la pierre et non agir sur elle; autrement dit, il doit se comporter comme Tayaout dans sa quête.

Or, Agaguk se comporte avec la pierre comme il le faisait avec Ramook et Iriook : il s'oppose, il affirme, il prend. Il agit en Père. Et quand il décide de commercialiser la stéatite, il est encore une fois logique avec cette visée de paternité : « “En changer la forme [de la stéatite] et libérer son âme? Ne serions-nous pas nous-mêmes des dieux?” Et il ajoutait, fervent : “Je crois que nous sommes récompensés et bénis. Les dollars du Blanc, la voilà notre récompense de savoir nous élever plus haut que les dieux”. » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 123) En somme, Agaguk ne fait que rappeler, dans *Tayaout*, la place de Père qui est la sienne depuis *Agaguk*. Quant à Tayaout, son attitude est inverse. Après avoir été « agi » dans sa quête, non seulement, après son retour avec la stéatite, refuse-t-il de repartir avec Agaguk pour le guider vers le dépôt de pierres, mais il aspire à prendre sa place parmi les siens, celle que cet âge d'homme maintenant atteint lui indique, car il est arrivé à l'étape où il s'agit de « savoir se rabaisser au rang d'homme », après avoir « respiré l'air des demi-dieux » (127). Tayaout reprend sa place, ce qui veut dire, au sens fort, qu'il reste soumis aux dieux. Par rapport au personnage d'Agaguk, le contraste est saisissant.

### La pierre de Mère

Pour comprendre le sens profond de cette opposition, relisons d'abord le contexte du départ de Tayaout de chez lui. À force d'avoir entendu son père parler du temps ancien, Tayaout en eut la nostalgie; désirant partir, il se souvient alors des conseils d'Agaguk pour se guider vers le Nord : « Tayaout apprit alors, de son père Agaguk, comment il valait mieux observer dans le ciel, lorsqu'on le peut, l'Étoile femelle plutôt que les autres, l'Étoile mère au clignotement plus jaune et qui pend tout près de la neige, là-bas, au bout de la plaine, et comment avec celle-là nul homme ne se perdait jamais sur les glaces. » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 16) Cette étoile, qui guidera Tayaout tout au long de sa course vers la stéatite, est explicitement maternelle. Or, la stéatite elle-même est en quelque sorte maternelle, puisqu'elle est dite « pierre de mer ». En outre, à Uivâluk, où Tayaout découvre la stéatite, le paysage est habité par la mer : « C'est à Uivâluk qu'il aborda. Un grand cap regardant le large de la mer. » (45) « “C'est mon pays”, constata Tayaout. “J'ai besoin de la mer.” » (46) Ces citations sont suffisamment claires, je crois, pour comprendre qu'il faut entendre ici la mère. Et c'est d'ailleurs uniquement parce qu'on entend la mère qu'on peut avoir accès à la signification de cette autre citation, qui relate le passage de Tayaout à l'âge d'homme après être revenu chez lui avec la stéatite : « Tayaout venait de franchir une autre étape de son itinéraire

d'homme. Déjà demain, tel qu'il l'entrevoyait, il s'intégrerait à la tribu et à la nation, sans jamais rechercher de nouveau l'évasion vers des étoiles stériles. » (128) À première vue, la formulation étonne : en effet, pourquoi des étoiles « stériles », si le périple de Tayaout dans le grand Nord lui a permis de ramener la pierre antique? L'étoile n'a-t-elle pas été, au contraire, un guide généreux et fructueux? Mais une lecture au second degré nous amène à envisager la stérilité en regard de la relation mère et fils.

Pour aller plus loin dans cette voie d'interprétation, comparons avec Agaguk. Quand Agaguk quitte les siens, il sait exactement ce qu'il fait et ce qu'il veut. Il agit contre son père et part avec Iriook. En revanche, Tayaout ignore ce qui le fait agir, il part sans but précis et sans femme. « Sauf que cela répondait à un besoin, que ce besoin, son père Agaguk l'avait déjà senti. Pour d'autres raisons, peut-être, cela Tayaout n'aurait pu le dire. Et sauf aussi que l'homme Agaguk n'était pas parti seul, mais avec sa femme Iriook. Cela comptait, cela devait compter, c'était une différence des générations. » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 40-41) De manière sans doute explicite, « une différence des générations » s'entend par rapport à Agaguk : c'est entre le père et le fils une question de génération qui explique la différence de leur attitude respective. Soit, mais cela n'explique pas pourquoi il devrait en être ainsi, l'explication est trop générale. Mais on pourrait aussi prendre le mot par rapport à la mère : la différence des générations, ce serait celle qui existe entre la mère et le fils, et parce qu'un fils ne couche pas avec sa mère, il doit partir. Dans *Agaguk*, on s'en souvient, la filiation maternelle est coupée, aussi Agaguk amène-t-il une femme avec lui. En revanche, cette filiation s'impose dans *Tayaout*; elle se donne à lire par delà le présent, en fonction d'un ordre signifiant qui relève de l'espace sédimentaire que constitue « le dépôt de pierre de mer<sup>6</sup> » (58) découvert par Tayaout. Thériault n'a pas tort d'insister: si Tayaout partait sans femme, « cela *devait* compter<sup>7</sup> ». Cela compte, mais ne se dit pas. Même que cela compte *parce que ça ne se dit pas*. Ça se ressent seulement, un peu à la manière de David Coudois ou du Troublé qui ressentent les choses sans pouvoir les dominer. Tayaout ressent « le trouble qui ne se dit point, le trouble qui n'a de nom ni de lieu » (45): « Seule la raison profonde différait : Agaguk avait besoin de s'éloigner des siens pour se réaliser; Tayaout, lui, ressentait des choses inconnues de tous, troublantes. » (41)

Aussi, quand Tayaout part seul, sans femme, c'est bien en fils qu'il part, et non en père potentiel, comme Agaguk autrefois. Au contraire de Ramook, qui doit craindre son fils, Agaguk n'a rien à craindre de Tayaout, si bien qu'il désigne à son fils l'Étoile mère. Or, contre toute attente, Tayaout revient avec

la stéatite, comme s'il avait trouvé la mère, comme s'il était habité par elle. Mais parce que cette relation repose sur un interdit, le texte la condamne par la stérilité : d'abord guide lumineux, l'étoile s'est en quelque sorte éteinte après le retour de Tayaout. Aussi, tout occupé à sa mère, qu'il a sublimée dans sa quête polaire, Tayaout ne pense pas aux filles. Jamais le roman ne fait la moindre allusion à un supposé intérêt de Tayaout pour l'autre sexe. Tayaout est en somme un être émasculé. L'âge d'homme qu'il a atteint est perverti par le sens de sa quête : c'est la mère qui le fait homme, alors que cela devrait être, comme autrefois pour Agaguk, une jeune fille qui est étrangère de sang.

On comprend mieux alors, à partir du moment où Tayaout atteint l'âge d'homme et qu'il vient réclamer sa place parmi les siens, la réaction d'Agaguk. Dans *Agaguk*, la mère est déjà morte, et jamais la Montagnaise n'est en mesure de la remplacer. C'est pourquoi Agaguk est un personnage actif au sein d'un roman de la réussite. Il en va autrement dans *Tayaout*, dont la fin est construite précisément pour faire échouer le processus incestueux entre le fils et la mère. André Brochu a souligné l'incohérence du personnage d'Iriook dans *Tayaout* par rapport à ce qu'il avait été dans *Agaguk*, où Iriook amène Agaguk à se libérer des entraves de la tradition. Dans *Tayaout*, elle devient « ce monstre maternel qui dresse le fils contre le père et qui, comme une antique Furie, voue l'un et l'autre à la mort, au nom d'une Tradition que, dans *Agaguk*, elle était la première à renier! » (*Agaguk* 19) La contradiction du personnage, dans le passage d'un roman à l'autre, vient de ce qu'il ne tient pas le même rôle : Iriook est avant tout une femme dans *Agaguk*, elle est une mère dans *Tayaout*<sup>8</sup>. Et précisément parce qu'elle est devenue mère, elle ne peut plus être femme; d'où ses exigences en apparence excessives envers son fils pour qu'il tue Agaguk, qui a violé l'usage des pierres anciennes. Car à travers la commercialisation de la stéatite, Agaguk agit contre Iriook, il la désacralise, lui retire l'ascendance symbolique qu'elle avait sur Tayaout. Aussi Iriook met-elle autant d'acharnement à le renier comme Esquimau que comme mari : « Il a été ton père. Il l'est, c'est la nature. Mais il ne mérite plus de l'être. Je le renie, moi » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 153), explique-t-elle à Tayaout. Dans ces conditions, Tayaout, ce personnage devenu « un être mystique » (Carpentier 165) sans que le romancier s'en rende compte<sup>9</sup>, n'est que la victime d'une emprise toute maternelle. Il a été choisi tel un « instrument docile, pour retrouver cette pierre » des origines (85); en d'autres termes, tel « un instrument du destin comme l'était Œdipe » (Nelson-Vanhee 36). Nous pourrions finalement synthétiser l'opposition entre Agaguk et Tayaout par la formule : Agaguk ou le fils qui se fait Père, Tayaout ou le fils défait par la Mère.



## La sanction

On voit que tout le roman est orienté vers un discours bien spécifique, qui a pour objectif la condamnation de l'inceste entre mère et fils. Non pas un inceste raisonné par les personnages, mais un inceste investi dans les formes du texte. À cet égard, Iriook est tout aussi victime du texte que Tayaout peut sembler l'être d'Iriook. C'est ce contexte qui, dans la dernière page du roman, explique la mort de Tayaout, attaqué par un ours blanc immédiatement après avoir tué son père. En cet ours, Tayaout retrouve celui qu'il avait blessé un an plus tôt et en qui il avait reconnu en rêve « son aïeul, le premier de tous, l'Inuk-Maître » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 31). « Mais qui est donc cet ours blanc, cette bête qui semble surgir de nulle part », demande Bérubé, tout en observant pertinemment que « Tayaout et Iriook se répondent et se comprennent curieusement bien, par-delà les distances, lors de la première "apparition" de l'ours » (35)? En effet, si nous relisons l'extrait en question, l'Inuk-Maître est ici « totem ou tabou ancien » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 31), donc à la fois signe de la croyance et signe de l'interdit. Surtout, le narrateur nous raconte qu'au moment même où Tayaout était attaqué par l'ours, Iriook rêvait elle-même à cette attaque, ce qui la place dans une très curieuse communion avec son fils, de sorte que Bérubé a raison de dire que cet Inuk-Maître « est en quelque sorte l'origine absolue que toute la démarche de Tayaout vise à atteindre et au-delà de laquelle on ne peut plus régresser » (35). À vrai dire, une telle régression, cela s'appelle aussi de la transgression. L'origine absolue n'est pas faite pour être habitée.

Ce n'est donc pas le meurtre du père qui fait problème dans ce roman. Au contraire, le parricide est nécessaire au fils pour se réaliser, à la condition qu'il procède d'une coupure avec la mère. Dans *Agaguk*, le parricide symbolique du héros est non seulement accepté, mais Agaguk fonde sa paternité sur ce meurtre. Dans *Tayaout*, le meurtre, réel, a lieu au nom d'un inceste imaginaire, et c'est pourquoi il sera sanctionné. L'Inuk-Maître ne vient donc pas punir Tayaout du parricide qu'il a commis, mais agir au nom d'une dynamique textuelle qui soustrait le fils à l'amour incestueux de la Mère. À travers l'aïeul suprême, le roman refuse de cautionner un « amour au goût de mère<sup>10</sup> », si j'ose dire. Mais on voit à quel prix : la mort de Tayaout élimine les possibilités de la descendance d'Agaguk. Certes, il reste l'autre fils d'Agaguk, le jumeau qui naît tout à la fin d'*Agaguk*, mais jamais il n'en sera question dans *Tayaout*, comme s'il n'avait pas véritablement droit à l'existence. Ce jumeau n'aura pas même été digne de figurer comme « l'héritage d'Agaguk », selon le titre du roman que Thériault fera paraître six ans après *Tayaout*.

Dans ces conditions, en regard de la dynamique de paternité qui anime toute l'œuvre d'Yves Thériault, *Agaguk* sonne bel et bien comme une exception que *Tayaout* se sera empressé de nier et que le reste de l'œuvre, de toute façon, abolit de manière assez nette. Le meurtre d'Agaguk par Tayaout, c'est aussi celui de *Tayaout* à l'égard d'Agaguk<sup>11</sup>.

NOTES

- 1 « Est-il donc, dans les au-delà de toutes les races, des dieux qui peuvent survivre lorsque leur peuple meurt? » (Thériault, *Ashini* 91)
- 2 André Brochu (1988) a montré, dans un article sur *La Quête de l'ours*, comment l'ourse était investie d'un sentiment d'agressivité qui doit être rapporté à l'attitude d'Antoine envers Julie. Or, ce sentiment d'agressivité est entièrement soumis à la quête de paternité du héros. Lorsque Antoine menace Julie : « Il faudra que j'aie un fils un jour, sinon je te renverrai d'où tu viens » (Thériault, *La Quête de l'ours* 197), il se trouve en quelque sorte à résumer tout le propos du roman.
- 3 La phrase est curieuse. S'il n'y a qu'Agaguk qui a dormi avec sa femme (« Sauf Agaguk »), alors l'adverbe « nécessairement » est fautif, puisque forcément tous les autres, par opposition à Agaguk, auront dormi avec une femme qui n'est pas la leur. Notons que c'est aussi pour ne pas devoir partager Iriook qu'Agaguk refusera de revenir s'installer au village pour en être le chef (285).
- 4 *Agoak, l'héritage d'Agaguk*, semblera contredire *Agaguk*. Nous lisons à la fin d'*Agoak* : « Autrefois, le père d'Agaguk, aïeul d'Agoak, pour avoir tué un Inuk de Pangnirtung qui lui avait volé des pelleteries, avait dû fuir la police, traînant avec lui la Montagnaise dont il avait fait sa femelle. Une fille lui était née, dans un igloo comme celui-ci, et il l'avait tuée. Plus tard Agaguk était né, et celui-là avait été épargné » (Thériault, *Agoak, l'héritage d'Agaguk* 235). Dans cet extrait-ci, il semble qu'Agaguk soit le fils de la Montagnaise.
- 5 On pensera encore à Agaguk qui, dans *Tayaout*, sculpte la stéatite afin d'alimenter la demande commerciale des Blancs, lesquels en retour le payent de dollars qui sont « notre récompense de savoir nous élever plus haut que les dieux » (Thériault, *Tayaout* 123), dit Agaguk. Toutefois, David cherche à se faire dieu pour trouver Dieu, tandis qu'Agaguk, on le sait, s'élève au-dessus des dieux pour mieux les trahir.
- 6 Un dépôt de pierre de mer sans la marque du pluriel. Coquille ou marque signifiante inconsciente qui cherche à dire *la* mère derrière les pierres?
- 7 Je souligne.
- 8 André Brochu (*L'instance critique* 167-169) a signalé que l'Étoile mère de *Tayaout* était déjà présente dans *Agaguk*, où elle semble identifiée à Iriook. Mais dans *Agaguk*, il est significatif qu'elle ne soit pas nommée « Étoile mère » comme elle le sera dans *Tayaout*; le narrateur d'*Agaguk* la nomme plus simplement « étoile-guide ». Mais peu à peu, il est vrai, l'Iriook-mère remplacera l'Iriook-femme, préparant la voie à *Tayaout*.
- 9 À propos de *Tayaout*, le romancier confie à André Carpentier : « J'avais pensé faire un roman où il y aurait eu plus d'aventures qu'il n'y en a finalement. Mais le personnage de Tayaout s'est mis à prendre sa propre dimension. Ça arrive, ça, quand tu es en train d'écrire, que tout à coup un personnage t'échappe un peu, ou disons qu'il ne suit pas la ligne que tu avais tracée pour lui. Et tout à coup mon Tayaout est devenu un être mystique, sans que je me rende trop compte de ce qui arrivait » (Carpentier, 165).

- 10 Calembour fondé sur le roman d'Yves Thériault, *Amour au goût de mer* (1961).
- 11 Il faut signaler qu'au « déni » apporté à *Agaguk* par *Tayaout* correspond le sentiment personnel du romancier à l'égard de son célèbre roman. Thériault n'a jamais caché qu'*Agaguk* n'était pas son roman préféré, ni dissimulé son agacement devant l'enthousiasme de la critique à lui donner la première place. Je citerai notamment ce long extrait, publié d'ailleurs l'année même de la publication de *Tayaout* : « Il n'est peut-être pas tellement paradoxal . . . que je ne cache pas ma préférence personnelle pour *Ashini*, plutôt qu'*Agaguk*, lorsqu'on me presse de le stipuler. C'est que, justement, *Agaguk* ne s'inscrit pas vraiment dans la suite de mon œuvre. Il est un livre à part, que je ne renie pas mais il me peine toujours un peu qu'on le prétende mon œuvre maîtresse. En quoi je scandalise probablement un grand nombre de gens. C'est *Agaguk* qui s'est le plus vendu, qui est le plus fameux de mes romans qui remporte les suffrages partout où je vais; il serait à croire que je le place moi-même au rang qu'on lui accorde ; or, je lui préfère *Ashini*. Comme, si je dois exprimer l'ordre de mes propres préférences, je mets bien en avant d'*Agaguk*, cet *Aaron* qui lui est infiniment supérieur, et *Les Commettants de Caridad*, livre méprisé par la critique et qui pourtant me survivra pleinement. J'en pourrais ainsi nommer quelques autres. » (Thériault, *Textes et documents* 37) Cette insistance de Thériault non seulement à rabaisser *Agaguk*, mais à lui opposer *Ashini*, qui est le roman exemplaire de la défaite du Père, ne laisse pas d'être intrigante.

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## Walking the Labyrinth\* Outdoors

This is easy, why do I bother, one path, turn, quick, another and already I'm almost at the centre, why do people do this over and over? A quick walk and . . . alarm! Suddenly I'm far from centre, farther away than when I started. Scent of petunias rises sweet but the turns—tighter and tighter. My ankle hurts. A grasshopper trills. And turn again, each time my feet, awkward. Can I cheat? Skip a circle while no one is looking? What's the point of this?

But the path holds me, leads me and suddenly the circle opens and it's a long smooth walk and I'm sailing now, a glide on through to the next quadrant, getting the feel of it, real progress now. Until another quick series of turns. All these circles and I'm getting nowhere, forget where I wanted to go; oh yes, to centre, mid-point. There's space there, to pause, to rest, to think. I am almost half way and suddenly for no reason I burst into tears.

Then move again, move on. Now under the blessed shade of an apple tree slow, keep to the cool as long as possible before I'm on to another long hot stretch exposed and look! Here's centre just when I was least expecting it, already half-way through and I'm getting the gist of it now, the grasshopper hopping from time to time, a small, surprisingly precious, company, all this heat and dryness home to him and I'm thirsty now but walk, one step after the other, another sweep and thirst passes, the grasshopper's song, petunias I watered this morning blooming and in full scent, all of us here in the labyrinth and I cry again as the path takes a few more turns my feet knowing it now, knowing just to follow, seeing the end draw close, reluctant and then it's here and I pause a second, one last breath and step across the perfumed line, final, as the grasshopper leaps.

\*A labyrinth (as opposed to a maze) is a single path laid out on the ground or a floor, which leads in a circular pattern to the centre. The walker then retraces their steps, in a symbolic journey. Historically the labyrinth has been used since pre-Greek times for group ritual and for private meditation.

## Liminal Ecologies in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

**D**iscussing the end of 1984, Margaret Atwood “credits Orwell’s novel with grounds for ‘optimism’ that few readers would share” (Ingersoll 173). Earl G. Ingersoll interrogates Atwood’s unconventional argument that “Orwell is much more optimistic than people give him credit for . . . Most people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn’t. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English—which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past” (qtd. in Ingersoll 173). Similarly, *The Handmaid’s Tale* ends with a note that indicates Gilead no longer exists, and Ingersoll suggests that “the ending of *Oryx and Crake* may be contaminated with a similar ‘optimism’ for which readers may have difficulty finding any firm basis” (173). Seeking a firm basis for optimism in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is indeed a difficult and dubious task when we consider that the novel has prompted a veritable flood of reviews and articles brimming with apocalyptic dread. Moreover, Atwood’s own numerous writings, website suggestions, and interviews appear to suggest prescribed approaches to *Oryx and Crake*. It’s as if the Children of Margaret have already marked the critical territory, limiting *Oryx and Crake* to a dystopian tradition of dark satire to be read as counterpart to *The Handmaid’s Tale*.<sup>1</sup> From an ecocritical perspective, however, one finds that despite the obvious apocalypse, Atwood’s novel offers new hope for humanity as well as other life forms. The ecological context of this novel reveals new growth in Atwood’s stressed arboretum.<sup>2</sup>

At its best, ecocriticism stirs readers to see forsaken lands such as Jimmy/Snowman’s<sup>3</sup> “Great Emptiness” (Atwood 103) not merely as dead and waste

spaces, but as liminal zones that continue to adapt and grow—even in “zero hour” (3). To view these zones as liminal encourages the re-examination of human relationships to post-natural areas such as abandoned lots, defunct corporate enclaves, and even graveyards, because in liminality “the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun” (qtd. in Spariosu 38). As isolated survivor of Crake’s bio-apocalypse, Jimmy/Snowman embodies the liminal as “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner, *Dramas* 232).<sup>4</sup> The liminar, characterized by anthropologist Victor Turner as an unsightly outsider, seems an apt description of the Abominable Snowman in *Oryx and Crake*: “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward-pointing footprints” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 7-8). The Snowman’s “backward-pointing footprints” symbolize a crucial dilemma in a world all but bereft of human kind. “These mythic and multi-directional footprints,” Danette DiMarco explains, “represent Snowman’s liminal position and potential power—to repeat a past cycle of aggression against nature in the name of personal profit, or to re-imagine a way for future living grounded in a genuine concern for others” (170). As Jimmy/Snowman scrutinizes his own ecological footprint alongside Crake’s genetically modified life forms and various indigenous species, he now lacks the capacity to replicate the unsustainable methods of the past. Rather, his transformation provides speculative groundwork for a new convergence of humans and ecosystems. Like the liminal land itself, Jimmy/Snowman embodies the resilience and promise of places considered doomed.

The basis for hope in this novel is in *place*, but not because as one critic suggests, the “elimination of the human race also solves the environmental crisis in one stroke” (Dunning 95). Instead, a study of existent flora and fauna in the novel indicates some chance for the environmental reincorporation, reconciliation, and transcendence of what Turner deems “*communitas*.” In its representation of liminal life from a biocentric perspective, *Oryx and Crake* reminds us that place is always being born. Life emerges to confuse the dividing edge, adapting and multiplying to reconnect pieces that have been broken. It is that “unconscionable” connection, the gene splice, that enables Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* to be read against the grain of critical responses that reduce the novel to a dystopian tale that cleanly represents the author’s supposed “political, social, and environmental concerns transformed into speculative fiction” (Howells, “Dystopian Visions” 161). The

term dystopian seems appropriate to label *Oryx and Crake* only in its most generic sense, for all Orwellian social, legal, and cultural apparatus has seemingly been eliminated by the novel's first chapter. Jimmy/Snowman's memories could be described as contextually dystopian as they are essentially set in the United States of the present using quasi-futuristic terminology—the “pleebland” is the depressed city and the “compound” is the gated community or corporate campus. On a speculative level, the memories of Jimmy/Snowman persist primarily to chronicle events that lead *Homo sapiens sapiens* to “zero hour,” a chronological pause between an unsustainable past and an uncertain future.

Reviews of *Oryx and Crake* foreground apocalyptic alarm with titles like “The End is Nigh” (*New Statesman*), “Grave New World” (*Ms.*), and “Bad News” (*Canadian Literature*). J. Brooks Bouson's “‘It's Game Over Forever’” parallels Atwood's comments about writing the novel with close readings of the text to censure aspects of Jimmy's “twenty-first century world that are meant to appal us as readers. Intent, in part, on instructing her readers, Atwood draws openly on the discourse of environmentalism as she emphasizes the effects of global warming on the future world” (142). In discussing the ambiguous ending of the novel, Bouson asks, “Are Snowman and the trio of survivors about to become the final human players in Crake's elaborate game of Extinctathon? Will it be ‘game over forever,’ as Crake predicted? Or is there some ray of hope that humanity will survive?” (153). Bouson's alternatives—“game over forever” or human survival—finally dismiss the complex viability of remaining flora and fauna that still thrive in the novel. This problem is symptomatic of recent Atwood criticism that uses anthropocentric theoretical paradigms to wrangle with environmental issues in her works. One representative example is “Re-Constructions of Reality in Margaret Atwood's Literature: A Constructionist Approach” where Klaus Peter Müller states that, “There is again nothing beyond that which human beings have constructed, the landscape is indeed the embodied mind. That is why there is a very strong emphasis in Atwood's work on the responsibility of human beings for their constructions of landscapes, cities, and environments” (246). This sort of critical disjuncture between ecological crisis and literary approaches that do not grant the ecological world any claim to “reality” seems a missed opportunity to scrutinize the environmental implications of Atwood's work. What these reviews and articles leave undone in their heralding of generic ecological dismay is the application of biocentric models to this literary exploration of future ecosystems and effects.

Let's entertain the notion that this novel's central focus is not the end of humanity, but the fate of all life. In the beginning of the novel the only person apparently left alive is Jimmy/Snowman, so readers are left to center not on precipitating events or social injustice as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but on "the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades" and the "shrieks of birds" that nest on abandoned offshore towers, with the "distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble" (*Oryx and Crake* 3). Two telling images resonate: tidal waters that submerge synthetic barriers, eroding them to particulate matter and seabirds that prevail on man-made platforms. After looking at his broken watch, Jimmy/Snowman scratches bug bites then "scans the ground for wildlife: all quiet, no scales and tails. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, he makes his way down from the tree" (4). In this first passage Jimmy/Snowman's interactions include flicking a spider, urinating on grasshoppers, and rubbing ants off a mango. It's clear that Jimmy/Snowman's relationship to place and environment, his range of vision, has drastically changed. He is now a niche within an ecosystem concerned with predators and sustenance, his primary concerns not social but ecological.

Readings of this novel have been species-limited in their response to "a world where everything has become altered almost beyond recognition by global warming and genetic engineering" (Howells, "*Oryx and Crake*" 170), leaving the biological diversity of *Oryx and Crake* unnoticed. But in "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology," published three years before *Oryx and Crake*, Ronald B. Hatch recognizes that "Atwood has something in common with recent ecocentrist writers in her rejection of the anthropomorphic viewpoint and their struggles to re-position humanity as one species among many in a web of natural connections" (181). This re-positioning can be seen in Jimmy/Snowman's relationship to birds and plant life in the post-natural city he inhabits. He observes:

Several of the buildings once held roof gardens, and now they're top-heavy with overgrown shrubbery. Hundreds of birds streaming across the sky towards them, roostward bound. Ibis? Herons? The black ones are cormorants, he knows that for sure. They settle down into the darkening foliage, croaking and squabbling. If he ever needs guano he'll know where to find it. (Atwood 95)

Buildings that once meant commerce and the towering superiority of the human species now mean fertilizer for Jimmy/Snowman, indicating that his perspective has now broadened to considerations of not only bird species but also gardening. He later notices when a "long scrawl of birds unwinds from



the empty towers—gulls, egrets, herons, heading off to fish along the shore . . . a salt marsh is forming on a one-time landfill dotted with semi-flooded townhouses. That's where all the birds are going: minnow city" (148). In these passages, the novel "pursues the theme of nature's very slow but very certain power to self-renew" (Hengen 77) by returning abandoned rooftops, landfills, and townhouses to a transformed but very real "web of natural connections." In "the former park", Jimmy/Snowman observes, "the botany is thrusting itself through every crack" (221) and that it "won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone" (221-222). This permutation, like the urban influx of bird life, indicates a resilience and increased adaptive capacity of plant and animal species.<sup>5</sup> Even Jimmy/Snowman's written report on the catastrophe is subject to the persistence of life, as language itself is swallowed: "It's the fate of these words to be eaten by beetles" (347). In one shattered corporate utopia, the RejoovenEsence compound, Jimmy/Snowman notes:

Already the weeds are thick along the curbs. The street is circular; in the island in the middle, a clutch of shrubs, unpruned and scraggly, flares with red and purple flowers. Some exotic splice: in a few years they will be overwhelmed. Or else they will spread, make inroads, choke out the native plants. Who can tell which? The whole world is now one vast uncontrolled experiment—the way it always was, Crake would have said—and the doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate. (228)

Obviously, this meditation on biota and non-indigenous species is in no way speculative or futuristic; one can see this process in any abandoned homestead where invasive plants have been abandoned to disturb biotic communities. Over time, species competition and adaptation will determine to what extent native and exotic species flourish, and in *Oryx and Crake* such moments are wrought with possibility as well as dread. The "uncontrolled experiment" of this landscape might well include "unintended consequences" that enable life to flourish in the interstitial zones left by a virtually extinct humanity.

At zero hour, Jimmy/Snowman holds out hope that this space has the potential to reach a steady state with high level of diversity for indigenous species. Zero, then, is not an absence without value, but rather a crucial point in biological time. Jimmy/Snowman's interactions with indigenous species also include a telling moment with a caterpillar "letting itself down on a thread" (41). The lepidopteran is "luscious, unreal green, like a gumdrop covered with tiny bright hairs"; it pauses, "smelling him, picking up on his chemical aura" (41). After noting that there "will be another such moment of

time, another such conjunction" (41), Jimmy/Snowman says to the caterpillar "[w]e have hard work to do, and loads to lift" (41). Even though Jimmy/Snowman second-guesses himself after his caterpillar-induced "inexplicable surge of tenderness and joy" (41), the metaphor nonetheless rings true. The caterpillar not only thrives at the end of time, but it also will "work" with Jimmy/Snowman to continue to foster a more sustainable and diverse bio-region. Like Jimmy/Snowman, the caterpillar is in a liminal stage between larva and moth or butterfly. The developmental transition of the caterpillar represents not only Jimmy/Snowman's transformation, but the fragile mutability of indigenous species observed in the natural world.

Crake, on the other hand, has abandoned altogether the differentiation between binary constructions such as native/exotic, indigenous/non-indigenous, and real/fake. Crake's "scientifically advanced world no longer relies upon such oppositional logic. Within his environment, the lines that separate the natural from the artificial are no longer necessary or visible" (Davis 89). As a scientist who both promotes rampant genetic modification for corporate interests and the deviously genocidal BlyssPlus pill, Crake seems to serve readily as corporate foil spliced together from H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. DiMarco argues that "a product of a profit-driven world who mirrors its economy of self-interest, Crake emerges as the quintessential *homo faber*, making it unlikely that any kind of positive social change will happen through him" (170); Crake's "scientific intelligence . . . positions him as a member of an elite class that values instrumental production only as it is linked with personal gain" (171). Ingersoll supports this contention by arguing that Crake serves as an enigmatic prediction of increasing pharmaceutical industry ills; "If anything," Ingersoll notes, "Crake learns from and exploits corporate behavior to further his own ends" (169). Those ends, we assume, are creating illnesses to keep "pills and profits rolling" (169). Coral Ann Howells states that "Crake the biological scientist, who espouses a purely empirical approach which devalues imagination, morality and art, appears to be an emotional blank, a state of mind imaged in his 'dark laconic clothing'" (*Oryx and Crake* 177). Howells surmises that Crake's "major scientific achievements—the BlyssPlus Pill and his life work of reinventing humanity with his own genetically modified Crakers—are a mixture of vision and commercial opportunism, underpinned by an uncanny drive towards death" (178). Most vehemently, Bouson proclaims, "Filled with scientific hubris, Crake, who does not believe in God or Nature, also does not believe

in the value of human life” (146). Readings that blast scientist Crake as millennial Frankenstein or corporate Moreau are incomplete because they de-emphasize Crake the bio-saboteur; as double-agent, Crake splices modified bodies to reveal, paradoxically, a yearning for *communitas* in a world that will little resemble its past or present state.

Crake’s most telling literary progenitor is not Victor Frankenstein who has “drunk also of the intoxicating draught” of scientist hubris (Shelley 29), but rather Gore Vidal’s Kalki, a religious idol turned eco-saboteur who renders the human race extinct with lotuses laced with a global dose of deadly bacterium *Yersinia enterocolitica*. As covert multinational Luddite, Crake fabricates a cover story to orchestrate global genocide so that the posthuman Children of Crake and the extant life on earth might survive. As clocks stop at zero hour, Crake and his liminal creations might be “seen less as a border or a limit between two already constituted worlds than as a space-time gap . . . through which a new world gradually emerges or is brought into being” (Spariosu 118). For good or ill, this new customized world is obviously generated by Crake’s complex understanding of the natural environment and its perils. He explains the paradox of human carrying capacity to Jimmy, asking him to “look at it realistically. You can’t couple a minimum access to food with an expanding population indefinitely. *Homo sapiens* doesn’t seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources” (119-20). Crake describes the overt effects of the BlyssPluss Pill in reproductive terms, explaining that it will “eliminate the external causes of death” such as “Overpopulation, leading—as we’ve seen in spades—to environmental degradation and poor nutrition” (293). In both passages, Crake’s sobering assessment of the overpopulation conundrum explains with frightening clarity what will happen to existing resources, clean air, and water if human numbers keep increasing at the current rate. “Demand for resources,” Crake reminds us, “has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply *for everyone*” (295). Crake prompts readers to think about questions that not only have an impact on the future but also concern many people today: What happens to customary human qualities associated with the Western post-industrial state in a world with housing and energy shortages, starvation, and drought? What happens to the inviolability of a human populace without the resources to lobby for its own betterment? What does it mean to be human when one’s only goal, day after day, is survival?

Clearly influenced by Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, *Oryx and Crake* modifies the dynamic between last man and group of post-apocalyptic creatures because—unlike vampires, plague mutants, zombies or other Matheson progeny—the Crakers pose no threat to Atwood's omega man. The Crakers serve as metonymic “floor models” (302) to exhibit alternative versions of humanity within millennial contexts, not simply in *arrière-garde* outrage but in far more unsettling philosophical speculation. Designed in Crake's high-security dome compound Paradise, these “environmentally friendly hominids” (Bouson 141) are depicted not as monstrous but as having supra-human beauty: “At first [Jimmy] couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colors. Each individual was exquisite” (302). Crake employs genetic engineering technologies to design posthuman creatures with not only aesthetic appeal but also resistance to climate change, insects, war, and starvation. As pertains to reproduction, Ingersoll succinctly explains that the “female goes into heat about every three years, cuing the males through the release of the appropriate pheromones, accompanied by visual signals of her readiness to mate: her genitalia and the adjacent area turn blue, an adaptation Crake copied from other higher primates” (168). To ensure fertility “the mating ritual requires that three males copulate with the female in turn, following a courting dance in which they woo her by waving their erect penises that have turned blue to mark their readiness to mate” (Ingersoll 168). Critics have emphasized the satirical or darkly prophetic import of the Crakers to the novel, most generally agreeing that it “is hard to take these purring, multi-colored, bluebottomed, blue-penis-ed, excrement-eating, perimeter-pissing, citrus-scented creatures seriously” (Dunning 95). But when we observe these traits in other species, they are understood as appropriate to specific adaptive functions; without undue anthropomorphism Crake describes modifications he and the so-called “splice geniuses” made in his GM humanoids. The “ancient primate” brain's “destructive features” have been eliminated, “the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism—or, as they referred to it in Paradise, pseudospeciation—had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: The Paradise people simply did not register skin colour” (305). “Hierarchy could not exist among them,” Crake explains, and “there was no territoriality . . . They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available” (305). Crakers are described here as having racial blindness, social grouping processes that eliminate dominance, and the

ability to consume a variety of raw plants. Ingersoll asks,

If life can survive only in the form of the Children of Crake, doesn't that survival outweigh the loss of some of what readers are likely to consider their 'humanity'? No, in thunder! Atwood seems to be shouting. If traditional human qualities have to be sacrificed in order to survive, it may not be worth surviving (167).

Problems of authorial intent aside, I would contend that life survives in increasingly diverse forms in *Oryx and Crake*, slowly adapting to the new topography left by the human cataclysm. Ecocritically, the question of the readers' sense of their "humanity" and "traditional human qualities" in opposition to survival of the species seems of secondary import in the novel to these questions: What is the relationship of these life forms to bioregion? What do the Crakers teach us about our own biotic relationships?

The Crakers embody genetically what Atwood's millennial "green" readers might aspire to behaviorally, and thus part of Atwood's novel's ecological optimism might be found in the capacity of culture to embrace an ethos of environmental stewardship. The emerging Craker culture fosters post-racial, non-hierarchical vegetarianism; the Crakers don't fight, don't waste, and know how to share. They have been programmed to prevent overpopulation and respect all species of life; Jimmy/Snowman thinks after stepping on a banana slug that "if he were a Craker he'd have to apologize to it—I'm sorry I stepped on you, *Child of Oryx*, please forgive my clumsiness" (334). Even their troublesome dining habits prompt ecocritical readers to reconsider issues of waste in a book preoccupied with garbage, excrement, and food security. The Crakers also help us to remember that as a species, humans are not exempt from adaptations and mutations that occur through processes of evolution, despite our various advances. Crake compels readers to speculate that as liminal creatures ourselves in passage among multiple states of being, humanity has the capacity over time to shed the genetic basis for attributes that lead to war and acts of ecocide. Thus, the essentialist conceptions of human inviolability that these critics champion are cunningly spliced with corporate science to encourage readers to ponder disquieting constructions of human identity. Atwood's novel remanufactures traditional philosophical categories of authentic, synthetic, and real in light of millennial scientific and environmental advance. Just, as *Oryx* explains, all "sex is real," biological effects of cosmetic surgery, cloning, predation by GM animals, and urban starvation are also real—regardless of where and how they originated. If it can hurt you, the novel suggests, it's real.

Before the BlyssPluss pill is introduced, depictions of animal-based transgenic hybrids are often described with as much humour as horror, and

fascination with real uses of animal genetic material sometimes adds a cloying lightness to abuses by multinational food and pharmaceutical conglomerates.<sup>6</sup> The stylistic playfulness of terms such as “ChickieNobs Bucket O’ Nubbins” (7) and “Organ-Oink Farms” (22) threaten to make depictions of corporate slaughterhouses and laboratories almost glitter. Moreover, Atwood’s novel appears to delight in depicting MaddAddam sabotage animals such as pox-infected wasps that annihilate ChickieNobs, car-destroying rodents “containing elements of both porcupine and beaver” (217), and a microbe that eats “tar and asphalt” that had “turned several interstate highways into sand” (217). But even these liminal bodies have the capacity to resist their corporate makers. Crake describes the MaddAddam covert “splice geniuses” as saboteurs “after the machinery. They’re after the whole system, they want to shut it down” (217). After BlyssPluss, Jimmy/Snowman observes that “Pigeons were supposed to be tusk-free, but maybe they were reverting to type now they’d gone feral, a fast-forward process considering their rapid-maturity genes” (38). Transgenic animals now represent emergence and flux in the relationship between humans and other species; humanity’s situation in this brave new biosphere, one that contains ferocious pigeons and rakunks, requires an extra level of respect and heedfulness, to say the least. Crake’s biological cosmology offers much more than a modest proposal because it develops an arena for negotiating and surviving cyborg landscapes and life to come. As a Crusoe figure who “goes animal” within a changing ecosystem to engender optimism in the face of crisis, Jimmy/Snowman must reconstitute identity in liminal space and bring about the possibility for ecological *communitas* through solitary survival, a return to the source of trauma, and renegotiation with the monstrous. “Last man” no more, he must consider cultural responses to the new ecological context, a quandary taken up by the God’s Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood* (2009).

Turner explains that “when a man ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of man, he also ceases to be master and becomes the equal or fellow of nonhuman beings. It is culture that fabricates structural distinctions; it is culture too that eradicates these distinctions in liminality” (*Dramas* 252-253). Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* reveals not only “The End,” but also a literary and cultural yearning for a new beginning—an ecological *communitas* emerging out of a world where cultural distinctions and borders have generated “more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries” (253-254). More than simply rehearsing

disaster, Atwood's novel attempts—with more optimism than people give her credit for—to see through apocalypse beyond a warming world where “everything was being ruined and would never be the same again” (63). Though the novel neither condones nor accepts ecocidal acts committed by genetic engineers or multinational food producers, it offers more than despair in the face of damage already done. An ecocritical reading of flora and fauna in *Oryx and Crake* strongly suggests that Jimmy/Snowman's liminal pilgrimage of confused identity, outsiderhood, ecological apprehension, and obligation will invariably end in a new stability of bioregional community. Jimmy/Snowman's predicament at the end of the novel reminds readers of our own dilemma at this crossroads in environmental history, at a moment “when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance” (Turner, *Ritual* 44).

#### NOTES

- 1 Characterizing *Oryx and Crake* as a dystopian bookend and sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) denies this book much of its ecocritical currency; as a novel of liminal topographies, *Oryx and Crake* can be seen rather as sequel and sister to Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing*. Both novels highlight literary figures with problems of self-classification as they observe at-risk natural environments. Both novels put forefront the correlation between imperiled environments and human identities in-between; both central literary figures have lost their names, with reclamation intimately intertwined with their changing relationships to the natural world. The “Historical Notes” at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals an optimism similar to that Atwood finds in 1984 and, arguably, *Oryx and Crake*.
- 2 Hope and “new growth” can also be found in *The Year of The Flood* (2009), the second novel in Atwood's proposed trilogy, though it is premature to suggest any larger statement about the ecological message of these works as a group before the complete trilogy is published.
- 3 I'll use “Jimmy/Snowman” to describe the novel's central character because of the many chronological shifts as well as the significance of identity formation and naming to this liminal figure.
- 4 Arnold van Gennep develops modern conceptions of liminality in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), and the idea is later refined by anthropologist Victor Turner. See Turner, *Dramas*.
- 5 “Biodiversity will increase . . . as buildings tumble and smash into each other,” suggests Alan Weisman in *The World Without Us* (2007), “and lime from crushed concrete raises soil pH, inviting in trees” (33).
- 6 Actual scientific “splices” such as “luminous green rabbits” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 96) and the “spoot/gider” (199) are described in relation to mood-enhancing wallpaper with “a modified form of Kirilian energy-sensing algae embedded in it” (201) and walls “made of a new mussle-adhesive/silicon/dendrite-formation alloy, ultra resistant” (297).

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# The Mouse, A Mouse

if the little mouse became  
as boundless as the sky as it wishes

the sky would become  
as free as a cloud

the cloud  
as powerful as a wind

and if the wind became  
as unshakable as a wall

the wall would become  
as penetrating as a mouse

and the little mouse  
a mouse

## Aaron d'Yves Thériault ou comment transgresser l'entre-deux

Les diverses écritures d'Yves Thériault, écrivain qui « s'est d'abord défini comme conteur », font preuve non seulement de la productivité de l'auteur mais aussi de sa maîtrise de styles et de genres très variés et de son intérêt pour les grands espaces, la liberté et l'être humain dans toutes ses facettes (Bérubé « Présentation » 10). C'est l'ampleur de l'œuvre thériausienne qui a retenu l'intérêt des initiateurs d'une exposition récente (septembre 2008-janvier 2009, Grande Bibliothèque) consacrée à l'auteur, *Yves Thériault : le pari de l'écriture*<sup>1</sup> et qui montre la portée de son œuvre dans la littérature québécoise.

Si les critiques littéraires ont toujours été fascinés par la richesse lyrique et symbolique de l'écriture de Thériault, l'intérêt universitaire se fait sentir au début des années 60<sup>2</sup>. Il en résulte de nouvelles approches qu'Hélène Lafrance a présentées et comparées dans son étude *Yves Thériault et l'institution littéraire québécoise* afin d'étudier le statut d'écrivain de Thériault. Après la publication de plusieurs mémoires de maîtrise et des articles qui privilégient les thèmes de la sexualité, de l'érotisme et de la violence (voir Carrier), le premier ouvrage qui analyse les structures, les thèmes et l'univers de l'écrivain est celui de Maurice Émond, *Yves Thériault et le combat de l'homme*. La dernière étude en date est celle de Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, *Un loup nommé Yves Thériault*, où une analyse de l'œuvre est complétée par des anecdotes présentant un portrait émouvant de l'auteur.

Dans *Une littérature en ébullition* (1968), Gérard Bessette consacre un long chapitre au primitivisme dans l'œuvre de Thériault, en montrant l'omniprésence de la thématique conflictuelle dans toute l'œuvre thériausienne, qui

se concentre dans son analyse sur la discorde entre parents et enfants. Cet antagonisme détermine aussi l'intrigue du roman qui sera l'objet de cette analyse, *Aaron*<sup>3</sup>, cinquième roman de Thériault, publié en 1954. Renald Bérubé présente ainsi la dissension dans *Aaron* : « le conflit de deux mondes, l'ancien et le moderne, le monde de la loi mosaïque et celui de l'Amérique du Nord après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale; le conflit de deux générations, de deux êtres qui s'aiment pourtant, le grand-père Moïshe et son petit-fils Aaron »<sup>4</sup>. Moïshe Cashin, vieux tailleur, est Juif orthodoxe et assure, après la mort de son fils David, l'éducation de son petit-fils<sup>5</sup>. Au cours du roman, celui-ci « se détache de la Maison des Récits de Moïshe et se lance à la poursuite de la réalisation de ses ambitions personnelles » (Teboul 2). Or, Moïshe et Aaron sont en froid l'un avec l'autre, une situation qui incarne, d'après Monique Bosco, « le drame des Juifs orthodoxes » (3), pris entre le respect de la tradition d'une part et le désir de mener une vie plus libre d'autre part. Bosco fait remarquer que ce thème de l'attachement à des vertus séculaires a ensuite largement été exploité par Thériault dans des romans comme *Agaguk* et *Ashini*. En effet, les « préoccupations essentielles » d'*Aaron* se prolongent dans d'autres œuvres de Thériault. D'après Bérubé, « l'aventure d'*Agaguk* commence à peu près là où s'achevait celle d'*Aaron*. Et dans *Tayaout, fils d'Agaguk* (1969), *Tayaout* semble plutôt s'inscrire dans la lignée des attitudes de Moïshe » (Bérubé « Présentation » 3).

Une des différences essentielles entre le roman publié en 1954 et la suite de l'œuvre thériausienne se rapporte au lieu où se déroule l'intrigue. *Aaron* est le seul véritable roman urbain où Thériault incarne « ses personnages dans le décor de Montréal » (Bosco 3). C'est le Montréal des rues étroites où règne l'atmosphère de son quartier juif des années 50, aux alentours de la rue Saint-Laurent, à l'écart du trafic. Mais, pour Aaron, c'est aussi « une ville en constant d'avenir, s'étendant de tous côtés, en pleine expansion, en pleine construction, . . . démolissant les vestiges du passé » (Bosco 3). L'espace clos de l'appartement dans le ghetto montréalais qui est le domaine de Moïshe, s'oppose en plus et très explicitement à la verticalité de la montagne, le mont Royal, dont la hauteur évoque chez le jeune protagoniste la sensation de flotter. Aaron, se développant passe d'enfant à l'état d'adolescent, quitte la maison pour aller chercher dans la montagne, nature sauvage en plein centre de la métropole canadienne, son identité.

Ces mondes de plus en plus différents dans lesquels vivent le grand-père et le petit-fils sont décrits en termes d'espaces qui soulignent une distanciation inévitable entre les deux personnages. Si, pour Moïshe, l'appartement

étouffant peut à jamais devenir un temple magnifique, ne serait-ce que pour la durée d'une récitation d'un extrait de la Torah, Aaron cherche à trouver son bonheur « au faite » (87) du mont Royal.

Ces lieux concrets symbolisent très clairement des conceptions divergentes qu'ont les deux hommes de la vie : protection, continuation de la tradition et omniprésence de la religion dans le cas du grand-père; liberté et ascension sociale pour ce qui est du petit-fils.

Rien d'étonnant à ce que ces deux visions du monde s'expriment en termes d'espace : comme l'affirment le linguiste George Lakoff et le philosophe Mark Johnson dans leur étude *Metaphors We Live By* (1980)<sup>6</sup>, l'orientation spatiale fait partie intégrante de notre compréhension du monde. Des oppositions binaires comme haut-bas, intérieur-extérieur, devant-derrrière, profondeur-surface, centre-periphérie se basent sur l'expérience corporelle et culturelle de l'être humain. Lakoff et Johnson développent l'opposition entre verticalité et horizontalité en montrant que les sentiments humains, par exemple, sont appréhendés en termes de verticalité et en argumentant que cette expérience humaine s'exprime dans notre langage quotidien sous forme de métaphores : être au septième ciel pour exprimer le bonheur; s'effondrer, chuter, s'écrouler pour dire la tristesse, le découragement.

À l'aide de ces métaphores d'orientation déterminées par Lakoff et Johnson, je me propose de montrer que la vision du monde de Moïse et d'Aaron dépend de la place qu'ils prennent dans l'espace. Ces métaphores soulignent que les espaces dans lesquels vivent les deux personnages se contrastent de plus en plus. Au fur et à mesure que l'enfant devient un adolescent, il se sent de plus en plus à l'aise dans des espaces où son grand-père ne se rendra jamais. Le but de cette analyse est de montrer comment la spatialité exprime l'écart de plus en plus grand et inévitable entre deux générations, et de quelle façon les deux protagonistes réagissent à cet éloignement.

Pour élaborer ces oppositions, l'analyse des métaphores d'orientation sera complétée par d'autres théories sur l'espace. La notion de la frontière telle que Youri Lotman l'a développée dans *Universe of the Mind* (1990) et la dialectique du dedans et du dehors de Bachelard<sup>7</sup> aideront à étudier l'opposition entre intérieur et extérieur. Le terme hors-lieu que Régine Robin a défini comme « un espace où des appartenances multiples se négocient toujours dans la difficulté » (9) ainsi que les réflexions théoriques de Bachelard<sup>8</sup> aideront à préciser l'émancipation du jeune Aaron. Finalement, le concept de liminalité, terme provenant d'études anthropologiques où il s'applique aux états de changement, de transition d'un stade de la vie à un autre<sup>9</sup>, sera utile

pour analyser la situation d'entre-deux dans laquelle se trouve le jeune protagoniste. Dans ce cadre, je m'appuierai sur les réflexions de Homi K. Bhabha, qui considère l'espace liminaire comme un entre-deux où des changements essentiels peuvent se produire.

### **Liminalité : vivre entre deux mondes**

La première image qu'offre le roman du vieux Moishe, et sur laquelle s'ouvre l'histoire d'Aaron et de son grand-père, est significative de la place que Moishe prend dans la vie. Il se trouve à sa fenêtre, « impassible, regardant sans voir, écoutant sans entendre » (3). La fenêtre, en tant qu'élément littéraire, symbolise évidemment d'une part une ouverture vers le monde, offrant une vue sur l'extérieur, une possibilité même de communiquer avec ce qui se trouve à l'extérieur. D'autre part, elle protège également contre tout ce qui est étrange, ennemi, inconnu. Dans ce dernier cas, elle constitue une barrière entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur. Pour Moishe, la fenêtre semble à première vue remplir cette dernière fonction : même si « la fenêtre est largement ouverte » (3), il ignore ce qui se passe de l'autre côté de la fenêtre parce que tous les sons qui montent par la fenêtre sont « terrifiants » pour Moishe, « sauvages, déments ». Pourtant, il y reste, il ne se détourne pas de la fenêtre, il ne la ferme pas, même s'il déteste ces sons. À mon sens, cette situation est particulièrement intéressante pour l'orientation et le point de vue.

Comme l'a fait remarquer Jean Morency dans son article publié dans *Cahiers Yves Thériault* 1, le spectacle de la ville est sonore plus que visuel (3) : c'est le tumulte de voix, de cris, de rires, de musique, de ronronnement de voitures qui caractérise premièrement l'environnement cosmopolite de Montréal. Non seulement Moishe rejette cette cacophonie, il s'y oppose même à l'aide de sa propre voix : il récite des versets du texte biblique, extraits cités amplement dans le roman. Ainsi, comme le dit Morency, il oppose la parole sacrée de la Torah à la parole profane de la ville, qui, dans le roman, est associée à la « nouvelle langue sonore du siècle » (4). Le grand-père n'accepte pas cette nouvelle langue, il refuse donc la modernité du présent : « de l'embrasure de la fenêtre, indifférent aux bruits, à la nuit vivante, aux rues surpeuplées, Moishe parlait » (4). Le rôle que joue la fenêtre en tant que frontière séparant l'espace sûr, harmonieux et sacré, d'une part, de l'espace dangereux, chaotique et hostile, d'autre part (Lotman 131), est poussé plus loin. La fenêtre ouverte, habituellement un espace « where what is "external" is transformed into what is "internal" » (136), n'établit ici pas de contact entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur, au contraire, elle semble être fermée

aux influences de l'extérieur puisqu'elle ne laisse pas entrer la ville moderne et profane dans l'appartement du grand-père. Ces deux mondes existent par conséquent l'un à côté de l'autre, la fenêtre ne fonctionne pas comme membrane qui filtre et transforme le monde extérieur pour faire partie du monde intérieur, elle oppose, au contraire, le dehors et le dedans.

La façon dont se présente la fenêtre crée ainsi l'illusion d'un monde à part et clos que serait l'appartement de Moïse. D'abord, le petit fils partage cet univers avec son grand-père : dans cette première scène du roman le petit Aaron se trouve dans son lit, écoutant la voix du grand-père, entendant surtout sa parole : « par-dessus la voix de la ville, bourdonnement continu, domin[e] la voix de Moïse, sortie de l'ombre, sans appartenance, éternelle et immuable » (8). Encore une fois, les mots 'éternelle' et 'immuable' soulignent l'importance de la tradition et de la continuation d'une culture d'une génération à l'autre. Il est clair dès le début du roman qu'Aaron est censé conserver la langue, les mœurs, le mode de vie des ancêtres. En tant qu'enfant, Aaron accepte ce rôle : « je veux aller où tu iras » (41), assure-t-il dans un dialogue avec Moïse, mais il change d'avis au fur et à mesure qu'il grandit. Il commence à se poser des questions, à interroger le passé et son identité juive, une interrogation qui finira par l'opposer à son grand-père.

Le moment de transition est logiquement, mais aussi un peu paradoxalement, la Bar-Mitzvah, cérémonie selon laquelle le jeune garçon juif atteint sa majorité religieuse (en général 13 ans), le moment où il compte comme une personne à part entière dans la communauté. Aaron devient donc homme, et c'est bien sûr son grand-père qui le lui annonce et qui en est fier.

La scène qui suit cette déclaration me semble révélatrice du développement du protagoniste : tout agité, Aaron sort et se met « à courir avec les autres vers l'avenue des Pins » (44). Il se lance donc dans le monde pour célébrer ce moment important avec ses amis. Il quitte le ghetto, mais immédiatement ce monde extérieur devient menaçant : plusieurs enfants lui barrent le chemin et le traitent de maudit juif. Ce comportement antisémite l'oblige à rentrer, mais il est attaqué avant de pouvoir le faire : dans le large portique de la maison où il habite, Aaron doit « plier devant le nombre », il est brutalisé par d'autres enfants du ghetto et dès lors commence chez lui « le lent apprentissage de la soumission à l'inévitable » (45).

Il éprouve donc physiquement qu'il est un fils du peuple élu constamment chassé, qu'il fait partie de ces perpétuels errants. La métaphore d'orientation est évidente ici : il apprendra la soumission, il s'habituera à plier devant la majorité. C'est le mouvement vers le bas qui se manifeste au moment où

commence sa vie d'adulte. Les termes utilisés pour décrire sa situation sont caractéristiques : d'abord « il se sent écrasé », ensuite il « saisit le moment de grimper l'escalier » (46), le même mouvement de redressement après avoir chuté est exprimé par les paroles de Moïse quand Aaron entre dans l'appartement : « quand on est tombé, ne se relève-t-on pas? » (47) Tomber et se relever, mouvement qui se répétera à l'infini dans sa vie d'adulte; pour la première fois, Aaron est confronté à son altérité et la réaction des enfants (la jeune fille canadienne-française Marie Lemieux en tête, et ses camarades dont un Polonais et un Yougoslave) donne une impulsion à la mise en question de son identité juive.

Le lieu de l'agression est évidemment significatif, puisque le portique fonctionne comme espace frontalier entre ce que Lotman considère le foyer et le non-foyer<sup>10</sup>. C'est l'exemple d'un lieu périphérique que des groupes marginalisés (les sans-abri, les jeunes, les drogués, sont les exemples fournis par Lotman) ont tendance à s'approprier et où le savoir-vivre habituel devient flou. Dans cette scène, c'est le héros lui-même qui est considéré comme marginal et cette marginalité l'oblige à occuper une place à part dans la société. Dans le roman, le portique est décrit comme « une pièce n'appartenant à personne et à tout le monde » (45), un espace de marge symbolisant la non-appartenance d'Aaron aux deux mondes distingués ci-dessus. La tension entre l'inclusion (être considéré comme membre à part entière du groupe des Juifs orthodoxes) et l'exclusion (par conséquent le protagoniste est exclu du monde profane) donne lieu à une situation permanente de liminalité. Après avoir vécu le rite de passage de la Bar-Mitzvah, qui est en elle-même une expérience liminale selon la théorie anthropologique de Arnold van Gennep, le jeune héros est passé du stade de l'enfance à celui de la vie adulte. Cette transition résulte néanmoins en une phase dans laquelle il vit à tout moment dans un espace liminal, parce que sa vie d'adulte est caractérisée par l'état d'être entre les deux mondes, il vit pour ainsi dire sur la frontière et n'appartient donc à aucun des deux.

C'est en cherchant à « passer le seuil » (121)—seuil étant le sens du mot latin *limen* sur lequel se base la notion de liminalité—qu'Aaron veut se distancier de son sort auquel il semble être condamné, à savoir vivre une vie de soumission. Pour ce faire, il devra dépasser l'impasse symbolisée par le cul-de-sac dans lequel il vit avec son grand-père : « une rue sans issue » où il est « acculé, traqué » (56). C'est le grand-père qui s'en rend bien compte un jour, « descend[ant] la rue Saint-Laurent tête basse . . . tournant à l'avenue des Pins et se hâtant vers le cul-de-sac » (56). Mais d'après Moïse, c'est

justement le destin qui les a poussés là, le destin de souffrir et d'avoir ainsi toujours la tête basse : « Pour rentrer chez lui, il marcha tête basse comme il en avait maintenant pris l'habitude. » (83) Le cul-de-sac oblige à vivre dans l'humilité, et l'allure de Moïshe, toujours orientée vers le bas, exprime l'acceptation de ce sort.

À ce lieu puant, sale, et sans issue s'oppose la maison luxueuse dans un quartier riche de la métropole où vit Viedna, jeune fille qui a renoncé à son identité juive et qui se fait désormais appeler Cécile. La visite qu'y fait Aaron souligne une fois de plus la situation de liminalité dans laquelle se trouve le héros. D'une part, il se sent « une personnalité neuve » (164) dans cette habitation moderne, il n'y est pas du tout intimidé : « cette beauté, cette propreté, ce luxe même n'étaient-ils pas plus purs que les taudis immondes où Moïshe renvoyait d'instinct tous les fidèles à l'enseignement des Lois ? » (165), se demande-t-il. Si la beauté et le luxe lui conviennent, s'il est à l'aise dans ce milieu, il n'est par contre pas attiré par le cynisme de la jeune fille qui ne veut plus être juive et dont la seule ambition est d'être riche. Pour Aaron, la question est de savoir : comment réaliser ses ambitions, comment fuir la pauvreté, sans pour autant devenir comme elle. Ou, en d'autres mots, comment appartenir au monde moderne sans renoncer aux traditions du vieux monde du peuple orthodoxe?

### **La montagne comme lieu d'apprentissage**

La réponse à cette question peut sans doute être trouvée dans le lieu qui s'élève non seulement au-dessus du ghetto, mais également au-dessus de la ville : dans la montagne. La montagne, la nature au sein de la ville, est un lieu d'isolement et de libération. Dans la postface de l'édition de 1980 du roman<sup>11</sup>, Laurent Mailhot fait la comparaison entre « la taille redressée, le mouvement souple, la démarche assurée d'Aaron pénétrant dans la synagogue pour la fête de la Bar-Mitzvah » (451) et la façon dont il gravit la montagne, « avec le même souffle, les mêmes pensées, les mêmes rêves » (451). La montagne joue le rôle du temple et c'est le grand-père lui-même qui lui conseille d'y aller parce que, pour Moïshe, la montagne, chaque montagne, représente le Sinaï (« les ordres divins n'auraient pas été transmis en vain sur la Montagne » 57). Pourtant, pour Aaron, la montagne aura une autre signification, il n'y trouvera pas la paix, comme l'espère son grand-père (75), mais la lutte et une nouvelle identité. Le mont Royal est le lieu dont Aaron « sortira transformé, investi d'une nouvelle science : celle . . . du fonctionnement même du monde moderne » (Major 245).



Pour arriver à la connaissance de la réalité, condition de son émancipation, il doit passer par plusieurs stades. D'abord, il trouve la solitude sur le mont Royal et il devient « l'adolescent de la montagne » : soucieux, grave. Cette première étape se caractérise par des questions existentielles : « Que devenir? Où aller? Comment être grand ? » (80) nourrissant ensuite son imagination : il rêve de devenir un grand homme, élevé au-dessus des autres qui lui paraissent déjà appartenir à un « monde étrange à lui-même » (81). Les autres sont d'après lui « enracinés dans une petitesse qu'il lui [faut] dépasser à tout prix » (81). La métaphore d'orientation ne peut pas être plus claire : la grandeur du héros s'oppose à la petitesse des gens communs. La supériorité du héros est encore élaborée à l'aide de formes verbales : « il marcha longtemps, passa le monument à Jeanne Mance, puis grimpa cette pente où, l'hiver, glissent les traîneaux et les toboggans. Puis il escalada d'autres pentes, rejoignit, au faite du mont, les chemins paisibles et déserts à ce temps de l'année » (87). S'il marche seul, comme le fait son grand-père, l'écart entre Aaron et Moishe est évident : si le grand-père marche, tête basse, vers son cul-de-sac, Aaron grimpe pour arriver au sommet du mont. Le véritable gouffre entre le petit-fils et le grand-père commence néanmoins à se creuser (Mailhot 452) lors du deuxième stade de l'initiation du jeune homme qui est, à mon sens, la rencontre avec Viedna, la jeune fille d'avant celle qui a changé son nom pour Cécile, avant d'être devenue trop cynique pour son âge. C'est elle qui « entraîne le protagoniste vers un petit vallon isolé, chaud, tranquille, alcôve secrète » où elle l'initie « à l'univers et à son fonctionnement » (Major 245).

Dans cette étape nécessaire pour le développement du protagoniste, la montagne lui paraît comme une oasis (93); les deux jeunes se trouvent réunis par la nature : « Ils [vivent] dans leur montagne, sommet désert qui se [dresse] vers le ciel » (93). Tout en s'allongeant dans l'herbe, ils se trouvent tout près du ciel. Horizontalité et verticalité ne s'opposent plus ici; ils sont couchés et flottent au-dessus du monde. Le besoin de se sentir supérieur aux autres se transforme alors en un sentiment tout naturel de suprématie caractéristique de cet état d'intangibilité dans lequel se trouvent tous les amoureux : « D'où ils étaient, ils dominaient Montréal. Ils voyaient les toits à leurs pieds, les hauts édifices, la ville ornée de tant d'arbres, et comme une grande paix puissante qui montait des masses de béton, d'acier, de ces rues dont les sons ne leur parvenaient point. » (94) Quel contraste avec la situation de Moishe au début du roman, vivant dans son propre monde à côté de la ville tumultueuse, s'efforçant de créer la paix dans le petit appartement. Ici, la paix

vient tout naturellement. Pourtant, ce n'est pas la forme de paix à laquelle se référerait le grand-père en conseillant au petit-fils d'aller dans la montagne. Il s'agit bien d'une paix temporaire; Aaron doit passer par ce stade de bonheur et d'amour, mais il finira son apprentissage tout seul.

C'est qu'il s'avère que la jeune fille veut se défaire de la tradition et de la religion surtout, puisque, d'après elle, « les malheurs des Juifs viennent de la croyance » (99). Comme Aaron, elle est attirée par la puissance, l'influence, l'autorité, mais, contrairement à lui, elle est sûre d'y arriver à l'aide de l'argent : « L'argent, la seule force et le seul dieu » (115), dit-elle. Mailhot, toujours dans la postface, explique : « Pour Aaron, la colline du mont Royal existe concrètement, physiquement. Mais le mont Royal n'est pas seulement pour lui un parc, quelques rochers, des arbres, un lac, la solitude et la fraîcheur, il est véritablement un symbole de royauté, d'affranchissement, de domination, de puissance : une ascension humaine et virile, non pas d'abord et surtout une vulgaire ascension dans l'échelle socio-économique. » (450) Or, une discordance très nette commence à séparer les deux amoureux, puisque c'est justement cette « vulgaire ascension » qui attire Viedna; à l'aide de la richesse matérielle, elle veut oublier et même rejeter son identité juive. Pour Aaron, la situation est beaucoup plus complexe. Commence alors la séparation des deux jeunes qui se reflète dans la nature : « La nuit tomb[e] rapidement. La montagne sombr[e] dans un abîme noir et le ciel sembl[e] s'éloigner, disparaître avec toutes ses clartés, plus haut, bien plus haut là où c'est le néant. » (114) Les métaphores d'orientation sont la nuit qui tombe, la montagne qui n'est plus symbole de supériorité mais qui, au contraire, devient elle-même abîme, et la hauteur qui ne se présente plus comme but désirable mais comme un état qui fait peur à cause de son caractère infini, ennemi presque. C'est le moment de la séparation; Aaron doit continuer seul.

Arrive le troisième stade de l'apprentissage où le héros est de nouveau « isolé en lui-même par toutes ces réflexions » (125). Toutefois, le livre ne révèle pas si Aaron regagnera le sommet de la montagne, et cette dernière étape reste pour ainsi dire ouverte. L'émancipation du protagoniste continue alors dans un tout autre lieu, celui de la ville. La transformation du personnage se manifeste au niveau de son physique : « grand garçon élancé, bien vêtu, paletot de bonne coupe, le front dégagé des boucles qui autrefois l'encombraient » (157). Ayant changé de vêtements, il s'est explicitement distancé de sa vie de soumission : il porte une veste longue de bonne coupe, mais il ne fabrique pas ces vêtements. Au lieu de travailler comme tailleur, comme l'aurait voulu Moishe, il est embauché dans un bureau. De plus,

son allure grande et svelte montre que les journées qu'il a passées dans la montagne l'ont en effet aidé à grandir et à se développer. Finalement, son front, qui est maintenant dégagé des vieilles boucles, montre explicitement une libération par rapport au passé. Il se présente comme un jeune homme sûr de lui-même. Pourtant, il habite toujours dans le ghetto avec son grand-père, et par conséquent il continue à vivre entre les deux mondes, même s'il s'efforce de faire entrer le monde moderne dans l'appartement. Ainsi, Aaron achète un appareil de télévision auquel Moïshe, évidemment, tourne le dos. Aaron propose d'aller se vêtir à neuf tous les deux, mais le grand-père refuse de s'habiller « comme les Gentils » (146). Tous les efforts du jeune homme échouent, l'écart entre les deux hommes devient insurmontable lorsque Aaron lui parle du désir qui est né en lui lors de ces journées de réflexions sur la montagne : « Un jour, peut-être je serai le maître du monde. » (154) L'aspiration de devenir un grand homme a pris des dimensions encore plus grandes : il veut atteindre le plus haut possible. Évidemment, aux yeux de Moïshe, le petit-fils se moque ici du pouvoir de Dieu et il sera puni pour tant d'orgueil : « Adoshem punit ceux qui veulent se hisser jusqu'à lui sans avoir été appelés. » (154)

Paradoxalement, le jeune homme s'est adressé à son grand-père parce qu'il avait « besoin de tendresse et n'avait pas su comment s'y prendre pour l'obtenir » (154). C'est précisément ce besoin d'affection qui motive Aaron à ne pas quitter l'appartement de Moïshe, à rester près du vieux afin de retrouver par moments la tendresse de son enfance. La véritable séparation est provoquée par le vieil homme lorsque celui-ci soupçonne qu'Aaron envisage un changement de nom afin de pouvoir plus vite faire carrière. En effet, Aaron essaie de « se persuader qu'un nom, ça se change » (182), tout en se gardant bien de suivre les traces de Viedna. Mais même s'il hésite encore, Moïshe « retrouv[e] sa voix d'antan, la voix roulante, ronde comme un son de tempête, la voix qui terrorisait Aaron » (183), et il renvoie son petit-fils pour qui il n'y a plus de place dans sa « Maison ». Cette maison, qui avait depuis un certain temps perdu la fonction d'un chez-soi pour Aaron, sera désormais un endroit interdit; il est pour ainsi dire chassé de son territoire tout comme l'avaient été son père et son grand-père avant lui. Son statut d'errant s'inscrit dans la tradition de son peuple.

Dans la ville il se promène, il fréquente la rue Saint-Laurent où il rencontre d'autres Juifs émancipés, mais Montréal ne devient pour lui un « hors-lieu » que lorsque la ville se présente sous ses traits naturels : « Montréal reverdie, ses arbres déjà lourds de bourgeons gras . . . Le long des trottoirs, les eaux

couraient qui venaient de la montagne par les pentes . . . Géographies inexorables, hydrauliques aux destins prévus, immuables » (155). Le destin de l'eau, sa marche interchangeable, donne lieu à une réflexion sur la capacité ou l'incapacité de l'homme de changer sa propre direction dans sa vie. D'une part, son appartenance aux racines fixe l'homme dans une tradition interchangeable, d'autre part, le rejet de cette tradition mènerait à une non-appartenance radicale. Aaron cherche à transgresser l'entre-deux dans lequel il vit et où la tradition et la liberté sont incompatibles, pour trouver un espace où les différentes appartenances coexistent. Un tel hors-lieu se présente probablement sous la forme de Montréal au printemps, où le protagoniste se perd dans les environs. L'ambiance éveille chez lui une rêverie—songe qui est perturbé par une averse soudaine—où l'idée de rénovation est incorporée dans la continuité que représente le cycle de la vie.

Comme la rêverie et le brusque dérangement de celle-ci se caractérisent par le rôle capital de l'eau, l'étude bachelardienne sur l'élément liquide est particulièrement opportune ici. Bachelard distingue plusieurs effets possibles auxquels l'eau peut donner lieu; en l'occurrence c'est la distinction entre la purification et la violence qui caractérise la lutte du héros. L'eau fraîche, matière de « puissance intime » et de « force féconde, renovatrice, polyvalente » (*L'eau* 163), nourrit le rêve de renouvellement qui emmène le jeune héros en voyage : « Un jour, le soleil—mon soleil—sucera cette eau—mon eau—hors des vasques de l'océan; il la tirera à lui pour en faire des nuages. Puis il laissera le vent les porter au-dessus des pays. Partout un ciel, partout des vents, et mon nuage peut aller partout. Mais s'il revient ici? Alors le nuage crèvera et l'eau retrouvera la montagne . . . » (156). Dans la vie cyclique de la nature, l'eau est d'abord transformée en nuage, qui voyage partout pour finalement trouver la montagne, qui fait à son tour pour ainsi dire sortir l'eau du nuage. En voyageant avec les gouttes, une union entre le héros et la nature s'établit : mon soleil, mon eau et, ensuite, « ma sœur la montagne » (156). Si la nature suit son cours, elle donne au protagoniste la possibilité de voyager librement, de mener une vie plus libre, sans être obligé de renoncer aux origines. Cette vision optimiste semble être détruite par l'eau violente, c'est-à-dire, dans l'optique de Bachelard, l'eau qui se présente comme obstacle naturel et que l'être humain cherche à franchir. Or, le saut au-dessus d'un ruisseau ou le fait de nager dans la mer (Bachelard, *L'eau* 208, 186) expriment le désir humain de vaincre les forces naturelles. Dans *Aaron*, l'eau violente se présente sous la forme d'une « averse chaude, pressée, lourde » (157), et Aaron de courir « en biais » pour s'abriter contre cette puissance. Le

contraste entre l'imagination d'un voyage où le héros s'incorpore à l'eau et flotte dans le ciel, et la réalité où il s'incline pour se protéger contre l'eau qui tombe, s'exprime dans une métaphore d'orientation qui, à mon avis, caractérise la vie d'Aaron : s'il est obligé de se courber de temps en temps pour survivre, il n'abandonnera pas son rêve où il se laisse porter au-dessus des pays. Le plus important sera de trouver un équilibre entre ces deux mouvements opposés, flotter comme un nuage et éviter l'averse. Contrairement à son père David, qui est mort quand Aaron avait onze ans, il ne s'inclinera pas. Après une courte période de révolte, le père n'a pas su résister à l'influence de Moïse et il s'est soumis, « plus attaché que jamais à la pratique des rites » (25). Aaron, étant « plus solide que David » (Mailhot 455), poursuivra sa lutte.

Comme nous l'avons constaté, la lutte émancipatrice d'Aaron l'éloigne de plus en plus de son grand-père, jusqu'à ce qu'une séparation définitive entre les deux hommes soit inévitable. Désormais, le grand-père et le petit-fils vivront dans deux mondes inconciliables. Cet éloignement s'exprime à l'aide de métaphores d'orientation, qui montrent le souhait du jeune homme de s'élever et qui soulignent que Moïse accepte l'inévitable. Le roman finit sur l'image de Moïse, qui ne relève plus la tête. Après une dernière tentative de s'adresser à Dieu, sa résignation semble être complète : « Il leva les mains au ciel en un geste lent, lui-même une dernière prière » (189), mais très vite « les épaules fléchirent » (189). Cette image montre non seulement que le vieil homme ne vivra pas longtemps, « chemin parcouru et vie faite » (175), mais aussi que « le grand-père, naguère substitut du Père, du Justicier, de l'Orgueil et de la Colère . . . , [devient] doute, vide, faiblesse, besoin. » (Mailhot 448) En effet, le maître est devenu « comme quelque relique antique, quelque statue de l'angoisse » (186). En comparant cette description du grand-père à celle du début du roman, où il se trouve devant la fenêtre et réfute le monde extérieur, il faut conclure que sa peur ne vient finalement pas de l'extérieur, mais de l'intérieur. Comme le constate Bachelard en étudiant la dialectique du dehors et dedans, « la peur est ici l'être même » (*L'espace* 196). Par conséquent, Moïse ne pourra plus se réfugier dans un espace clos et sûr ; il habite un « horrible en-dedans en-dehors » (*L'espace* 195).

Aaron, par contre, cherche à transgresser l'entre-deux en créant un hors-lieu qui lui permettra de maintenir les liens avec la tradition, tout en s'émancipant. Ce désir d'équilibre semble néanmoins difficile à réaliser, notamment à cause du danger de vivre dans un monde à part au lieu d'habiter une sphère plus élevée, comme le fait Viedna à partir du moment où elle a changé de

nom : « il disait *grimper* et sentait bien que c'était faux, que Viedna n'habitait aucune sphère plus élevée mais seulement un monde à part. » (160) À la fin du livre, il est suggéré qu'Aaron a également changé de nom et la question de savoir s'impose s'il arrivera en effet à « changer le cours des eaux » sans avoir à renoncer à une partie de son identité.

## NOTES

- 1 Le catalogue de l'exposition a été publié par la Bibliothèque des Archives nationales du Québec et les Presses de l'Université Laval, sous la direction de Renald Bérubé.
- 2 Voir Carrier. Carrier fait d'ailleurs remarquer qu'Yves Thériault « a souvent reproché aux critiques des grands journaux leur incompétence et leur manque de jugement » (159).
- 3 Les citations seront prises dans l'édition du dernier havre, 2003. *Aaron* fut monté à la télévision en 1958 par Guy Beaulne.
- 4 Présentation du roman dans le *Dictionnaire des œuvres littéraires du Québec*, tome III, 1982 : 1.
- 5 Pour une analyse de la figure du juif dans la littérature québécoise voir l'étude de Victor Teboul.
- 6 Dans cet article je me réfère à la traduction française (par Michel de Fornel) de cet ouvrage, *Les Métaphores dans la vie quotidienne*, publiée par les Éditions de Minuit en 1985.
- 7 *La Poétique de l'espace* (1957).
- 8 *L'eau et les rêves* (1942).
- 9 Voir Arnold van Gennep et Victor Turner.
- 10 "Home and non-home" (Lotman 140). Le mot "home" est à distinguer du mot "house", ce dernier se réfère au bâtiment matériel tandis que "home" exprime les sentiments de chez-soi et de certitude que peut fournir la maison.
- 11 Je me réfère ici au texte inclus dans l'édition du dernier havre de 2003. 445-59.

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## Yard Work

The mower's more an ornament  
than a tool. With a frame  
as rigid as a veteran's, ribboned  
with rust for services rendered,  
it's an occasion when my father  
wheedles it out from retirement  
to trim the rampant yard.

My father mows between raised beds  
of runner beans and cosmos, rows of  
tomatoes, milky peonies. Our long  
plots impose their order upon the surface,  
intolerant of eyebright, the leaking silkweed.  
But the natives will push through,  
fly their seeds like sparks, sow themselves.

\*

How I'm already limited by my choice  
of implements. Not for my unpracticed hands  
the machines that men ply to compel, to shape.  
That power isn't given, only tapped.  
Now a pair of kitchen scissors are cold  
across my palm, glinting despite decades  
of use snipping string and lilacs loose.

I stoop to sever the overgrown grass  
that coils like tripwire, and a sweetness  
rises like yeast. Summer's fermenting,  
the accumulated pressures slip untethered—  
neither the clothesline with its yawning pins  
nor the brickbacked  
rowhouses contain  
the parts of our lives evaporating, overhead.

\*



What grief we'd save ourselves if we let lapse  
all our bankable plans for this leaseheld land—  
the ones we would never settle, but carry  
over, year to year, accruing zeros.  
My mother's designs on gridded paper  
would conceive a garden of white bulbs.  
How could such modest visions translate to loss?

Our dreams spin like slides in a magic lamp,  
coloured shadows across a tiered, gray sky.  
Having been cut off from her ancestral ties,  
she claimed a subdivided lot. Fine print  
preceded her arrival. My mother mapped  
buried treasure for her daughters to find  
amongst the transplanted ferns, the tall stakes.

\*

I've forgotten the secret locations  
of time capsules, jars of marbles entombed  
beneath the pine deck. I sealed my childhood  
fears behind doors. Once I ran inside  
at the glimpse of rogue mushrooms, and hidden,  
sacs, pregnant with small flights. In nightmares,  
my body sank into sudden quicksands.

I was told there's nothing left to explore,  
and grew into the solace of chores.  
I yank and hack, weed and rake,  
dead leaves cleaving to the bright blades.  
Between the dry stalks, are uninhabited shells,  
hairpins, twine, plastic balls, deflated;  
green pennies, like fares paid into the past.

\*

This is how families become hampered,  
as if with each gesture, we sink deeper  
into the porous earth floors, already jammed  
with objects I never meant to catalogue,  
not equipped to dig. The field is dense,  
entering as risky as diving  
into the archives of memory.

Years from now, the house sold, my parents  
held the deed only time could untenant.  
We inscribe ourselves, over and over  
again onto place, with a violence  
that surely must deposit our names  
into the layers of topsoil and mica.  
Which machines for this kind of divining?

# Forgetting Loss in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*

**W**hile theories of melancholia have been ascendant in the fields of gender, queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies in the past two decades, scholars of this topic have tended to keep coming back to the same problem: if subjects of melancholia refuse to forget, what happens in politics and what happens to them? These two effects do not always map onto each other in the same way. Cultural theorists of melancholia have done an exceptional job of thinking through all the ways in which continuous grief can be mobilized for creative, political, social, and ethical projects and ends, but they have only hinted at the psychic harm that this process can incur.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in their concerted effort to move the discussion of melancholia beyond its associations with narcissism, pathology, and the psychic domain in general, they have gone too far in one direction. What is the effect on traumatized subjects who turn, or who are turned, back to look at their trauma? How can we envision a political project that takes better ethical care of those who bear the burden of remembering? Going a step further, I ask: is there a space left for forgetting in our endeavours to develop a politics of loss?

This essay engages this question through a reading of Madeleine Thien's novel *Certainty*, a novel that seems to pose most urgently questions that have to do with the ambiguous value of continually returning to a traumatic past. In its exploration of how reengaging the past is inflected differently for different generations living in the aftermath of World War II, *Certainty* can be read in the context of what Marianne Hirsch has described as the "ethics and aesthetics of remembrance in the aftermath of catastrophe" ("Generation" 104). Drawing on Heather Love's concept of the "backward turn" and Hirsch's

concept of “postmemory,” I argue that the impetus to keep certain wounds open and alive in the public sphere—to keep our gazes focused on a difficult past in order to combat historical erasure—must be tempered by a consideration of the psychic and material costs of such acts. Thien’s novel calls attention to these costs through an emphasis on the theme of return to trauma and on the necessity, sometimes, of forgetting.

### **The Costs of Looking Back**

In attempting to restore a productive value to forgetting in relation to critical discourses of melancholia, let me first briefly contextualize why remembering has been so important for scholars of critical race and queer studies in North America. In her influential book *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Ann Anlin Cheng asks the profoundly important question of how affects—specifically, melancholia felt as a result of racism—can be mobilized to serve political and social justice for racialized subjects in the United States. She turns to the famous Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* as a case study of how the decision was the first instance in United States history of “the expansion in the notion of justice to accommodate the ‘intangible’ effects of racism” (4). While Cheng uses *Brown v. Board* as an example of the potential link between racial grief and social grievance, she is also quick to point out the difficulty of talking about the “melancholia” of racialized peoples, especially since it seems to reinscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain” (14). Yet, as Cheng acknowledges, “it is surely equally harmful *not* to talk about this history of sorrow” (14) since memory in this context provides us with important and necessary insight into the components of racialization—“the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (10).

According to David Eng and Shinhee Han in their article “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” it is this hegemonic ideal of whiteness from which Asian Americans are continually estranged since a social structure is in place in America that ensures they remain in a state of “suspended assimilation” (345). Adopting a psychoanalytic approach to studying depression among Asian American youth, Eng and Han bring the question of race to bear upon Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of grief in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Challenging Freud’s association of melancholia with a pathological condition that “emerges from the disturbance of a one-person psychology,” Eng

and Han emphasize the *social* basis of melancholic feelings (345).<sup>2</sup> While the mental health issues of Asian American students have been for the most part individualized and attributed to essential cultural difference, Eng and Han argue instead that these issues may be traced back to structural forms of racism and exploitation that are ongoing and linked to a long history of racist institutionalized exclusions, from Japanese internment to Chinese exclusion (347). The melancholic refusal to “get over” this history thus signifies an agential subject position rather than a pathological one since, as Eng and Han explain, “[d]iscourses of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion force a misremembering of these exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can return only as a type of repetitive national haunting” (347).<sup>3</sup> Collective remembering, then, functions as an important antidotal force against racial melancholia—the “psychic splitting and national dis-ease” of Asian Americans engendered through experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racial formation (349).

In her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love reveals the similar political stakes of recuperating memory for queer subjects who have had their histories and identities under erasure. Love argues that “we need to pursue a fuller engagement with negative affects and with the intransigent difficulties of making feeling the basis for politics (14). What distinguishes Love from other theorists of melancholia is not her goal to recuperate negative affect as a politically productive tool, but her nuanced consideration of the challenges that this approach imposes upon “groups constituted by historical injury” (1). To illustrate her concept of the “backward turn,” Love invokes a number of classical figures who turn to the past: “Lot’s wife turning to look at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Orpheus turning back toward Eurydice at the gates of the underworld; Odysseus looking back at the Sirens as his boat pulls away; Walter Benjamin’s angel of history turning away from the future to face the ruined landscape of the past” (5). Love seems to position these figures along a spectrum of sorts—one that recognizes the differential costs paid in the act of turning back: Lot’s wife is destroyed as she turns to a pillar of salt; Orpheus saves himself, but loses Eurydice; Odysseus and the angel of history continue to move forward, but the former is bound to the mast and the latter has the wind tearing at his wings. In other words, none of the figures escapes the engagement with the past unscathed, and some suffer complete annihilation. Yet Love reminds us that “an absolute refusal to linger in the past may entail other kinds of losses” (10). In the end, Love asserts that “as long as

homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget” (29). The wider goals of the movement supersede the risk to the individual, who cannot afford to forget but who will pay a price for not forgetting.

Given that Love ultimately endorses a politics of remembering even as she acknowledges the costs, I am prompted to ask again: is there a space for forgetting within the fight for social grievance? How can we move forward in this fight at the same time that we allow ourselves, and others, to turn our backs on past events that remain too painful to look at? Might it be that some subjects are not yet ready to look back while others are ready to stop looking? I am interested in theorizing the value of forgetting, of turning away from a traumatic past, in a way that is not at odds with the project of becoming subjects of grievance. I am cognizant, however, that such an argument raises delicate problems when we are talking about the pasts of marginalized groups. To speak of forgetting these pasts in order to move forward immediately triggers alarm bells of reactionary, conservative discourse. Whereas alternative modes of remembering and remembrance are often regarded as subversive cultural forms, forgetting is, for the most part, seen as complicit with hegemonic forms of power.<sup>4</sup> While the value of remembering—or rather the costs of forgetting—for political movements that seek redress has been widely theorized, this essay argues that the costs of remembering for the individual must be held in tension with the necessary project of continuing to grieve losses endured by a whole community. Finding ways to live with one’s own trauma or to ethically relate to the trauma of others is not to forget injury, but to allow a critical and lived space for forgetting when remembering threatens to re-injure. Following Cheng’s assertion that one place “where such complexity gets theorized is literature” (15), I now turn to a discussion of how Madeleine Thien’s novel *Certainty* reveals the limits of theories of productive melancholia and reflects a turn to forgetting.

### **Returning to Trauma**

In *Certainty*, the character Matthew Lim embodies the figure of the melancholic, undertaking two return trips to the site of trauma (Sandakan, North Borneo—later Malaysia). As a result of witnessing the murder of his father during the Japanese occupation of Sandakan during World War II, Matthew suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder akin to what Cathy Caruth describes as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event

or set of events, which takes the form of repeated hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event” (4). From the outset of the novel, Matthew’s returns are associated with a desire for a cure: “In the decades that followed [the war], [Matthew] returned only twice, both times thinking that he could find a reason, a person who could bind him together, contain his memories, finally” (47). This person is Ani, Matthew’s childhood friend and first love, with whom he reconnects on his first trip to Sandakan. They are reunited only to be torn apart again by the community’s memory of Matthew’s dead father’s actions as a war collaborator. Fearing for the future of her unborn child who would bear the Lim family legacy, Ani ends the relationship with Matthew and keeps her pregnancy a secret from him. To Matthew, a future with Ani embodies “a life free from uncertainty” (166), a cure to the grief that threatens to overcome him; however, place contains the wounds of the past, as Ani reminds Matthew: “You should have known that forgetting could not last. Not in this place” (167). It is the refusal to forget on the part of the people in Sandakan that guarantees the impossibility of Matthew’s return. Here, Thien begins to explore the notion of the cost of remembering by demonstrating how the community’s memory is the basis for Matthew’s exclusion. This attention to the costs of holding on to the past is not a call to “normal mourning” in the Freudian sense, but a recognition that the work of mourning—work that Butler argues is rooted in an ethical recognition of the precarity of the other<sup>5</sup>—can in some circumstances necessitate the act of forgetting.

Thien’s novel emphasizes that conditions of structural oppression in the present can also foreclose the possibility of forgetting. While Matthew manages to start a new life by marrying a woman named Clara Leung and then moving to Vancouver, it soon becomes apparent to Matthew that forgetting for him cannot last in the new place either: “When Matthew came home, exhausted, ill, he said that he wanted to return to Australia, to Malaysia, that he had underestimated how different this country would be. He had been mistaken, he said, to believe he could start over, leave Sandakan and all that happened there behind” (134). Both the hostility of the adopted country and the pull of the homeland are represented as mutually reinforcing factors that influence Matthew’s desire to return. In a novel which strives to demonstrate what characters have in common as they struggle to cope with genealogies of loss, Matthew’s breakdown demonstrates that not all characters bear the costs of these losses equally. The racism, poverty, and everyday struggles that occur in the context of immigration can play a role in causing the traumas of

racialized diasporic subjects to resurface in the hostland. Daniel Schacter has explained in his book *How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* that remembering is a process of reconstructing the past based on the conditions of the present. As he puts it, “present influences play a much larger role in determining what is remembered than what actually happened in the past” (129). In *Certainty*, Thien suggests that Matthew’s sudden desire to return to the Sandakan is at least partially engendered by feelings of unbelonging in Canada.

Instead of enabling a process of repair and healing, however, Matthew’s return seems to break him further apart. In Sandakan, Matthew experiences an uncanny encounter with the past as he observes a film crew shooting a movie about the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps in Sandakan during World World II. In his book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger argues that the increasing reliance on digital remembering may disrupt the reconstructive dimension of human memory that filters information based on necessity. In our digital era, the ubiquity of triggers that can recall events the mind has forgotten threatens to undermine human reasoning by “confront[ing] us with too much of our past and thus imped[ing] our ability to decide and act in time” (119). Watching a scene “repeated many times” in which a POW is shot in the head by a Japanese soldier, Matthew “felt as if a stone at the bottom of his life had rolled loose, as if the contents of his memory could no longer be contained. They spilled into the air around him, vivid and uncontrolled. Why was this happening, he had wondered, when he had tried so hard, given up so much, to leave it behind?” (Thien 284-285). Here, Thien brings together several strands of imagery that she has employed throughout the novel—the glass jar, the road, the seed—to figure Matthew’s retraumatization in witnessing a scene reminiscent of his father’s murder. As Caruth has influentially argued, trauma is a kind of psychic wound that is “unavailable” to the traumatized subject as an event, but is only experienced as a latent return, a compulsive repetition. Furthermore, trauma is not merely a privatized event, for Caruth writes that it “seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). What happens when traumatized subjects are turned back to look at the story of that wound if they are not yet, or perhaps never will be, ready to tell it themselves? Standing at the site of trauma, Matthew asks himself: “When would the war be over for him? Sometimes, he said, one had



to let go of the living just as surely as one grieved the dead. Some things, lost long ago, could not be returned” (285). In Matthew’s reflections, Thien illustrates the high psychological costs that can be incurred by subjects who are “triggered” by representations of their traumatic histories. As clinical psychologist Elizabeth Fortes has stated in an interview with CBC Radio, these subjects “are nervous; their system becomes flooded with neurobiological information that once again brings them close to the traumatic response.” The effects can even be fatal if trauma is triggered in the wrong environment.

Thien’s novel engages this problem by linking Nietzsche’s arguments about the value of forgetting to scientific theories of trauma recovery and memory.<sup>6</sup> In a conversation with Ansel about how her radio interviewees sometimes recall memories unexpectedly, Gail states, “It’s Nietzsche. The ability to forget is what brings us peace” (85). Gail’s insight prompts her partner Ansel to add that “[h]e was on to something in a biochemical way, too. If there’s trauma, or a difficult memory, sometimes that severs the links. The memories themselves don’t disappear, but you can’t find your way back to them, because the glue that connects the different streams is somehow dissolved” (85).<sup>7</sup> The inability to find one’s way back to some traumatic memories, then, is not a failure but rather a preservation mechanism.<sup>8</sup> Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Eric Kandel has recently done groundbreaking work on the neuroscience of memory and has discussed the bioethics of medicalised forgetting in an interview with CBC Radio. Kandel explains that drugs have been developed that can medically prevent “post-traumatic stress disorder, while allowing [trauma patients] the experience and some aspect of the memory, except emotionally reduced.” Kandel does not come down on one side or the other in this debate, insisting that this issue needs to be “discussed, debated, and decided upon,” not within the confines of science, but in the public sphere at large. Thien’s novel also emphasizes the importance of opening up this kind of dialogue about remembering and forgetting trauma: “[Matthew] had once gone back to find it, the place between the rows of trees, but what he had tried to keep safe was lost. His childhood, a time before the war. A glass jar that moves from his father’s hand to his, a continuous question that asks, how am I to live now, when all is said and done and grief must finally be set aside” (305). Here, the past shifts from a fixed, static object into a question about survival in the present. As *Certainty* illustrates, the politics of loss should function not as an either/or prescription to remember or to forget, but rather as a mode of interrogation that seeks to maintain a careful, ethical balance in between.

Thien's novel also suggests that the maintenance of this ethical balance can be complicated by the medium through which trauma is represented. The character of Sipke Vermulem is a war photographer who begins his career with an optimistic view of the value of his profession, for he says to Ani: "The picture shows us that this suffering is made by people, and because it is made by us, it is not inevitable. That was the reason I wanted to be a photographer" (246). Sipke's words here recall Judith Butler's argument in her book *Frames of War* that a photograph can relay affect and institute a mode of acknowledgement that "argues' for the grievability of a life" (98). Haunting images of war, Butler argues, "might motivate . . . viewers to change their point of view or to assume a new course of action" (68). Sipke appears to become disillusioned with such a view of photography, however, after taking a photo at the end of the Algerian War that depicted a man with kerosene and a torch walking towards a barred house with a mob behind him (244). Paralleling in some ways the scene in which Matthew watches helplessly as his father is shot, Sipke is unable to stop the man and the mob from setting fire to the house of a suspected war collaborator, even as Sipke tells them that the entire family is inside. The afterlife of this photograph convinces Sipke that photographs of suffering do not always do the ethical work of haunting and grievability, as Butler herself has acknowledged. Sipke says to Ani:

I can't bear to look at it. I keep asking myself, what happens when the context is lost and only the image remains? People look at that picture now, in magazines and books, and they speculate about it. They don't know what happened before or after. All they see is this one moment, disconnected from the past or the future. It feeds their imagination, but it doesn't give them knowledge. (245-246)

Thien is concerned here with the relationship between the medium of representing trauma and the imagination of the viewer/listener. Without an ethical context, images of war and atrocity can have the effect of desensitizing viewers and can be framed to serve conservative agendas. Sipke's changed perspective on photography reflects Susan Sontag's critique that the photographs elicit an ethical pathos in viewers only momentarily, whereas "[n]arratives can make us understand" (83). Just as Butler suggests that Sontag perhaps draws too stark a division between the affective mobilizing potential of narrative versus photography (69), Thien's treatment of visual images, both photography and film, is neither uniformly condemning nor uncritically celebratory. Eleanor Ty, in her article on Thien's novel, puts this point another way by suggesting that "Thien's view of visual and audio

media is . . . neither fully modernist nor postmodernist in attitude. . . . Instead of an attitude of fear or criticism, she sees machines as necessary and useful apparatuses, almost as extensions of our selves, our bodies, our memories.” Indeed, Thien presents digital recording media as important technologies of remembering and transmitting the past, as evidenced by the positive relationship that many characters in the novel have with technology.

At the same time, however, Thien’s novel forces a reflection on the importance of thinking, more than ever, about how, why, and when we reconstruct trauma in the digital age. Listening to Sipke’s account of the iconic photo of the war in Algeria, Ani recalls finding her dead father’s body on the airfield in Sandakan during World War II—a memory which prompts her to ask, “[w]hat good did it do, after all, to remember, to hold onto the past, if the most crucial events in life could not be changed? What good did memory do if one could never make amends?” (247). Ani’s words echo critic Moris Farhi’s view that “memory, unless transformed into meaningful states that enable us to develop, will cause great devastation. Memories of trauma, if left to fossilise—or deliberately allowed to fossilise in blind obeisance to tradition—will wreak irreparable harm” (25). Acts of memory, Thien’s novel suggests, do not *always* elicit ethical responsiveness or change; these acts can sometimes make us paralyzingly unfit for action, as Sipke announces: “I would forget that day in Algeria, if I could” (247).

### **Anchoring the Past, Failing to Save**

While characters such as Matthew, Clara, Ani, Sipke, and William Sullivan struggle with memories of a traumatic past that they have experienced firsthand, the second-generation characters in *Certainty*—Gail, Kathleen, and Wideh—all bear a relationship to their parents’ traumatic histories that can be characterized in terms of what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”—“a generational structure of transmission deeply embedded in . . . forms of mediation” (“Generation” 114).<sup>9</sup> Although Hirsch limits her discussion of postmemory to the Jewish Holocaust, she gestures to the relevance of her analysis “to numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer” (108). According to Hirsch, postmemorial fiction “attempt[s] to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” (12). Hirsch argues that in displacing and recontextualizing personal and collective images of trauma in their artistic work, the postmemorial generation “has been able to make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or

simple retraumatization (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but a *mostly* helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past” (“Surviving” 9). Hirsch tells us that without an imaginative and reconstructive relationship to the past, repeated images of trauma have the capacity to “retraumatize, making distant viewers into surrogate victims who, having seen the images so often, have adopted them into their own narratives and memories, and have thus become all the more vulnerable to their effects” (8). Dora Apel reinforces this notion of the vulnerability of the postmemorial generation, whom she describes as having a “compulsion toward forms of reenactment” (3) that often “end in a kind of crisis, a greater sense of traumatic history’s elusiveness, but also its pervasiveness and its imminence” (188).

In *Certainty*, this crisis of postmemory is reflected in the character of Gail, who is constructed as a curious listener deeply affected by the silences in her family life. She grows up knowing that there is a secret in her father’s past to which she is not privileged—“a secret that has coloured her life, her childhood” (259). Postmemory, Hirsch explains, describes the second generation’s “curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge” (“Surviving” 11). The narrator recounts that “Matthew would tell [Gail] stories about his childhood before the war, about Sandakan, until he realized that she remembered so much. She wanted to hear everything, to know how the story continued. His words ran dry” (18). Met with her father’s silence and hesitation to disclose details of his past, Gail infers pieces of his story instead from listening to the sounds of her father’s nightmares and the whispers of secret names, from observing the morning-after signs of his insomnia and the waking hours he spends in his armchair, letting his tea go cold (208). Thien’s novel illuminates how we encounter the question of trauma transmission as the perplexity of living, understanding, and writing the broken intimacies of the present. Matthew’s past comes to have material effects on the present when the narrator recounts that “in the last few months, [Gail] has felt as if, day by day, she is losing footing. There are fissures, openings, that she no longer knows how to cover over” (259). Throughout *Certainty*, the trope of vertical movement, both descent and ascent, is central in figuring the structure of the trauma, and in this passage, the metaphor of falling is indicative of Gail’s precarious psychological state in needing answers that can ground or anchor her in the present. Gail’s inherited memories, filled with absences and gaps, cause her to become figuratively “unhinged” from a stable ground of memory and identity; ironically, however, it is Gail’s encounter with Sipke

and his counsel to allow some things to remain in the past—"to respect what is mysterious"—that ends up providing some measure of clarity for Gail (272). Sipke's meditation encapsulates a dimension of Thien's ethical project: Finding a way to care for the most vulnerable in the present means returning to the past in order to discover provisional, not absolute, truths that can help shape the path forward.

Thien presents the idea that an ethics of representing trauma must entail a respect for silence or uncertainty—an allowance for the details that, in Thien's words, have been purposefully "lost, forgotten, or pushed away" (qtd. in Chong 11).<sup>10</sup> Thien illustrates how Gail, in the production of her radio documentaries, embodies this figure of an ethical respondent to trauma in a recollected scene where Gail interviews the mother of a recently drowned teenaged son. During the interview, the woman suddenly becomes angry at Gail for asking questions that the woman perceives to be intrusive, prompting Gail to stop the recorder and to give the cassette tape to the grieving woman: "If only you could understand," the woman had said, clutching the tape. "The words that I put in the world can never be taken back" (210). Invoking the issue of the ethical implications of interviewing victims of trauma in the media, this scene brings to mind Fortes' claim that although "there is a long tradition of testimony in the survivors of trauma . . . there is a proper environment to speak about the trauma." Furthermore, Fortes believes that the "media has to have an ethical position to respect these traumatic histories." Thien illustrates in her novel how this ethical position can involve taking no action at all.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the psychic costs of remembering cannot be undone. Bringing pain into politics cannot function as a relentless recuperation of affect for the purpose of spectacle or politics. Thien's novel seems to make a particular appeal to the postmemorial generation to understand most intimately when it is important to draw the line.

Allowing this space for forgetting—for some elements of the past to remain in the past—can be difficult since, as Hirsch explains, the postmemorial generation's experience is often "shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair, and by the consciousness that the child's own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss" ("Generation" 12). In *Certainty*, this "desire to repair" is often figured as a theme of failing to save. Gail explains that "[f]or as long as she can remember, she had wanted to save them [her parents]. She imagined her parents turning to her, seeing her finally, and the past would fall away. That is what she had hoped for when she was a child" (212). This imagined "turning to"

Gail by Matthew and Clara is an act of turning away from the past, the trauma, and towards the future; however, it is a turn that Gail believes she has failed to bring about. Thien's novel is, in fact, replete with characters who believe that they have failed to save someone in the past: Matthew wishes that he could go back in time to prevent the murder of his father (167); Ansel spends night after night studying Gail's test results, trying to find "the detail that might have saved her" (95); Ani dreams about her mother telling her "to stop searching backwards," that Ani "cannot save" them because "the past is done" (172); Clara is told by her father "that what she believed was false," that she could not have saved the boy she watched fall to his death (123); Sipke is plagued by the memory of failing to stop the mob from setting fire to the family of the war collaborator. Thien uses this theme of the failure to save not only to comment on the dangers of becoming fixated on changing the past, but also perhaps to engage in a critique of historiography as being what Heather Love describes as a fantasy of "heroic rescue" (50).

Engaging with Michel Foucault's writing in which he discusses the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Love argues that Foucault exposes how our desire to recuperate figures from the past often has more to do with our desire to secure an identity in the present than with saving those figures. According to Love, the classical myth offers an apt emblem of the work of the historian since Orpheus' "failed attempt to rescue Eurydice is a sign of the impossibility of the historical project per se: the dead do not come back from beyond the grave, and this fact constitutes the pathos of the historical project" (50). The practice of queer history is doomed to failure, yet not turning back at all, Love insists, would be a betrayal of the dead. In this sense, failing to save the dead is not a failure at all, but rather an acceptance that "[t]aking care of the past without attempting to fix it means living with bad attachments, identifying through loss, allowing ourselves to be haunted" (43).

In *Certainty*, William Sullivan, like the figure of Eurydice, appears to Gail as a ghost from the past who is calling out to be saved. When he was a Canadian POW in Hong Kong during World War II, Sullivan encrypted his diary so that the enemy could not read it, but later he could not remember the encryption code. Gail's friend Harry Jaarsma explains that "Cryptography is a kind of protection," and he advises the listeners of Gail's radio documentary to "[t]hink of the Sullivan diary as a message from the past, but one that has been buried beneath many layers" (104). The forgotten code of Sullivan's diary reinforces Thien's recurring Nietzschean theme that forgetting is an survival mechanism of the mind. But Thien also uses

the diary as metaphor for the lures of the past that can threaten to consume those in the present, for Jaarsma further explains that, as a cryptographer, “you assume that there is something to be pursued, some meaning to be unravelled. It is exactly the kind of thing that can destroy a person” (105). Thien suggests that the postmemorial generation is particularly susceptible to this condition since their inherited memories are already so thoroughly permeated by narrative voids. They are like the obsessive codebreakers of Jaarsma’s analogy, the Orpheus of Love’s analogy of queer historiography.

In this respect, Thien constructs many parallels between Gail and Kathleen as subjects of postmemory: Kathleen believes that cracking the encryption of the diary will reveal something about the trauma her father endured in the camps—something that will, in turn, explain the years of alcoholism and domestic abuse that he subjected his family to after the war. Kathleen, like Gail, is searching for answers that can explain the broken intimacies of the present. When the “perfect answer to the mystery of her father” (203) turns out to be Sullivan’s log of the mundane, daily rituals of living in the POW camp, rather than a witness account of violence and torture, Thien suggests that some horrors are better left in the past; some intimacies may never be fully repaired. What subjects of grief can anchor themselves to for support are the everyday truths of how, in Caruth’s words, “we are bound to each other’s traumas” (24), for the narrator of *Certainty* explains: “Gail works with the belief that histories touch . . . So she weaves together interviews, narration, music, and sound in the hope that stories will not be lost in the chaos of never touching one another, never overlapping in any true way” (210). The last radio piece that Gail nearly finishes before she dies brings her story together with her father’s story, providing insight into Hirsch’s inquiry about how we can best carry the stories of atrocity survivors “forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them” (“Generation” 105). Rather than reproducing the horror and shock of past atrocities, Gail’s documentary—and Thien’s novel—lets the truth of the trauma become visible tangentially through the intimate sounds and voices of those puzzling the perplexity of living in the trauma’s aftermath.

Thien takes care, however, not to celebrate the production of the postmemorial project as a redemptive endpoint in a teleology of inter-generational trauma transmission. The most important puzzle that Thien presents in the novel does not have to do with Matthew’s or Sullivan’s pasts, but with the mystery of Gail’s sudden death by illness. Gail’s death establishes a kind of

circular model of grief in the novel that mirrors melancholia's self-reproducing structure. By the end the question that continues to hang over the text is: what is the meaning of Gail's death? Or rather, to what kind of metaphorical speculation does Gail's fatal illness lend itself? At one point, Ansel, Gail's partner, who is a doctor of internal medicine, speculates that Gail had an undiagnosed underlying medical condition, possibly inherited, that made her susceptible to pneumonia (95). The suggestion that Gail dies from an invisible inherited illness that suddenly surfaces at a specific point in her life invites us to connect Gail's death to Freudian melancholia—specifically the belated return of the repressed traumatic event. Thien introduces the possibility that Gail's death is linked to the trauma that has been transmitted to her from her father. The notion of a biological effect of transmitted trauma has been studied by theorists such as Teresa Brennan who argues that the “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into one another” (3). Emphasizing the physiological impact of transmitted affects, Brennan seeks to challenge the “taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject [that] is a residual of Eurocentrism in critical thinking” (2). Although she does not explicitly draw a parallel, Brennan's theory of the “process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's” (9) bears many similarities to the notion of sympathy or sympathetic attraction that has its roots in nineteenth-century medical discourses.<sup>12</sup> While Brennan actually moves away from the view of a genetically-inherited basis to affective conditions, she draws on Jean Laplanche's understanding of the “child as the repository of the unconscious of the parents” (32). Laplanche theorized that the unconscious of the parent could be transmitted to the child, who is especially susceptible to the forceful projections of the parents (33). Brennan explains that her theory differs from Laplanche in that she locates the “transmission of the ‘unconscious’ of the other within an intersubjective economy of affects and energy, in which transmission occurs as a matter of course” (173). Laplanche and Brennan's theories provide insight into the physiological dimension of the postmemorial generation's lifelong proximity to their parents' traumas. As Hirsch has explained, the children of atrocity survivors can inherit the weight of their parents' traumatic knowledge through nonverbal and unconscious forms of communication since postmemory is “often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible” (“Surviving” 9). Within this interpretive framework, Gail's illness in *Certainty* could be read as a physiological manifestation of the affects that



have been transmitted to her from her father—affects that not only influence and shape the direction of Gail’s life, but that actually physiologically “imprint” themselves on Gail in a manner that has fatal consequences. Thien’s novel prompts us to consider whether the weight of historical trauma can become even more unupportable for some members of the second generation who are driven to want to remember more than their parents. What is at stake in allowing a space for forgetting is not only the psychic survival of those who have suffered atrocity first-hand, but also of those in the postmemorial generation who perhaps feel most acutely that it would be a failure to forget.

### **Forgetting Loss**

In “After Loss, What Then?”, the afterword to Eng and Kazanjian’s *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler describes how the losses of genocide, slavery, exile, colonization can form the basis for a new sense of community—a site that “turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” (468). Butler, however, wants readers “to be clear about what this productivity is,” arguing that “[w]hatever it is, it cannot constitute a rewriting of the past or a redemption that would successfully reconstitute its meaning from and as the present” (468). What is notable in Butler’s definition here is not its clarity, but rather its ambiguity. Butler tells us only that productive melancholia is a response to loss that captures the traces of the past while not seeking to rewrite or redeem it. At the end of Butler’s essay, this ambiguity extends to the productivity of melancholia itself as she writes:

Many of the essays here refer to the sensuality of melancholia, to its form of pleasure, its mode of becoming, and therefore reject its identification with paralysis. But it probably remains true that it is only because we know its stasis that we can trace its motion, and that we want to. The rituals of mourning are sites of merriment . . . but as [Benjamin’s] text effectively shows, it is not always possible to keep the dance alive. (472)

Butler implies that while critics have been intent on recuperating the “sensuality” and “pleasure” of melancholia as a “mode of becoming,” they have perhaps not balanced this approach with a consideration of melancholia’s potential to incite psychic paralysis. A politics of loss, in Butler’s view, requires an acknowledgement that melancholia’s mode of becoming and its mode of paralysis operate dialectically.

In many ways, the title of Butler’s afterword resonates at the centre of Madeleine Thien’s *Certainty*. Set in the aftermath of loss that is both private and historical, Thien’s novel explores the value of forgetting in an age when

the atrocities of recent history have become increasingly commodified and mechanically reproduced. As the survivors and the descendants of the atrocities of the past half-century increasingly revisit their catastrophic pasts, *Certainty* demands a critical conversation among trauma, diaspora, postcolonial, and globalization studies that not only recognizes the value of remembering for the collective project of redress and reconciliation, but that also takes stock of the relentless call to remember and of the kinds of representations of trauma that are reproduced in the name of remembering. Thien's novel reminds us that melancholia is, at root, a condition of the traumatized individual psyche. The fragility of this psyche—and its vulnerability to retraumatization through discourse and representation—is not something we should forget or strive to move beyond in our efforts to develop a politics of loss.

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## NOTES

- 1 See especially Ahmed, *Happiness*; Butler, "After Loss" and *Precarious Life*; Cheng; Crimp; Cho; Eng and Han; Eng and Kanjanjian; Flatley; Gilroy; Love; Munoz; and Mishra.
- 2 Eng and Kanjanjian note that although Freud initially drew a distinction between mourning—"a psychic process in which libido is withdrawn from a lost object"—and melancholia—"an inability to resolve grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal"—he later blurred the distinction between these two states (3).
- 3 For an excellent article on the role of melancholia in remembering similar exclusions in Asian Canadian history, see Cho.
- 4 See especially Ahmed, *Emotion*, 33; Baudrillard, 23; Brown, 74; Kinsman.
- 5 For more on Butler's view of precarity and ethics, see *Precarious Life*.
- 6 See *The Use and Abuse of History*, 5-12, where Nietzsche links forgetting to action, arguing for the necessity of forgetting under the debilitating burden of memory imposed by historicism.
- 7 Thien is drawing here on recent developments in brain science that suggest memory is a function of links between neurons in the brain. As Anthony J. Greene explains, "memory is not like a video recording . . . or any of the other common storage devices to which it has been compared. It is much more like a web of connections between people and things. Indeed, recent research has shown that some people who lose their memory also lose their ability to connect things to each other in the mind" (22).
- 8 In his article "Seven Types of Forgetting," Paul Connerton seeks to challenge the commonly-held view "that remembering and commemorating is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing" (59). Connerton argues that while forgetting can be

complicit with regimes of silence and oppression, it can also be a necessary adaptive mechanism to safeguard against “too much cognitive dissonance” (63).

- 9 Like Eng and Han’s theory of racial melancholia as an “intersubjective psychology . . . that might be addressed and resolved across generations” (354), Hirsch’s theory of postmemory is invested in remembering pasts that have been historically silenced or misremembered. Postmemory, with its emphasis on how the postmemorial generation interweaves and reconstructs both (non)verbal *and* archival (often photographic) fragments transmitted to them by the previous generation, is a particularly apt framework for the present study since I have adopted a methodological approach that in part applies visual cultural theory (Sontag, Butler) to talk about textual descriptions of images. Hirsch’s theory of postmemory lends itself to this kind of methodology because Hirsch herself reaches for verbal (rather than strictly visual) art in her definition of postmemory. In many ways, Hirsch’s notion of the second’s generation’s “imaginative investment, projection and creation” of the past (“Generation” 106) embodies the kind of ethical context that Thien’s novel suggests is wanting in the majority of commodified and mass media representations of historical trauma. See Wasserman for more on visual culture and postmemory.
- 10 See Thien’s interview with Kevin Chong, in which Thien describes her experience of travelling to East Malaysia for the first time in search of answers about her familial past.
- 11 See Ahmed, who argues that it “is the very assumption that we know how the other feels, which would allow us to transform their pain into our sadness” (*Emotion* 31).
- 12 See Mary Ann Doan, who explains that “the meaning of ‘sympathy’ in physiology and pathology is, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, ‘a relation between two bodily organs or parts (or between two persons) such that disorder, or any condition of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other.’ Sympathy connotes a process of contagion within the body, or between bodies, an instantaneous communication and affinity” (67).

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## “Fortuna”

à la manière de Piero Piccioni

I deposit, withdraw; she banks, profits—  
Time’s all we waste as we lay waste this night,  
Lay siege to each other’s seizing bodies,  
And she incises my seven inches,  
As I size her up, our sighs redoubling  
As our thighs mount, dismount, add, and subtract—  
Multiple sums until our division.

A Great Depression frames the aftermath—  
Depletion, deflation, what’s left over—  
Discredit, repossession of ripped pride,  
The blank sheets, the stolen kisses, the loss  
Of self, the taxing, maxed-out bankruptcy . . .

Yet, all we are—our total—counts for naught,  
Unless we give everything in spending.

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## Hell Will Not Prevail

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**Robert Arthur Alexie**

*Porcupines and China Dolls*. Theytus \$24.95

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**Lorne Dufour**

*Jacob's Prayer*. Caitlin \$18.95

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Reviewed by Madelaine Jacobs

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When humans engage in indescribable horror, the most evocative use of the English language may be to ask a rhetorical question. In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, the heart of Robert Arthur Alexie's protagonist roars, "How the fuck do you describe something like this?" When there are no answers, the best response to pain is to stand and walk together. In this way, community strength is shared and no one is isolated by sorrow. Being together is the seat of joy and resiliency in communities where some find it impossible to continue to *be* at all. The theme of journeying together on the never-ending path of healing from brutal assimilative state programs connects Alexie's work to Lorne Dufour's *Jacob's Prayer*. Dedicated to the women and families torn by disappearance and death along Canada's Highway of Tears, the challenge of articulating *Jacob's Prayer* is evident in the thirty-four year span between the tragic central event and the publication of Dufour's beautifully woven poetry and prose.

*Porcupines and China Dolls* uses narrative to uncover unrelenting truth that pierces through individual differences to the empathic core of common humanity.

Alexie's statement that words "can't describe shit like this" is extraordinarily powerful. Although the agonizing abuse of characters set in Aberdeen, Northwest Territories, was much more widespread than demons of alienation and shame led them to believe, immense supernatural power was required to impel them to purposefully acknowledge what occurred in the dark places where they were confined as children. Alexie's insistence on expressing the horror that the residential school system wrought in First Nations communities is poetically magnificent. The "shit" is seeing your children taken away, "knowing their brown bodies were going to be scrubbed by white hands . . . knowing they were going to be forever ashamed . . . knowing they were going to cry that night . . . knowing it was going to sound like a million porcupines screaming in the dark . . . knowing there was not a thing you can do about it." With the double-entendre inherent in the protagonist's use of sex and intoxication to bury the self-directed question "*who're you*," Alexie is a blacksmith pounding the English language until it can be put to his own purposes.

*Jacob's Prayer* springs from Lorne Dufour's encounters with wounds incurred through colonial attempts to alienate Indigenous Canadians from their lands, identities, and family structures. Dufour came to Alkali Lake as a schoolteacher to join John Rathjen in a community initiative to reopen a school as the First Nation emerged from the colonial legacy of alcoholism.

Rathjen and Dufour were adopted into the community as they built individual educational success plans for students and promoted holistic educational methods that valued Indigenous knowledge. Tragedy struck Alkali Lake in 1975 when every-man-for-himself logic was favoured over the cooperation required for survival. Rathjen and Dufour had been attempting to build bridges of reconciliation between the owner of a large ranch and the adjacent First Nation who were allocated a small reserve. The landowner was on the lake preparing a goodwill gesture of a fireworks demonstration when the wind overturned his boat. It was too cold, he was too far out, and other boats were at too great a distance for a safe rescue. Rathjen courageously determined that he would attempt a rescue and a skeptical Dufour joined his friend in swimming out to the landowner with a long fence-railing. Dufour thought that the best chance for survival was for all three to swim back together buoyed by the railing and the boat's sole life ring. Even though his rescuers had risked their lives to swim with him, the landowner decided to swim independently with the life ring. Rathjen drowned. The landowner was rushed home to sit before a fire with a blanket wrapped around his wet clothes while he waited for a doctor. His heart stopped. Dufour was treated with an effective Indigenous method by Jacob, a man whose daughter had died assaulted and naked on the side of a gravel road. For Jacob, treating Lorne Dufour was a prayer.

Lorne Dufour's *Jacob's Prayer* and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* are prayers for healing. These prayers are not recited over the heads of fearful children who do not understand their meaning: they are true prayers grounded in the sacred dirt of life. As witnesses of the filthy legacies of colonialism, Dufour and Alexie call First Nations to come together with real hope for healing.

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## Les Vies plurielles

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**Nicole Balvay-Haillot**

*Fenêtre sur vie : Nouvelles et récits.* Vermillon 16 \$

**Nathalie Stephens**

*Carnet de désaccords.* Le Quartanier 17,95 \$

Compte rendu par Maïté Snauwaert

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Il est difficile de concevoir deux ouvrages plus éloignés. Le livre de Nicole Balvay-Haillot est un recueil de textes narratifs caractérisés par leur bonhomie, une sorte de confiance simple à l'égard du récit, et on ne voit pas ce qui distingue, dans cette suite, les « nouvelles » des « récits », si ce n'est peut-être une différence de longueur. Le point de vue, chaque fois fictionnel autant qu'on puisse le dire, permet d'épouser dans chaque histoire le regard d'un nouveau protagoniste, avec sa personnalité, sa situation psychologique, physique, sociale et très souvent sentimentale. L'ambition de l'ouvrage semble être un certain catalogage des formes de vie, et « le regard porté sur les êtres » fait partie des qualités retenues par le jury du Prix littéraire Jacques-Poirier-Outaouais 2006, qui lui a attribué une mention spéciale. La visée est celle de vies simples, ordinaires, propices à l'identification.

Avec l'ouvrage de Nathalie Stephens, c'est tout autre chose, à commencer par la facture du texte et le lecteur qu'il vise. Pourtant, il y est aussi question de vies multiples, possibles, qui toutes cette fois émanent de la narratrice. Vie d'écriture, vies des livres que l'on lit, que l'on revend, que l'on rachète; vie des textes que l'on écrit; et vies d'un soi qui n'est jamais unifié, certain, mais sans cesse à la lisière de la fiction. Le texte, ambitieux et juste, est personnel d'une façon non-autobiographique, ou autobiographique d'une façon neuve, de l'ordre de la vie de l'esprit. Il relève d'une préoccupation d'écriture, non guidée par un enjeu générique ni par une ligne de sens—si ce n'est, tenue mais présente tout au long, une interrogation sur la consolation : le désir *de l'ouvrage* d'être un

livre de, ou sur, la consolation, et son aveu d'être le dividende de l'échec de plusieurs livres précédemment avortés sur ce sujet. Ceux-ci lui servent cependant de toile de fond, et un intertexte interne au travail de Stephens, mêlé de références fréquentes à d'autres auteurs, informe la prose de cet *essai*, au sens libre de ce genre incertain, et à son sens intellectuel : une réflexion se fait jour au gré d'une lucidité poétique qui privilégie l'exactitude, et elle alterne avec des bribes d'une fiction qui ne sera pas écrite, ou plutôt, ne sera pas terminée dans sa forme d'histoire, mais se glisse, s'infiltré, comme en promesse d'un autre livre souterrain. *Carnet de désaccords* est lui-même souterrain, empreint d'un mystère qui peut tourner brièvement à l'auto-allusion et laisser le lecteur un peu perplexe. Mais le plus souvent ce côté nocturne le fait entrer dans une sorte de confiance, une parole nue dont il n'est jamais le voyeur mais le co-énonciateur, renvoyé à la responsabilité de sa parole et de sa pensée. Par son travail délibéré de l'indétermination et de la contradiction, par son ton caustique et interrogateur, le texte rappelle Claude Cahun, sur qui Stephens a écrit. Il offre enfin quelques réflexions pertinentes sur la ville, l'espace habité, l'exil—sur le mode, en séquences successives simplement juxtaposées, de la rencontre, qui est celui de tout le texte.

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## Collaborative Spirits

**David Bateman and Hiromi Goto**

*Wait Until Late Afternoon*. Frontenac \$18.00

**Larissa Lai and Rita Wong**

*Sybil Unrest*. Linebooks \$16.00

**Larissa Lai**

*Automaton Biographies*. Arsenal Pulp \$19.95

Reviewed by Susan Holbrook

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I must confess to a predisposition to enjoy David Bateman and Hiromi Goto's *Wait Until Late Afternoon* or *distilled, decanted and debauched*. One of my favourite

drinking evenings was spent in 1997 with Hiromi, as we laughed ourselves silly in an Oviedo bar, (beloved) children and partners across the ocean, drinking outrageously delectable honey liqueur and Asturian *sidra*, poured from a height so that it sparkled in the glass. This book seems born of a similar spirit of conviviality; one can almost imagine the idea for the project blooming out of intoxicated banter—"What if we wrote a whole book about *this*?" "What if we wrote a book drunk?" Not to suggest the esteemed authors really did compose while drunk (though for integrity's sake, I imagine there must have been some fieldwork of that kind). But their disposition toward language recalls that of Fred Wah, who cites as inspiration a Chinese martial arts film in which a monk "would practice his tai chi while drunk so he could learn how to be imbalanced in the execution of his moves without falling over." These poems do indeed throw us, throw story, throw language off balance, in order to reveal both the pain and beauty smothered by a firm footing. Here we get the wonderful play of two literature-loving interlocutors, who toe sober original texts under the table: "who [have] seen the boozy breeze," "go softly into the nightclub," "the condensation of these ice cubes in a glass." Bateman's translation of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," excerpted in that final quotation, is in turn translated by Goto, who offers "condescension / glassy eyed wetness." It is that back and forth, the conversational composition of the book, that is most appealing. When H sets a phrase in motion, D propels it further, and when D shares the darker side of alcohol, H confides her own answering history. It is an uncharacteristically intimate poetic exchange, suggesting that whether through an alcohol-induced *tête-à-tête*, or a determinedly wobbly *tai chi*, *veritas* will emerge when we cultivate an altered state.

*Sybil Unrest* is another collaborative work that seeks to tip us off balance. Unlike *Wait*



*Until Late Afternoon*, however, it offers no speaker tags. Each stanza could have been written by Larissa Lai or Rita Wong, or indeed both. The refused signature resonates with their mandate, to “produce an unstable, flickering sort of subjectivity that throws an enlightenment individual ‘i’ into question, and hopefully exposes its ideological underpinnings. It is into this unstable subjectivity that we attempt to reinject questions of gender, race and class, as well as geography, movement, power and hope.” It’s a tall order, even for a “we,” but this exchange, which gathers from wildly diverse discursive fields, manages to leave them all in a state of productive unrest. The book’s acknowledgement pages indicate the scope of the authors’ borrowings; here’s just one line: “colonel sanders, mr. Christie, the bible, apple, fido, mcdonald’s, trojan, air canada.” Through their poetic interventions, they unsettle the ease with which slogans roll off our tongues, and in so doing unsettle also our relationships to the seemingly more neutral terms governing our interactions. The range of their critiques does not result in diffusion; rather it throws into relief the interdependencies of various tyrannies. We see the collusions among regimes suggested by “freak trade,” “an unlikely strike,” “the lord is my shepherd / i get what I want.” As each familiar phrase is bent, we are compelled to take a closer look, and we hope the habit persists beyond the end of our reading.

While the third book under consideration, Larissa Lai’s *Automaton Biographies*, is a monograph, there is a collaborative energy here too. In “auto matter,” the autobiographical fourth section of the book, a plurality of family voices can be felt in this exploration of lifewriting that embraces generational legacies. The rest of the book is polyvocal as well, populated by high and pop culture phrases. Lai investigates them, slants them toward the light, yet demonstrates (as she has with Wong) that in their ubiquity they have necessarily become the

very vocabularies of our investigations. On a larger scale, Lai’s explorations zero in on cyborg-human dynamics (Part I is told through Rachael, the cyborg from *Blade Runner*), war machines, and animal-human relations, the latter through her poignant voicing of Ham, a chimpanzee sent into space by NASA and later subjected to biomedical research. While the reader can’t help but smile at some of the clever, ludic phrase inversions and tilts, this is no playful riff. Lai’s tight, prismatic stanzas are relentless in their insistence that we be more alert to the languages speaking through us, that we take responsibility for what we make and what makes us. Echoing Gertrude Stein’s questions in “Lifting Belly” about gender enforcements (“What is a man / What is a woman / What is a bird”), Lai questions the line between autonomy and automaton: “Who is a man / what is a machine / what has a mind / what is web-enabled.”

One of Lai’s telling strategies is to deny the expected predicate. Again and again we find an “i” followed by a noun: “i doll my rage,” “i web my dreaming’s sticky silk,” “i gene my fury in this shit stink,” “i language my body to being.” The result is the simultaneous evacuation of agency and striking animation of nouns, a tension that echoes the book’s troubling of the borders between thing and being, passivity and volition. The world is revealed as a circus in Lai’s book—“barnum” becomes a verb here—vertiginous, illusory, distracting, surreal; but importantly the work disallows our spectatorship, insists that we grab the trapeze and swing in to speak, question, act.

The three books under review feature collaboration, but they also speak to one another. They share an interrogative spirit, an acknowledgement of our discursive environments, and the rigorous testing, skewing, and reshaping of those environments. They also invite us to collaborate, encouraging us to read, hear, and respond to the world differently.

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## La Quête

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**Corinne Bayle**

*Ombres d'amours en rêve.* Noroît 18,95 \$

**Anne Guilbault**

*Joies.* XYZ 20 \$

**François Moreau**

*La Bohème.* Triptyque 24,95 \$

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Compte rendu par Adeline Caute

Textes de la quête, *Ombres d'amours en rêve*, *Joies* et *La Bohème* présentent des points de départ et d'arrivée identiques. Trois narrateurs sont mis en branle par une absence si vivement ressentie que c'est à corps perdu, vraiment, qu'ils se lancent à la recherche de l'objet dont l'absence leur cause un terrible trouble de la perception de soi d'abord, de l'autre aussi. Tous veulent, avec Baudelaire, tant ce feu leur brûle le cerveau, plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?, au fond de l'inconnu pour retrouver cet objet qu'ils ont perdu—ou, dans le cas de *La Bohème*, jamais possédé, car la quête de François est sans objet autre que le *nouveau*.

Et c'est sur le mode d'une dérive enfiévrée que les trois narrateurs rapportent leur périple sur les traces de l'objet de leur désir, et leur chute.

*Ombres d'amours en rêve*, taillé dans une prose poétique en étoile de la dérive et du flou, est la quête d'un amour, d'amours, aux visages évanescents débordés par les grands noms de grands morts de la littérature et des arts de la vieille Europe. Pour un Dostoïevski ou un Nerval nommés et croqués dans les détails de leur vie, Rimbaud ou Mallarmé se cachent derrière les mots de la narratrice et signalent en bout de ligne l'inadéquation de l'amour qu'elle veut porter au réel et à ses hommes : « Il est des jours où l'encre n'ajouterait pas une ligne au bonheur de vivre ». Un bonheur de vivre et une vie de papier faits de lignes, donc, où le style et le choix du mot l'emportent sur le présent vrai. Et si le voyage lui fait dresser une carte de son désir, la narratrice ne peut finalement

que confesser l'échec de son projet.

*Joies*, quête régressive des commencements, est le récit au présent d'un frère fou amoureux de sa sœur Georgie pour qui il sévade de l'hôpital psychiatrique où il était retenu. Le temps pèse lourd sur son désir, qu'on lui refuse, d'être avec sa sœur, et au fil des pages, c'est dans une mise en espace du chaos de sa tête que le lecteur l'accompagne. « L'extérieur devient l'intérieur » et « l'anéantissement vient brutalement, comme l'amour » sous un ciel « opaque », tout reflète les mouvements de l'âme du frère orphelin de son amour. C'est sur la tombe de Georgie que vient presque mourir le texte, avant la cascade en anaphores de dix « Au commencement . . . » disant la chute finale écrite dans la quête même du narrateur.

*La Bohème*, enfin, moins régressive que nostalgique, fait recueil des souvenirs des lendemains de la Seconde Guerre mondiale d'un narrateur qui s'appelle François, comme l'auteur du récit. De Montréal à San Francisco et à Tanger, de la rue de Rennes à Pigalle, c'est l'absolu et le vent que cherche devant lui un Canadien qui sait que le flacon importe peu, pourvu qu'on ait l'ivresse. De terres en terres et de bras en bras, de questions sans réponse à un temps que les moins de vingt ans ne peuvent pas connaître, François revit les heures belles de sa jeunesse et ses derniers jours vécus avant que l'usure ne le laisse devant cette vérité sur laquelle se clôt le roman : sous le multiple, on ne retrouve jamais que l'identique et surtout « la même Monica, l'éternelle Monica ».

Textes de la quête, *Ombres d'amours en rêve*, *Joies*, et *La Bohème* nous conduisent donc à trois chutes. Mais évidemment, moins que l'objet désiré de la quête, c'est la quête du désir qui anime nos antihéros en proie à cette soif qui revient en *leitmotiv* dans les trois textes. Et si ces derniers présentent tous le point commun d'être un regard nostalgique sur une quête elle aussi

en étoile, c'est que le texte donne corps au désir finalement déplacé sur le papier de l'écrivain. La catabase mise en espace dans les trois textes, Corinne Bayle nous le rappelle, peut être le sentiment « d'être comme un homme qui aurait fait un bond dans le paradis et en aurait volontairement condamné la porte et le chemin qui y conduisent ». Et déjà, avant nos trois narrateurs, Orphée le savait, lui.

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## Damsels in Distress

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**Mark Blagrove**

*Silver Salts*. Cormorant \$21.00

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**Lori Hahnel**

*Love Minus Zero*. Oberon \$19.95

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Reviewed by Timothy Dugdale

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Voice. It's arguably the toughest thing to accomplish in fiction. Even with a great plot and strong characters, if the narrator is unconvincing, well, the book's in deep doo-doo.

Mark Blagrove's new book, *Silver Salts*, has two narrators. One voice belongs to Lillie Dempster, a nubile little creature orphaned at fourteen by the influenza epidemic that stormed through her hometown, Saint John, New Brunswick. Lillie seeks refuge from this tragedy in the town's grand movie theatre and she keeps her eyes locked on the silver screen all the way through the Great Depression. Then Ernie Shipman comes to town and discovers that Lillie is a perfect double for Norma Shearer. Eventually she finds herself in Hollywood, in the offices of the fiery Louis B. Mayer. Mayer has a special assignment for her: to live Norma Shearer's life so Norma Shearer can have a real life away from the demands of stardom.

It's a lovely conceit, at once nostalgic and postmodern. Blagrove nicely matures Lillie from a podunk ingénue to a compliant yet hardly starstruck woman swimming with sharks in a big tank of dirty water. When the real Norma becomes pregnant, Lillie

becomes disposable. Sent back to the sticks, she must learn how to live in reality at last. But the Shipman film, long forgotten, is now a liability that must disappear with her.

If Blagrove had allowed Lillie to guide the entire book, it might have been shorter and perhaps a bit more taut. Instead, all too often, he switches out of her voice into third person, using a smart-mouthed commentator to cue the change of perspective, complete with film terminology. This is a distraction that is too clever and too clumsy. Lillie tells a much better story, especially when she's dealing with bums and moguls, drunk on booze and power, all of whom want something for nothing.

If Lillie Dempster is a bit out of focus, Kate Brandt in *Love Minus Zero* certainly isn't. You've seen her before.

She's right over there, on the stool at the end of the bar, nursing a pint. Looks like she's waiting for someone. She used to wear sweats when she was going through a bad patch, but today she has on a sundress. Not bad, really, for pushing fifty. A bit roomy in the hips, and the face has seen some heavy weather, but she has no air of defeat. If she could have kids, you know she'd be a great mother. If she could find a good man, you know she'd be a great partner.

The bar's in the basement of a hotel. The winos are still there. She remembers them from when they used to hoot and heckle the punk bands that jammed on the cramped stage at the front of the room. But there's more than a few hipsters showing up now, suburban kids looking for edge and authenticity. She's right over there and next week she'll be gone because it's time to leave. It's time to start over, on her own terms in her own place. Her name is Kate and by God, she's a sweetheart. You'll think so too after reading Lori Hahnel's darling if uneven debut novel, *Love Minus Zero*.

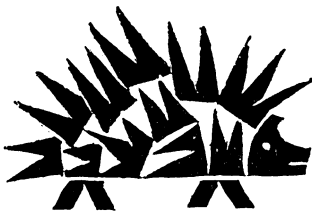
Thirty years ago, Kate Brandt used to be a punk rocker. She didn't just show up for shows, pogoing at the edge of the stage.

She rocked out, in an all-girl band called Misclairiol . . . in spite of herself. “I felt like someone else was playing my guitar, and who was that singing? Through the monitors, our voices were strangers. We’d never heard ourselves so loud before. Every mistake would be magnified, I thought, my stomach churned. Could the sounds we made fill up the place the way the other bands’ did? Did we want them to?”

The young Kate endures all the usual travails of chicklit—the benign neglect of boozy parents, the passive-aggressive (in)-attention of young gents trying to find a convincing posture, girlfriends grappling with their own demons and desires. Along the way into middle age, she grapples with a writer-husband who channels his lack of talent and discipline into shagging co-eds, a succession of miscarriages and desperation romps with shabby boy-toys. Hahnel lards the book with these biographical chestnuts, but in spite of chronic bad judgment and bad luck, Kate never sees herself as a victim. Her voice is true even if her aim is not. The book powers through the potholes.

When, after attending an old bandmate’s lesbian wedding where she runs into Niall, a long-lost love interest, Kate declares she’s happy, and you believe her. Niall is certainly not the guy who happens to be standing there as Kate runs out of gas. He’s merely a ghost of the past, to be bid a sweet *au revoir* as Kate sets off on a new course, alone. “I’m better now. I really am better. Weird, eh?”

Not at all, baby.




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## Genre Blur

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### Giles Blunt

*Breaking Lorca*. Random House Canada \$29.95

### William Deverell

*Snow Job*. McClelland and Stewart \$25.95

### Norah McClintock

*Homicide Related*. Red Deer \$14.95

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Reviewed by John Moss

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Nobody confuses Dashiell Hammett with F. Scott Fitzgerald. One is possibly the best and most influential American crime writer of the twentieth century, remembered now for movies based on his books. The other is the author of a novel taught widely in the North American school system because it is filled with fluently scripted crypto-cultural insights. Reading Hammett today, one is struck that the prose is awkward, the dialogue embarrassing, the drama simplistic. Fitzgerald, however, seems fresh and exciting. Mystery fans still swear by Hammett. Literature buffs re-read Fitzgerald.

Literature lasts. When genre-writing endures, it is literature. It seldom is.

*Snow Job*, the latest mass-market novel by William Deverell, is genre writing, but what genre? It is part thriller, part parody, a light-hearted exposé of political chicanery in Canada at the highest and lowest levels, a comedy of manners in which people get killed, caricature sketches of a fictional Gulf Island called Garibaldi, a forum for wordplay and jokes, a travelogue through Albania, and lots of other things. It is not a literary novel. The eternal verities are invoked by Latin quotations peppered through the text; the transcendent particulars are mostly connected to drugs. *Snow Job* aspires to nothing more than good entertainment. I enjoyed reading it, but when I turned the last page, all I was left with was paper.

At the other extreme is *Homicide Related* by Norah McClintock. This novel is resolutely single-genre. Sub-genre, in fact. It

is directed at what is known in teaching circles as “the reluctant reader.” McClintock has won a record five Arthur Ellis Awards for Best Juvenile Crime Novel. Not being a reluctant reader, nor prepared to vouch for the apparent affinity of reluctant readers for gratuitous four-letter words, innumerable drug references, juvenile sex, telegraphed plots, monochromatic characters, and moral vacuity, I have nothing to say about her remarkable achievement.

Giles Blunt is one of Canada’s best mystery novelists, and we have quite a number of them. Currently, Louise Penny is riding the wave. Peter Robinson is solidly established as an international bestseller. For depth of character and uses of locale to drive plot, shape and reflect relationships, these three blur the distinctions between genre writing and literature. Unlike Hammett, or, say, Agatha Christie, they stand up to critical scrutiny. They use the conventions of genre to engage the reader in a divine comedy where paradiso is governed by the laws of retrospective inevitability. They make you feel good, reading about death.

So, what happens when Blunt shifts genre? Cover copy declares *Breaking Lorca* a “literary novel,” implying that “literary” is in contradistinction a genre itself. The author has expressed concern that his literary work has been trivialized by its association with his crime fiction. But *Breaking Lorca*, while brilliantly conceived, is not a novel. It is a long novella. If rules are invoked, then rules apply. *Breaking Lorca* is more akin to *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Heart of Darkness*, or *Billy Budd* than to the longer works of Hemingway, Steinbeck, Conrad, or Melville. As a novel, it falters. As a novella, with its simple plotting, allegorical coincidences, opaque settings, and unrelenting pursuit of a powerful theme, it is compelling. While lacking the visceral immediacy of the author’s John Cardinal mysteries, it delivers an unsettling vision: torture is terrible, being human is worse.

The division between genre writing and literary writing is arbitrary, at best. *Alice in Wonderland* is fantasy. Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is fable. Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a mystery. *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* are masterpieces of horror. De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript* is speculative fiction; *Oryx and Crake* is science fiction. Who would presume to deny P.D. James the epithet “literary writer” despite her penchant for mysteries. Morley Callaghan showed a lifelong fascination with the thematic implications of crime. Michael Ondaatje in *Divisadero* continues to do so. Blunt’s *Forty Words for Sorrow* is a fine literary achievement, not despite but because it is a mystery.

Sometimes literary writing is execrable, but engaging. Writing within the conventions of genre sometimes approaches greatness. McClintock writes crime fiction to a limited readership and is, inevitably, self-limiting. Deverell frolics among fractured genres and the reader shares his delight. Blunt writes mysteries with wonderfully evocative and deeply compelling literary merit; when he turns self-consciously to literature, he writes well but leaves something behind. The infinite mysteries of literature and the literary qualities of a limited genre occasionally converge. Oddly enough, Blunt comes closer to this in his crime writing than his novella.

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## Neither an Empty Blank

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**Craig Boyko**

*Blackouts*. McClelland & Stewart \$17.99

**Stuart Ross**

*Buying Cigarettes for the Dog*. Freehand \$19.95

Reviewed by Richard Cassidy

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The letters on the cover of Craig Boyko’s first collection of stories, *Blackouts*, a Journey Prize award winner, do not quite fit. Many slightly spill onto the spine, or have simply been sliced away at the top and the right and the bottom, as if to suggest that

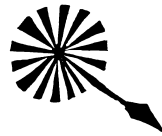
the three-hundred pages bound up between the covers of this handsome *Emblem* edition (in which there is, incidentally, no mention of the person responsible for the cover art) could not possibly contain all of the breadth and the girth of the imagined spaces and voices inside—which is paradoxical, like that impossible house in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* where the dimensions of the inner walls are greater than those on the outside—as if no list of such adjectives as “compelling and elegant,” “unexpected” and “captivating,” “stirring and irrefutable” could ever be long enough to cover or clothe this young body of writing.

For Boyko writes, though with economy and precision, about such a wide range of very different subjects—about a young man, for example, and his family on a sinking ocean steamship, in 1894 or 1895; about a rent collector and his tenants in Soviet Russia; about the members of a psychical research laboratory in blackout-enforced London in World War II; about boys and their arcade games, or about a girl and the kinds of agency required of her to reach out beyond the constraints of what she “hates”; about young love and old—and yet, throughout, he applies the same technical force to a recurrent set of compelling questions (of addiction, for example, or memory) which suggests, as the cover art does, that he is already, indeed, more than only the author of a first book of stories, that he is perhaps already a novelist in every respect except that he has yet still to actually publish his first novel.

That is, I recognize something that surprised me in Boyko, given that, never having had a blackout (that I can remember), and being a decidedly catholic smoker of cigarettes and good friend to dogs, I couldn't help but expect to feel perhaps more familiar with Stuart Ross's *Buying Cigarettes for the Dog*—so much for judging books by their covers. Indeed, a collection of stories written by “Canada's foremost

surrealist poet” (back cover) was destined to defamiliarize. Not only do men buy cigarettes for dogs here, but the sun “shrugs” and “holds its breath,” the “doorway to the school breathes a sigh of relief and begins to sob,” mountains can tell “when the time (is) right,” bibles “look up front the pavement” when “everyone (is) gone,” and a cow, standing in the middle of your living room, can show you its “eclectic taste in music.”

Consequently, just as Howie, after tossing and turning all night, his routine all wrecked by “a guy who had killed someone” who is sleeping on his couch and making him breakfast, must actually make an effort “to remember if he had a job and if he was late for work,” likewise, Ross' readers, subject to the shock of his surrealism here, are given cause and occasion to ask, to try to remember, what stories are, in fact, supposed to do, and how. Indeed, Ross provides ample room (and as a poet a compelling perspective) in which to start asking questions about storytelling, particularly in moments where his narrators want only to “go now,” where they “don't want to give everything away,” where “the more complicated [his stories] get, the less information they give you, the more holes they leave . . . holes in your arms.” In moments like these, and in those many forms of “blackouts” that are not the “empty blanks,” which Boyko is attentive to, both collections show themselves to be “capable” of that kind of “silence” that the Quebec poet and non-translator, Jacques Brault notes (after Benjamin?) is proof that they speak the “same language,” the same language of form, the language of story, though admittedly in different ways.



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## A Poetics of Listening

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**Robert Bringhurst**

*Selected Poems.* Gaspereau \$27.95

Reviewed by Paul Watkins

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Gaspereau Press, well-known for its tactile books, has released a comprehensive edition of *Selected Poems* by poet/typographer/linguist Robert Bringhurst. The textured taupe pages provide an aesthetic backdrop suitable for Bringhurst's elemental imagery; the organic setting also fits nicely with the ecological humanism found in the new poems of the final section entitled "The Living." This collection, which draws from the entire spectrum of Bringhurst's published and unpublished works, attempts to embody the living aspect of poetry, listened to in an attentive world. Bringhurst's poetic concerns are wide-ranging, moving across spaces from Japan and the Middle East all the way west to British Columbia, in an attempt to recover mythology, language, art, and music through the act of listening. Often, Bringhurst places divergent mediums of philosophical thought (such as European and First Nations) into a single poem with the intention of creating new polytextured dialogues that challenge homogenous approaches to poetry.

Paradoxically, while drawing upon pre-Socratic and Native North American thinkers in order to recuperate an element of orality, Bringhurst's poetry often reads as textually fixated by the page, resembling European poetic traditions most closely. The opening inscription to the collection, written by Bringhurst at his home on Quadra Island, describes his hope that "when conditions are right, it is good for poems to be spoken aloud." However, it becomes apparent to the average reader (or listener) that the typographic aesthetics of the page are at least as important to Bringhurst as producing audible sounds. Nevertheless, Bringhurst's poetic methodology is more

occupied by the quasi-orality of silence than by actual human speech; he brings to light the uncultivated, and often inaudible world that poetry can represent. In "Ararat," an early poem, we are challenged to find meaning in the silence of song: "Nor whether its song or its silence / is what we were listening for." Essentially, these often aphoristic poems confront a world that has been silenced, that has been subdued, degraded, and manipulated by a sense of human ownership.

Rethinking ecological consciousness, and drawing upon Don McKay's concept that "we don't own what we know," Bringhurst's poems rework anthropocentric perceptions into a world endowed with agency, capable of listening and speaking, which fully functions on a level beyond human language. The polyphonic poems (multi-voiced and rhapsodic scores for two to three readers), such as "The Blue Roofs of Japan" and "New World Suite No. 3," read like musical sonatas. Such poetic heteroglossia and dialogical engagement help flesh out Bringhurst's vocation as a poet who finds music to be a cohesive act that relates listening to thinking. This theory is expounded in *The Tree of Meaning* (thirteen lectures delivered by Bringhurst), where Bringhurst connects listening and poetry to the Haida notion that when you think in (or about) something, you say *hl gudang*, which means "I hear it."

Gaspereau's wonderfully crafted collection of Robert Bringhurst's *Selected Poems* is an ideal entry into the poetry of a thinker whose own listening prompts us to meditate on a world that exists beyond human communication, even if our processing of it depends on human language or semiotics, exemplified in "The Book of Silences." For Bringhurst, poetry participates in an attentive world that can reshape human thought. Bringhurst's bard-like poems recall Aristotle's notion that poetry is inherently a philosophical occupation (*Poetics*). Bringhurst's *Selected Poems* deserves a spot

on your bookshelf next to Pablo Neruda, Ghandl, or Dante, not just because the book looks nice, but because it makes a strong argument that while there is poetry that listens to the world and hearers that listen to the poetry, there is hope for an ecological renewal of nature, culture, and language.

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## War's Children

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**Walter Buchignani**

*Tell No One Who You Are: The Hidden Childhood of Régine Miller.* Tundra \$14.99

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**Deborah Ellis**

*Off to War: Voices of Soldiers' Children.* Groundwood \$12.95

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Reviewed by Reece Steinberg

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*Tell No One Who You Are* is the biography of Belgian Régine Miller, who escaped Nazi abduction as a child. *Off to War* collects the voices of children whose parents have been enlisted in recent and ongoing wars. These juvenile non-fiction works capture the feelings and thoughts of children affected by war in two situations and times. Children question authority figures and government in both books as they witness duplicity, violence, and grief connected to war. Other themes include the disruption of their childhoods because of trauma and the absence of at least one parent. Régine and many of the children of *Off to War* describe a sense of feeling unlike their peers, though on vastly different terms.

The protagonist of *Tell No One Who You Are* flees from the city to suburban and rural family homes, surviving the Nazi invasion of Belgium. Régine spends years moving from house to house, under the care of guardians usually unaware she is Jewish. She endures abuse and neglect from her caretakers and struggles with the uncertainty of whether she and her family will reunite.

Her careful skepticism and stubborn anti-authoritarianism, due in part to attendance

at her father's Communist meetings, show Régine to be prematurely self-reliant, but her voice is always a child's. The realistic, descriptive and active narrative quickly evokes an emotional connection and an interest in Régine's life. The central character's fears of being alone and being different from other children transcend the barriers of time and circumstance, helping young readers relate to her story.

*Tell No One Who You Are* is the story of a survivor; unlike Anne Frank, Régine lives through the war and shows how her experiences shape her life. The writing is clear and simple but not stripped of emotion; powerful, not sentimental. Miller's childhood is disrupted when she is denied schooling, then separated from her family and forced to take care of herself, but the strength and focus of the book is that she perseveres.

Deborah Ellis returns to the format of the controversial *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* in *Off to War*. She interviews forty Canadian and American youths, sometimes in groups of two or three siblings, about their parents' involvement in war and about military life. The author introduces each family and adds relevant factual information for each interview.

Many of the children experience a parent's return from leave with mixed feelings; emotionally damaged from war, parents are often ill-equipped to function within their families: "So many factors went into my dad being the way he is now. It wasn't just Bosnia. Not everyone who went to Bosnia came home and beat their kids." The children describe abuse, and parents who return distant and traumatized. Some parents became accustomed to issuing commands in the military and continue to do so with their family. Other soldiers witnessed children in desperate, life-threatening situations and become frustrated with their own children for acting like "normal North American kids." The children display a



mature understanding of why their parents act the way they do and what causes their behaviour.

Though her interview questions are not included in the book, Ellis clearly asks the children if they plan to join the military when they grow up. The answer is a resounding “no.” Most children display some skepticism about the military’s role in certain circumstances, are aware of protests against military tactics or decisions, or otherwise question the authority of the military and the government. The book is unique in offering the perspectives of children indirectly but thoroughly affected by war.

As a whole, *Off to War* says much more than does each story individually. The repetition present in the children’s experiences and thoughts relays a powerful narrative of young people spread over a vast area facing abuse and hardship, and sometimes feeling pride.

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## Gabrielle Roy’s Intercultural Writings

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**Rosemary Chapman**

*Between Languages and Cultures: Colonial and Postcolonial Readings of Gabrielle Roy.* McGill-Queen’s UP \$95

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Reviewed by Louise Ladouceur

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As mentioned on the book cover, Gabrielle Roy is one of the best-known figures of Quebec literature, yet she spent much of the first thirty years of her life studying, working, and living in English. For her, as a member of Manitoba’s francophone minority, bilingualism was a necessary strategy for survival and success. How did this bilingual and bicultural background help shape her work as a francophone writer? The implications of her linguistic and cultural identity are explored in chapters that examine education, language, translation, and the representation of Canada’s other minorities, from the immigrants in Western Canada to

the Inuit of Ungava. Drawing on archival material, postcolonial theory, and translation studies, Rosemary Chapman explores the effects of Roy’s intimate knowledge of both the English language and culture, challenging and augmenting the established view that her work is distinctly French Canadian or Québécois.

After an introduction describing the power relations in Roy’s Manitoba, where the education system was geared towards acculturation of Francophones as well as immigrants to an Anglo-Canadian norm, the first chapter, “The Ambivalences of Learning to Be Canadian,” portrays a gifted student who is equally at home in French or English and comfortable in a bicultural and bilingual context that precluded any sense of stable or exclusive identification with either one language community or the other. In the next chapter, “Colonial Legacies and the Clandestine Curriculum,” we learn that Roy’s search for academic achievement resulted in her successfully becoming bilingual and bicultural, which she viewed as a potential promise of escape rather than a handicap. Operating within a field of opposing ideological currents, and at the interface between the establishment and marginalized ethnic and cultural diversity, her fictional teachers inspire their students to learn to navigate among various cultural norms. In “Bilingualism, Diglossia, and the Other’s Language,” Chapman detects in Roy’s autobiography, *La détesse et l’enchantement*, as well as in her other works, an ambivalent attitude to language that destabilizes any identification with a single language position. These texts in French “can be read as bilingual texts offering a range of relationships to language in which speakers and readers can move from being victims of diglossia and colonial power to being active and creative participants in linguistic exchange.”

“Translating Difference: Conveying Context” examines the English translations

completed by Joyce Marshall, Annah Josephson, and Alan Brown of texts that unfold in Quebec. Although Marshall has attempted to retain certain Quebec expressions in the English translation, the heterolingualism of the source texts is often absent in the translations. This was something in which Roy herself was complicit when, during her revision of the English translations, she removed italics or footnotes indicating the presence of English in the original text, except when it was deemed necessary to exhibit “the contradictory position of francophone Canadians as British subjects.” In the final chapter, “Writing Canada: Finding a Place Between,” Chapman demonstrates that Roy’s representation of Canada’s minorities can be seen as “a working-through of the ambivalent position that she herself assumed as a *colon colonisé*, between two cultures and two languages, fully at home with neither the one or the other, but seeing each from a place in between.” She contends that the image of the migrant is central to Roy’s own sense of being/becoming Canadian because it reflects “the split consciousness that her Franco Manitoban upbringing opened up for her and which made her acutely sensitive both to the inadequacy of any essentialized notion of identity and to the marginalized position of other linguistic, racial, and cultural minorities.”

This extremely well-documented and convincingly argued study reveals aspects of Gabrielle Roy’s life and work that have rarely been emphasized in francophone literary criticism. It educates us on the complexity of intercultural relationships at work in the writings of an author who explored the recesses of the Canadian mosaic with a rare sensitivity and focus.




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## Words and the World

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**Daniel Coleman**

*In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics.* U of Alberta P \$19.95

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Reviewed by Stephen Ney

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Daniel Coleman’s three-part subtitle provides a good indication of the argument of his book, and a good structure for a book review. *In Bed with the Word* argues that reading can yield benefits in the realms of both spirituality and cultural politics. Coleman’s book succeeds in giving clear and logical explanation about these benefits, and because of its undogmatic and meditative tone it invites and enables the reader to experience what Coleman is commending more generally for book-readers.

The kind of material that Coleman urges his reader to read is not narrowly specified, though most of his discussion is about literary, religious, mythical, and historical books. Coleman’s counsel is somewhat countercultural because books, the old-fashioned kind, not websites or e-books or movies or “social texts,” are what he has in mind. His fear—which to the present reviewer is amply justified—is that alternative, heavily commodified sources of knowledge are increasingly substituting for book-reading, and that these other sources fail to deliver many of reading’s benefits. When you read a book, provided you aren’t just mining it for data or suspiciously scouring it for arguments to dismantle, you have to withdraw from your physical surroundings, to be receptive, and to move slowly. However, somewhat paradoxically, you also have to take an active role in imaginatively generating the sights and sounds and smells, the motivations and feelings and nuances, that the sparse words on the page can only suggest.

Coleman’s notions of spirituality and of reading’s centrality to it grow out of his experiences as the son of Christian

missionaries in Ethiopia and as a professor of Canadian literature. (Accordingly, his book is filled with engaging anecdotes about readers and writers located on the missionary frontier and in the Canadian literary canon.) His definition of spirituality—in the sense that it embraces aspects of ethics, relationality, sexuality, and politics—aims to be broad enough to include even the most non-religious reader. Spirituality is “how we shape our longing for connection to others and to the larger world.” Reading is spiritual because when we read solitarily, slowly, and actively, we have the opportunity to face our own uniqueness and imperfection; and because we are invited to surrender our control in order to be led where the writer is going; and because we open ourselves to connecting imaginatively with individuals we haven’t met—authors, characters, readers—yet with whom we nonetheless share an experience or a conviction: “[T]his sense of having friends who think like me happens precisely when I’m reading by myself words by people who are in fact very different from me.” Thus far, Coleman’s argument has much in common with the writings of St. Augustine, Ronald Rolheiser, Alan Jacobs, and Karen Armstrong, all of whom he cites sympathetically.

Coleman’s bridge from reading to cultural politics is more original but perhaps less solid, because occasionally his focus seems to drift away from a particularly attentive and generous kind of reading towards literacy plain and simple; his argument is at these moments the familiar one that literacy is essential to the making of the modern political subject. But the original core of his argument is that slow, active reading is not necessarily self-engrossing self-indulgence but that it can allow us to see “the real social and political worlds in which we live,” to chart our course through those worlds, and to find our voice to speak up for justice in those worlds. His vivid case studies are about individuals—eighteenth-century

American slaves and twentieth-century Ethiopian peasants—in contexts of social and political repression who learned to read and who were thereby empowered to stand on equal footing with and to resist their overlords.

*In Bed with the Word* is bound to find an eager audience among book groups both religious and secular. I hope it also finds an audience in university classrooms, where its advice is perhaps harder to follow. What is most innovative about Coleman’s book is the vulnerability and insight with which it analyzes the struggle the writer himself, an academic, has had to be a patient and generous reader nonetheless loyal to an institution that expects him to be suspicious, productive, and busy.

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## Narrating Re-Generation

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**Douglas Coupland**

*Generation A*. Random House Canada \$32.95

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Reviewed by Reilly Yeo

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Douglas Coupland’s *Generation A*, is set in a future free of bees and full of massive crop failures, extreme weather events, sado-masochistic religious cults, and anti-anxiety medications that soothe loneliness and prevent thoughts about the future. It’s a world too much like our own to be properly called a dystopia, and thus, like much of Coupland’s literary output, *Generation A* straddles the boundary between hilarious and chilling.

When the bees reappear and sting five people in five different parts of the world, scientists descend alike to analyze how the bees chose these five and, more importantly, how science can profit from it. The addictions of science to capital, and capital to the technological advancements science enables, are major causes of the problems humanity now faces.

We learn that the bees have died out because of the way corporate science has

responded to our desire not to worry about the future: once we're able to lose this worry, we no longer need each other. But as Coupland writes the stories of the five bee-chosen people, pushed by their deep desire to connect and go to the Haida Gwaii— islands off the coast of BC that remain relatively untouched by the novel's catastrophes—he points to a way beyond our solipsism and presentism.

*Generation A* is a fascinating bookend to *Generation X*; the latter of course made Coupland famous as the literary ethnographer of a post-Boomer society steeped in apathy and irony, and as a writer himself too reliant on these modes of expression. Refreshingly, in this book Coupland flirts with the idea that we, and he, might soon witness a new beginning—of sorts. He's careful even in his epigraphs not to veer too far from ambivalence (he takes Kurt Vonnegut's description of Generation A as "at the beginning of a series of astonishing triumphs and failures") and to include a tacit critique of his own literary project (from Malcolm McLaren: "Terrorize, threaten and insult your own useless generation . . . [D]evelop this as a story you can sell."). But he's doing something more here than merely continuing to chronicle the disasters and pathology of hypercapitalism. Having thoroughly exposed consumerism as a miasma in previous works, he paints the psychology of excess and its consequences with a few quick brush strokes, then moves on to an attempt to reveal what might be beneath that psychology—what human needs and talents might remain to motivate us to restore community and take responsibility for the future.

Faith in storytelling emerges as a key theme here, which puts Coupland in an awkward position—he's telling us that stories might have a unique power to solve our current problems. But as the novel becomes increasingly metafictional, it's clear Coupland has set himself a very high

bar, and we can't help evaluating his own stories by the criteria he has laid out—the dynamism of good stories can help us both be comfortable in our aloneness and find new ways and new willingness to connect. Unfortunately, the stories in *Generation A* are still too fragmented, and too heavily reliant on irony and self-reference, to convince us of this new perspective yet.

Still, *Generation A* might signal a promising transition for Coupland. In it, Coupland is much better at creating characters with distinct voices than he has been in past novels. He's not as deft yet with earnestness as he has been with irony; but then, that's a much more difficult project—and one readers can be pleased that he seems willing to undertake.

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## (In)visible Canadian

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**Robert D. Denham, ed.**

*Northrop Frye: Selected Letters, 1934-1991.*

McFarland \$49.95

**Branko Gorjup, ed.**

*Northrop Frye's Canadian Literary Criticism and its Influence.* U of Toronto P \$65.00

Reviewed by Graham Forst

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If Northrop Frye's reputation persists through the twenty-first century it will be in no small part thanks to the committed, tireless work of Robert D. Denham. However, his edition of these seven-hundred of Frye's known five-thousand letters will disappoint anyone looking for new insights into Frye, or anything like the kinds of revelations gleaned from the letters of other twentieth-century "preeminent humanists" such as those of de Beauvoir or Freud. Rather, most of these letters serve simply to validate Frye's self-assessment that he had "unconsciously arranged [his] life so that nothing ever happened to [him.]" The letters largely reflect the drudgery of academic life—the anguish over the "masses of material" piling up on his desk, of appointments and social

engagements, meetings and committees and teaching duties, etc. Occasionally there are flashes of insight, especially in the letters he wrote to Roy Daniells from 1935 to Daniells' death in 1979, but even here one finds nothing not expressed more articulately in his books, or more explicitly in his published diaries. Frye himself apologizes to one of his correspondents for his epistolary "drivel," and indeed, one wonders how a great mind like Frye's could have lived through the Great Depression, the rise and fall of the Third Reich, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Cold War, McCarthyism, Vietnam, feminism, and Rochdale with barely a whisper of opinion or even observation of these events in his personal letters. For example, the day after the fall of France in 1940, Frye ends a letter to Daniells with "The rest of the space on this page is reserved for shrewd and penetrating comments on the political and economic situation of the world." One yearns to comprehend such reticence—indeed, in the letters of what other "pre-eminent humanist" of the twentieth century (other than Wallace Stevens) can such detachment from the world around be found? Of course, it's foolish to imply that Frye didn't think long and deeply about world events. Indeed, he remarked once in retrospect how much of *Fearful Symmetry* was a response (and what a response it was) to the rise of Nazism. The disappointment here is that he simply didn't articulate his thinking about what was going on around him. One very personal thing about Frye does however emerge from these letters: his desire to remain "invisible," and his paranoid fear of criticism and anything approaching personal exposure. This paranoia appears most vividly as the 1989 publication of his biography approached (he had nothing to fear: the biography was obsequious and non-invasive); thus he often speaks of critics "waiting to pounce" on him, of prepublication "stage fright," of ever being found "naked" or of his fear of being

"as over-exposed as a model in *Penthouse*." There are numerous typos (Anselm is spelled "Anselrn"; Blake's Vala is given out as "Kala" for some reason)—and some grammatical typos are serious enough to make nonsense of the context. But Denham's 785 (!) notes are fun to follow, even if many of them are attributed to the wrong year.

Can there be, in Frye's world, an "invisible Canadian"? Doesn't all the awe of the open spaces, the "garrison mentality," the lack of an eastern seacoast, or the huddling against the 49th parallel make us, and our poetry, "visible"? Frye thought it did, which raised the still ongoing controversy rooted in Frye's seminal "Conclusion" to Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* as to whether Canadian literature should be considered autonomously alongside world literature, or, more patronizingly, as an expression of its historical and geographical context. This of course is an obvious version of the ancient form/content issue raised specifically for aesthetics by Aristotle and Kant; but the particular value of editor Branko Gorjup's collection of essays under review is to give this controversy a very Canadian dimension. And here, in Canada, the issue is of particular interest specifically because of the schisms it reveals in Frye's Canadian criticism.

These essays are not new: some go back to the 1950s and many are available in other Frye *Festschriften*—but, as Gorjup says in his introduction, it's "convenient" to allow Frye's critics and supporters a single ring to spar in, if only to show "how Frye's sense of Canadian literary culture was comprehended, rejected, or misread by his contemporaries."

Whether Frye's "symmetrical architectonic amusements" (Schopenhauer's poke at Kant) inspired or encumbered Canadian poets, this anthology certainly reveals that his work generated much serious, penetrating thinking about the Canadian literary tradition. What a particular pleasure it is to

re-read for example Francis Sparshott's dazzling simultaneous crucifixion and resurrection of Frye in "Frye in Place," published in this journal in 1979. Margery Fee's deflating of Eli Mandel's slippery rejection of Frye's patronizing nationalism ("Retrieving the Canadian Critical Tradition as Poetry") is just as strong now as it was almost twenty years ago, and Heather Murray's systematic dismantling of Frye's thematic criticism in her "Reading for Contradiction in the Literature of Colonial Space" is also still incisive.

Gorjup has divided the anthology into three parts: Part One investigates Frye's attempt to offer a potential "critical framework" for the study of Canadian literature; Part Two is given over to an "oppositional discourse," and Part Three presents a rear-guard attack on Frye's critics. Part One is well-represented by eloquent essays from James Reaney and D.G. Jones among others; but Part Two is disappointing. Here, the Devil's Party is offered the podium, but while George Bowering and Frank Davey neatly skewer Frye's "garrison mentality" mantra, it seems a lost opportunity that Frye's most vociferous critics among Canadian writers (Woodcock, Layton, Dudek, Robin Mathews, etc.) are loudly absent, as are any voices troubled by Frye's ignoring of French Canadian, First Nations, or (largely) of West Coast literature.

Part Three contains the excellent essays mentioned above of Fee and Murphy, but other essays here, troublesomely, try to defend Frye by rationalizing the clear contradiction between the regionalism of his Canadian criticism and universalism of the rest of his work by saying either that there *is* no contradiction as such, only postmodern "tension" (Linda Hutcheon), or that Frye wasn't really a Canadian literary critic at all, but rather a "mythmaker and mapmaker" (David Staines). Well, as for Staines, Frye certainly presented himself as an openly evaluative critic in the hundreds of reviews

of Canadian literature he wrote in the middle decades of the twentieth century. And Hutcheon's claim that the contradictions of Frye's positions are illusory—seen as contradictions only when regarded from an archaic "modernist" perspective—contains an obvious and disingenuous circularity: a thorn by any name pricks as smartly, and it doesn't resolve (or deny the existence of) a blatant contradiction by relabelling it postmodernist complexity. She says that she wants to replace "modernist" *either/or* thinking (Frye as regionalist *or* as universalist) with postmodernist *both/and* thinking (Frye was both at once). Then how can she dismiss Heather Murray's apt description of Frye as "a wolf in sheepdog's clothing" without realizing that, in doing so, she herself is taking a "modernist" grounded position? Such is the old problem with postmodernism, of course, and, for better or for worse, in spite of the best efforts of these eloquent scholars, Frye's patronizing of Canadian poetry is a sore that won't soon heal.

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## Canadian Idealists?

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**James Doyle**

*Transformations: The Life of Margaret Fulton, Canadian Feminist, Educator and Social Activist.* ECW \$18.95

**Ronald Poulton**

*Pale Blue Hope: Death and Life in Asian Peacekeeping.* Turnstone \$22

Reviewed by Valerie Raoul

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James Doyle's biography of Margaret Fulton is written from the perspective of a former colleague whose judgment is clear-sighted about what Fulton was able to accomplish in her long career as an academic and university administrator. During her time as the last Dean of Women at the University of British Columbia, she was already campaigning not only for women's rights but for a shift to what she considered feminine values of inclusivity and egalitarianism. In

1978, she became President of Mount Saint Vincent University, the second woman to head a secular postsecondary institution in Canada (after Pauline Jewett at Simon Fraser University). Although the Mount had by 1978 become secular and co-ed, Fulton's appointment was in keeping with its previous focus on women and faith-based commitment to community service. Her goals and attitudes reflect what was best in first- and second-wave feminism: a belief in women's capacity to succeed in a man's world (especially if they don't marry and have children), accompanied by a desire to change that world so that they might also continue to maintain the nurturing and caring roles associated with feminine (sometimes religious) values. Fulton became involved in the environmental movement because of these beliefs. She was certainly concerned for women in the developing world, but maintained a focus on universal women's rights rather than shifting to the "intersectional" analyses of gender, race, and class more typical of third-wave feminism. Her indomitable spirit pervades the book, which also conveys her reserve regarding personal relationships. After retiring in 1987, Fulton participated in a debate with then UBC President Martha Piper in a Women's Studies class at UBC, on whether or not her model for administrative structures can actually work. Piper seemed in awe of this almost legendary role model, who defused a potentially difficult situation with her ready wit. Fulton remains an inspiring example of modestly Canadian idealism and the "never give up" spirit.

The *Pale Blue Hope* in the title of Ronald Poulton's memoir about his experiences as a human rights lawyer on controversial assignments in Asia refers to the blue helmets worn by UN peacekeepers (often blood-smeared, as on the cover). The racy style provides a stark contrast to the biography of Fulton, which is strictly chronological, sober in tone, and extremely

discreet about personal matters. Poulton's account reads more like a thriller, and adopts a sophisticated structure interweaving two periods of his life when he was attached to UN missions: in Cambodia (in 1992-3 after the "killing fields") and in Tajikistan (in 1998). A flashback to 1975-6 recalls his upbringing in Montreal (untouched by political changes in Quebec), his success as a footballer, and the attraction he saw in the danger of UN missions. His involvement seems to have arisen from a liking for risk and a distaste for settling down, as much as from the Catholic ethic that initially inspired him. Unlike Fulton, he provides details of various sexual escapades (with a Russian "long-legged dictionary" among others) and personal memories such as nightmares. These evoke scary female figures who might really be men, and the Tajikistan he arrives in is described as "a prostitute with her legs spread wide." This is very much a man's view of the world, and the UN forces are expected to go in as virile heroes to save damsels and others in distress. His own assignment in both places is to uncover the murderers of UN personnel, and this goal certainly contributes to the "thriller" aspect of his story. However, a parallel discourse of disillusionment conveys the message that the UN is failing to fulfill its mandate. Any positive results appear to be due to luck rather than strategic planning, and those executed as assassins may or may not be the true culprits: the mysteries remain mysterious, the detective unconvinced. Ultimately, Poulton will return to Canada and become a family man, marked by the necessary but disheartening discovery that "every decision becomes the wrong decision . . . you find yourself searching for some moral standard by which to judge something awful"—one which religion does not provide, and nor does the UN. This is an engaging and insightful account that conveys both the necessity for the UN to intervene more effectively, and

the need for individuals involved to escape to private life in order to maintain their sanity. Idealists, whether they persist like Fulton or retreat like Poulton, are constantly up against reality checks.

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## Seeking New Caledonia

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**Marie Elliott**

*Fort St. James and New Caledonia: Where British Columbia Began.* Harbour \$26.95

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**Stephen Hume**

*Simon Fraser: In Search of Modern British Columbia.* Harbour \$36.95

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Reviewed by Mark Diotte

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I found the prospect and writing of this review to be particularly appealing given my residence in the Township of Langley, the home of Fort Langley, which claims to be the “birthplace of British Columbia.” While the colony of British Columbia was declared in Fort Langley on 19 November 1858, with James Douglas as governor, debate continues over precisely when and where “British Columbia” began. In the opinion of Marie Elliott, it is at Fort St. James (Stuart Lake Post until 1821), founded by Simon Fraser in 1806, that British Columbia began. Indeed, Fort St. James is the second oldest non-Aboriginal, continuously inhabited community in British Columbia, and according to *The Encyclopedia of British Columbia*, edited by Daniel Francis, it was “considered the ‘capital’ of New Caledonia for many years.” However, Stephen Hume, in *Simon Fraser: In Search of Modern British Columbia*, offers a competing claim for the origin of BC in the form of Fort McLeod, founded by Simon Fraser in 1805 and the first permanent European settlement west of the Rocky Mountains in what is now British Columbia. What is clear from all accounts, what is most important in my opinion, is the passion and dedication to the history of British Columbia these two volumes demonstrate; ultimately, both succeed

in contesting the stereotypical conception of Canadian history as underwhelming. Elliott and Hume go beyond the “facts” of history to foreground an identity of place forged through economics, conflict, politics, and above all, cooperation.

Despite the title of the book, Elliott’s *Fort St. James and New Caledonia: Where British Columbia Began* is better summed up in the introduction where Elliott states that “this book is a history of the fur trade as it developed in central British Columbia” up to the early years of the twentieth century. Elliott further qualifies her subject by posing a number of questions around the “main themes of survival and cooperation.” Questions such as “how did the North West Company gain a secure foothold west of the Rockies in a land well-populated by First Nations?” immediately inform her readers and involve them in constructing the answers. Furthermore, by posing such a question at the beginning of the work, the centrality and presence of First Nations populations are immediately established. Indeed, the reader is frequently reminded that European expansion west of the Rockies was impossible without the aid and cooperation of the First Nations, and that “without Native guides and interpreters neither Alexander Mackenzie nor Simon Fraser could have reached the Pacific Ocean.” Despite the conflicts that arose between the North West Company (and later the HBC) traders and the First Nations population, and despite the over-arching mandate of imperial expansion and exploitation, Elliott’s work suggests that an atmosphere of cooperation and economic interdependence prevailed. The NWC and the HBC made a practice of respecting First Nations’ customs such as the arrival of the first salmon, and cremation ceremonies, and of “recognizing headmen or chiefs at an annual ceremony.”

Often at issue in the fur trade was the relationship of the fur traders and company



men with First Nations women. These relationships often helped to forge trade alliances and agreements as well as fostering cooperation in areas of food, clothing, and shelter. The phrase *au façon du pays* is translated in Elliott's appendix as "in the fashion of the country" and is used to "describe the union of a fur trader and a native or Métis woman." While Elliott points to works such as Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in Blood*, which states that "Nor'westers treated Native women as commodities," she also reports that "many of the Nor'westers remained with their partners for life" and that individuals such as John Stuart and James McDougall "maintained stable relationships with Native and Métis women." In each chapter, Elliott not only chronicles the lives of clerks and traders such as Daniel Harmon, but devotes time to their wives and families. In the case of the Harmons, Elliott relates that they spent over "fourteen years together" during which they shared many "joys and sorrows together, including the deaths of newborn twins," and that upon their departure together from New Caledonia, they were "formally married" at Fort William.

In answer to the question, does Elliott convince me that Fort St. James is "where British Columbia began?," I would suggest that this is not the intention of the book. What it does do is successfully present an informative account of the fur trade, and place Simon Fraser at the beginning of British Columbia as the founder of Forts McLeod and St. James. More important, however, is that Elliott gives credit to those who operated in the background of Fraser as interpreters, clerks, guides, and suppliers. As Elliott suggests, it is individuals such as John Stuart, interpreter Jean-Baptiste Boucher, and clerks James McDougall and Daniel Harmon "who deserve the credit for cooperating with First Nations" and ensuring the success of the fur trade in New Caledonia which ultimately led to the colony of British Columbia.

What I commend about Elliott's work is the informative, approachable style in which she writes. The amount of information in this volume is substantial, and the research undertaken is both evident and appreciated. The combination of style and information makes this an essential book for the academic, student, and general reader alike.

What struck me the most about Hume's *Simon Fraser: In Search of Modern British Columbia*, based on the series in the *Vancouver Sun*, is the sheer beauty of the volume. From the stately and imposing watermark of Simon Fraser on the front cover to the myriad historical and modern photographs, to the helpful location maps that aid the reader on Hume's journey of discovery, to the weight and feel of the book, the luxuriousness of Hume's work is unmistakable. His conversational, poetic, and somehow personal tone is easy to read, and enjoyable from page to page. Hume makes his readers feel as if they too are on the journey with him, stepping gingerly into a canoe, blazing a trail through the forest, and trekking down path after muddy path. While some of the chapters seem, in my mind, more suited to the newspaper series in which they originally appeared, the simple convenience, style, and beauty of the book is too advantageous to ignore.

In his foreword, Hume remarks that "what follows is not history in the scholarly sense of that discipline. . . . Nor is this a conventional biography. . . . It is simply a curious reporter's story." Hume's words are important to framing his narrative, and if at times I wanted more of the academic insistence on facts, references, linearity, and biography, perhaps this desire reflects my personal bias rather than any particular flaw of the volume. As a "curious reporter's story" of an "epic life and the times it spanned," it succeeds.

In the numerous asides, and curiosity-laden interruptions to the narrative of Simon Fraser, in the focus on the search for

modern British Columbia, Hume finds the most success. Hume continuously operates in what I would call “tangent-mode,” offering enjoyable and engaging insights into modern British Columbia and Canada from the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range “annual top-gun war games for fighter pilots” near Cold Lake, Alberta, to Sault Ste. Marie, “hometown of Roberta Bondar, the first Canadian Woman in space,” to tracing the footsteps of Fraser’s expedition along the Ottawa River to behold the modern-day Tulip Festival from the Alexandra Bridge. Through these asides, Hume challenges his readers to “see” the history that is imprinted in the geography that surrounds us.

As Hume travels from location to location in his retracing of Fraser’s expedition, it quickly becomes clear that not much is known about Fraser or his journey west. Indeed, Hume often relies on conjecture or on the accounts of other historical figures such as Alexander Mackenzie to tell his story. Does Hume thus answer his own question “who was Simon Fraser?” In my opinion, yes. Indeed, Hume’s style allows readers to become Simon Fraser. In chapters such as “Forts Beyond the Rockies,” Hume delightfully becomes more novel writer than historian as he describes the scene facing Fraser, the “darkest winter months of 1806” where the “once-terrifying Peace River canyon was silenced by ice more than a metre thick” and only in a few places “did the slick, black shimmer of open water punctuate the silent eternity of white.” Hume fleshes out the epic figure of Simon Fraser, enlivens him in the imagination, and in doing so takes one of the first steps in elevating Simon Fraser from relative obscurity to national importance.

What stands out in Hume’s work is the idea of togetherness. He makes it clear that the idea of Canada is a creation, that the idea of British Columbia is born of an economic and political reality; these categories are modern inventions that lack

permanence and stability. He says it best when remarking on the winds that travel from Louisiana, down the Mississippi, down the Wabash and Ohio Rivers, and across Lakes Erie and Ontario: “it’s one more reminder of how the continent is woven together in ways that haven’t changed since Fraser’s day and will certainly outlast our own delusions of permanence.”

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## Women’s Pages: Reconfiguring Canadian Women in Print Culture

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**Janice Fiamengo**

*The Woman’s Page: Journalism and Rhetoric in Early Canada.* U of Toronto P \$25.95

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**Dean Irvine**

*Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956.* U of Toronto P \$34.65

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Reviewed by Cecily Devereux

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The recovery and reassessment of women writers in early Canada is a work that Lorraine McMullen suggests in *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers* had only just begun at the end of the twentieth century. Two decades of research in this area have produced such important and valuable studies of women in Canadian culture as Misao Dean’s *Practising Femininity: Domestic Realism and the Performance of Gender in Early Canadian Fiction* (1998) and Jennifer Henderson’s *Settler Feminism and Race Making in Canada* (2003). Janice Fiamengo’s *The Woman’s Page: Journalism and Rhetoric in Early Canada* and Dean Irvine’s *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956* have added significantly to these works and to study in this area. Aligned in their interest in locating women writers working in periodical print culture and in analyzing women’s negotiation of professional and public spheres and, crucially, of language,

these two studies together address the critical and historical absence of women from the record, in Fiamengo's case, of women in journalism and public speaking from the 1870s to the second decade of the twentieth century, and, in Irvine's case, of women from little-magazine cultures from the First World War to mid-century. Irvine's focus is on the ways in which women have been overlooked in the representation of a literary and cultural scene where the study shows them to have been vital as writers and editors; Fiamengo's is on the ways in which women emerge into and shape writing and speaking professions from which they had been largely excluded. Fiamengo's study is primarily concerned with women as producers of social texts in the popular press, Irvine's with women's literary writing. The two studies nonetheless share an impetus to provide a reassessment of women writers that is not "simply" a matter of recovery. Both studies undertake less, as Irvine puts it, to unearth an "alternative tradition" of women writers than to trace an "oppositional tradition" characterized by a desire for agency and for the meaningful change of the conditions of both labour and representation.

*The Woman's Page* considers the rhetorical practices of six women working and writing in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. While noting many other women working in Canadian periodicals—and appealing to other scholars to attend to their work—this study focuses on Agnes Maule Machar, Sara Jeannette Duncan, E. Pauline Johnson, Kit Coleman, Flora MacDonald Denison, and Nellie L. McClung. Each of the six chapters of the book attends carefully to one woman, closely analyzing her negotiation of language and construction of herself as a professional in a field of public writing or speaking. While providing detailed summaries of each of the six, the book also demonstrates how these women can

be understood collectively to represent the movement of women into a public sphere and how, then, the public sphere can be understood to have been transformed by the ways in which women writers and speakers made space for themselves in it. "By making it possible," Fiamengo suggests, "for ordinary readers to think of consulting a woman for medical advice, theological explanation, political theory, or literary judgment, the[se women] significantly broadened the parameters of women's sphere and heightened the authority of women's viewpoints." This study is compelling in its assembling of an archive of early Canadian women's work in public writing and speaking and in its balanced and lucid account of women as professional writers negotiating complicated and resistant structures of politics and ideology.

Like *The Woman's Page*, *Editing Modernity* engages in a work of recovery and revision. Undertaking "a reconfiguration of critical and literary-historical perspectives on the relationships among poetics, gender, and little-magazine production that inform women's participation in modernist literary cultures in Canada," *Editing Modernity* significantly places women such as Anne Marriott, Dorothy Livesay, Flora MacDonald Denison, Miriam Waddington, and P.K. Page in the Canadian little-magazine scene. While these writers are well known to Canadian literary history, this study suggests that, without a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of their work in the production of literary magazines, these writers cannot be well understood. One of the great strengths of *Editing Modernity* is its meshing of the record of women's print histories with critical readings of their poems. Irvine posits—and functionalizes—a practice of reading that is situated in the recovered record of women's work to produce the terms and the vehicles for their writing, and that demonstrates how extensively this work informs their writing.

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## Staying Power

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**Adrian Fowler**

*The March Hare Anthology*. Breakwater \$27.95

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**Ashok Mathur**

*A Little Distillery in Nowgong*. Arsenal Pulp \$27.95

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Reviewed by Jennifer Bowering Delisle

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Adrian Fowler's *The March Hare Anthology* celebrates Atlantic Canada's largest literary festival, the annual March Hare in Newfoundland. Adrian Fowler's introduction to the collection explains that since the late 1980s the festival has grown from a small event at a golf club in Corner Brook, to an event that spans the island and attracts writers and musicians from Newfoundland and Labrador, other parts of Canada, and abroad. The anthology boasts the work of participants like Michael Ondaatje, Patrick Lane, Alistair MacLeod, and Susan Musgrave. It also includes some of the best writers who hail from Newfoundland or make it home, including festival co-founder Al Pittman, Lisa Moore, Michael Winter, Wayne Johnston, John Steffler, Tom Dawe, and many others.

Two of the original organizers have now died, and Fowler notes that documents from the festival's early years have not been preserved. His well-researched introduction to the anthology plays an important role in documenting what history has been recovered, and in fondly conveying the flavour of the festival to new audiences.

Fowler explains that the March Hare is unlike other literary festivals: "poets, musicians and patrons sit around tables, bar-style, and break during the intermission to replenish their glasses or line up to partake of the Hare soup. After the readings, the stories and songs go on, as they would in a kitchen party, until the wee hours of the morning." The festival's mandate is to bring literature to the community at large, and to emphasize performance and entertainment. A democratic philosophy prevails, with

established writers appearing alongside little-known local poets, and traditional stories alongside experimental poetry.

Because of this egalitarian spirit, the anthology overall is uneven in quality. Pieces like the powerful prose monologues of Michael Crummey and the rich narrative poems of Lorna Crozier stand out. But there are also contributions from local participants that are anecdotal rather than literary, which, without the benefit of hearing them performed, strike an amateurish chord. The book has the feel, then, not of a carefully selected anthology but of an artifact, a document that attests to the growth and variety of the festival. The written text could never capture the interactive, musical "kitchen party" atmosphere of the festival itself. Perhaps then this anthology will best serve those who have been lucky enough to attend the festival over the years, as a reminder of two great decades of literature and music and a testament to its founders' legacy.

Ashok Mathur's *A Little Distillery in Nowgong* also has a life that extends beyond the pages of the novel, as an art installation that showed in Vancouver, Ottawa, and Kamloops, incorporating visual art and interactive performance. This spirit of play and innovation is also evident in the text itself, which tells a fantastical tale spanning more than a century, three countries, and four generations of a Parsi family.

*A Little Distillery* begins with the birth of a boy named Jamshed to a Parsi couple in late nineteenth-century India. Jamshed grows up struggling with questions of spirituality and destiny as he is torn between two paths: to become a *dastur* like his father or to take on a career as a businessman. We follow Jamshed, and then his daughter and granddaughter, through life-changing choices and devastating personal losses, against the backdrop of India's independence struggles, Partition violence, and finally modern diaspora to

England and Canada. Yet throughout these serious events, the novel maintains a sense of whimsy that builds into an unpredictable finish.

The novel is narrated by Sunny, a genderless, ethereal voice who speaks both to us and to Jamshed, and who claims to be Jamshed's yet-unborn grandchild. Sunny's playful interactions with Jamshed and other members of the family raise powerful questions about inter-generational connection and the formation and preservation of identity and faith in a globalized world.

Sunny wonders if the role of storytelling is "not to bring newness into the world, but to tell us what is already there." This notion of "what is already there" haunts the novel, as the characters strive both to find themselves within a future that seems predestined, and to honour a genealogy across the ruptures of diaspora. As a storyteller himself, what Mathur tells us is that the vectors of personal identity—gender, faith, ethnicity, nationality—may be in constant flux, but do not disrupt powerful familial connections that sustain the passage of time.

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## Embranchements

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**Vittorio Frigerio**

*La cathédrale sur l'océan*. Prise de parole 24,95 \$

Compte rendu par Farah Leplat

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*La Cathédrale sur l'océan* est le troisième roman de Vittorio Frigerio et une fois de plus l'auteur ne déçoit pas ses lecteurs. Il nous propose ici un polar où se mêlent action, mystère, et rebondissements en tous genres à travers les péripéties de Gaspard, un architecte dont l'ambition première est de se faire un nom dans son milieu professionnel en réalisant une œuvre unique, une création suprême. Le destin va en décider autrement, mais le voyage qu'il entreprend lui apportera bien plus qu'il ne l'avait escompté. L'histoire couvre une période de dix jours et chaque chapitre

raconte une journée de la vie du protagoniste. L'existence de ce dernier se trouve complètement bouleversée quand il fait la connaissance de Madeleine et de Nancy qui l'entraînent, toutes deux, vers une destinée aussi singulière qu'obscur. C'est à partir de ces curieuses rencontres que l'image du labyrinthe se tisse et rappelle une scène où Gaspard commence à tracer les plans de son nouveau projet tout aussi énigmatique : « Les lignes tracées sur les papiers répandus par terre paraissaient former entre eux des parcours tortueux et compliqués, comme s'ils s'étaient trouvés aux deux bouts d'un labyrinthe. » Et c'est en effet à travers une multitude de petites trames que l'auteur mène sa barque. Ainsi, le premier chapitre nous relate l'arrivée de Gaspard dans une ville qui est décrite avec beaucoup de détails mais dont le nom ne nous est dévoilé que bien plus tard. Très rapidement, s'installe une atmosphère mystérieuse qui excite la curiosité du lecteur qui en vient à se demander : « Où sommes-nous? De qui s'agit-il? Qui est cette fille que Gaspard rencontre dans la rue dès son arrivée? » Au fil des pages, l'auteur nous fait naviguer entre le rêve et la réalité, et à aucun moment il ne nous est possible d'anticiper la suite des événements. Les jeux de lumières et le style métaphorique de l'auteur contribuent à nous maintenir dans un univers onirique, et nous tiennent en haleine jusqu'au moment où l'auteur décide de nous faire sortir du brouillard. C'est avec une grande poésie que Frigerio nous fait part de l'état d'esprit de son héros et nous décrit chaque scène, ce qui confère à ce roman policier les allures d'un texte littéraire qui mérite d'être lu, non seulement par le grand public mais aussi d'être étudié dans les milieux académiques. Frigerio nous offre ici un roman remarquable qui se lit d'un trait, tant on est pris dans l'intrigue. Embranchements . . . donc pour reprendre la métaphore de l'auteur quand il parle de la vie de chacun de ses personnages, mais aussi parce que l'histoire

ne cesse de nous surprendre jusqu'à la dernière ligne, avec un dénouement des plus inattendus. *La Cathédrale sur l'océan* est donc, pour employer les mots de l'auteur, une « affaire en suspens. »

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## New Multiculturalisms

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**Martin Genetsch**

*The Texture of Identity: The Fiction of MG Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, and Rohinton Mistry.*  
TSAR \$25.95

Reviewed by Sam Knowles

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In this monograph, Martin Genetsch addresses the thorny and often discussed issue of Canadian multiculturalism in the context of three authors whose work, he argues, must be treated as solely and representatively Canadian. His introduction establishes the framework for his study, asserting that contemporary discourses of “globalization” fail to take sufficient notice of community-centred cultural interactions: analyses of M.G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, and Rohinton Mistry focus on their attitudes towards the “here” of Canada and the “there” of their respective countries of origin. Genetsch’s text follows just such a binary structure, although he states that he does not wish to imply an incompatible dichotomy: “in an increasingly multicultural Canada ‘there’ informs ‘here,’ and vice versa. . . . ‘Here’ and ‘there’ must be seen dialectically.”

Genetsch clears space for his argument with a well-informed overview of the history of multiculturalism in Canada, in which he opposes arguments such as Charles Taylor’s on the recognition of difference as “a moral [and] a vital human need” with opinions closer to Bissoondath’s trenchant criticisms of the celebration of cultural diversity. However, the section on postcolonial theory which follows highlights a flaw in Genetsch’s otherwise useful work: his knowledge of an array of postcolonial criticism, though impressive, is dated—none of

his sources were published after 2001. As a result, he does not engage with the excellent recent contributions to debates on postcolonialism from the likes of Elleke Boehmer, John McLeod, and Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (whose earlier work Genetsch does reference), connections with which would have strengthened his work.

When focusing on specific authors, though, Genetsch is on much firmer ground, and the rest of the book—comprising three author-led chapters on Vassanji, Bissoondath, and Mistry—emphasizes his literary-critical expertise. In the first of these chapters, for example, Genetsch employs incisive textual analysis to demonstrate how Vassanji, in *No New Land*, “illustrates that what to the racist looks like culturally ingrained laziness is in fact socially instilled depression.” This illuminating line of thought, probing the boundaries and fractures of Canadian multiculturalism, enables Genetsch to make a persuasive case for Vassanji—and, by implication, Bissoondath and Mistry—as Canadian, precisely because of the healthy scepticism offered on subjects such as immigration, assimilation, and belonging.

He is careful, however, to avoid homogenizing the authors’ responses: moving into the second author-led chapter, one success of Genetsch’s argument lies in the clarity with which he delineates the difference between Vassanji’s “balanced analysis” of the Canadian diaspora and Bissoondath’s “ironic reversal.” In *The Worlds Within Her*, a character’s ties to her Canadian “home” are far stronger than those to her country of origin, as “the cognitive matrix of Caribbean culture remains alien to [her]”: diaspora becomes “a relative concept contingent on the definition of what constitutes home.” Genetsch sides with Bissoondath, and concludes the chapter by raising the question of postcolonialism as “a problematic rather than a term of radical empowerment.”

Genetsch takes this question into the final stage of his argument, an analysis of Mistry's work that revolves around a particularly insightful reading of the short story "Swimming Lessons." So perceptive is this analysis, in fact, that Genetsch undermines his own argument somewhat: in paying close attention to the ways that Mistry brings together the worlds of Toronto and Bombay in his story's "oscillation between 'there' and 'here,'" Genetsch's own idea of a separation between cultures begins to dissolve. In a short conclusion, reiterating his understanding of Canadian multicultural fiction, Genetsch restates his "observation that the immigrant imagination is dichotomous"; I was left with the impression, though, that such binarism was at odds with the richness of Genetsch's subject-matter.

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## Lieu et réalité de l'imaginaire

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**Bertrand Gervais**

*Le Maître du Château rouge*. XYZ 24 \$

*La Mort de J. R. Berger*. XYZ 25 \$

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Compte rendu par Sylvano Santini

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Peu importe la puissance du principe de réalité, ses causes et ses effets qui produisent ensemble des blocs d'espace-temps qui structurent notre rapport coutumier au monde, l'imaginaire a aussi ses lieux.

Bertrand Gervais fait des lieux de l'imaginaire la substance même de sa trilogie des Berger (*L'île des Pas perdus*, 2007; *Le Maître du Château rouge*, 2008; et *La Mort de J. R. Berger*, 2009), nom dont on reconnaît celui de l'auteur dans les premières lettres de ses nom et prénom. Gervais y joue explicitement la référence autobiographique que l'on perçoit également dans les nombreux renvois mi-théoriques mi-philosophiques à l'imaginaire, à l'écrivain, au professeur de littérature à l'UQÀM, aux rues et immeubles de Montréal, etc. Tout cela, Gervais l'est, s'y déplace, et le connaît. Il ne servirait

à rien alors de dresser la liste de toutes ses références. Le plaisir de les retrouver pour ceux qui connaissent l'écrivain est plus amusant que leur divulgation. Au-delà alors de ce jeu de piste destiné semble-t-il aux initiés, le récit prend forme dans une intrigue à forte teneur de « particules imaginaires » dont le but principal est d'atteindre la cohérence. Gervais conçoit sa trilogie sous la forme d'un « Cycle » : le récit devra d'une quelconque manière joindre les deux bouts des aventures de Caroline Pas de Pouces, dont le temps de l'histoire (et non celui du récit) débute avec la mort de sa mère dont elle se sentira coupable et la mort de son père écrivain qui a nourri son imaginaire.

Caroline grandira du premier au dernier tome, elle deviendra une femme dont le père reconnaîtra la beauté et le caractère avant de mourir. Le cycle a quelque chose d'initiatique pour Caroline puisqu'elle passera de l'enfance à l'âge adulte. Passage turbulent, il va sans dire, puisqu'il correspond à celui de l'adolescence, et dont le trouble est amplifié par les voyages incessants entre les mondes imaginaires dont on ne sait pas très souvent s'ils sont attribuables à Caroline, à son père ou aux manipulations du professeur Eric Lint. Le père de Caroline vit également un passage initiatique. Celui de la mort qui est préfigurée à quelques reprises dans les passages difficiles entre les mondes imaginaires, mais aussi celui du deuil, non pas de lui-même (c'est lui qui meurt après tout à la fin), mais celui de sa femme peut-être, mais surtout le deuil de sa *petite* fille, celle qui grandira sans lui, c'est-à-dire sans son imaginaire. Car somme toute, le succès du parcours initiatique de Caroline, celui qui la fera basculer dans le monde autonome des adultes, n'est-ce pas une façon de se sortir des images de son père tout en se servant d'elles (j'imaginerais volontiers ici la véritable référence autobiographique)? Si ce parcours est bien ficelé dans les trois tomes, son évidence tient pourtant de la suggestion : il se tisse sous les détails des péripéties

de Caroline et des descriptions des différents mondes imaginaires kafkaïens.

Les images du dédoublement sont nombreuses dans le récit de Gervais, comme si toutes choses étaient divisées en soi par un principe qui relève, imagine-t-on, de la division entre le réel et l'imaginaire. D'une certaine manière, nous vivons tous deux vies qui, en général, s'entendent assez bien. Mais quand quelque chose les divise, comme c'est le cas pour Caroline qui se sent responsable de la mort de sa mère, la vie semble devenir un long processus de recomposition qui consiste pour l'essentiel à joindre les deux bouts qui ont été rompus. Il y a plusieurs images de doubles de Caroline dans le récit : Tamaracouta dans le premier tome qui lui apprend la mort de sa mère, Théo dans le second qui lui montre l'expérience semi-divine du double, et Polly dans le dernier qui lui apprend à lire. Mais tous ces personnages masquent peut-être le véritable double de Caroline. Eric Lint, professeur de littérature transgénique, qui *manipule* symboliquement plus que numériquement les mondes imaginaires, offre peut-être la leçon la plus importante à Caroline en provoquant involontairement la mort de son père, transplantant du coup une donnée de la réalité dans l'imaginaire de Caroline. Cette scène redouble la mort accidentelle de sa mère qui a initié ses aventures, mais c'est elle également qui les clôt en déchargeant Caroline du poids de la culpabilité.

La fin d'un monde ne correspond-t-il pas toujours à sa révélation, comme dans l'Apocalypse qui a été évoquée plus d'une fois dans le dernier tome? Cela aussi est une donnée de notre imaginaire que l'on greffé encore sur le monde contemporain, sous l'image fascinante des ruines entre autres. Le cycle se referme là où il s'est ouvert, mais sur une note positive, d'espoir. La trilogie de Gervais est un véritable récit initiatique, un conte philosophique voulait-il écrire. Les tergiversations dans les mondes imaginaires pointaient tous

finalement comme des faisceaux lumineux dans une même direction pour découvrir une clairière. Là où par moments on pense que l'auteur nous mène en bateau, il nous conduit véritablement quelque part, un lieu que j'appellerai, en cédant à la facilité, la réalité de l'imaginaire.

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## Writing to Defy Death

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**Hamida Ghafour**

*The Sleeping Buddha: The Story of Afghanistan Through the Eyes of One Family.* McArthur \$29.95

**Wayson Choy**

*Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying.* Doubleday \$27.95

**Thuong Vuong-Riddick**

*The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam.* Hagios \$19.95

Reviewed by Maria N. Ng

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Afghanistan is much in the minds of Canadians since Canada started sending troops to the Central Asian country in 2002, but few of us know much about the culture and history of Afghanistan. In Ghafour's *The Sleeping Buddha*, both an autobiography of her family and a field report of the state of Afghanistan in 2003, when the author returned to the country of her birth, the reader learns something about the country not often reported, if at all, in the media.

Hamida Ghafour "fled Kabul with her parents . . . in 1981" and was working as a reporter in England when she was offered the opportunity to return to Afghanistan by the *Daily Telegraph*, an opportunity to "witness firsthand this 'war on terror' and cover the post-Taliban reconstruction era." Acculturated as a Canadian, Ghafour tries to provide a humorous side to the patriarchal constraints imposed on all women—living with two other foreign women and a male South Asian aid worker, Ghafour writes, "the guards downstairs thought the women in the building were Waseem's harem."

But patriarchal values and suspicions of



professional women were the least of Ghafour's worries. Those she overcame by wearing clothes that were acceptable to the conservative Afghan society and when pushed, claiming to be a Westerner rather than an ethnic Afghan woman. What Ghafour had to negotiate with more difficulty were emotions evoked by seeing the destruction of her familial heritage and the destruction of her birth country, as well as by confronting a culture that meant much more to her through the memories of her parents. In *The Sleeping Buddha*, Ghafour is not merely reporting on the uneasy tolerance of the foreigners, the rubble left by the Russian invasion and the Taliban, and the politics of Hamid Karzai, but also on the loss of her grandmother's poetry, the ruins of the ancestral home, and the erasure of a family's concrete past. Although "poetry forms a deep and emotional core of Afghan identity," Ghafour laments that "books that survived the communist purges were looted by the mujahideen and what was left was burned by the Taliban."

On an equally personal note that provides the kind of insight that news reports cannot, Ghafour writes of visiting her grandmother's house in the eastern part of the country: "There is one ancient bush of purple blossoms in front of the house. The bombs missed it, and it has stood for nearly a century, as old as King Amanullah. My grandmother would have seen it from the window of the sitting room when she was a little girl." While analyses of American politics and Karzai's dilemmas and interventions of warlords are readily available if one looks for them, this kind of elegiac portrait of an Afghan family and the loss it suffers is both moving and rare.

Equally moving but for a completely different reason is Wayson Choy's *Not Yet*. Choy has established his writerly reputation with *The Jade Peony* and *Paper Shadows*, his earlier memoir. Readers might expect this latest book to be a sequel. It is and it

isn't. *Not Yet* is a meticulous observation of Choy's collapse from asthma-heart attack in 2001, his hospitalization, his very gradual recovery and rehabilitation process to health. This return to active life is followed by a trip to China, a rare behind-the-scenes description of the writing process as he worked on *All That Matters*, and ends with a second heart attack.

This reviewer only has the uncorrected proof and therefore cannot provide quotations. But Choy's writing is a mixture of humour, searing self-analysis, and eloquent recognition of the warmth and support provided by his friends—virtually an extended family—during his ordeals. In case one should think that *Not Yet* is all about Choy, it is also about writing and the writer's obsession with his craft against all obstacles, including failing health and medical interdictions. Choy, as shown in his previous books, has a wonderful knack for providing eccentric characters with endearing qualities. In this book, people such as Victoria and Danielle, though making only cameo appearances, are given the same attention as close friends and near relatives. But the real revelation, ultimately, is Choy the writer.

If Ghafour's *The Sleeping Buddha* is panoramic and Choy's *Not Yet* is a miniature, *The Evergreen Country* by Thuong Vuong-Riddick is somewhere in between. Told in the more conventional structure of an autobiography, the book begins with the arrival of the author's Fujianese ancestors in Vietnam and their gradual social establishment in Hanoi at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The first few chapters cover the marriages of grandparents and parents as well as the births of siblings. The pace slows down after the birth of the author in 1940, no doubt because Vuong-Riddick no longer relies solely on the memories of others.

Growing up, Vuong-Riddick experienced first the Japanese, then the Chinese military

invasion during World War II. It was also a Vietnam colonized by France. When peace returned, the author's father bought shares in a company called *Les Magasins Chaffanson* and the author attended a convent called *Les Oiseaux*. At the same time, Vuong-Riddick experienced the cultural confusions ethnic Chinese growing up under colonial rule inevitably must, whether it is between Chinese and Portuguese, Chinese and British, or in this case, Chinese and French. Into this cultural mix can be added the American presence in the 1960s, the author's sojourn in Paris, and her eventual settling in Canada. It is an eventful life. But that is not the only reason *The Evergreen Country* is interesting. The book also outlines the complex and tumultuous history of a country that, like Afghanistan, the world knows not enough about.

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## Insights from Memory's Sites

Anne Gilbert, Michel Bock, and Joseph Yvon Thériault, eds.

*Entre lieux et mémoire. L'inscription de la francophonie canadienne dans la durée.* Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa 39,00 \$

Reviewed by Paul Dubé

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Inspired by Pierre Nora's multivolume *Lieux de mémoire*, considered one of the grandest and most ambitious series of documents on the history of the French nation, this collection of essays—the result of a colloquium entitled “Lieux de mémoire, commémoration et identité dans la francophonie canadienne”—carries a title which reflects the authors' collective findings, that is to show how the Canadian “Francophonie” is inscribed in continuity (“durée”). The editors, whose introduction provides a clear and comprehensive articulation of the problematic and a useful summary of the essays included in the volume, have carefully weighed the words in the title, namely the

“entre” (between) which can surprise the reader, they say, “as much for the transition it expresses as for the hesitation it translates,” but is, they add, the only possible title given its object.

Indeed, the essays present a Canadian Francophonie in a transformative process, a society whose relationship to places and spaces is evolving, but quite differently as Quebec's consolidation of those sites is significantly different from that of the many communities stretching the land, weakened (and this needs questioning!) by their daily contact with the Other, be it the Anglophone or the immigrant. The Francophonie's memory markers are somewhat ambiguous as they are located between tradition and modernity, nation and ethnicity, majority and minority, Quebec and French Canada. Since the late 1960s, the Francophonie has experienced turbulent times within itself, this leading to a “deficit of meaning” which is also reflected in the tenuous link between time and place relative to continuity, a somewhat unusual situation when compared to most other societies.

In attempting to inscribe the Francophonie in continuity by constructing sites of memory, the essays focus on rather pragmatic aspects, namely by looking at history to locate solid markers and by matching them to places and spaces which outline a territory whose construction, mirroring identity, remains incomplete. For the Francophonie, these memory sites become a necessary passage as the territory remains in flux and its past is subject to multiple interpretations.

The reader will find fourteen essays divided into three parts: 1) historical, inscribing communities in continuity; 2) geographical, accentuating spaces/places (cities, village, monuments, etc.) to construct collective memory; 3) discursive, creating narratives (literature, film, etc.) by which a place of memory is instituted. As Nora's project called upon an array of specialists to provide the widest possible

perspectives on a complex matter, so does this collection of essays, focusing also on an assortment of objects, from licence plates to family ties, from theatre to rebellion, from landscape to discoverer, and so on: these are tied together with the carrying notion of “lieux de mémoire.” It provides a unique insight into the French communities of Canada.

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## Brain Food for Youth

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**Nancy Hartry**

*Watching Jimmy.* Tundra \$18.99

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**Tim Wynne-Jones**

*The Uninvited.* Candlewick \$19.00

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Reviewed by M. Sean Saunders

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Both of these skilfully written novels are most powerful when they are most demanding, placing complexity before their young readers in circumstances which present-day public discourse might reduce to undemanding dualities.

Set in Toronto in 1958, *Watching Jimmy* is narrated by Carolyn, the title character's neighbour and closest friend. Both children are eleven years old, but a head injury has left Jimmy diaper-clad and mentally incapacitated. Carolyn alone knows that Jimmy's violent and disturbing Uncle Ted is responsible for the injury, but she cannot reveal the secret, in part because Jimmy's mother, Jean, relies on Ted for financial support. In the hands of another author, the heart-breaking portrayal of Jimmy might have overwhelmed the novel, but Nancy Hartry's observant, smart, and iconoclastic narrator floats the story over the surface of a despair which often threatens to engulf the characters, but somehow never does.

The novel's climax comes when Carolyn is speaking about “Why I'm proud to be a Canadian” at the city's Remembrance Day ceremony. However, having heard Tommy Douglas as guest preacher at her church a few days earlier, Carolyn surprises her

audience (and herself) by spontaneously delivering a scathing critique of a country which would leave Jean unable to pay for the medical treatments that her brain-damaged son desperately needs. “I've just delivered a speech,” she thinks at the end, “about why I am not, NOT proud to be a Canadian. On Remembrance Day, no less. Oh, my.” Moments like this one—which insists that, despite what conventional wisdom might say to the contrary, criticizing one's country can sometimes be a profoundly loyal and patriotic act—give *Watching Jimmy* its considerable power.

Tim Wynne-Jones' *The Uninvited* is set in present-day rural Ontario. The novel opens with Cramer, a young man who works at two jobs while patiently caring for his psychologically unbalanced mother. Also early in the novel, half-siblings Mimi and Jay meet each other for the first time. Mimi has just arrived in the community, planning to live in a cottage which her father owns, but she finds Jay already in it. Family is a dominant concern of the book, and Wynne-Jones excels at representing the ways that Jay and Mimi make emotional space in their lives for each other, each a sibling that the other never knew existed.

But *The Uninvited* is also deeply unsettling. Cramer has been stalking Jay for years, and also starts stalking Mimi after her arrival, and the powerful heart of Wynne-Jones' work lies in Cramer's seeming contradictions: he is at once threatening and disturbing, gentle and loving. In this way, the author places Cramer's fundamental humanity before his readers, refusing to reduce the character to a two-dimensional villain.

In short, both novels take their readers seriously. They challenge young readers to think beyond simple dichotomies; they imagine that youth do not want easy answers to complex questions; and they assume that children and young adults are smart enough to understand the world in nuanced and sophisticated ways.

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## Vancouver's Chickamin

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Lee Henderson

*The Man Game*. Viking Canada \$32.00

Reviewed by Duffy Roberts

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I'd like to be able to centre this novel for readers with a summary of its plot, but that's just not possible. However, *The Man Game's* Man Game is half dance, half pugilistic competition, half ritual, half performance, and complex (the halves exceed the whole). *The Man Game's* narrative weaves two stories: a contemporary one where current male Vancouverites are in the process of reclaiming the moves of the game's choreography by studying and performing sketches "drawn by a [Chinese] pastry chef using a brush pen," and a story of how the game came into being in 1886 (to which the bulk of the narrative goes). Let me begin by suggesting that I'm glad that Lee Henderson teaches creative writing, as I'll assume that celebrating imagining is a wonderful and important part of his pedagogy.

I can't help but speak of *The Man Game* in the same breath as Taylor's *Stanley Park* and Jack Hodgins' *Innocent Cities*, and to do so names its exceptional pedigree. *The Man Game* is an imaginative novel, which is to say firmly rooted in Vancouver's (and surrounding area's) history (1886-87 to be precise). The history is not official, outside of the pomp and ceremony of officially recognizable historical officialdom. But the metaphors of place are decidedly Vancouver's, a Vancouver where "the ground [is] dark, patched with vermilion moss and scattered with bright golden chanterelle mushrooms tucked like hankies into pockets of the earth." The metaphors for tools used by Vancouverites are Vancouver's as well, where "they debated different swamper's axes and chose an eight-foot double-handed saw that looked like a killer whale's jaw." Henderson's Vancouver is alive, a "Vancouver [that] well

knows," a Vancouver that speaks Chinook as well as a vernacular nuanced in the stressing of syllables and single letters (in the Klayhowya and "ha-llo"s, and in the "I knew you were a poltroon . . . a coward, you illiterate fuck", and in the *totooshes* and *chickamins*).

*The Man Game's* Vancouver (a city "so far east that nothing was recognizable") is geographically resonant: Hastings Mill, Carrall Street, Georgia Street, a pit that turns into the basement for the Hudson's Bay, English Bay, Granville Street, banana slugs, Coal Harbour, the Salish peoples, Cordova Street, Westminster, Burrard Bridge, False Creek, arbutus trees, Dupont Street, Main Street, Wally's Burgers, Mount Pleasant, Stanley Park, the Whoi-Whoi Indians (did Red & Rosy's General Store and Sunnyside Hotel & Saloon exist? I can't help but not mind). *The Man Game's* Vancouver is also dirty ("Vancouver had a *living* smell"), violent, and at war with trees ("this is war. Trees want to kills us. We're here to kill every one a them."), but the dirt and violence are purposefully ironic and local: for example, immigrant labour in Vancouver is Chinese labour—trees from Vancouver are sent to the Emperor of China as revenge for Vancouver's "despicable," often violent treatment of the Chinese; for example, Toronto, a Vancouver Indian guide, sadly notes that "every time he was charged with meeting someone at the train, that person brought some new evil. It was as if they'd brought along a hidden set of matches and, once in Vancouver, dropped them on the ground, alighting it, transforming his home again and again. His home. Every time he brought guests to his home, it burned away a little more. Soon it would vanish completely and some new crystallized aberration would appear, the way blood, after soaking the earth, dries to a dark, cracked stained glass"—how are being haunted by the past and haunted by the future different? For example, after an overnight at the

whose house with “The Whore Without A Face,” Dunbar travels back to Toronto while “develop[ing] a full-blown case of catatonic mania brought on by a breed of super-syphilis . . . an intense bladder infection quickly turn[ing] into gushing venereal sores . . . all over his genitals and mouth”—are the diseases earned in a local Vancouver only incubated by departure, or by elsewhere that is East?

All of the above leads to the centre of this text, a centre that is the women. I quote a Vancouver friend and fellow reader when I say “they arrange; they negotiate; they surround; they supply; they configure; they avoid; they support; they invigorate; they nurse; they deconstruct the conventions of power; they circumvent the abuses of bureaucracy/received power.” And Molly is the inventor of the man game: she masters it, teaches it, imagines it and its potential into being, setting it free to arrange, negotiate, surround, supply, configure, avoid, support, invigorate, and nurse the men who compete in it, and gamble upon it. I also like how the meat and potatoes of the novel are meat and potatoes characters: “not a bank in the world knew any of their names.” These are the people that make a city most alive and visceral. I also like how Henderson archives history with these people, daring not to leave their stories out. This novel argues that to really know a city, to know it intimately, to know Vancouver as a secularly sacred place, these people’s stories are paramount.

In the end, Henderson’s Vancouver is grandly humble—for example, loggers learn new skills. And while I’d rather a different title, one that matches the cerebral wit and bravado and metaphorical shine of the text (or to encourage more sales), and while this book likes the sound of its own prose a little too much, one hundred pages less would tighten its belt, Henderson’s first novel is a real treat, “a more accurate sense of history” incarnate.

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## A Truly Public Discourse

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**Robert Hogg, ed.; Introd. by D.M.R. Bentley**  
*An English Canadian Poetics, Vol. 1: The Confederation Period.* Talonbooks \$29.95

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Reviewed by Margo Gouley

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The desire to map out the historical evolution of a distinctively English Canadian poetics is not a unique one in Canadian literary studies; however, the means Robert Hogg chooses to this end in *An English Canadian Poetics* may well be. While all of the material included in the present volume is reprinted from previously published sources, Hogg’s collection, selection, and arrangement of the essays on poetics in a focused volume makes this project a useful new contribution. Important English and American critical essays have been collected and anthologized to the point that many are now as canonical as the poetry they discuss: Hogg notes Wordsworth’s preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and Whitman’s various prefaces to *Leaves of Grass* as well-known examples. Unfortunately, as Hogg emphasizes, the same cannot be said of Canadian poetic theory. Many significant poetic statements of the last two centuries remain “disparate and uncontextualized” and, in the case of those not commonly included in poetry anthologies, obscure. This inaugural volume in a series planned to span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contains thirty-one essays on poetics written by five members of the group Hogg identifies as Canada’s first school of poetry: the Confederation poets Wilfred Campbell, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, and Duncan Campbell Scott.

While Hogg emphasizes that he retains full authority over the final selection of the poets and essays represented, he has chosen to consult with a specialist for this and each subsequent book in the series in order to bring a “refreshingly different perspective to bear on each volume.” In the present volume,

such perspective is provided by Canadian poetry and nineteenth-century scholar D.M.R. Bentley. With a characteristic balance between rigorous historicizing and careful attention to aesthetic detail, Bentley focuses his Introduction on the continuities, shifts, and breaks within the Confederation Group's poetic vision. Drawing from his own 2004 work, *The Confederation Group of Canadian Poets 1880-1897*, he discusses the formal and thematic preoccupations of each of Hogg's five chosen poets, with particular reference to the influence of Roberts' focus on "workmanship" on both his contemporaries and their successors. In this way Bentley situates the Confederation Group in their transatlantic and transnational context, and at the same time lays a useful foundation for the planned subsequent volumes in Hogg's series.

Hogg states in his preface that his selection process was guided by the belief that each essay should "advance our understanding of the poet's work" and that, to this end, the essays address either composition; genre; history, and biography; style and technique; human geography; arts and culture generally; or politics and social issues. He emphasizes that, in order to establish the importantly public nature of Confederation poetry and poetics, he has selected essays that were either previously published or delivered in a public venue. Avoided or excluded are interviews, translations, personal letters, and book reviews. Hogg notes that the same principles of selection will be followed in future volumes, including those on contemporary poetics: no articles will be solicited so that the works on poetics can be read as "representative of a truly public discourse." The desire to establish poetic discourse as a "truly public" one is perhaps the most interesting impetus behind this volume of *An English Canadian Poetics*. It is also one of its limitations.

While the pedagogical value of this initial volume is notable—chapters are organized

by author and include short biographical notes, as well as highly organized bibliographies of selected primary and secondary sources—it is unfortunate for the student of nineteenth-century Canadian poetry that Hogg chooses an all-male canonical sample, particularly in light of recent scholarship that emphasizes the contributions of women writers to Confederation poetry and poetics. The impossibility of including women poets in the Confederation Group is addressed on this volume's jacket: "All born in Canada in the early 1860s, these poets came to maturity after Confederation, and all were men—members of the sex most qualified (according to the gender assumptions of the time) to celebrate in poetry the nation-building enterprise." Perhaps Hogg's definition of what constitutes "public" discourse and the implied organizing principle of a nationalist impulse in the chosen theory makes possible the exclusion of writers like E. Pauline Johnson, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Agnes Maule Machar, and Sara Jeannette Duncan; but it is certainly to the detriment of an otherwise exciting foray into the under-theorized realm of early Canadian poetics.

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## Post-Communist Power Plays

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**Robert Hough**

*The Culprits*. Vintage Canada \$19.95

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**David Manicom**

*Anna's Shadow*. Esplanade \$21.00

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Reviewed by Reece Steinberg

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Details so complete and obscure that they betray the author's obsession drive the Russian-Canadian novel *The Culprits*. Robert Hough stitches together the mundane and the bizarre, Canadian pop-trivia and post-communist Russia, and delivers a chaotically fantastic nerdy read.

Inspired by a recent trauma, middle-aged Torontonian Hank Wallins devotes hours

at his dead-end job to searching for an Internet bride. He wades through a hundred profiles on FromRussiaWithLove.com until finding Anya, who replies to his emails. Anya is quiet but kind. Anya, down to her inward-turning left eye, is the spitting image of Martine, a sex worker from Marseilles and the most special of Hank's meagre collection of past lovers.

Hough includes elements of a stereotypical modern love story in Hank and Anya's convenient partnership; Hank tries to compensate for his blandness with gifts while Anya yearns for the bad-boy Dagestani she left at home, but the minute details of Hank's tinnitus and Anya's Russian-inflected dialogue mould the characters into imperfect specimens of everyday life. Both main characters evoke sympathy and distaste, and a distinct realness. *The Culprits* swerves away from any wisps of romance when the couple becomes twisted in a Chechen terrorist scheme involving Ruslan, Anya's former lover.

The author's most tender writing describes Anya's journey back to St. Petersburg to care for her badly traumatized and tortured ex-boyfriend. Anya's return shows how much she has changed since leaving, and also how different her character is in an environment in which she is comfortable. The natural dialogue she has with Ruslan's father Dadya and the way she steps in to care for the household strongly contrast with the absence of care she is able to show in Toronto and the awkwardness of her and Hank's interactions. While the style of writing is consistent throughout the book, the flavour and texture change rapidly. Hough describes the scenes of Ruslan's physical and psychological torture, Anya's bleak view of her life with Hank, and Anya's bittersweet return to Russia, the most dramatically written parts of the book, each in its own powerful but distinct language.

*Anna's Shadow* makes particle physics sexy, surveillance and spies commonplace.

Adrian Wells is a young Canadian diplomat, unequipped to be Anna Mikataev's questioner and main contact with the outside world. Anna's world had been laboratories and sub-atomic particles until she was accused of a crime and ended up confined to the Canadian Embassy's basement in Moscow. David Manicom's convoluted story folds together various settings and periods of time, from the 1990s to the present day. It successfully depicts many very different, difficult lives influenced by the uncertainty of post-communist Russia, a sprinkling of Canadian and Russian government agencies, and particle physics. Manicom shows great skill in exposing the tensions between characters: Adrian's devotion to Anna complicates his marriage, a union of two people so alike they are nearly non-communicative. The slew of governmental acronyms and photon-related subject matter is handled clearly and competently. Manicom informs the reader without interrupting the flow of the book or providing a surplus of facts. Brilliant descriptions of Russian landmarks, anonymous landscapes, and other settings provide a true-to-life backdrop to the characters: "From above, the full scope of the labyrinth becomes visible. The soaring red brick walls of the Kremlin and its burning golden domes. . . . Cut to the quiet warmth of a cell, Anna's Mikataev's hand cradling a cigarette." Manicom's flowing phrases and the crisp images they evoke push the story forward while encouraging the reader to take time to bask in the flavour of each bit of text. It is no surprise that the author is a Canadian foreign-service officer and has lived in Moscow. His intimate knowledge of the city and of Russian culture makes the book seem effortlessly authentic and knowledgeable without sounding like a dry lesson in foreign affairs.

Both *Anna's Shadow* and *The Culprits* explore the social, cultural, and political differences between the two geographically similar countries, as well as shifting power

dynamics between characters. In *Anna's Shadow*, Anna, captive for her own safety, and largely dependent on Adrian, uses clever stories and her innate magnetism to reverse their roles. From her place in the embassy basement, she develops a powerful hold over the Canadian, upsetting the relationship between the debriefer and the captive. In a similar way, Anya, a Russian immigrant to Canada in *The Culprits*, is completely dependent on Hank financially, as well as for her ability to stay in the country. Her emotional hold over him disrupts this power balance, leading him to lose a great part of his wealth in the hopes of saving her ex-lover. In both books, power struggles add welcome tension to the stories, and seemingly weak Russian characters show surprising skill in dominating their Canadian counterparts.

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## A Cambridge History of Distinction

Coral Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kröller, eds.

*The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature.*  
Cambridge UP \$165.00

Reviewed by Claire Omhòvère

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This new addition to the Cambridge History series is the result of a transatlantic collaboration between two leading scholars—Coral Ann Howells, best known for her extensive publications on contemporary Canadian women writers, and Eva-Marie Kröller, editor of the journal *Canadian Literature* between 1995 and 2003 and *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* in 2004. With the contributions of thirty-two specialists in Canadian studies from Canada and abroad, Howells and Kröller have produced a dense and compact study that will allow readers to take good measure of the cultural factors at work in the development of Canadian writing in English as well as in French, and its

evolution from the early days of contact to the present. A detailed chronology of historical and cultural events, a bibliography of selected critical works, and a capacious index complete the volume's scholarly apparatus.

*The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* identifies five chronological phases in the development of a national literature in conjunction with decisive historical and aesthetic mutations. Part 1 is devoted to the colonial period. The second part observes the characteristics of Canadian writing after Confederation. The models of modernity which emerged in the aftermath of World War I are discussed in a third part. The penultimate part focuses on the aesthetic experiments that began with the Centennial decade, testifying to a formal inventiveness which remains a hallmark of contemporary multicultural writing. Part 5 presents a detailed overview of poetry, drama, and fiction written in French. Each part comprises chapters addressing the intersection of formal and cultural concerns in their study of the generic or thematic questions specific to the context under consideration. Individual chapters do not, however, maintain a mutually exclusive focus. Major authors, canonical works, and evolving genres have their imports assessed and readdressed from the contributors' various perspectives. *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* consequently achieves a highly satisfying polyvocal quality. Writing in French, for instance, receives exclusive attention in the concluding section but references to its seminal authors and works intersperse the rest of the volume, pointing out the divergences and convergences through which the francophone tradition has constituted itself as distinct from, yet in relation to the rest of the national production.

Documents dating back to the colonial period are the object of fresh appraisal, particularly the correspondence of women with



an insider's knowledge of the fur trade society, or newly edited and published journals evincing "the importance of books, letters and literate exchange" in the Northwest interior. Read in retrospect, Victorian naturalists display subtle national sentiments in records that extol the magnificence of the local. Their guides and handbooks played a prominent role in the nineteenth-century formation of a Canadian sensibility, belying the "colonialist myopia" which allegedly affected the period. Genres often neglected as minor are also given prominence in chapters pondering the importance of life-writing and of the essay in the formation of a Canadian canon. The comics and *bande dessinée* have their own history retraced in a chapter bristling with data about the inception of the genre and its growing popularity at home as well as abroad. The contributors are mindful of the screen adaptations, opera versions, radio broadcasts, and prizes that also commend literary works to posterity. The pivotal chapter devoted to cultural change after World War II considers the recipients of the Governor General's Award in the 1940s and 1950s along with the many "outriders" who did not receive any public accolade at the time. Rising from the margins of region, gender, and race, their plural voices heralded the advent of a vibrant multicultural literature in the following decades.

The *Cambridge History* is also concerned with the strong currents of permanence underlying change. Aboriginal expression receives sustained attention from the inaugural chapter that analyzes in minute detail the "range of semiotic modes practiced by Indigenous cultures" before their contact with literacy to the substantial chapters dealing with the emergence of a literature "that is not synonymous with Canadian literature, although it has developed side by side with other contemporary Canadian writing." Satire and irony have their importance showcased in early classics by Frances Brooke and Thomas Haliburton bearing

witness to the slow process of cultural differentiation. A century later, Leacock's humorous stories are felt to resonate with a "distinctively Canadian ironic voice expressive of the diversity that collectively was settling into a middle way philosophically, politically, and culturally." Textual experimentation constitutes a third constant in the history of Canadian literature, as evinced in the many genres women writers actively invested in and transformed in the years following Confederation. Among many others, postmodern writers Leonard Cohen, Daphne Marlatt, Michael Ondaatje, and Robertson Davies have also experimented with the elasticity of genre in creative crossovers between poetry and fiction or fiction and drama.

The *Cambridge History* introduces a judicious distinction between the formal innovations of Canadian postmodernism and the historiographic metafiction with which it has long been amalgamated. Postmodern writing is redefined as "embrac[ing] the pairing of formal and cultural hybridity," whereas the various modes adopted in revisions of Canadian official history, i.e. realism, myth and postmodernism, are analyzed in a separate chapter. The "well-kept secret" of Canadian modernism is also the object of a welcome reassessment, emphasizing its essential differences from the metropolitan versions that developed abroad. This leads to a reappraisal of writers who have traditionally been categorized as realists, or naturalists, including the romantic but decidedly modern Lucy Maud Montgomery. To conclude, the editors of the *Cambridge History* have been successful in the goals they set themselves, namely complicating reductive readings of Canada's two linguistic traditions and allowing space for formerly marginalized voices or suppressed histories. The volume maps out fascinating literary ground, both in the near present and the remote past, but it also charts continuities in the ongoing

transformations of the national literature. Finally, it proceeds to a number of reassessments which testify to the vitality of critical debate in Canadian letters.

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## Living with the Land

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**Tristan Hughes**

*Revenant*. Douglas & McIntyre \$29.95

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**Bill Gaston**

*The Order of Good Cheer*. Anansi \$29.95

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Reviewed by Saleema Nawaz

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The isolated Welsh community at the heart of Tristan Hughes' novel *Revenant* is a place where associations are carefully mapped out and landmarks are written over by memory. Divisions between town and village, coast and farmland, are uppermost in the minds of Neil, Ricky, and Steph as they reunite thirteen years after an accident claims Del, leader of their misfit childhood gang. As Steph notes, "All the houses here have names—everything has names, even the fields, even the woods," and every bridge and footpath brings them back to their own memories of fearless Del and the months leading up to the tragedy.

Told in alternating first-person viewpoints, Hughes' narrative weaves heavy flashback with gloomy present-tense accounts of the friends' discomfited reunion. All three owe a debt to Del for the friendship she offered in a carefully circumscribed world of childhood hierarchies. Ricky's dark complexion and absent father made him an outsider by default, while shy Neil's stutter ensured his isolation. And beautiful Steph with her posh town upbringing could never aspire to Del's brash confidence and the daring ease with which she moved across the island.

Though the chain of events leading up to the accident is mostly ordinary—alliances, jealousies, small betrayals—Hughes infuses every page with a gothic foreboding. As Del's ghost haunts the friends both through

memory and coextensively through the land itself, the island becomes a menace of recollection. Born in Ontario, but raised in Wales, Hughes heightens the otherness of the Welsh landscape, lingering over obscure but evocative place names: "over the stones on Penmon beach, up the cliffs at Caim, over the banks of the river Lleiniog." In *Revenant*, Wales is a place of mystery, a hidden wonderland of rugged beauty. Guilt over the accident is twinned with the guilt of moving away, or simply of growing up, and the dread haunting Wales is like the tension, ever-present in small communities, between staying and leaving. The island is Del, the girl who never grew up, inasmuch as the story is constantly trying to bring her into focus, but as Ricky says, "isn't that just like islands for you: making things seem bigger and smaller at the same time, making stuff seem close and far away." The effect is of a small story under a shifting magnifying glass, sometimes held so near the page that the only things left on display are the details, mundane enough to become boring.

Hughes is obviously a skilled writer, and there is much to admire in his strong and expressive prose. The most energetic narration he gives to Ricky, who variously observes, "We're all wreckers and pirates at heart, and when you're a kid you can't hide it," and "Eggs had turned into omelettes and everything seemed a bit broken." But tipped heavily on the side of flashback and labouring under its own portentousness, *Revenant* drops too many hints and has too little plot to offer the reader much satisfaction.

Where *Revenant's* focus is geographically constrained, Bill Gaston's excellent and ambitious novel *The Order of Good Cheer* spans both Canadian coasts with storylines set four hundred years apart. In 1606, Samuel de Champlain prepares for a second Canadian winter after witnessing the deaths by scurvy of more than half the colony in the first year. And in 2006, noted bookworm Andy Winslow is tensely anticipating

a reunion with lost love Laura Schulz, who is returning to Prince Rupert eighteen years after they parted ways. Connecting these storylines is Andy's reading of Champlain's diaries and his interest in the Order of Good Cheer, a series of feasts proposed by Champlain in the hopes of staving off "the winter scurve."

Compounding Andy's nervousness is his apparent stagnation: a bachelor at thirty-nine, he still lives in the same house and works in the same grain terminal as he did before Laura's departure. In the interspersed seventeenth-century narrative, Gaston traces the New World love between Ndene, a Mi'kmaw woman, and Lucien, the settlement's skilled young carpenter.

Rendered in two separate but equally elegant prose styles, both sections reveal individuals struggling to achieve harmony with the natural world. Gaston's Prince Rupert is rife with low-grade depression and the more ominous tribulations of eroding shorelines and endangered fish stocks. Andy notes that when even his elderly mother starts talking like a Greenpeace activist "then the planet indeed must be in trouble." Four thousand kilometres and four centuries away, Champlain and the Port Royal settlers grow anxious battling boredom and the mortal mystery of scurvy, not yet understood as a vitamin deficiency.

As all of the characters face the enduring need for diversion during the long Canadian winter, Gaston's novel points to the value of camaraderie and the physical pleasures of eating, drinking, and making love. At once historical and contemporary, humorous and dramatic, *The Order of Good Cheer* is a wholly relevant novel for our time.



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## Beastly Trade

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**Graeme Gibson**

*The Bedside Book of Beasts: A Wildlife Miscellany.*  
Doubleday \$40.00

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**Kevin Hutchings**

*Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British-Atlantic World, 1770-1850.* McGill-Queen's  
UP \$80.00

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Reviewed by Nicholas Bradley

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In Graeme Gibson's *Bedside Book of Beasts*, a passage appears from Anna Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838) that describes the beliefs of the Chippewa Indians. "Not only all animals have souls," Jameson writes, "but it is the settled belief of the Chippewa Indians that their souls will fare better in another world, in the precise ratio that their lives and enjoyments are curtailed in this." The passage is illustrated by a detail from Cornelius Krieghoff's *Chippewa Indians at Lake Superior*, which portrays four men around a campfire, evidently recuperating from a canoe voyage, surrounded by a colourful and not altogether imposing forest. Painting and prose alike represent an admixture of sympathy and perception of difference. Jameson appears to admire the "very fanciful mythology" of the Indians, "which would make exquisite machinery for poetry," yet she marvels at the beliefs that, she thinks, render "everything . . . a mystery as great as the blending of soul and body in humanity." In Krieghoff's painting, the men are dwarfed by a landscape that is utterly devoid of markers of civilization.

In Gibson's anthology, Jameson and Krieghoff are included in a chapter entitled "Diet of Souls," which is concerned with the "wide variety of ceremonial behaviour [that] has always been associated with our human giving and taking of food," and their works are presented amidst selections from, among others, Knud Rasmussen, John James Audubon, James

Frazer, Earle Birney, and Susanna Moodie.

In Kevin Hutchings' *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British-Atlantic World, 1770-1850*, Jameson appears in the company of Francis Bond Head and George Copway. She offers "a critique of colonial governance" akin to Copway's "critique of colonial paternalism," and opposes Head's proposed treatment of the Ojibwa people in Upper Canada. Jameson's presence in both of the books presently under review and the different uses to which her writing is put suggest the importance of romantic ideas and aesthetics to contemporary understandings of animals, landscape, and intercultural encounters. *The Bedside Book of Beasts* and *Romantic Ecologies* are very different books in genre and intended audience, but each demonstrates that romantic discourses are inextricably part of contemporary thinking about environment and both human and non-human others.

*Romantic Ecologies* is a wide-ranging study of the ways in which the environmental imagination figures in transatlantic colonial practices during the Romantic period. It focuses on beliefs about slavery, animal rights, abolitionism, and Indigenous peoples, as they emerge in literature of the time. Hutchings proposes to re-examine "Green Romanticism," "a mode of analysis involving the application of ecological criticism . . . to the study of Romantic texts and contexts," but that, he maintains, has insufficiently recognized "political and historical realities." In order, then, to comprehend "the diverse ecological and colonial realities of the British Atlantic world," and especially to counter assumptions about the unidirectionality of exchange between Old World and New, Hutchings seeks to investigate "questions of transatlantic intertextual influence." (Critical antecedents in this regard include Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* [1992] and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* [1993].) Ecocriticism has been tightly linked to studies of Romantic literature in

Britain and the United States—accounts of Wordsworth by Karl Kroeber and Jonathan Bate and of Thoreau by Lawrence Buell have been highly influential—while critics such as Alan Bewell and Timothy Morton have shown that romantic ideas of nature are inseparable from that era's discourses of empire and trade. *Romantic Ecologies* reconsiders Green Romantic attention to environment in view of a historical approach to globalization. It thus newly describes the place of colonial Canada within an intercontinental commerce of goods and ideas.

Individual chapters treat "Race and Animality in the British Atlantic World"; William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "To a Young Ass, Its Mother Being Tethered Near It"; William Richardson's *The Indians, a Tragedy*; Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*, a colonial romance; and works by Head, lieutenant governor of Upper Canada, and Copway, also known as Kahgegagahbowh, an Ojibwa convert to Methodism whose autobiography "owes a debt to the subjectivist ethos that is a hallmark of Romantic thought." The afterword takes up again the subject of colonialism and ecology as Hutchings reflects upon "some of the ways in which the histories of Romanticism, ecology, and colonialism are mutually intertwined." Hutchings is a romanticist first and a Canadianist second, but *Romantic Ecologies* makes a significant contribution to the study of early Canada—particularly, in my opinion, for its attention to Indigenous writers and communities. "[W]e see the politics of assimilation or cultural genocide," Hutchings writes, "walking hand-in-hand with the practice of ecocide."

Gibson's *Bedside Book of Beasts* follows the pattern of his *Bedside Book of Birds* (2005): both volumes are miscellanies of literary writing about a host of species (some mythical), accompanied by many illustrations, such that the anthologies recount parallel stories, verbal and iconic, of how

birds and animals have been understood and imagined. Gibson associates birds with “spiritual matters” and animals with “earthly ones,” a contention that leads to a distinct shift in tone from the first book to the second: “Whereas birds are associated with creativity, longing and imagination . . . beasts are overwhelmingly physical. They and we—our animal side—are the body itself, with all its physical hungers, its strength and joyfulness, its vulnerability, grace, inventiveness and courage—and, beyond that, its mortality.” By design the books of *Birds* and *Beasts* are eclectic rather than encyclopedic or programmatic; part of the pleasure of reading them thus derives from observing Gibson’s editorial flights of association. *The Book of Beasts* contains selections from well over one hundred authors, from Claudius Aelianus to Adam Zagajewski. Most of the writers are well known, which is not to say that Gibson’s choices are predictable. Among those collected are Tomas Tranströmer, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, Edmund Wilson, Gary Snyder, John Newlove, Charles Darwin, Margaret Visser, Franz Kafka, Marian Engel—a variegated bunch. There are many Canadian writers, which helps distinguish Gibson’s bestiary from others of its kind, and a generous number of works in translation by non-Anglophone authors.

Gibson’s own contributions consist of a brief general introduction and introductions to each of the book’s eight sections. *Beasts*, he explains, are here understood as “alpha predators and their prey.” To an extent, then, the book is about hunting (and being hunted), although Gibson observes that he himself is not a recreational hunter, boyhood squirrel-shootings aside. Nor is he uncritical of “the industrial slaughter of the animals we eat.” But the violent relations of humans to animals fascinate him: “The only time I thought I might conceivably be eaten was in Queensland, Australia. It was an unpleasant feeling.” Gibson returns to his

preoccupation with hunting throughout the book, but generally his role is that of curator rather than critic or theorist of animality. The miscellany is delightful both to peruse and to read carefully, and, in addition to the particular interest of individual selections, it attests to the seemingly inexhaustible appeal of animals to writers and artists. Indeed, anthologies of writing about birds and animals are scarcely in short supply, but Gibson’s contribution to the genre is beautifully made and thoroughly enjoyable.

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## One Good Step

**Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, eds.**

*One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests.* U of Alberta P and Athabasca UP \$34.95

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Reviewed by Alison Calder

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Most studies of the Canadian and American Wests have, until recently, been situated firmly on one side or the other of the 49th parallel. Most studies have also, until recently, concentrated on the masculine West, a place where men are strong and brave and women do the dishes. The essays in *One Step Over the Line* step over these national and gendered lines in a number of ways, and the result is a valuable and interesting contribution to Western cultural studies.

The essays in this collection have their genesis in the “Unsettled Past: Reconceiving the West Through Women’s History” conference that was held at the University of Calgary in 2002. (A previous collection of essays from the conference, *Unsettled Past: Reconceiving the West Through Women’s History*, focused on the Canadian prairies and British Columbia.) One of the conference’s goals was to “emphasize comparative and transborder histories of women in the Canadian and U.S. Wests,” and these essays do just that, looking at both general social trends and

individual case studies. While only one essay, Molly Rozum's examination of three women authors from the Canadian and American grasslands, focuses specifically on literature, as a whole the collection provides significant contextualizing material to literary scholars and suggests many avenues for further research.

The editors have divided the collection into sections of two or three essays, each of which is closely related thematically, resulting in a very cohesive anthology. These groupings also emphasize the need to recognize differences in women's experiences, as in the section headed "Border Crossers." Here, Char Smith's essay on American prostitutes in Western Canada is paired with Nora Faires's study of the elite American Woman's Club of Calgary. While both groups of women crossed the border, often retaining their Americanness for strategic reasons, their motivations, experiences, and identities were vastly different. The third paper in this section, an extract from Cheryl Foggo's memoir *Pourin' Down Rain*, speaks to the different experiences of Black families in Canada and the United States, again pointing to the need to recognize the particulars of individual and local situations within larger social contexts.

Other sections in the anthology concentrate on racialized and gendered regions; writing by and about women; child care, education, and reform; and teaching the histories of the Canadian and US Wests. Two particularly interesting papers concentrate on labour history. "A Union Without Women Is Only Half Organized: Mine Mill, Women's Auxiliaries, and Cold War Politics in the North American Wests" by Laurie Mercier examines the roles of women's auxiliaries in the Mine Mill union. These organizations took on political and pro-union roles but were also vulnerable to anti-Communist rhetoric, expectations by male union leadership that they would adopt supporting and dependent roles,

and conflicts with women workers. In "Jailed Heroes and Kitchen Heroines: Class, Gender, and the Medalta Potteries Strike in Postwar Alberta," Cynthia Loch-Drake draws on interviews as well as photographic and archival evidence to piece together the suppressed role of women's political activism in the 1947 strike, and to provide a composite picture of women's experience as activists and workers in this particular community. An illustration of men's and women's differing experiences of legal and social regulations is shown when seven men and eight women were charged with criminal activities on the picket line. The men were sentenced to three months hard labour, while the judge "hesitated to send young women to jail" and gave them suspended sentences. On the men's release, they were hailed as working-class heroes—and the women who were equally charged with the picket line "crimes" made the dinner that celebrated the men's homecoming. Both of these articles call into play all sorts of questions about gendered, racial, and regional identity and manage to show how these questions are always interconnected, all the time.

Overall, this collection contributes usefully to ongoing conversations about the tenor of the North American Wests, reminding readers that national borders can be crossed, but also do make a difference. A challenge for scholars is maintaining that "both/and" perspective, as national categories, like other identity categories, are imposed, adopted, challenged, or accepted in unique ways by individuals in particular historical and local contexts.



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## Love, Familiar and Fractious

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**Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen**

*Lean-To*. Gaspareau \$19.95

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**Barry Dempster**

*Love Outlandish*. Brick \$19.00

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Reviewed by Mike Borkent

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One type of poetry that it seems everyone tries and most fail at is love poetry. Easily awash in sentimentality and clichés, the clear challenge of love to writers is to step beyond banal and expected discourse to revivify this affectively charged yet linguistically limited space, to return this powerful feeling to language. Tonja Gudvaldsen Klaassen and Barry Dempster engage love through the grittiness of everyday life, forging experientially loaded registers, resuscitating a motif that has left so many poems dead.

Klaassen's *Lean-To* draws on the sensuality and rhythms of everyday tasks to construct a space of belonging and being, at home and in family. Klaassen presents the experiential and emotional divergences and synergies of marriage, children, work, vacations, and home renovations, not withholding the mundaneness of many of these experiences but rather resuscitating them as spaces of meditation and sustenance. For example, in a series of fourteen short anniversary poems, she traces the tension between passion and civility within the couple's marriage: in "3. Leather," "I've already lost you, / husband—to this other you—husband // buttering toast, answering the phone." At the same time, Klaassen piles up sensuous details, like the smells of cooking eggs florintine or the tunes and lyrics of songs on the radio, to inform and complicate familial interactions and infuse them with tenderness and levity. The focus on materiality is also expressed in playful, open poetic forms, with frequent line breaks and spaces emphasizing the lexical content and aural/oral aspects of language while simultaneously gesturing to the unsayable affection

and love that burgeon out from these details. It is in the sensorial layering and formal manipulations that love resonates. While at times expected, the poetry presents domesticity in vibrant and nuanced ways, expressing the materiality of home that facilitates and maintains love and being within it. The focus on domesticity in part opens up this book to critiques of its reinscription of traditional husband-wife roles and "feminine" imagery, but it also presents the whole family as essential in constructing the home and the love that is there, broadening how and by whom domesticity is built and maintained. Aside from this problematic aspect, the poetry's noteworthy kaleidoscopic representation of the sensorium, which aligns familial and spousal love within a rich tapestry of daily life—gritty, pungent, sweet, dark, elated—offers an engaging return to love poetry.

Dempster, in *Love Outlandish*, also tracks love in daily life, but moves outside the realm of traditional domesticity by exploring the complex terrain of an affair: starting with the passion, obsession, and pursuit of love found, and ending in the despair and anger of love lost. Where Klaassen is deeply sensual and familiar, Dempster is richly metaphorical and worldly, developing a mosaic and vortex of meanings around the couple. Dempster constructs a transient and varied representation of love that explores longings, desires, expectations, and the fragmentation of these ideals into loss. While layered with metaphors (some expected), the tone is colloquial (seen in the more traditional lyric style as well) with a wry wit even in the depths of despair, such as in a conversation three days after the break up: "*How's it going?* / you ask. *Appropriately shitty*, I say, / glib with a gun to its head." Through this colloquial and personal tone, combined with abundant metaphorical flourishes, Dempster invigorates the intricacies of love in a fractious and needy world.

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## English Canada in Translation

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**Jane Koustas**

*Les Belles Étrangères: Canadians in Paris.* U of Ottawa P \$35.00

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Reviewed by Natasha Dagenais

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In his influential work *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti points out that when evaluating a translated work, reviewers have traditionally considered fluent discourse and easy readability as their criteria, not whether or not it is accurate. One could also argue that aiming to cater to a specific reading public will determine what, if any, domesticating strategies are used to ensure the marketing and marketability of the translation. In many cases, reviewers perceive a translation as successful only if it produces the illusion of fluency and transparency. Jane Koustas confirms this notion in *Les Belles Étrangères* (2008) by emphasizing that “the translated text is reviewed as though it were the original.” She alludes to the inherent danger involved in domesticating strategies used in “made-in-France” translations that aim to render and reinforce “a certain vision of Canada” to a distinctly continental audience.

Divided into three major, though somewhat uneven, sections, her study begins with an overview of the history of translation in Canada, the role/position(ing) of the reading public in approaching a (translated) text, and the promotion and market(ability) of Canadian culture in France through its literature. Her analysis is based largely on theories of aesthetic response, specifically on the notion of the reader’s “horizon of expectations” as part of an “interpretive community,” terms repeatedly brought into play by the author. It should be noted that “reader” here also refers to the translator and critic/reviewer. Drawing on Michael Cronin’s parallel between travelers and translators, as well as his use of the

“postcard” as a “metaphor for translation,” Koustas examines how French translations of Canadian texts sometimes poorly reflect “Canadiana” as the translators of the Canadian texts are not the implied readers, yet they share, presumably, the same target culture as the French interpretive community. Her main criticism, which is reiterated throughout her study, is the fact that, for the most part, “made-in-France translations” do not accurately render Canadian reality. Rather, French translators, consciously or unconsciously, provide a “travelogue image of Canada,” similarly reflected in the 1996 *Belles Étrangères* festival in Paris—when ten Canadian authors were honoured, and advertised partly in terms of their geographical location, thus emphasizing, according to Koustas, stereotypical, and limited, images of Canada.

The aim of the study is to show certain trends in translation receptions in France of English Canadian literature, and Koustas foregrounds her all-important discussion on how Canada and Canadian authors are perceived by the French through “the filter of translation.” She claims at the outset that her objective is to examine the reception of English Canadian literature in France by focusing on the success “of particular interest” of eight contemporary Canadian writers who have been translated into French: Mavis Gallant, Nancy Huston, Robertson Davies, Carol Shields, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Ann-Marie MacDonald, and Alistair MacLeod. While Koustas does not state clearly why these authors are, indeed, “of particular interest,” as opposed to other English Canadian authors, she argues that their works in translation help provide a “representative sample,” or, at the very least, reflect the common trends of made-in-France translations, especially in terms of their being more marketable to a French audience. Her discussion reveals inaccuracies and discrepancies in a number of made-in-France translations that create,



Kouostas asserts, “a troubling displacement.” Translations will inevitably reflect “target audience-friendly equivalents,” but the author of the study questions translation practices that seek to gloss over and render transparent a translated text as if it had been written originally in the target culture’s language. While Kouostas does concede that these translations are aimed first, on account of sheer marketability, at a French reading public, she also points to the perils of the continental interpretive community’s goal “to remove obstacles such as unfamiliar landmarks and vocabulary” from their translations of Canadian texts. Yet, Kouostas does not focus solely on French translators; she also discusses Quebec-based translators Lori Saint-Martin and Paul Gagné, who produced the French version of *Fall on Your Knees*. Although they share a similar horizon of expectations as the author of the novel, they still had to negotiate vocabulary usage, Kouostas mentions, with the French publishers of *Un parfum de cèdre*, in order to produce a “vision of Canada” in more or less continental French.

Significantly, Kouostas includes, in her third chapter, a comprehensive bibliography of approximately 640 English Canadian works translated into French from 1764 to 2004. It should be pointed out, however, that some of the translations were done by Quebec translators. Though identifying these “made-in-Quebec” translations would have made this bibliography arguably more complete and shown the increase in English-French translation activity in Quebec, nonetheless the bibliography itself represents a critical reference tool.




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## Poèmes de l'Origine

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**Andrée Lacelle**

*Tant de vie s'égare*. Vermillon 25 \$

*La Lumière et l'heure. Poèmes et carnets*. Vermillon 15 \$

Compte rendu par Stéphane Girard

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Publié une première fois en 1994, le recueil de poèmes *Tant de vie s'égare* d'Andrée Lacelle, à l'accueil critique alors fort favorable, connaît maintenant un second souffle avec une nouvelle édition chez Vermillon. Accompagné dès 1995 du prix Trillium de même que du prix de Poésie de l'Alliance française (en plus d'avoir été en lice pour le prix du Gouverneur général), il est clair que nous détenons là un ouvrage consacré par l'institution littéraire franco-ontarienne et dont la réédition semble plus que justifiée. Plutôt que d'offrir, tel un Patrice Desbiens par exemple, une poésie aux accents identitaires interrogeant la subjectivité franco-ontarienne dans son rapport à la langue ou au territoire, Lacelle opte pour une radiographie de l'Être, c'est-à-dire une recherche de l'origine de toute présence : elle y interroge « le secret matinal d'un premier bâillement » en entamant le « seuil troublant / d'une caresse première » et se demande « Comment dire / l'infini débris des faux commencements », là où « la genèse du monde s'étale ». Autant dire que cette entreprise est une gageure, pourrait-on dire, à la fois métaphysique et esthétique, « une sorte de fureur [qui lui] commande de risquer le poème ». Le recueil se termine sur ce qui ressemble à une promesse aux accents d'idéal quasi baudelairien, à moins d'être une véritable prémonition : « Ailleurs / Il y a d'autres mots pour un autre monde ». La poésie de Lacelle, en quête de son origine, appelle invariablement la Poésie, en un incessant mouvement autotélique.

Dans un recueil plus récent cette fois, intitulé *La Lumière et l'heure. Poèmes et carnets*, Lacelle fait le pari d'une poésie en prose accompagnée de tableaux de l'artiste

parisienne Réjine Halimi. Encore une fois, c'est le thème de l'inchoatif et des obscures et indicibles origines qui prime, alors que la poète descend « À la source du monde / Au matin des signes », en quête de ce moment d'« Avant la lumière ». Entreprendre ces « descentes à pic dans un état d'avant les mots », c'est-à-dire « Là où tout commence », confronte l'auteure à la composante somme toute phénoménologique de sa poétique : « Je suis présente à une présence, et je regarde un détail de cette présence à un moment précis de la lumière ». Le risque de son entreprise permet même de justifier, *mutatis mutandis*, celle de toute poésie moderne : « Les poètes cartographient la mappemonde de nos présences en pérégrination ».

En termes strictement formels, *La Lumière et l'heure* n'a peut-être pas la même cohésion que *Tant de vie s'égare*, ne serait-ce que par l'inclusion d'un chapitre épistolaire (« Quand à l'infini, clignote l'infini ») qui vient rompre avec le ton d'ensemble. Cela dit, la cohésion thématique de la poésie de Lacelle confirme qu'à défaut d'avoir clairement identifié, en la nommant, l'essence d'une originelle voie, elle possède définitivement une *voix* et une présence au sens qui lui sont propres.

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## Le retour d'exil de Windsor Laferrière

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**Dany Laferrière**

*L'Énigme du retour*. Boréal 24.95 \$

Compte rendu par Jimmy Thibeault

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Avec *L'Énigme du retour*, le prix Médicis de 2009, Dany Laferrière fait, une fois de plus, la preuve de son immense talent. Ce roman, qui hésite dans la forme, se promenant entre le vers et la prose, s'inscrit dans la suite de cette « Autobiographie américaine » amorcée il y a maintenant vingt-cinq ans. Le roman raconte le retour d'exil de deux

hommes, l'un qui y a laissé sa peau et l'autre qui cherche encore sa place entre le Nord et le Sud, entre le pays de l'exil et Haïti, le pays natal.

Le récit commence avec un coup de fil dans la nuit qui apprend au narrateur la mort de son père, qu'il a très peu connu parce que mis en exil alors qu'il n'était encore qu'un enfant. Il se produit alors un premier voyage de retour, celui du fils vers le père, à New York. En retrouvant le père, à travers les lieux et les gens qu'il fréquentait, le fils, qui a dû lui-même quitter le pays pour fuir la dictature, se trouve confronté à la folie qui guette toute personne vivant en exil. Et s'il quitte Montréal pour Port-au-Prince afin d'annoncer la mort de son père à sa mère, qui l'attend toujours, on se rend rapidement compte que ce voyage de retour est celui du père qui, à travers la figure du fils, reprend sa place dans le paysage haïtien. Pour le fils, il s'agit davantage d'un voyage l'amenant à s'interroger sur sa propre place dans le monde.

Mais rentre-t-on un jour d'exil? La question se pose dans la seconde partie du roman, celle du retour au pays natal. En effet, le narrateur ne semble pas trouver sa place au cœur de la vie urbaine de Port-au-Prince. D'ailleurs, le narrateur choisit de vivre à l'hôtel plutôt que chez sa mère et sa sœur, comme si ses longues années dans le Nord avaient fait de lui un étranger. De cet endroit, le narrateur devient un observateur qui tente de comprendre le monde, pourtant familier, qui se trouve devant lui. Mais le véritable retour se produit dans la campagne haïtienne, alors qu'il suit le chemin, véritable pèlerinage qui se fait sous le regard du dieu vaudou Legba, qui doit le conduire jusqu'au cimetière du village natal de son père. C'est là que l'exil du père et du fils prend véritablement fin. Pour le père, il s'agit de réintégrer le territoire qui l'a défini toute sa vie. Pour le fils, il s'agit, au contraire, de se libérer du poids de l'appartenance à un pays ou à un autre en

retrouvant son propre pays intérieur : « Ce n'est plus l'hiver. / Ce n'est plus l'été. / Ce n'est plus le Nord. / Ce n'est plus le Sud. / La vie sphérique, enfin. »

Écrit dans un style dépouillé, transcendant, *L'Énigme du retour* de Dany Laferrière semble boucler la boucle de cet œuvre colossal qui a entraîné ses lecteurs dans un voyage américain depuis l'enfance en Haïti à la vie nord-américaine de l'exil. En réinscrivant ainsi le retour dans cette route qu'a tracée l'auteur au fil de son écriture, on se rend compte que, finalement, ce retour a été amorcé il y a longtemps. La solution à l'énigme se trouve peut-être là : le retour n'est pas celui que vit physiquement le narrateur, mais se situerait plutôt hors du temps et de l'espace, dans le monde de la mémoire, de l'imaginaire, de l'écriture : « On me vit aussi sourire / dans mon sommeil. / Comme l'enfant que je fus / du temps heureux de ma grand-mère. / Un temps revenu. / C'est la fin du voyage. »

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## Question d'identité

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**Robert Lalonde**

*Un cœur rouge dans la glace*. Boréal 22,95 \$

Compte rendu par Charles Le Blanc

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Ce livre rassemble trois nouvelles : « Souvent je prononce un adieu », « Un cœur rouge dans la glace » et « Traduire Alison ». Les trois nouvelles mettent en scène des écrivains qu'on suppose médiocres et qui, à travers le voyage, tentent de se retrouver eux-mêmes. Le problème central que se pose ce livre est le suivant : « Sait-on vraiment ce qui nous tient en profondeur et ce qui nous change? » Programme ambitieux pour un recueil de nouvelles, si bien qu'à force d'articuler les récits autour de la même question, le lecteur a la sensation d'avoir lu la même histoire déclinée de façons différentes. La question de l'identité de soi se présente *sous le point de vue du lecteur* dans la première nouvelle, avec la

présence obsédante de Virginia Woolf, qui place justement le héros de la nouvelle dans le rôle du lecteur d'une œuvre dont la grandeur le dépasse; *du point de vue de l'auteur* dans la seconde nouvelle, où Toine, un écrivain qui cherche son frère l'ayant quitté, car il ne supporte plus le contrôle émotif auquel il l'avait soumis, peut être comparé au contrôle absolu de l'auteur sur ses personnages; *du point de vue du livre* enfin, où un auteur et une poétesse, à travers l'épreuve de la traduction, mettent en cause la possibilité réelle de se découvrir à travers une œuvre littéraire, la traduction montrant que le sens d'une phrase dépasse son contenu sémantique.

Je ne prétends pas que l'intention de l'auteur était de présenter ces trois points de vue, mais la chose intéressante avec la littérature—et qui la distingue des autres formes d'expression écrites—tient justement dans la richesse des interprétations auxquelles elle peut donner naissance. À cet égard, *Un cœur rouge dans la glace* est un ouvrage qui satisfait les amateurs de la littérature, ceux qui aiment la fréquentation des grands auteurs (on croise Woolf et Melville, entre autres), qui se délectent du plaisir des mots—ce qui est particulièrement vrai dans la première nouvelle où le *Journal* de Virginia Woolf est abondamment cité.

*Un cœur rouge dans la glace* ne connaît pas le sourire : c'est un recueil grave, austère, posé, tout en mal de vivre. On y croise, pêle-mêle, suicide, guerre fratricide, inceste. Les paysages sont gris, froids, tout en tempête. Le lecteur pourrait s'en accommoder si tout cela reposait sur des intrigues intéressantes, mais l'effet de répétition dans les trois nouvelles crée de l'ennui et on termine chaque nouvelle avec le sentiment que l'auteur a déployé de grands moyens pour un petit profit. En outre, ce recueil tient beaucoup de l'autoportrait de l'écrivain, de l'auteur qui se sait être auteur et qui se dit au miroir qu'il est auteur : on pose beaucoup et l'on se regarde autant être écrivain : « La

seule attitude raisonnable est de se rappeler qu'écrire est ce que l'on sait le mieux faire, que se livrer à autre chose serait gâcher sa vie et que ça nous rapporte un peu d'argent et qu'ils existent des gens qui aiment ce qu'on écrit. » « Écrire, c'est peut-être se battre dans l'herbe, au bord d'un chemin perdu, sans désirer gagner, sans craindre de perdre. C'est peut-être haleter, lâcher sa peur, empoigner sauvagement l'autre—soi-même—et lutter jusqu'à en perdre le souffle »; « Écrire, ce n'est pas raconter une histoire. C'est s'attaquer à l'indicible, c'est chercher la transparence » (17). On reforme le livre convaincu que ce beau et difficile programme a été atteint.

Les « nouvelles », très semblables entre elles, laissent perplexe. Très semblables, on ne sait trop à quel point : les personnages de Corinne (première nouvelle) et celui d'Alison (troisième nouvelle) se ressemblent comme deux gouttes d'eau. Dans ces deux nouvelles, les personnages principaux sont des professeurs, les deux montent de façon providentielle dans un avion à la dernière minute (que l'on me donne le nom de la compagnie, de grâce!), les trois nouvelles voient l'apparition d'un tiers (la grand-mère, Nicolas, Andrew) servant à l'auteur à dénouer mécaniquement son intrigue. Le rapport au réel doit parfois être précisé. Dans la première nouvelle, le professeur d'université voit sa leçon interrompue par la cloche qui sonne la fin du cours (?!); dans la seconde nouvelle, l'apparition et la disparition de Nicolas laissent une impression de *deus ex machina* qui n'a pas sa place dans un récit, par ailleurs, réaliste. Dans la troisième nouvelle, les personnages fondent en larmes à tous les instants, ce qui arrive peu dans la vie, du moins en dehors des congrès pour neurasthéniques. Trop souvent, le lecteur a le sentiment de lire une histoire dont l'auteur lui-même ignorait la fin au moment de commencer, d'où, sans doute, la faiblesse des dénouements.

En fait, dans *Un cœur rouge dans la*

*glace*, l'écriture est plus intéressante que les récits : « . . . un œil vert et triste, un vert de ruisseau abandonné par le soleil et les enfants » (12); « On ne sait plus comment être malheureux quand on a quelque chose à mordre, à commencer, à refaire, quand brusquement on se met à préférer la joie de l'autre à la sienne » (54); « . . . les mots sont de petites têtes chercheuses et ils trouvent toujours leur chemin dans le fabuleux chaos de l'univers. » On ne lasse pas d'aimer l'emploi de mots délicieux : défuntisait, rameuter, dépris, à contre-néant, « je ne m'attacherais donc qu'à des absents, des partis, *des en-allés?* », détailler (pour examiner), emmêlements. Ce livre a du style. Il n'est pas exempt de répétitions. Les métaphores introduites par « comme » nourrissent le premier récit jusqu'à plus soif, on note parfois une hésitation entre le discours oral et la langue littéraire, en particulier dans le deuxième récit (voir les pages 103 à 106), hésitation qui lève le problème théorique inhérent de la littérature québécoise : doit-elle être en *français international* ou en *français québécois standard* (je n'entends pas ici le jocal). Dans le deuxième récit, l'action se déroule de façon très marquée au Québec. Les personnages de Toine et de Nicolas sont des Québécois très typés—sans être nullement caricaturaux—mais leurs dialogues vont de la langue parlée à la langue soutenue, voire gallicisante (« Si, elle y est »). Cette alternance n'est pas sans interférer avec le plaisir de lecture et remettre en question le statut du texte lu : est-il vrai ou littéraire? Il pose aussi le problème du rapport de la vérité—ou de la véracité, ou de la réalité—avec la littérature.

L'époque est bel et bien révolue ou un livre était un objet d'art. Il est à présent *un objet de consommation*. On nous indique que le livre est imprimé « sur du papier 100% postconsommation, traité sans chlore, certifié ÉcoLogo et fabriqué dans une usine fonctionnant au biogaz ». Il n'en reste pas moins qu'il est laid. Bien relié (je l'ai mis

à l'épreuve) mais laid. Heureusement, la jaquette est agréable et le travail de la photographe Linda Plainsted sauve la mise (voir ses œuvres à l'adresse : <http://www.flickr.com/photos/manymuses> ). Toutefois, le fini glacé de la jaquette fait que le livre nous tombe des mains, qu'il se déshabille tout seul, si bien qu'on doit le lire, pour ainsi dire, tout nu. Il serait agréable que les éditeurs pensent à faire des tirages limités de livres cartonnés, véritablement pensés pour ceux qui aiment la littérature et les livres. Ce pourrait être une façon d'honorer les auteurs de grand talent. Nul doute que, malgré *Un cœur rouge dans la glace*, Robert Lalonde est du nombre.

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## Ladies First

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### Lori Lansens

*The Wife's Tale*. Knopf Canada \$29.95

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### Jeanette Lynes

*The Factory Voice: A Novel*. Coteau \$21.00

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Reviewed by Karen Crossley

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The world is full of women—quirky, inspirational, mad and memorable women—whose tales are seldom told. In two distinct ways, Lori Lansens and Jeanette Lynes have taken it upon themselves to remedy that situation, each crafting a story of surprising women who are meant, I am sure, to enchant with their quirkiness, inspire by their actions, amaze in their madness, and stick in the memory long after the covers of their books are closed.

*The Wife's Tale*, by Lori Lansens, features a lonely, plus-size woman, Mary Gooch, who wakes up one ordinary and extraordinary day to find that her husband of 25 years has gone missing. Despite the Chaucerian resonance of the title, Mary Gooch is no much-married Wife of Bath: her husband, Jimmy Gooch is her one and only, and so his disappearance sets her off on a surprising pilgrimage, initially to find her husband, but ultimately to find herself. While following

the trail of her missing mate from small town Ontario to Los Angeles, California, Mary Gooch encounters angels in unexpected places, and in surrendering herself to the kindness of strangers, learns to be kind herself. While Mary Gooch is herself a “well-rounded” character, Lansens also takes care to fill out the supporting cast with memorable creations, especially the people Mary meets in Los Angeles—Big Avi the limo driver, Jesús García, the pool man, and Ronni Reeves, a harried housewife/home party saleswoman. It all sounds both sentimental and surreal, I know, and certainly there are moments in Lansens’ tale that strain credulity, but most of the turns taken along the unpredictable path she sets for her protagonist come as delightful surprises, and, although light in tone, *The Wife's Tale* leaves its readers with a few things to think about, particularly regarding discrimination and untapped potential.

Where Lansens’ tale focuses on one compelling character, Jeanette Lynes brings together an almost Dickensian cast of characters in *The Factory Voice*. Set in 1940s Ontario, with most of the men at war and the women called upon to “man” the war machine factories, Lynes highlights the lives and loves of a group of women who find refuges of various kinds at Fort William Aviation, where Mosquito airplanes are made. Taking its name from the factory newsletter, *The Factory Voice* presents a series of apparently disconnected but ultimately hopelessly intertwined stories, primarily from the female point of view, as this group of diverse women struggle to get along. The four main characters span the emotional spectrum from mania and melancholy, from the unbelievably peppy Audrey Foley (snack-wagon girl) to the vicious Ruby Kozak (head stenographer/newsletter editor) and from the haunted Muriel McGregor (engineer) to the taunted Florence Voutilainen (factory girl). There are hints throughout the novel that all of these

women have storied pasts, but the narrative itself skims along the surfaces of their lives, and the deeper stories remain untold. Since the novel lacks a single focal character, the stories read like a series of small crises, with emphasis on incident rather than character development. Although every woman featured in the novel is demonstrably a different woman by the narrative's end, we readers never really know enough about any one particular character to be moved by the transformation. The result is a read that's fun, but not fulfilling.

What *The Factory Voice* and *The Wife's Tale* have in common is a focus on female liberation and personal empowerment, past and present. Both feature protagonists full of flaws and virtues, and both feature transformative moments in their characters' lives. What *The Wife's Tale* has that *The Factory Voice* doesn't have is the kind of focus that invites a reader to invest in a character. Whether that makes it a better novel in any way, depends, I suppose, on what you are looking for in a literary companion. Are you looking for a meaningless fling, or do you want to get involved? Readers, like women, need to know these things before they get between the covers.

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## La Poésie dans tous ses états

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**Daniel Leblanc-Poirier**

*La Lune n'aura pas de chandelier, poèmes.*

L'Hexagone 14,95 \$

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**Joanne Morency**

*Miettes de moi, poésie.* Triptyque 15 \$

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**Frédéric Durand**

*Sombre d'ailleurs, poésie.* Triptyque 15 \$

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Compte rendu par René LaFleur

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Des voix très variées se lèvent du sol québécois ces temps-ci, chacune circonscrivant un état intérieur unique en même temps qu'elle situe son dire poétique dans un État ailleurs

insolite, qui jouxte celui que nous habitons au quotidien.

*La Lune n'aura pas de chandelier* de Daniel Leblanc-Poirier illustre poème par poème la conviction de son auteur que le quotidien urbain non transformé contient toutes les merveilles (et tous les désespoirs), ce qui frappe de non-pertinence toute forme de mysticisme. Dans ce recueil, le poète agit à tous les instants par plaisir et pour le plaisir, creusant avec humour et lucidité le quotidien même le plus gris pour en dégager les noyaux merveilleux. Chaque vers est l'occasion d'associer un trait précis de l'expérience humaine non pas à une abstraction poétique ni à un azur sublime ni à une rose délicate mais à un bonbon, un sac de chips ou une bouteille de ketchup. C'est dire que son imaginaire se situe plus volontiers dans le dépanneur du coin que dans le royaume des essences et que le ton dominant du recueil est le comique décapant. En plus d'être le porteur de l'impératif d'aborder avec sa langue, ses tripes, et son sexe le monde dans toute sa variété, ce recueil assume sa nord-américanité, alliant le thème de la recherche poétique à ceux des grands espaces, à la vie nocturne de la Nouvelle-Orléans, à New York, aux plages du Mexique—bref, à tout ce nouveau monde excitant, vaste et varié, marqué par la vitesse et la consommation impulsive. Sous l'évidente dérision du sublime, à laquelle participe un quotidien présenté comme tout ce qu'il y a à aimer, s'articule un propos philosophique que résume le poème final : si la lune n'aura pas de chandelier, c'est parce que le soleil ne sera plus là pour l'éclairer. Elle devra se débrouiller toute seule, sans lumière issue d'ailleurs, comme l'individu d'aujourd'hui n'a d'autre monde pour son aire d'action où se réaliser que celui, physique et actuel, dans lequel nous évoluons déjà.

Comme son titre l'indique, *Miettes de moi* de Joanne Morency attire l'attention du lecteur sur le sujet écrivant, ici engagé dans un processus de dégradation-reconstitution.

La dégradation de soi est en fait une fragmentation parfois aliénante, souvent heureuse puisqu'elle permet une intersection entre soi et la riche multiplicité du perceptible; lorsque la dissémination de l'être devient insoutenable, le processus s'inverse : il s'ensuit alors une reconstitution de soi vécue sous le monde des retrouvailles. Mais quelle que soit la situation de la poétesse dans ce cycle qui n'est pas sans rappeler le *big bang* des astrophysiciens, celle-ci s'adonne à une quête de sérénité, de simplicité, et d'intégrité. Son modèle semble être l'enfant, celui-là même qui, avec la plus parfaite candeur, « délace » le quotidien, dénonçant les vérités absolues et toute autre forme de violence qui souille le rapport tendre et harmonieux avec le monde. Si cette parole efficiente, aérienne peut avoir un effet assainissant sur l'existence gangrenée de l'adulte, elle peut aussi transformer notre perception du monde. Dans cette visée de poète-mage, les mots s'avèrent de fiables alliés : « J'approche du but, syllabe par syllabe. À voix haute. » Son style, plein d'ellipses, a souvent la force d'un aphorisme. L'économie de mots aide à isoler une impression, empêchant l'établissement de la gênante anecdote. Finalement, cette poésie témoigne aussi d'une magie qui a lieu en dehors des mots, par exemple celle qui survient quand la poétesse réussit à déborder ou à « précéder » les fâcheuses limites de son corps à la faveur d'un déplacement psychique du percevant vers le perçu. Ainsi, la poétesse devient ce qu'elle voit, ce qu'elle mange, fait fi de la loi du corps pour devenir « plusieurs à la fois ». Absorbant le perçu pour ensuite le devenir, elle se dissémine (« Je ne sais pas où je commence. Je me répands abondamment. ») pour acquérir un sentiment de plénitude : « Je porte un collier autour du monde. » Entrer dans *Miettes de moi*, c'est se couler dans la tendre respiration d'une sensibilité qui exige un contact intense et simultané avec les mille ports d'attache de l'existence.

En même temps qu'il renvoie à un univers subjectif bien particulier, le « d'ailleurs » de *Sombre d'ailleurs* de Frédéric Durand renvoie au modélisateur qui identifie la qualité « sombre » comme allant de soi— dans ce monde-là. En effet dans ce recueil, la qualité « sombre » a valeur de Norme, constitue un univers infiniment riche en nuances, peuplé d'êtres maléfiques, tordus, entièrement livrés à leurs fantasmes de violence, de lacérations, de démembrements, fréquentant le cimetière comme d'autres fréquentent l'église, êtres porteurs d'une morale de prédateur, laquelle pourrait être résumée par : « Il faudra résoudre à étrangler ». Cette affirmation du mal nécessaire, naturel, répété sous diverses formes dans le recueil, s'inscrit bien sûr en faux contre la perception édulcorée de l'humain bienveillant. Aussi cette morale de vampire prend-elle la forme d'un style, car l'écriture est ici ardue, impitoyablement exigeante, *cruelle* dans la mesure où le sens demeure toujours juste en dehors de notre portée, comme pour nous narguer. Cependant, cette vicieuse alliance de thématiques baudelairiennes et d'une écriture à la René Char est en réalité pure délice pour qui demande au poème non tant de livrer un sens que de frapper l'imagination. D'entrée de jeu, cette voix cruellement sibylline nous introduit dans un dialogue intime avec un « tu » muet. Celui-là dispense à celui-ci un enseignement pour survivre dans le monde souverainement impitoyable qui est le leur, et qui, à l'aide d'énoncés tels que « Tu es ici pour nuire, mais ton mandat s'use », renforce la conscience de leur destin de malfaisant et souligne l'urgence de passer à l'acte. La violence soude non seulement les rapports avec autrui mais avec soi puisque la vérité nue, dégagée de tout pathos, de toute morale humaniste, est exigée de l'autre comme de soi-même. Est-ce la conscience de la nécessité de se détruire l'un l'autre qui explique que, peu avant la fin du recueil, le « tu » se retire? Le dialogue

se poursuit, pourtant, mais avec l'absent, sans changement notable de ton, comme s'il s'était toujours agi de mots-pour-la-mort, de paroles pour installer le lecteur dans la suave éternité de la mort comme absolue. Comment voir autrement le poète fasciné par « l'effondrement de chaque syllabe dans [le] poignet tranché » de l'interlocuteur intime? Ce qui ajoute à cet hommage à la mort est l'excellente force des chutes des poèmes, toutes des petites morts réussies. Souvent rédigées au futur simple, ces chutes donnent l'impression de lier les désirs ou frustrations du présent à un développement morbide à venir d'apparence inéluctable, comme si la voix poétique était celle d'un prophète énonçant la Loi implacable et inhumaine qui gouverne l'univers. Cette Loi qui termine et, à la manière d'un spectre, traverse chaque poème, est à la base d'un contraste habilement exploité entre les règles de conduite favorisant la grégarité de la population « normale » et celles énoncées dans *Sombre d'ailleurs*, qui règlent les comportements asociaux que refoule cette même population. En somme, d'une main de maître, Durand met en scène dans son recueil la voix d'un antéchrist qui susurre les terribles vérités de son Anti-monde.

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## Le Dur désir de durer

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**Eileen Lohka**

*C'était écrit*. L'Interligne 14,95 \$

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**Monique Le Maner**

*Roman 41*. Triptyque 18 \$

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Compte rendu par Pierre-Paul Ferland

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Comprenant cinq nouvelles, *C'était écrit*, de la professeure de littératures francophones à l'Université de Calgary, Eileen Lohka, raconte l'histoire de femmes isolées, confrontées à des forces inaltérables et étrangères : colonisation, guerres, catastrophes naturelles. En ce sens, le recueil rappelle les écrits post-coloniaux d'un Patrick Chamboiseau. Ces nouvelles

à l'écriture rythmée, resserrée sur l'action, se lisent comme des fables sur les dommages collatéraux provoqués par l'injustice. Certaines de ces femmes, vulnérables, abdiquent : Fatima, la jeune Algérienne renfermée sur elle-même en raison de l'horreur de la guerre, et Catherine, une paraplégique abandonnée dans son hospice lorsque l'ouragan Katrina se déchaîne, sauvée par un fugitif en cavale d'abord venu piller les lieux. La destruction de la Nouvelle-Orléans sert de métaphore à la dégénérescence de la femme isolée du monde extérieur, où seuls des souvenirs diffus de son espace originel peuvent survivre. D'autres choisissent la révolte. Madeleine, engagée à brûle-pourpoint alors qu'elle vaquait sur les quais du port breton de l'île de Groix, se travestit pour affronter les misères d'un voyage de dix mois en mer vers Pondichéry à des fins coloniales. Une autre femme, dépossédée par son tortionnaire au point d'en devenir anonyme, choisit de lui cacher la naissance d'un enfant difforme, qu'elle élève en secret dans une caverne. Parmi ces histoires inspirées par des faits divers historiques ficelées par l'écrivaine originaire de l'île Maurice, celle de Rafosty, esclave noire de la région de la Rivière Noire dont le récit de sa rébellion se transmet de mère en fille, constitue l'essence du recueil, adressé en exergue « à toutes les femmes restées sans voix, oubliées par l'histoire ». La notion d'oubli traverse également *Roman 41*, de Monique Le Maner.

Une tempête provoque la rencontre de deux hommes aux identités antithétiques. Pierre est un optimiste invétéré incapable du moindre souvenir. Adrien collectionne dans ses valises cent trois objets liés à sa mémoire. Réfugiés en huis clos dans un manoir, le duo tue le temps. Adrien cherche à léguer ses objets afin d'exorciser ses mauvais souvenirs, en vain. Paradoxalement, chaque don raté crée un nouveau souvenir chez lui. Chez Pierre, le contact avec ces objets lui révèle des souvenirs inconnus.



La question persiste de savoir quelle est la part d'invention dans ces réminiscences. La mémoire de l'un déteint sur l'autre; à l'inverse, l'oubli systématique de Pierre transpire sur Adrien. Un conflit surgit : à qui appartiennent ces objets? Peut-on posséder un souvenir? *Roman 41*, de Monique Le Maner, explore les questionnements qui nous tenaillent lorsque le moment de notre mort est fixé. Pierre et Adrien, d'abord archétypes, prennent alors une nouvelle réalité, et s'imposent comme des transpositions de l'environnement et des souvenirs d'une écrivaine mourante, la narratrice. La mise en doute de la vérité des souvenirs des personnages devient alors une mise en abyme des propres dilemmes de cette femme à qui l'on a ravi une part d'elle-même. Le ton du roman rejoint *En attendant Godot*, de Beckett, quant aux interrogations sur l'absurdité de l'existence. Le texte riche en dialogues aurait d'ailleurs atteint son plein pouvoir, à notre avis, sur la scène.

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## Gone But Not Forgotten

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**Steve Lundin**

*When She's Gone*. Great Plains \$19.95

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Reviewed by Robert Thacker

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Just as this novel closes, readers are offered an image: "Somewhere in the Canadian bush, on a frozen pond surrounded by trees where the mist hangs knee-deep, a kid plays hockey. He plays the game against the forces of nature, turning the laws of physics into poems. Occasionally some passer-by stumbles into view, and watches in reverence, the slow realization that the kid is more than just a kid, the game more than just a game, the love more than just love. The witness sees sport without a coin to its name." The romance of hockey, its utter purity, reverberates throughout *When She's Gone*: hockey played as it should be played and where it should be played—in Canada, most particularly Winnipeg—is the great constant here.

But now it is not played where it should be played—the WHA and the Winnipeg Jets are gone, the NHL has teams playing in places like Arizona. "These days the NHL is more sacred than Canada itself," Lundin writes. "The game is a country."

*When She's Gone* is not a very good novel, but it's an interesting one. Setting the romance of hockey felt by Canadian boys—and this is a book *very* much about adolescent boys ever drawn to hockey—at its centre, Lundin uses the game as a prism for every aspect of his story. That story is told by a seventeen-year-old goalie in staccato glimpses that, eventually, hang loosely together into a romantic narrative of boyhood, family, sexual initiation, and—striving, striving—perhaps wisdom. Perhaps. The Canada and western Canadian history Lundin constructs is as hockey-centred as he is; in a frontispiece opening we are offered hockey as the defining feature of being in Winnipeg: "The game got in our blood when the Selkirk Settlers first showed up at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. Not hard to figure out why. They were farmers one and all and given land along the rivers, each allotment the precise dimensions of a hockey rink." "Those first leagues were vicious. There were the two major ones, the Northwest League and the Hudson's Bay league. Serious rivals and it all came to a head when Louis Riel, left-wing for the Voyageurs, jumped leagues and signed with the Métis Traders right there at the corner of Portage and Main. . . ." These teams had to travel by York Boat and later on because "people were dying out there in the bush" "the government decided to build a rail line right across the country east to west sixteen thousand miles, ten thousand of them through solid rock." It "was built single-handedly by some guy named Pierre Berton."

While it would be a simple thing to take up some of this and point out numerous weaknesses in form, structure, and style, to do so would miss the essential strengths of

*When She's Gone*: here, hockey's romance—the purity of The Game—is as yoked with growing up Canadian, living a Canadian male adolescence, and just being Canadian in Winnipeg as might be imagined. Lundin evokes, in what might be reasonably called a loving way, the days when the Winnipeg Jets soared with Bobby Hull and the Swedes at the Winnipeg Arena. Set within the narrative of Mark's life, Lundin captures a time and a place now gone, just as his narrator's youth and family are gone. *When She's Gone* rollicks with the self-obsessed exuberance of adolescent youth; it offers a view of a Canadian west defined by hockey culture; it regrets the changes wrought to The Game by time, mutability, and commerce. Hockey's romance remains, though, and it still defines being, and being Canadian. She's gone but not forgotten.

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## National Anxiety in a New Age

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**Jim Lynch**

*Border Songs*. Random House \$29.95

Reviewed by Damon Barta

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By turns a post 9-11 elegy for a time when the US-Canada border was a “geographical handshake” and a lampooning of the popular will and political pressures that have made it otherwise, Jim Lynch's *Border Songs* is the story of a sleepy border community that becomes a locus of national paranoia.

The arbitrary nature of policing an arbitrary border are at the fore of *Border Songs*, particularly in the character of Brandon Vanderkool, a sort of bumbling innocent whose job with the American Border Patrol offers him opportunities to catalog bird calls and create pine-cone sculptures. Despite having no passion for his job and a reluctance to thrust himself into the lives of border-jumpers, Brandon stumbles across them at every turn. In one instance, smugglers literally stumble across *him* while

he is lying down in the woods, listening for the call of a rare owl. His “success” at apprehending illegal aliens and smugglers is lauded by the Border Patrol and used to attract political support for more funding, though many of Brandon's colleagues are largely apathetic about whether they “can stop six percent of what's rolling through instead of three.” These funds are then used to purchase sophisticated surveillance technology, such as camera towers and unmanned aircraft, to monitor a quiet countryside. At his best, Lynch succeeds in conveying the incongruity of everyday life next to a tenuously drawn border and a political perception of this border as a war-front. The absurd image of a “flying drone” presiding over a ditch and a handful of dairy farms suggests the funhouse distortion of reality implicit in “protecting” a border that narrows and expands at the whim of a fearful and fickle public. This is again well-illustrated by the anti-climax of escalating paranoia, when a robot is deployed at the Peace Arch to open a “radioactive” cooler that contains batteries and cat litter.

The physical and social awkwardness of Vanderkool is an apt metaphor for the arbitrary and uneven application of American power: usually well-intentioned, often hapless, and always consequential. However, Lynch's symbolic nuances are often overwhelmed by the unnecessarily direct and mechanical polemics of his characters. Lynch trots out stock American and Canadian figures that stand in relief to his idiosyncratic central character. Jingoistic, individualist Americans and self-righteous, pot-smoking Canadians frequently sling jibes at one another across a border represented by the ditch between their backyards. At times, the didacticism of these dialogues strains the credibility of the participants as believable characters, and the author's concern with being even-handed in his treatment of Canadians and Americans

exacerbates this strain. When a Canadian speaks, an American is made to speak with an equal and opposite rhetorical reaction, often to the incredulity of the reader.

Narrative credibility is also tested by an overtly populist thread in the novel, embodied by Brandon's father, Norm. A struggling dairy farmer who weighs the possibility of accepting cash from smugglers wanting to traverse his farm against a life spent on hard and honest labor, he seems to represent a more innocent era, and by extension, a contrast to the current, more complicated time. This moralistic undertone plays out as expected and does little to advance the narrative and less to ameliorate Lynch's facile treatment of character.

While the narrative appears to glorify a mythical, pastoral tradition and is ambiguously and curiously preoccupied with cannabis, these dalliances are ultimately subordinate to the greater theme of community divided—not by an indiscernible plane of latitude, but by external forces that construe the meaning of such a plane. Though *Border Songs* has its flaws, Lynch succeeds when his aim is directed towards the latter.

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## An Exorcist's Tale

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**Linden MacIntyre**

*The Bishop's Man*. Random House \$32

Reviewed by Pamela Owen

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The narrator of Linden MacIntyre's 2008 Giller Prize winning novel, *The Bishop's Man*, is Father Duncan MacAskill, a fifty-year-old Catholic priest who, after working as a Catholic missionary in Honduras and acting as Dean of Students for the local university in Nova Scotia, is assigned by the Bishop to his first parish, Stella Maris, in tiny Creignish, on southern Cape Breton Island. While the novel is set in the mid-1990s, we soon learn that MacAskill is a man haunted by the ghostly memories of

his past. These memories remain locked and suppressed within the vaults of MacAskill's mind. But within the confines of Creignish, an area situated uncomfortably close to the area where he grew up, a "non-place" called The Long Stretch, MacAskill must come head-to-head with the demons of his past. In the lonely glebe house of this tiny rural parish, MacAskill encounters the cold hard facts and consequences of the life he has lived, both in the priesthood and in growing up as the son of a local drunk.

Until this point in his life, Father MacAskill has spent most of his priesthood acting on the demands of the Bishop. Labelled by students and colleagues as "The Exorcist," Duncan, the Bishop's man, is noted for his experience in "rooting out perversions," tidying away potential scandal, and providing discipline when cases are particularly sensitive. The additional task of tidying away the emotions of the victims becomes MacAskill's cross to bear. It is that responsibility that wears away at his sense of justice and of his calling, most specifically, when he is forced to reflect upon the implications of his role as the Bishop's man. This occurs shortly after Father MacAskill's assignment to Creignish, when 19-year-old Danny MacKay, a boy he has befriended and to whom he is distantly related, commits suicide. When a whispered accusation in the confessional names Brendan Bell as the cause, MacAskill sees, in horror, how he has acted as the catalyst that set the events of this tragedy into motion. MacAskill's subsequent efforts to get to the truth of the matter bring him into confrontation with the Bishop, whose sole purpose is to protect the church, regardless of the damage some of its priests have wreaked upon their young and vulnerable victims. With the passing years in Creignish, MacAskill confronts the truth of his role in the church, as well as the other ghosts from his past. The dysfunctional family dynamics of growing up on Long Stretch Road resurface and, through a

series of journals, so do mysterious events in Honduras involving a woman, Jacinta, and a Central American priest, Alfonso.

*The Bishop's Man* is a story set during a time of transition. The novel provides an artistic and thought-provoking illustration of how, in the midst of change, we struggle with definitions of self and self in relation to others. This becomes a significant struggle for Father Duncan MacAskill who is working to define himself as a man pushed to the breaking point by loneliness, tragedy, and sudden self-knowledge, but also to understand his role in the Catholic church. The Church itself is an institution in the midst of a transition and is struggling to establish its own identity, an identity which, too, is pushed to provide meaning and substance for both its clergy and its congregation.

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## Réalités conflictuelles

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**Jocelyne Mallet-Parent**

*Dans la tourmente afghane*. David 21,95 \$

**Gérard Bouchard**

*Uashat*. Boréal 25,95 \$

Compte rendu par Maria Cotroneo

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Le personnage principal des deux romans ainsi que leur mission est ce qui lie les deux récits. Deux jeunes hommes avec des idées préconçues se donnent comme devoir la tâche de découvrir le mode de vie de deux cultures distinctes. Ils finissent par se rendre compte que la réalité dans les deux lieux qu'ils visitent n'est pas du tout ce à quoi ils s'attendaient.

*Uashat* raconte l'histoire de Florent Moissan, étudiant en sociologie, qui accepte une offre de stage dans la Réserve de Uashat. L'objectif de son séjour est d'observer la culture des habitants et de dresser la généalogie des familles de la réserve.

Inspiré par l'expérience réelle de nombreux Innus, Bouchard construit un roman qui reconstitue la tragédie vécue par les Innus lors de la crise de la cohabitation

entre les Autochtones et les Blancs. Il illustre dans ce roman les nombreux stéréotypes qui finissent par décrire tout le peuple autochtone. À travers ce roman assez émouvant, Bouchard réussit à projeter une autre lumière sur ce peuple en faisant comprendre à Florent et au lecteur les difficultés affrontées par les Autochtones et les malheurs qui font partie de leur destin.

Ce roman prend la structure d'un journal intime, décrivant chaque jour de ce stage du mois d'avril au mois d'octobre. La structure de ce roman permet au lecteur de s'approcher du récit qu'il lit parce que le journal intime donne l'impression de raconter une expérience personnelle. Mettant en évidence les sentiments, la subjectivité et les impressions du personnage principal, Gérard Bouchard fait en sorte que son lecteur ne reste pas à l'extérieur du texte.

*Dans la tourmente afghane* raconte l'histoire d'un jeune journaliste, Jonathan Depuis, qui de retour d'une mission journalistique à Kandahar, ne réussit pas à trouver la vie qu'il avait laissée avant de partir. Captif d'une bande de rebelles en Afghanistan, il témoigne d'avoir vécu le plus terrible cauchemar de sa vie. Il revient chez lui, transformé, traumatisé, enfin déstabilisé. Incapable de dire ou même de se rappeler les détails de ce séjour épouvantable, il mène sa propre enquête pour reconstituer cette expérience indicible qui désormais fait partie de sa personne. En reconstruisant son passé, il découvre non pas seulement les détails de son expérience en Afghanistan mais il découvre aussi que cette expérience traumatique a fait de lui un être changé, nouveau, voire meilleur.

Dans ce roman, Jocelyne Mallet-Parent illustre les conséquences de la guerre et elle critique de manière indirecte la mission en Afghanistan. En parlant d'actualité dans ce roman, le lecteur se trouve plus apte à comprendre les péripéties de l'histoire.

Ces deux romans partagent l'entrée dans un monde autre. Les deux récits mettent

en scène un témoin qui devient malgré lui assez impliqué dans ce qu'il observe. Jocelyne Mallet-Parent et Gérard Bouchard illustrent deux cultures et deux mondes dépossédés de leur identité et privés de bonheur. La particularité de ces deux romans reste dans la capacité des personnages principaux à dépasser la négativité des expériences vécues et à voir quelque chose de plus positif derrière ces mondes pessimistes. Ils apprennent aussi que la réalité dans ces lieux est assez différente par rapport à ce qu'ils avaient appris avant d'en faire l'expérience personnelle. Mallet-Parent et Bouchard pénètrent dans des mondes où règnent la misère, la tristesse et la pauvreté pour en faire ressortir la grandeur et la beauté.

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## Traces and Spaces, Memory and Stages

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**Marc Maufort and Caroline De Wagter, eds.**

*Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama.* Peter Lang \$57.95

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**Bruce Barton, ed.**

*Developing Nation: New Play Creation in English-Speaking Canada.* Playwrights Canada \$25.00

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Reviewed by Scott Duchesne

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In her pioneering 1994 article "Coming Together" in *Lift Off!* '93: Intercultural Theatre in Toronto and Canadian Multiculturalism, Mayte Gómez writes: "To search for the universal takes us to the normative, to the static and unchangeable. To search for difference creates movement, interaction." This thought, applied to two discrete, though not entirely disconnected, subjects, defines the attitude of these two new publications that offer important contributions and pose critical questions to the ever-evolving field of English Canadian theatre studies.

Gómez's article functions as a useful link between these two collections, as she

concerns herself both with the status of (inter)cultural memory and how the work of dramaturgy—the focus of Barton's collection—determines that status, for better or for worse, in the material conditions that inform "workshops" and "festivals." Not surprisingly, this status is the central concern of the first article in *Developing Nation*, written in 1986 by the late great (and greatly missed) Elliot Hayes. He writes: "The 'masterpieces' are worth producing, or watching; other plays 'need work.'" For Hayes, "workshops and warehouse spaces seem to be the only outlets available for Canadian drama," since "large theatres are so dependent on box-office income that they feel they must please audiences with tried-and-true products," avoiding that unknown quantity called the "Canadian play." In different ways and to different degrees, the articles that comprise *Developing Nation* address and interrogate these basic issues under the provisional rubric of "dramaturgy" and document what Barton calls the historical shift "from nationalism to multiculturalism to interculturalism and internationalism." Indeed, one of the connecting themes of these two collections is an acknowledgment that increasing diversity in the form of the ongoing integration of a variety of ethnicities and cultural communities in (mainly) urban areas—in both of these collections, Toronto is the default urban space under consideration—must be addressed by cultural institutions, including theatre, in which the profitable lure of "masterpieces" or "classics" outweigh the risk of staging plays that challenge the comfortably normative, static, and unchangeable.

Barton's underlying philosophy in *Developing Nation* is a refusal to define the subject of the book, which is, he claims, a historical characteristic of the practice itself: "dramaturgy resists the mantle of stable definition," he writes, "[a]nd instead insists on perpetually redefining itself in relation

to its context." For Barton, there is a playful, productive, and "adaptable *understanding* of dramaturgy" that resists the "'one-size-fits-all' approach" that is often associated with—and, if many authors in *Developing Nation* are to be believed, often practised in—English Canadian theatre. To that end, Barton has gathered up articles from the late 1980s to the present day that never attempt to pin down this necessarily elusive profession; instead, they respond to it, contributing their own understanding of its changeable nature, which provides the reader with a productive range of approaches. The result is a collection that varies in degrees of interest and quality—there are some articles that are out of place, especially in the first half and the final "Snapshot" section of the book—but *Developing Nation* is nevertheless a useful and highly recommended first step in promoting a dialogue about the history and practice of dramaturgy both in the theatres, and, more importantly, in the theatre and drama departments of schools, colleges, and universities.

In *Signatures of the Past*, editors Maufort and De Wagter have assembled an impressive group of scholars who have produced a wide array of equally remarkable papers on the subject of cultural memory. It has been quite some time since I've been as intellectually engaged and energized by a collection of essays on English Canadian theatre. Gomez's breakthrough article in *Developing Nation* would find a comfortable home in *Signatures of the Past*, as it mirrors many of the concerns of the authors, especially regarding Canada's official policy of Multiculturalism as it has developed since the 1970s. In particular, it would make an excellent companion piece to one of several highlights of the book: Ric Knowles' "Performing Intercultural Memory in the Diasporic Present: The Case of Toronto" which, like many of the other papers, assumes that "All cultural memory is performative" which attempts to "suture a divided cultural identity to the communal building of shared

cultural memory" by way of "the embodied practices of intercultural memory."

In his introduction, Marc Maufort defines cultural memory as a phrase that incorporates "a latent but nevertheless profound doubt of identity that plagues hybridized Western societies in an age of globalization," reflecting concerns such as "diasporic identities, exilic predicaments, and multi-ethnic subject positions." In response to this definition, it would be more accurate to posit that indeed doubt *fuels* many of the best papers in this collection, urging scholars to interrogate the predicaments that trouble cultural memory: Craig Walker's "Hopeful Monsters and Doomed Freaks" explores cultural memory as a "relationship between the genetic heritage we carry in our DNA and the cultural heritage which we carry in . . . our present social codes"; Guillermo Verdecchia explores cultural memory in Latina-Canadian plays as "points of rupture and loss from recent Latin American history," presenting "a significant intervention in the cultural memory of . . . Latino leftist masculinity" in his essay "Contending with Rupture"; Roberta Mock's "Memories, Hauntings and Exorcisms in Brad Fraser's *Snake in Fridge*" posits that Fraser's Canada wills itself "into existence, straddling the borders between imagined history and imagined future, in a constant state of 'becoming.'" Doubt, it appears, is the key to understanding Anglophone Canadian drama, and these papers make an excellent case.

Less successful, or perhaps less obviously significant, is Maufort's conceit that informs the title of the book, which is influenced by Jacques Derrida's concept of a "signature" that "evokes both a presence and an absence," in which, according to Maufort, the essays "offer a clearer, but by no means definitive, assessment of those elusive 'signatures' of past cultural memories." Not many of the authors in this collection overtly take up the concept of the "signature" in their work, though certainly it

haunts many of their subjects. However, it does take centre stage in the final essay of the collection, Karen Shimakawa's "Performing the Asian American Signature in Law and Theatre," which stands out among an already extraordinary collection of work. Especially rewarding for me was the last section of her essay subtitled "Embodying the Ethnic Signature," in which Shimakawa analyzes the assumptions grounding the material that forms the audio walking tour of New York's Chinatown, marketed by Soundwalk, Inc. Incorporating Brian Massumi's concept of the *biogram*, Shimakawa argues that how we move through and experience ourselves through space/time speaks to "how bodies and subjectivities are produced—constantly, dynamically, multiply/contradictorily, *in motion* and *in space*." Although many of these essays make *Signatures of the Past* more than worth the price, it is Shimakawa's essay in particular, I think, that makes this collection a *necessary* addition to your bookshelf. *Signatures of the Past* embodies the spirit of what Gomez defines as the search for "difference": resisting the "normative, the static and the unchangeable," moving and interacting with a doubt-full society through an approach that might compel scholars to re-examine their models of the study of theatre and drama.




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## Method and Material

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**Ian McKay**

*Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920.* Between the Lines \$49.95

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**Gregory Betts, ed.**

*The Wrong World: Selected Stories & Essays of Bertram Brooker.* U of Ottawa P \$30.00

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Reviewed by Bart Vautour

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Every so often a text comes along that changes how things are done. Ian McKay's second volume of an expected three-volume history of the left in Canada is one such text. The weighty tome (over 600 pages) takes on what McKay calls the Canadian left's first formation, which took place in the period prior to the more familiar and oft-debated interwar period. His thesis rests, in large part, on the confluence of the overwhelming surge of capitalist modernity—a period of rapid industrialization in Canada (with all its transnational implications)—with the rising discourse of "social transformation founded upon the insights of evolutionary theory."

Like many books that are able to come up with some really key, wide-ranging insights, *Reasoning Otherwise* is both interdisciplinary and accompanied by an innovative and original methodology. McKay employs what he calls "reconnaissance," a methodology he began theorizing in the pages of *The Canadian Historical Review* and *Labour/Le Travail*. He uses reconnaissance to get at the "general rules and assumptions, the grammar and syntax, underlying those statements" which are "left behind by the people of a given political formation." McKay puts this reconnaissance to work in order to explore "questions" of class, religion, gender and sexuality, race, war, and the aftermath of the general strikes of 1919. Particularly relevant for the study of the literature of this period is McKay's discussion, in his chapter on "The Religion Question,"

of the left's negotiations of modernity and spiritualism and how those negotiations were connected to evolutionary discourse.

In *Reasoning Otherwise*, McKay continues the rethinking of the history of the left in Canada he began in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*. He maintains the notion that anybody who shares four key insights can be called a leftist—these are insights into “capitalism’s injustice, the possibility of equitable democratic alternatives, the need for social revolution, and the development of the preconditions of this social transformation in the actual world around us.” These insights are good markers for getting away from sectarianism in the production of historiography of the left in Canada and they seem useful for the study of leftist literature in Canada—they are certainly a good alternative to simply calling something “political”—but I wonder if I shouldn’t have reservations about the viability of the fourth “insight” when it comes to artistic production.

While one of the blurbs on the back cover suggests that McKay’s book “will become the definitive text for the foreseeable future,” what is so promising about his method is that it does *not* aim to shut down continuing discussion. Rather, McKay’s “mission of reconnaissance” acts as incitement for other scholars and students to delve deeper into the complicated construction of the left within this period.

If Ian McKay has approached the history of the left through reconnaissance, scholars of literary modernism in Canada can perform a reconnaissance of a slightly different kind with the material Gregory Betts has given us in his important collection, *The Wrong World: Selected Stories & Essays of Bertram Brooker*. Betts’ edition is the third instalment in the Canadian Literature Collection, which publishes scholarly editions of out-of-print or unpublished Canadian texts from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.

This collection of Brooker’s writing brings together a selection of short stories, one novella, as well as essays and polemics, many of which have never been published. Perhaps better known as a modernist painter, Betts’ introduction convincingly makes the case for the importance of Brooker’s prose to the emergence of literary *and* interdisciplinary modernism in Canada. The critical introduction is informative, to be sure, but not so much as to turn a reader away from actually reading the stories and essays. The short stories range from earnest realism to avant-garde experiment, while the essays take on subjects ranging from the censorship of art in Toronto to “cosmic patriotism.”

It is perhaps a bit odd that within a single-author collection of texts spanning a significant amount of time, the dates of first publication or approximate dates of composition are not made immediately accessible for each selection when the editorial procedure follows chronological arrangement. This may seem overly picky but when literary scholars look to reconstruct the emergence of modernist expression in Canada and include Brooker as one of the first to articulate literary modernism, as this collection does, knowing the specific time frame of composition and publication becomes germane because the emergence of literary modernism in Canada was deeply interactive, reactive, and responsive.

Despite a few slippages in the construction of the textual emendations and revisions, Betts has done a great service to the study of modernism in Canada by recovering and arranging these texts. This collection has great pedagogical potential and can contribute much to a rethinking of how modernism is taught in Canada. Part of the text’s usefulness for teaching is its accompanying website ([www.press.uottawa.ca](http://www.press.uottawa.ca)) which contains supplementary material such as biographical information, essays



and short stories that are not included in the collection, and study questions for the texts that are included. The strength of this collection lies in the fact that it is geared to help both literary scholars do the work of reconnaissance that Ian McKay advocates and that is so important for the study of modernism in Canada while it also facilitates the ability of a new generation of students to do that same work.

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## Too Much Happiness, Too Much Grief

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**Anne Michaels**

*The Winter Vault*. McClelland & Stewart \$32.99

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**Alice Munro**

*Too Much Happiness*. McClelland & Stewart \$32.99

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Reviewed by Beverley Haun

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Anne Michaels writes the novel as poetry; Alice Munro writes the short story as novel. Between the two we see the ideas of genre pushed until the conventions do not hold, and we are left immeasurably richer for the changes.

*The Winter Vault* is named for a kind of structure familiar in Canada. Traditionally, when the ground was too frozen to bury a body until the spring thaw, that body was kept at a cemetery in a winter vault to await interment. In Michaels' novel, this expediency of a cold climate serves both as a seasonal practicality and as a metaphor—the emotional space, the season of grief, that we all occupy as we respond to deep loss. It is not only loss of people but also of place and the many possible responses to such loss that form the basis of the world created here by Michaels.

The novel is divided into three parts: “The Riverbed,” “The Stone in the Middle,” and “Petrichor.” “The Riverbed” follows the courtship and early marriage of Avery Escher, an English engineer, and Jean Shaw, a Canadian botanist. They meet in Quebec

in the late 1950s amid the disruption and displacement of communities that preceded the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway. They marry and move to an Egypt experiencing a similar destruction of ancient Nubian towns along the Nile to make way for the Aswan Dam. Theirs is a relationship based on talk as they conjure themselves for each other through their stories of family, childhood, and formative experience. As if to counteract the destruction they witness, they also share an urgency to tell each other all the disparate facts and wisdom they have collected throughout their lives—esoteric points about plants, engineering, and cultural practices. As Avery tells Jean, his father taught him that “no two facts are too far apart to be put together.” All of their shared memory is told in lyrical prose that washes over the senses and invites a slow reading to fully absorb.

In the second part, the Egyptian honeymoon gives way to great personal loss and they struggle to overcome their tragedy. Avery turns to architecture, Jean plants obsessively. A Polish Canadian artist befriends Jean during this period, his stories of suffering in the Second World War further illustrating how loss changes the survivor, both diminishing possibilities and making experiences more acute. The third part is very brief, and the title says it all. “Petrichor” is the name given to the aroma that accompanies the first rain after a dry spell. Plant oils are released, washed from the earth's pores to fill the air with the scent of renewal.

Toward the end of *The Winter Vault*, Michaels writes, “Our memories contain more than we remember: those moments too ordinary to keep, from which, all of our lives, we drink.” Munro provides keys into those memories we are surprised to find we all hold in common.

Two observations are foremost in my mind after reading *Too Much Happiness*. The first is the way in which Munro makes

the particular universal. To enter and engage with an Alice Munro story is to see what you think you know with fresh eyes. You graduate from the reading with a heightened awareness and find yourself recalibrating your way of making sense of the stories all around you. The second observation comes from a statement by the main character in the last story and namesake of the collection, the great nineteenth-century mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky: "She was learning, quite late, what many people around her appeared to have known since childhood—that life can be perfectly satisfying without major accomplishments . . . There need be no agonizing." Here is the paradox of this collection. While Sophia recognizes late in life that there need be no agony, eight of the other stories pinpoint the episode or choices made in otherwise unaccomplished lives that lead to varying degrees of agony. Agony still finds a way.

There are ten stories in *Too Much Happiness*. Eight share the point of view of older narrators looking back to pivotal formative incidents from their youth. Six bear witness to the socially-sanctioned dynamics and consequences of women dominated by male power in relationships. Three stories take place in the present. Two have male protagonists. All deserve multiple readings.

While murder, jealousy, humiliation, and betrayal give the first eight stories their impetus, "Wood," the ninth story, acts as a counterpoint and prepares the way for Sophia in "Too Much Happiness." "Wood" is a fairytale, covert but classic. Roy, a quiet furniture repairman, is married to Lea, a garrulous and energetic woman who works as a dentist's receptionist. She approves of Roy's repair business, his obligation to others, and his own preference for cutting firewood. He tends to visit the bush when she is at work and finds himself increasingly, secretly drawn to the bush and his love of trees. As a season of ill health

witthers Lea's vibrancy, she seems "stuck in a nest of brambles." With his wife lost to him, Roy spends more and more time in the bush until Percy, a local trickster lurking at its edge, tells Roy a tale that shifts his boreal enthrallment from love to greed. He enters the bush, he hurries, he missteps, he breaks his ankle. Painfully crawling for hours, Roy pulls himself out from the centre of the woods. When he finally emerges, severing the hold the forest had on him, he is astonished to find his wife waiting, revitalized. Lea had languished as his obsession with the bush increased. Released now from their spell, she is miraculously restored to him. But he feels only tentative joy lest he lose her again. He is still befogged by the woods' enchantment, although he is beginning to see how it is "tangled up in itself," dense and secret.

"Wood" is a seemingly gentle tale of rural Southern Ontario, yet it holds the reader in an iron grip, unable to anticipate the ending, astonished to find herself also under a spell—until Munro deliberately, deftly, chooses to release her. Paradoxically, the best story in the collection, it is no better than the rest.



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## Studying Canadian Studies

Sourayan Mookerjee, Imre Szeman, and Gail Faurshou, eds.

*Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Duke UP \$32.95

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Reviewed by Kit Dobson

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*Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader* marks an important publication. At a time when Canadian studies departments and institutes across the country have been threatened with cuts—the Centre at Simon Fraser University being the most prominent recent victim—this publication marks a level of consolidation for the field. It is a solid book at close to six-hundred pages, and makes a valuable contribution to Canadian studies. With contributions from media studies, literary studies, cultural studies, Aboriginal studies, and studies of multiculturalism, as well as government policy documents and a concerted effort to bridge the divide between Quebec and the rest of Canada, this reader does a great job of covering its ground.

Divided into three sections—“Canadian Cultural Theory: Origins,” “Contemporary Canadian Cultural Studies,” and “Government Documents”—the reader delivers a lot of important content. The section on “Origins” represents the key heavy-hitting men of the post-war generation, with two selections from each of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye, and George Grant. These selections are by and large the expected pieces—Frye’s “Conclusion,” McLuhan’s “The Medium is the Message,” and so on—although neither selection from Grant is from *Lament for a Nation*. Additionally, this section includes important interventions concerning Quebec and Aboriginal issues from Paul-Émile Borduas, Fernand Dumont, and Harold Cardinal, and is rounded out by an essay from Anthony Wilden. Taken as a whole, this section demonstrates both the relatively recent arrival of Canadian cultural

studies—indeed, the volume as a whole evidences a major theme of the “belatedness” of Canadian cultural identity—and of its intellectual complexity (not to mention its abiding masculinity).

The section titled “Contemporary Canadian Cultural Studies,” while providing further evidence of the relatively short time frame, is divided into three very strong sections, with good and representative essays in each: “Nationalism and Canada” (with essays from Ian Angus, Jocelyn Létourneau, Rob Shields, Kevin Pask, and Maurice Charland), “Race, Difference, and Multiculturalism” (Himani Bannerji, Katharyne Mitchell, Eva Mackey, Lee Maracle, Kristina Fagan, and Len Findlay), and “Modernity and Contemporary Culture” (Stephen Crocker, Ioan Davies, Will Straw, Jody Berland, Rick Gruneau and David Whitson, and Serra Tinic). Collectively, the three sections range from strong critiques of Aboriginal policy and multiculturalism to analyses of hockey culture and the Rick Mercer’s “Talking to Americans” segment on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

The final section, “Government Documents,” provides almost exactly what one would expect here: excerpts from the Report of the Massey Commission, excerpts from the Report of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission, and a government pamphlet on multiculturalism. The last is an interesting choice: I would expect multiculturalism to be represented in this section, but a reprint of either Trudeau’s 1971 statement addressing “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework” or just the Multiculturalism Act would be the usual documents used in teaching. The pamphlet reproduced does include Trudeau’s statement, however, and is representative.

In terms of apparatus, each essay includes an editor’s note to give the original source, and essays are headed by useful biographical notes. An excellent introduction from the editors demonstrates that Canadian

cultural studies is, indeed, “unique and distinctive,” offering “theoretical and analytic resources” that boost cultural studies more widely. The introduction convincingly makes the case for Canadian cultural studies as distinct from either British or American cultural studies, while recognizing that “the production of a book that proposes to represent a national tradition of cultural studies will be controversial.” Canada’s position here, which the editors view as being “globalized *avant la lettre*,” however, allows them to make the case, via a sustained reading of Canadian history, that it is important to recognize the distinct intellectual traditions that Canada offers. A conclusion by Yves Laberge addressing the relationship between Anglo-Canadian and francophone intellectual networks is helpful in addressing the gap between Quebec and Canada *vis-à-vis* cultural studies.

If there is a letdown here, it is the Foreword by Fredric Jameson. It seems initially exciting to see such an august figure addressing the topic of Canada (which he does elsewhere in his writing as well). However, at two-and-a-half pages, this Foreword is not able to add much to a volume whose strength rests on the contributions within the volume itself. Moreover, Jameson’s description of Canadians’ “still distinctive way of life” came across, to this reviewer at least, as weirdly ethnographic in nature.

That said, *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader* marks an important contribution, one that will be useful for anyone working in Canadian cultural studies and cognate fields; these are essential essays and documents. It is, moreover, an accessible and useful text that I heartily recommend to instructors of Canadian studies looking to foster a sense of academic rigour in their courses.




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## Travelling Bodies

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**Shani Mootoo**

*Valmiki's Daughter*. Anansi \$29.95

**Diana Fitzgerald Bryden**

*No Place Strange*. Key Porter \$27.95

Review by Carolyne Van Der Meer

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Shani Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter* is set in modern Trinidad, in the crime-rife city of San Fernando. The class system is alive and well: the right measure of Indian blood and skin tone holds great importance here. Too Caribbean is negative, as is skin too dark and houses too far down the hillside. Women’s education is most respected (by men) when it is undertaken outside the university: too much education is unfeminine. Fit female bodies are poorly viewed among the upper classes. And homosexuality is best hidden.

As such, the stage is set in *Valmiki’s Daughter*. Valmiki, a wealthy, well-respected doctor in San Fernando, lives with his wife Devika and two daughters Viveka and Vashti in the upscale hilltop suburb of Luminada Heights. Very quickly, we learn that Valmiki not only has repeated affairs with foreign women—in other words, not the dark-skinned women of Indian descent from his own class, but the ill-respected mostly white foreigners who consult him in his medical practice. His secretary Zoraida knows of all of his liaisons and protects him in his quest for discretion—even helps foster this odd element of his practice. We also learn that Devika rarely addresses this aspect of Valmiki’s character. While she is aware of his behaviour, she does not condone it. She even somehow worships his indisputable virility, but she will not unsettle her own charmed life, which wants for nothing materially.

We also discover quickly that though he presents an image of virility in his seemingly insatiable desire for female flesh, Valmiki’s real carnal desire is for men. Marrying Devika was a way to save him from the shame of pursuing his true nature,

which would have been shunned in traditional Trinidadian society. Nevertheless, interspersed with his pursuit of women is a regular connection with Saul, a man of a much lower social class than Valmiki, who is married to a woman who knows of and accepts his homosexual nature—and who, like Devika, knows on which side her proverbial bread is buttered.

Of course this stage, set as it is, leads to the obvious question: so what is it about Valmiki's daughter? Early on, we also discover that Viveka causes great tension in the family because of her interest in sports, her unfeminine tomboy-like nature, her pursuit of a university degree—and ultimately, her awakening interest in women. Valmiki has a special connection with Viveka, and allows her to manipulate him; he inherently understands that their natures are one and the same. And Devika, who believes that a mother knows everything about her child by mere “feel” or intuition, instinctively knows that Viveka is like her father.

Mootoo's novel is one of powerful tensions that push and pull with an almost sexual rhythm. There is a constant play of contradictions: Devika's disgust with Valmiki's never-ending ways, yet her desire to be taken by him; Valmiki's incessant need for female validation pitted against his primordial hunger for male companionship and sexual play; and Viveka's realization that seeking a romantic connection with a male would be socially correct but contradicts her awakening need for female completion. Mootoo is skilled at chafing these imbalances, one against the other, and finding resolution, though that resolution continually hangs on the precipice of disaster. My only complaint about this novel is Mootoo's insistence on beginning each section of the novel (there are four parts and an epilogue) with a geographical journey that addresses the reader as “you” and takes her on a guided tour of San Fernando and all other places significant to the story. This

is a tedious change in tempo that risks losing the reader at each section's outset.

Diana Fitzgerald Bryden's *No Place Strange* explores the politics of place more probingly than the politics of bodies, though it does touch on this theme as well. And while *Valmiki's Daughter* held us captive in a continuous wave of foreboding, *No Place Strange* dangles us in the arenas of terrorism and murder. Bryden's complex novel plays out the connections of four people to legendary Palestinian terrorist Rafa Ahmed—legendary because of her beauty, her coldness—and because of her sex.

Lydia, a young Jewish Canadian woman, knows of her journalist father's love affair with Rafa from an early age. His untimely death is surely the result of his relationship with her—which Lydia must somehow reconcile. She escapes from her reality by travelling to Europe, and meets a young Lebanese man, Farid, with whom she falls crazily in love—though circumstances separate them before she can tell him she is pregnant with his child. What she doesn't know is that Farid is the son of Mariam, a well-respected scholar under whom Rafa once studied. Lydia and Farid's unexpected separation in part arises from the sudden visit of Mouna, Farid's cousin, who was also raised by Mariam. The intensity of their kinship destabilizes the budding romance between Lydia and Farid, and ultimately leads Lydia to take a brief trip from their meeting ground in Greece. But that trip severs their bond for years to come.

In short order, Mouna, a political activist in her own right who is obsessed with Rafa, discovers that Lydia is the daughter of the white journalist whose death might have been at Rafa's hand—a possible sacrifice for Rafa's cause. Her leanings—both sexual (though unrealized) and political—for Rafa Ahmed, prevent Mouna from understanding Lydia's pain at having lost her father. And they complicate her sympathy for the relationship between Farid and Lydia.

Bryden's novel follows the journeys both Lydia and Mouna make: Lydia's quest for the truth of her father's relationship with Rafa; Mouna's for the role the man really played in Arab-Israeli relations. Their tense relationship, explored briefly in the framework of Lydia's short-lived love affair with Farid, finds resolution when she travels to Montreal to attend a conference where Rafa is scheduled to speak. Mouna anticipates this trip, fully understanding that Lydia will want to confront Rafa in her quest for answers. She wants answers too. When they do connect in Montreal, craftily orchestrated by Mouna, they are surprised, though they dance around one another skittishly, to find that they like each other. And the ultimate reunion for Lydia and her young boy, Felix with Farid, is both moving and satisfying for the reader.

Bryden's skill, in this, her first novel, is of a seasoned writer. The author of two books of poetry and of numerous published short fiction and non-fiction selections, she seems an amateur beside the heavy-weight Mootoo, whose *Cereus Blooms at Night* was a finalist for the Giller Prize among others. Yet that couldn't be farther from the truth. She is good company for the acclaimed Mootoo, and *No Place Strange* is strong evidence.

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## Poésie en trombes, mode majeur

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**Pierre Nepveu**

*Les Verbes majeurs*. Noroît 17,95 \$

**Pierre Ouellet**

*Trombes*. Noroît n.p.

Compte rendu par Élise Lepage

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Les Éditions du Noroît publient deux nouveaux recueils qui s'ajoutent à l'œuvre de deux poètes confirmés, Pierre Nepveu et Pierre Ouellet. Leurs recueils partagent un souci commun pour une parole essentielle et urgente qui s'affiche dès le titre.

« La femme qui dort dans le métro », première section des *Verbes majeurs* de

Pierre Nepveu, rappelle la femme de ménage de Mirabel dans *Lignes aériennes*, son précédent recueil : « sa vie est une bouche vorace d'aspirateur, / elle le sort chaque nuit comme un chien en laisse / dans des couloirs sans voix, elle le promène / . . . il se cogne sans rien voir » de ces espaces durs et inhospitaliers. Nepveu interroge avec une discrète acuité le réel immédiat, les mondes familiers de tout un chacun. Les « Pierres sur la table » « épellent sans bruit le mot toujours / qui est le mot le moins humain qui soit / et le plus cruel, et le plus étranger ». Plus loin, les substantiels « Exercices de survie », consacrés à la perte des parents, constatent avec angoisse que « la structure de l'être / résiste au poids du chagrin ». C'est dans cette section qui exprime une intériorité inquiète que se trouve le poème qui donne son titre au recueil :

Les verbes majeurs  
 nous obsèdent au milieu  
 d'un été sans mouvement  
 naître, grandir, aimer,  
 penser, croire, mourir  
 . . . . .  
 —à moins de vivre à l'infinif  
 . . . . .  
 ou comme un moine bouddhiste  
 qui a enfoui au fond de lui-même  
 la destination du verbe aller.

La préoccupation pour le verbe revêt davantage d'urgence et de violence chez Pierre Ouellet. Souvent coupés, entrechoqués à la chute du vers, ses « po- / èmes drus coupés au / couteau » évoquent les « bruits blancs » d'un dieu disparu, de l'« em- / mèlement de langues parlées et dé- / parlées » ou de « l'histoire humaine du point / de vue des / victimes ». *Trombes* est un recueil dense dans lequel Ouellet s'attache lui aussi à quelques verbes capitaux : « vivre », « envier », et « mourir » qui départagent la dernière section, ou encore le

fer rouge du verbe  
 aimer du verbe pri-

er dieu les deux  
 mains jointes dans une  
 même voix la langue tressée à  
 ses gestes c'est le par-  
 ler bas des  
 plus pauvres qui manquent de mots pour  
 dire  
 chaque chose et ce qu'ils sont l'un  
 pour l'autre les pos-  
 sédés de la vie que dé-  
 possède leur langue ap-  
 pauvrie

« [J]e n'è- / cris pas, » peut-on encore lire,  
 « j'in- / terprète une / à une les donnés  
 é- / crasées de la / boîte noire du monde :  
 le crâne a- / trophié d'une humanité tom- /  
 bée bas. »

*Les Verbes majeurs et Trombes* sont deux  
 recueils majeurs qui révèlent chacun à leur  
 façon quelques mots essentiels écrits à voix  
 basse, en mode mineur chez Népveu, ou  
 emportés par une belle puissance lyrique  
 chez Ouellet.

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## Tasting this Place

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### Sasenarine Persaud

*In a Boston Night*. TSAR \$16.95

### Fred Wah

*Is a Door*. Talonbooks \$17.95

### E.D. Blodgett

*Poems for a Small Park*. AU \$19.95

### Gillian Jerome

*Red Nest*. Nightwood \$17.95

Reviewed by Emily Wall

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These four books give us the rich and complex tastes of particular places: Persaud gives us a Boston suburb juxtaposed with a South American homeland; Wah offers slices of Mexico, Vancouver, Thailand, and Laos; Blodgett sketches the outlines of a city park in Alberta; Jerome gives us the East Side of Vancouver with its condoms and dragons. All four poets strive to give us the rich flavors of these places, and explore what the idea of place means in terms of self-location.

Persaud's poems are delicious on the tongue. He gives us "honeyed milk" ("XVI: The Flame of Shiva—a Phallus?") and "Galub jamuns soaked in red wine" ("Boston Cheek"). There is an under-tongue taste of native language that the speaker—and now the reader—longs to hold in the mouth. On the plate, we have Brookline. This town/suburb becomes a strange land he helps us taste in its strangeness—the way the trees bud, the way snow compacts to ice. The speaker is living in exile and the poems are poems of displacement. Persaud avoids the typical ex-pat approaches of nostalgia for homeland or gratefulness for the new home. One of the greatest strengths of these poems, especially as a book of exile, is that Persaud shows us what's not there—no mother, no sweet cookie to end the meal, no satiety for the speaker. As we read through the book there is a growing tension in the spaces between the images. This is longing without nostalgia. The poet is also adept at balancing—the dryness of daily life, the bitterness of exile, and the sweetness of memory: "turmeric corn, lime peas, flaky roti, curried Yukon, / Basmati—she went to London—rice, baked turkey— / enough, enough, you ass, shut down the computer" ("Thanksgiving"). Each poem, held on the tongue, tastes true—he's one of those rare poets who gets the recipe of humanness exactly right.

Fred Wah's poem "Mr. In-Between" ends "how to find the door / to stand in the way / just be there Mr. In-Between" and this gives us a feel for the poems in the book. While the other three books are rooted in place, Wah's book is about standing in the doorway of many places. We press our ear to the door and hear a cacophony of languages, of songs, of voices coming through from the other side. Both the gift and the frustration of this book is our inability to walk through that door. Like Persaud, Wah explores the landscape of the exile: "From the summit / of myself I was on the other side, / part of

the exclusion act” (“Count”). Wah avoids the temptation to simplify the complex nature of this dislocation, but in dislocating the reader, he also keeps us outside. He counters that, perhaps, with sound: Wah’s poems sing: “Being where / overwhelming scars / screams and frogs / attention to the mud / of mind embroidered shy” (“Evening before 30 quiet”). But while there is a pleasure in this sound, there is a dizziness to it too. These poems spin—we want to put our finger out and stop the record, just for a moment. Ultimately we are tantalized, but in the end Wah doesn’t give us anything that rings in the ears for days after reading.

E.D. Blodgett’s poems strive for stillness. The book reads like a meditation—a quiet moment in a yoga studio, or a walk through the park at sunrise—refreshing, but also temporal. What the poems are missing is dialogue—we have no real sense of a conversation with the poet, or of a conversation with the self. The poems are almost pure image, but unlike many contemporary haiku, which they resemble in other ways, they don’t take surprising turns or use the final line to snap us awake. Instead, they lull us: “reaching with longing for / the other bank that rose / forever beyond their grasp” (“Gifts of a River”). Lines like this make us pause, but ultimately move on again, looking for the next plaque, the next poem. The best moments are the metaphorical surprises: “generations of / the sun standing in sheaves” (“Dreams of a City”). These small moments of perfection resonate in our ears. The rest of the poems provide a moment of quiet, but nothing we’d remember after leaving the park and returning to the world.

Gillian Jerome’s poems are a visual feast. A reader could stay on one page of the book for hours at a time, tasting the flavours of the images: “People pluck banjos and guitars, drink beer in brown bottles / That turn yellow when they hold them up to the sun” (“Untitled”). Like Blodgett’s and Persaud’s,

hers is a book of place. One of Jerome’s gifts is image juxtaposing while crafting the landscape of East Vancouver. We have a constant shifting of sand, and a hundred surprising leaps and connections: “The song of our liturgy, the song of the answering machine” (“Tenement Song”). Another notable technique is her ability to spin a poem out into the dream world, even into the surreal, and then know exactly when to reel it back in. “Constellation” does this perfectly—we inhabit the real world of the poem enough to plant our feet, and then can follow our dream selves into the landscape of the heart without getting lost.

Reading these poets together is like sitting down to a feast of the newest Canadian poetry. Each gives us a taste of these landscapes, and while some dishes are more satisfying than others, it’s delightful to sit at this richly laden table.

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## Souvenirs inédits

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### Anthony Phelps

*Une phrase lente de violoncelle.* Noroît 17,95 \$

### Gilles Lacombe

*Trafiquante de lumière.* L’Interligne 11,95 \$

*Les Plages à la laine de chevreau.* L’Interligne 12,95 \$

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Compte rendu par Natasha Dagenais

L’auteur de plus d’une dizaine d’œuvres poétiques, Anthony Phelps, à la fois poète, romancier et diseur, commence son recueil *Une phrase lente de violoncelle* (2005) par « Il était une fois », des mots d’une simplicité trompeuse qui se trouvent dans la première section donnant son titre au recueil. Ces paroles narrent une histoire de rites de passage que reflètent les oscillations entre le passé et le présent. Alors que l’espace du passé exprime le regard d’un enfant ayant vécu dans « le temps de l’insouciance » et d’un adolescent habité par l’allégresse du « pas à pas de la vie », c’est l’homme « aujourd’hui » habitant un présent dans lequel c’est « la vieillesse qui s’installe »



qui reconstruit ses souvenirs, ceux de son enfance en particulier lui rappellent « son lieu caraïbe ». À travers la musicalité de ses vers, Phelps peint un portrait détaillé dans les cinq sections de son recueil du paysage de la mémoire « de qui tel il était », car l'identité se trouve au cœur de cette quête poétique dans « l'obscur mémoire du temps ». S'interrogeant et sur l'univers du songe dans toute sa complexité et sa diversité et sur le délire verbal qui regroupe paroles, phrases, strophes, poèmes et mélodies, le poète nous livre « la raison d'être de l'écho » du passé pour façonner une œuvre lyrique.

Le passage du temps se remarque aussi dans *Trafiquante de lumière* (2005) et *Les Plages à la laine de chevreau* (2008) de Gilles Lacombe. Phelps crée des tableaux de par ses mots, tandis que Lacombe parsème ses textes poétiques d'illustrations. Dans le premier recueil, le poète et artiste visuel s'attache davantage à la lumière dans le but de déclaircir ou de mettre à nu des passages lyriques qui font allusion à la mort d'un personnage féminin, de « celle qui était mon amie ». En effet, les élégies décrivent d'emblée une « friponne », un personnage féminin taquin qui, en dépit de la mort à ses trousses, est une « trafiquante de lumière » assoiffée de la vie. Lacombe reconstruit entre autres le paysage de la « joyeuse vacuité » des choses en se remémorant la vie de son amie disparue, en particulier dans le poème en prose dans l'épilogue. Il évoque ainsi la vie au travers de multiples paysages naturels afin de montrer la vie qui suit son cours. De plus, Lacombe raconte des souvenirs d'amis disparus, des souvenirs d'une femme « mendiant de l'amour de Dieu » qui ne veut pas mourir mais qui exprime son désir et son espoir inlassables pour la vie. La préoccupation pour le rythme s'entend également dans le second recueil de Lacombe dans lequel les poèmes en prose ont comme toile de fond « la douceur d'une plage ». Quoique ce

recueil soit encore plus dense de phrases imagées que les deux recueils cités plus haut, *Les Plages* reprend plusieurs des mêmes thèmes, soit le contraste entre le plein et le vide, ainsi que les paysages naturels dans lesquels le poète nous fait réfléchir au sens de l'existence.

Les deux poètes représentent chacun à leur façon leur vision des mystères de la vie en tissant des liens entre le langage de la mémoire et le paysage des souvenirs.

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## Enlightening Essays

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**Joseph Pivato, ed.**

*Mary di Michele: Essays on Her Works.* Guernica \$18.00

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**Gerald Lynch, Shoshannah Ganz, and Josephine Kealey, eds.**

*The Ivory Thought: Essays on Al Purdy.* U of Ottawa P \$38.00

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Reviewed by Neil Querengesser

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Two recent collections of essays provide some interesting and informative perspectives on both a still-growing and a well-established literary reputation.

*Mary di Michele: Essays on Her Works*, number twenty-one in Guernica's Writers Series, includes eight essays as well as an introduction, brief biography, bibliography, and interview. Critical works on di Michele are not plentiful, so the current volume, edited by a prominent scholar of Italian Canadian literature, is a welcome contribution. In addition to Canadian literature specialists, contributors to Pivato's collection come from the fields of Italian Studies, French Immersion, Law, and Comparative Literature. The essays range in content from a straightforward summary and exegesis of di Michele's major works by Lisa Bonato to Barbara Godard's comprehensive and incisive study entitled "Refiguring Alterity in the Poetry of Mary di Michele." Elsewhere, Nathalie Cooke explores the limits and complexities of

the sometimes paradoxical third-person “confessional” poetic voice, John Paul Fiorentino painstakingly deconstructs the ampersand of “Luminous Emergencies,” and Debra Muchnik gives an interesting and accessible reading of *Under My Skin* as film noir. Ian Williams looks at the problematic nature of di Michele’s attempts to write music into fiction, Richard Harrison delivers an elegant encomium, and Vera F. Golini gives a partial reception history of di Michele’s works, providing some essential criteria for manufacturing a position within the literary tradition by marginalized and immigrant writers. Golini’s strategy is echoed in most of these essays, all of which essentialize the Italian Canadian immigrant experience even as they often attempt its deconstruction in various ways. Like most other volumes in the series, this one would appeal to generalists and specialists alike. It delivers good value for its price, although its publication economics appear to necessitate a pocket-book size and crowded pages. The book is also marred by several annoying typographical errors. Overall, however, it provides a good basic bio-critical overview of an important writer of whom an increasing number of scholars are taking note.

While it is hoped that di Michele’s literary output will certainly continue to grow and develop, the Purdy canon is now obviously closed. *The Ivory Thought: Essays on Al Purdy*, the thirty-second volume in the Reappraisals: Canadian Writers series, is a timely collection of papers delivered at the 2006 Purdy symposium at the University of Ottawa, six years after the poet’s death. As much as it provides an extensive overview of a half century of his poetry and poetics, *The Ivory Thought* also creatively anticipates future editorial and critical directions in Purdy studies. The introduction and eighteen contributions re-examine Purdy at both his literary best and his most pedestrian as well as his constant

editorial interest—indeed interference—in the publication of his oeuvre. Many essays reconsider the question of literary influences, often beyond the obvious ones such as Bliss Carman and Earle Birney. Sandra Djwa contends that E.J. Pratt’s influence on Purdy was far more extensive than supposed, arguing that, like Pratt, Purdy drinks deeply from the Romantic stream. Elsewhere, I.S. MacLaren revisits Purdy’s *North of Summer*, maintaining that the poet too easily dismissed Robert Service’s legacy in order to paint himself as the first true poet of the Arctic. Also revisited by many was that awkward and generally unacknowledged moose in the room that was *The Enchanted Echo*, most notably by D.M.R. Bentley, whose close reading of Purdy’s first publication sheds far more light on it and its sources than had previously met the collective critical eye. Janice Fiamengo and others take a critical but fair look at Purdy’s literary weaknesses in the context of the “rhetoric of failure.” Creative tributes of various sorts enrich the volume as well, including pieces by Stephen Brockwell, Gwendolyn Guth, and Steven Heighton. In a(nother) letter to the departed Purdy, George Bowering does not disappoint as he takes to task his eastern Canadian colleagues and also Purdy for what he sees as their limiting conceptions of tradition and nationalism. Looking to the future, Sam Solecki imagines the materials for a new form of Purdy biography taking shape as a “polyphonic and perspectival” project. In a similar vein Dean Irvine argues for closing the current gap between Purdy criticism and editorial practices, envisioning a future comprehensive edition of Purdy’s poems involving an extensive collaboration of critics, editors, and students. These and other essays contained within *The Ivory Thought* make it an excellent and informative collection, geared toward the specialist but certainly accessible by the general reader.

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## La Nature du roman

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**Monique Proulx**

*Champagne*. Boréal 27,95 \$

**Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska**

*L'Apprentissage*. XYZ 21,00 \$

Compte rendu par Daniel Letendre

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Quatrième roman de Monique Proulx, *Champagne* a pour cadre un lac, ses rives, les montagnes qui l'entourent. C'est dans ce lieu enchanteur que l'auteure installe ses personnages : la doyenne, amante de la nature; une jeune femme en convalescence et à l'enfance troublée par un père violent et abuseur; un petit garçon tourmenté par la séparation de ses parents et qui cherche à anéantir l'avenir par une incantation magique; son oncle qui l'héberge et qui tente d'apaiser la détresse du monde; une scénariste vivant une crise conjugale et qui s'inspire de tous les riverains pour forger des récits qui rattrapent dangereusement la réalité.

Malgré leurs histoires divergentes, ces personnages ont deux points en commun : la volonté de défendre leur lac millénaire contre « les prédateurs »—la civilisation et ses porte-étendards—et la passion pour une nature à la « beauté rugueuse, aux pouvoirs cachés », où le moindre petit fruit est un « trésor » à cueillir, où chaque instant passé dans les sentiers boisés est une « chance royale ». Héritage dont tout un chacun est le gardien, la nature est également le lieu d'un apprentissage : celui du respect que l'on doit à ce qui nous dépasse, à ce qui était là bien avant nous et qui nous a donné naissance. Questionnant les notions de responsabilité et d'obligation envers son prochain, Monique Proulx se sert de la nature pour sensibiliser son lecteur au fait que chacun est une partie d'un tout dont il est responsable, que cette entité soit la société, l'environnement ou l'espèce humaine.

Habilement mené dans une prose mimant la luxuriance de la nature dont il fait

l'inventaire, ce roman ne prétend pas à autre chose que ce qu'il est : une histoire, cinq histoires qui portent à même leurs lignes un amour profond pour la nature sauvage du Québec, pour ces « huards, maringouins, achigans près du quai, perdrix, . . . rose fuchsia, rose poudre, carmin, rouge sang, cerise, lilas, . . . phlox rampants et les lupins mauves éclatants » qui animent le tableau laurentien. Véritable ode à la préservation du patrimoine écologique, et en cela bien de son temps, ce roman somme toute agréable laisse tout de même le lecteur sur sa faim : les arguments qui sous-tendent le plaidoyer pour la conservation de la forêt restent un peu simplistes et le lien entre ce texte et l'actualité récente (la bataille des citoyens québécois pour la protection du mont Orford de 2005 à 2007) donne au discours environnemental des airs de ritournelle tout en reléguant au second plan les personnages et leurs traumatismes.

Le court texte qu'est *L'Apprentissage* est celui d'une venue à l'écriture, celle d'une enfant devenue femme sans pour autant avoir quitté complètement le temps d'avant, celui des mots de la mère, cette « narratrice » de la mémoire. Celle qui n'est désignée que par les différents stades de la vie (« l'enfant », « l'adolescente » et finalement « la femme » ou « elle ») est confrontée jour après jour au fossé qui existe entre la vie rêvée et la vie réelle, entre le monde et les récits qui donnent à voir le côté caché des choses, porte dérobée qu'elle tentera elle-même de franchir pour lier à jamais ses différentes mémoires, pour se constituer pleinement en tant que sujet : « Elle souhaiterait peindre un jour le double visage de l'univers : celui qui s'offre à sa vue, précis, tangible, et celui que son ingéniosité ou son imagination pourrait en tirer. » *L'Apprentissage*, comme l'indique le titre, est un roman où la vie révèle ses détours et ses réseaux complexes formés de traditions, de mémoires, de désespoirs et de désirs qui sont à élucider pour, au final, devenir soi.

Représentante d'un mode de vie en disparition, celui de la paysannerie québécoise qui a survécu jusqu'au début des années 1960, le personnage de ce roman est surtout l'héritière de langues, d'images, de traditions et d'autant de récits dont elle devra en partie se défaire afin de parvenir à trouver elle-même les mots qui la feront exister : « Elle veut maintenant sortir de la littérature, trouver l'écho des voix, la résonance des mots. Elle veut traduire la passion d'être, l'ultime parole pouvant toucher le noyau irradiant et silencieux de toute vie. » L'écriture de Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, impressionniste, imbibée de silence, reste collée au personnage et à ses pensées. Plutôt qu'une explication de l'aventure humaine, l'auteure propose un regard intime sur l'émigration d'une femme (de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, de la campagne à la ville, des mots d'autrui à ceux qui lui sont propres) et sur la reconfiguration des récits dont elle hérite, reformulation qui forme, au fil des phrases, l'être qu'elle devient.

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## Language Movements

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**Sina Queyras**

*Expressway*. Coach House \$16.95

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**Dennis Lee**

*yesno*. Anansi \$14.95

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**Peter Dale Scott**

*Mosaic Orpheus*. McGill-Queen's UP \$16.95

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**Clint Burnham**

*Rental Van*. Anvil \$16

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Reviewed by Aaron Giovannone

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In an increasingly global world, the movement of information, goods, and people has become accelerated, more frequent, and relatively democratic. In such a world, it makes sense to ask: how does movement shape our experience? And how does experience of movement find expression? Each of the four books of poetry reviewed below offers its own interpretation of

what it means to move through literal and linguistic spaces.

Sina Queyras' latest collection, *Expressway*, explores the sorrows and the pleasures of contemporary life through the networks of movement it makes available. We travel through the poems in *Expressway* in myriad ways: on a father's bicycle in wartime France, on the persona's "skateboard . . . feel[ing] the air under foot," as well as simply strolling through a park: "She walks near expressways, a patch / Of emerald green turf besieged by doggy bags, / Where frolicking hounds squat to pee, crimson / Cellphone at her ear. She is calling home, / Calling the past, calling out for anyone / To hear." The natural setting, as well as the rhyme, recall the wandering Romantic poets, a connection Queyras makes explicit in this and many other pieces. The title itself is a pun on "express," as in personal expression, the highly-prized value of Wordsworth and company. Yet Queyras demonstrates that forms of poetic expression that we've inherited actually reproduce in us certain kinds of emotions rather than letting such emotion "spontaneously overflow." In *Expressway* we move relentlessly down the avenues that have been constructed for us; there is no outside, nowhere we can go that hasn't already been trod upon. We exist in a continuous present, looking back nostalgically but unable to imagine a future that might be different: "You think the expressway is the future, but you are wrong." The only escape is the dismantling of the expressway, a solution Queyras proffers in prophetic tones in the collection's finale: "Go forth and undo."

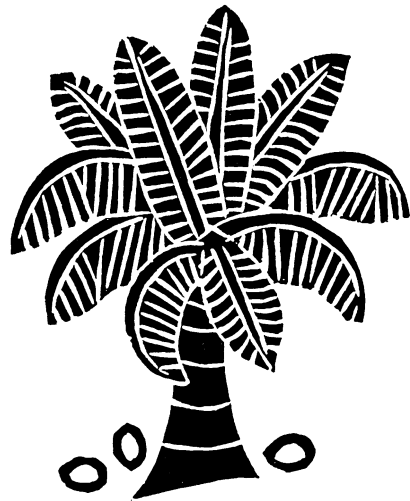
The poems in Dennis Lee's *yesno* have their own unique way of moving through phrases that halt, stutter and collapse, that "walk like apocalypse." In *yesno* the forward movement of speech is disrupted by language's unctuous materiality, which seems to dictate the compositions more than narrative or self-expression do: "Combing the

geo-pre- / frontal, scritch- / scratching for  
 relicts of *yes*. / Giddyap, ganglia. / Skulldog,  
 with sonic contusions. / Hushhammer riffs?  
 Words wrenched from their referential func-  
 tion become, to a certain extent, unfamiliar  
 “stuff,” organic material that decomposes and  
 grows, sprouting shoots of half-meaning  
 and tendrils of delightful sound: “Still  
 singable / coleptera. Still ozone / *ave*, still  
 / redwoods memorious: earth / clamant,  
 earth / keening earth / urnal, earth / gravid  
 with loss.” These poems question culture’s  
 distinctness from nature by returning one  
 of our most cultural tools, language, to the  
 “boolean sands.” Once divested of its task  
 to signify, words indeed become sonorous  
 and surprisingly self-referential, lamenting  
 that “disincarnate meanings mope” in the  
 “whacked grammar of terra incognita.”  
 Here language often sits pensively in  
 self-contemplation.

The title of Peter Dale Scott’s *Mosaic Orpheus* suggests immobility rather than movement, but in fact this former diplomat’s collection travels from Quebec to Oxford, from Berkley to Bangkok, in poems that range from well-made lyrics to sprawling political analyses. This collection presents us with several touching pieces that pace out personal experiences in efficient verse: “The piano music / louder and louder / so completely beautiful / that even when I woke up / and could no longer hear it / I went on feeling the pleasure / that could have only come / from something inside.” A number of other poems treat politics and history through quotations and paraphrases from source material, an approach reminiscent of Ezra Pound. Some of these pieces provide marginal and bibliographical notes, suggesting that we are to invest them with a certain objective authority. Other poems, however, treat these same issues with a cinematic flair James Bond might bring to the job: “And what happened to Danny Casolaro / on the trail of the so-called Octopus / until he was ‘suicided’ in West

Virginia / with my name and number in his notebook.” Whether this particular scene seems “true” or not, overall the treatment of political matters in *Mosaic Orpheus* is most engaging when told from a personal point of view.

For its part, Clint Burnham’s *Rental Van* largely eschews a stable subject position. In this restlessly experimental book, language itself is a rented van, of which we only have temporary use. While this collection offers poems in various formats, including columns, blocks, and giant fonts, it steadily treats language as a kind of mechanism: a set of grammatical rules and lexical options that function quite apart from their content. Bits of narrative and snippets of voices briefly surface before being lost to new contexts: “he drives the suv in the family the blank look of a progressive house dj cd cover next to others just like him nine opposing biceps . . .” In this sense perhaps *Rental Van* is more like a bus which, regardless of who is aboard, pushes on to the next stop.



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## Different Directions

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David Rampton, ed.

*Northrop Frye: New Directions from Old.* U of Ottawa P \$38.00

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Reviewed by Graham Forst

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The University of Ottawa Press issued this *Festschrift* under its “Reappraisals of Canadian Writers” rubric, but while there’s some reappraisal here, a lot of the volume is taken up by doctrinally committed Frygians fighting a rearguard action in defence of Frye’s pursuit of “the total subject of study of which literature forms a part.”

Robert Denham confronts Frye’s “obsolescence” in his “Pity the Poor Frye Scholar?” which begins by citing as evidence of Frye’s topicality the (just completed) publication of the thirty-volume *Complete Works of Northrop Frye*. This of course begs the question of whether the enormous U of T Press project was a pure boondoggle in the first place. Denham admits that Frye is now “at the circumference” but notes that he is nonetheless “still on the reading list in English and comparative literature courses.” Which of course proves nothing—Greek mythology is on *all* university calendars but worship of Zeus has notably fallen off in recent millennia.

Under the rubric “Frye and the Sacred,” Ian Sloan in his “The Reverend Northrop H. Frye” tries to square Frye with his own brand of high church Anglicanism. As evidence of this putative concord, Sloan notes that both Frye and the church “hate value judgements” (he can’t be thinking of how the church feels about gay marriage); and both, consequently, “abjure dogma.” Well, Frye certainly abjured dogma, but he wouldn’t have shed modern church dogma, says Sloan, because it is “supple” and constantly “developing.” In Frye’s terms, of course, anything supple and capable of development isn’t dogma any more. Sloan, one feels here, is trying to rescue Frye for

the church by forcing him into a box which Sloan, as a practising minister, can accept and deal with.

Under “Reconsiderations,” Jean O’Grady in her “Revaluing Value” attempts, unconvincingly, to justify Frye’s abjuration of value judgements. She begins by saying that “no judgemental criteria apply in the *Anatomy*.” Surely that’s naïve, as Frye’s critics have insisted: everyone who’s creating a system preferentially *selects* those materials which will rationalize the system, and Frye did this no less than do the most “objective” of historians or cultural theorists. His unacknowledged preference for Romance and Comedy, and “kerygmatic” writers are obvious examples of such (implicitly judgemental) personal preferences. If O’Grady means no *science of criticism* can be based on judgemental criteria, she’s right, but that begs the question raised by Frye as to whether or not there *is* or *can be* a science of criticism.

In any case, says O’Grady, “the value of literature is found [only] in the imaginative pattern the reader constructs.” But because of the vagueness of the word “literature,” this is not as value-free as O’Grady suggests. Is it really “private and personal and unpredictable” to say for example that *Hamlet* is “better” than *Animal House*? I think not. (Frye is never strong here either.)

Among the other papers by the Frye “old guard,” the best is Michael Dolzani’s “The Earth’s Imagined Corners,” which appears under “Reconsiderations.” Here, Dolzani asks the crucial question as to whether Frye’s utopian vision, like his critical theory, doesn’t end up “[imposing] symmetrical design at the expense of chaotic facts.” Dolzani quietly implies it does, a remarkable admission from a long-time Frye admirer.

Truly “new directions” in Frye studies are offered here by the younger scholars: Sara Toth’s “Recovery of the Spiritual Other” is an original and helpful overview

of the similarities (and they are many) between Frye and Martin Buber, and the comparisons she makes between Frye and Lacanian psychology are surprisingly *a propos*. Interesting also are the links Gary Sherbert makes between Frye, Derrida, and Heidegger on the topic of metaphor in his interesting “Frye’s ‘Pure Speech.’” Similar attempts by Jeffery Donaldson to link Frye to the vegetable-brained Daniel Dennett are unsuccessful, and Troni Grande, in her overview of feminist reactions to Frye, completely glosses over feminism’s very valid problems with his work. David Jarraway in his “Frye and Film Studies” attempts to wed Frye’s criteria to film noir, but it is an arranged marriage at best. Michael Sinding in his “Reframing Frye” shows revealingly how Frye can be used to enrich traditional myth discourse.

Like most conference-generated *Festschriften*, a mixed bag of earth, with nuggets mixed in for patient readers.

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## La Poésie est une bien vilaine manie

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**Diane Régimbald**

*Pas*. Noroît 17,95 \$

**Normand de Bellefeuille**

*Mon nom*. Noroît 17,95 \$

Compte rendu par Ariane Audet

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*Pas*, quatrième titre de Diane Régimbald, est un recueil de la quête qui démultiplie les points de vue comme les espaces. Composé en huit temps, le pas désigne le mouvement de la marche, mais aussi, comme adverbe, la négation. Négation du visible, des corps qui cessent d’avancer pour revenir, danser ou se diriger vers la mort. Inspiré des chorégraphies d’Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker et de Leine et Roebana, *Pas* évoque ce passage entre le corps et l’ailleurs, *au-delà* du physique, du terrestre et du sens des mots. Les poèmes se construisent comme une série de seuils à franchir où l’énonciatrice se fraie

un chemin, arpente et glisse à la rencontre de l’inconnu, ce « pilier du glissement » nécessaire pour « aller vers » : vers la danse et sa communauté, les rues endiguées dans la ville, pour traverser la barrière des langues et enfin revenir à la mer, son véritable « enracinement ».

Il y a dans *Pas* un va-et-vient constant entre l’avancement nécessaire du « pas » et le retour aux traces anciennes—les siennes, celles des autres—, pour remonter aux différentes mémoires, qu’elles soient spirituelles, physiques ou amoureuses. Pour y arriver, l’énonciatrice prend toujours une route qui se situe « entre », et le recueil est construit sur un mode dialectique qui, malheureusement, enlève subtilité et finesse à la réflexion. En opposant, par exemple, voir et marcher ou racine et errance afin de mieux transcender l’ordre des choses . . . on finit par tourner en rond et tomber dans le cliché. S’il n’y a jamais de mauvais sujet, la pauvreté des images et la redondance formelle des poèmes, en ayant la manie de trop vouloir en dire, gâchent le propos : « chaque pas compté / relève la graphie des pas passés / préparant ceux qui / viendront renouvelés / d’un autre silence ». Dans le cas de *Pas*, c’est ce silence qui fait cruellement défaut.

Si je reproche au recueil de Régimbald la redondance, l’effet de répétition ne pourrait être plus opposé dans le recueil *Mon nom* de Normand de Bellefeuille. Par-delà la symétrie en miroir du titre, *Mon nom* est un véritable livre laboratoire qui se déploie avec une rare maîtrise. Sous-titré « Chronique de l’effroi I », le recueil s’inscrit dans cette lignée de livres inclassables qui font œuvre, rappelant les Pascal Quignard—en moins verbeux—par la charge d’érudition, les réflexions philosophiques, poétiques et la recherche formelle qu’ils s’appliquent à développer. Livre sans fin—ou appelant la fin . . . —*Mon nom* interroge évidemment la question du nom, de l’autobiographique et celle de son « origine ». Le recueil se place dans « l’entre » de l’événement (la vie,

la mort), par la mise en scène de son quotidien le plus anecdotique : « tout comme l'éternité », l'écriture « est une vilaine manie » faite de petits gestes banals que l'on redouble, démultiplie et répète sans fin, et le poème reste surtout un « détourné nécessaire » par lequel on se pose l'éternel « comment dire ». Pour y répondre, *Mon nom* ne tente pas d'embrasser un cycle tout en feignant de s'y égarer. Plutôt, il propose une réelle recherche poétique, un défri-chage du souvenir et de l'oubli en épousant le rythme des connexions de la conscience, celui qui se loge dans l'écart des « grandes légendes » et des « conversations de table ». Le poème est ainsi à la fois « laboratoire et surgissement », élaboré dans le doute, l'attente et l'imperfection de toute recherche. Traque infructueuse s'il en est une, le langage ne « rend [évidemment] compte que de l'égarement » . . . et le lecteur ne peut que se réjouir que le poète l'ait préféré à l'immobilité du sauvetage : « j'ai dit *non* à Noé / et à tous les saints du calendrier / je me suis regardé, une bonne fois / le visage / j'ai pris un risque immense / j'ai choisi la témérité / j'ai choisi, cette fois, de faire face / à mon nom ». On attend la suite avec impatience.

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## Vies précaires

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### André Roy

*Les Espions de Dieu*. Les Herbes rouges 14,95 \$

### Jean Yves Collette

*Agonie d'André Breton*. Noroît 18,95 \$

### Hugues Corriveau

*Le Livre des absents*. Noroît 17,95 \$

Compte rendu par Mariloue Sainte-Marie

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La poésie peut-elle apaiser (à peine) les inconsolables en évoquant les disparus, en circonscrivant ce « *rien-toi* avec exactitude » pour reprendre les mots endeuillés de Jacques Roubaud dans *Quelque chose noir*? Que peut la poésie contre la mort? Si peu de chose et pourtant elle a cette possibilité de rappeler « l'obsession du ciel », la recherche

obstinée d'un idéal même écorché par les guerres, les idéologies ou la médiocrité quotidienne. Avec *Les Espions de Dieu*, André Roy rend hommage à vingt écrivains foudroyés : Anna Akhmatova, Antonin Artaud, Paul Celan, Varlam Chalamov, Stig Dagerman, Mahmoud Darwich, Huguette Gaulin, Claude Gauvreau, Zbigniew Herbert, Vladimir Holan, Franz Kafka, Primo Levi, Federico García Lorca, Ossip Mandelstam, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sylvia Plath, Raúl Rivero, Nelly Sachs, Avrom Sutzkever, et Marina Tsvétaïéva. Ces espions, ce sont ces poètes pour qui « . . . les miracles ne se produisent plus / après le tsar, après Lénine, après Dieu ». Lancés sur la terre, vaincus par la violence du siècle dernier, emprisonnés, arrêtés, condamnés, désespérés, suicidés, ils persistent, pourtant, à durer parce qu'ils cherchent des mots « plus concrets que le jour pauvre », parce qu'ils croient—comme on croit en Dieu—à la poésie. Envers en contre tout. Même si c'est pour mieux s'anéantir une fois le poème offert.

D'abord paru en 1980 aux Éditions Le Biocreux sous le titre *La mort d'André Breton*, la nouvelle édition du recueil de Jean Yves Collette affronte sans faillir la peine et l'absence. À l'origine de ce livre noir, le meurtre d'un être cher, le choc d'une perte brutale, d'une disparition violente. « Répondre au goût fort du sang. Travailler l'assassinat, l'élaborer ». Voilà un projet qui permet de tourner autour de l'incompréhensible, de l'inadmissible, peut-être même de les scruter tous deux comme il a été possible d'« [é]tudier sérieusement le fonctionnement des larmes retenues ». Alors que le titre du recueil joue sur l'homonymie entre le patronyme de l'écrivain français et celui de l'assassin québécois, les poèmes intègrent, en les malmenant, en les travestissant, des citations tirées de l'œuvre d'André Breton. « N'avoir que la version de l'écrivain Breton. Peut-être est-elle trafiquée? N'avoir que la fumée celtique. N'avoir que des étourdissements,



des vertiges et des maux de tête. N'avoir que les aveux de l'accusé. » Tour à tour, *Agonie d'André Breton* évoque, par bribes, des fragments d'un passé amoureux interrompu et la vie mi-réelle mi-fictive du meurtrier. Travail d'usure de la mémoire, la poésie est ici une tentative d'épuisement de la souffrance. « Pour amener la fin, il faut jeter ensemble dans le creuset de la Terre, la part du feu, la part des monstres, la part des vivants, la part des inanimés. Pour ne pas arrêter la vie, la laisser passer quand elle passe; pour ne pas avoir peur du temps, le laisser filer quand il file . . . ».

« Les amis, arbres nus, sur un territoire / que les ombres ensemencent ». Ainsi s'ouvre *Le Livre des absents* de Hugues Corriveau, livre d'hébétude, de désolation, de mélancolie. Les paysages blafards de Sylvia Plath, fragile figure des poèmes d'André Roy, reviennent à l'esprit : « On this bald hill the new year hones its edge. / Faceless and pale as china / The round sky goes on minding its business. / Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack ». Des ombres, petites lucioles perdues, traversent le recueil de Corriveau, rappelant la fragilité des existences et des êtres, ravivant un instant l'odeur et le goût des passions anciennes. « Ils sont là, mes proches, près des affleurements, / à parler aux conques de ce qui se passe dans le dos / des abandonnés, ceux qui restent. » Ici, la poésie assume avec dignité la douleur de la perte et de la solitude. Le deuil pourra ensuite lentement s'accomplir : « Je laisserai la porte ouverte cette nuit. / Peut-être qu'un renard roux trouvera sa soif, / attendant qu'on s'allonge près de moi ».



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## The Spiritual Subject

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**Jacob Scheier**

*More To Keep Us Warm*. ECW \$16.95

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**Barbara Colebrook Peace**

*Duet for Wings and Earth*. Sono Nis \$14.95

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**Christopher Patton**

*Ox*. Signal \$16.95

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**Kelly Parsons**

*I Will Ask For Birds*. Sono Nis \$14.95

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**Kim Goldberg**

*Ride Backwards On Dragon: A Poet's Journey Through Liuhebafo*. Leaf \$18.95.

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Reviewed by Amanda Lim

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Despite the very different aesthetic choices and voices of these five poets, certain themes connect them. Spirituality, for instance, is a central theme, whether explicitly in Peace's multiple-perspective version of the Christ story or in Patton's contemplation of the relationship between ecological health, personal fulfillment, and community-building. Spirituality goes beyond religious affiliation and instead is presented as part of the interconnections and tensions involved in constructing individual and collective subjectivities.

Scheier's Governor General's Award-winning *More To Keep Us Warm* showcases his witty and self-reflexive handling of themes such as war, death, love, and religion. "I'm not here for sushi," for instance, gives an unglorified but humorous portrait of heartbreak, and "On Women" combines solipsistic hurt, irony, and self-deprecation. Scheier's deft shifts in tone complicate what could easily turn into banal lyrical confessions but which, here, become provocative and ethical conundrums that force the reader to reevaluate certain assumptions—evident in the witty but disturbing "Apollo," the melancholy reflections upon citizenship in "Red Diaspora," and the astute political critiques in "Dear Office of Homeland Security." A noticeable poem is "Kaddish for 1956," in which he issues a challenge to

the literary scene and the cultural values it engenders, reminding us that effective and relevant poetry exists in a multitude of forms, and that poetry does not necessarily have to be formally challenging in order to question normative conventions. Although the poem's tone resembles a rant, it is rather refreshing to encounter a poem that unabashedly addresses the very issues at the centre of the Canadian literary scene.

Barbara Colebrook Peace's *Duet for Wings and Earth*, mostly in the form of "songs," might appeal to religious readers first because it focuses entirely on the birth of Christ and the accompanying Biblical narratives. While knowledge of these stories would be beneficial, Peace's unique retellings from a variety of perspectives (human and animal) invite different readings, and prior knowledge is not required to appreciate her humor and fresh lyricism. For instance, "Song of the Magi" lends intimacy and colour to the scene by including the magis' argument about the correct star that will lead them to the infant Jesus. Similarly, "Song of the Donkey" and "Song of the Sheep" are vignettes told from the viewpoints of a donkey who wishes to please Jesus and of Dolly the cloned sheep. Thus, Peace connects nature and the supernatural, balancing contemplation with levity, in suggesting the multiple ways in which humans seek guidance and connection. However, the unique humour of her poems also has the effect of possibly detracting from the collection as a whole. "Song of the Donkey," for example, elicits a laugh but is almost too close to parody, jarring with the earnestness of poems like "Song of God," so that the collection seems of two minds. On the other hand, perhaps this is in fact part of Peace's point: that our collective reasoning has limited our perspective so much that we fail to acknowledge the complex, and frequently contradictory, positions that inform our thinking.

Kelly Parsons' *I Will Ask For Birds* is a standout collection, mixing a variety of genres and forms. Some of Parsons's meditations on spirituality are reminiscent of Peace's, such as her series of poems about different guardian angels, the angels of first flight, wakening, and sleep. Not surprisingly, Parsons' acknowledgements indicate her conversations with Peace. However, Parsons' reflections on spirituality are not limited to Christian figures but include influences from eastern religions. She frequently infuses what could be clichéd subject matter with innovative observations and surprising turns of phrase. "Monks at the table" overturns expectations about cultural differences and suggests some of the social effects of globalization; "Original Face" asks ontological questions that challenge simple binaries between "nature" and "culture"; "I shall wear pomegranate" might be read as a feminist revision of conventionally androcentric myths of origin; and the longer poem "Songs from the Night Sky" is a moving elegy about the destruction of the natural environment. Parsons' poetry encourages openness and possibility, in language, spirituality, and relationships. "At the liquor store, in search of poetry" demonstrates this ongoing search and suggests that questions both poetic and philosophical may be found in visiting the most ordinary of places and examining our everyday practices.

Christopher Patton's *Ox* has an ecological emphasis that demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the multiple, ethical connections between the natural environment and human society. Through unique examinations of the flora and fauna that inhabit the spaces of daily interaction, he illustrates the multiple narratives that intersect through time and across lives. The poems, whose titles frequently reference these flora and fauna—such as "Red Maple," "Weeping Willow," and "Bird Seed"—are finely-wrought paintings that are nuanced

observations of both elemental nature and human nature. One of Patton's strengths is his skillful handling of language, whether through his tactile and sensuous imagery, his strong verbs, or his attuned ear to rhythm. Patton often uses the dash, like Emily Dickinson, to deliberately fragment meaning and examine the relationship between poet, observer, landscape, and word, seen in poems such as "Leaf Bee" and the concluding, long poem "Weed Flower Mind." His insightful connections between individual human life and communal ecology are shown in his depiction of trees as both witnesses to and participants in human settlement and history in poems like "Red Maple," "White Pine," and "Vine Maple"; his reflections on the pastoral as genre, aesthetic, and problematic romanticization in "Underwood"; and the balance of life and death, human and animal, in the bee activity of "Poisoned."

Kim Goldberg's *Ride Backwards on Dragon: A Poet's Journey Through Liuhebafa* stems from her decade-long study of Liuhebafa, an ancient form of Taoist internal martial art and philosophy. This unique book consists of sixty-six poems, each one devoted to one of the sixty-six movements of Liuhebafa, and they are divided into two main sections, "External Transformation" and "Internal Transformation." Together, these poems demonstrate the inextricable connections between physical and psychological development and stress the importance of both balance and self-reflection in one's life. Given the current popular interest in other Eastern-derived disciplines such as yoga, Goldberg's collection reminds us of the numerous practices available to people interested in exploring the connections amongst body, mind, and spirit. The poems deal with multiple issues, including the progression of time, mortality, and an exploration of wandering as both a personal journey and an ethical position of openness and self-discovery. Through wry,

often hilarious, observations about her own practices and life journey, and the actions of others, Goldberg emphasizes the necessity of constant questioning and re-evaluation, whether in her funny contemplation of stillness in "Geese flying in pairs" or her reading of disjointed dreams in "Heavenly Lord points at star."

In their own ways, the emphases of these books on interconnectivity suggest that spirituality is but one avenue through which to pursue an ethical journey that involves responsibility to the well-being of the self, the community, and the natural world. Research for these three things is central if we are to approach contemporary questions of existence and relationships.

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## "I'll Teach You Cree"

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### **Gregory Scofield**

*Kipocihkân: Poems New and Selected*. Nightwood \$17.95

### **Philip Kevin Paul**

*Little Hunger*. Nightwood \$16.95

### **Anna Marie Sewell**

*Fifth World Drum*. Frontenac House \$15.95

### **Neal McLeod**

*Gabriel's Beach*. Hagios \$17.95

Reviewed by Nicholas Bradley

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Four recent collections of poetry by First Nations and Metis writers demonstrate a range of formal techniques and linguistic effects, even as each book engages themes of healing and regeneration, both individual and collective. Reading the volumes together inevitably throws into relief their relative strengths and limitations, but simultaneously suggests something of the variety in poetry written by indigenous authors in Canada, not simply in biographical or geographical terms (although these are certainly pertinent), but equally in terms of conceptions of what poetry itself might achieve and of how it might sound. In the books discussed briefly here, the anecdotal

lyric almost always provides the point of departure, but the collections also reveal a diverse range of styles, topics, and understandings of what it means to write poetry.

Gregory Scofield's *Kipocihkân* combines ten new poems with relatively short selections from the poet's five previous volumes, which range from *The Gathering* (1993) to *Singing Home the Bones* (2005). The persona of many of the earlier poems is a tough chronicler of life on "the Urban Rez"—"Tough Times on Moccasin Blvd" is the wry epitome with which Scofield ironizes the real sorrow that his poems describe. Scofield also shows, in this mode, that he is acutely, wittily aware of the politics of writing: are his poems merely "dark talk / for white talkers to talk about"? (In "The Dissertation," one of the book's new poems, academic "prodding and jotting" exact a steep price: "She overtook his poetry like a landlord, / rented him a room in his life.") But the fine *Kipocihkân*'s later poems suggest that the bravado is only a guise, and that Scofield is essentially an elegist, a poet who mourns the passing of relatives, lovers, and time.

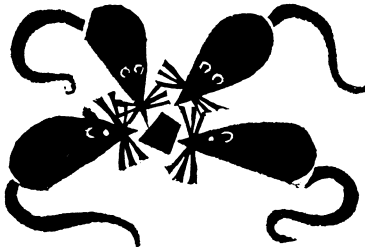
The introductory poem, "kipocihkân," is a tour de force of code-switching, alternating between Cree, English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, the juxtaposition of languages enacting Scofield's account of how he came to be a poet; his is a complex family history, full of both violence and sacred stories. A note explains that "kipocihkân" is Cree slang for someone unable to speak—an odd guise for a poet to adopt, perhaps, but then one thinks of the English poet Tony Harrison's "Heredity," a riddle about the origin of his calling: "*Wherever did you get your talent from? / I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry— / one was a stammerer, the other one dumb.*" For Scofield as for Harrison—two English-language poets from different worlds—poetry stems from the very difficulty of speaking, from the unlikelihood that art should be made from

grim experience. This reality, for Scofield, includes traumatic events of past and present, from "the day Riel slipped through the gallows" to "the halls of psych wards" to "a pile of broken bones." Thus the book must begin with ceremony, with prayer for survival: "Ba-ruch A-tah Ado-nai," he writes, "pimatisiwin petamawinân." Scofield gives thanks, and, almost in the same breath, asks for life. "I'll teach you Cree," he promises. He does, and much else besides.

In *Little Hunger*, his second collection, Philip Kevin Paul continues the project of his first book, *Taking the Names Down from the Hill* (2003)—although here he writes in an even more focused manner. This project is to assert and evoke the connectedness of land, culture, and family in Central Saanich, British Columbia, north of Victoria, the traditional territory of the WSÁ, NEC Nation. The result is an intensely local set of poems that assume the place to be central to the author's personal and cultural identity. *Little Hunger* contains occasional words and phrases in SENĆOŦEN, but more commonly Paul makes reference to speaking in the indigenous language. Thus he writes, for example, of saying "prayers / in SENĆOŦEN," hearing "Saanich words, bare as the ocean shining behind the young trees' heads," and addressing a buck with "his best SENĆOŦEN name." Paul's poems are written almost entirely in English, but they insist that the sacred relation of people to land is most powerfully figured in the place's older language. In "Descent into Saanich," he writes of approaching the local airport. In flight he cannot hear the sound of the water "as it slides against / the east end of our smallest islands," a sound he "know[s] by heart" and that "lays claim to [him], a child of Saanich." Paul's poetry is likewise claimed by place. At times his world seems private, scarcely comprehensible to outsiders; the poems, like Scofield's, also depict familiar sorrows.

In Anna Marie Sewell's *Fifth World Drum*, Mi'gmaq, Ojibwe, Ukrainian, Cree, and Okanagan inflect the poems' English. The convergence of languages arises from the author's own history, but Sewell's poems are also concerned with the language of the national story. "[H]ow can you love a neighbour / who would change the name of god on you?" she asks. Colonial place-names betray, for Sewell, the defining character of the places themselves. Her poems therefore search for other names, "an older name than Fleuve St. Laurent," for example. At other times, Sewell examines her purpose in writing, proposing that "to be a poet" is to have one's "mind dragging / wide open through the sea" in search of "what is needed," in the afterword, she contends that what is needed is "the rhythm of a Fifth World," a world of reconciliation.

Neal McLeod's *Gabriel's Beach* links "the story of Juno Beach in 1944," where the author's grandfather fought, to "[t]he events of 1885," which, as McLeod writes, "changed the life and land of Indigenous people in a profound way. The prophecies of the iron rope across the land came to be fulfilled." McLeod's use of Cree ties the descriptions of combat in France to the history of his ancestors in the Canadian West. The five-page glossary at the end of the book signals the importance of the language to McLeod's poetics: the crucial, defining terms here are "ê-mâyahkamikahk"—"where it went wrong, the Northwest Resistance of 1885"—and "waskawîwin—"movement, life force."




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## Strange Weather

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**William Neil Scott**

*Wonderfull*. Nunatak Fiction \$22.95

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**Rivka Galchen**

*Atmospheric Disturbances*. HarperCollins \$29.95

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Reviewed by JC Peters

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*Wonderfull*, Calgarian William Neil Scott's first novel, is a magic realist tale set in a town so small it is absent from all the maps. It is also full of magic: cars and even parts of houses are abandoned in the surrounding pines, a storm rages for four months, and the ghosts of dead relatives play "their eternal game of dominoes" on a kitchen table every evening. Despite all this enchantment, Garfax is hardly a happy town. As our narrator Oswald explains, "Garfax has only ever had the slightest tolerance for wonders."

Oswald admires his father for his storytelling, and so follows his tradition of beginning with "something to get his throat warm, as he put it." We learn about the strange beginnings of the coastal town of Garfax, and Oswald eases into a web of short episodes that weave together the stories of Garfax with Oswald's own coming of age.

The writing is straightforward, suspenseful, and often funny. Reading this book is very much like being a child listening to an exuberant uncle over the campfire: it's just as absorbing, and you don't want to be sent to bed until the story is done. In one such story, a lovestruck boy wanders into the pines and causes a strange quirk in the town's makeshift radio antennae. Radios begin broadcasting what they hear, and villagers listen curiously to "furious couplings, chilled arguments, hasty arguments, and the tender mundanities of daily conversation." At first the village is fascinated, but as this literal manifestation of gossip grows, it becomes crueler and more dangerous. Fearing change more than anything else, the

Garfaxians finally decide to destroy these magical radios. This chapter is fascinating, imaginative, and perfectly detailed, without a trace of hyperbole to send the magic realism off its perfect balance.

The one flaw of the novel, and it is a small one, is that it eventually has to end. Stories that march along like these could simply keep going, and the children by the fireside would certainly keep listening. Scott does bring the story full circle around to the final pages, and the ending is appropriate enough, but it feels somewhat unfinished. Despite this small flaw, the novel is a real pleasure.

*Atmospheric Disturbances* by Rivka Galchen is less about magical storms and more about inner turmoil. Psychiatrist Leo Liebenstein, at home with a migraine, discovers one day that his beloved wife has disappeared, and been replaced with a woman who looks, talks, and even smells, just like her. Discovering this, he is obligated to find his true wife and uncover why this simulacrum was put in her place. This quest sends him on a long journey; he even teams up at one point with a patient of his who believes he can control the weather. We follow the beautiful and strange atmospheric disturbances of Leo's mind as he narrates his descent into his own psychosis.

The story is fascinating, combining the pleasures of the best detective novels with tenderhearted romance, a touch of science fiction, and a generous splash of comedy. Most impressive about this novel, however, is Leo's voice. Everything is narrated almost myopically from his perspective, but it is achingly clear that his perceptions are deeply flawed. He even admits the strangeness of his endeavours: "The way I proceeded with my investigation might cause me to lose credibility before mediocre minds." But Leo's is not a mediocre mind, and the cadence of his long and elegant words seduces us as we follow his hyperlogical solutions to their bizarre conclusions with enthusiasm and utmost sympathy.

This is a feat, because Leo is quite hard to sympathize with: he refuses to believe his wife is actually his wife, he despises seeing people cry, and hates dogs. Yet he is so delicate in his unfailing need for rationality, so insecure in his conviction that he is too old and ugly for her, and so fragile in his need for love from the one person whom he will not allow to exist in his mind.

Like *Wonderfull*, the one flaw of *Atmospheric Disturbances* is that it, too, eventually has to end. This in-depth character study is not, in the end, a detective novel with an answer to whodunnit. The final moments feel somewhat tacked on with much less detailed care than the rest of the story.

Both Scott's *Wonderfull* and Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* are beautiful and impressive first novels. Whether you can't wait to hear the end of a good story or you want to know how far you can fall down the rabbit hole of another person's brain, both books will keep you reading late into the night, and both young writers should be watched closely for what they come up with next.

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## Relationships and Recollection

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**Josef Skvorecky**

*Ordinary Lives*. Key Porter \$27.95

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Reviewed by Emer Savage

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Josef Skvorecky has been writing for over fifty years. In the Author's Note that precedes his latest novel, *Ordinary Lives*, he describes the book as a summation. Indeed this book ties together tales and characters from many of Skvorecky's novels and renders a complicated history, spanning over fifty years, through the heartbreaking stories of the people who, like Skvorecky, grew up in a little town in what was then Czechoslovakia.

*Ordinary Lives* is a retrospective narrative. Set during class reunions in 1963 and 1993, the narrator tells the stories of a group of people whose lives were dictated by some of

the more horrific policies of the twentieth century, in the form of the Nuremberg Laws and Communist class laws. Skvorecky's narrator, Danny, who features in a number of his earlier novels, has been described as his alter ego. Danny, like Skvorecky, graduated from high school in 1943 in the Nazi-controlled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and subsequently left for Canada in pursuit of a freedom that was unattainable in the then-communist state. This alter-ego narrator, however, focuses not on himself so much as his memories of and relationships with others. As a returnee, he is both insider and outsider and thus gives us access to his small town world and, furthermore, becomes our intermediary between the present and the Czech past.

It initially struck me that this book was directed primarily at an audience familiar with the author's earlier novels. Throughout the book, Skvorecky has referenced characters who featured in his earlier works with additional notes, which appear at the back of the book. While, at first, I felt that these references distanced me from the characters and disrupted my engagement with the story, I later began to feel that at times this background information endowed the characters' relationships with a sense of history and connection. Moreover, Skvorecky's notes on the historical and political situations that had such bearing on the characters' lives grounded the narrative in a very specific context. He positions the ordinary lives of the characters within the larger frame of the political actors of the time, and this greatly added to my understanding of the characters.

New readers of Skvorecky will enjoy this book, and while they may not feel the same level of connection with the characters that a fan of the earlier novels may, Skvorecky's depictions of the changing landscape of the Czech past and his rendering of the impact of this history on the lives of ordinary people is engaging. This novel would appeal

to a wide range of readers, particularly those interested in history and memory studies, as Skvorecky's treatment of memory in the book is particularly engaging. His choice to tell the story through his musing narrator's memories really foregrounds that this novel is primarily concerned with remembering, recording and coming to terms with the past. Skvorecky provides insights into the influence of time and distance on his aging narrator's sense of past events.

Although it is grounded in specific historical and political contexts, *Ordinary Lives* is really about people, relationships, and survival. It tells important stories in accessible and human terms. While the inclusion of so many characters and notes on past novels is at times distancing and disruptive, Skvorecky succeeds on many levels in creating a mosaic of memories of a complicated history and leaves us with the valuable message that it is relationships that endure. This honest observation on the significance of human friendships was, for me, the most lasting and affecting aspect of this well-wrought and rewarding read.

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## Context Is All

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**Fiona Tolan**

*Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction.*

Rodopi € 67 / US\$ 170

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Reviewed by Coral Ann Howells

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This study of the relationship between Margaret Atwood's fiction and feminism over the past forty years is structured as a double narrative, being both a historical survey of shifts and trends in Western feminist discourse as it has developed and also a critical assessment of Atwood's engagements with that discourse in her novels from *The Edible Woman* to *Oryx and Crake*. Here Tolan faces a challenge since Atwood has consistently refused to be defined or overdetermined by the feminist label, and feminist politics is only one component in her

fiction, along with human rights and environmentalism. Tolan's solution is to identify the connections between feminism and these other topics while centering her analysis on the cluster "gender, femininity and sexuality" as the dominant factor in Atwood's work. She argues from the historicist position that while Atwood's novelistic production is embedded in her contemporary context, she also challenges social myths and assumptions in a process of continual critical engagement with her culture. The result, as Tolan phrases it, is that "the feminism to be read in Atwood's novels is not the feminism to be discovered in feminist textbooks."

From that position Tolan develops a critical methodology which takes account of the ways in which Atwood's novels negotiate the diverse strands of feminist theory. Her discussion treats the eleven novels to date in chronological order, with every chapter title signalling a specifically feminist code, such as "*Lady Oracle: Postmodernism and the Body*," and "*Bodily Harm: The Imprisoning Gaze*." Close textual study is accompanied by—indeed sometimes outweighed by—accounts of cultural and theoretical debates pertinent to a particular novel. That imbalance between contextual and critical analysis would seem to be the main structural flaw in this book, though Tolan's thorough historical research might be seen as its main strength.

Beginning with *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's "protofeminist rather than feminist" book, Tolan adopts the Lawrentian dictum, "Don't trust the teller, trust the tale" as she dissents from Atwood's disavowal of anterior influences. Instead, she shrewdly analyzes the extent of Atwood's indebtedness to De Beauvoir and Friedan in her treatment of cultural constructions of femininity, psychosomatic illness, and her preoccupation with the female body as socio-cultural document. She is very persuasive on the extent to which Atwood's first heroine is embedded in early 1960s

consumerist culture, though oddly does not comment on the surreal imagery which is such a distinctive feature of this novel. Indeed it is that "capacious topic" the female body, and gendered power relations which provide the main thread of continuity through Atwood's fiction. Although Tolan ranges widely to address Atwood's ongoing dialogue with feminism, science and biotechnology, environmentalism, and national politics in such novels as *Surfacing*, *Life Before Man*, and *Oryx and Crake*, one focal point links constructions of female subjectivity to female bodies. Here Tolan is at her best, locating Atwood's protagonists within a mesh of conflicting theoretical discourses. In *Lady Oracle* she demonstrates the complex interlinking of a postmodernist aesthetic of parody and pastiche with feminist debates around female authorship and mother-daughter relations, together with anti-essentialist theories of the self, out of which Atwood constructs her playfully Gothic masquerade that prefigures the work of gender theorists of the 1980s and 90s. Citing Judith Butler, Lacan, and Susan Sontag together with French feminist theorists, Tolan establishes a context within which feminist preoccupations shift from an exclusive interest in female bodies towards socially constructed concepts of gender.

In that same period Atwood's disillusion with early feminist aspirations is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*. As Tolan demonstrates in her reading of Zenia, "the Other Woman," Zenia's otherness need not be read in terms of dangerous female sexuality (as it has usually been) but in relation to postcolonial discourse and concepts of alterity. Tolan's range of contextual references to theorists like Bhabha and Spivak situate *The Robber Bride* on that significant shift within 1990s feminism towards recognition of women's ethnic and racial diversity.

Not surprisingly, by 2000 with the advent of Third-Wave or postfeminism Tolan's



chapter on *The Blind Assassin* is subtitled “The End of Feminism?” and the one on *Oryx and Crake* “A Postfeminist Future.” Iris Chase Griffen’s ageing body and death spell the end of an era, while Atwood’s dystopia envisages a future which is not only postfeminist but also posthuman. There is however, the troubling figure of Oryx, whose presence reintroduces all the traditional feminist issues surrounding the female body and fantasies of femininity. Tolan concludes that “once again, feminist discourse proves to be a valuable and constructive backdrop to Atwood’s writing.” Or is it the other way around, with *Oryx and Crake* providing a valuable backdrop to feminist theorists’ interrogation of biotechnology and those perennial issues of pornography, female silencing, of gender, femininity, and sexuality?

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## Pièces détachées

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**Larry Tremblay**

*L'Arbre chorégraphe*. Noroît 14,95 \$

**Thierry Dimanche**

*Autoportraits-robots*. Quartanier 16,95 \$

**Mathieu Bergeron**

*La Suite informe*. Quartanier 17,95 \$

Compte rendu par Vincent C. Lambert

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Si ce n'était des pauvres premières pages, dans lesquelles le dramaturge Larry Tremblay a cru bon d'exposer quelques réflexions sur « l'expérience poétique », *L'Arbre chorégraphe* serait à la hauteur de son apparente humilité. Or, dès le début, l'auteur annonce que « la poésie n'est pas qu'affaire de mots. C'est une expérience. Ça se vit. Au mieux, ça s'existe. » Et comme l'existence, ajoutent les initiés, la poésie ne s'explique pas. Larry Tremblay, lui, tient d'abord à nous raconter comment la chose lui est venue. C'était en Inde, lieu tout indiqué. Il rencontre, sous un arbre, un homme emboucané dont la naïveté est sagesse et qui semble parler, littéralement,

en poème. Le poète n'a donc qu'à transcrire. Les grandes questions surgissent : « Dis-moi, / le visible a-t-il des racines / qui s'enfoncent quelque part . . . quelque part / qui ne soit ni ici ni là »? Quel est donc ce « lieu qui s'effiloche dès qu'on s'en approche »? Cela est-il moins banal parce qu'inséré entre deux images inattendues? La sagesse, en poésie, un autre l'a dit, est assise à l'orée. Ici, elle trône en feignant encore la candeur du fou; elle s'écrit comme la vérité sort de la bouche des enfants.

Plus humbles sont les *Autoportraits-robots* de Thierry Dimanche, au travers desquels on sent à l'œuvre une volonté d'arriver à une « relecture innocente » qui donne à cette écriture une intelligibilité dont elle et son univers profitent admirablement. Ce détour par la confession, même à demi simulé, est bienvenu dans une œuvre qui pratiquait jusque-là une ironie tous azimuts, s'esquivant là où le lecteur attendait d'être rassuré quant aux motivations véritables de cet art qui peut sembler essentiellement provocateur, et qui paradoxalement n'est pas sans revendiquer cette absence de finalité au nom d'une implication du lecteur dans les tribulations jugées homologues du poème et de l'existence. « Dans l'agencement du faux, espérer l'authentique », dit un fragment d'« Arts poétiques de poche » : mais ce dont la poésie de Dimanche est ici capable, dans ses meilleurs moments, c'est justement de ramener cette opposition factice entre le faux et l'authentique sur un seul plan énonciatif, plutôt que d'user de supercheries pour contourner une franchise éternellement différée. Cela donne de très beaux poèmes : le gainsbourien « Neige après toi », l'étrange « Trompe l'œil affectif », entre autres.

Objet délirant et vertigineux que *La Suite informe*, le premier livre de Mathieu Bergeron. Vertigineux parce qu'il s'agit justement, au sens figuré par le livre, d'un objet au sens propre. Le lecteur assiste, mais manipulé, de l'intérieur, à l'élaboration d'une machine qui est la lecture elle-même

en train de s'opérer, rien de moins. On comprend à la toute fin que le produit de cette machine est évidemment le livre que l'on tient entre les mains, et on ne peut faire autrement que recommencer depuis le début. De quelle machine parle-t-on, au juste? Toute description de ce dispositif tendra bien sûr à être interprétée comme une allégorie de la lecture, mais là réside la véritable force de *La Suite informe* : dans cette spatialisation de la page comme étendue vide, illimitée, se construit sous nos yeux ce qui ressemble parfois à un mobile, parfois à une cellule, où des gens sans mémoire, éberlués, exécutent ce qui n'a pourtant pas de motif apparent, mais tout notre être est sollicité, souvent par des images assez terrifiantes : « Où qu'on regarde, c'est à perte de vue des comportements dissociés de leur utilité réelle. Jusqu'à ce qu'ils se retournent, tous en même temps ».

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## Breathless Poetics in Toronto

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**Zoe Whittall**

*Holding Still For As Long As Possible*. Anansi  
\$29.95

Reviewed by Louise Young

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The dust cover of Zoe Whittall's new novel, *Holding Still For As Long As Possible*, promises the reader a textual insight into what it means to "grow into adulthood with the 'war on terror,' SARS, and Hurricane Katrina as your backdrop": a reductive promise on which, luckily, the novel does not deliver. In its place, Whittall has crafted an ironic, witty and incandescently truthful portrait of the exigencies of urban alienation and anxiety that ultimately finds redemption in the simplest of human connections. Whittall asks, if this is the Canada we live in, where individual, local, national, and multinational traumas fold into layers of soundbites and data,

how—and to whom—do we articulate the simplicity and purity of our pain?

Set beneath the "vomit-coloured" skies of Toronto between 2005 and 2006, the novel unwraps the interconnected narratives of three twentysomethings: Josh, a compassionate, transsexual paramedic; Billy, a former child-star with debilitating anxiety; and Amy, a free-spirited aspiring filmmaker, who is dating Josh. While Josh is resuscitating his emergency callouts and the dwindling sparks of his relationship with Amy, Billy treads lightly around the edges of a world filled with anxiety-provoking triggers. Whittall frames Billy's panic attacks in the language of recreational drugs, where anxiety is the latest alchemical blend of adrenaline and exhaustion and the "absence of fear is an opiate." The author's roots as a poet shine through in the choppy passion of her prose and, as the shorthand of the emergency callout signal blends with the staccato of text-messaged heartache, the three narrators, stories fold into a single human drama.

Whittall's searing narrative gaze implicates the reader in a dance of emotional voyeurism, as the increasingly tense and frantic pace of the novel eases only to zoom in on those gut-churningly naked moments of human fragility and loss that we all experience and can only hope that nobody witnesses. As the narrative swoops in and out of the characters' breakneck and stressful lives in the spirit of the best and worst of reality television, we gaze unflinchingly at their most jubilant, desperate, and vulnerable moments, picking over the bones of human frailty. Whittall's spare and unapologetic prose grasps the mixed pressures of horror and tedium that Josh's career as an emergency worker places upon his personal life while, at the same time, never belittling the smaller domestic traumas of human breakdown, as seen through his relationships with Amy and Billy. As text and technology fold space and distance

into incestuous proximity, Whittall's lyricism enacts the isolating closeness of the increasingly intertwined personal lives of her characters. While the sexual musical chairs occasionally seem a little convenient, Whittall retains her purposeful sense of each characters' immediacy through their constant disclosures and unflinching humanity.

While Whittall tracks the frailty and terror in the interior worlds of Josh, Billy, and Amy, she also grants them access to the most delicate moments of softness and grace, a "holding still" that brings the caustic cityscape of Toronto into balance. Following on from the success of her 2007 debut novel, *Bottle Rocket Hearts*, she has not missed a beat here. Breathless, jolting and sputtering with vitality, *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* explores the inevitable expiry date on lives and relationships, and our white-knuckle struggle to hang on to both.

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## Connect the Strands

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**Emma Wilson**

*Atom Egoyan*. U of Illinois P \$19.95

Reviewed by Monique Tschofen

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A welcome contribution to scholarship in English on the Canadian director and artist Atom Egoyan, Emma Wilson's *Atom Egoyan* dips into ten of his feature films, from his earliest feature, *Next of Kin* (1984), through to *Where the Truth Lies* (2005). Wilson's chronological approach makes it possible to see the evolution of his work over time, but also the dense interrelatedness of his corpus. As she puts it, "Egoyan achieves a consummate emotional and aesthetic structure in which every strand connects and speaks to another." Her close readings draw attention to the touchstones so familiar to both Egoyan audiences and critics—"exile and nostalgia, trauma and healing, the family and sexuality." However, her chief focus

as she weaves these themes together while reading the films is the nexus of "traumatic loss, mourning, mania, manipulation, fantasy."

Her introduction lays out the terrain that her later readings map in detail as she attends to the films' narratives, visuals, sounds, tropes, and themes. Here, she notes that Egoyan's work is haunted by questions of identity related to his treatment of the exotic, the foreign, and ethnicity. She relates these cognates of identity to his explorations of the ideas of home—private and collective—and of exile. Related to identity, she argues, is the way Egoyan "queers" the family, making strange the internal dynamics and desires of family members who are in essence strangers to one another. This queer space of the family, she elaborates, makes incest possible when the unfamiliarity of family members makes them desirable despite proximity. Even Egoyan's interest in media, technology, and image-making, she suggests, relates directly to this dynamic of identity and estrangement, she suggests, as protagonists manage their feelings prosthetically. What is most interesting about her treatment of this nest of ideas as she analyzes the films themselves is her observation that these processes in his films lead not to devastation and ruin, but rather to healing. The inherent hopefulness of Egoyan's work is something few critics have noticed or commented on.

Although Wilson wraps her work around two theoretical sources—Svetlana Boym's comparative framework of restorative versus reflective nostalgia, and Slavoj Žižek's model of locating meaning somewhere in between a film's disorienting and shocking images and its more seductive and palliative defense formations—this is not a book that actively engages with film theory or psychoanalytic theory, nor with the body of scholarship and criticism on Egoyan. She uses her secondary sources as allies, too often letting them speak for her.

A development of her claim that European art-house cinema is “key to understanding Egoyan’s films” (xii) would offer a real contribution to the critical literature. While she alludes to such filmmakers as Renais, Roeg, Greenaway, and Lynch, she does not tease out the significance of the comparisons. Her connections of Egoyan’s work to that of a fascinating range of visual artists including Arbus, Goldin, Mann, Dijkstra, and Wall are equally original and promising, but again she does not develop the significance of the tradition and practice of these photographers for Egoyan. Wilson’s strength rests less in her reaching *hors texte* than in her attentive analyses of the ten films she sets out to address.

Still, with her coherent overview and thoughtful close readings of Egoyan’s features, and with her intelligent interview with the director, Wilson’s *Atom Egoyan* offers a valuable entry into the filmmaker’s oeuvre, and offers provocative ideas to serve as springboards for future scholarship in the area.

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## Acts of Survival

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**Sharon Rose Wilson**

*Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women’s Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison.* Palgrave Macmillan US \$74.95

Reviewed by Coral Ann Howells

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Sharon Rose Wilson, the American *doyenne* of Atwood studies, engages here on an ambitious enterprise of reframing Margaret Atwood’s fiction in a globalized context of “contemporary feminist, postmodernist, and postcolonial women writers’ use of fairy tales and myths around the world.” Atwood heads this collection, which includes fiction written over the past forty years by Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Rosario Ferre, Iris Murdoch, Jean Rhys, and Keri Hulme. That agenda signals a new era in Atwood criticism, recontextualizing

her fiction in wider historical and generic parameters, where similar recent studies include Fiona Tolan’s *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007) and Ellen McWilliams’ *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (2009).

While there is nothing new about describing Atwood’s fiction as feminist, postcolonial, or postmodern, Wilson’s method of situating her in this company is new, another version of Adrienne Rich’s re-visioning, “entering an old text from a new critical direction.” Nearly half of the nine chapters are devoted to Atwood’s later novels, where Wilson takes Atwood as the model for her subsequent explorations. The cover picture featuring Atwood’s watercolour *Fitcher’s Bird* emphasizes the focus of these meta-fairy tales on women’s resourcefulness and survival, often achieved through telling tales (and telling lies). Arguing that all feminist postcolonial writers use fairy-tale and mythic intertexts in similar ways, Wilson demonstrates her position in a formidable twelve-line sentence detailing narrative techniques of parody, irony, gender reversals, deconstruction and displacement of original plot lines, explaining that it is the function of such practices to “foreground sexual politics and other political issues, including those of the postcolonial condition.”

Wilson begins by clearing the ground for her argument, carefully defining her terminology and declaring her intention to “refute some common biases that damage understanding of contemporary women writers,” while sternly taking to task other critics and reviewers for their omissions and misconceptions. That overtly didactic tone sometimes detracts from the pleasure of reading an exceptionally illuminating and scholarly study.

The first chapter, “Monstrous, Dismembered, Cannibalized, and (sometimes) Reborn Female Bodies: *The Robber Bride* and other Texts,” focuses on the penumbra of allusions

to fairy tales, myths, the Bible, folklore, and popular culture which constitute the gendered scripts against which Atwood's treatment of body politics needs to be read. Here Wilson broadens her scope beyond earlier feminist analyses to include postmodern and postcolonial dimensions of Atwood's fiction. Her reading of *The Robber Bride* is emblematic, comprising a detailed discussion of Atwood's tricksterish deployment of three major intertexts, "The Robber Bridegroom," "Fitcher's Bird," and the Great Goddess myth, all of which recur as important intertexts throughout this volume. Such intensive analysis generates new insights into Atwood's critique of patriarchal and sexual politics, from a nuanced understanding of the complicitous relation between Zenia and her three female "victims" (all of whom embody aspects of the Great Goddess) to the significance of the Gulf War in the novel, where "Robbers and Fitchers pervade personal, national, and global life."

However, the most pervasive presence in this cross-cultural literary and anthropological study is the Great Goddess, figured under her triple manifestations as Maiden, Mother, and Crone, bearing witness to Wilson's woman-centred narrative about female creativity and the power of stories as agents of transformation and healing. In every chapter the goddess surfaces through dizzying lists of intertextual connections, and one way through this highly condensed study is to keep our eyes fixed on the goddess, putting aside related discussions of Bluebeards and forbidden rooms, magic realism, dystopias, and inscriptions of postcolonial hybridity. (There are enough topics here for a dozen doctoral dissertations.) Crone goddesses, frequently associated with Medusa, the moon, witches, tricksters, and muses, shadow the ageing female storytellers in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, while female artists as mythographers feature in

Murdoch's *The Green Knight* and Hulme's *The Bone People*. On the other hand, Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* embodies all the triple goddess roles herself, and Wilson makes connections here with African and Egyptian goddesses, offering a positive revisionary reading of the Tree of Life scarred into Sethe's back which suggests a symbolic blossoming beyond the history of slave victimization. Wilson employs similar analytical techniques in her readings of Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (connections with Native American myths and the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*), Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (connections with Caribbean folk tales) and Hulme's *The Bone People* (connections with Maori myths as well as Christian sacred stories).

This exploration of resonant intertexts in contemporary women's writing is always purposive, linked to the power of storytelling through which "magical transformation, rebirth, and healing are again possible." Wilson's encyclopaedic knowledge of myths, folk tales, and fairy tales first demonstrated in her groundbreaking *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993) is here sweepingly deployed in this project of feminist remythification. Indeed, her attention to the mass of intertextual allusions in these narratives may well be her most valuable contribution to the reading of these fictions in new ways and new contexts.

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## Small Transformations

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**Tim Wynne-Jones**

*Pounce de Leon*. Red Deer \$19.95

**Mireille Levert**

*A Wizard in Love*. Tundra \$19.99

**Tolowa M. Mollel**

*The Orphan Boy*. Fitzhenry \$21.95

Reviewed by Hilary Turner

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If Aristotle had written a treatise on picture books, he would undoubtedly have recommended plots that take the reader from bad

fortune to good. Such a formula, though obviously unsuitable for tragedy or epic, and perhaps too simplistic for the adult mind, is just the thing for young children—who need to know about causality and change, but who do not yet require a purgation of pity and terror. All three of these books show us interesting characters whose lives are pleasantly transformed by a single action or event.

In *Pounce de Leon*, Tim Wynne-Jones has created the sunny story of a small kitten who enters the life of Mrs. Florida Brown, a lonely older woman whose life is dominated by an unexplained grief. Told entirely from the kitten's point of view, and brought to life by the lush watercolour paintings of Alfredo Tapia, the tale is a cheerful account of how small things can make a big difference. Pounce, the title character, is both cute and single-minded, and his mission in life is to rescue his benefactress from her secret sorrow: "If her knuckles ached, he'd let her pat him for a good long time. When her tummy acted up, he would sit on her until she felt better. And if she was lonely at night, he'd let her curl up right there beside him." As befits his surname, Pounce makes an important discovery. A neglected stone fountain bubbles in an overgrown corner of the garden. In leading Mrs. Brown to the fountain, Pounce helps her to confront her sorrowful past—and with that courageous act, something of her youthful buoyancy is restored to her. The book ends with a new beginning.

Another lonely soul is the subject of Mireille Levert's amusing tale, *A Wizard in Love*. Hector, a retired wizard, is every bit as reclusive as Florida Brown, and much less even-tempered. With only his cat Poison for company, Hector spends his days napping, watching TV, and eating cookies—until one morning he is awoken by a "horrendous racket" emanating from the house across the street. This proves to be the piano playing of his new neighbour, Isobel, who

is everything that Hector is not: she is charming, generous, creative, and beautiful. Hector's first impulse is to put a stop to the disturbance by magical means, and so he bakes an evil cake that will poison Isobel. But even as he delivers this pernicious offering, something in her manner makes him falter. Her beauty and kindness remind him, somehow, that he was not always an embittered curmudgeon, and Hector permits himself to be charmed into playing the piano while Isobel sings. The able but quirky drawings of Marie Lafrance make the change in fortune graphic and concrete. The scenes in Hector's gloomy house are grey and dingy, while Isobel's presence and dwelling are rendered as bright, bold, and colourful. The ending is happy indeed, with the whole neighbourhood joining in the musical celebration.

The third of these books is slightly more complex than the others in that it entails a reversal in the plot, moving from bad fortune to good—and then back to bad again. Based on a Masai legend that reminds one of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, *Orphan Boy* tells the story of an old man who is granted the assistance of a star—a star in the form of a magical boy named Kileken (the Masai name for the planet Venus), who rescues him from toil and poverty. We follow them through a change of seasons, from rainy to dry, each detail of the weather registered by the lavish and open-hearted illustrations of Paul Morin. Yet even when "the drought has burned up the last blade of grass and the last drop of water," Kileken magically keeps his master from want. Of course, as in all good legends, there is a catch. In exchange for his continued prosperity, the old man must promise not to pry into his young charge's secret ways. And of course, as in so many myths, legends, and folk tales on this theme, his curiosity gets the better of him. He spies on the boy, destroying the trust that the two have cultivated. In

response to the man's lack of faith, the boy resumes his place in the heavens, and the old man is abruptly returned to his original precarious existence, dependent on the weather, and forced to eke out a subsistence in the sparse landscape. This is a beautifully produced picture book, with an admirable integration of text and pictures that pulls together the joyful and the eerie aspects of the tale. Good fortune comes to those who do not expect it, and even to those who do not deserve it. Good fortune comes when it chooses to come. These books teach us to accept it and revel in it, and they warn us against trying to control it.



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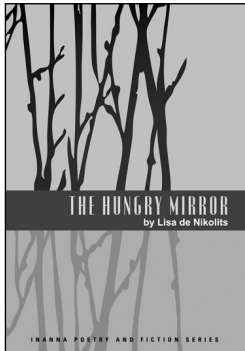
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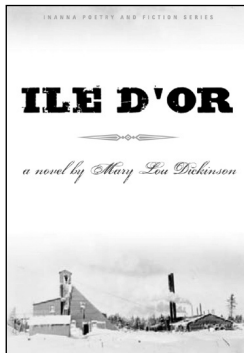
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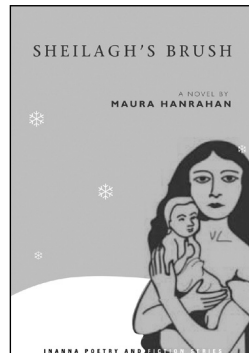
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**Articles**

Kevin **Flynn** has published on nineteenth-century Canadian poetry and culture, particularly on literary representations of the railway in Canada. His current research on Ralph Waldo Emerson's lectures in Canada is part of a larger project on the influence of American Transcendentalism on nineteenth-century Canadian literature and culture. He is also working on an enumerative bibliography of Canadian literary criticism with an eye to interrogating shifts in the Canadian canon away from literary value and toward theoretical positionings.

Katja **Lee** is a PhD student at McMaster University. Her research seeks to find productive ways to bring autobiography theory and celebrity theory into conversation with one another. Her dissertation will focus on the autobiographies of famous Canadian women.

François **Ouellet** est professeur de littérature à l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, où il est titulaire de la Chaire de recherche du Canada sur le roman moderne. Les travaux de la Chaire visent à conceptualiser une histoire du roman qui est fondée par la poétique et par la métaphore paternelle. François Ouellet est l'auteur d'une douzaine de monographies (notamment deux ouvrages sur l'œuvre d'Emmanuel Bove) et collectifs. Son dernier livre, *Louis Hamelin et ses doubles* (2008) rédigé en collaboration avec François Paré, a reçu le Prix Gabrielle-Roy 2008. Il fera paraître prochainement, aux éditions Nota bene, un essai sur l'œuvre de Daniel Poliquin.

Lee **Rozelle** is the author of *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld*. He teaches at the University of Montevallo and publishes in scholarly journals such as *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Critical Studies*, and *ISLE*.

Jeanette **den Toonder** is Associate professor in Contemporary French and Francophone literature and culture at the Department of Romance Languages and Cultures of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands where she is also director of the *Centre for Canadian Studies*. She has published widely on the contemporary novel in Quebec, on the Acadian novel, and on francophone immigrant writing, focusing on questions of travel, identity, and space.

Y-Dang **Troeung** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her work has been published in journals such as *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Postcolonial Text*, and she is a co-editor of a forthcoming special issue on "Postcolonial Intimacies" in the journal *Interventions*.



## Poems

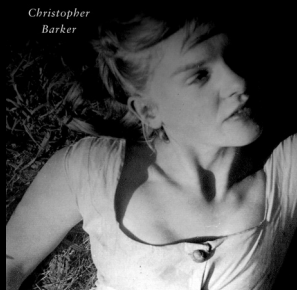
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## Reviews

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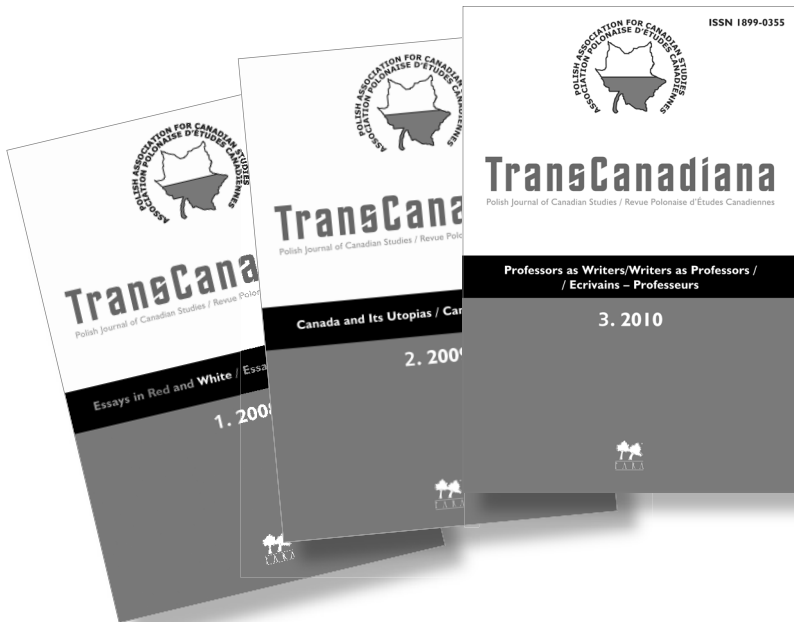
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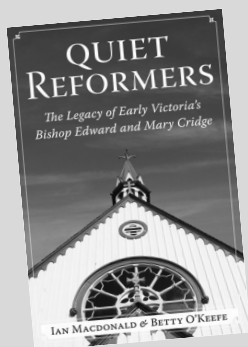


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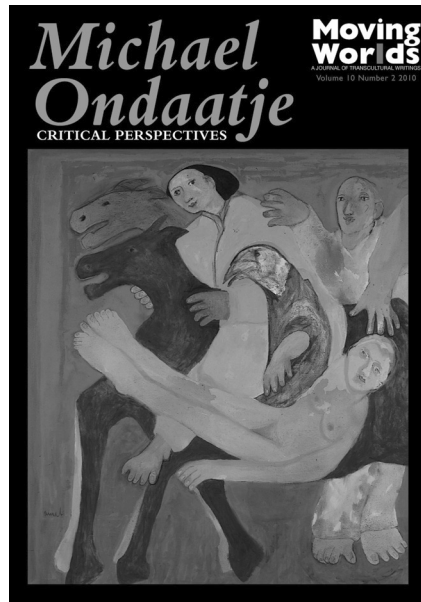
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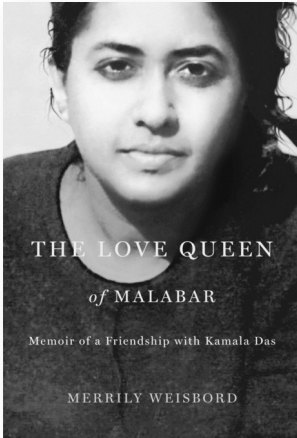
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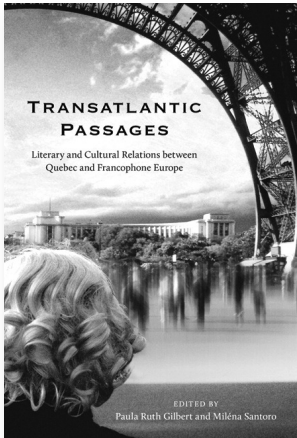
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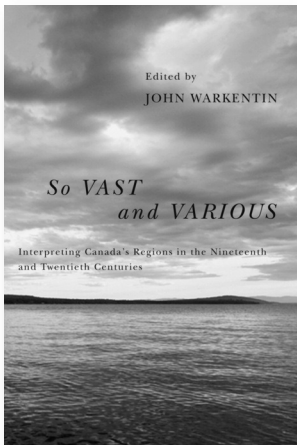
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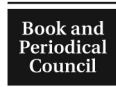


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