

# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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# Pacifist Poetics

Laurie Ricou

Notice what this poem is not doing.  
—William Stafford

I have long paid attention to writers who would teach us to inhabit natural landscapes more completely, more sensitively. That interest, turned toward region and then to bioregion, has in recent years bracketed the Canadian aspect of my reading of Canadian literature. In a bioregion, Canadian is at once meaningless and still crucial.

What he terms the “brim gravity” of place has often pulled me toward Oregon poet William Stafford. But when asked recently if I had anything to say about Stafford as pacifist I was uncertain. Would there be anything in the concept of a pacifist poetics? Reading Stafford again not as regionalist but as *pacifist*, I was confused. For all that he had been celebrated, or sidelined, as regionalist, surprisingly few poems now seemed to be *located*. Where place names did appear, in title or stanza, they often seemed incidental or accidental.

I thought then of a Canadian novel intriguingly adept at listening to place—Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John* (1939). O’Hagan’s mythic regionalism leads us on, one strong pulse in it insisting on an obligation for naming:

It is physically exhausting to look on unnamed country. A name is the magic to keep it within the horizons. Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you’ve got it. The unnamed—it is the darkness unveiled.

This nearly psalmic praise of naming reiterates a commonplace of North American cultural history. A good many poets who resist it—and, of course, its celebration is ironically inflected in O’Hagan—do so by *believing* in the magic, but probing the unspoken, unwritten names beneath the name.

Against O'Hagan, I found Stafford saying *no* to naming. Stafford does not want to *keep "it"*; he declines to keep place within the horizons. Although I'd not thought about a pacifist poetics, and certainly cannot claim to have done any study of the matter, or of the shape of a tradition of pacifist discourse, I sensed a possibility here. But having been tutored in a national mythology that mentions "peace" first among its constitutional ideals/aspirations, I was inevitably tempted to test a Canadian connection.

I respected the history of pacifism and the peace movement in Canada. I cringe at the various ways in which the mythology of the peaceable kingdom has too often been thin veneer concealing racist violence at home and abroad. And the conjunctions prompted me to revisit one of my favourite Stafford poems, "At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border":

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
where the unknown soldier did not die.  
This is the field where grass joined hands,  
where no monument stands,  
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,  
unfolding their wings across the open.  
No people killed—or were killed—on this ground  
hallowed by neglect an air so tame  
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

"At the Un-National..." by William Stafford is reprinted from *The Way It Is* (Graywolf Press, 1998) by permission of the Estate of William Stafford.

Part of my interest in this poem, of course, is that it's one of Stafford's defining pacifist manifestos. And it is so by being so decidedly *not* a manifesto. But also I am more lured by the magic of naming than I have noted Stafford is. The tenuous reference in the title might enable me to appropriate the poem for Canadian literature.

"This is the field . . . This is the field." Where is *this*? The anticipatory pronoun, if it has any meaning, refers to some generalized space along the Canadian border. I have always thought of the poem as quite definitely set in Peace Arch Park at the BC-Washington border between Blaine and White Rock. I am not sure I would call the monument there "un-national." It is, perhaps, *binational* with *two* slogans (facing north "Brethren Dwelling Together in Unity"; facing south "Children of a Common Mother"). Inside the arch, a gate, fastened open, with the hopeful wish "May These Gates

Never Be Closed.” By contrast, Paul Merchant, a long-time friend of Stafford, always thought of the poem as set on a body of water, perhaps a lake. Only the poem is correct, of course. The place is not park (or lawn, or garden) or lake, but “field.” It must be an “open” space, an expanse of anything, even a sphere of activity. It is *not* a *battle* field.

The poem proceeds in ten unevenly rhyming lines. You could think of it as an un-sonnet. It bends toward a proposition, ponders a complication, then stops at line ten without a resolution or denouement. More significantly, and crucially, I think, for his pacifist poetics, the poem moves, or loops backward, through a series of negatives—one or two in every line, but the third. It sings, in this uncelebrating insistently privative way, a history—and a site—of no killing.

The “un-” means differently than starkly “the converse of”. “Un” is enabling, as in *unfolding*, allowing flight, and creative reading. The “un”—in unfolding—is not negative; instead it proposes reversing an action. Just this dimension I would want to read back to the title—un national—so different in meaning and aura from un-Canadian and un-American. Unnational is not plainly negative, not “*not* national”: “it seeks to “reverse the action” of national, to reverse being national, or claiming nation. Stafford teaches a *release from* national. Hence, the absence of nation-state ideology—celebrated by a monument we discover in line four does not exist: “where no monument stands.”

Such absence—variously articulated as the unknown, tameness, neglect—is enabling. In line six, it provokes a vestigial memory of the unsound of deafening battle: and no bird sang. What *connects* in this open field is what we used to call *natural*: “grass joined hands” and “birds across the open.”: The unnamings of war is enabled by the invitation to read another form of writing, and speaking: the motion of grasses, the tracks of bird-words.

“Negation,” Anne Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost* “depends upon an act of the imagining mind”; negation, she continues, “requires the collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination.” I like that: I can almost imagine that assertion broken up in lines as a Stafford think-poem. Carson’s intricate reflection points eloquently to the pacifist strategy of Stafford’s poems. “Where the unknown soldier did not die” makes far more demand on a reader than “no soldier died here” or “the unknown soldier lives in memory.” The screen of our imagination will also project that all the soldiers are unknown.

How to see the border in this poem? Or know when you've crossed it? We're not even sure it's a *line*. Or that it is numbered 49. To *name* it, Stafford refuses to assert, would be to assert control, to take some pleasure in control and possession. The feel of control too easily becomes a conviction of border—and a building of *barrier*.

How do you advocate for peace? In William Stafford's case, by not advocating for peace. By un-naming place. Because war is always about place and about getting it, holding on to it, William Stafford leaves it blank. You don't got it. You can't own it. Forget its name. Un-name in peace.



## Like It's A Name

They call each other Friend. With a capital F like it's a name. A word they use and no one asks who they mean when they say Friend. They mean the one you'd put your man out of your bed for. The tormented Friend who needs to sleep beside your human warmth. The one who puts you in the shower when you're too wrecked to think of it yourself. On the telephone it's *Hi Friend*. Birthday cards arrive signed Friend. Arrive addressed to Friend. Friend is the one you take with you when you go to meet your sister for the first time. The one who has to hear everything before anyone else gets to know. Friend is the one you miss when you don't miss anyone else. The one you don't see for a month but still have a Friend-shaped space where she's the only one who fits. Friend knows everything. Friend is the Best Girl at your wedding.

# There is no Bentham Street in Calgary

## Panoptic Discourses and Thomas King's *Medicine River*

**T**homas King's first novel, *Medicine River* (1989), has not received much critical attention. Only a handful of articles have been written on it and the sole book-length study of King's work, the recently published *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* by Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews, devotes less than ten pages to it. This critical neglect can, perhaps, be explained by the general view of *Medicine River* as the most accessible of King's novels and, in particular, as lacking the range and density of cultural and historical reference in his second novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). As Darrell Jesse Peters puts it, the "strength of [*Medicine River*] lies in its deconstruction of popular stereotypes concerning Native people" (67). With one exception, an article by Stuart Christie that focuses on the historical correspondences in the novel, the standard critical assessment is that *Medicine River* is restricted in its intertextual manoeuvres to subverting conventional stereotypes of First Nations peoples. It is a view explicitly taken up by Percy Walton (78–9) and implicit in *Border Crossings*, where discussion is largely confined to King's comic inversion of cultural stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> In his generic categorization of *Medicine River* as comic realism, Herb Wylie takes this critical evaluation one step further. Seeing *Medicine River* as retaining "the sense of a consistent, contained, empirical reality" that is disrupted by King's later fiction, Wylie situates it outside the framework of intertextual allusion altogether (112). Disregarding its gender specification, the reprimand delivered by Harlen Bigbear, the trickster figure in *Medicine River*, to the members of the basketball team he coaches, after the team loses a tournament, is equally well-deserved by the critics of the novel: "You boys don't try hard enough" (15).

*Medicine River* is less conspicuous and more subtle in its intertextual referencing than *Green Grass, Running Water*. It also shows a decided preference for Canadian over American content in its cultural and historical references, an intertextual bias, as it were, which may help to explain the critical neglect of the novel: American critics don't get the references. What excuse can be offered for Canadian critics? The question may be more effectively addressed later in the essay, after some demonstration of the elaborate intertextuality of *Medicine River*, and an assessment of the strategic value of its intertextual operations. What better place to start than with an intertextual reference in which King provides a metafictional hint on how to read *Medicine River*.

"James and me grew up in an apartment on Bentham Street in Calgary" (44). There is not now, nor was there ever as far as I can discover, a Bentham Street in Calgary.<sup>2</sup> Neither a realistic nor an incidental detail, "Bentham" can most fruitfully be read as a reference to the eighteenth-century Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and his panopticon, Bentham's architectural design for a circular prison that makes inmates constantly visible to a central tower or point of observation, "a never-closing inquisitorial eye," as Bentham called it (cited in Semple 144).<sup>3</sup> A particularly effective technology of surveillance, the panopticon derives its power from the prisoners' assumption that they are always under observation and must therefore act accordingly. The panopticon is also, of course, the figure Michel Foucault uses for the regulatory operations of dominant discourses. In Foucault's definition, dominant discourses are systems of knowledge constituted by binary rules of inclusion or exclusion. Like Bentham's panopticon, they are instruments of knowledge and of power. Because they define social reality, not only for the dominant group whose culture generates them, but also for dominated groups, they can be seen as imposing a constant surveillance. They also, like Bentham's panopticon, function to instill discipline, persuading subjects to become agents of their own subjection by internalizing the subjectivity constructed for them by certain systems of knowledge. Caught in the gaze of dominant discourse power/knowledge, subjects become, like Bentham's prisoners, self-disciplining.<sup>4</sup> As is indicated by the scene which immediately follows the initial Bentham Street reference, King both adopts and revises Foucault's formulation, using "Bentham" not only as a metaphor for the operations of the dominant discourse that is colonialism, but also for the tactics and strategies of discourses that struggle against colonial relations of power/knowledge:

There were other Indian families in the building, mostly mothers and children. We all spent a lot of time playing in the basement, and Henry Goodrider, who was a few years older than me and who was always doing something funny, made up a big cardboard sign that said Bentham Reserve, Indians Only. Henry didn't mean that the white kids couldn't play in the basement. It was just a joke, but Lena Oswald told her mother, and Mrs. Oswald came downstairs carrying a blue can with little animals painted on the sides. She put the can on the bench and took the sign off the door.

She gathered us all together and asked us our names. Then she shook hands with us and said we should all be friends. "White people do not live on reserves," she said. "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians."

Then she opened the can and gave each of us two big chocolate chip cookies. (44)

The story of Mrs. Oswald and Henry Goodrider, recollected from the childhood memories of the novel's narrator, Will Horse Capture, provides a particularly good illustration of *Medicine River's* intertextual resourcefulness. An allegory of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance, it offers a symbolic representation of the history of colonial relations between the dominant anglo-European Canadian culture and First Nations peoples, from the time of the signing of the first Treaties in the late seventeenth century, up to the time of the novel's setting in the 1980s. It also demonstrates the point that King makes in his 2003 Massey Lectures, that, historically, legislation related to First Nations people has operated "to relieve us of our land" and "to legalize us out of existence" (*Truth* 130). With her character visibly marked by the language and rituals of Canadian colonialism in its historical encounters with First Nations peoples, Mrs. Oswald appears in the scene in a number of different guises. In one, she is a Treaty Commissioner, doling out symbolic handshakes and promises of peace and friendship in exchange for Indian land title. In another, she is the infamous 1969 Trudeau government White Paper, a policy document designed to nullify the Treaties and eliminate Reserve lands (Indian Chiefs of Alberta 5), a "termination plan," as King has called it (*Truth* 137). The White Paper even contained a "cookie" clause: "If Indian people are to become full members of Canadian society they must be warmly welcomed by that society" (Government of Canada 5).

Mrs. Oswald's character also alludes to the Indian Act, which, since its first passage in 1876, has operated to define, control, and assimilate First Nations peoples. Indeed, it is because of the defining power of the Indian Act that Will, his brother James, and their mother Rose Horse Capture are currently living in the Bentham Street apartment in Calgary. For, by marrying a white man, Rose has lost her legal status as Indian and hence her right to live on the Stand Off Reserve, which is her home. The Indian Act thus not

only advanced assimilation, but also discriminated against women, as Indian men retained their status when they married non-Indians.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Oswald's concluding statement, "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians," reveals at least one more intertext for her character: Canadian multiculturalism, first introduced as state policy in 1971 and then enshrined in law in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. Along with the values of diversity, tolerance, equality, and harmony with which it is associated, multiculturalism has become the centrepiece of Canadian identity, setting forth a narrative of national progress, according to which the nation has left behind the racial and cultural hierarchies and exclusions of the past. But, as Homi Bhabha observes, multiculturalism has ways of preserving the dominant group's cultural hegemony, one of which is to construct a norm/other binary, the norm being "given by the host society or dominant group" ("Third Space" 208). In her use of the second (as opposed to the first) person plural pronoun in the phrase "your colour," Mrs. Oswald offers a perfect illustration of this strategy, defining Henry and his friends as racially Other, in relation to which "white" remains an unmarked category of privilege and power. Then, in a reflection of the way in which the dominant culture uses multiculturalism to deflect the demands of First Nations peoples for self-government and self-identification and to erase First Nations nationalities from the national landscape, Mrs. Oswald assimilates the children into the eurocentric framework of Canadian identity. The irony of Mrs. Oswald's position is that the ideal multicultural Canadian nation she imagines is one that does not even serve her own interests. For it offers her no protection against an abusive husband whose brutality sends her regularly to hospital for treatment for wounds and fractures. It is, in other words, a patriarchal as well as a colonial order, the same social order that denied Rose Horse Capture her rights as a status Indian.

While Mrs. Oswald personifies the "dominating, overseeing gaze" (Foucault 152) of colonial power, Henry Goodrider and his sign, "Bentham Reserve, Indians Only," symbolize First Nations resistance to colonial power. In its reversal of the terms of the Canadian government's "Whites Only" apartheid policy, on the basis of which Indian Reserves were established in the first place, Henry's sign exposes and ridicules the discriminatory knowledges of colonial authority. Subverting the dominant culture's binary system of knowledge, the sign also establishes another, specifically First Nations, site of power/knowledge. In King's narrative, "Bentham Reserve" means "the strategic reversal of the process of domination. . . .

that turn[s] the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (Bhabha, *Location* 112).

The Mrs. Oswald-Henry Goodrider scene in *Medicine River* is paradigmatic of the larger narrative: intertextuality is its major mode of resistance against colonial power. The same reliance on historical allusion to expose the colonial nature of Canadian society is found, for example, in the textual details the narrative provides concerning Rose Horse Capture’s employment during the time she lives with her sons in the Bentham Street apartment in Calgary. Rose works, first for the Hudson’s Bay Company, and then for Petro-Canada, in both cases as a cleaner, a category of work which, in its exploitiveness, epitomizes the experience of First Nations people in Canada since the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company in the 1600s. In dominant Canadian culture, “the Bay,” as it is commonly known, is a conventional signifier of Canadian national identity, a designation which, in its suppression of the company’s historical role as a tool of British colonialism and an exploiter of First Nations labour and resources, offers considerable insight into the way in which historical amnesia is culturally produced in a society. Established by the Canadian government in 1975, Petro-Canada, with its mandate to nationalize the Canadian oil industry, quickly became a symbol of Canadian sovereignty. But as its practice of ignoring Aboriginal land rights indicates, Petro-Canada, as well as the “postcolonial” nation state it represents, is as colonial in its relations with First Nations peoples as was colonial society.<sup>6</sup>

While King subjects the Canadian historical record to scrutiny throughout his narrative, *Medicine River*’s main intertext is the English European-Canadian literary tradition. Concentrating on the period of high Canadian nationalism which started in the mid-1960s and lasted through to the mid-1980s, King reveals the colonial affiliations of contemporary Canadian literary culture. Included in his intertextual examination are the two most important theoretical works in recent Canadian literary history, Northrop Frye’s “Conclusion” to a *Literary History of Canada* (1965) and Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), works which have had an enormous influence on the formation of the English Canadian literary canon over the past three decades. Frye’s most famous comment from the “Conclusion,” that the Canadian literary imagination is “less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (220), is evoked several times in King’s narrative, one of the references occurring in Mrs. Oswald’s expression of nationalist sentiment: “All of us here are Canadians.”<sup>7</sup> As Renée Hulan notes, ever since Frye

first asked his question, it “has teased Canadian literary criticism with the promise of an answer, a national punchline that we could all get” (61). As we shall see, King provides that punchline. But it would seem that his solution to Frye’s riddle—a solution which exposes and displaces Frye’s colonial conceptualization of Canadian identity—falls so far outside the scope of the rules and prevailing ideas of the dominant discourse that the Canadian literary and cultural establishment doesn’t get it. King also uncovers the ideological alliance with colonial practices of Atwood’s characterization of Canadian identity as defined by victimhood and survival, survival in the face of a hostile nature and of British and U.S. imperialism. At the beginning of *Medicine River*, Harlen is described by Will as having “a strong sense of survival” (2), a direct reference to Atwood’s casting of European Canadians as victims of colonial exploitation and not as agents of colonialism in their relations with First Nations peoples.

*Medicine River*’s main intertextual focus, however, is the English Canadian literary canon which developed out of Frye and Atwood’s nationalist aesthetic and, in particular, two of the most canonical works of the period: Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) and Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974). *Medicine River* plays on both the form and content of these narratives. As Frank Davey observes in his study of post-centennial anglophone-Canadian fiction, many of the novels of the period, including *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, are “doubly-plotted first person narrative[s]” in which the narrator “alternate[s] regularly between presenting the present and the retrospective action” (236). *Medicine River* conforms absolutely to this narrative pattern, intercutting Will’s memories of the past with contemporary events in *Medicine River*. As Davey also observes, the double narratives of authors such as Atwood and Laurence all use a “crisis in the narrator’s present” to motivate the investigation of the past (236). *Medicine River* adopts this same plot mechanism, with Will being prompted by the death of his mother to review his life: the years of his childhood spent in the Bentham Street apartment after his father’s desertion of the family; and his more recent experience of working as a photographer in Toronto.

*Medicine River* also closely resembles Atwood’s and Laurence’s novels in its symbolic structure. What I will call “orphanhood,” using the word metonymically to refer to the loss, not only during childhood but also later in life, of one parent or both through death or abandonment, is a recurring theme in all three novels. Morag in *The Diviners* is an orphan proper, as both of her parents have died by the time she is five years old. She also loses

her adoptive parents in the course of the narrative. Atwood's nameless narrator too loses both parents, although she has reached young adulthood by the time of their death. Will becomes fatherless at a very early age when his father abandons the family; and by the time of the present setting of the narrative, he has, like Atwood's and Laurence's narrators, lost both his parents. Like the other narrators too, Will is on a voyage of discovery, his journey through physical space from Toronto to Medicine River serving as a metaphor for a journey into personal history. The object of Will's quest is also, like that of Atwood's and Laurence's narrators, to find a missing father. Metaphorically, Will is in search of a home and an identity—as are the other narrators. Finally, like the other two novels, *Medicine River* is a national allegory, that is, to modify slightly Fredric Jameson's formulation, a novel in which "the story of the private individual destiny is . . . an allegory of the embattled situation of the public . . . culture and society" ("Third-world" 69).<sup>8</sup>

As Bhabha says, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (*Location* 86). Having invoked the narrative conventions of Atwood's and Laurence's novels, *Medicine River* systematically alters them, revealing in the process some of the tactics and strategies of dominant culture power. Orphanhood is such a common figure in English Canadian literature—Canada's most famous literary orphan, Anne of Green Gables, Naomi of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Hana of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the children of the MacDonald family in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischiefs*, Pi Patel in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, as well as Atwood's narrator and Laurence's Morag—it might be considered one of its defining features. In the dominant Canadian literary tradition, orphanhood signifies the geographical and historical displacement of immigrants, who, by leaving their ancestral homes, cut themselves off from their historical roots and collective past. King revises this trope, using it to represent the dispossession and displacement of First Nations people by European colonial occupation and immigration. By thus refiguring the trope, King effects a displacement of the colonial perspectives which inform it: the myth of the empty continent, the notion of European cultural superiority, the claim of a European right to settlement.

Atwood's narrative evinces no discomfort with the contradictions entailed in its use of the orphan trope. Laurence, on the other hand, perhaps in part because *The Diviners* comes after *Surfacing*, and certainly as a result of the understanding of colonialism she acquired during the time she spent in Somalia and Ghana in the years leading up to their independence from Britain, aims for inclusiveness in her representation of Canadian history and

society. The inclusive character of her national vision is, perhaps, most evident in her designation of Morag's daughter Pique, who is Métis on her father's side, as the novel's embodiment of Canadian identity. More significant for my present purposes, however, is Laurence's use of motherlessness in the case of Jules Tonnerre, Morag's lover and Pique's father, as one of a number of significations in the novel of Métis and, presumably by extension, First Nations displacement and cultural loss because of European colonization. But, while *The Diviners* has, not without reason, been considered remarkable for its incorporation of perspectives on Canadian history and society which are normally missing from dominant culture representations, it also repeatedly falls back on predictable, stereotypical identifications of First Nations people. For example, unlike Morag's parents, Jules' mother does not die, but rather (irresponsibly) abandons her children, while his father, whom in later life Jules comes to resemble closely, is violent, lecherous, and alcoholic. Furthermore, Jules himself essentially abandons his daughter, Pique, to be brought up single-handedly by Morag. Using a self-reflexive parodic discourse, King inverts these stereotyped representations in *Medicine River* by casting Will's (white) father in the role of both the irresponsible and the dissolute parent. He also undercuts the parallels between Métis and Scottish immigrant history that Laurence, in an attempt to justify European appropriation of First Nations land, emphasizes, using Will's father's desertion of his family to represent the long-standing and on-going treatment of First Nations by European immigrants and colonial and Canadian governments: abandonment, broken promises, impoverishment.

As both Margery Fee and Terry Goldie explain, one of the strategies white writers employ in an attempt to resolve the dilemma of immigrant displacement and to establish a Canadian identity is to connect their white protagonists "with an object, image, plant, animal, or person associated with Native people" (Fee 16). Goldie labels this process "indigenization," a word which "suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous." For white writers especially, he says, "the only possible chance seems to be through the humans who are truly indigenous" (73). Atwood and Laurence both employ this strategy in their novels. Atwood has her narrator in *Surfacing* discover an Indian Rock painting, a discovery that enables her to achieve Canadian self-definition. In a similar move, Laurence uses Morag's relations with Jules as a means of empowering her protagonist to find independence and freedom. As Fee says of the ubiquity of this narrative movement: "It allows, through the white character's association with the Native, for a white 'liter-

ary land claim,' analogous to the historical territorial take-over, usually implicit or explicit in the text" (17).

At this point the intertextual plot thickens, as King, too, characterizes indigenization as an act of cultural imperialism justifying the perpetuation of colonial relations of domination and subjugation. Not incidentally, Fee's and Goldie's essays were published in *The Native in Literature* (1987), a collection of essays co-edited and introduced by Thomas King. As I will try to indicate, in its treatment of a number of issues, *Medicine River* can be read intertextually as a narrativization or novelization of *The Native in Literature*. King presents his critique of indigenization through the story of the relationship Will has in Toronto with Susan Adamson, who, as her surname might suggest, is the embodiment of dominant culture power. Adding yet another layer of intertextual meaning, this story is, in itself, a parodic rewriting of Laurence's story of the Morag-Jules relationship in *The Diviners*. Like Morag, Susan is trapped in a loveless marriage from which she needs to be liberated. What attracts her to Will is made evident by a remark she makes at one of their initial meetings: "You're Indian, aren't you?" (108). In the role he plays in the relationship, Will fits the description Goldie provides of Jules: "a symbol of sexual prowess, which a white female might use in her own liberation" (71). True to form, following sexual contact, Susan, like Morag, is able to leave her husband and find fulfilment as an independent woman in a new life she creates for herself, in her case in Pickering Ontario. The similarities end here. For according to the conventions of this (colonial) narrative, the Native character, having performed the role of catalyst in the white character's emancipation, must, as Jules does, die (Goldie 77). Will escapes this fate, narrowly it seems, as King wryly acknowledges the potency of the convention by (twice) identifying Susan with the nuclear power plant, Canada's oldest, largest, and most accident prone, situated in Pickering (224 and 234).

In his treatment of Will's quest for self-identification, King plays parodically on both Laurence's and Atwood's texts, making the trajectory of Will's journey of self-discovery very similar to that of Laurence's and Atwood's narrators. Initially all three narrators are alienated from their roots and their past, Morag and Atwood's narrator from Canadian culture and Will from Blackfoot culture. All three also experience mental colonization. As signified by her marriage to Brooke Skelton, an English man and a professor of English literature, Morag internalizes the colonial assumption of the superiority of English and inferiority of Canadian culture. Atwood's narra-

tor, on the other hand, adopts the values of American technological society, her relationship with a married man and the abortion she has as a young woman signifying her status as a victim of colonizing forces. Will also follows the path of assimilation, but in his case it is the one laid out for him by Mrs. Oswald in her “all of us here are Canadians” declaration, the relationship he has in Toronto with Susan representing his assimilation to the dominant, white Canadian culture. Finally, all three undergo a decolonizing process, with Morag and Atwood’s narrator embracing their Canadian identity and Will reclaiming his Blackfoot heritage.

All three novels present themselves as narratives of decolonization. However, when *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* are read dialogically through *Medicine River*, it becomes evident that their decolonizing manoeuvres are implicated in the colonial enterprise. For Will’s status as a colonized subject in King’s narrative not only throws into question Atwood’s and Laurence’s casting of their narrators as victims (as opposed to agents) of colonial exploitation. It also makes evident that, from a First Nations perspective, their eventual adoption of a Canadian identity is not a formulation of decolonization but rather is, like Mrs. Oswald’s nationalist stance, an assimilationist tactic. But King takes his deconstruction of Canadian identity in *Medicine River* one step further, indicating, as he does much more explicitly in his later writing, that Canada is itself a colonial invention.

“National allegory” is a term I applied earlier, not only to *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, but also to *Medicine River*. And certainly Will’s story, like that of Atwood’s narrator and of Morag, runs in parallel to history and is offered as an emblem of national over-coming. For example, Will’s assimilation to white Canadian culture represents the historical process of colonization and the assimilationist policies and practices of successive national governments; and his reclamation of his Blackfoot identity, a cultural identity which has been thwarted by colonialism, captures in cameo form the process of decolonization and the reestablishment or maintenance of First Nations self-determination. But King undermines the logic of the narrative of nation model Atwood and Laurence employ, a model from the perspective of which First Nations autonomy or nationhood is not imaginable.<sup>9</sup> For, if decolonization is to occur in *Medicine River*, Will’s metaphorical journey must ultimately take him in the opposite direction from that in which Atwood’s narrator and Morag travel: away from a Canadian identity. By exposing the contradiction that lies at the core of the Canadian decolonization project, the contiguous relationship between Canadian nation-

hood and colonial occupation of First Nations territory, King subverts, as well as menaces, the cultural authority, not only of narratives of nation such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, but also of all Canadian nationalist discourse.

To underscore the point that the national community imagined in *Medicine River* is not defined by the Canadian nation state, a colonial construct, but rather by First Nations self-definition, King also plays parodically on the conventions of landscape representation in dominant Canadian culture. As W. H. New demonstrates so effectively in *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power*, Canadian writers have recurrently used landscape to fashion their images of nationhood. Both *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* open with passages of what New calls “symbolic landscape description” (145). By contrast, *Medicine River* insists from the outset on the urban setting of its narrative: “Medicine River sat on the broad back of the prairies. It was an unpretentious community of buildings banked low against the weather that slid off the eastern face of the Rockies” (1). In focusing on the town, King upturns the conventional European Canadian identification of First Nations peoples and cultures with nature. He may also be pointing to the gap between the urban character of contemporary Canadian society and the natural landscape images which Canadian culture continues to employ to define Canadian identity. The major function of his backgrounding of the natural landscape, however, is to distance or disassociate his narrative from the nationalist aesthetic of texts such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* and to locate it in another field of discourse altogether, outside the confines of Canadian nationalism.

Using this same distancing strategy, King also draws attention to the fetishistic treatment of water within Canadian literary discourse, thus anticipating the question New was to ask a decade later: “why is the water so important to Canadian writers” (122)? Both Atwood and Laurence use water as a primary indicator of national identity; both locate their narrators beside bodies of water in the opening sentences of their novels. King calls his novel *Medicine River*, referring both literally and figuratively to the healing powers of First Nations communities. But he also very pointedly situates the river off in the distance, outside the purview of the town’s residents. “‘Say,’ said Harlen,” from the window table of a third-floor restaurant, “‘what a great view. What do you think? If we stood on the table, we could probably see the river’” (3). If, as New suggests, water, in texts such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, signifies the possibility of starting afresh in “an unspoiled [that is unpeopled] land” (122), then King’s response is to laugh his head off.

Trickster Harlen also directly challenges the conventions of Canadian landscape representation, linking them with the long history of European appropriation of First Nations land. Knowing that Will needs to develop an identifying relationship between self and place in order to overcome the trauma of First Nations geographical and cultural displacement, Harlen counters the reasons Will offers for staying in Toronto by explaining to him the Blackfoot connections to the land in the environs of Medicine River:

I told Harlen I liked Toronto. There were good restaurants, places to go. Things to do. Medicine River was small.

"American Hotel is a great place for beer. Baggy's just opened a sit-down restaurant. You got the Rockies, too. You see over there," Harlen said, gesturing with his chin. "Ninastiko . . . Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?" (93)

Place is "a palimpsest on which the traces of successive inscriptions form the complex experience of place, which is itself historical" (Ashcroft 182). King demonstrates this process of reinscription in *Medicine River*, writing over a place which has already been over-written by the text of colonialism. He also reverses one of the primary colonizing processes: the appropriation of place by naming. As well as demonstrating a total lack of colonial imagination, naming the mountains in southern Alberta "the Rockies," a name which is already a reinscription, was part of the colonial process of erasing the presence of First Nations people from the land they occupied and claiming mastery over it. Renaming the Rockies "Ninastiko," King (re)maps a Blackfoot geographical, linguistic, and social order on to the (de)colonized landscape. This, then, is King's solution to Frye's riddle. "Here" is not a European Canadian definition of place. Rather, "here" is Native land, First Nations territory.

In his Introduction to *The Native in Literature*, King notes that, in focusing on "how the presence of the Native has influenced white literature," traditional studies of literary representations of First Nations have "obscure[d] the influence that white culture has had on Native oral and written literature" (13). *Medicine River* demonstrates that influence. Engaging in what Laura Donaldson calls, in her analysis of *Green Grass, Running Water*, "a contestatory intertextuality" (40), its narrative interrogates, erodes, and supplants the panoptic discourses of colonial power/knowledge. In his Introduction, King also indicates the importance of literary texts as sites of cultural and political struggle. *Medicine River* makes this same point through its rewriting of the anglo-European canon of Canadian literature

from the viewpoint of First Nations cultural and political requirements. It therefore does not seem to be entirely coincidental that *Medicine River* has suffered a fate very similar to that of the Shawnee oral narrative, “Thrown Away,” discussed in an essay in *The Native in Literature*: a “Native socio-political allegory,” which, as King says in his Introduction, has been consistently misread as “realistic narrative” (12–13).

There is, King says, another neglected area in the scholarship on “the Native in literature”: “the influence that Native oral literature has had on contemporary Native writers” (Introduction 13). As George L. Cornell, the author of the essay on “Thrown Away,” shows, “Thrown Away” is not a realistic story about Shawnee child abandonment, but rather is a symbolic representation of the abandonment of the Shawnee by the British after the American Revolution; of the rise to prominence of the Shawnee leaders, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa; and of Shawnee resistance to United States western, colonial expansion. “Thrown Away” would seem to have left its imprint on *Medicine River*, which is also a story of the abandonment of two brothers by their white “father.” More significantly, Cornell’s analysis of the function of oral narratives as “historical records of indigenous peoples” (180) precisely describes one of the narrative techniques King adopts in *Medicine River*—the symbolic representation of historical events as, for example, in the Mrs. Oswald-Henry Goodrider scene. It would therefore seem that in *Medicine River* King “draws from oral tradition to incorporate aspects of Native story-telling” as he also does in *Green Grass, Running Water* (Chester 45). Like *Green Grass, Running Water*, *Medicine River* also illustrates the more general point King makes in *The Truth About Stories* concerning Native written and oral literatures: that “they occupy the same space, the same time. And, if you know where to stand, you can hear the two of them talking to each other” (101–02).

Its intertextual performance, *Medicine River*, rather than deviating from what becomes an established pattern in King’s fiction, actually provides the model for his later writing. Why have the critics missed the rich referentiality of *Medicine River*? Cornell offers three interrelated reasons for the misapprehension of First Nations oral texts: the failure to place texts in the cultural and historical context in which they were produced; the imposition of European literary definitions on them; and the devaluation of orality in colonial culture. A slightly modified version of these reasons might help to explain the critical misreading of *Medicine River*. Still, since the allusions, however subtly invoked, refer in many cases to Canadian cultural icons—

Northrop Frye, Margaret Laurence, the Rocky Mountains, the Hudson's Bay Company—it is difficult to imagine how Canadian critics could miss them. Perhaps it is *because* the targets of King's subversive tactics are especially revered elements of Canadian culture. *Medicine River* may, in other words, be just too threatening to cherished notions of Canadian identity for Canadian critics to handle. Or perhaps it is that, as Raymond Williams says, there are "areas of practice and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognize" (cited in Bhabha, *Location* 148). Whatever the case, King turns to a much more blatant form of intertextuality in *Green Grass, Running Water*, making the intertextual character of his undertaking unmissable.

Nonetheless, and in spite, or perhaps because, of the relative inconspicuousness of its intertextual manoeuvres, *Medicine River* does provide quite explicit instructions on how to read its narrative, amplifying, as it were, through the story of Will's brother James, the metafictional clue provided earlier in the novel in the scene involving Mrs. Oswald and Henry Goodrider. Unlike Will, James stays in Medicine River with their mother up until the time of her death, after which he moves to San Francisco where he will have more of an opportunity to make his living as a visual artist. He also becomes a world traveller. Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan, Hawaii, South America: James has been there. From each of the places he visits, he sends Will a postcard. "The return address always said, 'Bentham Reserve'" (145). Bentham Reserve is also the perspective from which *Medicine River* is written.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See the pages referred to in the index of *Border Crossings* under the entry "*Medicine River*."
- 2 My thanks to the staff at the Calgary Public Library for consulting various Calgary street directories. I would also like to thank Gord Ames, Nils Clausson, Lynn and Helen McCaslin, Ben Proctor, Fred Stratton, and Peggy Wigmore for their research assistance.
- 3 It is also worth noting that the logo Bentham designed for his prison was of "an ever-open eye encircled by the words, 'Mercy, Justice, Vigilance'" (Semple 143).
- 4 Foucault 109–33, Ashcroft *et al* 41–3 and 226–27, and Semple 9–10 and 144.
- 5 In 1985 the Indian Act was amended to remedy the discrimination against First Nations women. But, as King points out in *The Truth About Stories*, though under the new legislation, Bill C-31, individuals, male or female, cannot lose status by marrying out of status, "their children and their children's children are at risk." This is because Bill C-31 contains "what is called 'the two generations cut-off clause.' Marry out of status for two

generations, and the children from the last union are non-status.” As King observes, since “right now about 50 percent of status Indians are marrying non-status folk. . . if this rate holds steady, in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada” (141–44).

- 6 The reference to Petro-Canada also reinforces some of the points King makes in “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial”: that the term “postcolonial” is misleading in its assumption of progress and development; and that postcolonialism is both a eurocentric and a nationalist paradigm (11–12). For an account of Petro-Canada’s participation in the destruction of the lands and the economy of the Lubicon First Nation, see “The Lubicon of Northern Alberta.”
- 7 Several other evocations of Frye’s comment occur in Harlen’s discourse on place, 15 and 93. The second of these passages is discussed later in the essay.
- 8 According to Jameson, national allegories are an exclusively “third world” narrative mode. This restriction is, in his view, because, unlike “first world” countries, “third world” states are defined by “the experience of colonialism and imperialism” (“Third-world” 67). It would seem that Jameson does not always follow his own maxim: “Always historicize!” (*Political Unconscious* 9). As Aijaz Ahmad points out, Jameson’s analysis “rests . . . upon a suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations” (3). One of those differences appertains to the failure of colonies to dismantle aspects of colonialism in their political institutions and cultural attitudes after independence, the subject Laurence takes up in *The Diviners*. There is also the question of U.S. economic and cultural imperialism, the issue that Atwood tackles in *Surfacing*. Jameson’s most egregious omission, however, is the on-going experience of colonialism and imperialism of North American First Nations. The extent to which the United States has transcended nationalism is another question.
- 9 The exclusiveness of Laurence’s vision in this respect is made particularly evident by the trajectory of Pique’s voyage of self-discovery. For it is as an aspect of her Canadian identity that Pique sets off to discover her Métis heritage.
- 10 In their claim that King occupies an “‘in-between’ position, as a part-White and part-Native writer” (10), Davidson *et al* misconstrue Bhabha’s notion of an in-between or liminal space. Like race, liminality is a cultural, rather than a biological phenomenon. It is the location of subversive counter-discursive strategies which, as Bhabha explains, deconstruct fixed or essentialist identities, preventing them from “settling into primordial polarities” (*Location* 4).

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## Bee and Woman: An Anatomy

*Wings: Apis mellifera (Worker, 27 Days)*

Beating two hundred times per second. Slur of buzz. Muscles, an athlete's, body swinging side to side. Lantern above the grass. Four wings, hooked together, aftwing, upwing—ridged and braced—forewing, hindwing—with veins.

Now, motionless. Glassine.

You want to believe I'm delicate.

Quick riff between lavender, lilies, Oriental poppies. I'm on the threshold, the one who's out there waiting. Looking into windows, dark rubbed to bronze, where someone's talking in the living room—mouth opening and closing—to someone else, unseen. I can't get closer. It's a way to avoid sameness, staying. Living in air, air passed over and under, folded and puckered: the long pull, in and out, of a silk scarf. I'd call it sex, a world, glimmering as it goes through. You'd use a different word for it. You'd call it home.

*Wings: Uxor et Mater (Female Caucasian, 43 Years)*

Home, the body. No one sees wings, folded discreetly, on my back. You think I'm a harpy, one of three strange daughters of Electra and Thaumias, clutching victims in her talons. Or sirens singing distance in wine-dark voices. Someone blocking the path like a sphinx. Beautiful, cold. Otherworldly. Think of me another way.

What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, three at night?

—

Try again.

Who sees things from above? No, it's always bowls, spoons, cups: the table neatly set for breakfast. The back door flung wide to darkness. Out there, nested bowls, spoons, cups. Larger than any of us imagined. A single green glove hangs under the porch light. Only a moth. Nothing to be afraid of.

Time's up. Answer correctly and still you've missed it.

# Writing Paintings and Thinking Physics

## Anne Simpson's Poetry

**B**orn in Toronto, raised in Burlington, Anne Simpson has lived in Nova Scotia for 15 years. Her first collection of poetry, *Light Falls Through You* (2000), won the Atlantic Poetry Prize and the Gerald Lampert Prize. The Lampert jury found the collection to be “strongly original—in its supple music and lucid imagery, its range of reference and in the scope of its moral concerns.” In 1999, Simpson earned the Bliss Carman Poetry Award for her poem “Little Stories.” *Canterbury Beach* (2001), Simpson’s debut novel, was shortlisted for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award and the inaugural Chapters/Robertson Davies Prize.

In 2002–03, she was Writer-in-Residence at UNB. We met at Molly’s Café, Fredericton, for this interview. Just a few weeks earlier, in March, Simpson’s second collection of poetry, *Loop*, was released. *Loop* was the Canadian winner of the 2004 Griffin Poetry Prize.

Anne Compton (AC): I’ve talked to many poets, but I’ve not yet asked the question “Why do you do it, write poetry?” It’s gut-wrenching, time-consuming, and often we don’t get to where we’re going.

Anne Simpson (AS): I do it because there is no other way to express what I need to say. I painted for a long time, but I’m not painting now. Painting is one form of expression, but it’s as if I want several forms. In practical terms, though, I knew I couldn’t paint and write *and* raise children at the same time. I had to make a choice, and I thought writing was more portable. But to answer the question—I guess there’s something in me that exceeds everything else. Perhaps I come closest to it in poetry. It’s as though there is a surplus. Poetry is a working out of ideas, but it’s also play.

Even if the ideas are serious, the play can be inventive. That's one part of it, and the other part is that in writing poetry, I can bear witness to the world. It's not just a case of me writing about me. I'm more interested in the world and what we can be said about being in the world.

AC Do you wait for a poem to occur? Or, do you write for a certain period every day whether or not you feel inspired?

AS I write fiction every day. Fiction takes longer: you need the timber to build the house, to do the floors, the walls. All that takes longer. I don't do poetry everyday, but I don't wait for the inspiration to come and seize me. I do it regularly, but not as regularly as fiction.

AC Your tone suggests that you don't believe in inspiration.

AS To some extent we are inspired by things—I don't want to be disparaging about inspiration—but there's a lot more to it. There's the hard work of putting poems together. There's also the convergence of ideas, and for me that takes a lot of reading and looking and thinking. Usually three or four ideas will come together at the same time. Once that happens, I can start playing around with them.

AC You published three books in four years. Is this a sudden emergence or a long-nurtured development?

AS For a long time, I didn't know that I was a writer. In fact, I still question it. It was a matter of gaining confidence over a long period of time. Also, I didn't have a whole lot to say when I was younger, or I didn't have it in me to say what I needed to say. I knew when it was time. It had a lot to do with going to the Banff Centre for the Arts, and being treated as a writer, and starting to believe in both my fiction and poetry.

AC Since we are not in your home landscape, would you briefly describe it for me?

AS Nova Scotia is that place right now, but I'm also realizing that it is the place where I grew up, Burlington, Ontario, the landscape of suburbia, coupled with the steel factories of Hamilton. I'm beginning to see now what that childhood landscape was. But Nova Scotia is very strong in my thinking, and I use it in my writing a lot.

AC You seem to be suggesting that you are only now digging down to the first layer.

AS Yes, I guess I am. It was so exciting to write "Altarpiece" (*Light* 59–76) and to use a landscape that is part of me. The American poet Jack Gilbert has Pittsburgh in his soul, and after reading his poetry, I realized some of the places that are in mine.

- AC The observed and the imagined: do you gravitate to one or other of those poles?
- AS Both, I think. In my long poems, the observed and the imagined work together. The observed landscape, for instance, is often peopled by characters who are frequently imagined. The characters often just pop into my head and these two things, the observed and the imagined, come together. I need to observe and think about most things and then discover how they are a way into the poem.
- AC You seem to be describing a sequence here that relates to a paper you presented at Banff—"Bowling Before the Light"—where you say, "The movement from seeing, listening and wondering, to that of imagining, is the beginning of the writer's work."
- AS I often begin to imagine the characters as I am working out the ideas. It may not always be A followed by B, followed by C. I think there are centripetal forces in a given poem, particularly in long poems, but there are also centrifugal forces: the thing can fly apart. The initial ideas are a bringing together, a gathering of various things, a collage, which I try to make something of. It is a matter of "how will these things cohere?" and "will it fly apart, and how can I hold it together?"
- AC Is it a bad thing if it flies apart?
- AS At the end of "The Trailer Park" (*Loop* 80–91), I came to a point where I could do no more. The poem had expanded to a point where I couldn't bring it back from the stars and the cosmos—into the world again. I had to let it go out.
- AC In *Light Falls Through You*, except for narrative-based poems such as "Deer on a Beach" (2–3), "Light Falls Through You" (4–5), and "Sea of Death" (17–18), you appear to favour a very short line, a line one-phrase in length, so that a poem steps carefully from phrase to phrase. Do you determine line, and line length, through sound rather than by grammatical sense?
- AS I often go by what must be some innate sense of rhythm. I have been told by people that there is rhythm in my poetry, but I am not always aware of that as I lay down a line. I am very aware of how the poem looks on a page, so that may have something to do with why the lines break where they do. I worry about the long line. Can I impose control on a line when it gets to that length?
- AC These short lines enforce a quality of quiet in the reading process. As a result, the reader is acutely aware of your word choices. I am struck by certain sounding words—"undulating" (*Light* 1), "undulate" (*Light* 14),

- “elongated” (*Light* 24), “indolence” (*Loop* 73), “embellished” (*Loop* 74)—that occur in your poetry. Do you gravitate toward certain sounds?
- AS I was reading “Altarpiece” (*Light* 59–76) out loud yesterday to a friend, and I realized that the words where I wanted a kind of laziness of tone—you mentioned the word “indolence”—seemed to be appropriate to the sense, the atmosphere, that I wanted. So it must be something done unconsciously. I think I am striving for the same thing that I strive for in visual terms. For me, that involves getting at the sight and the sound of the world, and even trying to go so far as to get at taste and touch. For me, perception is the way we know the world; I mean *knowing* in the sense of deeply knowing. Sensation is our entry point, and from there we can move on to ideas.
- AC Section titles in *Light Falls Through You*—“Souvenirs,” “Reliquary,” “Altarpiece”—suggest a ceremonious memorialization of events or lives. Is poetry itself like one, or all, of these things?
- AS Yes, poetry is a way of remembering. I didn’t realise that it was so ritualistic, but I suppose it is. To go back to an earlier notion, bearing witness has to be ceremonial to some extent. This act must be done with reverence, and I guess this is my attempt at reverence.
- AC If we live in a ritual-deprived world, perhaps poetry moves into that place.
- AS That’s true. I think poetry is an attempt to remember as thoughtfully as possible. So, if this means that it somehow becomes ceremonious and ritualized, so be it. It is true that it’s memory—and how we keep the things we keep and how we lose what we lose—in which I am most interested. When I was painting in Antigonish, during the years when my children were young, I spent a lot of time on very large paintings. At that time, I would often look at art magazines, and I remember clearly picking up an art magazine in which Tony Urquhart’s “Reliquaries” were pictured. I do think it must have had an impact on me to see those things. I must have been thinking of that when I titled one of the poems “Reliquary” (*Light* 53–57).
- AC One of the registers of intensity in your poetry is grief, but there’s also a lot of violence, especially in “Souvenirs,” the first section of *Light*. Do you feel an obligation to face and to write about this kind of violence?
- AS Yes. We live in a beautiful but terrifying world. I think that it is something that comes up in “Altarpiece” (*Light* 59–76): dread is facing something squarely. I am drawn to poets who do this: they look at things and do not look away.

- AC For all the violence, a couple of poems early on in *Light Falls Through You* come down to the words “marvelling” (1) and “miraculous” (11). Looking squarely at violence does not appear to breed cynicism. Is the world still a place of miracle for you?
- AS Yes, it’s a place of wonder, surprise, grace. After all the terror and horror, and the unbearable things that happen, there is yet wonder and beauty.
- AC One poem says, “words, such as love,” are “[k]ites,/ they come back when I pull on them, so I’ve lost // nothing . . .” Similarly, in “Chopping Wood” (*Light* 7–8), an injured man drags himself home by hanging onto memories of his wife. Is love, in all its forms, what this book opposes to violence?
- AS Oh, yes. It’s a kind of “stay against confusion,” to use Robert Frost’s phrase, a stay against forgetting. The important thing is to love things as they are before they go.
- AC Very few poems have been written about the experience of giving birth. In canonical poems, if there are infants or little children, they are either sleeping or dead. I’m thinking of poems by Ben Jonson, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Do you think that it took a certain population mass of women writers before we started getting poems about childbirth?
- AS Short answer, yes. I look around at the writers who are close to me in age and of the same gender, and they write about their children. I often shy away from the personal, but I still do it.
- AC Would you say that the place of poetry for you is not so much a geographical place, but rather—given the number of poems that focus on birth and death—a threshold?
- AS I think I come to the threshold again and again. Maybe poetry is an instance of coming to the entry-place of another world, and looking on that world. There are so many worlds within us. This is a way to at least glance into those worlds.
- AC Asking that question, I am reminded of the work of playwright and poet Wole Soyinka in whose country, Nigeria, you spent two years. Soyinka writes of thresholds. What kind of impact did that stay in Nigeria have upon you as a writer?
- AS Soyinka did have an influence on me. Perhaps more so when I came back and I was doing graduate work, a course on Commonwealth literature. Soyinka is very interested in myth, the myths that concern his world, and they are so different from the myths that I was used to, the Greek myths. So I was rediscovering Nigeria upon returning to Canada. While I was there, though, the impact was profound, but I found I couldn’t

write about Africa, and can still hardly write about it, perhaps because it was such a vivid experience.

AC Did being in Nigeria determine your becoming a writer?

AS There were a couple of things that happened there that had to do with writing. One occurred when I first got there—a woman, a Canadian teacher working there, had just published a story in *The Fiddlehead*, and I thought, “Oh my God, isn’t that something.” I was so impressed. I remember thinking, “I have two years here. I could easily write a novel. There is enough time and no distractions.” But I couldn’t. Of course I was reading a lot because I was teaching. The first year it was a boys’ school, fairly predictable teaching. The second year, though, it was more interesting, an advanced teacher’s college, and I remember trying to teach T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. It made such sense there because it was the dry season, and the poem resonated for me in a way that it never would have in Canada. Eliot’s notion of thirst and dryness, and needing to locate the mystery of things, the water of life, became very significant in that place. So although I wasn’t doing much writing, there was a lot of absorbing of experience there.

AC I wanted to ask you about metaphors in your work that suggest a spatialization of the mind: In “A Head Like Hers,” the mind is one of two “luminous places” (*Light* 13); in another poem, there are “rooms in the mind” (*Light* 17); and a third poem asks, “Where do any of us wander / but in the mind . . . ?” (*Light* 22). Do you think of the mind as a many-roomed house?

AS When I was young—a lot of kids must do this—I remember thinking that there’s a world that I go to in my head. I could roam around in that world. I thought that it was pretty great to be able to go there. Later, I realized that imagination does have many houses, and we can visit each one, depending on the project. It was hard for me to come and live in Nova Scotia. I did feel very much that I had to pull something out of a hat, and it was to the imagination that I turned.

AC Was Nova Scotia, like Nigeria, a turning point in your becoming a writer?

AS At first, I didn’t know what I’d do with myself there. My husband had work; I didn’t. I felt like I had to cobble things together. But it was the first time that I gave myself permission to be creative, truly creative. I was painting a lot and then I was writing a lot.

AC If the mind is figured architecturally in your work, the body is often a landscape: “I see everything planted in you unfurling new leaves / and flourishing” (*Light* 4) and in another poem, “your // heart flowers on

the tip of my / finger, while I respond with several // smaller buds, nested / up and down your spine . . . “ (*Light* 10). In both cases, the landscape season is spring, so is the body a site of hope?

AS I think it must be. I’m doing a series of poems about anatomy. It’s a kind of long celebratory poem though it’s not that there’s praise in every line or anything like that. But the body is so beautiful, and I don’t mean that in terms of young women who are beautiful or that sort of thing. In art school, we had to draw figures carefully, and these could be old guys off the street. There was one I remember in particular, George. I remember thinking how beautiful the body is, despite its ugliness. Despite that, it is so remarkable a thing. It is what we inhabit.

AC “I have closed thousands / of little doors in my skin” (40), the narrator says in the title poem, “Light Falls Through You,” and in “Sea of Death,” the lesson that the snake teaches is “to shed our skins a thousand times // in any given day” (*Light* 18). Does this recurring idea—the changeability of skin—pertain to the slipperiness of identity?

AS It seems to me that we are always in the midst of change and this is one of those ways that we shuck off what we were and begin again. We are always beginning again. Skin is such an interesting thing, and this goes back to my fascination with the body and drawing the body.

AC You studied visual arts for three years. What effect has that training had on your poetry?

AS An enormous effect. I’m not painting right now, so everything’s being poured into poetry. For me, the painting is a threshold—we were talking about thresholds earlier—you move into the painting and then almost past it. Every visual object that I become obsessed with is a door into something else.

AC We’ll talk about the painting as a “door” in a moment, but first two poems strike me as especially paintable—“White, Yellow, Mauve” (*Light* 26–27) and the cherries in the foreground of “Little Stories” (*Loop* 1–5). Do you think in terms of painting when you are writing?

AS I paint when I write. I write paintings.

AC Then I’d describe your palette as predominantly blue, sliding over to mauve, purple, indigo. Would I be right?

AS You would be dead-on—with little hints of red. The man who wrote *The Art of Colour*, Johannes Itten, asked his students to give the palettes that describe their particular personalities. There was one student who came up with four palettes, all different, and I thought that if there was one student I would identify with, it would be that student. It is not

enough to say, “These are the colours that interest me.” That’s not enough. There are more. White, black, red, for instance, would be another palette. Colours, for me, are almost like ideas. They lend the poem its atmosphere as much as its idea. So much of the intellectual working out of the poem has to do with the kind of palette I’m using.

- AC In both books, the most ambitious of the poems—“Altarpiece” in *Light* and “Seven Paintings by Brueghel” (19–25), in *Loop*—link 16th-century art works and 20th-century civilization. What are the features in the work of the German Grunewald and the Flemish Brueghel that enable you to look at our time through their time?
- AS Here’s the weird thing about choosing Matthais Grunewald: I had in mind the book I’d been reading, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1941–1991*, by Eric Hobsbawn. In it, Hobsbawn mentions that the twentieth century was like a triptych. I immediately thought of the Grunewald masterpiece—*The Isenheim Altarpiece*—which has side pieces as well as a perdella, and opens up to present four painted surfaces. The three main paintings, though, are the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. The paintings are bold and brightly coloured. They show us a strange and distorted world. Yet, this altarpiece resonates with the twentieth century. Pieter Brueghel, one of the Flemish painters of the Northern Renaissance, died about the time that Grunewald was born. But the interest in story-telling is consistent in both, and neither of them shrank from what they wanted to portray. They had a vision that took in the whole world. Brueghel revealed so much about human nature, as Geoffrey Chaucer does—all the greed, indifference, cruelty, capriciousness, kindness, nobility—that he observed without flinching.
- AC In “Altarpiece” three historical moments—Grunewald’s painting of the crucifixion; the installation in 1933 of Hitler as Chancellor; and end-of-the-century suburban culture—are folded together. So the poem itself re-enacts Grunewald’s triptych, a folding altarpiece.
- AS The turning points in the twentieth century I was most concerned with had to do with World War II: the advent of Hitler, the war itself, and the dropping of the atom bomb. There are smaller moments in the poem that echo that violence such as the near-fatal beating of one boy by another. All of that is set against the banal landscape of the golf-course, those monster-homes—affluent homes that you find in Burlington down by the lake—the steel factories in the background. So I was setting up a cluster of moments, one juxtaposed with another.

- AC In this, and other poems (the paste and plastic of the Disney theme park noted in “Now What” [*Loop* 7–8]), you are a critic of present-day culture. Although your work, it seems to me, has been very well received, this aspect of your work has received the least attention. Do you think of yourself as a political poet?
- AS I didn’t before, but I do now. It’s not just a case of bearing witness, but it is also a case of—and I don’t want to sound like a moralist—standing apart. There is a way in which you have to stand outside of your culture and look at it, and keep on looking.
- AC You refer to the linked sonnets based on the seven paintings by Brueghel as a “corona written for Staten Island, New York” (*Loop* 92). Could you say something about how these two things, Staten Island and Brueghel, came together in the making of these seven sonnets.
- AS I always need a place to write about—or I often do, particularly with a long poem. I was looking at photographs of the Staten Island landfill site. Staten Island was re-opened, and all the debris from the Twin Towers was taken there. I had a ten-day period to work on that poem, so I was working hard. It was a little bit like breaking stones trying to write that corona because sonnets are awfully hard to do. I was trying to make these two things—Brueghel’s paintings and the landfill site—connect, come together, and it was a bigger project than that one tragedy: it was a lament not just for the debris that was taken from the Twin Towers over to Staten Island; I was also thinking of these paintings, each one a kind of door, as an entryway into what we have made. And what have we made here, but this, a tower of garbage? The life that we have made here has become a memorial. Each one of those Brueghel paintings helped me to structure the thing as a whole. But I don’t mean to talk about just this one thing that happened, the tragedy of 9/11. I don’t mean to talk just about that atrocity, but many atrocities.
- AC In spite of the forward momentum achieved through linking the last and first lines of succeeding sonnets, the sonnets themselves are comprised of fragments of sentences: “Shut in rooms. / Gone. *Tick*. The towers. *Tock*. Of fire. A fold / in air.” (19). Is this syntactical feature—fragments of sentences—meant to instill a feeling of the end of things?
- AS I could not write in iambic pentameter with these sonnets, so they are not true sonnets. I could only write in this disjointed, fragmentary language. No other language would do though I was still trying to make the lines fit the sonnet form. There are ten syllables in each line, and the end rhymes are there, but the flow of the sonnet is not there the way you

would find it in a Shakespearean sonnet. None of these seven sonnets sound like a sonnet. It's a way of getting language to show the breakdown of the world. It is getting language itself to bear witness.

AC The syntax is meant to restate the condition?

AS It is a way of constantly arresting the reader. It's hard to go forward. It does not move smoothly. It does not move like music. It does not move like a lyric ought to move, or the way you are used to lyrics moving. I realised as I was going along that the very fabric of this was different.

AC A broken crown?

AS Yes.

AC These poems originate not with Brueghel's paintings of stolid, contented peasants, as in *Peasant Wedding*, but, rather, in his grimmer work. I was interested in the paintings you chose, but was equally interested in the ones you did not choose.

AS Yes, I know. There is that very famous one, *The Fall of Icarus*. I did not choose that one partly because everyone chooses it. I wanted to choose ones that, yes, were known, but also ones like *Christ and the Adulteress* that are not known well. It is a panel in which the figures look quite austere. Brueghel is known for his paintings of crowds, with lots going on and with many stories being told, but in this case, the painting is stripped down to the bare essentials.

AC There's a little sliver of something wrong even in the paintings that are right.

AS Just as there's a wrongness in the world. In the corona, I realised that I was going to have to connect the last line up with the first line, and the first line—"These watches. Ticking, still. Each hour is cold" (19)—is very devastating. What that image draws on are photographs of watches that were found in the debris of the World Trade Centre. What does a watch do besides tell the time? A watch itself is like a little room, but it cannot do any more than what it is designed to do—it ticks, it tocks. That's the end of it. So for me to come from the beginning to the end—"Love's breath. Things we can't hold: / these watches. Ticking. Still. Each hour is cold" (25)—was the most unbearable thing. There was a sadness in it: that it just comes to this. It's only these watches. We don't have the people. We've lost them. There is no light at the end of the tunnel for me in this corona. There might be little moments of uplift, but there's not a lot. That's the way I thought about that atrocity, but also about atrocity in general.

AC Of the Brueghel paintings invoked in this series, the most placid is the scene *Hunters in the Snow*, one of his most lit paintings although it is a

dusk scene. Your poem of that title seems, however, to suggest that the return to domestic comfort is a deception: “Each thing / deceives. The counters, cutlery. . . . Some children skate; they laugh. / And history has no place “ (24). Is the domestic, then, just another refusal of history?

- AS In this case, yes. In the context of this particular poem—this sonnet—history has no place because people want to forget. As for whether we think of ourselves as being part of something larger going on in the world, well, it’s difficult for us to do that. It means we have to stand outside of the comfortable houses of our lives. But history has a way of invading and disrupting the domestic.
- AC Clocks (*Loop* 9), watches (*Loop* 19), and time would appear to be of great interest to you. I understand that *Loop* at one time bore the title “Time-Piece.” Why is *Loop* the more suitable title for this material?
- AS I am very interested in form now, and in inventing form, in fact. The title *Loop* seemed to say more about the forms, how they circle back on themselves. That was one thing. Then, there’s the theme about things recurring in time. So there are all kinds of loops. The present-title made more sense. “Time-Piece” was sort of static.
- AC Besides the corona of sonnets, *Loop* contains a prose poem series, a villanelle, and the curious circular form, “Möbius Strip” (54–63). Are forms, other than free verse, of increasing interest to you?
- AS I’ve been trying for months to formulate why it is I’m fascinated with form. I think that the content is the saying of the poem and the form is thinking it out in terms of shape.
- AC The prose poems “Gesture Drawings” (*Loop* 26–36), of which eleven follow immediately upon the highly wrought sonnets of “Seven Paintings by Brueghel.” In this arrangement, are you drawing attention to a formal difference between the two series, parallel, let us say, to the difference in the visual arts between painting and drawing?
- AS Don McKay said that these are the two wings of my art, and I think what he meant was one is the very rigorous, highly wrought corona and the other is a series of improvisations. That series is made up of gesture drawings and it’s quick. Those poems were written very fast, and it took a long time to write and re-write the sonnets. I was so intent at that time, I could do nothing else.
- AC In the final piece in “Gesture Drawings,” there are the lines “There’s something else, but the eye alone is not capable, in any case get it down on paper.” Might this explain your shift from drawing and painting to poetry?

- AS Whether it's drawing or poetry, it's always a case of trying to get it down on paper. I'm talking about the elusive thing that resists capture. This is just as much a problem for the artist as it is for the poet. It's the attempt to pin down the ineffable. The task is impossible, but we try to do it anyway.
- AC "Ordinary lives are always / embellished by the papers" (*Loop 74*). What does poetry do with or for ordinary lives?
- AS Poetry can give us whatever limns the ordinary, which can be, occasionally, the extraordinary. I was especially concerned with this when I wrote my first novel, *Canterbury Beach*, because the lives of those characters—ordinary ones—were ones in which I was deeply interested. None of those characters was going to set the world on fire, but I wanted to examine them carefully, with tenderness.
- AC I can't imagine anything more unlike a novel than your poem "Möbius Strip," which is the most minimal of your poems. What do these two forms—the minimalist poem and the novel—answer to?
- AS In the case of "Möbius Strip," I wanted great economy so it would work as a Möbius strip, but also because the poem seemed to expand, paradoxically, the more I contracted it, and I was intrigued by that. Of course, a novel is a different thing altogether, like working on house construction as opposed to making a cat's cradle out of string. You can toss all kinds of things into the novel and it can be accommodated with room to spare.
- AC What urges you in one direction or the other?
- AS I think that poetry is a way for me to work out big ideas in small containers. It's kind of like finger painting was for me when I was young: you can make a big mess and use all the colours you want and have a lot of fun. So while the subjects I choose are serious, the work itself can be enormously playful. The novel is larger, so the play is different for me, but it's still there. In the novel, I want to tell stories: big stories, small stories. It comes of wanting to understand why people do what they do. For me, this is a very rich and intriguing thing: I like to weave the stories together and make a kind of tapestry of the telling. For instance, in *Canterbury Beach*, I was interested in making a novel that was a memory theatre—that Renaissance concept of retaining ideas by means of an imagined memory theatre—for a family, by examining the individual lives within that family. There's nothing to stop a writer from playing around with the novel, and I'm finding this out with my second novel. It's a whole world you can construct, though you have to do it with care

and precision, but the thing is that people will *believe* in this world. I love that about the novel.

AC It surprises me that your poetry and fiction are not more alike. Of course poetry takes place in time, and fiction, or at least plot-driven fiction, takes place in space. But is their difference more than that?

AS I think I want to do something different in each, so it would be easy to think that they're not alike. But I couldn't write fiction without poetry, or poetry without fiction. I need them both. But I want to talk further about what you say about time in poetry and fiction. Interestingly, I see poetry as stopping time, rather than "taking place in time," as you put it. I don't think it depends on a narrative line, or linear time, let's say, in the way that fiction does. Poetry can have bits of story in it, and it can even have a narrative line, but in the end, I don't think poetry cares about story in the same way. It is not *required* to tell a tale. So I see poetry as the knife that cleaves through linear time. Fiction depends on time, though. Even unconventional novels—and I'm thinking of *Time's Arrow*, by Martin Amis, as an example—depend on our knowledge of chronological time.

AC In a conversation with Jan Zwicky, you said, "poetry remains a touchstone for all other writing that I do" (116). Why is poetry the "touchstone"?

AS Poetry is at the heart of things for me. It's that simple. It's like air: I need it to breathe. I didn't always know this, but I know it now.

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# Canadian Art According to Emily Carr The Search for Indigenous Expression

**A**lthough Emily Carr was initially committed to depicting First Nations cultural iconography and experiences in both her writing and what is considered to be her first of two phases of painting, she eventually focused her attention entirely on the landscape of the West Coast. Acknowledging the importance of the West Coast to her art, contemporary cultural critics have yet to examine at length the mechanics at work behind Carr's belief in how indigenous material was formed. No sustained investigation maps precisely how Carr saw the land operating in both her writing and her painting (which, in her attempt to discover "just exactly *what* [she] had to say," she regarded as interchangeable), and or explains why she shifted from featuring First Nations cultural iconography and experiences to images of West Coast landscape (*HT* 237).

For Carr, West Coast images in both media depicted the state within the nation-state: she regarded her subject matter and, more largely, her art as a centripetal force in the construction of what she perceived to be authentic Canadian national identity. She conceived of her images as akin to a spiritual icon within a Christian religious framework, that is, as transcendent and morally uplifting. If she believed her images were shaped by a spiritual impulse,<sup>1</sup> although not necessarily by religious principles, the anticipated "conversion" or transformation was not to a specific religion with a particular ideological framework as much as it was to a national ideal. Apparently, Carr envisioned her audience as comprised primarily of inhabitants of Canada who had been conditioned to be sensitive to and to appreciate the land, and who would also be, therefore, more amenable to the spiritual

influences she believed her work would contain. She believed that aesthetic depictions of landscape contributed to the creation of an imagined national community or ideal, a transcendent entity in which the self was absorbed into a larger whole.

Canadian critics generally approach Carr's aesthetic depictions of landscape in two ways. The first, although now considerably less popular, stream envisions landscape as "hostile wilderness." This pattern of English-Canadian cultural criticism was consolidated by Northrop Frye, who predicates his argument on the assumption that the wilderness was an "other" that caused artists to experience first intellectual and imaginative dislocation and then, the inevitable corollary, "garrison mentality" (1982, 49). In *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* (2001), Gerald Lynch interprets Carr's *Klee Wyck* (1941), the book that won the Governor General's award for non-fiction in 1942, within Frye's "admittedly selective and tendentious reading" of Canadian literature (116). He notes Carr's fears of "self-annihilation in wilderness space," and "appeasement of and accommodation within that threat" (117). Generally out of vogue in English-Canadian literary criticism, this stream persists in disciplines such as art history (Udall 43), sociology (Angus 128), and religious studies (James 64).

The second stream of English-Canadian cultural criticism, now entrenched within contemporary literary and cultural discourse, considers modern aesthetic depictions of landscape as, at least ostensibly, benign: the discourse ranges from refuting Frye's view of artistic endeavours of this period and demonstrating that such a view is more colonial than the subjects under his scrutiny (Brydon 14), to suggesting that Carr's endeavours reflect national concerns (Shadbolt 2002, 115), to arguing that the use of landscape may seem benevolent but is a function of the economic and political exploitation of indigenous peoples. Jonathan Bordo's essay, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness" (2000), is an example of the latter, politically engaged tendency in cultural criticism. He investigates how artistic depictions of landscape disguise the tensions and inequalities embedded in efforts to construct a uniform national identity, explores "the wilderness" as "a paradigmatic site for the symbolic staging of Benedict Anderson's imagined community of the nation-state," and suggests that, in such cultural endeavours, an implied witness apprehends and depicts, but remains absent from, the wilderness: "The specular witness performs a rather special and dual role. It exalts a picture that testifies to an unpicturable condition—the wilderness sublime—while simultaneously legitimating, as a

landscape picture, terrain violently seized, dispossessed of its indigenous inhabitants, and reconstituted as territory” (225).

Bordo’s perspective is of particular interest because it registers a politically sensitive approach in contemporary cultural criticism—that is, this approach recognizes the shifting (and shifty) idea of a uniform national identity, and gestures toward the complicity of such twentieth-century artists as the Group of Seven in the perpetuation of a homogenous national identity that often elided difference and effectively erased First Nations presence from artistic representations, or appropriated First Nations cultural production. Marcia Crosby, among other critics, adopts this ideological posture in relation to the artistic endeavours of Carr. She criticizes her work, and all of the reviews that praise her unreservedly, for the underlying “assumptions of loss and salvage”: “the paintings represent the land as devoid of its original owners . . . thus lending tacit support for the actual dispossession of the property of First Nations people” (274).<sup>2</sup> Crosby’s critique might be extended to Carr’s writings, not just her paintings, given Carr’s sense that the medium was *not* the message, but interchangeable: if the idea “was crystal clear,” then “the medium would wrap it round” (*HT* 237). Since Carr often included, if she did not focus on, First Nations totem poles and iconography in her landscape paintings and wrote about First Nations cultural groups (primarily in *Klee Wyck*), her artistic endeavours have also been linked to the trope of vanishing culture thus: “Like most individuals of her era who were embroiled in fantasies of colonial fulfillment, Carr saw First Nations culture as in eclipse—and consequently in need of documentation and salvaging before it disappeared entirely” (O’Brian 9).

Such a perspective is limiting, however, and does not incorporate what Carr herself believed she was doing, or how she engaged in sometimes subtle and complex ways with the idea of the nation, First Nations culture, and landscape. Focusing on Carr’s impulse to preserve imposes expectations, moreover, that are part of a post-colonial ideological inheritance, and, in so doing, dismisses Carr’s remarkable artistic precociousness, her sense of self-agency in relation to the dominant ideology of the period, and the innovative ways in which she was interacting with First Nations communities and depicting their cultural artefacts when her own peers would not have considered the subject worthwhile. To some extent, Carr was involved in what Gerta Moray has called “aestheticized nostalgia,” that is, the belief in (and hence contribution to) the demise of First Nations peoples and in the need, therefore, to render aesthetically their cultural artefacts (1993, 25); however,

to castigate her for not living up to late twentieth-century political truisms or to fail to consider her own perception of her efforts seems to be critically reprehensible. Although Carr's notions of national identity and of indigenism were certainly partly fostered by the prevalent ideas of her time, her initial attention to First Nations iconography (what she conceived of as paying homage to one part of her cultural inheritance) and, later, to landscape demonstrates that she was also actively engaged in contesting or resisting dominant imperial forms. Her use of what she regarded as indigenous material served an anti-colonial function, that is, it was used to express difference from imperial approaches.

If Carr were a "specular witness" who participated in the enforced exile of indigenous inhabitants, she herself believed that her artistic endeavours served quite another function: first, she maintained she was following the artistic example of and then exalting First Nations culture and iconography in the interest of finding an indigenous form of expression; and second, she believed she was aligning herself with the marginal status of First Nations people. Rather than "beautifying" Canada with imported feathers (and hence justifying Frye's original indictment of English-Canadian artistic endeavours in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*), Carr sought to develop a style and expression that was indigenous to the country. She impugned the notion that "we are obliged to bedeck ourselves in borrowed plumes and copy art born of other countries and not ours"; instead, she believed that artists ought to "search as the Indian did, amid our own surroundings and material, for something of our own through which to express ourselves, and make for ourselves garments of our own spinning to fit our needs."<sup>3</sup> Carr is generally concerned with First Nations cultural forms because she believed they were "taken straight from nature" and the materials from "the country itself": "The Indians of the west coast of Canada have an art that may be termed essentially 'Canadian' for in inspiration, production, and material it is of Canada's very essence and can take its place beside the art of any nation" ("Modern and Indian Art" 2). She valorized aboriginal art and its corresponding value system because it was not inherited from or tainted by imported forms:

[T]he Indian [found] that great Art of his . . . not in academics, or travel, or pictures, or books. He got it from profound observation, absorption of his material by all of his five senses. Only when he had made himself familiar with his material from bones to skin did he venture to express the thing in his art.<sup>4</sup>

By extension, Carr believed that only after she immersed herself in the West

Coast forests and absorbed her material with all her “five senses” would she too be able to express “the thing” in art. A direct response to nature was pivotal. Such a belief informed her own aesthetic sense, as is apparent in the justification for the original title of *Klee Wyck*, “Tales in Cedar.”

Apparently, every component of cedar was used: “The fibre of the bark” was employed for “weaving clothes, mats, baskets and the trees themselves they used for the carving of their totem poles.”<sup>5</sup> Like the “Indian totem poles,” Carr wanted to create “stories in cedar”—to make use of indigenous material about her—in order to capture and convey the “flavour” of “the West Coast.”<sup>6</sup>

As the title, *Klee Wyck*, also demonstrates, Carr identified with First Nations individuals, who provided her with “a sympathetic echo of her own condition”: she felt marginalized from conservative Victorian society (Shadbolt 2002, 12). At the same time, she conceived of herself as a mediating figure between First Nations cultural groups and white, Western culture. She claims that the Nuu-chah-nulth gave her the name “Klee Wyck,” meaning “Laughing One,” a gesture that signaled her acceptance into the community. Specifically, Carr suggests that the name is bestowed upon her by Mrs. Wynook, a First Nations woman who persuaded Carr not to paint “the old Indians [who] thought the spirit of a person got caught in a picture of him” (26). The function of laughter in *Klee Wyck* is confirmed when, in “Kitwancool,” Carr explains how it “bridged the gap between their language and mine” (146) and results in the dissipation of cultural “strain” (144): more generally, Carr, as “the laughing one,” perceived herself as an intermediary figure between two distinct cultures.

Although the story of her re-naming may be regarded as an attempt to “become Native,” as Terry Goldie suggests of such tendencies, and thus as a seductive but pernicious way to justify her appropriation of First Nations iconography, she fully recognized that she was not a part of First Nations communities, or, at least, not consistently regarded in that manner (13): “When the Indians accepted me as one of themselves, I was very grateful” (145). She was, moreover, initially committed to including their cultural artefacts, rather than “erasing aboriginal presence,” and giving them the attention that either ran counter to period stereotypes (in, for example, the paintings of Cornelius Krieghoff or the novels of Ralph Connor) or were refused entirely by her contemporaries (13). Robert Fulford astutely remarks upon how Carr did not appropriate “Indian art for the use of whites,” nor did she “[ignore] the native culture of her own time”:

[S]he was not an artist seizing on Indian art for purely formalist reasons; all to the contrary, her art was a public, political act, owing as much to her civic conscience as to her artistic sensibility. She specifically opposed the white authorities, whether missionaries or government employees, who were urging natives to change their way of life, and she saw the totem poles as part of 'an integrated and complex native culture.' (38)

He adds that Carr also maintained that if First Nations persons actually desired assimilation, they "were ignoring or destroying the evidence of their cultural past, and she wanted to persuade them that this art was worth saving" (39). She perceived her work as a small attempt to counterbalance the fact that totem poles of such "northern tribal groups as the Haida and Tsimshian" were no longer being carved; the totem poles "appeared to be under threat, carried away for museums and private collectors, damaged by weather, neglect or vandalism. Those left standing in deserted villages were rotting or being consumed by the rain forest" (Laurence 12).

In fact, the original manuscript and first edition of *Klee Wyck* reveals her anger for the manner in which Native people were being treated.<sup>7</sup> "Friends," a significant excerpt that caps the story in the original manuscript and the first published edition, but that was cut from subsequent editions, demonstrates Carr's indignation: in this excerpt, she narrates her argument with a "Missionary" who demands that she "use [her] influence" to persuade Louisa and Jimmy, a First Nations couple, to "send their boys to the Industrial-boarding school for Indians." (KW 106) Carr's initial response—a resolute "No"—is only elaborated upon when the Missionary insists upon a reason for her refusal to intercede. Louisa's child, who is the "product of the Indian's Industrial School," Carr claims, learned to feel "ashamed of his Indian heritage": Louisa, she maintains, is able to attend to [her own children]" (KW 106) Although Carr has been depicted as unaware of "political implications", and as "fitting in with the Canadian government's plan to absorb the original inhabitants of the country," the early drafts of the manuscript demonstrate her considerable outrage at efforts to assimilate First Nations cultural groups and suggest one of the original purposes for her interest in recording their work (Shadbolt 2002, 15).

Yet Carr is engaged in a situation, a cultural double bind, as it were, that effectively ties her artistic hands. What she writes or paints about will never be deemed appropriate in our period: if she refuses to include traces of First Nations culture, she is contributing to the erasure of aboriginal presence (Bordo 1992, 98; Crosby), but, if she includes it, she is negatively appropriating it (Shier, Goldie). To approach Carr's painting and writing entirely

from this point of view, obscures her own anti-colonial impulses, her refusal to pander to imported standards, which she perceived as impeding indigenous, national growth. Carr's artistic endeavours may be seen as a hybrid formation: she participates in a limited fashion in what John O'Brian has called "fantasies of colonial fulfillment" by subsuming First Nations cultural material into her own (or refusing it representation in the later canvases), but, she also resists her own imperialist ideological inheritance.

Carr was motivated by the possibility of developing another authentic national culture. She initially felt compelled to include First Nations cultural artefacts in her work because, aside from recognizing these artefacts as being steadily obliterated, she conceived of abandoned villages and their totem poles as indigenous, national "relics":

I glory in our wonderful West and I hope to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. These things should be to us Canadians what the Ancient Briton's relics are to the English, only a few more years and they will be gone forever.<sup>8</sup>

She believes that such art, rather than her own artistic expression, might be deemed indigenous. To employ First Nations images, especially totem poles, was to foster a national art freed from or not associated with European conventions, even if she depended on techniques acquired abroad in order to do so. Although the idea of painting "Western forests did not occur to [her] in that period," the shift from First Nations iconography to the West Coast forests, which she conceived of as the spiritual force behind the totem poles, is consistent with her artistic aims:<sup>9</sup> to forge an indigenous artistic language and expression that reflected larger, national concerns.

As for her canvases, by the 1930s Carr had decided to shift from First Nations cultural iconography upon which she had become too dependent for the development of indigenous forms of expression. As she suggests in *Hundreds and Thousands* (1966), her posthumously published journal, her sense of her artistic maturation is matched by her belief that her paintings ought to reflect a distinctly Canadian subject in an indigenous style (and, as such, share an affinity with First Nations cultural endeavours, but not depend on them for artistic expression). Part of this shift may also be accounted for by Lawren Harris's encouragement to look directly to nature for the source of both material and techniques and to "saturate [herself] in our own place, the trees, skies, earth and rock," and to allow her art to "grow out of these. It is the life that goes into the thing that counts."<sup>10</sup> Shortly after the East Coast exhibit, therefore, she began to regard First

Nations artefacts and culture not as subject matter, but as models of how to approach Canadian landscape:

We may not believe in totems, but we believe in our country; and if we approach our work as the Indian did with singleness of purpose and determination to strive for the big thing that means Canada herself, and not hamper ourselves by wondering if our things will sell, or if they will please the public or bring us popularity or fame, but busy ourselves by trying to get near to the heart of things, however crude that work may be, it is liable to be more sincere and genuine. ("Modern and Indian Art" 4)

Most importantly, she regarded totem poles as authentic expressions of indigenoussness from which "newer" Canadians might learn. Although the poles "had served her well," and "had taken her into different places and kinds of nature," Carr's work began to reveal that "she was also reacting to and seeking out for the purposes of her changing art the various offerings of nature" (Shadbolt 2002, 112): she turned entirely toward depicting landscape.

Appreciating Carr's approach to landscape in both her writing and her painting, and her conception of its function in creating an English Canadian national identity, must incorporate the cultural system referred to as the nation-state. That phenomenon, as Benedict Anderson argues, emerged only within the past three centuries and was once organized according to spiritual principles. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991), Anderson traces the rise of the nation and argues that it is imagined as both limited, that is, as separate and distinct from other nations, and sovereign, an entity that was born of the decline of the hierarchical dynastic realm, the monarchy being one example of this system. Ultimately, it is "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). He identifies how religious-based imaginings and impulses are similar to those that are nationalist-based, notwithstanding his tempering such an argument with the assertion that "it would be short-sighted to think of the imagined communities of nations as simply growing out of and replacing the religious communities and dynastic realms" (22).

Yet, when the nation was being imagined, as it was in early twentieth-century English Canada by such artists as Carr, a fervour inheres that bears resemblance to religious devotion and identification. Carr's spiritual and religious rhetoric concerning art, especially in relation to nation-building resides in the notion that the nation-state (as defined by Anderson) evolved from the dynastic system. As the "contents" of that system altered, the

structure remained: an ideal that involved imagining the nation as a transcendent entity—landscape replaced the figure of the monarch as the spiritual apex of the hierarchy. Cultural and artistic activity in early twentieth-century English Canada provided spiritual orientation and centripetal, nation-building iconography, specifically images of the land. Carr, in like manner, believed she was contributing to a sense of national unity and identity.

Just as the dynastic realm's legitimacy was secured by the notion that it was divinely ordained, as Anderson suggests, so Carr's belief in both First Nations cultural endeavours and Canadian landscape as sources of national identity and authenticity was derived from and legitimated by spiritually-oriented principles. This connection explains why she felt certain that her visual and verbal renderings of West Coast essence and indigenouness were, as she believed of Lawren Harris's painting, religious in inclination: of Harris, she asserted that "his religion, whatever it is, and his paintings are one and the same," and of his canvases that "[t]here is a holiness about them, something you can't describe but just feel." On July 16, 1933, in *Hundreds and Thousands*, she wrote, "Once I heard it stated and now I believe it to be true that there is no true art without religion. If something other than the material did not speak to [the artist], and if he did not have faith in that something and also in himself, he would not try to express it" (41). Only a few days later, on July 17, she reveals the source of her own "faith": "God in all. Nature is God revealing himself, expressing his wonders and his love, Nature clothed in God's beauty of holiness" (42). She expressed great disappointment, therefore, when she observed a priest strolling casually by Harris's canvas, "Mountain Forms," at a Royal Canadian Academy exhibit because she assumed that "the spirituality of the thing [ought] to appeal to one whose life was supposed to be given up these things" (*HT* 13). Many of these ideas were shaped by her contact with the Group of Seven, whom she met in 1927 when, at the invitation of Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery, she travelled to Ottawa to view her canvases and Native-designed crafts displayed for a National Gallery exhibition (held in conjunction with the National Museum) entitled "Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern." She claimed that their paintings were a "revelation" about how to approach Canadian landscape aesthetically. Her response was spiritually charged; she documented the experience in *Hundreds and Thousands*:

Oh, God, what have I seen? Where have I been? Something has spoken to the very soul of me, wonderful, mighty, not of this world.

What language do they speak, those silent, awe-filled spaces? I do not know. Wait and listen; you shall hear by and by. I long to hear and yet I'm half afraid. I think perhaps I shall find God here, the God I've longed and hunted for and failed to find. (*HT* 6–7)

Consistently after this experience, Carr describes the West Coast as essential to her—and others'—spiritual transformation and, more largely, to the creation of a distinct, national aesthetic. Canadian landscape, especially that of the West Coast, becomes a spiritual entity providing unrestricted, unregulated “space,” both literal and imagined, in which she might forge indigenous artistic expression and language.

Even as she drew from the language of the religious establishment, she believed that art contained a spiritual force that operated outside of institutionalized religion. Conversely, she expressed considerable disdain for the Christian establishment and its missionaries because of their condescending and heedless attitude toward First Nations individuals. In the opening of *Klee Wyck*, in a passage of remarkable subtlety, she makes reference to the practice of repeating the “Our Father” in church as she gazes outside the window toward “a grand balsam pine tree”: “The Missionaries’ ‘trespasses’ jumped me back from the pine tree to the Lord’s Prayer just in time to ‘Amen’” (*KW* 4). Carr insinuates that the Missionaries are responsible for “trespasses” and for regressive rather than progressive movement, whereas the “pine tree,” a natural element, provides her with authentic spiritual orientation. Her paintings mediated this spiritual essence. “Art,” a means of rendering God in “Nature,” becomes “an aspect of God.” She echoes the Group of Seven’s own conviction that their canvases are “witnesses” to the spiritual potential of Canadian landscape. When one of her own canvases received attention for “showing spirituality,” she was delighted and exclaimed, “Oh, if it *were* really a ‘spiritual interpretation.’ Will my work ever really be that? For it to be that I must myself live in the spirit. Unless we *know* the things of the spirit we cannot express them” (*HT* 88). When she received a letter from Hanna Lund about how her painting, entitled “Peace,” “represents Divinity,” Carr recorded in her journal that “my soul spoke to hers, or rather, God spoke to her through me. Then he spoke back to me through her thought of writing [to] me. I am humbly grateful that my effort to express God got through to one person.” God “speaks” to her, she claims through nature: the woods are a source of the “profoundly solemn” from which, “as from the Bible, you can find strength.”<sup>11</sup> Not only are they “God’s tabernacle,” but she could “eat the woods as one eats the sacrament” (*HT* 201, 196). This curious metaphor of the eucharist suggests

an obligation to internalize the West Coast forests, and that this process, like the receiving of the sacrament, was an act of faith. These references indicate the principles of legitimation employed in dynastic realms: that is, she perceived both the land and her canvases as “divinely ordained.”

Carr had been consistently searching for a way to mediate spiritual transcendence (“the God I’ve longed and hunted for and failed to find”). That search was also informed by and couched in the rhetoric of the sublime and American transcendentalism. Specifically, some of her ideas were informed by her thorough reading of and admiration for the work of Walt Whitman. In her journal entry, dated August 12th, 1933, for example, she mentions she is reading Frederick Housser’s *Whitman to America*, which, she claims, “clarifies so many things”:

[L]iving the creative life seems more grandly desirous (opening up marvellous vistas) when one is searching for higher, more uplifting inspiration. I find that raising my eyes slightly above what I am regarding so that the thing is a little out of focus seems to bring the spiritual into clearer vision, as though there were something lifting the material up to the spiritual, bathing it in the glory. Seek ever to lift the painting above paint. (*HT* 48)

She concludes this entry by examining her struggle to apply these principles to the mountain she is trying to paint: “it began to move, it was near the speaking, when suddenly it shifted” (48). She wonders about this particular failure by asking herself, “Did I carelessly bungle, pandering to the material instead of the spiritual? Did I lose sight of God, too filled with petty household cares, sailing low to the ground, ploughing fleshily along?” (48–9). She took these failures seriously and struggled because she wanted to build “an art worthy of our great country, and I want to have my share, to put in a little spoke for the West” (*HT* 5).

The diction in such journal entries derives from the sublime, from that which rises above ordinary experience and ambivalence. The sublime both expresses attraction to and fear of the subject matter, a simultaneous sense of serenity and terror, although the terror is “regenerative” (Glickman 139). In *Hundreds and Thousands*, Carr repeatedly makes reference to her search for a new vocabulary to articulate these experiences, those spiritually transformative in nature, that defy existing forms of expressions and representation. This problem is central to the sublime: the difficulty is not only how to articulate that which has no verbal or visual equivalent, but also how to capture an unfamiliar experience and a geography that elude containment. As Susan Glickman suggests, however, the Canadian sublime was also used to develop a sense of itself in opposition to British conceptions of the picturesque.

If “[a]rtists from the Old World” were alarmed by the West and found it “crude, unpaintable,” and if they felt “[i]ts bigness angered, its vastness and wild spaces terrif[y]ing,” Carr, as a New World artist, “loved every bit of it.” (*GP* 103) The West Coast forests offer her the opportunity to express difference and to mediate transcendence, to rise above personal and individual concerns, and to experience the sublime ecstasy of belonging to something higher, communal, and anti-individualistic.

Such temporary ontological dislocation, which Frye condemned because it apparently contributed to the stifling of English-Canadian artistic endeavours, is integral to the experience Carr wanted to capture and convey: the human mind subdued and overpowered by the sublime, by the “recognition of the vastness surrounding it” (Glickman 139). The experience of the sublime has been uncritically conflated with a part of the anxiety and sense of inferiority connected with colonial-mindedness. Yet, in the early twentieth century all Canadians were asked, implicitly, to share in this experience, through which Carr and others believed that they would be made “Canadian”: Canada’s “wild magnificence”—that is, uncultivated land, or what Jonathan Bordo has defined as “wilderness”—was a source of inspiration and was given “parity with civilization in the expression of national character” (Glickman 49). English-Canadian depictions of a sublime landscape operated as a part of a larger national discourse that would create like-minded citizens.

That experience involves the dissolution of boundaries between self (or inhabitant of Canada) and other (wilderness). In the process, another larger self—an imagined Canadian national identity—and another “other,” imperial Britain, are forged. This form of the sublime may be fruitfully contrasted with that elicited by Carr’s experience in London. The “same feeling flooded over” her whenever she visited London: “[in] the stomach of the monster, [there was] no more You an individual but You lost in the whole. Part of its cruelty part of its life part of its wonderfulness part of its filth part of its sublimity and wonder, though it was not aware of you any more than you are aware of a pore in your skin.”<sup>12</sup> This description of the sublime corresponds to Frye’s now popularized notion of the “garrison mentality,” but Frye’s garrison is generated by the Canadian wilderness and not, as Carr here suggests, by a city and certainly not by the imperial centre. Carr regards the experience of the sublime in Canada as a positive, if terrifying experience, which results in the undoing of any connection to British imperialist ideas and which is the matrix for the forging of a distinct Canadian identity. In a letter to Ira Dilworth, her editor and friend, she directly compares the “air-

less desolation of London”—the “factory outskirts, the smoke, grime, crowding people” and the “condensed horror heavier than weight itself, blacker than blackness” with the West Coast in which she never experienced the “desolation of utter loneliness” which overcame her.<sup>13</sup> Her employment of the rhetoric of the sublime harkens back to the dynastic system, although the contents and specific effect—that is, a new kind of imagined community organized by different principles—have significantly altered.<sup>14</sup>

Carr thus regarded Canadian wilderness as a civilizing force, not as a force to be civilized. She envisioned the Canadian West Coast as the matrix for spiritual experience and growth, for the creation of indigenous art, and in turn, of national development and identity: rather than grappling with issues of faith, she was endeavouring to generate or create faith and belief in national identity as she saw it being shaped by geographical uniqueness. As Stephanie Kirkwood-Walker argues, “To accept a part in imagining the national soul, to join with the Group of Seven in devising images for the Canadian imagination, was to adopt a persuasive and compelling rhetoric that rested easily on the shoulders of a modern artist in a young country” (58). Bordo’s sense that landscape was used as the “paradigmatic site for the symbolic staging of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community of the nation-state,” did not necessarily exclude First Nations cultural forms nor promote the demise of First Nations cultural groups. In fact, Carr’s interaction with First Nations communities indicates that she was quite uniquely engaged with the process of “shaping a nation” and with the English-Canadian nation-building discourse that was prominent at the time.

#### NOTES

- 1 In “Toward Defining Spirituality,” Walter Principe traces the root and application of the word, and suggests that, at its origin, it stood in opposition to another way of life: a spiritual person is one “whose life is guided by the Spirit of God” whereas a “carnal” person is one “whose life is opposed to the working and guidance of the Spirit of God” (130). To appreciate its significance, one “must take account of the link between the objects of faith and the reactions aroused by these objects in the religious consciousness” (137). In early twentieth-century English Canada, the “spiritual” or “spirituality” would have meant that which deals with experience outside of and in opposition to the material, corporeal world, but that experience is made in response to an object of faith: transcendence is thus integral to spiritual experience, articulated as something which is above and beyond individual concerns and the material world, and the object of faith was the land, as representative of the nation and its potential.
- 2 See also Reid Shier’s interview with the Salish artist, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun in *Mix* (1998).

- 3 “Modern and Indian Art of the West Coast,” *McGill News* (Supplement) June 1929: 4.
- 4 Emily Carr, notebook, no date, quoted in *Sunlight in the Shadows*, np.
- 5 BCARS, Parnall Collection (MS 2763), box 2, file 24. Ira Dilworth, letter to W.H. Clarke, 5 May 1941.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Gerta Moray’s “Wilderness, Modernity and Aboriginality in the Paintings of Emily Carr,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.2 (Summer 1998): 43–65. In this article, Moray discusses the editorial cuts made to the first edition of the book, which was “[sanitized . . .] for use in Canadian schools” (52).
- 8 Emily Carr, “Lecture on Totems” (pp. 52–53), as quoted in Moray 1993, 211.
- 9 Carr, “Modern and Indian Art” 6.
- 10 Lawren Harris, letter to Emily Carr, 4 November 1932, Carr papers. As quoted in Tippet, 175–6.
- 11 “Quatsino,” *Opposite Contraries*, 28.
- 12 *Growing Pains* ms, as quoted in Blanchard 81.
- 13 BCARS, Emily Carr Papers, MS 2181 (microfilm, reel 1224). Emily Carr, letter to Ira Dilworth, 23 November 1941.
- 14 Although Carr’s “national imagined icon” is more specifically focused on images of the West Coast, her canvases might still be regarded or invoked as if they were the “semiotic equivalent of nationhood” (New 142). Artists of the modern period seemed to have few difficulties with seeing specific geographical locales as representative of the nation as a whole: her work was regarded as carrying “cultural resonances or assumptions” and as generalizing “from particular details to a panoramic truth about a characteristic—even if metaphoric—‘Canadian’ landscape” (144).

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## Communion of the wasps

They came straight up, the wasps, not from above as you might expect but from the ground, as if the earth were releasing all the demons as children we were told to inhabit it. They swarmed over us, as frantic as we were, we to escape, they to spread their love, to prove it. Their need, they bore on their sleeves, emblems of the venom they carry not for harm, but sacrament. Our need was deeper, the pain hurrying us along the path, stripping our clothes from us, ribbons of music erupting from our mouths more in fright than pain, music that charted the course of our need, of its hunger. The wasps circled, conferred, looked into themselves for the strength they needed for pursuit but fell short. Our need was greater, for escape, for comfort, to look into ourselves and see a reflection less like that of the wasps, the fear etched on our eyes, the rancid smell of it. They came to us as supplicants, seeking communion, faith, offering sacrifice. We turned our backs on them, aloof gods, their belief in us not strong enough to sustain our own. They brought us the only gift they know, we spat it out.

# Doing the Honourable Thing

Guy Vanderhaeghe's  
*The Last Crossing*

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock emphasizes that European imperialism, rather than a unilateral imposition of authority, was a dialectical process, “a violent encounter with preexisting hierarchies of power that took shape not as the unfolding of its own inner destiny but as untidy, opportunistic interference with other regimes of power” (6). This “untidy interference” not only varied depending upon the specific colonial context but also in the triangulation of “the formative categories of imperial modernity,” race, gender, and class, which “emerge only in dynamic, shifting and intimate interdependence” (61). Though McClintock focuses largely on the representation of women, her study is grounded in an appreciation of recent feminist theory’s “insistence on the separation of sexuality and gender and the recognition that gender is as much an issue of masculinity as it is of femininity” (7). Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Last Crossing* (2002), the follow-up to his highly acclaimed *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996), provides a striking fictional exploration of how the triangulation of race, class, and gender in imperial modernity has indeed similarly shaped constructions of masculinity.

Set in the same cross-border Whoop-up country that provided one of the main settings for *The Englishman’s Boy*, *The Last Crossing* stages an encounter between the ossified, stifling social codes of Victorian England and the emerging, seemingly anarchic social codes of the Western frontier and explores the way in which notions of masculine identity and conduct on both sides of the Atlantic have been shaped by imperial attitudes. In the process, *The Last Crossing* revisits (perhaps *exhumes* is a better word) what

might seem—in a contingent, anti-foundationalist postmodern culture—an old-fashioned, traditional concern: honour. The word, it seems fair to say, resonates with chivalric associations that have been substantially discredited as socially authoritarian, patriarchal, and even imperialist. Written at a time of declining belief not just in honour but “in masculinity as a gender identity specific to men which accounts for their privileged command of power, resources and status” (MacInnes 46–7), *The Last Crossing* explores how doing the honourable thing pits individual conceptions of the right course of action against social codes of proper conduct shaped by imperial constructions of race, class and gender. The novel highlights how compromising the former to satisfy the latter often means sacrificing integrity for power and is a recipe for psychic and spiritual misery.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, McClintock contends, “the image of the natural, patriarchal family” served as an important discursive rationalization for imperialist intervention, “providing the organizing trope for marshalling a bewildering array of cultures into a single, global narrative ordered and managed by Europeans” (45). *The Last Crossing* portrays the dynamics of such hierarchical subordination in operation, as the novel is about a paternally legislated quest that takes the sons from the imperial centre to the remote “Wild West.” On the orders of their father, Henry Gaunt, Charles and Addington Gaunt travel in 1871 from England to Whoop-up country, the still-indeterminate Western frontier territory crossing the Canada-U.S. border, to locate their wayward, impressionable brother Simon, who has disappeared without a trace after following his religious mentor on a mission to “uplift the Indian” (108). Through this expedition, Vanderhaeghe deconstructs the Victorian patriarchal family, both writ small in the Gaunt household and writ large in the British Empire. Vanderhaeghe exposes the corruption and stifling social stratification of Victorian patriarchy and challenges its authority through the Gaunt brothers’ turbulent encounter with both the anarchic, democratic individualism of frontier society and the communal alterity of indigenous peoples.

Honour in the Victorian patriarchal family implies submitting to the authority of the father and safeguarding the social respectability of the family name. Henry Gaunt’s strict adherence to these principles, however, cultivates filial rebellion and Oedipal resentment. Indeed, all three Gaunt brothers are marked or marred by their emotional struggle with their father, an authoritarian, middle-class *arriviste*. In each case, this struggle gives way to behaviour that diverges from prevailing Victorian mores:

Addington's repressed jealousy and resentment expresses itself in transgressive physical and sexual excesses. Simon, in his ingenuous, eccentric romanticism and Christian idealism, flouts his father's wishes and threatens to make "the Gaunt name a laughingstock" (112). Finally, Charles' unfulfilled need for paternal affection cultivates a resentful obedience and a soul-stultifying conformity. In short, even before the sons' departure for the New World, the Victorian "family" is depicted as the site of dissension, repression, and thwarted self-actualization. By having the Gaunts transport this psychological baggage to the Western frontier, Vanderhaeghe complicates not only the stereotype of the rectitude and propriety of Victorian England but also the stereotype of the licentious anarchy of the Wild West, suggesting that the former is not as honourable, nor the latter as dishonourable, as it has been made out to be.

This deconstruction of stereotypes takes place particularly through the depiction of attitudes towards love and sexuality, in which considerations of honour traditionally have played a large part. The Gaunt brothers' respective and divergent departures from dominant Victorian notions of sexuality and courtly behaviour intensify as their travel to the West liberates them from social surveillance and sexual regulation. Their reactions to this liberation not only complicate the quest at the heart of the narrative but also highlight the inimical effects of imperial constructions of masculinity and sexuality. Vanderhaeghe's portrait of the Gaunts' excursion into Whoop-up country turns the tables on what McClintock describes as the Victorian paranoia over contagion, a biological image for a largely social anxiety about "boundary order": "The poetics of contagion justified a politics of exclusion and gave social sanction to the middle class fixation with boundary sanitation, in particular the sanitation of sexual boundaries." As a result, "[c]ontrolling women's sexuality, exalting maternity and breeding a virile race of empire-builders were widely perceived as the paramount means for controlling the health and wealth of the male imperial body politic" (47). Through his portrait of the Gaunts, Vanderhaeghe reverses the course of this contagion and figures imperialism as a migration of the ills of Victorian society outward to the margins of empire, subverting the trope of the genteel Victorian being confronted with the lawless, depraved Wild West.

The most destructive and most literal example of such contagion is Addington, whose violent and fetishistic behaviour, at home and abroad, is firmly rooted in the contradictions at the heart of Victorian society. As Ronald Pearsall notes, despite the façade of Victorian disapproval of

promiscuity, young men of the privileged classes were encouraged to keep mistresses or make use of prostitutes rather than marry imprudently (175). Such behaviour, however, as Addington aptly illustrates, could have negative consequences far worse than social opprobrium: “the Russian roulette of Victorian sex” was running the risk of venereal disease (Pearsall 285). While playing the role of the courtly and solicitous military gallant, Addington secretly combats a case of syphilis, requiring debilitating treatments of mercury that render him increasingly erratic and violent, a veritable sexual Jekyll and Hyde. “Going out to dine, his body smeared with mercury, gleaming like a sardine under evening dress” (159), Addington symbolizes the hypocrisy and decay beneath the veneer of Victorian moral and sexual propriety.

His predatory sexual behaviour—underlined repeatedly through images of hunting and fishing—also dramatizes the Victorian fetishizing of class distinctions. Compensating for the prohibition on premarital sex in his own social circle, Addington sexually exploits female servants at the Gaunts’ country estate, Sythe Grange, and steals articles of clothing from eligible ladies to hold “to his nose at the moment of climax, of spending” (27) with prostitutes. After his arrival in Fort Benton, Addington takes this disaffected, transgressive search for thrills to its violent extreme by murdering the socially marginal Madge Dray. As Pearsall notes, the “odd notion that the rape of a virgin cured venereal disease can only have carried weight with profligates who were far gone with that prime reward of promiscuity, general paralysis of the insane” (430–1). Acting on this assumption, Addington rapes Madge and then strangles her with his belt, a cherished talisman taken from his surrogate father, the Gaunts’ gamekeeper. The reaction of the Fort Benton authorities to this brutal rape and killing initially situates it as a relatively unremarkable, if gruesome, instance of frontier lawlessness and sexual licentiousness; the sheriff and justice of the peace unceremoniously leave Madge’s body covered with a horse blanket on the jailhouse floor as they accuse Custis Straw, a local, of murdering the impoverished and vulnerable young girl. The irony, of course, is that the perpetrator is a newly arrived English gentleman, whose ostensibly curative violation, and subsequent murder, of Madge can be seen as an extension of Victorian sexual dissolution and class exploitation.

Addington explicitly attributes his disease to the torpor imposed on him by a restrictive Victorian society, and his physical decline over the course of the novel sustains the theme of imperial contagion. Evoking the trope of

imperialist expansion as masculine penetration and release, he mistakenly views his Western excursion as a cure for the enfeebling, feminizing claustrophobia of England and stops treating his disease. When the search party reaches Fort Edmonton, however, his condition reasserts itself, and he slumps back into his volatile brooding, brutally embracing Lucy Stoveall during a dance in the Englishmen's honour and trying to purchase a young girl from a Blackfoot village. As the party's guide, Jerry Potts, resolves to put an end to Addington's dishonourable, predatory behaviour, he explicitly underlines the export of contamination: "As he spoils, he wishes to spoil others" (304). Addington's corrupt sexuality, which runs rampant in the West, suggests the continuity between Victorian sexual repression and exploitative imperial adventurism.

The genteel artist Charles, no less a product of repressive Victorian codes of sexual propriety, has a less dramatic but nonetheless dubious impact on the frontier. Charles' socially inadvisable fling with the homeless and abandoned Lucy Stoveall, who occupies a low rung on the frontier social ladder, puts him in a crisis of honour, forcing him to choose between following his heart and upholding the family name. Vanderhaeghe alternates third-person narration with the first-person perspectives of a number of his characters, including Charles, whose narrative emphasizes how his liaison with Lucy, though less predatory and more consensual than Addington's sexual forays, also represents a transgression, a dangerous crossing of class boundaries. Lucy becomes the search party's cook in hopes of tracking down the Kelso brothers, whom she presumes guilty of Madge's murder. Her situation troubles Charles' gendered class distinctions, as he reflects on "how difficult it is to set the boundaries . . . , to decide exactly what position she occupies, that of our servant or damsel in distress" (151). He treats their initial excursions away from the search party as shameful, but their affair progressively destabilizes his sense of social and sexual propriety, as he becomes increasingly intoxicated by Lucy's beauty, vigour, and self-assurance: "What uncharted waters I find myself in with her, far different from my previous situations, where things were always clear. . . . Can the word 'mistress' be spoken to a woman like her. I think not" (198).

Ultimately, though, Charles, obstructed by his conformist instincts, is unable to make the transition to the less stratified and less prohibitive social order of the West. Witnessing the passing of a Métis caravan, Charles unwittingly bares his conformist, "essential self," to Lucy by regretfully longing to live likewise "free of the constraints and prohibitions of civilized behaviour"

and revealing that he thinks “precisely in those terms” (279). Instead, Charles fulfills his rival Custis’ prediction—“Men like him don’t hitch themselves to buggies like her except for short trips” (231)—because he is too concerned with Victorian propriety. Fearful of his father’s disapproval, Charles leaves Lucy behind when he returns to England, promising to come for her after fulfilling his “clear obligation to [his] father” (364). His reluctance implicitly concedes that his behaviour has been dishonourable, a flouting of Victorian social and sexual codes, and it seals his romantic fate. Lucy perceptively realizes that Charles is too genteel and sensitive to stand the opprobrium that the social gulf between them would inevitably invite. That she is pregnant (a fact she decides to keep from Charles) clinches the decision. Thus, ultimately, Charles’ liaison with Lucy amounts to “a Sunday drive,” but one that leaves Lucy in a compromised position that she is forced to remedy by proposing marriage to Custis.

If the timid, self-righteous Charles fails to heed Simon’s injunction “to be ourselves and not someone else’s dream of us” (156), Simon, in contrast, is eager to shed Victorian constraints. A lost sheep in more than his rejection of social respectability, Simon has wandered from the heterosexual fold as well, and is found at the end of the novel living in a Crow village with a *bote*—a highly respected, ambiguously gendered “two-spirit” or *berdache*. His decision to remain with his lover scandalizes Charles to the degree that he plans to suppress the information that Simon is even alive. Whereas Charles refuses to give credence to Simon’s air of spiritual emancipation, he concedes that, in Simon’s eyes, to remain with the *bote* is to do the honourable thing: to be true to himself. In pursuing that ideal, though, Simon, like his brothers, puts his own questionable sexual stamp on the New World. While flouting Victorian sexual codes by co-habiting with the *bote*, Simon, however sympathetic and well-intentioned, imposes other codes on the Crow by discouraging the *bote*’s promiscuity, a culturally sanctioned part of her function (Williams 102). This angers the Crow warriors, who resent being denied her spiritually and sexually desirable company and suspect that he is stealing her power. Though Simon benefits from the Crow’s respect for, rather than ostracizing of, homosexuals, his intervention extends the regulation of native sexuality by missionaries that Walter Williams sees as largely responsible for the suppression of the *berdache* tradition in Amerindian cultures (181–92). In that sense, Simon exports some imperial attitudes as much as he tries to leave others behind.

While the Gaunts’ “untidy, opportunistic interference” through their sex-

ual behaviour can be seen as transporting the dissension, repression and corruption of Victorian patriarchal society to the margins of empire, Custis Straw and Jerry Potts—the cowboy and Indian respectively to the Gaunts’ Victorian gentleman—wrestle more conscientiously with the dominant standards of masculinity and honourable behaviour in their respective cultures. Victor Seidler argues that a central characteristic of constructions of masculinity is a fear of “showing ourselves as vulnerable and dependent human beings, since this seems to ‘prove’ that we cannot be relied upon as ‘real men’” (50–1). Vanderhaeghe depicts both Custis and Jerry as willing to flout this convention in favour of a more personal and less conformist sense of honour. Custis, for instance, though considered a social outcast, comes much closer than Addington or Charles to the chivalric ideal echoed earlier by the genteel Miss Venables at an archery contest at Sythe Grange: “It may be silly of me to believe that in some distant time men wore their ladies’ favours upon their sleeves, as a pledge of love and protection. But that, sir, is a belief in *ideals*” (20). In his conspicuous courting of Lucy, Custis becomes a figure of public ridicule, his behaviour characterized as unseemly and unmasculine by his sceptical friend Aloysius Dooley. However, Custis is conscious not to overstep the bounds of a socially compromised position—openly courting a man’s wife—and in contrast with Charles puts his life on the line when he follows Lucy north to ensure her safety and to see justice done for the murders of her sister and husband. In short, Custis is careful to defend her honour, figuratively wearing her pledge on his sleeve.

However much Custis’ protection of Lucy might accord with traditional patriarchal constructions of men as protectors of women, his sense of honour excludes the sexual competition and assumption of masculine superiority typically associated with that role, especially in the rugged, individualistic culture of the frontier. As Seidler suggests, prevailing ideologies of masculinity emphasize strength and rationality over emotions and intuition, but it is possible “to discover our weakness and vulnerability as a different kind of strength” (92). Custis in particular reflects what Vanderhaeghe himself describes in his work as “a kind of dialogue between older, more conventional notions of masculinity” and “newer, more contemporary ideas of what it means to be male” (“Making History”). Custis prevails in his pursuit of Lucy not because he is the Alpha male but because he pursues her with genuine consideration and commitment. For instance, despite being rejected by Lucy for all his troubles, he selflessly urges Charles to reject conformity and claim Lucy as his own. When Charles balks, Custis

compensates for Charles' inability to do the honourable thing, accepting Lucy's offer of marriage and essentially "making an honest woman of her" in the eyes of society. Thus Custis compensates for the damage done by Charles' transgression (pursuing sexual relations outside of the bonds of marriage and outside his own social class) of a code of respectability that Charles is unable to shake off. In the process, Custis' intentions, as he professed all along, ultimately prove to be honourable, as he "did nothing to come between" Charles and Lucy (387). Indeed, in the novel's frame story, which Charles regretfully narrates decades after his New World excursion, Custis, displaying a sensitivity and lack of competitiveness in stark contrast with dominant frontier codes of masculinity, sends Charles a letter informing him of the existence of his daughter and paving the way for a possible reconciliation with Lucy. Custis' marriage to Lucy, furthermore, blurs the border of gender identities, as not only does Lucy propose the union—usurping the role conventionally played by the man—but she also continues figuratively to wear the pants while running the family ranch. "The neighbours used to say," according to Custis' son-in-law, who delivers the letter to Charles, "that when it came to work, Custis Straw was not half the man his wife was" (389).

A similar overcoming of gender hubris marks Jerry's story as well, as Vanderhaeghe elaborates on the story of the historical Jerry Potts' break with his Crow wife, Mary. Following the outlines of Potts' biography, the narrative relates how the half-white, half-Kanai Potts leads a reprisal attack against a Crow camp after escaping from his Crow captors (see Long 39–43, Dempsey 5). In *The Last Crossing*, Mary, though grateful for Jerry's safe return, refuses to honour him for his accomplishment, as custom dictates, because it is her own people who have been killed. Her ambivalent allegiance touches a sensitive chord in Jerry—his uneasy attitude towards his own hybridity—and teaches him "that to live divided is dangerous, a confusion that sickens the spirit" (100). When Jerry subsequently expresses a desire to move into the heart of Blackfoot territory (in the midst of Mary's traditional enemies) she balks and returns to her own people with their son Mitchell after challenging Jerry: "What do you wish to be, White or Kanai?" Their split comes in part because of a perceived insult to Jerry's honour: "She knew his secret. He wanted to be both and could not pardon her for reminding him of the impossibility of it" (105). At the end of the novel, however, Jerry is consumed by remorse and tracks Mary down in a Crow village, where he debases himself in the warriors' eyes because he "begs his

father-in-law for his daughter. Cries and pulls at his leg like a child” (347). If, as Jane Tompkins argues, the Western “is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity” (45), Jerry, like Custis, manages to overcome the former without sacrificing the latter.

The concept of honourable relations between men and women in *The Last Crossing* is bound up with the concept of honour and reputation in physical strife, stereotypically the preserve of masculine accomplishment. “Strength,” Seidler notes, “is the easiest way to confirm your masculinity” (31), and Vanderhaeghe explores this side of masculinity particularly by contrasting Addington with Custis and Jerry. *The Last Crossing* provides reflections on such tests of physical capability as hunting, fighting, and warfare, questioning traditional conceptions of masculinity and further underlining the tensions between personal integrity, social conventions and imperial assumptions.

As Olive Dickason and other historians have observed, part of the stereotype of European conquest is the myth of the superior and independent colonist, a myth that effaces the historical reality of European dependence on native peoples for guidance and survival (xi). This arrogant presumption of imperial superiority is aptly embodied by Addington, who is a sinister parody of figures of adventure from *The Boys Own Annual*, which Vanderhaeghe cites as a key influence on his formation as a writer (“Influences” 324); indeed, Charles describes Addington as “a character in a boy’s book” (197). Especially through juxtaposition with the capable and unassuming Jerry, Addington is portrayed as the epitome of imperial bluster: self-important, bullying, and belligerent, a “trumped-up little martinet,” in Custis’ words (230). While Addington is courageous and physically adept, he is, in various ways, a loose cannon, utterly lacking in judgement and modesty, his volatile and brutal behaviour wreaking havoc throughout the narrative.

Addington’s disquietude and instability are traced back to his experiences in the colonial militia in Ireland, where he spearheads the brutal, indiscriminate suppression of a popular protest in Dunvargan, goading his soldiers into a deadly sortie against a relatively defenceless crowd of men, women and children. This undisciplined, bloody reprisal earns Addington a dressing-down from his superiors that prompts him to resign, seeing himself as the victim of a claustrophobic, hierarchical imperial order: “Elderly officers pushing down the strong for fear of losing their places” (160). Addington’s standing upon honour, however, seems to be contradicted by a more deep-seated discomfort with his bloodthirsty behaviour, suggested by recurring

nightmares in which the horse he rode during the riots metamorphoses into a scaly, decomposing nag, symbolizing his psychological, moral and physical decay.

The New World initially provides relief from his malady and scope for a masculinity that he associates with conquest: "Face it, overcome it, that's what defines a man" (160). However, as Addington arrogantly assumes leadership of the search party, his belief in his superiority as a gentleman and a soldier repeatedly leads to dishonourable and risky behaviour. His conceited braying alienates most of the party and violates Jerry's sense of honour and dignity: "The Englishman does not understand it is only correct to speak this way after the thing is accomplished, when the right to do so has been earned" (175). Utterly oblivious to the peril in which his self-indulgent and whimsical decisions place them as they travel north through hostile country, Addington bristles when his decisions are ignored and/or contradicted by Jerry, recognized by most of the party as the more reliable authority. At times seemingly admiring of Addington's capability while consistently usurping his authority, the taciturn Jerry, indeed, infuriates Addington with what can be seen as subversive colonial mimicry: "You cracking smart, Cap'n" (138).

In one of the novel's key incidents, Addington's high-handedness leads to a clash of codes of honour and a clash of fists. Both Custis and Addington stubbornly stand on principle defending their respective allies when an inebriated Jerry is assaulted by Addington's sycophantic fellow-traveller Caleb Ayto for filching the Captain's wine, which has been "restricted to the gentlemen" (142). In the ensuing boxing match, Addington gives Custis an almost fatal trouncing only because Custis is ambushed from behind by Ayto. Oblivious to this unsporting intervention, Addington is condescendingly and obnoxiously magnanimous in victory, while Custis, the moral victor, nearly wastes away to death after his somewhat quixotic defence of Jerry. Although Addington technically prevails in this contest of honour, his behaviour is clearly more unseemly and self-aggrandizing. Custis' obstinate insistence on a bout that he is almost sure to lose is motivated, moreover, not only by his respect for Potts (and his reluctance to shame himself in Lucy's presence) but also by lingering guilt over what he sees as his craven behaviour while fighting for the North during the Civil War. Having abandoned his friend to save his own hide during the Battle of the Wilderness, Custis has never forgiven himself: "And I tell myself, Custis Straw, next time you're carried out, let it be feet first. It's what you deserve"

(272). While his fight with Addington and his harrowing rescue of Lucy from the clutches of Titus and Joel Kelso can be seen as indulging his death wish, they can also be seen as gestures of atonement, expressions of his belief that a man “needs to serve something bigger than himself” (119).

Custis, however, does not compensate for his putative cowardice with the swaggering, demonstrative aggression so prevalent in Whoop-up country; indeed, his behaviour challenges the conceptions of honour and masculinity that prevail in a frontier town like Fort Benton. What his friends Aloysius and Dr. Bengough admire about Custis is his steadfast, almost masochistic inoffensiveness in a masculine culture that privileges aggressive self-assertion (as exemplified by Custis’ antagonists, Titus Kelso and Danny Rand); “Straw is the only man I know who does his best to harm no one but himself” (163), observes the doctor. At the same time, Custis retains a dogged and discriminating sense of honour, killing Titus (who has killed Lucy’s husband, but not her sister) but sparing his brother Joel (whose only crime seems to be craven sycophancy). Tompkins describes the moment of vengeance in Westerns as “the moment of moral ecstasy. The hero is *so right* (that is, so wronged) that he can kill with impunity” (229). Custis, however, thanked by Lucy “for settling with the Kelsos,” retorts, “I don’t care to be congratulated for shedding blood” (317). Here again, Vanderhaeghe seems to be revising the nihilistic and exclusive masculinism of the Western, which Tompkins sees as a rearguard defense against the Christian idealism and feminine influence of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity:

in many Westerns, women are the motive for male activity (it’s women who are being avenged, it’s a woman the men are trying to rescue) at the same time as what women stand for—love and forgiveness in place of vengeance—is precisely what that activity denies. Time after time, the Western hero commits murder, usually multiple murders, in the name of making his town/ranch/mining claim safe for women and children. But the discourse of love and peace which women articulate is never listened to . . . , for it belongs to the Christian worldview the Western is at pains to eradicate (41).

Not only does the Bible-obsessed Custis show mercy, but also Lucy is depicted as no passive motive for male action. Playing the role of her younger sister’s protector, she confronts the Kelsos with a sickle in Fort Benton, courageously invades their Saskatchewan River trading post seeking vengeance, and demands that Custis kill Joel as well as Titus. As a socially isolated woman unaccustomed to meting out violence, Lucy is no idealized, invulnerable, avenging Amazon, but Vanderhaeghe’s portrait of her nonetheless questions “the assumption that it is only men who possess masculinity”

(MacInnes 57) and points to what MacInnes (for one) sees as the radical instability of the concept of gender (25).

While for most of the male denizens of Fort Benton honour and a robust, physically forceful masculinity are synonymous, Custis consistently distinguishes between the two and comes across as virtuous and honourable, while Lucy comes closer to Tompkins' image of the Western's taut, righteous avenger. In *The Hollywood Posse*, one of the key sources for *The Englishman's Boy*, Dianna Serra Carey describes the cowhands' code of honour: "Virtues such as fair play, honor, loyalty and chivalry that have since been reduced to the hackneyed staples of the Western film were to them untarnished moral values" (168). Through Custis and Lucy, whose first-person perspectives provide valuable insight into their complex and usually crossed purposes, Vanderhaeghe reinvests those virtues with meaning, while deconstructing the monolithic, patriarchal masculinity with which they traditionally have been associated.

If Custis serves as chivalric foil to the Gaunt brothers, Jerry serves to put Addington's accomplishments as a hunter and soldier in perspective, at the same time highlighting imperial constructions of military honour. Jerry matches Addington in physical courage and capability but in the heat of conflict also displays a restraint, sound judgement, and respect for others that Addington singularly lacks. Jerry's qualities are showcased most obviously in Vanderhaeghe's stirring portrait of what Alex Johnston dubs "the last great Indian battle," during which the historical Potts led an overwhelming force of Blackfoot against an attacking party of Cree and Assiniboine which had underestimated their numbers (see Johnston, Long 55–8, Dempsey 8–10). The clash demonstrated Potts' shrewd military judgement and courage in battle, as well as consolidating his reputation for having strong medicine. Vanderhaeghe emphasizes, furthermore—especially through the implicit comparison with Addington's murderous swashbuckling and self-aggrandizing, patronizing magnanimity—Jerry's restraint and his respect for his opponents. When the half-Cree, half-Scottish Sutherland brothers are finally killed at the Battle of the Belly after a courageous last stand against overwhelming numbers, Jerry pays tribute to their bravery by giving them an honourable burial. Later, at Fort Edmonton, he displays the same magnanimity in his treatment of Addington, who deserves it far less. Having perceptively diagnosed Addington's malaise—the death wish implicit in his erratic testosterone adventurism—Jerry accedes to Addington's request to find him a grizzly to hunt: "Maybe he is asking Potts

to help him find an honourable way to rid himself of his own feeble body,” to “enter the World of Skeletons like a man, with courage” (299). While Jerry’s cooperation can be read as a well-deserved bit of revenge, the emphasis is clearly on Jerry’s willingness to aid Addington in dying an honourable death by pursuing a creature whose strength and fierceness (like most of what he has come up against in the New World, including Jerry himself) Addington has fatally underestimated.

The wellspring of Addington’s hubris is his belief in the innate superiority of the English gentleman, and similar considerations of race and social status complicate Jerry’s sense of honour. Jerry pays homage to the Sutherlands not simply out of respect for them as warriors, but also out of a sense of identification with them as half-breeds “who, fair enough to pass as white men, chose to give their lives for their Cree brothers” (336). A reverse image of the self-aggrandizing, monstrous Addington, the mixed-race Jerry lives a double life in which, within a myopic Eurocentric perspective, his honour is shrouded: to English eyes he is disreputable (he is mistaken at first by Charles as the stereotypical drunken indigent), but by native people he is held in high esteem.

Vanderhaeghe’s portrait of Jerry’s struggle with this dual existence accords with McClintock’s caution that ambivalence and hybridity are not always cause for celebration (67–8). Jerry’s mixed heritage represents not so much a liminal, consistent in-betweenness but a more complicated, uncomfortable and uneven back-and-forth. Dishonoured by Ayto’s assault, Jerry abandons the search party, stymied in defending his honour because his previous killing of a white man has exacerbated his already subordinate status in white society. As Jerry reflects earlier in the novel, that status is predicated on racist conceptions of sanguinary contamination:

The Nitsi-tapi accept him as one of their own, despite his Scotchman father. The whites will never do the same. The whites are proud of their blood, always boasting that theirs is stronger than the blood of any other people. So how is it that the strong blood doesn’t overcome the weaker? If they believe what they say, why isn’t he a Scotchman? . . . One drop of black blood makes a man a nigger, and one drop of Kanai blood makes Jerry Potts a red nigger. (98)

Vanderhaeghe thus illustrates the difficulty of “doing the honourable thing” when negotiating the two heritages—trying to be true to two peoples in the process of cultural, territorial, and political struggle. Conscious that it may mean turning “his back on one portion of himself” (173), Jerry returns to the search party, primarily out of a sense of obligation that reverses the imperialist presumption of “the white man’s burden”: “To save white men from themselves is the burden Andrew Potts’s blood places on his son” (176).

This brooding over the tension between his sense of honour and his divided heritage is partly what prompts Jerry at the end of the novel to locate his wife and son. Jerry is saddened that his own son will grow up to hate his people, the Kanai, and that Mitchell's "spirit will be divided like his own is, never at rest" (99). When Jerry rescues the three-year-old Mitchell from a vicious dog, the boy takes him for an enemy, and Jerry—in a gesture of compensatory humility—bestows honour on the boy by letting him "count coup" on him and chase him away. Jerry then reconsiders the advantages of a mixed heritage: "perhaps to be shaped by many hands was a fortunate thing, far better than to be shaped by a single hand. A bundle of sticks does not break as easily as one stick. For Mitchell's sake, he prayed his son would become such a bundle" (361). Jerry's willingness to compromise his honour to make amends to his wife and son highlights the difficulty of navigating social conventions of masculine behaviour and personal conceptions of what doing the honourable thing entails. In this instance, though, Jerry's hybridity, his conflicted internal border crossing, aids in making the best of a situation (ultimately the legacy of colonization) complicated by competing attitudes towards race, class, and gender.

Simplifying somewhat the transformation of attitudes towards gender, MacInnes writes in *The End of Masculinity* that "the public evaluation of masculinity has undergone a profound shift. What were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible, to communicate, to empathize, to be soft, supportive or life affirming)" (47). Vanderhaeghe's exploration of masculinity and honour in *The Last Crossing* revitalizes those virtues, without suggesting that those virtues are exclusively masculine or that men are exclusively virtuous. MacInnes argues that, within the context of identity politics, masculinity is often questionably posited as "a form of identity that prioritizes instrumentally aggressive and politically or ecologically aggressive relationships with other human beings and with nature over expressive nurturance or emotional intimacy" (56). Though Vanderhaeghe certainly portrays such aggression—not just through Addington but through Titus Kelso as well—it is on the extreme end of a whole spectrum of male behaviour. Furthermore, Vanderhaeghe, like MacInnes, draws attention to "the importance of social structures which force men and women to act in certain ways which they might not otherwise choose" (MacInnes 57)—not

just in the hierarchical, patriarchal culture of Victorian England but also in the ostensibly more egalitarian West, where that culture repeats itself with a difference.

Guy Vanderhaeghe titled his 1983 collection of stories *The Trouble With Heroes*; the title of *The Last Crossing* could well have been *The Trouble With Honour*. The trouble with honour, as *The Last Crossing* demonstrates, is that “doing the honourable thing” too often requires subordinating a more individual, contingent, and situational sense of what is morally, emotionally or spiritually appropriate to restrictive, distorting social conceptions of propriety, inflected by hierarchical and often imperial assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality. Vanderhaeghe troubles the concept of honour by juxtaposing the ostensibly more civilized, ordered, and genteel conceptions of honour of the Victorian gentleman with the ostensibly more anarchic, uncivilized conceptions of honour on the Western frontier. However, though Vanderhaeghe deconstructs the stereotypes implicit in this dichotomy, particularly through the contrast between the dignity of Jerry and Custis and the corruption of Addington, he does not simply reverse its terms. Rather, underscoring the continuity of certain aspects of the Old World’s social order in the New, Vanderhaeghe highlights the way in which the dominant codes of masculine behaviour and honour in both worlds reinforce uneven and exploitative relations of power—power over women, power over animals, power over other men—instead of empathetic, mutually respectful, and equitable co-existence with others. Vanderhaeghe suggests that traditional conceptions of honour value status over moral, ethical and spiritual integrity and that, consequently, doing the truly “honourable thing” often requires resisting social dictates grounded in rigid assumptions about class, race, and gender. If, as Vanderhaeghe contends, “the historical novel is always about contemporary issues in disguise” (“Making History”), *The Last Crossing* thus makes a significant contribution not just to the burgeoning corpus of Canadian historical fiction but also to the increasing and profound reconceptualization of masculinity and femininity.

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## View from an Office

Selective vision makes the day  
miraculous: my window snares a view of rain

in sheet, in sun, against  
a perfect net of blue.

My days are stacked in yellow piles,  
their moments batched and clipped.

This day's rain is a wall of light beyond  
a beach of wood, a sea of glass

and we who row toward  
a liquid air we cannot reach.

## Sign and Symbol in Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone*

**M**ost reviewers of Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* embrace the novel's apparatus, accepting implicitly the author's claim that she was writing something other than a prolonged beast fable. Catherine Bush, reviewing for *The Globe and Mail*, offers a representative perspective on this tale told from the point of view of elephants: "*The White Bone* is a quest story, and a novel that takes its readers into an alternate world seen through the eyes of an alien intelligence . . . Gowdy has created her own elephant lore, hymns, cosmology" (1). Similarly favourable reviews by Bill Richardson in *Quill and Quire* and Margaret Walters in the *Times Literary Supplement* also identify a quest pattern, and echo Bush's defense of Gowdy's representation of elephants: "We recognize in [the elephants] traits and peccadilloes that are our own, but they are mercifully innocent of anything that smacks of cutesy, Disney-like anthropomorphizing" (Richardson 35). Walters even goes so far as to suggest that the weaknesses of *The White Bone* lie in its occasional attempts at fable, such as when "the matriarchs' squabbles occasionally dwindle into obvious satire on humans behaving badly" (22). Such non-allegorical readings stress Gowdy's zoological scrutiny, contending that the detailing of elephant habits of eating, excreting, travelling, and mating protects the characters from signifying as human. And, as a glance at the novel's acknowledgments shows, Gowdy has indeed done her research, supplementing her extensive reading with a trip to "the Masai Mara so that [she] might see the African elephant in its natural home" (330). Reviewers of *The White Bone* who foreground its description of physical behaviour comprehend the animal characters as animals: even if "the elephants do offer us

a mirror of ourselves, [it is] not a straightforward reflection but the chance to imagine ourselves as elephants rather than elephants as us” (Bush 1).

Another camp of reviewers is unwilling to disregard the novel’s allegorical properties: while Judy Edmond of *The Winnipeg Free Press* notes that “Gowdy has said she did not intend this book to be a parody or social satire along the lines of *Animal Farm* or *Watership Down*,” she argues that “Gowdy’s prose [is] so weighty with metaphor that one wonders whether *The White Bone* is meant to be understood on another level” (3). Sara Boxer of *The New York Times* is more explicit:

*The White Bone* is a big religious put-on, an elephantine *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The white elephant bone at the center of the book is a relic that everyone believes will point to the “Safe Place.” The elephants, fearful that uttering the name of the bone will weaken it, call it “the that-way bone” (sounds like “the Jahweh bone”). The elephants’ trek is a test of their faith in the face of drought and bounty hunters. When Date Bed, a Christ figure, picks up a rearview mirror, it is a lesson in vanity. And those monstrous female names are not so different from Prudence, Piety, Chastity and Discretion. (7)

The issue for Boxer is not that Gowdy’s characters are animals; Boxer is most absorbed by those sections of *The White Bone* that describe the finer points of the elephants’ material/corporeal existence. She is annoyed by Gowdy’s apparent references to “another level” of interpretation. That Gowdy’s elephants act like elephants is, for Boxer, not enough to counteract their role in an allegorical story.

The uncertainty regarding *The White Bone*’s standing as allegory (or otherwise) is only partially a matter of Gowdy’s declarations on the subject. According to medieval narrative tradition, the four levels of interpretation associated with allegory are: the literal level of interpretation, which operates as a textual “veil”; the moral or tropological level, a didactic level that may be read for lessons about individual behaviour; the allegorical level, whose lessons are lessons of belief rather than behaviour and that apply more generally; and, finally, the anagogical level, which points to the universal sign of God. Despite its engagement with metaphysics, the novel’s literal level of interpretation does not appear to function as a textual veil for either a moral or an allegorical level of interpretation. Gowdy is certainly not providing the didactic lessons for individual behaviour that are in keeping with the moral allegory, and even the ecological grounding of *The White Bone*, which is surely engaged with ethics, cannot be read as a coherent doctrine. In other words, while the depiction of the slaughter of animals is ethically and environmentally charged, Gowdy’s literal story does not mandate

for a particular code of human conduct or order of beliefs. Her zoological emphasis praised by reviewers precludes such mandating, since the behaviour of the elephants cannot serve as a code for the behaviour of humans.

Still, *The White Bone's* concern with names and naming, the reading of signs, and the processes of mourning are all associated with the concerns of the allegorical text, in particular the contemporary or postmodern allegorical text. The elephants' naming procedure, which entails the marking of and "surrender to" (21) personality traits, together with the species' reliance on an elaborate system of "links," recalls Deborah Madsen's assertion that "Interpretation is represented as the subject of allegorical narratives" (135). Further, the portrayal of Tall Time's increasing disbelief in the veracity of the "links," his alarm at "the sickening prospect that everything exists for the purpose of pointing to something else" (135), is associated with the so-called "revival" (Smith 105) of allegory initiated by critics of modernism and postmodernism. Paul Smith argues that critical insistence on "the nature of allegory to stress discontinuity and to remark the irremediable distance between representation and idea" (106) has led to the recovery of "allegory as a privileged form of discourse in postmodern artistic practice and theory" (106). Finally, *The White Bone's* ironic genealogy, which describes a family's diminishment instead of growth, seems related to Walter Benjamin's conception of the allegory as ruin, as "in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay" (178).

Even without engaging the moral or allegorical levels of interpretation, *The White Bone* does appear to point to the presence of an anagogue. The thematizing of the spiritual and the metaphysical, which occurs as a supplement to the zoological scrutiny, indicates a level of fixed meaning onto which literal referents may be translated. Thus, the legend of "the Descent," which tells of "a starving bull and cow [that] killed and ate a gazelle and in doing so broke the first and most sacred law 'You shall eat no creature, living or dead'" (7), signals that Gowdy is working explicitly within (and against) a Judeo-Christian framework.<sup>1</sup> In her conception of the elephant visionary, defined in the novel's glossary as "A cow or cow calf who is capable of seeing both the future and the distant present" (xvi), Gowdy presupposes an interpretive activity both transparent and fixed. Mud's role as her family's visionary forces her to come to terms with Torrent's conviction that "nothing want[s] substance until it is envisioned—'Once envisioned,' he said, 'it is obliged to transpire'" (82). And, as Boxer registers, Gowdy's ele-

phant mythology includes figures that represent the universal sign. Boxer notes “Date Bed, a Christ figure,” although for a discussion of the anagogic level of interpretation, it is more fruitful to consider how the figure of “the She” operates as a sign for God’s persona. The tension between the narrative function of “the She” and that of Date Bed marks *The White Bone* as an imperfect or possibly postmodern allegory, in that the force of the symbol undermines the anagogic sign.

In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man rehearses the historical distinction between symbol and allegory: “[the romantic] valorization of symbol at the expense of allegory . . . appeal[s] to the infinity of a totality [that] constitutes the main attraction of the symbol as opposed to allegory, a sign that refers to one specific meaning and thus exhausts its suggestive potentials once it has been deciphered” (188). For Gowdy, a distrust of the reciprocal relationship between sign and meaning associated with traditional allegory initiates a postmodern adjustment. Madsen explains that true allegory should be thought of “as the quest for a transcendental center or origin of meaning—an absolute—in terms of which narrative truth will become legible” (135). The first clue that the sign of “the She” is not such “an absolute” is that its apparent function as such is never veiled: as the narrator asserts, “Ask the big cows to account for any mystery and they will answer, ‘Thus spake the She’” (23). Much of the novel is concerned with contesting blind faith in the ways of “the She” and, by extension, the Judeo-Christian framework. In postmodern fashion, the thematic exploration of how absolute reliance on a rigid faith system is a potential danger to the elephant psyche is also a lesson for the reader about how to interpret the text. Just as the elephants, in particular Mud, must learn to develop a faith that operates outside a religious system, so too must the reader accept the somewhat paradoxical narrative mandate that, although some of the elephant mythology resembles or inverts human myths, to read the novel only in terms of a one-to-one relationship between animals and humans is to succumb to the lure of uncomplicated, though overly static, reading system. Gowdy rejects reading practices associated with traditional allegory and with fixed systems by valorizing a Christ figure not as part of an allegorical pre-text but as part of a symbolic order in which other uncontrolled levels of meaning are suggested.

Date Bed’s symbolic, as opposed to signifying, status comes into focus when her role is compared to that of the white bone itself. As Hail Stones recounts, the legend of the white bone emerged after a period known as “the darkness,” during which, in the face of drought and slaughter, all

seemed lost for the elephant species. The white bone, a newborn elephant's rib bleached by the sun, "radiated toward all living creatures a quality of forgiveness and hope" (43) and could reveal a Safe Place to any elephant who found it and "believe[d] in its power" (44). The white bone belongs to the same diegetical system of myth as "the She," and is vulnerable to the same skeptical understanding. The hackneyed construction of the elephant mythology, with its various inversions and parodies, might suggest *The White Bone* is an allegory for the failure of religion altogether. However, the symbolic value of Date Bed as a Christ figure has a dual function. Gowdy's development of a symbol undermines the authority of a fixed anagogue in the true allegory while the symbol of the sacred defuses the reader's sense of an unqualified attack on faith.

Gowdy's characterization of Tall Time reflects the ruptured allegory, especially as postmodernists have taken up this imperfect form. Smith differentiates between the allegory with which Madsen is concerned and the contemporary allegory in which "a shared referential, metasemantic system such as was available to mediaeval allegorists and their audience is not commonly held by readers . . . so [that] one has to be constructed or invented in the act of reading itself" (107). Craig Owens also focuses on this aspect of the contemporary allegory, arguing that "the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading" (223). Thematizing reading an indeterminate system, or, as de Man would assert, thematizing the failure of such readings (*Allegories* 205), designates the postmodern allegory. Tall Time marks these interests in *The White Bone*, as he is often portrayed in the process of obsessive allegorizing. The narrator explains, "It was a comfort for [Tall Time] to discover that his birth mother had died as a result of a specific circumstance—that, with vigilance, such deaths could be avoided. He became a student of signs, omens and superstitions, or "links," as all three are often referred to" (49). Tall Time's comfort level is greatly disturbed not only by the idea that the links might be infinite (135), but even more so by his increasing sense that the links are meaningless (157). Tall Time eventually cures himself of his allegoresis<sup>2</sup>, his tendency towards excessive interpretation, and decides to follow the directions of Torrent rather than those suggested by the links: "Not once, in thirty years of being guided by the speechless messages of his surroundings did he ever feel this certain. There is a membrane of moonlight on the ground, bats flare up, terrible omens he strides through as if in defiance of a natural law" (299). Although Tall Time's catharsis is a postmodern

deterrent to reading the novel as simply a series of links defining the human world via an allegorical system, Gowdy does not allow the dilemma of interpretation to be easily resolved. In the paragraph following the portrait of Tall Time's newly unencumbered sense of his place in his world, Gowdy describes his ironic death by gunshot, suggesting that the real dread of abandoning an interpretive system founded on omnipotent permanence is that, without one, tragedy may appear meaningless.

Though *The White Bone* is not using Christianity as an unproblematic analogic pre-text, Gowdy is absorbed by Christian symbols of sacredness and salvation, and by such myths as that of the Fall, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Apocalypse. In distinguishing between signs of Christianity and the symbol of Christ, Gowdy's work recalls feminist theologians reformulating the symbol of Christ. In *To Change the World*, Rosemary Ruether notes that, although "Christology has been the doctrine of the Christian tradition that has been most frequently used against women" (45), it is precisely by considering "alternative models of christology" (47) that feminists can reconcile themselves with the Christian church. As Maryanne Stevens points out in her preface to *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*, the essays contained in the volume all discuss such "alternative models," figuring Christ as a symbol for "universality and inclusivity," (3) for "radical stubbornness," (3) in his status as a "stranger; outcast, hungry, weak, and poor," (4) and as a "trickster who dismantles our categories and peels us open to new depths of humanity" (5).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Gowdy's corpus detects the sacred in non-traditional realms, such as those of worldly/bodily experience as opposed to those of myth, and on the margins of "normal" behaviour. Her fashioning of the sacred symbol is part of a trend in Canadian literature and culture surveyed by William Closson James in *Locations of the Sacred*. In his preface, James states that, "even as fiction relocates the sacred from its older abode beyond the earth to some place or other within ordinary experience, so the broader cultural scene provides evidence that the sacred may be found at the boundaries and margins rather than at the centre, at points of crisis and limit rather than in the continuities of the conventional" (ix). James goes on to argue that "The religious meaning of fiction cannot be determined or measured by the degree to which its subject is overtly religious, nor by the extent to which it espouses a view of life congenial to some religious outlook or other" (33). By James' definition of "religiousness," which he asserts is "derive[d] from [a novel's] concern with ultimate questions of meaning, truth and value" (33), Gowdy's work

may be considered religious and, I would argue, Christological<sup>4</sup> as opposed to Christian in that she explores how faith might proceed outside the limits of particular religious practice.

To determine the features of Gowdy's Christology, the way the sign of the white bone differs from the symbolic value attached to Date Bed must be considered. As noted, the first mention of the white bone is made by Hail Stones, who recounts what he knows of it to the She-S family "using the formal diction" (42). Hail Stones frames this almost ceremonial narrative by citing Rancid as his own family's source for the story (41), and concludes by conceding that "We [the She-Ds] never did learn how Rancid came by the legend . . . He died before we could ask. But we did not doubt him" (44). The She-Ss also decide to believe to this version of "the legend" and to take up the quest for the white bone. However, Rancid's counsel that the white bone will "always [surface] within a circle of boulders or termite mounds to the west of whatever hills are in the region" (44) is not the only account circulating around The Domain. Tall Time, who has been told by Torrent to "go to the most barren places and the hills and to look for an extremely large standing feast tree" (142), is "taken aback" by She-Boom's profession that "THE SHE-L'S' AND 'L'S SAID IT WILL BE FOUND NEAR A WINDING RIVERBED NORTHEAST OF A RANGE OF HILLS" (142). The conflicting accounts of the white bone's whereabouts reflect Gowdy's interrogation of blind faith's reliance on an ever-receding truth-source. Torrent explains to Tall Time that "Faith is not trust in the known" (157), and even Torrent's version of the white bone story is marked as third-hand (142).<sup>5</sup>

Early on in *The White Bone*, Gowdy discusses the importance of cultural transmission amongst the elephant community:

the Long Rains Massive Gathering . . . is the great annual celebration to which upwards of forty families journey to feast together and hear the news and sing the endless songs (those exceeding five hundred verses) . . . So much is bound to happen, in fact, that cows arriving at a gathering customarily greet each other by declaring their chief intention (next to eating, of course): "I come to seduce." "I come to gossip." "I come to enlighten" (8).

The transmission of culture through song most powerfully connects the elephant families to one another when they are dispersed throughout The Domain; the songs take up such activity as birthing, "delirium" or oestrus, thanksgiving, and, especially, mourning. In keeping with the superstitious nature of many of the elephants, some songs have developed as "link" songs, which function as mnemonic warnings. After the slaughter at Blood

Swamp, Mud finds comfort in one of Tall Time's link songs: "Except in the cases of berries and specks / Blue blesses calves and the peak-headed sex / Eat a blue stone and for two days and nights/ Those who would harm you are thwarted by rights" (94). The link songs differ from songs of birthing or mourning, and are like the various accounts of the white bone, in that their circulation defers spiritual energy on to material objects. The dubiousness of this deferral is brought into focus in the chapter that describes Date Bed's death, and in which both her attempts to make use of a mnemonic guide to find the She-S-and-S family, and to mobilize the power of the white bone fail. In panic, the elephants mistakenly depend on the value of external, arbitrary, and metonymic signs, for as Tall Time must admit, "the white bone is itself a link" (156). In her characterization of Date Bed, however, Gowdy suggests an alternative, more metaphoric, manner of conceiving the sacred.

Although the white bone makes even Date Bed susceptible to the hazards of superstition<sup>6</sup>, she is initially distinguishable by her interest in logic. Mud thinks that, when the time comes, Date Bed should be given the cow name "She-Studies" (24). The narrator describes Date Bed's unusual curiosity about cow remedies:

Before she learned not to, [Date Bed] would ask the cows why one treatment was chosen over another, why the ingredients deviated from the standard mixture, and the answer was always a variation of "That's what works," which even as a small calf Date Bed heard as a variation of "Thus spake the She." To her frustration nobody, not even the eminent She-Purges, was interested in the logic behind the remedy. (107)

Date Bed's "supreme" interest in logic (107) is identified as troubling for the nurse cows, who feel that to inquire into finer points of a remedy is "to tamper with their power and offend the She" (108). For Date Bed, however, healing is more a matter of resourcefulness and reason than blind faith: she reasons that she can use a fire to cauterize her bullet wound in the absence of the standard warthog urine or hyena dung (108). Date Bed is also the only elephant character in the novel depicted as having an explicit "idea," that of attracting eagle scouts with the Thing (179), as opposed to functioning only according to habit, duty or distress. Date Bed's logic, however, does not keep her from expressing her faith in spiritual energy; directly after healing herself she "murmurs a song of thanksgiving" directed towards the loving-kindness of the She (109–10). Gowdy privileges a belief system whose energy is primarily situated in the individual mind; Date Bed's acknowledgment of the She is an acknowledgment of her own ingenuity.

The scene's literal representation of malady and healing emphasizes an important aspect of the sacred symbol, which will manifest itself as a process of psychic healing in the surviving members of the She-S family. The depiction of Date Bed's logic and her will to heal is associated with another aspect of her character crucial to Gowdy's Christology: Date Bed's facility with unusual forms of communication. Date Bed is a remarkably adept mind talker, able not only to hear the thoughts of other creatures but to converse with them; she is even able to gain information from a cluster of flies, despite the norm that "Mind talkers and insects don't communicate, so there is no point in asking [them for help]" (110). Date Bed's skills are set in relief against the strained discourse that takes place among the rest of her family, whose infighting and petty silences add bitterness to their grief, and against the difficulty Tall Time has communicating with the brusque We-Fs. During their trek toward the Second Safe Place (as it is called by the We-Fs), Tall Time realizes that "it is no use asking Sink Hole where they are going, or even when they will be stopping for the day, such questions invariably being met with an odour of disapproval so powerful it burns the inside of [his] trunk" (289). The two bulls' failure to make contact, culminating in Sink Hole's taking literally Tall Time's petulant order that Sink Hole leave him alone (291), results in their permanent separation and, metaphorically, in Tall Time's death. The capacity for communication is thus granted sacred value as it provides a possible avenue for literal and figurative salvation.

When Mud becomes the family's mind talker, a transformation that conclusively signals Date Bed's death, her initial response is to disregard the sacred value of communication that typified Date Bed's handling of the gift. Mud is not interested in conversing with other species: "What [the giraffes, impalas and oryxes] call themselves [she] doesn't know, she never bothered to ask Date Bed, and not knowing, she can't conceive of addressing them. Besides, why should she?" (309) Mud similarly dismisses her own family's grief, having become freshly obsessed with the search for the white bone and oddly resentful of the time wasted on the search for Date Bed (307). Mud shows her terrible single-mindedness when she promises her newborn to Me-Me, and only after She-Snorts has saved Bolt by killing Me-Me is Mud shaken from this dangerous fixation. Mud's newborn metaphorically resurrects Date Bed, having been born exactly where Date Bed died, and at a moment marked by a bolt of lightning (322). Mud's catharsis allows her finally to grieve Date Bed, "this beloved name a requiem for every loss of her life, from her birth mother to her birth name to Date Bed to the brief, dream-

like loss of herself”(324). The catharsis also reveals to Mud the difference between the Safe Place, which is merely an allegorical sign, and symbolic salvation, which for Mud is love. Once Mud has become “herself” again she is finally able to cultivate her new gift; Mud’s first success at mind talking with another species is the dialogue she has with Date Bed’s beloved mon-gooses, who point out the direction indicated by Date Bed’s throwing of the “that way” bone (326). Mud, however, is no longer consumed with the idea of the Safe Place; rather she “is weak with love”(327) for her daughter.

In contrast to the allegorical sign of the white bone, the sacred symbol does not guide; at most Date Bed offers others a catalyst for self-recognition. The issue of identity is raised in Chapter One, during Mud’s renaming ceremony. As is to be expected, Date Bed ruminates most extensively on how the process of naming is bound up with the issue of identity. With reference to the renaming ceremony, Date Bed states:

“it seems to me that unless they regard you as a future nurse cow, they choose a name that will antagonize you . . . They hope that by provoking you, you’ll eventually prove them wrong. A misguided strategy, in my opinion. More often than not, cows surrender to their names.”(21)

Certainly, the cow names that give reviewer Sara Boxer so much trouble are useful shorthands for the superficial behaviour of such characters as She-Screams or I-Flirt. However, far from confirming a traditional allegory, such overly suggestive names reveal Gowdy’s rejection of allegory’s mandates; the portrayal of She-Screams as domineering, intrusive and very, very loud makes plain the problem of acting according to a static sense of identity, of being controlled by a sign of one’s self. Date Bed’s later reflections about names suggest that this sort of “surrender” serves only to mask one’s true and sacred identity.

As Date Bed approaches her death, her thoughts about identity become more insistent and profound. After realizing that her memory is growing dimmer, she fastidiously works at retrieving the details from out of her shadow memories, believing that each retrieval represents an extension of her life (270). Date Bed’s earlier notion that identity is related to the external sign of a name, whereby in the end “you are the measure of what your cow name has come to signify”(271), is replaced by her “hunch that you are the sum of those incidents only you can testify to, whose existence, without you, would have no earthly acknowledgment”(271). This realization is another crucial feature of Gowdy’s Christology; perhaps more than a healer, the sacred figure is witness to the crises of annihilation that threaten herself and/or those who love her.

In their introduction to *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub specify one of the central features of “eye-witness” accounts:

Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, non-interchangeable and solitary burden . . . To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude. (3)

The assertion that, in the face of trauma, the subject is forced back in on his or herself, is similar to the idea suggested by Date Bed’s “hunch.” The witness is necessarily singular, and his or her identity is specified by that which only he or she has seen. While Date Bed’s role in *The White Bone* is that of the sacred witness, all the surviving characters in the novel are forced to take up the “burden of the witness,” a burden that not only transforms each individual, but also produces an epistemological chasm between them. In response to She-Soothe’s claim that she “knows” Date Bed, She-Snorts states, “You don’t. You can’t, not any longer. None of us are who we were” (306).

She-Snorts’ words reflect the paradox of Gowdy’s concern with individual identity. Gowdy’s plot tracks the regenerating processes of self-recognition. Her work is preoccupied with the celebration of peculiarity, especially the particularity of experience that produces the subject, and unique expressions of love. But her work also investigates such negative aspects of individualism as vanity and the inability to communicate. In *The White Bone*, many of the negative features of individualism are aggravated by those traumatic incidents that isolate the witness. Date Bed’s role is to solve this paradox; as a Christ figure, she assumes the solitary burden of the witness and provides a catalyst for renewal by acknowledging the uniqueness of love. The circumstances of her dying days, however, make it difficult for Date Bed to “transgress” her isolation. Although she bequeaths her ability to mind talk to Mud, as well as many of her species’ songs to the mongooses, Date Bed’s role as a sacred witness to “outrage” (Felman 4) is jeopardized because her dying entails draining her perfect memory and thus a potential rupture of identity.

The preface to *The White Bone* is taken up with the issue of elephant memory and its complex relationship to identity. The narrator points out that “Some [elephants] go so far as to claim that under that thunderhead of flesh and those huge rolling bones they *are* memory” (1) and, later in the narrative, the matriarch of the She-Ds further explicates this claim. She-Demand’s position, however, that elephants *are* memory in so far as they are the “living” memories of the She (83), is displayed as another problem-

atic manifestation of blind faith. After the slaughter at Blood Swamp, Date Bed considers the fate of her species, wondering whether its ordeals might be either a test or a punishment from the She: "And then, recalling She-Demands' final sermon, she thinks, 'We are being remembered,' and this strikes her as a more terrible prospect than the other two because it is unassailable"(104). Date Bed's associations of memory and the force of doom is further complicated by the narrator's assertion that the species is actually "doomed without [memory]. When their memories begin to drain, their bodies go into decline, as if from a slow leakage of blood"(1). This two-sided nature of elephant memory is another complicating feature of Gowdy's representation of the sacred witness. The species is doomed without memory. Like other persecuted groups, who "must *survive* in order to bear witness, and . . . must bear witness in order to affirm . . . survival"(Felman 117), the elephants depend on preserving and regenerating individual and collective memory. For this reason, the species is committed to activities such as mourning their dead, singing the Endless songs, reiterating their lore, and the scrupulous "noticing" of the world around them (1-2).

However, the phenomenon of being remembered, or witnessed, is a "terrible prospect"(104), both because it exposes the persona of the She as entirely and terribly separate, and because it seems to presuppose doom. Throughout the novel, being witnessed is often equated with death. As a visionary, Mud is saddled with various images of slaughter and death, including her vision of the massacre of the She-D family, which precedes the She-S's encounter with the survivors. Equally disturbingly, Mud witnesses the dead body of She-Screams several days before She-Screams falls over the rock ledge; Mud is struck by the "cruelly pathetic" fact that she must now comprehend all of She-Screams' ludicrous behaviour in light of a memory of her death (183). This aspect of memory, for many elephants, makes the act of bearing witness taboo: as She-Snorts scolds Mud, "A death vision is the burden of the visionary alone"(239). Various questions then arise: how is spiritual regeneration possible without the sharing of memory? How is the apocalyptic moment salvaged from the crisis of annihilation? How much of Date Bed's sacredness, her identity, has survived in Mud without the act of bearing witness?

Gowdy's response to these questions entails a return to ruptured allegory, in which all interpretive signs are revealed as necessarily indeterminate. As Date Bed's health worsens, her memories begin to be replaced by what she calls "hallucinations," visions of things she has never witnessed. Date Bed's hallucinations include her sense of "walking in an immense cavern where it

is somehow as bright as midday, and on each side of her, in phenomenally straight rows, stacks of strange fruits . . . glide by”(160); of a “wall, twice as high as she is and three times her width” on which “life unfolds . . . in jerks and flashes as if it were the shifting scene of someone else’s memory”(179); and of “A conical green tree bristling with short thorns and laden in what appear to be sparkling fruits or flowers”(279). Date Bed’s witnessing of the supermarket, the movie screen, and the Christmas tree reflect Gowdy’s brief foray into the explicitly tropological or moral level of interpretation, as human reality is directly juxtaposed with elephant reality. Date Bed considers that, just as such visions may be the “lost memories of a creature from a place unknown,” her own draining memory might “have entered the body of some strange, doomed creature who, like her, is enthralled by the scenes unfolding in its mind”(274). In other words, humanity is facing the same crisis of annihilation as the elephant species and the only way to transform such a crisis is to compare and embrace different realities. Clearly, however, such transformation depends upon a fairly precarious set of circumstances, as even the elephants themselves have difficulties understanding one another. According to Gowdy’s construction of the pitfalls of self-recognition and the generally destructive relationships between species, the salvaging of the apocalyptic moment seems rather unlikely.

Still, beyond Gowdy’s pessimistic view of social behaviour is the sacred symbol that represents love. That the sacred is a compound of suggestions rather than a controlled sign signals Gowdy’s postmodern approach to allegory. Further, the indeterminacy and variousness with which Gowdy imagines love dulls the intensity of her social pessimism and makes room for a renewed faith. In the final scene of *The White Bone*, Mud has developed enough self-awareness to shed her anxiety about belonging to a family compact and, “out of contrition,” to acknowledge the numerous guises of love (327). And while Mud has had a vision of the Safe Place, “in which she recognized nobody,” she chooses not to “speculate”(327) about this falsely remembered sign. Such visions belong to a system of dubious links, blind faith, and the bitterness of fear. Rather, Mud regularly looks behind her to notice the trace of where her family has been, “the dust raised by their passage rolling out as far as the horizon”(327). This witnessing “of passage” is threatened by the apocalyptic crisis, and is recovered by the sacred confirmation of love.

During an interview with Jana Siciliano, Gowdy asserted that she “didn’t want to write a novel . . . designed to shed light on human folly through animal behaviour. Rather than being a social satire, *The White Bone* is an

attempt, however presumptuous, to make a huge imaginative leap” (Interview). The novel elaborates a thematic rejection of a fixed faith system, one in which unique expressions of fear or grief or love are subsumed within a codified and “unassailable”(104) creed. Thus, the sacred renewal of the elephant families may appear to lose its force if considered as a mere sign for a lesson on human behaviour within the similarly fixed scheme of traditional allegory. In ecocritical terms, Gowdy’s avowed and thematized refutation of allegory communicates her frustration with unthinking anthropomorphism, the human practice of viewing everything in terms of itself; she questions human reluctance to place the animal at the centre of the story. Gowdy, however, does not avoid social satire as completely as she hopes to. In the scene describing Date Bed’s “hallucinations” of elements of the human world, Gowdy envisions an ill-fated elephant making the same sort of “imaginative leap” that she is attempting, representing reciprocally Gowdy’s despair for the “strange, doomed creature”(274) of her human self. In such scenes, the novel’s complex explorations of faith, memory, grief and love emerge explicitly as human concerns. *The White Bone*’s attempt at animal-centred literature is its crucial and overriding aim. While such an ecocritical novel is possible, the form seems quite limiting, Gowdy’s own declarations notwithstanding. As an instance of postmodern allegory, which inevitably and ultimately gestures towards the human, *The White Bone* enlarges its aims. The novel explicitly and convincingly solicits the reader to allow the elephants to bear witness, to regard suffering humbly as no less horrific for being alien. More implicit, and to my mind more significant, is the challenge to cultivate reciprocal awareness. Mud’s witnessing of “the dust raised by [her family’s] passage” (327), described in the last scene of the novel, models for Gowdy’s reader the human imperative to examine similarly the consequences of earthly passage, to acknowledge, for example, that “grief” and “faith” and “love” are human terms describing the often violent collisions among consciousness, body, and world. Though a postmodern rupture between human and animal persists, that rupture does not excuse a relativist setting aside of the unintelligible. Rather, attention to mutual unintelligibility, as rendered in *The White Bone*, becomes a site of reciprocity; that we can only know Mud’s “love” as “like-human love” compounds the term as symbolic, unfixed, and still imminent.

#### NOTES

- 1 Gowdy’s manipulation of Judeo-Christian myth chiefly includes her inversion of the stories of Genesis. For example, humans are represented, not as the acme of the natural

- order, but as diminutions of higher creatures (7); the world is almost destroyed, not by a flood, but by drought (43).
- 2 The term “allegoresis” is most commonly associated with medieval literature, referring to the process of interpreting texts allegorically. As J. Stephen Russell notes, “In the Middle Ages, allegory was not a mode of writing; it was the self-conscious recognition of the way we perceive see the world, replace any thing with words or other signs” (xi). Here, I am using the term to specify Tall Time’s propensity to impose meaning onto the objects in his world, to transform everything into a sign.
  - 3 Stevens is here referring to essays by Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, Jacquelyn Grant, and Eleanor McLaughlin.
  - 4 Gerald O’Collins states that the “branch of theology called Christology reflects systematically on the person, being, and doings of Jesus of Nazareth” (1). I am interested in Christology’s focus on identifying the features of the Christ symbol, especially as those features are associated with a particular ideological framework.
  - 5 Torrent explains to Tall Time that even the We-Fs have not seen the white bone directly, but that rather their “ancestors” have (70).
  - 6 Such is the case when Date Bed comes to depend unreasonably on the Thing (a car’s side-mirror that is a fragment of one of the instruments of her species’ destruction).

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## The Village of the Blind (India)

The moon limps, with a twitching white  
cane, over the village of the blind.  
Eyeless hammers fall and find  
by sheer hind-sight.  
A bull-like anvil bellows at their bite.  
Maggots swaying can remind,  
in a dead sheep, of what's behind  
our eyes: a lack of light.  
Unblinking cataracts spread mud  
down the bleary river;  
and an inkwell on the nurse's desk pours  
indelible black on each flower  
in the temple garden's vanishing blur.  
Here, there's no way out. No door.  
The jungle is a tight, hallucinatory verse.

## The Three Tropographies of Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance*

Gary Wolfe's useful work on the iconography of science fiction suggests that, as the science fiction genre has developed, its conventions and stereotypes have taken on the status of icons, with the icon's peculiar ability to move and inspire. According to Wolfe, icons evoke but also transcend the easy pleasures of familiarity and recognition and tap into our deepest beliefs, fears, and desires (16–19). I propose to borrow Wolfe's insight, substituting the term "trope" for "icon," while retaining his emphasis on the emotional and cultural power of abiding images and patterns of action. *A Scientific Romance*,<sup>1</sup> Ronald Wright's prize-winning 1997 novel, draws much of its power from its rich intertextuality and particularly from three sources of generic convention—three interwoven tropographies that compel reader involvement in complex ways.<sup>2</sup> Combining Christian and erotic tropes with those of science fiction, Wright creates a dynamic matrix of images and actions that articulate the longings of his postmodern hero, David Lambert, for connection and meaning.<sup>3</sup> Some of these tropes reflect well-known myths; others are what we might call myths-in-the-making. Examination of these tropic patterns helps to elucidate the particularly elaborate tapestry of generic allusion that gives *A Scientific Romance* much of its expressive resonance, although it by no means exhausts the breadth of reference in a work that ranges from the Bible to Baudrillard.

### Science Fiction

The science fiction tropes Wright employs in *A Scientific Romance* derive quite explicitly from a number of sources, most prominently from the grandfather of time-travel fiction—H.G. Wells.<sup>4</sup> Wright's iconic time

machine is not just a variation on the Wells device. In the novel *A Scientific Romance*, a young Russian scientist, Tatiana / Tania Cherenkova, a student of Nikola Tesla—and Wells' lover—constructed it, and thus it becomes a part of Wells' life in Wright's imaginings. Inspired to build for her beloved what he had imagined, Tania later flees to the future in despair after Wells tires of her. The hero of Wright's novel discovers the time machine after he receives a letter from the grave. Wells entrusted the letter to his solicitor and, with characteristic hubris, asked that it be passed on to a scholar of Wellsiana at the end of the twentieth century. According to the letter, before Tatiana left in the time machine, she installed a failsafe mechanism to assure that the device would reappear at her basement laboratory in the "first moments of the twenty-first century" (29). David Lambert, a young historian of Victorian technology and the letter's skeptical recipient, manages to be on the spot when the time machine materializes. His own motivations for taking the machine into the future, as well as what he finds there, are the subject of the novel.

Wright borrows the sub-title of Wells' work for his own story, as well as the time travel device. According to Paul Fayer, "scientific romance" was the coinage of a mathematician named Charles Howard Hinton, who first used the term in 1884 (256). Wells' *Time Traveller* journeys forward hundreds of thousands of years, from the late-nineteenth century to 802,701 A.D., while Wright's David Lambert travels forward in time just five centuries. Wells' tale comes to the reader through a frame story narrated by Hillyer, a friend of the *Time Traveller* who conveys the Traveller's story and describes the inventor's various attempts to convince a salon of local personages that his time machine works. Wright's work is an epistolary novel, conveyed via letters and journal entries inscribed on computer disks. How the information on the disks becomes a book is never explained in *A Scientific Romance*, but if, as Wright hints, his hero survives his ordeal and is able to go back in time as well as forward, the book's existence is easily explained. The "romance" of *The Time Machine*<sup>5</sup> is clearly that of a wild adventure story, but at least two common senses of the term are at play in Wright's *A Scientific Romance*—a book that is clearly both a quest / adventure narrative and a novel of lost love.

In their different ways, both works debunk the casual human assumption that the march of time means progress. Wright's Lambert initially places his faith in the progress of science. Rootless, solitary, and mired in an uninspiring job, David has recently discovered that the woman he loved in his student days, Anita Langland, has died and that he has been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human form of "mad cow" or BSE, and the

illness that killed her. After making a number of twentieth-century updates to the time machine, David launches himself forward to the year 2500, looking for Tania, a cure for himself, and a way to rewrite his history with Anita. Wells' project requires a more aggressive thrust into the future, since he wants to tackle common assumptions about evolution, suggesting not only that its movement may not always entail progress but also that class divisions in late-Victorian England could result in degeneration of the human species. As Darko Suvin has observed, "the basic device of *The Time Machine* is an opposition of the Time Traveller's visions of the future to the ideal reader's norm of a complacent bourgeois class consciousness with its belief in linear progress" (223). While Wells' novel focuses fairly narrowly on class issues and evolution, with a few asides concerning *fin de siècle* aestheticism, Wright tackles a host of modern ills evident at the end of the twentieth century, including the destructive capacity of science and technology, rampant commercialization, globalization, and the oppression of native peoples by white Europeans.

Time travel in both novels reveals a dystopic future, and both works end indeterminately. In *The Time Machine*, Wells portrays the Time Traveller engaging two races, the Eloi and the Morlocks, that he believes to be strains of debased humanity. Then, having propelled himself "more than thirty million years hence" (93), the Traveller relates the last vision of his journey, that of an uninhabited Earth dying as it nears a dying Sun. "A horror of this great darkness came on me," the Time Traveller reports; "The cold that smote to my marrow, the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me" (*TM* 95). At the novel's end, after three year's absence, the Time Traveller has yet to return from an attempt to go forward in time again to document his findings. When Wright's David Lambert finally discovers a remnant of humanity near Loch Ness in Scotland, it is more recognizably human than the Eloi or Morlocks of 801,702 A.D. However, the Macbeth clan appears at the brink of extinction, unskilled, illiterate, fearful of technology, and practicing a primitive form of Christianity. [The clan's origins story and theology labels greed and the love of technology the besetting sins of those who previously perished from the Earth (*SR* 282-283).] Plagued by genetic and other diseases, the clan appears unable to reproduce sufficient healthy offspring to maintain itself. Although less dark than the Time Traveller's final vision, Lambert's bleak picture of Earth in 2500 holds out little hope for human progress, even in the distant future. As David observes near the end of the book:

The Glen Nessies of the earth may survive, human numbers may eventually rebuild, we may with time and luck climb back to ancient China or Peru. But the ready ores and fossil fuels are gone. Without coal there can be no Industrial

Revolution; without oil no leap from steam to atom. Technology will sit forever at the bottom of a ladder from which the lower rungs are gone. (SR 346)

David's own fate, like that of the Time Traveller, is left unresolved. A *Scientific Romance* closes with David setting the time machine for return to life in the twentieth century—before the time he believes he and Anita contracted their fatal disease. Appropriate for a novel concerned with time and memory, David's reports range back and forth, among past, present, and future time, providing in the disjointed, fragmented style of memory (or the delusions of illness) the narrative of his early life, of his relationships with Bird and Anita, and of his exploration of life in the year 2500.

A *Scientific Romance* participates in a post-World War II tradition of literary fiction that employs some science fiction devices and tropes without fully participating in the genre.<sup>6</sup> Wright samples liberally from established elements of science fiction, but he writes that his desire was to “borrow without being pigeon-holed” as a science fiction writer—one reason for the consciously literary style of the novel with its myriad allusions and literary pastiche. As he has observed,

I went through a science fiction phase in my teens and early twenties but am no longer a fan . . . It's [primarily] the early stuff I like . . . My influences were Victorian and Edwardian “scientific romances” (e.g. Bulter's *Erewhon* and Morris' *News from Nowhere*, as well as Wells) and their twentieth-century descendants—mainly the great social and political satires of Orwell and Huxley, but also Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, John Wyndham's gloomy dystopias, and Kubrick's superb film *Dr. Strangelove* (“Re: SAR”).

The landscape Wright's hero explores in the England of 500 years hence—a steamy jungle thriving where chilly fog used to reign, the detritus of the twentieth century rusting under vines—conveys the vision of “an author who understands what it takes to bring down a civilization” (Weller 34).

For much of the novel, Wright plays on the “last man” tradition in science fiction, drawing from his youthful reading of Shiel's classic *The Purple Cloud*<sup>7</sup> and alluding to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Surveying devastated London, David quickly realizes that his quest for a cure has failed, but since he must wait at least two months for the solar batteries of the time machine to recharge, he decides to use the time to look for its inventor, Tania; puzzle out what has happened prior to 2500; and search for survivors. But Tania is not to be found, except in dreams, and David has only a friendly puma for company during his early explorations. When he discovers in Scotland the dark-skinned people of Glen Nessie herding llamas like sheep, he is not sure how to react. Before he can decide how (or whether) to reveal himself, he is captured and taken to a village, where he is first imprisoned, then

befriended, and finally offered a starring role in the annual Passion play.

Wells' story is a tall tale of the imagination and a polemic—an adventure story that comments on ideas: evolution, socialism, and late-nineteenth-century aestheticism. Characterization is practically nil. The Time Traveller has no name; he is simply the gentleman scientist. “Kingsley Amis argues in *New Maps of Hell* (1961) that [science fiction] must deal in stock figures because it ponders our general condition rather than the intricacies of personality” (Sanders 131). Wells provides a case in point. *A Scientific Romance*, however, is not a science fiction story but a story that borrows from science fiction. Its characterizations have the depth and introspection, the “Inwardness,” as Aldiss terms it, that Wells' and others' scientific romances lack (120).

The iconic time machine is central to Wright's enterprise. With it, he pays homage to Wells and sets his plot spinning, but most importantly, he taps into a powerfully evocative nexus of human longings and fears. Wells' device permits David to flee the mortal threat of his disease, at least temporarily, and to confront the unknown in the shape of the world's future and his own. Because it offers as well the possibility of rewriting the past, Wells' device in Wright's hands becomes the occasion for a profound meditation on memory and regret. Near the end of the novel, David asks,

Why is the echo richer than the source, and time remembered always grief? People come and go, and you hardly notice how they feel, what you feel. Then one day when you least expect it remembrance slips like a blade into the heart: what you did and didn't do, said and didn't say; and suddenly you fall down into a cold and sunken place with only your regrets for company . . . (SR 330–31)

Time travel causes David to contemplate the works of time—and how he has spent his time—with a seriousness he has heretofore avoided. He is able to examine the dark moments of his past from a great distance—the only perspective from which he can bear to look at them. Looking back, he can ponder his painful history—the death of his parents in a car accident on Christmas Eve when he was 11 after he'd wished his father dead, his betrayal of Bird and of their friendship, his loss of Anita—and assess his guilt and responsibility.

Certainly the time machine trope gathers much of its power from the device's abiding presence in the science fiction tradition—or perhaps it is more accurate to observe that its potency has created the tradition. But the machine's special force derives from a number of factors: (1) its position as a meeting point between the known and the unknown (in this case, the present and future); (2) its relation to a “subjunctive” reality based on possibility, on what might be or might have been—the term is Samuel Delaney's (52); and (3) its myriad psychological and cultural evocations,

among them the human attraction to (and fear of) technology and the yearning to transcend time and thereby repair old wrongs and gain immortality (Wolfe 17). Other familiar science fiction tropes—the mutant remnant, the landscape of future-shock, the time loop, the post-apocalyptic search for human survivors, the new dark age—play their parts in the novel's grand scheme, gathering significance beyond their functions in its plot.

The trope of time travel also makes possible Wright's and David's chilling meditation on life in the late twentieth century. As Patrick Parrinder has observed, "Prophetic [science fiction] is a propaganda device which is meaningful only in relation to the discursive present in which it arises" (29). Wright is not trying to predict the future so much as using subjunctive reality to imagine where the world might end up in 500 years if human beings continue to behave as though their actions have no consequences. As David travels through England and Scotland, he pieces together the elements of modern civilization's demise. Global warming, nuclear and chemical pollution, the unintended effects of genetic research, the almost total failure of antibiotics and the spread of incurable disease, unfettered capitalism and globalization—in Wright's imagined future, all have played their part in the dissolution of modern technological and industrial culture. "Civilization's always a pyramid scheme," Prof. Skeffington used to tell his archeology students. "Living beyond your means. The rule of the many by the few. The trick is to keep wringing new loans from nature and your fellow man" (SR 83). As he returns to England and the time machine near the end of the novel, David observes that "One thing seems clear enough: nature didn't clobber us, except in self-defense. There was no *deus ex machina*, no cosmic foot" (SR 327). With coal and fossil fuel stores exhausted and the secrets of science and technology lost to the surviving remnant, humanity seems destined to live in a "Scrap-Iron Age." David imagines "old girders beaten into swords and ploughshares over charcoal fires, stainless steel more precious than gold. Not for a hundred million years will the earth become gravid with new coal and oil, and Lord knows what will have evolved by then" (SR 347).

While the time machine and time travel tropes are the central science fiction elements Wright employs, he uses a number of other science fiction tropes effectively, of which I will mention only three: the search for human survivors, the rejection of science and technology, and the mutant remnant. When David fails to find the time machine's test pilot, Tania, the echoing loneliness of London threatens his sanity, and he becomes determined to discover whether any human beings have survived the apocalypse. Wright crafts this search adeptly, carefully drawing out the suspense and playing on David's and the reader's hopes that some vestige of humanity remains. The

novel is nearly two-thirds over before David discovers the Macbeth tribe. Meanwhile Wright toys with us as we follow David's search. A "brilliantined head" that peers down at him from the ruins of a toll booth ramp turns out to be a sea lion (SR 105). What looks at first like a baby's arm in the puma's lair is revealed as the arm of a monkey (SR 120). A "stout man in a three-piece suit, about twice life-size, lying on his back" turns out to be an upended statue (SR 122). And naked footprints in the dirt are those of a bear (SR 215).

As mentioned previously, the companionship of a one-eared black puma David names Graham somewhat alleviates his loneliness. David and Graham share the fruits of their hunting, and Graham shadows and protects David until his travels take the big cat too far from home. Writing to Anita, David admits how much the cat's presence means to him: "I can talk to you and I can talk to Bird [via his journal]; I can hear myself speak and sign and recite sublime poetry and utter gibberish; but Graham is the only living creature I can touch, and who touches me, in this whole world" (SR 170). When the cat leaves him and returns home, David is desolate. Graham provides friendship, warm-blooded connection in the absence of human society, but the animal also represents the natural connection between man and nature that man's mistreatment of the natural world has virtually destroyed.

Graham is also part of the mutant remnant David finds in this alien landscape. At first surmising that the cat had lost an ear in a fight, David later realizes that he was born without it, one of the many victims of the environmental pollution everywhere evident. Village chieftan Macbeth, whose tiny kingdom survives on the shores of Loch Ness, looks very little like the ancient Scot Shakespeare conjured up but quite like his Moor of Venice blown up to sumo wrestler size.<sup>8</sup> David speculates that Macbeth and his people are either descendants of urban blacks whose skin color protected them from the harsh effects of global warming or, very likely, the product of latter-day genetic experiments with a melanin enhancement called "Black Face," of which David has found documentary evidence. According to the tribal origins story, they are the remnant of human civilization. Their "gospel"—the story of how they survived by asking nothing of God and rejecting technology—owes something to the Old Testament, something to the origins story of *Riddley Walker*, and something to *The Passion Play from the N. Town Manuscript* (the latter two works cited in Wright's acknowledgements). Wright's exploitation of mutant remnant tropography heightens the reader's sense of human-engineered disaster and plays upon natural human fears of deformity and defect. As David learns more about village life, he realizes that almost any sexual pairing is winked at because the tribe is so desperate to replenish itself. The remnant's policy of combating extinc-

tion through any means necessary—polyandry, polygyny, incest—evokes the shiver of taboo.

Wright's allusion to the Scottish Play refers more or less overtly to white British and European imperialism, with a sidelong glance at the fraught history of the emerging British state and the problem of colonialism closer at hand in regard to Scotland and Ireland, the tribe standing for the native, mostly dark-skinned, peoples who have faced white, European exploitation and repression throughout recorded history.<sup>9</sup> Aspects of *A Scientific Romance* that address the depredations of empire will come as no surprise to readers familiar with the author's other work. Wright, who was born in Great Britain but now considers himself more Canadian than British,<sup>10</sup> had been an established, award-winning travel writer for many years before he penned his first novel and had also authored an acclaimed work of revisionist history several years before the publication of *A Scientific Romance*.<sup>11</sup> His non-fiction work, particularly the 1992 book *Stolen Continents: The Americans Through Indian Eyes Since 1492*, offers an indispensable gloss on the ecological, political, and cultural concerns of the novel. Released just prior to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' encounter with the Americas, *Stolen Continents* explores the European incursion from native American perspectives and might almost be considered a companion piece to *A Scientific Romance*—the one looking forward, the other back. *Stolen Continents* looks back 500 years to examine the effects of European invasion on five civilizations—Aztec, Mayan, Inca, Cherokee, and Iroquois—and to recount the cost to the land and its indigenous peoples, and, of course, *A Scientific Romance* casts the reader forward 500 years, as Wright imagines the potentially destructive effects of western civilization on its own lands and people in a not-too-distant future. Besides borrowing the occasional image or character from earlier books—howler monkeys and a black puma from *Time Among the Maya*, for example (57)—Wright creates landscapes in the history and fiction that are disconcertingly similar, describing the ravages of violence and disease, political and cultural disintegration, and ecological disaster. Occasional references in *A Scientific Romance* to the five ancient cultures discussed in *Stolen Continents* contribute to the pleasurable complexity of Wright's fictional terrain. For example, when David meets the leader of the tribe, he observes:

This was it: the fraught meeting of alien kind and white invader, the encounter of worlds. Would he be florid and obsequious like Moctezuma to Cortés: "My lord, you are weary, you are tired"? Or a disdainful and sarcastic Anahuallpa, flinging down the Bible, averting his nose from the smelly barbarians who dared disturb him at his bath? (SR 237)

Both of these scenes, mentioned in passing in *A Scientific Romance*, are treated at greater length and within their richly textured historical and cultural contexts in *Stolen Continents*.

### Christianity

Although science fiction tropes are clearly central to the novel's design, the time machine and other science fiction elements gradually cede prominence to Christian tropes in the last third of the book. Here Wright's bold use of communion and crucifixion<sup>12</sup> creates a rich nexus of horror, genuine sacrifice, love, and skepticism in scenes simultaneously true to David's rejection of Christianity and redolent of his desire for love and transcendence. David Lambert's quarrel with Christianity began at age 11 with his parents' untimely death on Christmas Eve. He writes, "I remember telling Uncle Phil I couldn't believe in a god who'd killed my mother and father and dumped me in the hands of therapists" (SR 150). That his parents' death also dumps him quite literally into the hands of a pederast priest—the same Uncle Phil, who serves as David's guardian for six years—does not do much to advance God's cause either. So David is no believer. Yet, at the ruins of Christopher Wren's London temple on Christmas Day 2500, David acknowledges a desire to believe that "God so loved the world"<sup>13</sup> and observes in his missive to Anita that "people like us . . . are too clever by half: too smart to kneel; not smart enough to shape a credible alternative" (SR 150). Lambert's journey into the future confirms his cynicism—among other things, he finds a brochure advertising a biorama owned by "Vatican Disney"<sup>14</sup>—but he retains a vague uneasiness about taking communion with Macbeth's tribe as an unbeliever. (Their chalice is a Waterford crystal martini glass; the sacramental wine an old malt!) Even after his near-death participation in primitive Christian ritual, David's last jottings in his journal suggest that creation is the last prerogative of the something or someone David still calls God (SR 349). Wright's use of Christian ritual and trope reaches its apogee in a horrifying reenactment of the Passion with David starring as Christ—Macbeth and company filling secondary roles in the annual rite. David's first name recalls the Old Testament House of David from which the Messiah comes, and his last name, Lambert, the sacrificial lamb, the Christ of the cross; his mother's name was Mary.<sup>15</sup> As the annual Passion Play unfolds, David is dismayed to discover with what relish the assembled mob scourges and abuses him on his own *via dolorosa* and stunned when his friend Hob<sup>16</sup> apologetically drives a six-inch nail into his palm. As an outsider, a "pairson of nae colour," David had initially been treated with fear and suspicion, but his developing relationship with Macbeth, the tribal leader, had led him to believe he was

safe. Macbeth had even seemed to take in stride David's reluctant admission that he has come from the past—the source, according to the tribal origin story, of technology and, hence, destruction—and to have accepted David's pledge that no others would follow him. But Macbeth's wife demands David's sacrifice, and Macbeth appears to agree.

Wright's use of crucifixion tropography is masterly. Pale and blonde and 33 years old, David "looks like Jesus" (SR 228) to the village girl Maile—the image of Jesus still preserved in a nearly indestructible plastic dashboard figurine. A representative of the Gentiles—in tribal lore the "greedy and ambitious people" whose materialism and selfishness despoiled the earth—David must suffer for the sins of his age. A scholar of nineteenth-century technology and curator of the Museum of Motion, he is the scapegoat for capitalist exploitation of the natural world, and, as the only surviving white man, European exploitation of native peoples. In personal terms, David must die to his old self—the self so mired in grief and regret that he has become isolated from others and lost the power to act. The aftermath of David's crucifixion is painful physical recovery and a type of spiritual rebirth, his suffering on the cross causing him to recognize the extent to which he has lived as one of the walking dead. Tellingly, he remembers hearing the news of his parents' accident at 11 and not being certain whether they had died, or he had.

The sensation of having escaped and lived on becomes a solipsism, a trick of evaporating consciousness or, if you like, an anodyne from a loving God to spare you the blow of your extinction. And it follows that one may never know when one has died, may go on living an echo, like a player performing to the darkness of an empty hall he thinks is a full house. And the ever-running play you write and act is your eternity. (SR 325)

The passage is both a meditation on the nature of consciousness and existence (how do we know that we exist?) and David's acknowledgement of how little of his life he has truly lived. Ironically, it is a trick of memory—a misremembering and distortion of the gospel story on the part of the Macbeth tribe—that affords David his chance for realization and renewal.

## **Eros**

As earlier noted, *A Scientific Romance* is both a science fiction adventure and a love story. The time machine takes David to 2500, but Eros propels him. He goes in search of a cure for his illness but also to find the basis for a healing return to past romance. The erotic tropography of David's affair with Anita Langland—passion consummated after a near-death experience, the betrayal of a friend and rival, blood sacrifice—is mirrored darkly in the final section of the novel as David's dreams and memories recall his lost love.

Darko Suvin has observed that the message of true science fiction is that “man’s destiny is man” (65). Suvin makes the statement in an article positing that science fiction has no room for metaphysics, but his statement can be applied to David’s search for meaning as well. David’s desire to believe in something beyond himself finds its focus in Anita—in human, not divine love—what Robert Polhemus has termed “erotic faith” (1). Polhemus observes,

Because doubt about the value of life has been a human constant, historically people have always needed some kind of faith. And with the spread of secularism since the eighteenth century, erotic faith, diverse and informal though it may be, has given to some a center and sometimes a solace that were traditionally offered by organized religion and God. By love we can change the situation—that sentiment moves people: love relationships have the highest priority in the real lives of millions as they have had for innumerable characters in fiction. (SR 1)

The details of David’s and Anita’s love affair come to us in brief, disjointed fragments of memory as David records his thoughts, but as the tropes of eros, of love, combine with those of Christianity and science fiction, they gather power and shape the novel’s response to the vision of loss it portrays.

The love affair begins with the familiar trope of romantic betrayal. Anita is Bird’s girl, and Bird and Anita are David’s friends. All are outsiders, orphans of a sort, and only children. David’s parents are dead. Anita’s parents are far away in the West Indies and have little to do with their daughter. Bird has a mum, but never knew his dad, and as a “Cockney in Classics” at Cambridge, is a rare bird indeed.

Many of the names Wright chooses for his characters are Dickensian in their allusiveness. As earlier noted, David is a Christ figure, and Wright plays with his first and last names. David’s love interest, Anita Langland, claims to be related to the English poet William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, the earliest known example of English alliterative verse. Anita quotes from Langland’s poetry, and lines from *Piers Plowman* appear on her gravestone. As a child of elderly colonials, her character summons up ghosts of Olde England, of empire and glory days past.

Tania, the architect of the time machine, is both Anita’s antithesis—the woman scorned—and her symbolic double, a relationship pointed up by the fact that the women’s names are anagrams for each other, and both have red hair. David is always seeking and just missing Tania—in the time machine, in his dreams—just as he is always reaching and searching for Anita, failing to understand her when she is with him or to find her after she has gone.

Bird’s real name is Charles Gordon Parker, an allusion to the famous Charlie “Bird” Parker—alto saxophonist, composer, and co-founder (with Dizzy Gillespie) of *bebop*—and also to Charles George Gordon, Governor

General of the Sudan from 1877 to 1880, sometimes called “Chinese Gordon” and “Gordon Pasha” because of his service to the far-flung British empire. The name, then, reflects Bird’s mixed heritage in much the way some African-American slave names combine the names of slave and owner and oppressor.

David does not set out to betray Bird. In fact, his friendship with both Anita and Bird appears almost familial. However, when the deed is done, it does not improve our opinion of David to remember that Bird had confided in him. “He talked a lot about you in those days,” David recalls in writing to Anita, “was terrified he’d lose you, couldn’t imagine what you saw in him . . .” (SR 131). The trope of betrayal adds drama to the story and complexity to David’s otherwise somewhat blandly likeable character. It also provokes a *frisson* of discomfort regarding David’s values, and, almost simultaneously, pity for Bird and sympathy with David’s helpless passion.

The betrayal occurs in the context of another erotic trope: passion stimulated by a near-death experience. Like lovers in wartime, David and Anita fall into each other’s arms after very nearly perishing in a sudden sandstorm while on a dig in Egypt, the ancient combustion of love and death defeating all their defenses in an instant. It seems appropriate, then, that after Anita abandons David, he goes searching for her in that same death-obsessed desert country. It is likewise appropriate that he cannot find her again except in the context of death, when he reads her obituary ten years later.

What to do with a man in love with a dead woman—with a man whose search for meaning requires the resurrection of one who is lost? Ronald Wright suggests an answer, and he reveals it in David’s dream on the rood. David records two visions from his pain-wracked hours on the cross, as he drifts in and out of consciousness: in the first, he is back in Aswan, with Anita; in the second, he is reliving a memory from his last undergraduate year at Oxford—a champagne breakfast after a dance he and Anita attended together. In the second scene, betrayal and blood sacrifice collide as Bird, enraged at the discovery that David and Anita are lovers, crashes the party and throws a fire-axe at David’s head. Anita averts disaster by flinging out her arm, deflecting the blade but severing an artery in the process. David later wonders if the blood transfusion she received after her injury was the cause of her fatal illness—“The blood that killed you; the blood you spilt for me” (SR 318)—Wright’s imagery skilfully connecting both Anita and David to the crucified Christ, substituting human sacrifice for divine, and combining erotic tropes and Christian.

The two visions—David’s dream of Aswan while on the cross and his memory of Bird’s attack—open the fourth section of the novel, ominously

entitled “Tithonus.” By the end of the section, David has returned to the time machine, reactivated it, and set it for some time in the 1980s, before he and Anita parted. The last pages of the novel record his determination to attempt a return to his own past and conclude with the opening lines of Tennyson’s elegiac poem. The passage closes with Tithonus’ stark pronouncement: “Me only cruel immortality / Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms, / Here at the quiet limit of the world.” (SR 350). Things do not look good for David or Anita. And yet, taken fully into account, the first of David’s two visions supplies a guardedly optimistic gloss on Tithonus’ monologue. That vision pictures David and Anita reunited at Aswan, almost two years after she left him, bantering playfully. “Look at yourself,” David teases. “That pipe for a start. People are giggling. Haven’t you noticed? Even the staff.” “*They ought to be used to eccentric archaeologists in Egypt by now,*” Anita replies, “*we’ve been coming here for two hundred years.*”<sup>17</sup> “Some longer than that,” David responds; “until today I was older than you could possibly believe” (SR 316–17).

Embedded in this first vision is a glimpse of David’s fate—the result of his attempt to return to the past and “live again” with Anita. In the vision, David *has* made it back but has not yet revealed to Anita where he has been or what their future might be. At the end of the novel, as David prepares to set off in the time machine back to the late twentieth century,<sup>18</sup> he wonders, “Will it be as I dreamed on the Rood: an earthly paradise of bad wine and good company beside the Nile? Was that a vision of the future (or more precisely an amended past)?” (SR 348–49). Ending the novel as he does, Wright leaves open the possibility that it is so, but he also does a bit more than that. In David’s vision on the cross, Anita calls him “Dave.” Much earlier in the novel, David recalls receiving just two postcards in response to his many letters to Anita over the years:

I sent letters to Luxor, to the Dakhla Oasis, to Heliopolis, to Aswan. Two postcards came. The first wounding, unworthy of her (though clever in a puerile way): a sunny Levantine beach, Israeli stamp, and one line: *Topless in Gaza, on the pill, with Dave*. Unsigned. I prefer to think ‘Dave’ sent this, whoever *he* was. The second I believe was genuine Anita: the unfinished obelisk at Aswan, the largest stone ever attempted by the Egyptians, the one that was their match, cracked and prostrate in its quarried womb and tomb. And on the back, from the Book of the Dead, three words of Aten—*I am Yesterday*—in that green ink she liked. (SR 63)

The postcards make sense, of course, if David Lambert made it back, if he is the “Dave” to whom the message refers—writing to some version of himself in an alternate time-continuum, Anita on the pill to avoid sacrificing a child to the future that David has already seen. In this reading, David has a science

fiction version of a mystic vision. In his own dream while on the rood, the tropes of science fiction, Christianity, and love come together, producing a powerful magic and the intimation that, despite all the obstacles before him, David made it back.

However bleak the novel's vision of the future, the conclusion offers the reader restrained wish-fulfillment: the pleasure of imagining David's harrowing quest rewarded in reunion with his one, true love—a vision of David and Anita clinging together at the “quiet limit of the world.”<sup>19</sup> If David does not quite defeat death, he seems to have assayed a temporary end-run around it. And yet the power of the novel—what hangs in the mind long after its pages are closed—arises less from its semi-happily-ever-after ending or even its powerful landscape of future shock than from the abiding human desires its tropes evoke. When we first meet him, David Lambert is a man adrift in regret, a man without deep human connections or purpose. Using Christian, erotic, and science fiction tropography, Wright fashions a tale in which David's rescue from regret becomes our reminder of it. In Wright's hands, Wells' time machine becomes the embodiment of the human desire to do what in a real world without time machines cannot be done: to go back, to correct mistakes, to avoid past sins, to recover losses, to rewrite history in favour of love and purpose and meaning.

Wright acknowledges a major debt to the nineteenth-century science fiction he read as a young man—Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*, and Richard Jefferies' *After London* and *The Great Snow*—and, as previously noted, to polemicists such as William Morris and George Orwell. Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* is also an obvious and acknowledged influence. His novel, in turn, appears to have inspired some aspects of Margaret Atwood's latest work. Atwood, who has long sampled from the science fiction tradition in penning literary novels, appears to tip her hat to *A Scientific Romance* in her 2003 novel, *Oryx and Crake*,<sup>20</sup> another vision of future dystopia, this one the inadvertent result of extreme genetic manipulation meant to birth a paradise. Both Wright's and Atwood's novels focus to some degree on genetic engineering run amok, a common enough element in contemporary dystopian fiction, but Atwood echoes several aspects of Wright's vision that appear more directly inspired. One is David's belief that the earth of 2500 cannot recover from its new dark age because humanity has not only lost the technological skills of an earlier time, but the raw resources necessary to birth another iron age are also depleted and largely inaccessible (*SR* 346–347). Atwood's genius, Crake, makes virtually the same prediction (*OC* 222). Another reverberation is the religious dogma that Atwood's protagonist, Snowman, fabricates to explain his presence to the

naive beings Crake created (OC 346–353) and which is reminiscent of the origins story that Wright’s Macbeth clan uses to explain its survival (SR 281–283). Most notably, Atwood’s brief allusion to *Macbeth*, a work her protagonist Snowman has come to know through watching a “self-styled installation artist” named Anna K. perform via the web (OC 84), is a nod to Wright’s more extensive use of the Scottish Play in the next to last section of *A Scientific Romance*.

While Wright’s book borrows from the futurist fiction of the past, his elegaic tone brings to mind contemporary British writers Graham Swift and Ian McEwan, and yet it has as well something of the nostalgic, lyrical grace one finds in the prose of some American Southern writers—Willie Morris, Eudora Welty, William Styron—and in parts of Faulkner. The first lines from Tennyson’s “Tithonus,” capture the mood and the facility for nineteenth-century quotation that enriches his work: “The woods decay, the woods decay and fall / The vapours weep their burthen to the ground / Man comes and tills the soil and lies beneath, / And after many a summer dies the swan” (350).

And yet, unlike Tithonus’ gorgeous lament, *A Scientific Romance* is not unrelievedly dark. There is hope, if not for a brighter dawn, at least for a recovered and rewoven past. Matthew Arnold’s entreaty at the close of “Dover Beach” is surely the more appropriate poetic refrain for the vision of return toward which the novel gestures: “Ah love, let us be true to one another / For the world which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new / Has really neither help nor hope / Nor light nor certitude / Nor help for pain . . .” (lines 29–34). Wright leaves us with a haunting vision of one man clinging to love, a single survivor of the late-twentieth century reaching out for human connection as the only source of comfort in a world bereft of faith in God or the ingenuity of man. In this final vision, the tropes of Christianity, science fiction, and romance come together—God and science abandoned, while love abides.

## NOTES

- 1 Future references will be abbreviated SR.
- 2 In his masterly volume, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*, Damien Broderick joins Samuel Delaney in rejecting an iconographic (or tropographic) approach to science fiction criticism (154). While I agree that a purely iconographic (or tropographic) approach to science fiction must be reductive, Wright’s agile use of multiple tropic patterns in *A Scientific Romance*—which the author considers science-fiction influenced, not pure science fiction—is sufficiently intricate to preclude oversimplification on the part of writer or critic.

- 3 For reviews of *A Scientific Romance*, including a number that attest to the novel's haunting qualities, see Vernon, Weller, Charles, Hopkinson, Schellenberg, Miller, and Hutchings.
- 4 Harry M. Geduld notes that Wells was not, however, the inventor of time travel. Wells' work was certainly the most influential of all time travel books, but earlier examples include L.S. Mercier's *L'An Deux Mille Quatre Cent Quarante* (1771) and Johan Herman Wessel's *Anno 7603* (1781). Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin observe that Wells' contribution was to create time travel by mechanical means, introducing the elements of technology and science and thereby changing the future of the scientific romance (19).
- 5 Future references will be abbreviated *TM*.
- 6 The work of Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing come to mind. Atwood has noted, for example, that her most recent novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), "is not science fiction. It is fact within fiction. Science fiction is when you have rockets and chemicals. Speculative fiction is when you have all the materials to actually do it. We've taken a path that is already visible to us" ("Life after Man").
- 7 One of several sources he acknowledges in the book (*SR* 351–352).
- 8 Wright has noted that the "personal appearance of my Macbeth was inspired by Idi Amin" ("Re: ASR").
- 9 According to David Norbrook, a number of Shakespeare's contemporaries noted the radicalism of the text (80). Alan Sinfield's "*Macbeth*: history, ideology and intellectuals" offers a transgressive reading of the play suggesting that it can be read as justification for rebellion against tyranny.
- 10 When I asked about his identification with Canada, Wright reported, "I've lived in Canada for more than half my life and have been a citizen most of that time. My mother is English through and through, but my father was from British Columbia, though his family moved back to England when he was about ten. So I'm truly half and half, and am probably more Canadian now than British. The England I belong to no longer exists, destroyed by time and Margaret Thatcher. It was partly this sense of familiarity yet detachment that made Britain an ideal setting for *A Scientific Romance*" ("Re: ASR").
- 11 Wright, who holds a BA and an MA from Cambridge in archeology, is the author of four non-fiction travel books that deal with the clash of European and native cultures: *Cut Stones and Crossroads: A Journey in the Two Worlds of Peru* (1984); *On Fiji Islands* (1986); *Time Among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico* (1989); and *Home and Away* (1993)—a travel memoir. His second novel, *Henderson's Spear*, is a multigenerational story that also treats themes of love, memory, history, and connection but in a more purely realistic way than *A Scientific Romance*.
- 12 Science fiction and speculative fiction writers have long employed these Christian tropes creatively. See, for example, Jorge Luis Borges, "The Gospel According to Mark" and Harry Harrison, "An Alien Agony."
- 13 John 3:16 (KJV).
- 14 The influence of Baudrillard is evident throughout the novel, not only in a passing reference to his "obscene ecstasy" (*SR* 86), but also in this mention of Vatican Disney—see his "Disneyworld Company," written shortly after the opening of Euro Disney in France—and in regard to David's desire to reshape his past—see "Reversion of History."
- 15 Wright plays a number of similar games with naming in the novel, which I discuss in the next sections of the essay. (Even the name of the doctor who treats Anita, and later David, "Dorothy Six," alludes to a labour de-industrialization movement.)
- 16 In keeping with Wright's penchant for allusion and wordplay, Hob for Hobbesian? Elsewhere David describes the lives of the tribe as "nasty, British, and likely short" (*SR* 146).
- 17 In the novel, when David recalls conversations with Anita, her words are italicized and his are not. The words from Anita's postcard are also italicized.

- 18 In his classic article, "The Time Travel Story and Related Matters of SF Structuring," Stanislaw Lem addresses the problem of the time loop and going backwards in time.
- 19 Perhaps inspiration for the lover's reunion in Aswan may be traced to a trip to Egypt Wright took with his wife, Janice Boddy, (Wright, *Home and Away* 86–95).

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# Eagles

A leaf wheels past, drawn by the invisible  
horses. Once I saw a woman with a gleaming  
head, younger than she'd ever been. There,  
two eagles near the beach: white ruffs, yellow  
eyes. One launches itself into air, then  
the other. Weight, held aloft. Wind tufts  
racing water, feathers air. Now a wave slides  
away, leaving a few rocks, starkly, on pocked sand.  
Whatever you were going to say—  
say it.

It's not tenderness coming towards us,  
covering stones with white cloths, pulling  
them away with a flourish. Quickly.  
Prongs of silver sharpen cloud, the large eagle  
swoops down to the eaglet, teaching it  
to glide. Begin.

## “Mystory” in Allison Muri’s *the hystery of the broken fether*

Iv told my story, what I ment to tel, the histry of Sams ranch is in here somewheres, and I told about the mystory of his death. Which wasn’t so mystrious after al. —*the hystery of the broken fether*, 95

In Allison Muri’s first novel, *the hystery of the broken fether*, 94-year-old narrator Indigo de Plume recalls the murder mystery of horse wrangler Samuel Coldridge through complex coding strategies while revealing her own secret history in a fictive autobiographical narrative. Far from a conventional mystery or detective story, *the hystery of the broken fether* eludes genre definition and invokes myriad intertexts in a challenging yet playful autobiographical “hystery/mystory.” *the hystery of the broken fether* is written as Indigo de Plume’s journal, to be handed down to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren; in it Indigo reveals, among memories and digressions, that she is the murderer of Sam Coldridge.

Upon first glance, the novel is an editorial nightmare: abominations of spelling, grammar and syntax litter the text, rendering it almost incomprehensible for an impatient reader. This form of writing, termed “illiterature” by one critic (Jones 29), enables Muri to capture the rhythms and errors of the writing style of a barely literate woman while creating intriguing and intelligent word play that can direct the reader to clues in solving the murder mystery. Reviewers have criticized Muri’s work harshly, commenting that “some experiments shouldn’t be let out of the laboratory and this is one of them” (Van Luven 29). Although some critics maintain that “the misspelling is distracting” (Broughton), or “has the effect of demeaning the narrator by drawing attention to, and even mocking, her ignorance” (Jones 30), Muri succeeds by making her words perform doubly. Muri does not use spelling errors to mock the intelligence of an uneducated Prairie woman or simply to mimic the sounds of dialect; the “errors” enable Muri to work the language harder, to demand doubleness from her text, and to provoke active

detective work in her readers if they are to solve the spiraling mysteries. Rigorous reading leads not only to the detection of Sam Coldridge's murderer in *the hysteria of the broken fether*, but to a re-evaluation of the limits of traditional genres and orthography for the writing of oral storytelling.

In her circular autobiographical storytelling, Muri resists traditional narrative structures. She self-consciously and irreverently re-negotiates conventions through a parody of genres and intertexts. Linear time lines are discarded in favour of an intricately helical narrative in which Muri appropriates stories from Greek mythology, the Old Testament, and elements from literary theories, all the while borrowing from native storytelling. The detective genre, in particular, is examined; Muri invites her readers to *detect* various guises, connections, and paralinguistic codes that elaborate women's experiences and the traditional boundaries of the genre. Contrary to the pattern of most detective stories, the discovery of the killer is not the penultimate moment in this novel; instead culminating in a single climax, the everyday life of the protagonist and her adult life after the murder unfold as if circling several peaks.

The most significant mystery in the novel lies in the relation between the narrator, Indigo de Plume, and young Iphigenea Plumay, who was raped by Sam Coldridge. The connection between the two women is concealed in the misspelled recollections of Indigo's journal, but one may uncover it through careful reading. Indigo describes the life of Iphigenea Plumay in the third person, but she also suggests that her own life story can be broken up as the lives of three separate people: "So it was like I got three seprate lifes, three difrent storys. I was one person befor I got married, then I lost that person al that time I had a famely. Than I was an other one after they was gone, I was a new self, that's the one I am now" (24). A reader is left to wonder how many mysteries and histories are linked to the broken fether ranch where Sam Coldridge was killed. If we are instructed by Indigo to think about her stories "backwards and forwords" (32) and, and if stories unpeel in layers like onions (31–2), what connection does the narrator have to Iphigenea in the story? How was Indigo de Plume present to witness the details of Iphigenea's rape and the murder of Sam Coldridge? I almost shut the back cover after my first reading before I thought, what *iph* rather, what if, Indigo and Iphigenea are actually the same person?

When a reader begins to suspect that Iphigenea Plumay has adopted the "nom de plume" Indigo de Plume, it becomes even more satisfying to search for clues linking one woman to the other than to solve the murder mystery. Muri generates suspense by indefinitely deferring the "a-ha!" moment where a reader can point to Indigo's connection to Iphigenea. No

definitive truth exists, but hints and clues about their single identity abound. One of the clearest hints that Iphiginea and Indigo are one and the same person is Indigo's declaration, even though most of the story focuses on Iphiginea: "seems almost like you got to say once and foral, This is my story, Im the main one in it, its all about me" (49). Here, the narrator reveals tacitly that she is the main character in each of the narratives: she is the girl who was raped, the harried mother, and the elderly woman. Indigo separates the different phases of her life so she can leave behind the girl who was raped by Sam Coldridge.<sup>1</sup> Indigo distances herself from her deepest trauma as she obscurely confesses to murder. Muri's ambiguous language requires the reader actively to piece together the mystery of the narrator's identity. Indigo's detached perspective demonstrates how severely rape and violence have fractured the character's sense of a cohesive or unitary subjectivity.

Indigo de Plume takes her new name from the indigo crow who flies so freely (48). She comments that the young Iphiginea took a long time before "she becum like her crow" (50). The crow and the colour indigo resonate within a larger context of symbolic and storytelling Native traditions that appear in the novel. The crow is recognized within many Native cultures in North America as an incarnation of the Trickster or Transformer figure who, as Penny Petrone explains in *Native Literature in Canada*, uses guises, deceptions, and guidance to lead people to moments of greater clarity and insight about their lives.<sup>2</sup> The colour indigo, particularly in Canadian First Nations and Australian Aboriginal cultures, is the sixth colour of the rainbow and is often associated with the ability to read cultural and spiritual messages from the Spirit World.<sup>3</sup> Indigo represents the night-time sky, spiritual "seeing," and the skills to interpret the dream time with clarity.<sup>4</sup> When Iphiginea re-names herself Indigo, she finds a clarity about her own life that took years to achieve. As a young woman, Indigo learns about her totem animal, the crow, from her Métis husband Michel and through Michel's grandmother's parables. Indigo finds peace and guidance from a variety of stories about the crow which pose questions rather than supply answers. In *How Should I Read This?* Helen Hoy studies some ways in which native writers including Jeanette Armstrong and Lee Maracle use oratory and storytelling. Armstrong and Maracle suggest that any number of perspectives can be drawn out by the listener and no fixed meaning is designed specifically to be taken from the story (Hoy 196). Armstrong describes her own use of this storytelling mode as "raising questions to make things clearer" (qtd. in Hoy 196 and "What" 16). In her novel, *Ravensong*, Maracle suggests that patient and intuitive readers and listeners of Native storytelling will "get the answer when it [is] time" (qtd. in Hoy 196; Maracle 16, 49).<sup>5</sup> Muri positions Indigo

both within and outside native culture; Indigo is not native by birth but she finds a way to belong to a culture that grants her some solace and provides her with the structures to heal. As readers of the novels from a variety of backgrounds, we are encouraged severally to involve ourselves in similar acts of interpretation and engagement with the story, with aspects of native cultures, and with the ways in which we listen and learn. At age 94, Indigo gathers the various strands of her story and aspects of her identity in order to tell her grandchildren a fuller version of her “hystery” and “mystory.” As Indigo adopts the last name “de Plume,” translated as both “pen” and “feather,” she takes on a name which announces her blended heritage. Indigo de Plume releases herself from the connection to the “broken fether ranch” by placing a whole, unbroken feather in her name.

### **Feminist Coding Strategies**

Indigo uses feminist coding strategies in her journal so that she may pass on her life experience to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren without an incriminating confession. In “The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature,” Joan Radner and Susan S. Lanser define coding in literature as “the adoption of a system of signals that protect the creator from the dangerous consequences of directly stating particular messages” (414). Typically the writing of women and other oppressed groups, argue Radner and Lanser, includes “covert expressions of ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes that the dominant culture—and perhaps even the oppressed group itself—would find disturbing or threatening if expressed in more overt forms” (414). *the hystery of the broken fether* can be seen among a multitude of novels that incorporate feminist strategies of narrative coding. Radner and Lanser examine six primary strategies of coding found in texts written by women: appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and claims of incompetence (412). Each of Radner’s and Lanser’s strategies of coding can be deciphered in Muri’s novel and each leads to the reader’s discovery of Indigo’s secret “hystery.”

The first strategy of coding—appropriation—involves the use and adaptation of dominant forms or genres normally associated with male culture. By appropriating various intertexts, such as detective novels, stories from Greek mythology, and the Bible, Muri recasts traditionally patriarchal narratives, links herself with the traditional authority of her intertexts, and thus reinstates her narrator, Indigo, as the questioning authoritarian. Muri’s appropriation of intertexts undermines, rather than supports, notions of the author’s absolute knowledge and authority over the story. Indigo constantly questions her own capabilities as a storyteller. Juxtaposition is the second

coding strategy described by Radner and Lanser. Sometimes context or form can affect how an insight will be interpreted. In *the hysteria of the broken fether*, Muri has Indigo, who is without formal education and barely capable of spelling, express playfully perceptive insights on patriarchy in literature. Indigo recalls her children and grandchildren studying the “littery cannon” (39). She writes, “I don’t know what that is exacly but al it means is they studyd grate riters like first Shakedspere and Milting. then they also studyd what was Geek clasics. . . . And of corse they lernt the Old Testesment” (39). In her misspellings, Indigo strips authority from the literary canon by introducing phallic metaphors such as a cannon, a spear, Biblical Testes, and by referring to the heroes of mythology as geeks. The integration of classic literary knowledge in a misspelled journal encourages readers to examine their prejudices about the limited intelligence of uneducated writers and to consider the class-based borders that run between formally trained and self-taught scholars.

Distraction—the third strategy of coding—is defined by Radner and Lanser as drowning out or drawing attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message (417). One of Muri’s recurring strategies of distraction is to allow significant passages to masquerade as digressions. Whenever Indigo submits a self-deprecating comment, or re-directs her focus—“It seems I got myself realy all muddled up now, I dont no what the conection of that is to my story that Im teling you now” (52)—it is a clue for the reader to pay close attention to the preceding “digression,” which carries information integral to the mystery. Other strategies of distraction include overt distinctions between Iphigeneia and Indigo (when the two women are actually the same person), and Indigo’s insistence that the murder of Sam Coldridge is the primary subject of the novel.

Strategies of indirection and trivialization operate in the novel through Indigo’s writing style and voice. Indirection—telling the truth in a circuitous fashion—can involve hedging, which Radner and Lanser define as the use of ellipses, litotes, passive constructions and qualifiers, techniques sometimes identified with “women’s language” (418).<sup>6</sup> Great potential lies in lulling the reader into expecting the content of a passage to match the innocuous, hesitant writing style of its author. Muri has Indigo trail off distractedly in order to deflect the possibility that the weary and harmless storyteller could possibly be a murder suspect. These recollections are far less threatening than would be the memories of a confident, youthful, and more focused narrator.<sup>7</sup> Trivialization—the use of a form that is considered by the dominant culture to be unimportant—can be viewed as a tactical feminist coding strategy; when a particular form is considered unthreatening, the message it carries, even if it might be threatening in another context, is

likely to be discounted or over-looked (420). One does not expect a murder confession to lurk within the notebook of an old woman in a nursing home; nonetheless, Indigo's testimony stubbornly and subtly weaves its way through her journal.

Muri also uses claims of incompetence as a feminist coding strategy for her narrator. Within a discourse of inability, apologetic, deferential claims of incompetence are not signs of inadequacy, but rather modesty topoi in classical rhetoric engineered to win the sympathy of the reader. Indigo's topos of inability, the way she separates her incompetence from that of other authors, does more to convince the reader of her rhetorical skill, than to illustrate her ignorance of narrative technique. In a single paragraph rife with self-conscious insecurities, Indigo contrasts her own circular story-telling methods with the linear trajectories of literature, specifically and subtly evoking King Arthur and the directness of his quests:

I don't know how al those Arthors tel a story from start to finish, just like that. . . .  
 Probaly its just me, I don't understand the cumplex naycheer of the riten word. I gess maybe being just a mother and a house wife for al those many yrs makes it so you cant think in a strait line, you no how you have to stop rite in the middel of darnning socks at the table to stop the potatos from boiling over and then go back to get the baby whos woke up again for the third time and put it back to sleep, then aswer the dor and say no thanks, not intersted, and go back to put the peas on (32)

Indigo works diligently at convincing her reader that she is an incompetent narrator as she simultaneously produces cunning writing that critiques linear, patriarchal conventions of structure. Like the classic Renaissance rhetoricians who feigned modesty and conventionally began speeches with proclamations of their own inadequacy in order to arouse pathos in their audiences, Muri has Indigo display her ability as a writer as she disparages her ability to write.

Muri's use of feminist coding strategies directs the reader to other more subtle and restrictive codes in literature. She looks at how conventional spelling and grammar act as barriers to those without education. Through inconsistent spelling and unusual grammar, Muri challenges the apparent "neutrality" of conventional language, choosing, instead, to view it as a constructed and exclusive system based upon linear, elitist and patriarchal structures. Muri avoids using standard spelling, proper grammar, and the use of "I" as a unified subject throughout the narrative in order to point out and reverse the code; she does not require Indigo to conform to conventional standards; rather the reader must adapt, and, in a sense, decode the unconventional orthography of the novel. An ironic and celebratory liberty infuses the spelling "errors;" double entendres and puns contribute to the

story in a way that would be impossible if standard English spelling and grammar were used exclusively.

The more ambiguous or complex a code, the higher the risk becomes for potential misinterpretation. Because codes are ambiguous by definition, there is always the risk that any instance of coding will reinforce the very ideology it is designed to critique (Radner and Lanser 423). How is it possible for an author to ensure that various codes are covert enough to obscure messages that challenge the dominant order, yet accessible enough to be deciphered by readers who may be enlightened by the messages? Muri's novel can be problematic for readers who are unaccustomed to doing such detective work; one reader may excavate layerings of mysteries and intertexts, while another reader might miss the codes entirely and interpret the novel at the level of plot. Assuming that a coded text may permit a variety of interpretations within various target audiences, Muri risks the certitude of a definitive reading in exchange for increased responsibility on the part of the reader, who may uncover an indefinite number of interpretations.

### **Detecting Intertexts<sup>8</sup>**

One of Muri's most interesting coding strategies is the literary intertexts in Indigo's tale. What may appear to be an excessive tribute to patriarchal forefathers can be read as renegotiating genre boundaries and calling for feminist revision. Deliberately drawing on intertexts associated with male heroes, Muri destabilizes them within new contexts and opens them to innovative interpretations. As Bakhtin suggests, a negotiation occurs between the authoritative text and its resignification in the new text:

When we borrow another's words, and traditional phrases and stories are not only another's words but are the words of the anonymous and sometimes authoritative, traditional 'other,' we negotiate between the world the authority describes and the world we describe (342–343).

Muri allows Indigo to co-opt the authority of the literary greats and challenge their inviolate status. Before studying the oral traditions from which Muri draws, I will explore four types of literary intertexts—the detective genre, Greek myths, the Old Testament, and literary theories—in order to identify the connections and codes Muri has created.

The predominant literary intertext in *the hystery of the broken fether* is the detective genre, which traditionally has been associated with male or patriarchal narratives and ideologies (despite the increasing number of female detectives and female writers in the genre). To understand why Muri appropriates elements from the detective genre, let us briefly examine the stereotypes within classic, metaphysical and hard-boiled detective fiction and new

directions of feminist and post-modern metaphysical detective stories.

Muri parodies the “classic” detective genre—typified by Edgar Allen Poe’s literary stories, Arthur Conan Doyle’s adventurous plots, and Agatha Christie’s Golden Age “puzzle” mysteries—by working from within a metaphysical and feminist framework. Instead of focusing attention on “who-dunnit” and rewarding the reader with the answer, Muri mocks the conventions of the “classic” detective genre and uses techniques from the metaphysical detective genre to pose questions, not only about the mystery itself, but about the possibility of discovering anything finite or definitive about the “truth” of the crime. Kathleen Gregory Klein describes “the course of the Classic detective” as one that “follows undeniably through a series of red herrings to the unitary, unchallenged explanation of the crime and conclusive identification of the murderer” (183). Muri obligingly provides readers with a dead body on the second page of the novel, an ineffective male detective named “Arthor Conan Hitchdcock,” and a slew of potential suspects. The narrator comments ironically on the use of formulaic conventions after Sam Coldridge’s body is discovered: “Well there you have it then. Seems like every story needs a body now don’t it.” (8). Readers may note that the novel’s detective, Arthur Conan Hitchdcock, does not solve the mystery in the novel; he only acknowledges that, indeed, a murder has occurred. Muri leaves the role of the detective almost entirely to the reader and provides sufficient clues for the reader to begin investigative work.<sup>10</sup>

A metaphysical detective story, as defined by Sweeney and Merivale in *Detecting Texts*, “parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure” in order to pose “questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (2). Metaphysical detective stories are marked by their own self-reflexivity (2) and speculations about the workings of language (7). Muri invokes the metaphysical detective genre and adds a feminist sensibility. Although the detective in metaphysical detective stories is “almost invariably male” (Sweeney and Merivale 2), Muri assigns the role of the detective to the reader of her novel and further stretches the boundaries of the sub-genre.

Muri’s post-modern disruptions and digressions culminate in her defiant resistance to secure closure. Muri urges readers to see beyond the linear trajectories of “classic” detective stories to recognize that time is circular and stories travel in multiple directions, “backwards and forwords” (32). Muri begins the last paragraph of the novel with Indigo’s anti-conclusion: “So now Im in trouble again, Im not realy sure how to draw al the meanings together, I dont realy no how to make al those conections come to gether to make the happy ending” (95).<sup>11</sup> By the end of the novel readers have likely

figured out the identity of Sam Coldridge's murderer, yet that discovery only initiates a series of connecting mysteries and narratives composing the author's fractured identity.

Muri's novel acknowledges some of the concerns that writers of feminist detective stories have explored in responding to the patriarchy in the "hard-boiled" tradition. According to Coward and Semple, "hard-boiled" detective fiction "usually starts with a disruption of the status quo and proceeds to a discovery (and eradication) of the perpetrator of the disruption" (44). In early hard-boiled detective stories, such as those by Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler, forensic details and police procedures predominate while the "establishment"—the police, coroners, judiciary, and detectives—specialize in handling disruptions and restoring traditional hierarchies to power. Maggie Humm suggests that contemporary feminist detective writers gravitate to the hard-boiled tradition in order to "explore ways in which women can have power in male environments by exploiting, not necessarily having to discount, the feminine" (237).

Recently, feminist detective novels use "fluid boundaries" over traditional linear progression; they emphasize the *process* of discovery, psychological detail and intimate relationships between women (Humm 244). Humm observes the trend to challenge gender norms in contemporary feminist detective fiction written by Rebecca O'Rourke, Sara Paretsky, Gillian Slovo, Barbara Wilson and Mary Wings. Female detectives—heterosexual and lesbian—explore the way women move "through public spaces and patriarchal time" (239) and more importantly, unsettle the balance of power in male environments while solving mysteries. Humm observes that differing ways of organizing time in detective fiction are related to gender. In comparing male-centered, linear time with Julia Kristeva's idea of female *jouissance*, a type of psychic temporality, Humm notes that feminist detectives are generally synchronic in their approach, rather than diachronic: they read clues in fields, from any point to any other point, rather than in a hierarchic sequence (245).<sup>12</sup>

Muri aligns herself with contemporary feminist detective writers in appropriating aspects from the hard-boiled (Chandleresque) form, which generally describes a "criminal milieu" and does not view a single crime as an isolated occurrence, over the "classic" form, which focuses on a single mystery or case (Tomc 52). Choosing a highly participatory genre that from the beginning puts the reader on guard for deceptions, guises, linked mysteries and surprising connections, Muri finds the detective genre a fertile context for drawing together feminist and metaphysical storytelling.<sup>13</sup>

From the theatre and mythology of Ancient Greece, Muri appropriates a second significant intertext. Iphigeneia is directly linked to the title character

in Euripides' paired plays, *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Muri appropriates three significant elements from Euripides' tragedies: the idea that marriage is a sacrifice, the imagery of sacrificial animals, and Iphigenia's escape to a land of savage natives. As *Iphigenia at Aulis* begins, Iphigenia is about to be sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon, to the goddess, Artemis, so the men of Argos can sail forth and recapture Helen of Troy. Agamemnon tricks Iphigenia into thinking she is going to the marriage altar instead of to the sacrificial altar. At the last minute, Artemis saves Iphigenia and takes her to the land of the savage Taurians. Muri likens Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia to Abe's arranged marriage for his daughter, Iphigenea, in order to contemporize the Greek tragedy and to explore a father's choice to sacrifice his daughter's happiness for his own purposes.

In the novel, when Abe discovers that Iphigenea is pregnant, he immediately sets off to Ernfold to arrange a marriage for his daughter with Mr. Ramseys, an old widower, crying out, "Some times you got to make a Sacofice" (74). After being presented with the dismal option of being married to Mr. Ramseys, Iphigenea leaves her family and marries Michel, her Métis friend. Muri's Iphigenea is given an independence that the ancient heroine was not afforded; in essence, Iphigenea becomes her own *deus ex machina*. Instead of being whisked up and saved by a goddess, Iphigenea takes her own leap, leaves her family and flies toward a new life as Indigo de Plume. Muri does not, however, suggest that Iphigenea's life with Michel is without sacrifices.

Muri appropriates sacrificial imagery from Euripides' plays to describe how her narrator, as a young mother, feels trapped with her infant children pulling at her breasts. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Iphigenia is compared to a sacrificial animal on the altar, and says of her executioners: "They handled me like a calf, Greeks handled me, for sacrifice" (134). In Muri's novel, the heroine refers to her own children, not her adversaries, who make her feel like a sacrificial cow:

and you dont no why but when you sit by your self in the rocker in the dark with your teat hanging out and your baby bunting at you like a calf at a cow, tuing and sucking, choking and raging then latching on again and staring at you with no expresion but just watching, and your held down there in the chair by those eyes, you just weep. (76)

Muri complicates the imagery of sacrifice by suggesting that it is not always an enemy who requires one to sacrifice oneself. Muri's portrayal of Michel as a thoughtful, hard-working Métis from Saskatchewan critiques the xenophobic assumptions in Euripides' description of the "evil savages" in *Tauris*. Abe's racism toward Michel is countered through Indigo's perspective. She does not see Michel as a savage (or a noble savage, for that matter) but

rather as a decent husband with whom she has a balanced marriage of love and sacrifice. By integrating the intertext of Euripides into her novel, Muri offers a pragmatic representation of sacrifice in the world, where a woman's sacrifices of herself are made continuously—not once in a life-time—for her children and her spouse.

Muri selects a second intertext from the Greeks in her use of *métis*, which has at least two mythological meanings: it connotes the power of transformation or the ability “to imitate the shape of your enemy and defeat him at his own game,” and it is the name of the goddess Metis, mother of Athena, who designed various transformations and tricks to achieve her desires (Bergren 73). Muri links Indigo, her puns and double entendres, with women from early Greek mythology who were sources of ambiguous truth-telling. Muri integrates *métis* in the novel not only in her unorthodox use of language, but also in the character of Michel, who is *Métis*, and in the strategy of imitating and transforming conventional literary structures for her own purposes.

In “Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought,” Ann Bergren explores the concept of *métis* as a predominantly feminine activity—comparable, in its semiotic character, to weaving—and presents a long line of women storytellers in early Greek thought who wove together the ambivalent modes of truth and trickery. Bergren observes, in recalling the false and true nature of the Muses,<sup>14</sup> the riddling Sphinx, and Gaia who devised plots based on her prophetic knowledge, that most women in Greek mythology were capable of ambivalent modes of double speaking. Bergren describes how the strategy of *métis* was used by Greek goddesses in order to avoid the male appropriation of reproduction. Before Rhea gave birth to her son Zeus, she asked Gaia and Ouranus for a plan to elude her husband, Cronus, who had swallowed all of her other children. Rhea was given a stone wrapped in blankets. Only Rhea knew the true son from the false son and her baby survived. Bergren observes that the “(re-) production of social legitimacy and true meaning are in the hands of the female” and so is the “power of *métis*, the power of substitution, the power, therefore, of the *tropos* or ‘turning’ that will later become the foundation of rhetoric” (74). Years later, when Zeus had his own offspring, he improved upon his father Cronus’ attempt to control reproduction and swallowed not just his children but their mother, Metis, to ensure that he alone would possess the knowledge and power she represented (74). Bergren then concludes that if, on the divine level, the power of language attributed to the female is appropriated by the male, it follows that the human male is, in the perspective of early Greek thought, “forever plagued by his vulnerability to the woman as the ambiguous source of truth and falsehood” (75).

In addition to Greek literature and mythology, Muri appropriates from the Bible and translates the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses into female-centered interpretations. Muri draws a parallel between the Biblical character of Abraham, who nearly sacrifices his son, Isaac, and her character Abe, who comes close to sacrificing Iphigeneia, not in order to prove his faith in God, as was done in the Bible, but rather to avoid the shame and stigma of having an unmarried, pregnant daughter. Muri's narrator recognizes and comments upon the number of sacrifices she makes in life, not of, but rather, for her children.

With a critically feminist perspective, Muri's narrator improves upon the story of Moses, who wandered in the desert for 40 years before arriving at the Promised Land, by commenting on the deficiency of linear structures that focus on the teleological goal rather than on the journey. After raising five children and a grandson over a period of 40 years, Indigo looks back on the years of wandering *as* her life, rather than a means to finding it: "You no, it seemt some times I was wøandering all the time I was a wif with children for them 40 yrs, but that was my life and I made the best of what it was" (24). The Moses intertext also functions as a significant link in connecting Iphigeneia and Indigo as a single character, as Moses is Iphigeneia's middle name, and a character with whom Indigo identified throughout her 40 years of wandering as a wife and mother.

Muri challenges the Moses narrative for its strains of colonialism. Indigo realizes that Moses and the Children of Israel possessed advantages and riches before they ever arrived at the Promised Land. She questions, "Wasnt God feeding them and watching over them. Whyd they need to take that land" (24–5). Holding Moses responsible for his colonization of Israel, Indigo makes an analogy to Canada as a "pormiss land, a Garden of Eden" (25). She writes, "evry body left off living their lifes to go in serch of that virgin land that they coud turn into there own welth. It seems like its greed, just that pure and simpl" (25). In contemporizing the story of Moses, Indigo comments on the greed and racism of Canadian settlers, who ousted native people from their land, stripped away land titles and rights, set up reservations, and proclaimed Canada a "free country" that had to then be purchased as property.<sup>15</sup>

Like Moses in the Bible, Indigo demonstrates a painful self-consciousness in her articulation, although Indigo's difficulties are in writing whereas Moses' dilemma is in speaking. While Moses needs his brother Aaron to be his mouthpiece, Indigo endeavors to speak for herself, although she exposes her hesitations by including the crossed-out words that she deems inappropriate for the novel. Indigo criticizes Moses for not having the courage to be

a hero, then crosses it out: “~~He probably just didn't have the balls~~” (40). The cross-outs draw attention to the process of writing and the presence of the narrative voice. The strategy of crossing out words, introduced by Derrida as “sous rature” or “under erasure” serves to de-naturalize language and forces readers to confront assumptions about the author’s presence (Spivak, xiv–xvi). In effect, the cross-outs or the practice of writing “sous rature” code the text as if it is a manuscript and work towards questioning the convention of valuing a formal literary product over a document which reveals its process.

Another central intertext with a theoretical dimension is the writing of Harold Bloom. A manifestation of Bloom appears in the novel as *Harry Bloom*, the folk historian who instructs Indigo and the other residents of the retirement home how to write journals. Muri illustrates how Indigo, a woman possessing very little formal education, unwittingly enacts Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence after listening to and rejecting some of the advice from the volunteer Harry Bloom. As Indigo learns to write a memoir, she is dissatisfied with the conventional structures provided by Harry Bloom, so she creates, adapts and responds to the influences of her predecessors. Ironically, Indigo’s response encapsulates Bloom’s basic theory of poetic influence and the anxiety of influence. Indigo’s ability to enact Bloom’s theory subverts prejudiced notions that a formal education equals intelligence and experiential education equals ignorance.

In “A Meditation upon Priority” Bloom comments on poetic influence and intrapoetic relationships; he explains how one form of poetry can inform another through a series of distortions. Bloom does not believe that one writer is merely influenced by an earlier writer, but argues that poets misread one another “so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (705). A poet’s attitude to his predecessor is akin to the Oedipal relation of son to father, rife with admiration and envy (708). The anxiety of influence is the feeling of ambivalence toward the precursor and the anxiety about the fear of never creating anything original. Defensive or distortive readings result from the angst-fraught relationship of one poet to his/her earlier poetic influence. Bloom lists six distortive processes that operate in reading, or misreading, the work of a predecessor;<sup>16</sup> these include “clinamen,” a poetic misreading where the poet swerves from the precursor; “kenosis,” a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor; and “daemonization,” a movement towards a personalized counter-sublime in reaction to the precursor’s sublime (709). Muri clearly engages in Bloom’s theory of distortive practices by swerving from the literary structures of her precursors, establishing discontinuity with the arbitrary teleologies of the classics, and creat-

ing her own woman-centered counter-sublime in reaction to the conventional sublime of literature. Indigo's counter-sublime, her fascination with her children's feces (78), demonstrates the author's irreverent response to Kant's definition of the sublime found in Romantic literature.<sup>17</sup>

Muri responds not only to some of the classic intertexts, but also to Harold Bloom's theory, with "distorted" readings. She "misreads" Bloom's theory just as Bloom says writers will misread their influences, and portrays in Indigo, not a fear of creating something original, but rather an anxiety over not being able to create a female structure which resonates with the rhythms of a woman's body. After having been taught the Aristotelian plot structure of a rising action, climax, denouement and closure by Harry Bloom, Indigo hints that the traditional structure is limited in promoting the rise and fall of a single narrative and seems "to be just that little bit indescent" in paralleling a man's sexual arousal and climax. Indigo posits a circular narrative structure that mirrors her own female sexuality with several climaxes of pleasure and arousal (14):<sup>18</sup>

But I dont no why that struckyour is like that, whys there only one peek why cant there be multipull peaks or may be not even peeks, theyr so sharp and pointy. may be insted there coud be circels widening out and out and out from the center like when you throw a stone in to a quiet pool. why is it so fast to the Closur. (15)

Indigo's poetic distortion of the Aristotelian structure is particularly fitting in the novel because it demonstrates how writers can deliberately "misread" and adapt intertexts for their own purposes. The thinly disguised persona of Harold Bloom functions as a signal to readers to welcome misreadings of central texts. Muri's integration of high literary theory couched in sentence fragments and spelling errors creates an ironic paradox; it is a model for an integration of theory and practice that challenges a reader to investigate beyond the apparently simplistic tone.

Muri connects the conventionally divisive camps of literature theory and oral expression by devising ways to write down oral traditions and stories while preserving aspects of oral performance. Indigo's journal is written, but in her intimate and vernacular mode of storytelling, she seems almost to be speaking aloud. Certain nuances of the writing may actually be detected best when read aloud by the reader.<sup>19</sup> Greek drama and Biblical intertexts are both rooted in such oral traditions of performance and recitation. Muri's novel exhibits some paralinguistic qualities—nonce words used to describe sound effects (60), white spaces to indicate passages of time, capitalized words to imply urgency or volume—all which convey a performative tale. Muri's novel gestures toward an actual historical project developed in part by the oral historians of Saskatchewan. In 1981, oral historians

and folklorists launched a project that aimed to construct a living local history by gathering stories from those living in nursing homes in order to supplement the existing written records. One of the main initiatives of the project was to record the long-established history of the oral tradition of native elders in Saskatchewan.<sup>20</sup>

Muri's novel values the knowledge and experiential wisdom of oral storytelling and the idea of passing a story on through the generations.<sup>21</sup> Parables from Michel's grandmother and Iphigenea's great-grandmother about the history of the crow and how women ought to behave (50–52) are given central positions in the novel and function as significant clues to the reader to link Iphigenea to Indigo. As Michel relates his "Soo" story from his grandmother, he explains that "peples storys they can tell you whats the meaningful things in there lifes" (51). Although Iphigenea does not understand the point of Michel's stories right away, nor her great-grandmother's stories, Michel suggests that the meanings will continue to illuminate themselves to her as she is ready to receive them. In her journal, Indigo recalls Michel telling her, "I don't know exactly what it means but may be even if you dont no, may be it can still tell you some thing about some thing" (50). Muri's approach of allowing the stories to reveal themselves to readers over time introduces a teaching method rooted in a native tradition of storytelling—one which Lee Maracle calls "theory through story" (*Oratory* 14)—where a variety of meanings can be accessed and certain values of a culture can be heard and interpreted through its stories.

The inscription of oral parables points to a contemporary oral/written challenge facing some native writers which Daniel David Moses addresses in the preface to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature*. He explains how some elders believe the written dissemination of stories in English breaks too far from the traditional oral roots of storytelling. Moses notes that many native storytellers do not publish their stories and says that for some native people, "If the material is working orally within the community, that's enough" (xxvi). Maria Campbell takes a different position and urges younger native writers to find a way to write even if they do not have the support of the elders of their communities, or do not speak a native language.<sup>22</sup> For the past decade, Campbell has experimented with writing in dialect to try to capture an oral essence that she feels is missing when she writes in academic English (qtd. in Lutz, 48). She does not write in Mitchif, her grandparents' language, because it is not taught and her readership would be limited. Instead, Campbell writes the way she speaks to her community:

I've been working with dialect for about ten years, and a lot of my writing now is in very broken English. I find that I can express myself better that way. . . . It's

very beautiful, but it took me a long time to realize that. Very lyrical, and I can express myself much better. I can also express my community better than I can in “good” English. It’s more like oral tradition, and I am able to work as a storyteller with that (qtd. in Lutz 48).

Thomas King uses the term “interfusalional” to describe the blending of orality into written literature in the writing of Okanagan writer, Harry Robinson (King 13).<sup>23</sup> In order to preserve the voice of the storyteller, Robinson uses a particularly oral syntax that coaxes the reader to read aloud, and transposes rhythms modeled on his native language into English (King 13). In a mode similar to Robinson, Muri creates a novel that pays critical attention to the difference between orality and literary texts. Her hybrid novel, validating oral expression and challenging literary traditions, resists classification.

Through an investigation into the linear and masculinist ideologies of traditional stories, Muri challenges the conventions of patriarchal intertexts, literary theories, and detective fiction. She draws on storytelling theories from native cultures to instruct readers to listen closely to multiple meanings. She does not provide a linear plot, with a rising action, climax, dénouement and conclusion, but rather, circular stories which spiral into connected narrations and resonate with the rhythms of her narrator’s body and memory. Throughout the novel, Muri engages in various feminist coding strategies which link her narrator to ambiguous female storytellers from diverse contexts including early Greek thought, native traditions and feminist metaphysical detective fiction. Muri’s *the hystery of the broken fether* resists classification in any one genre, as it calls for a highly participatory reader and a re-examination of the constructed elements and politics of genre. In “Gender and Genre,” Amy Schuman argues that the politics of genre classification is concerned with resistance: “the refusal to be named as a part of a particular category or the act of undermining authority or authenticity claims” (76). The politics of genre, Schuman states, is not simply the identification of new genres or intertextual genres. It involves an exploration into how authority is appropriated by the dominated and how conventional genres are put to nonstandard purposes (83). Muri’s appropriations enable her readers to explore the “coded” mysteries of traditional conventions through an expansion of genre boundaries in her hybrid “hystery/mystery/memoir.”

#### NOTES

- 1 Muri draws parallels between Sam Coldridge and Samuel Coleridge, the Romantic poet. She draws on images and lines from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” In part 3.3 of the poem, Coleridge refers to a “water-sprite.” In Muri’s text, Sam asks Iphigeneia if she is “the water sprite of this here wel” (89) before he rapes her. In part 7.9, Coleridge describes the

- body of the ancient mariner “like one that hath been seven days drowned, / My body lay afloat.” In Muri’s novel, Iphigeneia and her sisters are the first to find Sam Coldridge floating in the river, drowned, the day after she killed him. In the poem, the Mariner begins his confession of killing the bird out of agony and in telling the story, he frees himself (7.15.3–4). Perhaps Indigo rids herself of her own albatross by telling her “confessional” story.
- 2 See Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada* on animal totems and trickster/transformer/culture-hero figures (16). See also Jeannette Armstrong’s *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, and Hartmut Lutz’s *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Writers*.
  - 3 Ningwakwe Priscilla George developed the Rainbow /Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy, published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. In her Canadian literacy project, George describes the significance of each colour of the rainbow and how literacy learners can be nurtured by attending to the healing properties of each colour of the rainbow.
  - 4 Ningwakwe Priscilla George, 38.
  - 5 See Maracle’s *Oratory* for a more detailed exploration on theories of orality and storytelling.
  - 6 For discussions on “woman’s language,” see William O’Barr and Bowman K. Atkins, and Robin Lakoff.
  - 7 The genre of an elderly women looking back at her life—also referred to as the Memoirs of a Crone genre—has become popular in contemporary fiction; see Ian McEwen’s *Atonement* and Carol Shields’ *The Stone Diaries*.
  - 8 My sub-title echoes the title of Merivale’s and Sweeney’s study on metaphysical detective stories, *Detecting Texts*.
  - 9 Muri combines Alfred Hitchcock and Arthur Conan Doyle in her parody of a super-detective.
  - 10 Although Poe is customarily regarded as the originator of the “classic” detective genre with his Dupin stories, he is also credited with some of the earliest forms of metaphysical detective stories in the 1840s. G.K Chesterton is another early metaphysical detective story writer from beginning of the twentieth-century and combined crimes with mysteries outside of human nature (Sweeney and Merivale 4.) See Sweeney’s and Merivale’s *Detecting Texts* for a clear outline of the sub-genres of detective fiction with an emphasis on metaphysical detective stories.
  - 11 Muri’s inconclusive ending parodies the neat conclusions of detective stories, and also the conventional happy endings of comedies. She says, “nobody that I no is geting married, and its not even spring time” (95).
  - 12 Unlike Muri, a large number of feminist detective writers including Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky and Marcia Muller refuse to forego the traditional and “satisfactory” conclusive ending in their detective stories and cling still to traditional climactic resolute endings (Tomc 52). Gertrude Stein’s essay “Why I Like Detective Stories” provides a self-critical commentary on Stein’s own decision to leave the ending to her early story, “Blood on the Dining-Room Floor” open because she later reconsidered and “concluded that . . . on the whole a detective story . . . has to have an ending and my detective story did not have any” (“Why” 148–149 and qtd. in Sweeney and Merivale 21). Muri breaks rank with these writers with her anti-conclusion and risks a certain amount of clarity in coding the identity of her murderer and writing back to the traditions of the genre.
  - 13 Muri’s feminist and metaphysical detective story is in the company of Margaret Atwood’s “Murder in the Dark” (1983) which provides a good example of a self-reflexive metaphysical feminist tale ending with a question; Carol Shields’ *Swann: A Mystery* (1987) and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1991). See Sweeney’s and Merivale’s *Detecting Texts* for analysis of these stories (2, 20).
  - 14 The Muses, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, are able to speak true and false things in a coded, double language: “We know how to say many false things like to real things,/ And we

know, whenever we want to, how to utter true things” (qtd. in Bergren 69).

- 15 See Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* for an overview of the literary history of Native Canadians.
- 16 Harold Bloom lists six processes by which a poet responds to a precursor: *Clinamen*: poetic misreading where the poet swerves from the precursor; *Tessera*: completion and antithesis as if the poet failed to complete the work enough; *Kenosis*: a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor; *Daemonization*: a movement towards a personalized counter-sublime, in reaction to the precursor’s sublime; *Askesis*: a movement of self-purgation; and *Apophrades*: the return of the dead, as if the later poet had written the precursor’s characteristic work (709).
- 17 Immanuel Kant.
- 18 See Hélène Cixous for a discussion on how writing has been “run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy (1093).
- 19 A reader may miss the reference to Samuel Coldridge if the following passage is not read out loud: “You no some times you just gotta make that leap . . . even tho you might fall into the gap or you might just barely scabble over to the other side . . . but there aint no way you no unles if you jump off from that stony *cold ridge*” (87).
- 20 See the proceedings from the *Saskatchewan Oral History Conference* (1981).
- 21 Muri’s novel, with its emphasis on orality, can be situated among the retrospective vernacular novels of other women writers including, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, and Sharon Riis’ *The True Story of Ida Johnson*.
- 22 Métis writer Marilyn Dumont rightly points out that many native writers live in urban centres with no sense of “native community” or any of the stereotypical notions of what non-natives believe it is to be native. Dumont argues that there is a *continuum* of exposure to traditional experience in native culture which allows for evolving conceptions of native culture. “Popular Images,” 45–50.
- 23 See Thomas King’s “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” for an explanation of four models of Native writing: tribal, interfusional, polemical and associational.

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## Non-Fiction Picture Books

**Debbie Bailey** (Photos by Susan Huszar)

*The Hospital*. Annick \$5.95

**Tanya Roberts-Davis**

*We Need to Go to School: Voices of the Rugmark Children*. Groundwood \$9.95

**Candace Savage**

*Wizards: An Amazing Journey through the Last Great Age of Magic*. GreyStone Books \$22.95

**Stephen Shapiro and Tina Forrester**

Illustrations by David Craig

*Ultra Hush-Hush: Espionage and Special Missions*. Annick \$19.95

Reviewed by Lynn (J.R.) Wytenbroek

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While children's picture books are generally underfunded in Canada, children's non-fiction picture books are doing well.

Schools and parents alike seem to be willing to buy non-fiction picture books when they will not, or cannot, buy the fiction.

There are many excellent picture books for the young non-fiction reader, including four diverse new books. Each has its own strengths but the three later books share in having exciting layout and design.

The simplest of the four books is *The Hospital*. Written for very young children from two to four years old, this cardboard book combines photographs of hospital rooms, procedures and hospital personnel with simple text explaining to children what experiences they might have at the hospital. The pictures are big and bright with a cheery yellow border, and show instruments such as stethoscopes and

wheelchairs clearly but in a non-frightening manner. The book also captures a wide variety of ethnic groups so that children and adults from many backgrounds are depicted, including the doctors and nurses.

Tanya Roberts-Davis, writing for an older, pre-teen audience, visited the rehab houses and schools for the Rugmark children in Nepal when she was 16. *We Need to Go to School* is the result of that visit. The book incorporates pictures drawn by the children themselves: they are placed in different positions on the pages so that the layout never becomes predictable or dull. After a brief but informative introduction, the book compiles the children's own stories about how they were rescued by Rugmark representatives from the violent and desperate life of the carpet factories, where some started working as young as five. The stories are told in a straightforward manner by the children themselves and they leave no room for sentimentality. Their stories are stark and harsh, but honest and real. They are told without self-pity and with obvious pleasure when describing their new lives. Some of the stories are only a few lines long while others cover one or two pages. Some of the children include their poetry. The main thing missing from the stories is any reference to the children missing the families they were taken from when they left the factories. That is understandable in some cases where the family life was brutal. But the ones who left loving families make no reference to them in their stories, which seems a little strange. *We*

*Need to Go to School* educates western children about the appalling conditions that many children in bonded labour in the developing world both work and live in: being forced to work 13-hour days with little food, no breaks for play, no days off and, often, regular beatings. It may even increase an appreciation of the chance to go to school, as every one of the Rugmark children speaks about dreaming about going to school even while labouring under such horrific conditions.

Layout in *Wizards* is also very eye-catching. Using illustrations from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Savage has created a rich visual smorgasbord for her pre-teen readers. The illustrations are thoroughly explained while terms or concepts such as “witch bottles” or “care of magical pets,” are given lines or even paragraphs of explanation, set off to the side of the main text. The main text describes magic and its practitioners at the time of the development of science. The book traces the early life and studies of Isaac Newton as a background for the discussion on magic in pre-scientific Europe. It covers all forms of magic, including those accepted by the church, accepted in civil society but not by the church, and those which were considered crimes and punishable by imprisonment or death. The book is written in an interesting and conversational manner. In these days of Harry Potter mania, this Saskatchewan Award-winning book should be a favourite amongst Grade Three to Grade Seven readers.

Perhaps the most fascinating book of the four, *Ultra Hush-Hush*, is a guide to the secret missions, espionage and code-breaking ventures of World War II. Dealing with complex material in a manageable format, this book gives pre-teen readers some real insight into both the dangers and excitement of the behind-the-scenes part of the war. Although it concentrates on the Allies, the book also chronicles some of the most

clever or effective under-cover operations of the Axis, as well. Written in an entertaining, accessible manner, this book is designed to engage young boys, particularly, although the material should also be of interest to some girls. With large pictures or coloured photographs almost every page, with a layout that differs from page to page, and with different coloured sections denoting extra pieces of information or definitions of terms and concepts, much as *Wizard* did, this book is a visual feast. With a full index and glossary at the back of the book, *Ultra Hush-Hush* is one of the best books available today for readers of illustrated non-fiction, a book that will interest and inform both young and adult readers alike.

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## More Brilliantly Alive

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**Neil K. Besner**

*Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Prairie Fire P \$18.95

Reviewed by Faye Hammill

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This book was prepared in the knowledge that Carol Shields was dying. It is, in effect, a memorial volume, though it was published several months before her death. The fiction-writer Maggie Dwyer concludes her contribution, a personal essay, by commenting that the years since the diagnosis of Shields' cancer have been difficult for her friends, but adds: “Carol is, if possible, more brilliantly alive.” This poignant sentence might stand as an epigraph to the collection, which celebrates Shields' life as well as her writing, and demonstrates what a vigorous afterlife she will have through her books.

The combination of essays of friendship, interviews and critical analyses included in this volume makes for a wide range of tone and approach. Among the contributors are creative writers in all genres, researchers, lecturers, a theatre producer, and a journalist. Aside from Besner's introduction and Shields' very short concluding piece,

“About writing,” the book comprises 20 contributions, seven taking a personal angle and 13 analyzing Shields’ novels, poems, short stories, and plays. Only seven of these 20 are newly commissioned; the remainder have been previously published, some of them 15 years ago. Astonishingly, no mention of this is made in the editor’s introduction, and no information about the original publication of these pieces is given anywhere (except that dates are appended to the two interviews, by Marjorie Anderson and Joan Thomas, conducted in 1993 and 1994 respectively). This omission, which implies that the book consists of wholly new material, will be seriously misleading to future researchers.

Besner has, however, made a wise and judicious selection from the body of published criticism on Shields, reprinting articles by Clara Thomas, Perry Nodelman, Deborah Schnitzer, Leona Gom, David Williamson, Simone Vauthier, Brian Johnson, Katherine Ings, and Chris Johnson, as well as reminiscences by Blanche Howard and Lorraine McMullen. All these are already well known to Shields scholars, but they are here placed in a fresh context, and relate in interesting ways to the new pieces. For example, McMullen, who supervised Shields’ MA thesis at the University of Ottawa, comments on her reading and intellectual development during this period, and her account complements a new essay by Shields’ daughter, Anne Giardini, about sharing reading experiences with her mother. Also, Nodelman’s contribution, “Living in the Republic of Love: Carol Shields’ Winnipeg,” first published in 1995, speaks on several levels to William Neville’s “Carol Shields and Winnipeg: Finding Home.” Neville’s piece is placed with the memoirs and interviews, since it focuses on Shields’ own experience of Winnipeg, while Nodelman analyzes one of her fictional inscriptions of the city. Yet Nodelman, although offering a detailed close reading of *The Republic of*

*Love*, also takes a highly personal approach, tracing in detail his own and his students’ relationships to Winnipeg.

This warm, rather un-academic style is shared by several of the other pieces in the critical section, notably Warren Cariou’s “*Larry’s Party: Man in the Maze*,” which begins: “Whenever I was sick as a kid, I got to stay home and do mazes.” His autobiographical account of his fascination with mazes leads smoothly into a reference to Kierkegaard’s maxim that life is lived forwards but understood backwards, and hence into an original analysis of *Larry’s Party*. Cariou is a creative writer as well as a critic: the essays of Gom and Williamson likewise adopt an informal tone. It is interesting that so much of the criticism on Shields’ work has been written by novelists and poets. A particularly good example is Aritha van Herk’s critical fiction “Extrapolations from *Miracles: Out of Carol Shields*” (in her book *In Visible Ink: Crypto-Fictions*). Van Herk’s piece, together with those included in Besner’s collection, demonstrates that Shields’ own experiments with literary genres are continued in the published responses of her readers.

Among the more traditionally scholarly contributions to *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life* are new essays on Shields’ most recent texts—Wendy Roy on *Unless*, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh on *Jane Austen: A Life*, and Marta Dvorak on *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. Dvorak’s essay complements the other two pieces on the short fiction, Clara Thomas on “Mrs Turner Cutting the Grass” and Simone Vauthier on “Various Miracles.” Dvorak and Vauthier adopt the language-based style of analysis, drawing on rhetoric and narratology, which is emphasized in French universities. Theirs are the most intellectual and challenging essays in the book. Equally impressive is Brian Johnson’s reading of *Swann* in relation to Barthes and Foucault, which combines erudition with wit: “Despite their

seemingly parallel construction of authorship, however, the sheer extravagance of Swann's murder points to ways in which Barthes' wholesale eradication of the author might be somewhat overzealous."

The author is certainly not eradicated from this book: Besner's title, *The Arts of a Writing Life*, arises from his perception that Shields' writing "performs the beautifully intricate relation between art and life as if it were seamless, and perfectly natural." She does emerge from the personal essays as a rather saintly figure: endlessly generous, brave, entertaining, and energetic; while many of the critical pieces also partake of the celebratory quality which marks Shields' own writing. Only Chris Johnson, writing on Shields' plays, can see faults in her work; yet he also echoes the other contributors by evoking the joyousness of the first encounter with a Carol Shields text.

Many of the essays selected for reprinting by Besner are taken from the special Shields issues of the journals *Prairie Fire* (1995) and *Room of One's Own* (1989). It is an excellent thing that these articles are being made more easily available, particularly to scholars outside Canada.

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## A Swing and a Miss

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**Dave Bidini**

*Baseballissimo*. McClelland and Stewart \$36.99

Reviewed by Tony Griffiths

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This book is a vessel that sails under so many flags that its destination and course are never clear. The reader is left disoriented and often irritated by the lurching from the shifts of course and the veering thematic winds that cause them.

The skeleton of the book is based on a cool idea that Dave Bidini had: Why not take the wife and kids out of muggy Toronto and repair to Italy for a season to follow one of its minor league baseball teams; become "embedded" as it were? Nice work if you

can get it, but what has this got to do with literature? *No problemo*. Write a book about the experience! It's bound to be interesting because it'll be about those wacky Italians. Then people will buy the book and perhaps read it—and that's literature.

There is a flaw in this idea that is responsible for the book's weak sense of direction. Working and playing with a bunch of small-town Italian ball players, looking for good material yet armed (and this is gutsy) with only a rudimentary understanding of the Italian language, has an inherent thinness that inevitably leads to padding. And padding there is, in the form of many extra snippets not well melded into the story of the Italian team.

Baseball is the dominant theme, hence *Baseballissimo* is presumably first and foremost a "sports book." The author has written other books including one on hockey, so the pattern continues. However it seems unlikely that any Major League fan interested in the lore of baseball would invest good money in a book about any kind of bush leaguers, so such a book must have pretensions in the area of human interest. But that niche was carved out long ago by the classic tales of Ring Lardner (*You know me, Al: A busher's letters*, 1916). Hence, *Baseballissimo*'s raison d'être became human interest tales based in the Italian minors, a theme that definitely had not been covered before.

The book alternates between chapters describing specific baseball games (eight of them), and chapters on other assorted topics (22 of them). The team under the spotlight is the Peones of the town of Nettuno. The name Peones is derived from the word for plebs and not from the genus of plants, so don't go thinking that there is anything effeminate about these Italian men. Indeed, the Peones seem like a nice enough bunch of guys, living up to the international standard of guy behaviour, ranging from somewhat noble to somewhat gross. The author,

either in an attempt to save the reader from a lot of Italian words, or in an attempt at humour, decided to issue nicknames to all the team members. Hence we have “The Emperor,” “Skunk Bravo,” “The Red Tiger” and so on. This device is unsuccessful: it robs the players of their individuality, their nationality, and their dignity. (Note: Isn’t George W. Bush also fond of issuing humorous nicknames?) Despite the use of nicknames, there are so many players to deal with (18 Peones in all) that of necessity they must be described sketchily. Hence the reader never really comes to see them as any more interesting than people you might meet in your own home town. Indeed the truth is that they probably are not.

The games played by the Peones are much like baseball games anywhere. Someone bunts (then we learn the Italian for bunt); someone homers (then we learn the Italian for homer); and so it goes. The Peones surge ahead and they are happy; then the opponents surge ahead and the Peones are unhappy. It is truly baseball like any other baseball. Is it possible that Bidini was expecting some interesting Italian twists on the rules or in the play? If so, he did not find them. The Italians are true to the great American baseball tradition.

The chapters that are not about the Peones’ games are in some ways more intriguing. They certainly show more variety and provide welcome relief from the rather samey sets of game play-by-plays. Furthermore they deal with some lesser-known (although not always fascinating) topics. Here we learn about the history of the small coastal Italian town of Nettuno that provides the backdrop for the games. This involves quite a hefty chunk of second world war history. However, if you decide to read this book and you already know that the Allies fought their way up the Italian peninsula, going through towns like Nettuno on the way, you might want to skip these sections. It turns out that the American troops intro-

duced baseball to Italy at that time, and one of the first places where baseball took hold was Nettuno. Who knew? In other chapters we read about such diverse topics as great moments in Major League baseball, great personalities in Major League baseball, Dave Bidini’s awakening to his Italian ethnicity, and a whole lot about the Toronto Blue Jays. Some of these diversions are too much to bear and invite chapter-skipping, for example the chapter devoted to the visit to Nettuno of the nubile teenage cousin of the author’s wife.

The prose seems to have escaped careful editing. Grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors are a regular source of irritation. Naïve constructs shake the reader’s belief in the story, invoking the “Oh, come on” response.

The book is an undemanding and fairly distracting summer read if one is stuck at the cottage without *Reader’s Digests*. However, as literature it fails. The writing is too self-indulgent and unfocused, never really tackling anything of substance. There is wit, but not enough to keep the book afloat. In this regard the author could benefit from reading Dave Barry, who uses a similar form of narrative yet manages to keep the reader smiling.

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## Two Portraits of Carr

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### Jo Ellen Bogart

*Emily Carr: At the Edge of the World*. Tundra Books \$24.99

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### Nicholas Debon

*Four Pictures by Emily Carr*. Groundwood Books \$15.95

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Reviewed by Ann Morrison

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The story of Emily Carr’s life and her struggle for recognition as an artist became known to us through her published journals, short stories and autobiographical writings. Now her powerful paintings of rain-soaked forests on the west coast and of First Nations

villages with their weathered totems are accepted as visual icons in Canadian art. The artist's life story and art combine in the imagination to present Carr as a mythic figure. Two new biographies of this artist, written for children, indicate how very differently Carr's story can be interpreted.

*Emily Carr: At the Edge of the World* by Jo Ellen Bogart gives the reader an overview of the artist's life, touching on as many experiences as possible, given the space restriction. Placing Carr first within the social context of turn-of-the-century Victoria with its stuffy resistance to new ideas, Bogart then describes Carr's efforts to overcome professional isolation and her eventual success at a national level. The author's narrative is empathetic and controlled, retelling many of Carr's anecdotes that would appeal to children. In trying to cover so much of Carr's career, Bogart occasionally gets caught up in details, losing the force of those life-changing moments that were so crucial to the artist.

In spite of a few minor errors, this version of Carr's life is effectively summarized, but there is very little analysis of her art. This central aspect of her career is represented by the inclusion of 16 superb photographic reproductions of paintings and drawings by Carr from different periods of her career. There are also pen-and-ink illustrations by Maxwell Newhouse to provide visual context for the narrative. These drawings are highly-detailed, child-like, whimsical and sometimes very strange. The author might consider how an aboriginal child would respond to Newhouse's depictions of carved totems.

A completely different approach is taken by author/illustrator Nicholas Debon, who has chosen four important Carr paintings to represent significant events in her life and changes in her painting practices. *Four Pictures by Emily Carr* is like a breath of fresh air! This remarkable little book propels the reader into the immediacy of

Carr's adventures through comic book storyboards. As each of the four stories unfolds, the graphic format captures the reader's emotional involvement. Here Carr is portrayed as a real person with disappointments, frustrations and moments of joy through simple lines of expression and Debon's use of cinematic techniques. But it is in the subtle treatment of the background surroundings that the author's sensitivity to her whole situation is evident. For example, Debon's depiction of the rainforest in the fourth section reflects the influence of Lawren Harris' style. As both author and illustrator, Debon can present a deep connection between text and image. In this highly imaginative book, brief summaries bridge the four graphic sections to complete the overview of Carr's life and suggest to the reader there is more to explore.

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## Rhapsody in Montreal

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**Nicole Brossard**

*The Blue Books*. Coach House Books \$24.95

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Reviewed by Louise H. Forsyth

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*The Blue Books* are translations of Québec author Nicole Brossard's first three novels: *Un livre (A Book)*, *Sold-out: Étreinte/illustration (Turn of a Pang)*, and *French kiss: Étreinte/exploration (French Kiss; or, A Pang's Progress)*. Published between 1970 and 1974, they celebrate, lament, and review a modern Montreal, a city with which young urban radicals were engaging passionately: "the one obsession we couldn't escape was the city and its streets." In this, these novels proffer shards of new mythologies for one of Canada's and the world's unique cities.

The novels direct attention to the use of words—in people's lives, in the text being read, in Montreal—because words, grammars, stories, and discursive structures are apparatuses available to all for critical reflection upon things that matter to indi-

viduals and communities. The elusive and allusive words in Brossard's writing of resistance are like the sensuous, often mysterious, strokes of an oriental painting. The writer's persona in *French Kiss*, who "rides eager astride the delible ink," speaks of "writing that feeds on zigs and zags and detours," and terms the narrator a ludic technology: "a circulatory mechanism in and through the order of words and titillating venues."

*A Book* provides all elements of conventional fiction: characters, narrative voice, actions, love interests, geographical and historical references. It suggests the story of two young women and three young men during the summer of 1970 in Montreal: events in their daily lives of work and socialising, their sexual encounters, bombs exploding, political events. It even offers the occasional complete sentence of descriptive prose, which, because it contrasts so strikingly with the otherwise spare sentence fragments that move the book forward, can only be read ironically. The reader is challenged by the narrator to find coherence in the fragments. "Someone" in *A Book* has constructed the text by putting words on the pages; "someone" in the text is telling the disjointed story; "someone" is reading the words in the present moment. The narrator affirms in the first sentence that *you* are holding a text and making sense of black marks on white spaces: "A text beginning like this. . . . The text and the spaces." Often, the voice playfully points to the actual page readers are on or where certain words were used, to the selection of words and syntactical placement done by the writer (frequently making deliberate errors "the sentence unfin"), and to the physical activity involved in reading: "All that is happening is this reading being done, the only real thing, causing a few muscles to move imperceptibly and [raising consciousness of one's] own breathing." The narrator reminds readers at the end that, while this story "is no more," *your* real physical pres-

ence and involvement with words remains: "The words are yours. . . . Someone is reading. And gently closes the object."

The back cover of *A Book's* first edition highlights the invigorating process of seeing the "real" world in fresh ways after one has lucidly passed through a fictional representation of it: "Strange process, strange progress. To come back to life after having verified life in a book. (!)." From the beginning, Brossard's writing has been an evocative challenge to readers to engage in exploratory processes of playing with words for themselves to see the complex interweaving of fiction and reality in life's every facet. Such processes will enhance the awareness of self as a physical presence, creative force, ethical agent, and receptor of social institutions' formulaic ideologies. Narrators in *French Kiss* return often to this theme: "This is fiction but then I don't know what isn't any more"; "*You the deaf*, look to your ears!"

*Turn of a Pang* is an explicitly political novel that plays with parallels between 1941–43 (life in Montreal during World War II, conscription controversy, Brossard's birth) and 1970–73 (October crisis and after, writing of *Turn*), times of extreme animosity between Ottawa and Québec when life was tough, death ubiquitous, culture flamboyantly cinematic, desire and passions high and immediate. In "this trumped-up tale of childhood and maturity," seemingly disjointed words and events contrive to burst open official stories so as to produce "a slice of yesterday's everyday life": "words get to be no more than slogans snarled between teeth, crusted on lips." This "narration built of juxtaposition" is without normal characters. An emblematic Cherry "tell[s] me a story in rusty red" by serving as the vehicle for sensuous and sensual experiences in a gritty and historically layered Montreal.

*French Kiss*, an extraordinarily original novel that deserves recognition as a classic

of Québec literature, celebrates the zest of three women and two men, “mutating characters,” enjoying fully the privilege and pleasure of being “plugged into all forbidden things.” It is a road novel that pulses in both directions across Montreal’s Sherbrooke Street. At the centre of the text is a sequence of explosive, erotic ecstasy, when all the characters engage together in a *french kiss* at the intersection of Sherbrooke and Saint-Denis. The novel’s events flow in “feverish circulation” through veins and arteries of ardent minds, passionate bodies, and pulsing crowds in the city’s streets. At all these levels, thrusting tongues of language and lust spark unfettered intercourse: “from the heart of the city to the epicentre of oneself, the target and motive source.”

These novels subvert received notions of identity, reality, language and logic. They challenge readers to look, listen, think and speak for themselves. Although they pre-date the time when Brossard explicitly positioned herself as a feminist and lesbian writer, the explosion in these texts of sexist language and gender stereotypes shows her already moving decisively out of all heteronormative conventions.

*A Book and Turn* were the first translations of Brossard’s work. Despite the almost insurmountable difficulties of translating her experimental texts, she was well served by Larry Shouldice and Patricia Claxton. I note, though, that Shouldice’s choice of “variable” to translate “variante,” meaning individuals in a crowd, is unfortunate. Claxton’s translation of *French Kiss*, with her excellent foreword on imaginative and creative strategies to avoid “semantic loss” in translation, is equally fine. Brossard’s “Introduction” to *The Blue Books* provides important theoretical and historical insight. As the original publisher of these translations, Coach House is admirably maintaining in *The Blue Books* its bold and visionary commitment to radically creative writing.

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## Making Waves

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**Scott Burke, ed.**

*Maiden Voyages: Ship’s Company Theatre Premieres 2000–2002.* Broken Jaw P \$22.95

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Reviewed by Virginia Cooke

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Launched in 1984 in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia on the Bay of Fundy, Ship’s Company Theatre claims as its mission the production and development of Canadian and Atlantic theatre. Plays are produced aboard a de-commissioned ferry vessel, the MV Kipawa, the last of the Minas Bay ferries. Since 1984, Ship’s Company has mounted over 30 plays, 18 of them original productions, most notably Wendy Lill’s *Sisters* and *The Glace Bay Miners Museum*.

*Maiden Voyages* includes three works created for the Ship’s Company between 2000 and 2002: *Chairmaker the Musical* (2003) by Scott Burke, *Miles from Home* (2001) by Michael Melski, and *Sole Survivors* (2000) by Donna E. Smyth. The collection functions as a “ship’s log” of recent productions, and has intrinsic archival value. Each play features a Nova Scotian hero, and resonates locally, but two of these works may fail to make dramatic waves beyond the Bay of Fundy’s shores.

Scott Burke, who directed all three dramas, found inspiration for *Chairmaker* in a volume of rhymes and songs of Edgar Fisher, employed for 60 years in a chair factory in Bass River, Nova Scotia. Around these ditties, Burke wraps a thin 1940s tale of the factory owner’s son, Jimmy, ordered to work in the chair factory as penance after he has failed math and wrecked his father’s car. The factory (and the play) are presided over by an avuncular manager, Edward, who serves as both mentor and matchmaker for Jimmy—and serendipitously, as resident rustic philosopher and leader of the town’s barbershop quartet.

Local reviews attest to the audience’s enthusiastic embrace of *Chairmaker the Musical*, in part because it honours the his-

tory of the place (the actual Bass River chair factory burned down in 1948). However, lacking the music, the script fails to capture this appeal. Rather than homespun and charming, it seems predictable, with humour as adolescent as the characters. It does raise the issue of whether young people from Nova Scotia must pursue their dreams in Ontario.

In *Miles from Home*, Michael Melski offers the most overtly biographical of the plays, which he terms “a necessary synthesis of history and myth.” He adheres closely to *Marathon King*, Williston’s biography of Johnny Miles, the miner’s son from Cape Breton, “a twenty-one year old delivery boy in ninety-eight cent sneakers,” who twice won the Boston Marathon. Against the backdrop of strikes, disasters, and the drudgery of mining in Cape Breton, Melski explores Johnny’s obsession with running. The story itself is simple enough—boy wins race, boy loses race, boy wins race again, fulfilling his dream, and lifting the spirits of the folks back home. Yet the play offers several points of interest.

One is the soundscape. Starting guns, mine explosions, ships’ whistles, roars of crowds: such sounds often conclude one scene and transform into another sound that opens the subsequent scene. Further, sound sometimes offers ironic counterpoint to action or dialogue. Johnny’s non-sequitur monologues during races present the inner sound of running, which contrasts with the sportscaster’s booming external accounts of the race, as well as with the physical action. The set requires a track—astonishing, considering its production aboard a ship.

Melski’s ambitious attempt to correlate Johnny’s story with the social struggles of the miners works unevenly, but succeeds through the voices of the miners during the scenes of running. The play undoubtedly has local relevance, as Johnny Miles became a symbol of hope to Cape Breton miners.

*Sole Survivors*, based on the life of poet Elizabeth Bishop, originated as a one-

woman show, *Running to Paradise*, and was re-fashioned for the Ship’s Company. In brief vignettes, Smyth touches on events from Bishop’s life, from her 1934 meeting with Marianne Moore, to her 1979 receipt of an honorary degree from Dalhousie University. During those scenes, we meet Robert Lowell, Lotta Soares (Bishop’s Brazilian lover), and more briefly, Ezra Pound. One by one, the characters suffer immense loss. Smyth has mined the lively correspondence between these poets for glimpses of their complex relationships, and to track an introverted Bishop through loneliness and alcoholism, offset by her satisfaction in poetry and painting. The figure of Charles Darwin, whose writing Bishop admired, serves as a framing presence, guiding Bishop on her journey, and prompting her convocation address.

For Ship’s Company, the local connection lies in Bishop’s childhood roots in Great Village, Nova Scotia, where her mother suffered a breakdown. Bishop is haunted by guilt for her neglect of her mother. Of the three plays, *Sole Survivors* seems most likely to weather waters outside Nova Scotia. It deserves attention both from readers and potential producers.

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## Of This, and Other Worlds

**Aaron Bushkowsky**

*Mars is For Poems*. Oolichan P, \$14.95

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**Gregory M. Cook**

*Untying the Tongue*. Black Moss P \$17.95

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**Linda Frank**

*Cobalt Moon Embrace*. Buschek Books \$14.95

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**Adam Getty**

*Reconciliation Poems*. Nightwood Editions \$14.95

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**Daniel Sendeki**

*Strange Currencies*. AhaDada Books \$14.95

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Reviewed by Carole A. Turner

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The Canadian landscape is saturated with poetic conceits that co-opt actuality in order to portray the self. Poetic narcissism

becomes less a self-indulgence and more a record by different scribes bearing witness to the world and their own reactions. Poets are indicators of vital conditions, not unlike canaries once kept for early warnings in dangerous mine-shafts. These five poets offer responses ranging from meditative wrestling matches with the self to incomplete reconciliations with unstable histories and with avatars of beauty, spirituality and world violence.

Aaron Bushkowsky contemplates extra-terrestrial bodies as sites for whimsical speculation, projecting the inner world onto the outer in a thinly-veiled self-portrait. In *Mars is for Poems*, dream-visions portray parallel universes, and imagination is set against ambivalent responses to consumer culture including science-fiction television, and pop-chart radio. Bushkowsky's planetary distancing inverts perspectives revealing sacrosanct and mundane conventions as arbitrary signs of cultural pre-conditioning. His writing insists we learn to love, and re-assess the quotidian while responding to our own inner exuberance.

Gregory Cook's poetry is sprinkled with metaphors bridging self and environment while apparently reaching for the stars, but actually falling back into the self. In *Untying the Tongue* the poet's ink captures a passing world that includes country hay-festivals, lost reminiscences of World War II veterans and taxi rides with abused women from half-way homes. Cook's backdrop of ancestral heritage is set against engaging collocations: "On our farm sheep-counting lived in books and tales. / The horse that jumped my amnesia's footboard / was as real as my defiance of fear / its striking hooves breaking my heartbeat." In Cook's self-conscious world, everything is story, including the process of writing.

Linda Frank spins memories and orphic dreams while held in thrall by the triple moon goddess. Paths of life are traced by departing birds, remnants of things left

behind, and accumulated moments winding across morning skies. Frank's richly metaphoric, mythological method incorporates natural imagery and symbolic sites, including hill-country plateaus, sensuous serpents, and ancient Abbeys. Shifting from Montreal to Hamilton, many of these poems allude equally to esoteric spirituality and pop culture ballads. In *Cobalt Moon*, the world of the living is kept at arm's length, yet the self is explored so that fleshly passions emerge through turbulent dream-songs embracing Kurt Cobain, Orpheus, Carlos Castaneda, Leonardo Di Caprio, and J.S. Bach.

*Reconciliation Poems* features manifold Biblical allusions, including Capernaum, and the olive groves of Galilee, wrapped in a contemporary gauze of words anointed with polysporin, covering irreconcilable wounds that may never heal. Adam Getty interweaves industrial cityscapes, tortuous dream worlds, world history and ancient myth. Images of Srebernica and cinnamon Cheerios are set in ironic juxtaposition to self-conscious speculations about the failure to achieve immortality through writing. Getty works in a slaughterhouse in Burlington, Ontario, drawing inspiration from Moritz among others. Getty's lucid eye measures Ophelia against the Mahadeviyakka, while Zamboni machines sweep past potters of ancient Corinth, and the mischief of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov is contrasted with the worlds of Homer or the Iroquois.

Daniel Sendeki sends postcards from Beijing, the Mekong Delta, and other Asian sites of strife. Sendeki observes time's transformational power reducing once-potent bombshells to children's toys, while the laughter of Laotian children slips into dreams of Walt Whitman occupying the poetic underworld of Calcutta. Sendeki's tour of self-discovery relies heavily on metaphor to depict inward and outward progress simultaneously. His poetry resonates with eerie melodies of absence, in

grisly meditations at Hanoi, Phnom Penh, the Taj Mahal, Seoul and Tokyo. Mixing eastern and western spiritual perspectives, the return home is underscored with a parodic consecration and the realization that “To lose again what you’ve found out” can only inspire laughter at finally arriving where you have always been.

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## Growing Pains, Still?

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**Howard C. Clark**

*Growth and Governance of Canadian Universities: An Insider's View.* UBC Press \$85.00

Reviewed by L. M. Findlay

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The stream of books about Canadian universities continues, and in a mostly positive way. The tricky and contentious part comes when talk turns to improvement, greater competitiveness, or new orders of connectivity and accountability.

Howard C. Clark is President and Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of Dalhousie University. A former Professor of Chemistry at UBC and Western, he draws on wide knowledge in his account of change in the Canadian university system since 1945. He describes his own intellectual formation in New Zealand and Cambridge before recording the Canadian phase of his career through the filters of scientific training and a very traditional, British academic grooming. Rapid and sweeping changes in Canadian postsecondary education are documented from the perspective of raw recruit, established scholar, and academic leader, as Clark changes while attempting to reform the mission of the modern, publicly funded university. Readers may recognize here all sorts of connections to their own experience, including the satisfactions, challenges, and occasional nightmares of any career in academe where highly intelligent and motivated people attempt to work together within environments and structures rarely given a thought when things are going well but subject to fierce dispute

during funding crunches or periods of review, redirection, or rebranding.

Dr. Clark is commendably concerned with the dismantling of disciplinary silos and the need for “a broadly based but rigorous undergraduate education.” For him, a broad belief in the value of science and technology led to the postwar establishment of large science departments in key Canadian universities, and these departments in turn were the primary transformers of institutions into “real universities” with major research capacities. And there is little doubt today, with a massive innovation agenda underway, that many universities look to these aspects of their performance as the main source of their value and reputation. However, Clark is less persuasive when he strays from this reductive narrative into analysis of the “more competitive Canadian society of the early twenty-first century, with its concern for efficiency and accountability,” or into complaint that Canadian governments, unlike their peers elsewhere, have left universities with too much autonomy. Much of Clark’s argument hangs on the idea of a clash between rapid and sweeping “growth” and arcane and relatively immutable “governance.” He sees the unrelenting oversight of faculty performance not as exemplary self-policing but rather as “creeping legalism” that has lowered standards and feather-bedded the undeserving and the obstructive. Predictably, he looks to business for better models of accountability and efficiency, a strategy that would increase the corporatization of Canadian universities just when Enronian and Haliburtonian ethics are influencing a wide array of domestic and international policies, and when there is a greater need than ever for independent critical voices to contest from inside their alleged “timewarp” the demands of impatient opportunists and self-confident amnesiacs. This is no time to be subordinating academic freedom and

participatory governance to the edicts of autocratic academic CEOs and their governmental and corporate constituencies.

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## La tuberculose dévoilée

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**Louise Côté**

*En garde! Les Représentations de la tuberculose au Québec dans la première moitié du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle.*  
Presses de l'Université Laval \$29.00

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Compte rendu par Susan Kevra

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Dans *En garde! Les Représentations de la tuberculose au Québec dans la première moitié du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Louise Côté nous offre une étude fascinante d'une maladie mortelle à l'époque en question. L'auteur puise ses données dans de nombreuses sources: les archives institutionnelles et gouvernementales, les revues médicales, mais aussi des sources populaires: telles que romans, contes, journaux de sanatorium, publicités, correspondance et entretiens. Bien qu'elle fournisse peu de tableaux ou de chiffres, cette lacune est bien compréhensible. En effet, c'est le genre de données qu'elle remettra en question en soulignant la peur et la honte engendrées par cette maladie qui poussait les familles à cacher le type de mort, ce qui faussait les statistiques. Ni ouvrage historique sur la médecine, ni histoire sociale, c'est plutôt un ouvrage ethno-anthropologique qui retrace les changements dans la notion de la maladie et dans les attitudes envers les gens atteints.

L'originalité de son argument réside dans sa capacité à faire entendre différentes voix: celles du malade, de la femme désespérée priant pour le retour de son mari, du médecin démuné de remèdes, des personnages des romans, des promesses extraordinaires sur un bocal d'huile de foie de morue. Elle nous guide dans les sanatoriums québécois, faisant revivre les beaux "appartements communs confortablement aménagés" du sanatorium du Lac-Edouard. . . "dégagea[nt] une impression de chaleur et de confort." Elle nous promène également dans

l'immense Hôpital Laval, avec près de 500 lits, lieu moderne, stérile et efficace, afin de soigner un public plus nombreux mais bien moins fortuné que celui du Lac-Edouard.

Comme le titre le suggère, les images militaires forment l'architecture du livre qui est divisé en trois parties, intitulées "Déclarer la guerre," "Stratégies de combat" et "L'armée des tuberculeux." Dans la première partie, Côté trace l'évolution de la compréhension de la maladie et montre comment la perception du malade a changé selon les croyances médicales du moment. La deuxième section, "Stratégies de combat," contient la description de remèdes étranges—consommation du sang de boeuf, du lait de femme, etc., tentatives visiblement nées du désespoir. L'impuissance de la communauté médicale a aussi contribué aux pratiques douteuses comme la stabulation (l'installation du patient la nuit à l'étable, enveloppé de la couverture d'une jument et couché sur un lit de paille pour pouvoir respirer l'air mêlé de l'odeur du lait de l'animal, censé posséder un pouvoir guérissant) et aux interventions douloureuses et dangereuses telles que la collapsothérapie (dans cette intervention, il s'agissait d'affaïsser le poumon dans l'espoir de permettre au poumon percé de mieux guérir). Sans les antibiotiques, qui ne seront découverts que dans les années 50, les médecins, munis d'armes insuffisantes, constituaient une armée bloquée.

L'autre armée symbolique à laquelle Côté fait référence, surtout dans la troisième section du livre, c'est la multitude de malades. Retirés de leur communauté, ils se retrouvent engagés dans une bataille pour la vie en solidarité avec d'autres qui partagent dans la même peur. Un ex-patient du sanatorium du Lac-Edouard a expliqué: "Nous étions comme à l'armée. Nos uniformes, c'était nos robes de chambres." Au coeur d'un ouvrage plein d'histoires navrantes, Côté dévoile l'image stéréotypée du sanatorium vu comme une prison, pour

révéler un endroit plein d'humanité, d'humour et de tendresse. La seule faiblesse de cette section—voire, du livre entier—est une tendance à remanier certains sujets déjà abordés.

Avec le recul, il est tentant de croire que nous sommes bien meilleurs que nos ancêtres avec leurs cures et leurs interventions cauchemardesques. À l'heure actuelle, on peut se sentir à l'abri des forces ravageuses de la tuberculose, mais les antibiotiques autrefois considérés comme invincibles ne sont plus une garantie contre la tuberculose. L'ouvrage de *Côté* porte toutefois un message plus large. Comme nos ancêtres, nous ne sommes pas non plus immunisés contre les dangers dus à l'ignorance ou aux désinformations diffusées par ceux qui prétendent nous protéger, tout en stigmatisant ceux qui ont le plus besoin d'aide.

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## Potent Unjust Nuptials

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**Terry Crowley**

*Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada*. U of Toronto P \$29.95

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Reviewed by Samara Walbohm

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Terry Crowley's bio-political history is timely and prodigious. With its subject, its timeline (covering significant moments in the making of Canadian nationalism leading up to World War II) and particularly the number and depth of sources used, *Marriage of Minds* is impressive and subtly judicious in the current political climate. Following the lives of Oscar and Isabel Skelton through childhood, shared experiences at Queen's University at the turn of the last century, and (mostly) Oscar's academic life both at the University of Chicago and his academic appointments at Queen's, Crowley details the personal and professional influences and intellectual shifts which define the Skeltons as "a tentative bridgehead to the modern" and ultimately lead to Oscar's appointment as "modern

mandarin" and then as undersecretary of state for External Affairs under Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King in 1925. Crowley effectively links Skelton to an entire lineage of Canadian and international political and economic figures such as James Laurence Laughlin, Herbert J. Davenport, Adam Shortt, Robert Hoxie, Clifford Clark, Harold Innis, and Vincent Massey and does much to enrich contexts of Canada's political and economic history. Crowley effectively chronicles the making of Skelton's personalized view of "new liberalism" which held as its ideal an independent Canada, one not linked solely by residual colonial ties (and debts) to Britain but one which would forge new and progressive links with the United States. A central aim of Oscar Skelton's intellectual and public career which spanned World War I, operated successfully through R. B. Bennett's leadership (1930–35), and contributed to the events leading up to Canada's engagement in World War II (his untimely death in 1941 did not allow him to witness the allied victory), would be to promote untiringly (and not without criticism) these goals in negotiation with his role as public advisor.

*Marriage*, "a blend of private and public, thought and action," is most effective when Crowley implements sources such as diary entries and correspondence from King and other international figures, as well as between Oscar and Isabel, to revision central moments and figures of Canada's past and disentangle common criticisms of Skelton as a neutralist/isolationist in various political projects such as the Manchurian Affair (1931) and Canada's complex and shifting role prior to World War II.

*Marriage* ultimately presents Skelton as a prescient socio-political visionary and does much to recontextualize the evolution of Canadian nationalism. Crowley impresses most with his use of alternative or "private" sources from the world inhabited by women and his claims of Isabel's importance to

Canadian cultural history are certain. But sadly they are often lost as brief snippets slipped between detailed accounts of Oscar's illuminative career. Crowley insists on the significance of Isabel's contributions to domestic and cultural history with such progressive works as *The Backwoodswoman*, (Canada's first women's history), her biography of Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and her work on F.P. Grove.

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## A Few Pearls in a Lot of Gravel

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**Nirmal Dass**

*City of Rains*. ThistleDown \$19.95

Reviewed by Anupama Mohan

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*City of Rains*, in many ways reminiscent of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, is structured on the twin narratives of Raj Kumar, whose life-story underscores and makes purposive the life and narrative of the nameless "I" of the story. From Dhanoa, a Himalayan village in India to Rouen in France, the novel's reach is vast. Raj's diary reminiscences of a past idyll in Rouen entwine with the narrator's own Odysseus-like journey to an idyll in Punjab, the land of his parents, the fountainhead of his family's myths.

For this reader, the novel's strengths lie in the evocative descriptions of French life, of a Rouen almost arrested in memory, to be culled out in intricate patterns by the meticulous narrator whose desire to demystify Raj is as urgent as is his need to locate meaning in his own life. Raj's love story unfolds with the narrator's own experience of India, which is where the novel falters. As the disparity between the India of the narrator's dreams (heroic myths, "vestigial memor[ies]" of an Afghan heritage) and the hard reality that he encounters ("the great wash of misery overwhelmed me") is brought out then repeatedly stressed, this reader could not help but wince at the oh-so-familiar train of India-deriding. At the

other extreme, the Dhanoan idyll and its mystical ecstasies of a life untouched by technology and city ethics appears as a simplistic diminution of 21st century India.

The novel's terrain is uneven: Dass' evocative recounting of the intense 1947 Partition of Hindustan sits awkwardly with the chapter on Dussehra, which when not naïve in its retelling of the Ramayana myth, that itself is not one but many-versioned ("Rama came to doubt Sita's fidelity, and had her burnt on a pyre"), is often downright inaccurate. Ravana's island fortress is called "Sri Lanka" and not Lanka, the former a nomenclature the island adopted only when it became a nation in 1948.

Hanuman is erroneously described as "king of the monkeys": the brothers Bali and Sugreev were rival contenders for kingship. These are anomalies that perhaps only an Indian (or one well familiar with Hindu myths) would notice, but they symptomatize for this reader a fundamental lack within the novel, and smack of neo-orientalist tendencies by which the picture of India evoked is the unidimensional and clichéd one of "muddle," "cacophony," "infested with gods and demons." In short, it is an India of "a few pearls in a lot of gravel." Not only does such a vision mark any exaggerated incredible extremity from the pastoralism of Dhanoa with its "cowbells, the stray dogs, the nightingales," it is also the pitfall of an outsiderly and dismissive attitude that diasporic writing must constantly guard against, and one that cannot be wished away by labeling as the "ex-patriot's" take on India.

The novel disappoints also with its lack of meaningful women characters. The women are pale, insipid creatures, mere names, with little to do in the phallogocentric memoirs that make up the novel. Even Raj's all-important muse remains a cipher: the "tremendous" Isabelle's tremendousness remains an imputed and oblique power, as she frustrates with her lack of interiority and personhood.

The novel's polyphony, intertextuality, and eclectic mix of poetry and prose, myth and memory, language and silence are, however, powerful metaphors of its central question: "What does it mean to live in two worlds? Or even three or four?" Ultimately the novel belongs not to Dass, nor even to the narrator one hopes is not Dass himself, but to Raj's quest and to his City of Rains, Rouen.

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## Fathers, Sons and Heroes

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**Brian Doyle**

*Boy O'Boy*. Douglas & McIntyre \$12.95

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**Eric Walters**

*Run*. Viking Canada \$22.00

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Reviewed by Rick Mulholland

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*Run* and *Boy O'Boy* are novels about relationships. Both books feature a boy in early adolescence who, in one form or another, is having difficulty with his father. Doyle's Martin has a father who is rarely home and, when he is, is often fighting with Martin's mother or bullying Martin. Winston, in *Run*, rarely sees his father, a reporter, who is divorced from Winston's mother.

The two boys have other difficulties in their lives. Winston gets into trouble with the law and is sent to spend time with his father, who is on assignment in Nova Scotia covering a human interest story, while Martin begins to have trouble with the organist for the summer church choir he joined. Without strong father figures in their lives, Martin and Winston show signs of hero worship.

For Winston, the hero is Terry Fox. Winston befriends Terry and his best friend, Doug Alward, while accompanying them on the Marathon of Hope through Nova Scotia where Winston's father interviews Terry for a newspaper story. Winston spends many days and evenings talking to both Terry and Doug. It is through these chats with Terry, either while running, eating meals, or playing one-on-one basketball with him, that Winston unknowingly

reveals the trouble he is having with his father that has led to the trouble that he is having back home in Toronto. These interactions develop into a great friendship that shows Winston Terry's strength, courage, and determination to succeed. Winston vows on his return to Toronto to follow Terry's example and begin to change the way he interacts at home and at school.

Martin's hero is his neighbour, Buz, who is fighting overseas in World War I. Throughout the story, Martin is looking forward to Buz's return because Buz always protected Martin and his friend Billy from neighbour bullies. After Martin joins the summer church choir, the organist of the choir becomes a little too close to Martin, who has no idea how to deal with the problem. When he sees his best friend Billy having the same problem, they try on their own to solve it but only make matters worse. Then word comes that Buz will be returning soon. Martin knows that Buz will know how to solve the problem with the organist. Buz eventually returns and, when everyone shows up to greet him, Martin decides to tell him what was happening with the organist. In true traditional hero fashion, Buz saves the day.

In one book, the relationship is improved after the hero's intervention, and in the other, the reader is left wondering. I would highly recommend both these books for general reading or when looking for books concerning the relationship between fathers and their sons.

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## French Canadian Lives

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**Paulette Dubé**

*Talon*. NeWest \$18.95

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Reviewed by Jeanne Perreault

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Paulette Dubé's novel *Talon* is set in the early 1960s in a small French Canadian community north of Edmonton, not unlike Legal, Dubé's hometown. This is a world

that has not yet been written, the secrets of its social realities central to the novel. Dubé's characters are five generations of women of one family who are blessed with the power to heal or prevent harm with prayer. The family is "halfbreed," but makes no overt reference to its Aboriginal heritage, an omission common in many French Canadian families. In these characters, devout Roman Catholicism is thoroughly mixed with traditional First Nations' knowledge of healing and otherworldly powers.

To bring 100 years of family history to the present, Dubé introduces the youngest woman Phélice (b. 1938) who is determined to trace the history of her great grandmother, Rubis (b. 1843), left in Gaspé when the rest of her family moved West. Phélice has Rubis' notebook of herbal remedies, prayers, and journal entries, which provide information about the family's movements, clues to the mystery of her violent death, and a pretext for the next generation's characters' actions. (It also includes a recipe for mustard plaster that made my eyes water and skin burn in corporeal memory.)

The novel skips back and forth between generations, sections marked by a date or place name, punctuated by Dubé's own poems, Phélice's taped interviews, or a "[ ]" indicating (I finally figured out) a photograph, followed by a description of it and then an explanation of its context. For me the form of this novel pushed the story right to the edge of its strengths. The fragmentation of chronology and the many characters in multiple and intergenerational relationships to each other is at first confusing, then irritating, and finally right. The narrative voice (or, more often, authorial function) places narrative elements alongside each other. It reports on what is said by whom, who opens the bottle of rye, and who corroborates or corrects a tale. Most interestingly, the narrative intercepts a character's memory with a direct presentation of the event itself. This practice

ensures that the reader, like the character, remembers as the story is told and retold, as the young wife is punched in the face, as the baby is lost—by design or accident—and as the spell is cast along with the prayer. The mesh of stories and secrets that has kept the daughters, sisters, mothers and aunts in thrall and in trust with each other is made intelligible to the reader, not only by way of the power of stories, but also through the immediacy of an originary experience. Dubé asks important questions in *Talon*, not just about memory and narrative, but also about evil manifested here in the violence of fathers and husbands and sons. She examines the ramifications of acting (or not) against injustice, cruelty, and betrayal. The women who face questions of morality and necessity do so not as ethical abstractions but as everyday realities.

French Canadian expressions and songs appear throughout the book. They evoke a time and place and language that Dubé makes available, not flawlessly, but vividly. A glossary is helpfully provided. This Canadian reality will be a surprise to many, and a sharp fragrance of home to others.

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## Recovering Popular Fiction

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**Evelyn Eaton**

*Quietly My Captain Waits*. Formac \$16.95

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**Alice Jones**

*The Night Hawk*. Formac \$16.95

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**G.A. Henty**

*With Wolfe in Canada*. Inheritance n.p.

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Reviewed by Andrea Cabajsky

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The Canadian publishers of these three historical adventure novels aim to revive general interest in books that were once phenomenally popular and which remain noteworthy today for their innovative treatment of North American history, as well as for the celebrity status their authors once achieved. Both Formac and Inheritance Publishers emphasize the lasting educa-

tional and entertainment value of historical fiction by Evelyn Eaton (1902–1983), Alice Jones (1853–1933), and G.A. Henty (1832–1902), respectively. In reissuing the complete original texts, the publishers also share the goal of fostering a taste for historical adventure as well as a desire for unabridged historiography.

*Quietly My Captain Waits* (1940) and *The Night Hawk* (1901) have been reissued in the “Formac Fiction Treasures” series edited by Gwendolyn Davies, which aims to recover nearly forgotten Canadian novels written by Maritimers. *Quietly My Captain Waits* recounts the story of Louise Guyon Damours de Freneuse, whose notorious affair with Simon-Pierre de Bonaventure in early eighteenth-century Port Royal forms the subject of Eaton’s exploration of political and sexual intrigue against a backdrop of imperial contest in Acadia. *Quietly My Captain Waits* was an immediate hit. As editor Barry M. Moody explains in his short introduction, when the novel was first published, “Hollywood was already interested [in producing a film of it], and was considering Vivien Leigh as the star.” Warner Brothers ended up paying \$40,000 for the movie rights and had Bette Davis, rather than Leigh, in mind for the lead. World War II eventually put a stop to production, so Hollywood never ended up making its film of Bette Davis in eighteenth-century Nova Scotia. Nevertheless, the novel had other recognition, as a Literary Guild Selection and a Harper’s Find.

Eaton is an interesting figure in her own right. She is the author of 20 novels, an autobiography, three books of poetry, numerous book reviews and magazine articles (including 25 for the *New Yorker*), and three books of spiritual life-writing. Eaton had a fraught relationship with her immediate family, who felt she had disregarded upper middle-class codes of conduct by becoming a writer. Her mother always compared Eaton unfavourably with her

blonde-haired, blue-eyed sister to the extent that, in her sister’s debutante year, her mother sent Eaton to Paris so that she would not diminish her sister’s chances of marrying well. Eaton was later rejected by her mother for having had a child out of wedlock, although Mrs. Eaton later attempted to make amends once her daughter’s writing career had become profitable.

Eaton finally found her niche when, at the age of 40, she discovered her paternal Micmac heritage, which she felt explained not only her dark hair and eyes, but also her psychic experiences. (Eaton apparently saw ghosts so vividly that she had difficulty telling who was real and who was not.) Eaton eventually became accepted as a medicine woman, became a pipe carrier, and became known as Mahad’yuni (“Hands-Show-Way”). A former war correspondent, novelist, essayist, medicine woman, and spiritualist, Eaton is a fascinating literary figure. In reissuing an affordable edition of *Quietly My Captain Waits*, Formac has performed the extremely valuable service of reintroducing Canadians to an entertaining novel and an intriguing writer.

Alice Jones is the author of four novels, three unpublished works, and several travel stories. *The Night Hawk* is her first novel, and tells an American civil war story from the perspective of a Confederate spy based in Halifax. The larger-than-life heroine, Antoinette Castelle, repeatedly risks her life for the cause of Southern nationalism, which she pursues with almost religious fervour in the hope that, by “dying for [her] country, [she] may be made whole.” A popular romance of intrigue, travel, disguise, poisoning, a duel, kidnapping, blackmail, illicit sex, numerous marriage proposals, and a divorced heroine who battles persistent foes while managing not to diminish her sexual allure, *The Night Hawk* will be familiar to today’s consumers of action-adventure films that feature strong-minded yet vulnerable heroines.

Less is remembered today about Alice Jones, and more about her father, A.G. Jones, former lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia (1900–06), an advocate of free trade with the U.S., and a prominent Repealer. Her father's influence on Jones is apparent in *The Night Hawk's* plot, which sidesteps the historically strong ties between the Maritimes and New England, as well as debates about emancipation. *The Night Hawk* portrays Nova Scotia instead as a political and moral analogue of the American South. Fortunately, Greg Marquis' short introduction does well to illuminate the novel's cultural and historical contexts for the benefit of readers desiring an introduction to its deceptively complicated historicism and its little-known author.

The Formac series emphasizes the formative role of Maritime writers in shaping international literary taste for historical romances during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also aims to recapture an era in which people eagerly awaited their next installments of rousing adventure stories and entertaining romances. Inheritance shares this latter aim with Formac and, in reissuing Henty's *With Wolfe in Canada*, aims to attract a new generation of male juvenile readers to Henty's novel of "military exploit and thrilling adventure."

*With Wolfe in Canada* links the fate of its resourceful and athletic protagonist, James Walsham, with dramatic events surrounding the Seven Years' War, when Britain secured its destiny as "the great colonizing empire of the world." The Inheritance edition of *With Wolfe in Canada* is published by special arrangement with the American publisher Preston/Speed. The short introduction to this edition can thus also be found on Preston/Speed's website, which details Henty's influence on some of the twentieth century's more famous political leaders and scholars. Both publishers locate Henty's didactic value at the roots of their decision to reissue affordable editions of his

novels. In the short introduction that prefaces this edition, however, the publisher advocates the book as a "study aid" with the somewhat perplexing aim of helping readers to "compare/contrast" the "society of various European and heathen cultures."

While a longer introduction is beyond the scope of this edition, one wishes that Inheritance had clarified its understanding of Henty's didacticism. Given Henty's muscular Christianity, as well as the conservatism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism of his young male protagonists, and given that the introduction locates the protagonists' "heroism" in jingoistic terms, then such clarification is highly desirable in a text intended as a "study aid" for young boys. More rigorous proofreading and correction of typos might also have been helpful.

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## Rewriting Gabrielle Roy

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Jane Everett and François Ricard, eds.

*Gabrielle Roy réécrite*. Éditions Nota Bene \$19.95

Reviewed by Paul Socken

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This collection of essays is the result of a 2001 seminar held by the research group on Gabrielle Roy at McGill headed by François Ricard. Jane Everett defines "réécriture" as working with the original creative text in whole or in part, transforming it in some important way. She presents a masterful overview of the theories of re-writing as presented by such critics as Genette, Lefevre and Ricardou. Examples of re-writing are translation, adaptation for television or film, critical editions, and literary criticism. She concludes that, after examining Gabrielle Roy's works in this light, one appreciates their complexity and resists all attempts at simplification or generalization.

Dominique Fortier shows how *Rue Deschambault* and *La Route d'Altamont* are parallel works but different in tone. Fortier's sophisticated reading takes into

account differing narrative voices and ultimately concludes that *La Route d'Altamont* constitutes a re-writing of *Rue Deschambault*. Christine Robinson studies the genesis of "Un Jardin au bout du monde" through an analysis of three versions of "Le Printemps revint à Volhyn". She focuses on narration, communication and the question of characters dropped in the process of re-writing. Robinson deftly illustrates how this story represents a "véritable laboratoire d'écriture" for Roy's other works. Yannick Roy demonstrates convincingly how three unpublished works, that at first glance appear completely unrelated to the Roy corpus, in fact are prototypes of later works. More importantly, she shows how the earlier works are allegories which take root in fictional form and how the fiction is necessarily more subtle and nuanced although each genre is reflected in the other.

Sophie Montreuil examines 15 letters exchanged between Roy and her translator, Joyce Marshall. In translating *La Montagne secrète*, Marshall had to take into account the original, the existing translation by H. Binsse and Roy's ongoing commentary on the translation. The result is a fascinating and unique glimpse into a personal and professional relationship. Lorna Hutchinson and Nathalie Cooke write (in English) about Roy's fame in English Canada at a time when the political atmosphere and government funding for translation were favourable. In a long article, they discuss Roy's carefully cultivated relationships with critics and publishers in English Canada and the care and attention she took in her translations. They suggest that she created a persona which she manipulated to her advantage. Sophie Marcotte discusses the space between text and its interpretation: the zone that she calls fluid is, in the final analysis, a re-writing of the text. She uses the example of music where the interpretation of the composition is a major part of its expression. The volume concludes with "Feuilles mortes," a

story of Gabrielle Roy published previously only in *La Revue de Paris* in 1948 and in *Maclean's* in English in 1947. For readers of *Alexandre Chenevert*, this is a seminal text.

This book is yet another important contribution to Gabrielle Roy studies by Ricard's group at McGill. All the articles are of high quality and deserve praise.

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## A Fur Trade Narrative

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**Robert M. Galois**

*A Voyage to the North West Side of America: The Journals of James Colnett, 1786–89.* UBC Press \$95

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Reviewed by Alan D. McMillan

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Captain James Colnett, an experienced mariner who had sailed with James Cook, signed on as captain of the *Prince of Wales* and leader of an expedition to the Northwest Coast in 1786. This was a commercial endeavour, spurred by the lucrative trade in sea otter pelts. After spending the summers of 1787 and 1788 trading along the coast, from Vancouver Island to Prince William Sound, and the winter in Hawaii, Colnett sailed to China with his valuable cargo. From there, rather than returning to England with the *Prince of Wales*, Colnett assumed command of the *Argonaut* and sailed back to the Northwest Coast. When he reached Nootka Sound in the spring of 1789, however, he found a Spanish garrison claiming sovereignty. Colnett's subsequent arrest and the seizure of his ship led to the "Nootka Crisis" that brought England and Spain to the brink of war. Colnett's journal as captain of the *Argonaut* was published in 1940, but his earlier voyage on the *Prince of Wales* remained unavailable and little known until the appearance of this book.

Editor Robert Galois intersperses Colnett's narrative with excerpts from a second unpublished journal, that of third mate Andrew Taylor. Taylor provides additional details and is occasionally critical of Colnett. Galois has extensively annotated

these accounts, providing 110 pages of footnotes. A substantial introductory essay, in which Galois situates the voyage in its historical and political context, greatly enhances the utility of the book. Five appendices provide additional information.

This journal documents an early period in the maritime fur trade and provides observations on indigenous people of the Northwest Coast and Hawaii. Although some groups, such as those of Nootka Sound and Prince William Sound, were familiar with European visitors, in other places, such as among the Tsimshian and Heiltsuk, these encounters may have been the initial contact. Even there, however, Native people already possessed European goods. At each location, powerful chiefs attempted to control the trade and restrict more distant communities. Although ethnographic details are disappointingly brief, the journals do offer glimpses of late eighteenth century Native life. Colnett and Taylor were astute in distinguishing between Native groups based on linguistic and cultural differences, and Galois offers numerous scholarly annotations to guide the reader.

These accounts also cast light on early trade practices and relations with Native peoples. Taylor expressed disapproval of Captain Barkley's coercive trading techniques in Nootka Sound. They also had to contend with Native distrust stemming from Captain Hanna's use of his cannons the previous year. Theft was an irritant for all the early European traders and Colnett resorted to such harsh punishment as flogging offenders. He also had recourse to his cannon, with lethal effect.

Colnett's voyage typifies the intersection of commerce, politics, and scientific investigation in the late eighteenth century. As Galois notes, there was little practical difference between the "scientific" voyage of Cook and "commercial" expeditions like Colnett's. Colnett left a cartographic legacy that aided later arrivals such as George Vancouver.

Colnett's central position in the "Nootka Crisis" meant that he played a key role in the "contesting imperialisms" that played out on the Northwest Coast. Galois is to be commended for making available the account of Colnett's earlier travels.

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## Hollywood Not

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**Mike Gasher**

*Hollywood North: The Feature Film Industry in British Columbia.* UBC Press \$24.95

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Reviewed by Jerry Wasserman

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Vancouver's identification as Hollywood North has become such a cliché that no self-respecting Vancouverite would repeat it today without at least a smirk of self-conscious irony. The city rocketed to its status as North America's third or fourth largest production centre over the course of little more than a decade beginning in earnest in the mid-1980s. When the video boom, a proliferation of new American cable channels, and the Fox network's inaugural seasons triggered an increased demand for "product," Vancouver and environs answered the call. Only a quick plane ride up the coast from Los Angeles in the same time zone, the region offered a variety of spectacular locations, compliant unions eager for the work, and local governments anxious for the economic spin-offs and glamour that the industry brings. Along with a rapidly weakening Canadian dollar, it all added up to major savings for American companies. In 1987, Hollywood producer Stephen J. Cannell built a large studio in North Vancouver to accommodate his new TV shows such as *21 Jump Street*, and the floodgates opened.

By the year 2000, according to Mike Gasher, film and television were contributing over a billion dollars annually to the provincial economy compared with only \$12 million in 1978. By that time too, the locals had started to become blasé about the whole deal. People would joke that

practically everyone in the city had at one time or another been seen on *The X-Files*, and location fatigue began appearing in neighbourhoods where film trucks had become as common as Starbucks. Given the typical pattern of British Columbia's boom and bust economy, many expected that the crash would soon follow. Although it hasn't yet, production has fallen steadily over the past few years for a variety of reasons, and the Hollywood North label increasingly smacks of colonial cringe.

Gasher's earnestly informative book, focusing on feature film production, argues that this recent history differs only in degree from British Columbia's position in the North American film industry during most of the past century. Gasher identifies a number of interrelated elements that have characterized the BC filmmaking experience: the branch-plant nature of its economic base; an emphasis on foreign rather than domestic location production; its alienation from the institutions of central Canadian film financing and production; an industrial rather than cultural conception of cinema; and, accordingly, provincial government film policies heavily skewed toward regional industrial development. He provides a late chapter that looks briefly at local colour in such made-in-BC movies as *The Grey Fox*, *My American Cousin* and *Double Happiness*: "indigenous films [that] particularize and diversify British Columbia [and] render the province a distinct historical, political, social, and cultural entity." But ultimately, he argues, the shapers of provincial film policy have been more interested in the industry than in the films, more eager to present the province as a cinematic *tabula rasa* that can double for anywhere than as a source of cultural identification or art. "This land is your land . . . We can give it to you for a song," boasts a BC Film Commission promotional brochure. Cast as a cheap commodity, no wonder British Columbia remains more of a stand-in than

a star in its own movies. A former film commissioner suggests that its most notable role has been "Nowheresville, USA."

Not that British Columbians haven't responded to that role with an ambivalence typical of Canadian relationships with the US. As early as 1920, the province began trying to balance its share in the profitability of American movie-making with a half-hearted maintenance of indigenous cultural defences. While encouraging American companies to shoot and screen their movies in BC, the government also established the British Columbia Patriotic and Educational Picture Service which required that BC theatres open every show with fifteen minutes of films and slides depicting the "wealth, activities, development, and possibilities" of the province. By 1924 BC's fifteen minutes of legislated fame were no longer being enforced but the American movies remained. When Britain established a preferential quota in 1927 for films made within the Empire, Hollywood studios moved into BC to make "quota quickies" for the British market. In 1937 the BC film censor—the first in Canada—banned 50 films for displaying US flags. But long after British quotas and BC censors were gone, American quickies, flags, and money remained. By 1995 total spending on film and television production in BC had leapt to over \$400 million, a mere 8 per cent of it local investment.

Although Gasher steers clear of political finger-pointing, his analysis reveals a depressing lack of concern for homegrown cultural development by the "free enterprise" governments that have run BC for most of its history. At the start of the film boom in the mid-1980s, British Columbia accounted for a miniscule 1.3 per cent of total provincial government spending on film and video production in Canada. When the Social Credit government of the day committed \$10.5 million to help finance local films, it would only justify the fund in terms of economic diversification and tourism.

Alberta had had a cultural branch and Saskatchewan an arts board since the 1940s; Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba added theirs in the 1960s; but British Columbia had to wait until 1995 for an NDP government to establish the BC Arts Council. Not that it had much effect. In 2004 the provincial Liberals eliminated a \$4 million fund to encourage local film production.

Despite all this, British Columbia has profited much more than it has suffered from being a northern satellite of the Hollywood empire. As multinational industries go, this is exploitation on a very minor scale. The Americans have not set up film *maquiladoras* along the border. They may pay less well than they do in L.A. and treat locals with the polite condescension they reserve for all foreigners. But the regional economic benefits are indeed substantial, the reflected glamour is harmless fun, and the industry is a whole lot cleaner than pulp mills, sweatshops, or mines. The absence of a thriving feature film culture is hardly unique to the westernmost province, nor can it be blamed on crass Hollywood moguls elbowing out clumsy local artists. The problems of funding and distribution are endemic across Canada (at least outside of Quebec), and the dark shadow cast by American cultural hegemony transcends all national borders. Only when we begin seriously to distinguish between film as *culture* and film as *cultural industry* will the branch-plant mentality of Hollywood North cease to be a concern for anyone outside the Ministry of Regional Development.

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## Moore's Catholicism

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Liam Gearon

*Landscapes of Encounter: The Portrayal of Catholicism in the Novels of Brian Moore.* U of Calgary P \$49.95

Reviewed by Ross Labrie

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Brian Moore's considerable interest in Catholicism runs through all of his fiction, and, according to Liam Gearon, requires a

more detailed analysis than it has received. Allied with this purpose, Gearon links Catholicism in Moore to various contexts—landscapes as he calls them—geographical, cultural, political, psychological. In this way he pursues the relationship not only between Moore's characters and religion, but also illuminates the diverse contexts that modify the form that institutional Catholic belief and culture took at any one point. Moreover, filling out the theatres of consciousness in which his protagonists live, Moore attempted to show the effects on personal religious belief provided by shifting patterns of secular history and by geography.

The landscape spaces linked are both external—destinations arrived at largely by Irish emigrants—and internal—locales lived in sometime in the past and later inhabited within the characters' memories. Among the external locales are Belfast, Montreal, rural Ireland and rural Quebec, New York, and coastal California. In addition to such contemporary locales, there are historical settings, such as that which forms the background of *Black Robe*, into which Moore brings a post-Vatican II consciousness of Catholicism which he juxtaposes with a narrow, pre-Vatican II traditionalism. Such traditionalism included the notion that there was no salvation outside of the Church, a point of view that, for Moore, contributed to injustice both in the colonized world and also, for example, in the twentieth-century world of Vichy France evoked in *The Statement*.

Gearon is discerning in capturing the central irony that governs the whole of Moore's writing about Catholicism. What struck Moore was that simultaneous with, and in part because of, the Church's making itself more open to the world around it after Vatican II, its ability to sustain the supernatural belief of its members critically waned. Gearon is knowledgeable about the religious history and culture on which Moore draws. His discussion of natural

landscapes might have been more detailed and exegetical so as to bring out more convincingly than he does the significance and art of Moore's narrative strategies. Also, the book ought to have been better proofread.

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## Not-So-Petty Details

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**Camilla Gibb**

*The Petty Details of So-and-So's Life*. Doubleday  
\$32.95

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Reviewed by Colin Hill

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Camilla Gibb's gritty and disturbing second novel, *The Petty Details of So-and-So's Life*, follows her critically acclaimed *Mouthing the Words* (1999), and establishes her among the boldest and most original writers of contemporary Canadian fiction. Gibb's insight into the sordid side of modern life was evident in her debut, and is sustained in *Petty Details* which arrestingly treats various taboo subjects: mental illness, alcoholism, child abuse, explicit sex, violence, homophobia, incest, self-mutilation. Writing in refreshing, pared-down, colloquial, visceral, immediate language, Gibb follows a dysfunctional family of four as it implodes following the mental disintegration of its breadwinner, Oliver, an idealistic inventor who abuses his children, mistreats his wife, and is reduced to homelessness in stages. His wife, Elaine, sacrifices her artistic aspirations to support her children, and becomes a bitter and emotionally disengaged alcoholic. Both of her affection-starved children spend their adult lives reeling from their messy childhoods. Emma, the better off of the two, is a sexually confused, anti-social archaeology student who is more comfortable with animal bones than people. Her brother, Llewellyn, becomes a violent, self-loathing, homophobic, drug-addicted tattoo artist. This toxic assortment of characters promises drama, and the voyeuristic reader with a strong stomach will not be disappointed. Gibb manages, however, to

explore these destructive and fascinating lives while avoiding melodrama and gratuitousness almost entirely (apart from a few implausible turns). She achieves this because her writing is psychologically astute and convincing, and her characters are both unmistakably human and uncomfortably familiar.

On a technical level, the most remarkable aspect of Gibb's novel is its ever-shifting narrative voice. At times, the story is presented from a gentle, comforting, and sympathetic perspective. At other times, the narrator is markedly detached, ironic, and prone to offer didactic analysis; in these latter instances, Gibb offers us an almost naturalistic representation of modern life, replete with social commentary, psychoanalytic probing photographic detail, and derisive caricature: "Look, the lezzies are here in drag," mocked a pack of puke-skinned boys as they walked up the stairs into the gym." But the indeterminate narrative voice is not a result of weak writing, and ought to be considered a strength rather than a weakness of Gibb's novel. Most immediately, it draws attention to the tenuous balance she usually strikes between tragedy and comedy: *Petty Details* is at once one of the funniest and saddest Canadian books of recent years. More ingeniously, the narrative voice is constantly weaving in and out of the consciousnesses of Gibb's characters, and the reader can never be certain who is thinking what, and who is passing judgement on their pathetic lives. On one level, this book is about the way that the "voices" in one's head are a product of upbringing and a reflection of the values of society at large. This is hardly a new concept, but Gibb's narrative technique masterfully blurs the boundaries between the minds of her characters and the harsh world that derides them. And Gibb's shifting narrative voice keeps readers off guard and uncertain about when to laugh, when to feel pity, and whether they ought to feel guilty for doing both.

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## Wages of Farming

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**Susan Haley**

*The Murder of Medicine Bear*. Gaspereau \$27.95

Reviewed by Albert Braz

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Susan Haley has acquired a well-deserved reputation as a writer of thoughtful yet entertaining fiction. Her humour is much evident in works such as *A Nest of Singing Birds* (1987) and *Getting Married in Buffalo Jump* (1984), both of which were made into movies for CBC television. Haley is more ambitious in her latest novel, her seventh, but the results are not always positive.

*The Murder of Medicine Bear* is an epic-length saga about a multigenerational aboriginal family from southern Alberta. As the narrative opens, Marina Smythe, a.k.a. Marina Medicine Bear, returns to the Ochre Reserve, with three young children and penniless, after an absence of over 35 years. Marina's sudden arrival in the community, which she had left when she was adopted as a child, marks the beginning of a searing journey through family and group histories, the cultural and racial encounters between aboriginals and non-aboriginals, and the complex identities of the mixed-race products of those encounters.

Much is commendable in *The Murder of Medicine Bear*. For example, part of the reason Marina returns to the reserve is that she is trying to escape her abusive partner, who has threatened to kill her. Haley brilliantly captures the tension within Marina, who becomes so consumed by fear of her would-be murderer that she sees him everywhere, even in places where it is almost certain he cannot be. Haley also succeeds in capturing the byzantine (and overtly chauvinist) intricacies of the Indian Act, in which the children of aboriginal women who marry whites, but not those of their male counterparts, lose their aboriginal status and are classified as "whites." Finally, the author dramatizes how the essential

conflict between Natives and non-Natives on the Prairies is not the result of some evil Eastern machinations, but of the cultural-economic imperatives of the settlers and their dependence on agriculture. Indeed, Haley seems to agree with Rudy Wiebe's observation that the relations between aboriginals and non-aboriginals in Canada reenact the archetypal conflict between Cain and Abel, in which the agriculturalist invariably—at least until recently—ends up displacing the pastoralist.

However, some problems mar Haley's novel, not the least of which is the absence of the humour that marks much of her other work. For a text about individual and collective identity, it is puzzling that the people of Ochre Reserve are portrayed as generic Indians, as opposed to, say, Lakota, Cree, or, most likely, Blackfoot. After all, the white family with whom the Medicine Bears become most intimately associated, the Hallourans, are not described merely as European but as Irish. Most significantly, though, in her exploration of the aboriginal/ non-aboriginal conflict, Haley does not seem to consider the natural fluidity of all living societies. It would seem possible that even without arrival of the Europeans, aboriginal life on the Prairies would have to change.

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## Shopping, Winning, Owing

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**Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin**

*Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*. U of Minnesota P n.p.

**Pamela Klaffke**

*Spre: A Cultural History of Shopping*. Arsenal Pulp P \$22.95

**Kembrew McLeod**

*Owning Culture: Authorship, Ownership & Intellectual Property Law*. Peter Lang \$29.95

Reviewed by Latham Hunter

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Empowerment and democracy are noble ideals which are crucial to the effectiveness

and importance of Cultural Studies; students and even professors should embrace the dynamic, popular, and entertaining aspects of this field—these characteristics are part of what makes Cultural Studies significant in both the academic and public spheres, and help to break down the barriers between the two. However, to lean too far in the direction of the dynamic, fun, or popular—to imitate the texts and practices often under study—renders a Cultural Studies publication largely ineffective. Of the three texts under review, only one completely avoids this hazard, and as a result, is the most successful.

In reading *Spree: A Cultural History of Shopping*, I was reminded of the new “hip” high school textbooks with pages packed with trivia in the margins and thumbnail pictures scattered amongst the paragraphs. This is far from a substantial text—the 12 slight chapters are further divided into, on average, four-page blurbs on subjects such as infomercials and celebrity branding. Certainly these are important subjects to consider when taking into account the breadth and depth of consumer culture, but *Spree* is really without any political weight. For example, it recommends without a trace of irony “must-see shopping scenes” like the one in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which will “make viewers swoon.” Ultimately, none of the topics offered here—from the advent of credit to the explosion in online shopping—is treated as much more than a tidbit. Particularly bewildering is the section on “what your astrological sign says about your shopping style.” Particularly galling is the recurrent image of female legs in miniskirts and high heels kicking about amongst bulging shopping bags. *Spree* is much like an extended version of an only slightly progressive fashion magazine.

*Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon* is a much more satisfying effort, largely because, unlike *Spree*, it

engages with complex issues. The book takes into account representations of female athleticism in broadcasting, advertisements, magazines, and film; it also includes personal testimonies and sociological studies. It demonstrates a solid and yet fairly lively dialogue with both established and emerging critical voices; Judith Butler and Susan Bordo are particularly evident. And, like any good study of gender issues, *Built to Win* includes a look at the increasingly blurred line that attempts to divide male and female, as well as corresponding representations of masculinity. That being said, however, I did find that Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin have a distinct bias in favour of a particularly competitive brand of athleticism, often citing winning, championships, competition, and aggression as healthy indications of the value of sport. They speak of heroism with a Darwinian bent, not really stopping to consider how a hard body and vigorous gym regime can be just as binding and unforgiving as the pressure to be soft and “feminine.” The authors make much of studies that show that sport is good for women’s health and self-esteem, but they completely ignore other, non-competitive forms of athleticism, like the increasingly popular yoga, which can be just as beneficial. To describe the gym in terms of “comfort,” “safety,” “pride” and “assurance” is to reveal that only a very tiny slice of “female athleticism” is being discussed here, and yet Heywood and Dworkin write as though they represent a universal feminine.

Multiple points in the book gave me serious pause: for example, to state that Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* is not a sex object, any more than the Terminator, seems rather sightless, as do the essentialist generalizations made about her. The book states that Croft is powerful because “she walks shoulders back like the typical guy,” whereas her brother is not typical because he is “easily

incapacitated by the bad guys.” It is dangerous to suggest that there are essential masculine and feminine characteristics.

I was also concerned with the authors’ use of an advertisement to indicate how the increasing depiction of “female masculinity” indicates a cultural shift towards acceptance and even celebration. They include, as proof, an advertisement for Nike which features a woman lying down, facing the camera, with her body stretched out behind her. Heywood and Dworkin omit the fact that this ad appeared in a two-page format: the female model paired with a *male* model on the second page. When comparing both halves of the ad, it becomes apparent that the woman—lying down, her buttocks and crotch quite plainly emphasized—is depicted as significantly less powerful than her corresponding and oppositional male, who stands centrally in the frame, all muscled torso and defiance. This is classic gender construction, and should not be ignored.

McLeod’s *Owning Culture* is the most accomplished of these three books. It is common enough for Cultural Studies to deal with commercialization, but it is relatively unheard of that the field incorporates a legal approach. “Copyright” should indeed play a larger role in our understanding of the commodified world, and McLeod highlights its relevance and importance with conviction, humour, and a fine eye for both startling details and the bigger picture. His research is commendable, his connection with popular texts is convincing, and his theoretical context is sound. It is risky to bring in so many seemingly disparate texts and practices—McLeod makes handy use of, for example, Disney, *The Waste Land*, U2, *Star Trek*, genetic research, Third World patents, and Dadaism—but they are skillfully woven together. What emerges is an appreciation for an often overlooked, and yet crucial, component of power and communication today.

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## Extending Asian America

**Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, Akemi Kikumura-Yano, and James A. Hirabayashi, eds.**

*New Worlds, New Lives: Globalization and People of Japanese Descent in the Americas and from Latin America.* Stanford UP \$83.90

**Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz**

*Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: the Metamorphoses of Southern California.* Stanford UP \$36.00

Reviewed by Lily Cho

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That we need to extend our ideas about “America” in order to reflect more accurately the South as well as the North is not new. Postcolonialists and Latin Americanists among others have long insisted that critical work on “America” must also recognize the differential relation between the North and the South. Yet despite the push to look southward by critics such as Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Lisa Yun, and Richard Laremont, Asian American studies remains largely focused on Asians in North America. Part of the project of extending our understanding of Asian America lies in the necessity of thinking of minority communities as articulated by each other and to look at the complex relations between these populations and across different geographies. Both *New Worlds, New Lives* and *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy* admirably accomplish the important work of insisting on the complicated relations between migrant populations while at the same time making a powerful case for the need to extend our understanding of “America” in Asian American studies. Both of these books challenge the northern bias in contemporary Asian American studies and demand that we extend our understanding of Asian America to embrace more rigorously the experiences of Asian communities in South America and to understand Asian migration to North America as crucially related to Latin American migration.

*New Worlds, New Lives* charts the trajectories of Japanese migration both to and from the Americas. The book emerges from the long term research work of the International Nikkei Research Project, a project closely associated with the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. While its editors had originally planned to focus on Japanese migration to the Americas, they acknowledge the necessity of attending to the migrants of Japanese descent (300 000 by 1991) “returning” to Japan as temporary workers, or *dekasegi*, in search of better opportunities for work. Thus the strength of this collection lies not only in its broad understanding of migration to “America” but also in its addressing of a fascinatingly racialized labour migration phenomenon, which complicates our understanding of globalization and the identities of temporary workers. Essays such as Jeffrey Lesser’s exploration of Japanese Brazilian migration or Audrey Kobayashi’s examination of the profoundly gendered effects of Japanese migration to Canada usefully take up the globalization rubric which Hirabayashi, Kikumura-Yano, and Hirabayashi set out. Consisting of 18 detailed case studies against which the editors’ propositions regarding the impacts of globalization on Japanese identity can be tested, this collection represents an important contribution to our understanding of race, migration, and globalization.

While *New Worlds, New Lives* examines Asian identities in South America as part of its project, *Asian and Latino Immigrants*, charts the interconnections between Asian and Latino migrants in southern California. Careful not to flatten out the differences between communities, López-Garza and Diaz highlight the connections between Asian and Latino immigrants. Examining the Asianization and Latinization of labour in southern California over the past two decades in particular, this collection tracks the ways in which the exploitation of

labour continues to be racialized. The collection opens with an analysis of an infamous case of labour exploitation in southern California involving the incarceration of 71 Thai garment workers who had been held captive in an apartment complex in a Los Angeles suburb, El Monte, for as long as seven years. When the case broke in 1995, the public was horrified by the barbed wire compound where these women worked 17- to 21-hour days under constant surveillance. However, as Su and Marterell clearly argue in their contribution to the collection, the case of the El Monte workers is crucially *not* exceptional.

Strikingly, the book’s description of current conditions is a strong echo of the conditions of indenture which impelled early Asian migration. López-Garza and Diaz describe the world of snakeheads and coyotes who bring labourers to the US as participating in “[a] shady world of human cargo [that] feeds the exploitative industries with a vast workforce subjected to low-wage injustice on a semipermanent basis.” As though taking a page directly from indenture recruiters from a century ago, López-Garza and Diaz note that “[t]he labor contractors often ensure these workers that transportation, immigrant work permits, and housing will be ‘taken care of’ as part of a normative recruitment practice. A vast majority of these workers who have little or no savings, borrow money from family members or accept ‘loans’ from the labor contractors to finance their escape from a life of terminal poverty. What they have done in reality is sold their future for a pittance on arrival.” As many of the essays in this volume suggest, indenture is not a phenomenon of the past, but a cruel reality in even the wealthiest pockets of the First World.

Finally, many of these essays contest the push-pull model for analyzing motivations for immigration. As Su and Marterell note regarding the Thai women who had been enslaved in the garment factory in El Monte:

“In the face of stark poverty at home, it is questionable whether immigration is a matter of choice.” Calling for a way of understanding the complex social, economic, and political factors which impel thousands of people to put their lives at risk every year in search of work and opportunity, the collection as a whole argues for a more complex understanding of migration that moves beyond the simple dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary labour.

As both of these books demonstrate, contemporary global capitalism persists in its reliance on captive and deeply racialized bodies. Not only do these books extend our understanding of Asian America to embrace more fully the complexities of southern migrations, they also function as tools for researchers who seek to understand the ways in which the history of global capitalism’s reliance on captive bodies continues to thrive in our contemporary world.

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## Pathway of the Son

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**Jack Hodgins**

*Distance*. McClelland and Stewart \$37.99

Reviewed by W.H. New

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Imagine Dennis Risto Aalto: a 50-something Ottawa businessman who’s made a public name as an ‘instant garden’ designer and fast food merchant, but who still goes by the name of Sonny. Imagine that Sonny is still sorting out his Utopian Finnish roots (Sointula, in Canada, and another settlement in Australia). He’s trying to hide (and hide from) his past, rebelling against his rural father, is upset about the mother who abandoned him as an infant, and confused about women in general. There you have the beginnings of *Distance*. Sonny is maybe a difficult character for some readers to identify with—quick to resentment but too passive to be a conventional hero, well-intentioned but stumblingly awkward in close relationships. Yet he’s worth the effort

to understand. *Distance* is Jack Hodgins’ most mature novel to date, and Sonny’s middleaged quest (for nothing short of the meaning of life, love, origins, and death: the garden metaphor resonates) is one that everybody, sooner or later, has to undertake.

When *Distance* opens (*in medias res*), Sonny is walking up the aisle of a west-bound jet, crossing time zones forward in space and backward into memory. At the end of this journey he expects to find his dying father, but as any quest-reader knows, fire and flood will test him before he finds love. Along the way he will enlist the aid of transformative helpers, do battle (those ritual quarrels with Timo, his father), meet up with beasts, strip away artifice, and (however inconclusively) come slowly to terms with the ambiguity of his goal.

So while the story ostensibly takes place in the Ottawa Valley, northern Vancouver Island (Cape Scott is “the end of the world”), and the (dry, then wet) interior of Queensland, it happens more profoundly inside the mind. “Distance” measures spaces between people as well as places: between father and son, desire and consequence, action and ideal. References to 1990s Canadian preoccupations (violence, clearcut logging, multiculturalism, the separation referendum) demonstrate further how “distance” constructs a culture of loss. This story does not generalize from Sonny’s story out to Canadian politics; Hodgins tackles the more difficult and interesting challenge of showing how a *mindset of separation*—repeated in many guises (the rhetoric of single origins, the covert racism of categories of identity)—can come to frame what individuals expect and therefore how they behave. Sonny—as Dennis/Risto—has to learn his way back to the mix that constitutes community. Against the politics of loss, therefore, the novel provides running reminders of the possibilities of continuity: allusions to Virgil, the *Kalevala*, a Tlingit tale of the

Milky Way (the path that heroes take to chase monsters). Encounters with his childhood friends (and their own fathers and sons) reflect what Sonny might have chosen to be, and recurrent tales of lost boys run variations on his predicament: Warren, Sonny's alienated Ontario son; the boy on the plane, who sees God out the window; Lachlan Hall, who leaves King's Cross streetlife to become a helper; Alan Price, who heads for trouble; Rohan (Holly Fitzgerald's son), for whom Dennis/Risto might yet become a kind of father. At the end of Sonny's quest for rootedness is not Utopia but something more human (therefore imperfect) and humane. Hodgins understands his character's lingering passivity and (wisely) refuses to blame.

Stylistically engaging, paced well, fully in command of voice and the details of local ecologies, *Distance* is neither a comic romp nor a morose tragedy. Instead, it faces up to the adversities that follow on unresolved conflict, and at the same time it shows how comedy expresses people's refusal to despair—even as they acknowledge the irretrievability of Eden and the inevitability of ends. This warm book asks readers to laugh at the predicament of being human—particularly of being confused and male in a time of social and generational change—but also to understand that laughter does not excuse us from responsibility, lest distance make onlookers of us all.

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## A Recipe for Artists

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**Margaret Hollingsworth**

*Be Quiet*. Blue Lake Books \$21.00

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Reviewed by Linda Morra

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In a letter to Ira Dilworth, the British Columbia Regional Director for CBC Radio, Emily Carr wrote that “when people [get married without love,] they deserve what they get! Where would [my writing] and my painting have gone?” Margaret Hollingsworth,

author of such previous books as *In Confidence* (1994) and *Smiling Under Water* (1989), addresses that question in her new novel, *Be Quiet*: how would an artist's career develop if she were distracted by an unsatisfying marriage? She interweaves two narrative lines: one set in the early 1900s that revolves around the lives of Carr and Frances Hodgkins and another set in the contemporary period that is about a painter named Catherine Van Duren. These narratives are connected by the discovery of the diary written by fictional character Winifred Church, who records her impressions of Carr and Hodgkins and whose husband is also an artist. Hollingsworth thus implicitly invites a comparison between these artist figures and shows not only how a painter's career would be derailed by the claims made by marriage and children but how it might also result in the most disastrous consequences.

*Be Quiet* opens in a sanatorium, based upon the actual East Anglia sanatorium in England where Carr resided for a period of 18 months to recuperate from illness. The novel then shifts to the present during which time a retirement party is being thrown for Van Duren, who is resentful that she was never recognized by her academic peers and awarded tenure. Although her artistic output suffered, she was obliged to work because she “was the sole means of support for her family and had everything to lose by stepping out of line.” It is further hampered by her daughter Kit, whose presence leaves “a trail of used up space.” After years of neglecting her painting career because of the demands of her job and her daughter, she is able to focus her attention upon painting with renewed vigour: “no restrictions, no judgment, nothing and nobody to come between her and her goal.” Yet, the effort is too little, too late, as it seems, because many of her paintings are destroyed and her attentions are once again diverted by the novel's end.

Hollingsworth has selected female artists from a period that was ostensibly much less inclined to tolerating feminist concerns related to artistic independence and freedom of expression. She shows these artists to have made bold advances in spite of limiting social conventions and expectations. Those who marry, like Winnifred, understand that in playing the role of “wife” they may “never have ambitions—it is a recipe for disaster.” Conversely, in a period when women appear to have made numerous strides in terms of their rights and social mobility, Hollingsworth’s female characters seem to be disoriented and restricted by their commitments to family. One can infer, therefore, that it is the greatness of spirit of Carr and even of Hodgkins that allows them to rise above all limitations, forfeit obligations, and recognize that even meaningful human liaisons must be sacrificed for the sake of artistic integrity.

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## Expanding the Archive

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**Betty Joseph**

*Reading the East India Company, 1720–1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender.* U of Chicago P n.p.

Reviewed by Teresa Hubel

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For those of us who study British India, the archive of the East India Company, located in the India Office Collection of the British Library, is a storehouse of frequently dull, though occasionally absorbing, and often headache-inducing (because they are also sometimes hard-to-read) fragments of information about the earlier decades of the British imperial enterprise in India. It is not the kind of thing that literary studies scholars usually go for. Betty Joseph is obviously an exception. In her book *Reading the East India Company, 1720–1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender*, this archive is not only one of her fundamental sources, but it also serves as a metaphor of the whole textual presence in our twenty-first century

world of the real historical manifestation of the British Empire in India. The archive is both a depository that houses the physical remains of the East India Company, in letters, lists, records, and proceedings, and a “discursive formation” (following Edward Said) or “enunciative field” (a Foucauldian term) that, moment after moment, allowed British India, with its representation of the Orient, to emerge, to constitute itself.

By means of this latter and larger definition, Joseph is able to move from factory records to novels to paintings to guidebooks in her attempts to reveal the ways in which the figure of woman worked within, sometimes at the edge of or even against, imperialist imperatives. This movement, always in pursuit of a specific analysis, is one of the great strengths of the book. In chapter one, for instance, she highlights the use of woman as the yardstick for measuring the patriarchal economies in England and south India; in chapter three, she focuses on the deployment of a feminized domestic sphere to assert imperial possession. It makes for some fascinating reading of the kind that produces flashes of insight about the interconnectedness of the texts that comprise one’s own research.

Joseph wields the postcolonial theories she uses in this book well, even with a flourish. I particularly appreciated her careful delineation of the extent to which she is indebted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work. This is the case especially in the essay “The Rani of Sirmur” where she calls for literary scholars to examine the archives of colonial governance, a call to which Joseph has obviously responded with her own book. I appreciated it because it shows her to be a responsible scholar. Far from simply echoing Spivak’s ideas, however, Joseph departs from them in important ways. She insists on the possibility of discerning some glimpse of historical subjecthood (though not of the sovereign variety) in the traces of the colonizing and colonized women that

the archive preserves. This is a subjecthood that glimmers and can be compelled to mean something resistant to the patriarchal and colonial forces that constrain it and through which it was made to materialize.

My one major reservation about this book is that the circle of its scholarship is small. Joseph is too narrow in her choice of theoretical and critical sources, confining herself mostly to American-based or American-blessed scholars, and the consequence is that she sometimes seems to be unaware of the interesting debates and analyses going on in other global arenas. (For example, she uses the term “Anglo-Indian” with no sense of its slipperiness.) Her chosen historical period overlaps with Kate Teltscher’s work (both Teltscher’s 1995 book and a more recent essay on the myth of the Black Hole), as it does with Christopher Hawes’ history of the early Eurasian community. I was surprised to get to the end of Joseph’s book, where she examines the nationalist use of the figure of the Indian woman, to find neither Uma Chakravarti’s nor Tanika Sarkar’s nor even Partha Chatterjee’s important essays on the subject cited.

In spite of these oversights, *Reading the East India Company* is, in its contribution to the scholarship regarding early British India, postcolonial theory, and feminist studies, a valuable and resourceful book. While its language is too discipline-specific for undergraduates, it will, I expect, appeal to graduate students and more senior scholars.

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## Three Independent Critics

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**Christopher J. Knight**

*Uncommon Readers: Dennis Donoghue, Frank Kermode, George Steiner, and the Tradition of the Common Reader.* U of Toronto P \$50

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Reviewed by Graham Good

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At present, English departments normally teach critical theory on the “approaches” model, with a menu that includes Decon-

struction, Marxism, and Feminism. Theory anthologies will usually only include critics who can be associated with one of these official approaches, which graduate students (and increasingly undergraduates too) are expected to learn to “apply” to literary texts. The result is that independent critics whose writing is not readily classified in this way are marginalized in the formal structures of the academy, even though they may be well known to a more general public through the major literary reviews, such as the *New York Review of Books* or the *London Review of Books*, or through prestigious lecture series subsequently turned into books. Students may thus be left with little familiarity with independent criticism, and are sometimes taught that there can be no such thing: “independent” thought is often dismissed as an ideological mask of bourgeois class interest or cultural conservatism.

Christopher Knight’s book offers a detailed reading and thoughtful defence of three of these independents: Dennis Donoghue, Frank Kermode, and George Steiner. Without forming them into a “school,” he is able to find enough similarities to justify treating them together: all have had long and illustrious academic careers, have very wide interests in literature and culture, have published prolifically through review essays, lectures and books, and write to an implied “common reader” rather than to specialists. All have expressed skepticism about aspects of “Theory” currently dominant in the humanities, while still dealing with many of the same issues in their own way. Further, all have an abiding interest in the links between literature and religion, though Knight wisely resists classifying them as “religious critics.”

Though the commentary on each critic is wide-ranging, surveying books, articles, memoirs, reviews, and controversies with other critics, in each case Knight selects a central theme to follow. With Donoghue, this theme is imagination. Once, in the

1950s and 1960s, a staple and uncontested literary value, "imagination" was gradually dropped from the critical lexicon after 1970, along with "originality" and "creativity." Those terms implied that artists transcended the limitations of their society, and were thereby enabled to offer a radical critique of it. After 1970, theory-driven criticism increasingly took over, in its own estimation, the function of radical critique and, treating art as a social "product," accused the artist of complicity in social injustices. Where artists were previously felt to be capable of moving "beyond culture" in Trilling's phrase, they were now seen to be completely enmeshed in it and conditioned by its ideologies. Meanwhile the critic, even though enmeshed in institutional structures like the academy, usurped the "radical" viewpoint formerly attributed to the artist. Donoghue's work stands out against this trend, continuing to value and defend the imagination of Romanticism and Modernism in an era where he felt that Postmodernist artists had abandoned any form of social critique and accepted only the standard of marketability. For Donoghue, the imagination still has an element of mystery which cannot be explained by material conditions and which forms a link to the realm of the spiritual and the divine.

For Kermode's work, Knight chooses the theme of canon formation, both in the biblical and the literary criticism. He argues that Kermode consistently opposes the idea that literary value is determined by non-literary interests, whether those be associated with established hierarchies or previously marginalized groups. For Kermode the canonical texts *deserve* to be canonized on intrinsic grounds, whatever help they might get from social structures of authority. These works have "permanent value" not as historical monuments, but through their "perpetual modernity." The process of desacralization in Western culture makes these focal works an important

compensation for what has been lost.

Knight's theme with George Steiner is elegy, his "sense that we live in a post-culture, after the Fall." Grouped around this are many sub-themes: crisis, decline, epilogue, remembrance, ruin, silence. For Steiner, the central event of the modern era is the Shoah, a second Fall. He sees himself as a late survivor of the Central European Jewish culture which flourished in "the long liberal summer of 1815 to 1915," and its sequel in the 1920s, a culture destroyed by Nazism. This culture, rather than Anglo-American critical traditions or French theory, is Steiner's true context, according to Knight. Steiner exemplifies a kind of "high bookishness" which, with its focus on private reading and intellectual-spiritual interiority, is at odds with the "productivity" of today's specialized "literary professionals." Steiner believes that the "gifted few" capable of this personal culture will always be a minority among the "semi-literacies" of mass-consumer society, particularly American society (Knight justifiably reproves the strain of anti-Americanism in Steiner's writings). Steiner's prophetic musings on Jewish culture and destiny have also been controversial, but Knight's commentary here is more sympathetic, and these pages are among the most fascinating in the book.

In conclusion, Knight offers "inwardness" as a key common interest among the three. Perhaps this is the link between their independence from set "approaches," and their stress on religion. To varying degrees and in various ways they explore the spiritual dimension of literature in a climate which is either indifferent or hostile to such concerns. Where in previous ages individualism might imply a break with religion, it seems now that having religious concerns may lead you into an individualist position, so orthodox has anti-theism become.

Knight's book is a thoughtful, conscientious reading of all of the works of all three critics, but at 405 pages of text and another 100 of

notes, bibliography, and index, it is overlong. It relies heavily on long quotations which often contain quotations within themselves, and on paraphrase. In a laudable but excessive accommodation of complexity, Knight rarely resists the temptation to pursue a digression or insert a subordinate clause, qualification, or parenthesis. The proof-reading has let through a number of small errors: “reigning in” instead of “reining in,” “Henri Moore,” “twentieth-first century.” There are some repetitions of long quotations, and the sections which deal with each critic’s disputes with other critics sometimes seem familiar as the antagonists (Culler, De Man, Eagleton) are often the same. The patience of Knight’s readings occasionally produces impatience in the reader. The book would be more effective if 100 pages or more were cut. Nevertheless, it is a work of great importance in giving detailed attention to critical work which pursues a different path from the beaten track of Theory. It validates the visions of its three critics as providing us with (in Wallace Stevens’ phrase) “a wonderful instead.”

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## Shades of Otherness

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**Laurie Kruk**

*The Voice Is the Story: Conversations with Canadian Writers of Short Fiction.* Mosaic \$15

Reviewed by Paul Denham

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The short story, for whatever reasons—historical marginality, its capacity to focus on the particular, the part played by small literary magazines—plays a particularly significant role in English Canadian writing. Much more than merely an adjunct or an apprenticeship to the novel, it has become the preferred form of some of our best writers, notably, of course, Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant. Laurie Kruk’s subjects in the present volume are Alistair MacLeod, Elisabeth Harvor, Jane Rule, Timothy Findley, Edna Alford, Sandra Birdsell, Jack

Hodgins, Joan Clark, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Carol Shields. Munro and Gallant are not here, presumably since both have frequently been interviewed elsewhere, nor is Margaret Atwood, known mostly for her work in other genres. But their presence is felt in acknowledgments of influence on the interviewees. Indeed, Munro gets a hefty 26 entries in the index, indicating that, as we might expect, she is the central point of reference for Canadian short-story writers. Marian Engel and Margaret Laurence are tied for a distant second place at ten entries each, followed by Margaret Atwood (eight) and Mavis Gallant (five). Giving Engel more prominence than the much-admired and anthologized Gallant may indicate, possibly, that the works valued by editors and teachers are not always those which are most important to other writers.

But would Engel loom so large if these interviews were to be done now? It’s hard to say. Most of the interviews, except for those with Hodgins and Vanderhaeghe, were conducted in the early 1990s, and hence the book does not feel as up to date as it might. For example, one might expect, in a book where the “shades of ‘otherness’ or distance from the cultural mainstream” are defined as one of the common threads, that some First Nations writers would be included, as they probably would be if such a series of conversations were being conducted today. Eden Robinson and Thomas King, both relatively recent arrivals, are names which come readily to mind. To say so is not to request some sort of quota, but to follow the logic of the editor’s own reading of marginality. The landscape of the Canadian short story looks somewhat different now from the way it looked a decade ago, and it is writers such as Robinson and King who have made it different.

The book’s title is taken from a remark by Jack Hodgins, and points to the centrality of the notion of voice. Kruk acknowledges that she began with an interest in “the voice

of the woman writer,” different from the mainstream male voice, but soon discovered that there were other voices, marked by degrees of distance from various mainstreams: distances of sexual orientation, of class, ethnicity, and region. “Absorbed by these fictional voices,” she writes, “we realize just how illusory, how defensive, is our belief in the Canadian [social] ‘mainstream’ and its day-to-day dominance.” The notion of the short story, and the volume of stories, as making room for a multiplicity of voices is perhaps one way for accounting for its substantial place in a multicultural and diverse country: “The sense of in-between-ness created by our reception of each story, within its volume, as something both completed and added to, challenged, questioned, is another intriguing aspect which causes some readers to wonder if the short story is especially appealing to Canadian writers.” And, we might add, to readers.

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## L'enfance à risque

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**Raymond Lévesque**

*Le petit Lalonde*. Lanctôt Éditeur n.p.

**Esther Beauchemin**

*Maïta*. Prise de parole n.p.

Comptes rendus par Sylvain Marois

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Ce n'est pas tous les jours que Raymond Lévesque publie un roman. Poète et chansonnier reconnu à travers la francophonie, mais aussi dramaturge, Lévesque a déjà publié d'autres récits et romans (*Ketchup*, en 1994, et *Paix sur la terre aux hommes de bonne volonté*, en 1997, par exemple), mais son dernier ouvrage, *Le petit Lalonde*, est des plus ambigus. D'abord parce que l'auteur, en poète expérimenté qu'il est, nous laisse présager d'une certaine qualité langagière, d'une certaine profondeur du discours, voire peut-être même d'une certaine complexité du récit. Ensuite, ces qualités étant absentes, le malaise ressenti par le lecteur confronté à des phrases courtes,

pleines de clichés, malhabiles et qui, de toute évidence, auraient gagné à être travaillées et retravaillées, s'en trouve largement aggravé justement parce qu'il s'agit de Raymond Lévesque, « un poète expérimenté ».

*Le petit Lalonde* nous raconte les hauts et les bas de la carrière fulgurante d'un jeune chanteur, enfant prodige exploité par ses parents, ses multiples imprésarios et gérants, ses femmes et ses musiciens, ses partenaires de tout acabit et, bien sûr, par la « grosse machine du show-business ». De ses humbles débuts montréalais aux tournées internationales en passant par son séjour à Hollywood où il « aurait tourné six films par semaine » (79), puis son exil à Cuba et au Venezuela, Gérard Lalonde (plus connu sous le nom du *Petit Lalonde*, *The Little La Fayette* ou *The Little Ranger*) aura, avant même d'avoir atteint sa majorité, tout vu du monde : tant sa géographie que ses pires exemples d'êtres amoureux, incluant l'abus d'alcool et de cocaïne, l'envie, la jalousie, l'hypocrisie, la violence sous toutes ses formes et, bien sûr, quelques meurtres . . . On comprend l'ampleur du poids qui pèse sur les épaules de ce jeune homme lorsqu'il revient à Montréal, complètement lessivé—tant au niveau financier qu'au niveau émotif—pour n'y trouver, hélas, aucune solution à son injuste et terrible existence. Tous les ingrédients du drame humain sont présents, moins le plus important : l'intérêt !

Et c'est justement pour cette raison qu'un incompréhensible sentiment d'ambiguïté nous assaille. Comment donc justifier, lire ou interpréter les nombreuses boutades (faute de meilleur mot) à connotation raciste dispersées à travers le roman (17, 18, 23, 73, 105, 113, etc.) ? Dans certains cas, on reconnaît les « victimes » de Lévesque : les Libéraux (43), le clergé (29), les riches (27), les Québécois « mous » (47), la langue (68), etc., mais pourquoi cet acharnement sur les musiciens, les handicapés, les pompiers. . . , bref sur l'humanité entière ? Le problème

c'est qu'on ne le saura jamais, car tout le récit se déroule comme une caricature; les grands traits et les « gros mots » ne suffisent pas à rendre crédibles les situations ni à donner vie aux personnages et encore moins à créer de l'intérêt chez le lecteur. Cela dit, on peut se demander s'il s'agit d'une satire, si *Le petit Lalonde* n'est pas une fable, ou justement une caricature inspirée de la vie du « petit Simard » ou de « Céline » . . . Mais, même si c'était le cas, la qualité générale y gagnerait si peu d'intérêt qu'on demeurerait sidéré qu'un tel auteur ait rédigé un tel roman.

L'autre texte que nous avons lu est, disons-le, à l'opposé du premier. Premièrement, parce qu'il s'agit du premier texte de théâtre publié par Esther Beauchemin et, deuxièmement, par sa superbe construction interne et son irréversible mécanique dramatique accentuée par l'utilisation de comédiens, d'ombres chinoises et de marionnettes. *Maïta*, c'est l'histoire d'une jeune fille de douze ans (Maïta) qui, quelque part en Asie, doit travailler dans une usine de jouets pendant quatre ans pour payer les dettes de sa famille. Son père, marionnettiste ambulancier, lui promet de revenir la chercher, sans faute, dans « 1 461 jours ». Derrière cette prémisse—déjà bien lourde de sens—se dessinent l'amitié et les conflits que vivront Maïta et les autres enfants-ouvriers. Ils devront faire face à M. Wunan, le directeur de l'usine, et à des situations auxquelles, nous en conviendrons, des enfants ne devraient pas être confrontés. Ils trouveront, toutefois, un certain réconfort en Issane, la marionnette remise à Maïta par son père à son arrivée à l'usine. Issane, « princesse de la lumière », vivra des aventures où le rêve et la poésie se mêlent à la réalité pour la rendre, peut-être, plus supportable. Ce métaspectacle de marionnettes, absolument indispensable dans le texte de Beauchemin (ne serait-ce que pour alléger la lourdeur de l'atmosphère carcérale dans laquelle évoluent ces enfants), représente

l'élément fantastique essentiel à ce genre particulier d'écriture et offre un minimum d'espoir à une situation qui n'en contient guère. Il faut, en effet, avouer que le seul défaut de ce texte est sans doute lié justement à sa charge émotive (l'esclavage des enfants) si bien mise en place et si bien développée par l'auteur. On peut se demander si le drame vécu par Maïta et ses pauvres compagnons ne risque pas de tomber comme une tonne de briques sur un jeune public du même âge que les personnages . . . Il est clair que cette pièce de théâtre « a quelque chose à dire [et] qu'elle le dit bien » (8) et que bien peu seront en désaccord avec l'objectif didactique. Cela dit, si le message passe très bien, l'espoir d'un monde meilleur y est, selon nous, tout aussi difficile à trouver que la solution à de telles injustices.

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## How to Be Good

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**Cynthia Macdonald**

*Alms*. Penguin \$32.00

**Christy Ann Conlin**

*Heave*. Doubleday \$29.95

Reviewed by Alison Calder

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Cynthia Macdonald's funny first novel, *Alms*, takes a satirical look at charity and virtue, pointing out that these two things don't necessarily go together. Martine Craythorn, the protagonist, is the adult child of an unlikely parental combination: a canned-soup heiress and a crusading professor whose idea of a fun Christmas morning is taking his young daughter to visit terminally ill children, in case she had any ideas about the world being good and fair. Martine inherits a position of privilege from her mother. From her father, she inherits a hatred of that privilege, and herself as recipient of it. The result is an obsession with "porepeople," whom she adores, but whom she also fears and avoids whenever possible, preferring to work for charitable

causes that allow her to avoid actually meeting any of the “porepeople” in question.

Macdonald walks a tricky line here. Martine’s actions, divesting herself of personal belongings, giving away her money, not taking up more room in the world than she has to, are ones that we should applaud. Aren’t we all being urged to simplify our lives? But Martine’s actions are motivated not only by virtue, but also by self-hatred, as she punishes herself for the life into which she has been born. Her myriad eating disorders are one aspect of this self-punishment, as is her refusal to allow herself any sort of comfort, her continual search for jobs that demean her further, her clothes that are increasingly inadequate, and her lodging that is increasingly unsafe. While Martine does seem to come to some self-recognition by the novel’s end, the conclusion trails off, with the verve and energy of Macdonald’s delivery finally running out of steam.

Seraphina Sullivan, the narrator of *Heave*, a first novel by Christy Ann Conlin, also tries to be good. She’s got a lot less going for her than Martine does, including a nasty addiction to alcohol and a family whose staggering range of dysfunctions makes her own seem almost normal. As the novel opens, Serrie is bolting from her wedding, running back to her parents’ home, where she sits in one of her father’s outhouses (he’s a collector) and ponders how her life got to this point. Only 21, Serrie’s life is a series of alcoholic blackouts, leading to damaged relationships and a spectacularly unsuccessful attempt to escape to Europe.

The novel’s structure is tricky, and Conlin isn’t quite successful in creating layers of flashbacks while moving the story forward. The reader’s motivation is to discover whether Serrie, an appealing character, will be able to pull her life together. The first-person narration is a bit of a problem, however; Serrie seems to have little idea of how she got to where she is, and even less of where she’s going. The narrative mean-

ders through various byways which, while entertaining, ultimately make the narrative seem as directionless as Serrie. As a result, several dramatic events near the novel’s end lack power, seeming anticlimactic rather than revelatory. Conlin’s novel tackles hard things with humour and sensitivity, and she doesn’t provide any glib answers. But it would be nice to have at least the suggestion of a resolution.

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## Love and Loss

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**Tara Manuel**

*Filling the Belly*. ThistleDown P \$21.88

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**Helen McLean**

*Significant Things*. Dundurn P \$21.99

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Reviewed by Christine Kim

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*Filling the Belly*, Tara Manuel’s first novel, is the story of Rosa Keegan, a young girl growing up in Newfoundland. While differences such as gender, age, sexual orientation, class, and geographical location distinguish Rosa from Edward Cooper, the protagonist of Helen McLean’s *Significant Things*, their narratives overlap in important ways. Both characters undergo life-altering experiences that cause them to ponder the nature of love, loss, and memory. Through these crises, Rosa and Edward attain a sense of self-awareness that helps them mature.

In many ways, *Filling the Belly* is a conventional bildungsroman. Rosa is initially presented as an intelligent and feisty (as her interactions with her multiple siblings demonstrate) adolescent struggling to negotiate the passage from childhood to adulthood. Rosa is thrilled when she is given “a room of her own,” a luxury in a home in which emotional resources are vast but financial ones scant. In the privacy of her bedroom, Rosa deals with more common growing pains, and with the consequences of two devastating events. First, prior to the start of the novel, Rosa was

raped by a young boy. The sexual assault is marked by the memory of physical pain “screaming inside her at a deafening pitch,” pregnancy, and eventual miscarriage. As she works to overcome the aftermath of this terrible afternoon by confiding in her journal and inflicting minor pain on herself, she suffers a second loss. Rosa is given the dire news that father has lung cancer. Despite the often-overwhelming sorrow Rosa feels, hers is not a narrative of victimization. Instead, we watch her fight against feelings of helplessness by coming to terms with her grief for both her father and her body. Although the events in Rosa’s life cause her to long “to fee[!] the simple things a child feels,” she learns to move forward with joy, if no longer innocence.

In *Significant Things*, Edward also develops emotionally after suffering heartbreak. Like Rosa’s, Edward’s life is shaped by loss, most notably of his mother, Dolly, a beautiful but weak woman. The novel shifts between the past and present. Edward was doted upon by Dolly until she married a piano manufacturer from England. Edward learns to compensate for this emotional abandonment by forming deep attachments to beautiful objects instead of people. While such substitutions help Edward become a successful art dealer, they prevent him from finding comparable success in his human relationships. Edward’s attraction to beauty and emerging sense of taste provide solace in other ways. As a child, Edward was told that he was the illegitimate child of the Prince of Wales. Although he consciously rejects this tale, Edward subconsciously embraces the possibility of being fathered by royalty every time he considers himself having “been born with a talent, his God-given aesthetic sensibility.” Consequently, Edward feels obligated to use his discriminating eye ethically, a burden that is apparent in his attitude towards his young Italian lover, Paulo. Edward uses his position as an established art dealer to “discover” Paulo.

Edward’s actions are motivated by both selfless and selfish desires. On the one hand, Edward sincerely believes Paulo is a great talent whose art will enrich the world. On the other hand, he also hopes to be showered with Paulo’s eternal gratitude, and therefore be able to collect his love.

Both *Filling the Belly* and *Significant Things* explore the sorrow that often forms the underbelly of intense love. Through these two sensitive and introspective characters, the reader is presented with two distinct models of what it means to love, mourn, and live.

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## Metcalfe in Darkest Canada

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### John Metcalfe

*An Aesthetic Underground: A Literary Memoir.*

Thomas Allen \$36.95

*Forde Abroad.* Porcupine’s Quill \$14.95

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Reviewed by Frank Davey

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John Metcalfe’s main fiction in this memoir is that since his arrival in Canada from Britain in 1962 he has led an “aesthetic underground” within Canadian letters to resist nationalism, multiculturalism, commercialism, cronyism, prize-seeking, and “bland,” “crude” but culturally fashionable writing. By “aesthetic” he appears to intend timeless formal and linguistic properties detached from cultural contingencies. Among his affiliates in this “underground” there have been, he suggests, Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Hugh Hood, Leon Rooke, Clarke Blaise, Norman Levine, Mavis Gallant, John Newlove, David Solway, and bookseller Bill Hoffer—several of whom (Munro, Laurence, Rooke, Levine, Hood, and Blaise) the book’s dust jacket also claims he “nurtured.” While it may seem bizarre to regard the likes of Munro, Laurence, Newlove, Blaise, Gallant or Hood, with their numerous trade publications, as in any way “underground,” one can see a plausible cultural strategy in Metcalfe’s own claiming of such status.

“Underground” has connotations of unjustified lack of recognition, unfairly denied legitimacy, and heroic resistance. Metcalf may have published more than 18 books and 34 trade and academic anthologies, many with publishers such as Clarke Irwin, McClelland & Stewart, Random House, McGraw-Hill, Van Nostrand Rinehold, and Methuen, but if he can successfully argue this as “underground” activity, he can make even more visibility and legitimacy appear to be his due.

*An Aesthetic Underground* is a rambling, anecdotal, and basically chronological account of Metcalf’s life as a child and student in England and teacher and writer in Canada. Most of the numerous and lengthy quotations (some go on for three to four pages) are from texts he has written himself, and are often accompanied by implications that they have been ignored or deserve re-reading. Lynette Hunter suggests in *Outsider Notes* that women tend to write their autobiographies early in their careers, usually in discourses of epistemological uncertainty, while men write theirs near the end, usually in a discourse of empirical authority, as a last-minute attempt to control their career’s meaning and value. Metcalf indeed appears untroubled by any theoretical uncertainty about self-representation, casting himself enthusiastically as an authority on whatever he has done. He is preoccupied with value: “When I started out in the sixties Hugh Garner was considered a heavyweight; Morley Callaghan reigned. Their prose was bangers-and-mash. My story writers [the writers whose work he has anthologized and edited] are mercurial, their prose an extremely delicate instrument indeed.” He is preoccupied with his own reputation, exclaiming about his first novel, “Surely . . . my book’s virtual disappearance require[s] some kind of explanation?”

Occasionally he lashes out at accusations that his criticism has been condescending and imperialistic. Yet he also remarks several times that he has hoped to “save”

Canadian literature from itself—remarks not dissimilar from those of nineteenth-century British missionaries in Asia or Africa. He locates the source of his literary views in F.R. Leavis, through his sixth form teacher, who had been a Leavis student at Cambridge, and through his tutor at Bristol University, L.C. Knights, the founder of *Scrutiny*. He describes his first years in Canada as “not simply living in cultural desolation” but also “not living in history,” claiming that “there was no Canadian tradition or body of work I could hope to join.” He declares “the mediocrity of all Canadian writing from its beginnings to the present.” Of his role in the establishing of the Writers Union, he writes that what he had envisaged was “a large stone mansion, a somnolent library—literature, reference, with a sprinkling of *erotica*—log fires, deep leather chairs. A silver handbell which, when rung, brought forth Scrotum, the wrinkled old retainer, with his silver salver”—presumably a British gentleman’s club.

The standards that he repetitively claims to represent are those of “sparkling language” and “glorious rhetoric,” aesthetic qualities which—like the somnolent library above—offer the illusion of being outside of time. Exactly what these qualities look like in practice, other than perhaps containing favourite Metcalf adjectives such as “dazzling” and “blazing,” never becomes clear. Like many advocates of timeless literary values, Metcalf seems to regard “good” writing as self-evident and, rather than explaining what it may be, merely quotes extensively from writing he admires. His own writing in this memoir is most interesting when most sardonic or sarcastic—particularly in devastating portraits of Alden Nowlan, Al Purdy, Bill Hoffer, John Newlove, and Fred Cogswell. The book’s later chapters read as an extended advertisement for the small press Porcupine’s Quill (“ . . . the best literary press in Canada. Perhaps in North America”) and

for the writers Metcalf, as “Senior Editor,” has had published there. Several of the paragraphs are simply lists of Porcupine’s Quill titles. The “bibliography” which concludes the book is, audaciously, a list not of books cited, but of ones written, edited, or editorially chaperoned by Metcalf.

Metcalf’s *Forde Abroad* is one of his recent Porcupine’s Quill editorial selections—a novella set at a Canadian literature conference around 1987 in Slovenia, on the eve of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Those familiar with Eastern European Canadian studies of this period will find several of the characters uncomfortably similar to people they know, including one of the central characters, the East German short fiction specialist Karla, whose real-life version lost her position at Jena after German re-unification because of suspicion of Stazi complicity. While Metcalf catches the atmosphere of these lavish politically charged conferences quite well, his attempts to parody the poststructuralist academic language of the time are clumsy and poorly informed. A concluding epiphany involving the mating of cranes offers what Metcalf probably believes is “glorious rhetoric” but seems unrelated to the aging Forde’s various insecurities or to the satire of international academia.

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## Seeking in Chaos

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**Lisa Moore**

*Open*. Anansi \$24.95

Reviewed by David Creelman

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On the surface, *Open*, Lisa Moore’s latest collection of short fiction, seems to be about ordinary people; wives and husbands, parents and divorcees struggle to make their way through their lives. But Moore peels back their prosaic skins to reveal the minds and emotions of unsteady characters who are aware that something in their daily lives is amiss. Her skillfully constructed inner portraits are brought together in a

collection that is haunting, evocative, unsettling, and ultimately richly rewarding.

*Open* succeeds, first of all, because Moore is a disciplined and careful stylist. At their core the volume’s ten stories function as realist texts; the narratives draw close to the inner psyches of the central protagonists and create the illusion that they are faithful records of the character’s inner experiences. Moore drops typographical devices, like quotation marks, which would introduce a sense of distance, and employs instead fast moving sentences which shift with mercurial speed to follow the character’s mind. These stories do not employ new narrative techniques. Five of the stories feature first-person narrators whose inner thoughts are recorded through a clipped stream-of-consciousness. Moore follows the characters as they reflect on their present-day experiences, which trigger a series of memories, associations, and thoughts. The remaining stories, most of which employ a third-person narration, are no less intimate, as Moore uses a standard modernist mode of writing, free-indirect discourse, to allow the narrator to draw close to the characters’ experiences and voices. The stories never become myopic or muddled, but Moore risks occasional moments of confusion in order to provide a less mediated access to the individual’s interior experience. These characters emerge as complex figures whose physical sense of the world is conveyed through an array of vivid imagery, poetic metaphors, and striking similes. Moore’s attempts to track the inner minds of her characters do occasionally go astray, and some stylistic experiments falter. The fusion of film script and internal narrative in “The Way the Light Is” is muddled and pretentious, and sometimes the narrative is so disconnected, as in “Close Your Eyes,” that the effort spent sorting through the fragments is not worth the aesthetic payoff. But such missteps are rare. Moore’s hand is usually deft and sensitive and this is

most apparent as she crafts her conclusions. She has an uncanny ability to find just the right closing; a phrase which echoes the narrative's central concerns, hints at where the characters may go, while refusing to offer any degree of certainty or resolution.

Moore's determined irresolution is evident, not just in the conclusions, but in the plots and characters of the texts themselves. In *Open*, individuals are not secure, and their lives are not anchored or constant. Because individuals are unstable, the relations they develop are impermanent. Marriages, friendships, and family bonds are built on the shifting grounds of emotional experience and sexual impulse. Inevitable change breeds invariable loss. The narrator of the opening story "Melody," allows herself to be swept along only to find herself in a marriage which is vacuous and empty. Her friend, after whom the story is titled, concludes that "You'll just have to do something about it," but we are far from confident that this narrator will be able to marshal the force she needs to act decisively. Indeed, Moore seems to conclude that life itself throws the possibility of permanence into question. The final story "Grace" functions as a prolonged meditation on the nature of uncertainty. As Eleanor watches her husband drift toward another woman, while they attend a friend's wedding, she realizes that she is both bound to him by her love and powerless to hold him by her will. Nowhere is the ambiguity of the collection's title more evident than when Eleanor longs to be open—honest, accessible, and communicative—but finds that she must suffer for being open—vulnerable, unprotected, and revealed.

Moore's stories provide an articulate exploration of the modern world by focusing particularly on the accidental and the random. Events in *Open* are not guided by fate or providence. Characters are buffeted by chance and the stories evoke a curious sense of tension as we realize that events

will unfold without explanation or rationale. In these stories, Moore avoids the techniques of foreshadowing and thus as parents die, mates leave, and friends betray, the reader is left feeling the full force of life's arbitrary rhythm. The characters have trouble asserting themselves in the face of life's sudden turns. As Rachel says, in "Natural Parents," as she enters into a brief extra-marital affair, "I didn't decide. At no point did I make a decision." More pointedly, in the collection's strongest story, "Azalea," the protagonist Sara realizes the core of her life, her marriage, is "an invention of randomness. . . a hailstorm, a do-si-do on black ice." As the characters confront the absences of their lives, they recognize that not all things can be fixed. In Moore's world resolutions are tentative. They are sometimes positive but never certain.

*Open* was short-listed for both the Winterset Award for Excellence in Newfoundland Writing and the Giller Prize. Such acclaim recognizes Moore's skills as a writer and the strengths of the volume. She treads a fine line between confusion and productive chaos, and she produces compelling fiction because she trusts her readers to stay with her through the journey.

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## Writing Home

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**Kim Moritsugu**

*The Glenwood Treasure*. Dundurn \$21.99

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Reviewed by Jennifer Fraser

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Kim Moritsugu's novel resembles one of the old houses that it has as its setting: at first, one thinks it needs work, repairs, stripping of finishes, but by the end, the house is treasured for its fine bones.

The novel is a mystery and a good one since I found myself reading far into the night in order to find out what would happen. Such conventions as solving puzzles, breaking codes, the threat of injury or murder, double-crossing, and trying to outwit the bad guys

in order to escape—all appear in *The Glenwood Treasure*. Moritsugu uses these conventions to complex and enriching effect: an unappreciated child assists in the puzzle; monetary treasure is not found, instead, emotional richness is discovered; enemy siblings are the “good” and “bad” guys and thus family insights dominate the mystery in humorous as well as haunting ways.

The main character begins as a self-pitying figure. Named “Blithe,” à la Noel Coward, she more readily suits his patronymic. Over the course of the novel, she becomes “spirited,” shedding her cowardly trappings in order to claim her name on her own terms. Blithe become a good liar and double-crosser, willing to fight for her own happiness. Moritsugu cleverly presents this shift by putting side by side Blithe’s polite spoken text and her rebellious unspoken thoughts.

Blithe becomes an author literally and figuratively. One of the most interesting and enduring aspects of *The Glenwood Treasure* are the self-reflexive passages on writing. Blithe re-writes her own unhappy childhood through composing a children’s book. Striving to represent for each architectural site a feature that is “hidden in plain sight,” she finally learns how to see beyond the past and, using mnemonics, create a future.

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## BC Lit in Extra Innings

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**Susan Musgrave**

*The Fed Anthology*. Anvil P \$18.00

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**George Bowering**

*Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9*. Coach House P \$14.95

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Reviewed by Travis V. Mason

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Susan Musgrave bookends *The Fed Anthology* with poems by Lorna Crozier and Patrick Lane. If Crozier’s sombre, elegaic “Needles” sets the tone by offering alterative ways into the anthology (through either sharp or blunt hypodermics), Lane’s “The Death-Watcher” reaffirms the tone

and offers a way out, a “portal” through which to escape. Chances are, though, you won’t be escaping soon after reading this collection of new fiction and poetry from the Federation of BC Writers. Between entrance and exit are accomplished stories and poems about serious issues: unhappy marriages, divorce, infidelity, illness, miscarriages, parenthood, old age, absence, loss, violence, abuse. Musgrave has chosen carefully from the Federation’s 1000 members and produced a collection (marking the group’s 25th anniversary) consistent in tone and featuring works similar in theme. While serious, these previously unpublished works are also refreshingly current, fresh as a centenarian’s vomit. This last simile refers to one of the collection’s notable exceptions to the rule of seriousness, Patrick King’s “The Birthday Wish,” narrated by “the first person to reach a century” at Golden Oaks Home for seniors.

I am not suggesting that serious is not compelling if done well. Musgrave successfully intersperses the collection’s 30 poems amongst the 22 stories. Along with Crozier and Lane are a handful of other recognizable names, Alan Twigg, Betsy Warland, W.H. New, Linda Rogers, David Watmough, and Tom Wayman among them.

While each piece, individually, invites readers to find hope beyond the very real, very ordinary subjects and events they depict, the cumulative result can be a hardening rather than a heartening. These are earnest pieces rendered with varying degrees of earnestness, and some, not surprisingly, are more successful than others. For the majority of authors represented here, presumably, hope lies in the act of writing itself; for their characters, however, hope is embodied more by local retreat: whether it’s the naked, Hochtaler-drinking painter trying to find her bearings in a Denman Island cabin on September 11, 2001, in Laura J. Cutler’s “The Implosion,” or the three-foot-eleven retired naturalist

spying bears just outside of Sechelt in Watmough's "The Naturalist."

This sense of the local similarly permeates George Bowering's *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9*. Republished by Coach House Press, the second edition of Bowering's book-length ode to his favourite game fittingly triples the total number of copies with a print run of 1000 to complement the 500 printed in 1967. While a triple might not be the rarest of feats in baseball, it is the offensive play that makes hitting for the cycle one of the most difficult accomplishments in sports—rare enough, that is, to be as exciting and elusive as this little book. Thirty-seven years after the original, Gar Smith's enchanting design—a green-velvet covered pennant shape that unfolds to form a diamond—remains refreshingly green and enticingly velvety. Here's a book that reminds us all over not to get too comfortable with The Book's formally conservative tendencies. The poetry, too, unsettles readers' unfortunate preference for conventional verse about conventional themes.

Bowering simultaneously sings the game's mythical universality, its popular and its Pacific Northwest history, and its grassroots lyric mythology. He doesn't create so much as report on a world in which "God is the Commissioner of Baseball / Apollo is the president of the Heavenly League," old Indian chief Manuel Louie tries out at shortstop for the class-A Wenatchee Chiefs, and Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, et al., satisfy their statistical destinies, all under the watchful eye and critical pen of the official scorer for the *Oliver Chronicle*. If the idea of putting baseball before hockey, especially in 1967, seems un-Canadian, keep in mind neither Bowering's book nor the game itself is about the Canada imagined by the country's traditional cultural "center." Rather, it is about art, inspiration, and the poet/fan whose "body depends on the game." It is also about caring, about paying attention to how "a man breathes differently / after rounding the bag."

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## Making Space

**Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, eds.**  
*Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*. U of Chicago P \$36.50

**Helen Liggett**  
*Urban Encounters*. U of Minnesota P \$25.95

Reviewed by Charles Barbour

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The "Epilogue" to *Monuments and Memory* indicates that the final drafts of the essays collected in it were due in September of 2001. Most of the authors argue that a monument is not an object but a process. Well beyond the intentions of those who commissioned, planned, or built it, the significance of a monument is perpetually being altered by practices and events. "Designed to be permanent," Robert Nelson and Margaret Olin assert in their "Introduction," "the actual monument . . . changes constantly as it renegotiates ideals, status, and entitlement, defining the past to affect the present and the future." In this sense, *Monuments and Memory* has itself taken on the characteristics of a monument. Since 9/11, the significance of the essays collected in it alters as well, and the whole book contributes to discussion of how properly to memorialize that tragedy. Since *Monuments and Memory* generally argues in favour of lived memory as opposed to official history, I will begin with a memory of my own. What I will recall about the days following September 11, 2001 was the official deployment of the concept of "trauma" to end meaningful discussion, to enforce reverential silence, and to produce a climate of intense censorship that soon became integral to American society, and codified in its law. I recall a gap, a studied lack of study, a muffling of every explanatory discourse save that of radical tragedy and Manichean binaries. There was a virulent anti-intellectualism suppressing all those who said things that only a couple of days earlier would have been commonplace in just about any university

classroom, and that just about any humanities student would have taken as obvious—that empires operate by obliterating history, by concealing their own past complicity with that which they now find it efficient to deem “evil,” and by promoting speculative discussions of “culture” and containing analyses of material conditions. Images like the one on the cover of Nelson and Olin’s collection—a photograph of the excoriated hull of one of the Twin Towers—have also come to operate as a kind of official monument. With the aid of such images, the events of 9/11 have been exploited by the official culture to stifle debate and to justify violence. While they were written prior to September 11, 2001, perhaps *because* they were written prior to it, the essays in *Monuments and Memory* constitute an inadvertent critique of the official “rhetoric of monuments” that has emerged since.

Nelson and Olin have collected an extraordinarily eclectic range of papers—on everything from early modern travel journals to the markers of nuclear waste sites, from nationalist conflicts in India to Roland Barthes and the temporality of photography. The various essays are, however, connected by common theoretical concerns, particularly an interest in two lines of thought—Maurice Halbwachs’s work on “collective memory,” or memory as it is materialized in public spaces, and Pierre Nora’s notion of “*lieux de mémoire*” or an “environment” as opposed to a “site of memory.” The book adds to this growing field by favouring the processes and practices of memory and monuments, rather than the objects and their intended referents. The challenge in most of the contributions is to tease out the ways that unofficial cultures appropriate official monuments and redirect their meaning. Among the most interesting themes is that of colonial monuments and aboriginal peoples, such as Jonathan Bordo’s “The Keeping Place” and Ruth B. Phillips’ “Settler Monuments, Indigenous Memory.”

There is much new historical excavation of marginalized cultures in *Monuments and Memory*, and details abound, but I take away the principle that the monuments authorized by official cultures exist, not to memorialize something that has been lost, but as metonyms for something that is always already lost. Officially sanctioned monuments tend to stand in for something we never had, but now, for one reason or another, wish to believe we did. I sincerely hope the concerted effort in *Monuments and Memory* to think monuments otherwise will influence those charged with creating a monument to 9/11. However, given the current political climate, I seriously doubt that it will.

I began reading Helen Liggett’s *Urban Encounters* around the same time that I rediscovered Dziga Vertov’s amazing *Man with a Movie Camera*—a great constructivist peon to urban modernity filmed in the wake of the Russian revolution. Liggett’s book is now for me indistinguishable from Vertov’s film. Drawing heavily on the work of Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, Liggett explores the manner in which our discourses on urban spaces do not merely represent but actively produce those spaces. “The urban is not approached as only a particular place or a preexisting site to be interpreted,” Liggett contends; rather, and as seen in Vertov’s film, “urban space is the raw material for production.” Liggett critiques the rhetoric of “decline” dominant in most readings of the city, and proposes instead to focus on the everyday, quotidian, lived experience of urban life. The city is a place of infinite encounters, where space and self become complexly interwoven, and chance continuously overwhelms abstract planning. Montage is the mode of representation adequate to these encounters, and *Urban Encounters* is itself a performative articulation of this point. It is a kind of montage. Thus it is interspersed with photographs primarily of human bodies or representations of human bodies in the midst of

momentary gestures. The suggestion is that whatever sense we wish to make of urban spaces must begin with these moments of surprise, anguish, joy, or affect more generally. Marxism is dismissed as capital's "house critique," but Marx and Engels fare relatively well, their texts being reinterpreted as early urban theory. Here we find Engels wandering the streets of Manchester contemplating the condition of the working classes, Benjamin rummaging through Parisian detritus thinking about arcades, and Lefebvre here pinching, there renouncing situationist strategies. Doubtless because Liggett teaches at Cleveland State University, the significantly named city of Cleveland (the city that splits the land) is everywhere represented, and thus produced. The point is that space is not an empty abstraction, but performance, production, activity. It is a collection of practices, and these include the practices of writing, photography, and publishing. "Space ties together the idea of area with the idea of domain or regime," Liggett maintains. "It also links the discursive to the material and makes both sites of politics. It expands the way in which we can think about the boundaries of society as well as where we stand in relationship to those boundaries." Liggett and those she discusses propose a new way of thinking about space—one that is not caught up in the tiresome procedure of mapping grids of social power, but looks to the way that space is an activity, or a whole range of activities, and not simply a thing. As Vertov knew as well, to look is also to make.

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## Black Talk

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**Donna Bailey Nurse**

*What's a Black Critic to Do?: Interviews, Profiles and Reviews of Black Writers.* Insomniac P \$21.95

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Reviewed by Leslie Sanders

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Donna Bailey Nurse has been walking the literary beat in Toronto for about a decade,

her interviews, profiles, and book reviews regularly appearing in publications ranging from the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and *Quill and Quire*, to small Black and Caribbean community newspapers such as *Pride and Word*. This collection concentrates on a selection of the author's recent publications. Read as a whole, it provides a lively popular introduction to a range of contemporary black writing in Canada.

As the book's title suggests, a particular concern motivates this collection. Bailey Nurse names it in her opening salvo, and sentence, in which she recalls Noah Richler's response to her offer to write a column on "black books from a black perspective" for the *National Post*. Richler replied, "I did not hire you to be a black critic." Resisting the intended colour-blindness of Richler's response, Bailey Nurse asserts that blackness is an important part of who she is, and who black writers are, and that black experience is as "rich, diverse and compelling as white experience," of relevance to all because "we are all connected." Yet, she finds, Canadians are particularly uncomfortable discussing race, and so she insists on making it central to her conversations and reviews.

In framing her work in this fashion, Bailey Nurse might be seen as invoking issues that are heavily theorized in critical race, postcolonial, and anti-racist theory but her interest is more personal, concrete, and conversational. In fact, she describes her aim as divulging the conversations, whether in interview or review, that black people might have among themselves, making a white audience privy to what "we really feel." As a result, many of the profiles, and especially the interviews—with Toni Morrison, Cecil Foster, Lawrence Hill, David Odhiambo, Austin Clarke and Nalo Hopkinson—do have an air of directness and intimacy that is both refreshing and informative. Quite simply, Bailey Nurse asks questions that a white interviewer

might not dare and is often rewarded with a revealing frankness about the challenges and hurt of “writing through race.”

There is little information on many of the writers profiled in this collection, and so it is a valuable resource for readers, teachers, and scholars alike. However, Bailey Nurse is not, it must be said, a trenchant critic: *What’s a Black Critic to Do?* will frustrate the scholar seeking incisive analysis. Rather she is an appreciative reader, in love with literature that maps the world she inhabits, and unabashedly devoted to the writers who provide it. It must be said that her supportive solidarity is needed, as the literary establishment’s response to Austin Clarke’s Giller Prize for *The Polished Hoe*, discussed in the first profile, makes abundantly clear. There is a dearth in Canada of reviewers who can knowledgeably address black texts, and certainly a dearth of black critics. This collection provides evidence of what black critics can do.

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## Cancer Treatment

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**James S. Olson**

*Bathsheba’s Breast: Women, Cancer and History.*  
Johns Hopkins UP \$24.95

Reviewed by Tanis MacDonald

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In the preface to *Bathsheba’s Breast*, historian James S. Olson discusses his reasons for choosing the surgical amputation of his left arm in order to combat a recurring tumour, and offers this personal anecdote as an expression of solidarity with women who lose a breast to cancer. The arguable equivalency of the experiences is less of an issue than Olson’s bias towards radical surgical procedures, a bias that he comes by honestly but one that makes *Bathsheba’s Breast* a deeply subjective account of the history of breast cancer.

Treating “history’s oldest malaise” as a dread disease and medical mystery, Olson reconstructs cultural beliefs and individual histories with agility and relish; his affec-

tion for narrativizing the lives of prominent women who contracted breast tumours gives the first half of *Bathsheba’s Breast* considerable energy. His graphic accounts of primitive mastectomies performed without anesthetic in unsanitary conditions do not make comfortable reading, as indeed they should not. Olson’s painstaking research into the historical fallacies and treatment options for breast cancer provide an accessible overview of the development of medical science in this area.

The text’s account of these treatments would be more difficult to read without Olson’s sympathetic regard for the women whose journals and letters become the keys to discovering how pre-twentieth century women regarded the diagnosis of breast cancer. These women include Atossa, Queen of Persia in fifth century B.C.; Anne of Austria who served as the Queen Mother of France in the seventeenth century; writer and intellectual Alice James; Nobel Prize-winning physicist Marie Curie; and American ambassador Shirley Temple Black. Olson spends a good deal of the text elaborating upon the medical histories and states of mind of these women as their breast tumours are discovered, diagnosed, and treated. His characterization of the women’s fortitude makes a good ballast against the anatomical fervour with which he describes each operation.

However, the change in the text is considerable when Olson turns his attention to William Halstead’s development of the mastectomy in the nineteenth century. As Olson charts the sophistication of medical procedures, he mirrors the style of medical discourse, and seems to do so without a trace of irony. The male doctors become heroic by pioneering experimental procedures, while the women who were so elaborately praised in the book’s first half are reduced by the experiments in radical mastectomy to a “nameless sorority,” a “sisterhood of guinea pigs.” Olson’s account of feminist challenges to medical legislation in

the 1970s suffers from a similar problem. The text displays compassion towards individual sufferers who led the movement—Rose Kushner in particular—but beyond the individual, Olson seems to have little interest in the politics of women's health. Far from focusing upon the feminist demand for a revolution in women's health care, Olson treats the concerns of female patients—many of whom are also activists—as merely ancillary to the struggle he calls the “breast cancer wars.” In choosing to focus on the health histories of Nancy Reagan, Happy Rockefeller, and Betty Ford, Olson seems to legitimize their breast cancer as worthy of examination because of their ladylike demeanour and their husbands' conservative politics. He goes on to disdain the feminist classic *Our Bodies Ourselves*, and pillories any doctor who turns from surgical procedures to consider non-invasive treatment. He accuses both renowned oncologist Bernie Seigel and pioneer Norman Cousins of quackery for paying attention to the psychological health of cancer patients. These later chapters are the most subjective in the book and more difficult to read than the graphic operations of the first few chapters, leaving the impression that a more accurate subtitle for Olson's book would be “Men, Mastectomies, and History.”

*Bathsheba's Breast* takes its title from the story of a twentieth-century doctor who diagnoses one of Rembrandt's models, after noting an irregularity in the appearance of her breast in a painting in which she modeled Bathsheba. His subsequent research showed that she likely died of breast cancer. This anecdote functions as the perfect introduction to Olson's book. The details are meticulously researched, yet fancifully narrativized; it is imaginatively conceived and scientifically interesting but grounded firmly in the premise that male doctors are driven by passion and genius, while women remain passive objects of the gaze, born to suffer either a tumour or a surgeon's knife.

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## Au fil de la vie. . .

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**André Paquette**

*Parcours d'un combattant.* Triptyque \$18

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**Monique Le Maner**

*Ma chère Margot.* Triptype n.p.

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Comptes rendus par Anne Scott

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On ne saurait imaginer deux livres plus différents et seuls les aléas des contraintes d'un compte rendu critique pourraient nous faire imaginer les mettre côte à côte.

Le premier retrace quelques mois de la vie d'un adolescent que les événements vont rapidement faire passer à la vie adulte. Deuxième volet d'une chronique commencée avec *Première expédition chez les sauvages*, ce roman poursuit le portrait du personnage central, Frédéric Taillefer, esprit rebelle et indépendant qui cherche à trouver sa place dans sa famille et dans la société, ou plutôt hors d'elles.

Le style est journalistique et factuel, peu de l'énergie scripturale est consacré à une étude psychologique approfondie des personnages, qui demeurent au bout du compte assez unidimensionnels. Faits et événements se succèdent en phrases courtes, comme les chiffres d'une caisse enregistreuse ou les arguments de l'instruction d'un procès, le tout raconté tantôt au présent ou futur historiques, tantôt dans un mélange de passé simple et de passé composé qui fait parfois hésiter la lecture.

Les éléments documentaires sont parsemés au fil des pages, comme les chapitres obligés d'un panorama historico-sociologique, comme autant de petites leçons que l'on veut donner au lecteur que l'on imagine adolescent. On aura, tour à tour, l'éducation chez les pères, le hockey vieille mode, les rapports garçons filles, le rôle dominateur du père dans la famille de l'entre-deux-guerres, la crise économique des années trente, le dur travail dans les chantiers du Nord, la déclaration de guerre et les réactions des deux communautés

vis-à-vis du conflit qui menace d'anéantir la vieille Europe.

La principale difficulté ici est que le récit ne s'attarde vraiment assez sur aucun élément. Même si certaines remarques peuvent sembler porter juste, elles passent trop vite pour créer chez le lecteur une impression durable.

Le second, tout à l'opposé, est un livre dont la lecture est difficile, tant par les émotions qu'il évoque que par les événements qu'il retrace, un roman soigneusement écrit, qui pèse chaque mot et dispense la cruauté goutte à goutte, incisif et tranchant comme un couteau. Un roman écrit comme se joue la musique de John Cage ou de Philip Glass : un thème, toujours recommencé, ressassé, mais jamais vraiment tout à fait le même. Le sens y vient des variations subtiles qui se composent à petites touches, discrètement et comme furtivement, dans la répétition. Un roman épistolaire qui s'enroule comme un serpent, revient inlassablement sur lui-même et sur son cœur sanglant : un sentier, une fin d'après-midi d'automne et trois petites filles qui sautent à la corde. L'horreur a fait irruption dans ce décor faussement innocent, faussement parfait, faussement immaculé et plus rien n'a plus été comme avant, un mensonge a suivi l'autre et les innocents sont tombés devant le crime et la lâcheté.

Tout dans ce texte, le décor, le temps, les lieux, les personnages, se dessine lentement, apparaît plus clairement et plus cruellement à chaque redite, comme un tableau impressionniste dans lequel formes et couleurs s'ordonnent à mesure que l'on prend du recul.

Une enfance pourrie s'y dit à petites touches, déjà pourrie, au fond, avant que l'indicible ne vienne la détruire à jamais. Car, en fin de compte, si les enfances heureuses nous coulent sur le corps comme des ondées rafraîchissantes, les autres nous collent à la peau et se logent dans les recoins les plus obscurs de notre mémoire d'où elles empoisonnent et étouffent

l'avenir. Devant l'horreur inavouable de ce qui a troué cet après-midi d'automne, seul le silence pouvait être viable. Lorsque tout bascule et que l'on comprend que tout était déjà ordonné d'avance, il n'y a plus d'innocence et tout le monde est coupable.

Ce qui fait la force de ce récit est son écriture retorse et tourmentée, sa mise en abyme du processus même de l'écriture et surtout le jeu autour de la vérité, car le lecteur se demande jusqu'à la dernière ligne où est la vérité vraie de ces vies ravagées, quelle est la véritable chronologie ou l'authenticité des personnages et des événements mêmes. Ce qui se cherche au fil des phrases, c'est bien, comme le dit la petite phrase qui occupe le centre géographique et thématique du roman : « l'unique point qui est vérité et contre quoi tout est mensonge. » Problème retors s'il en est, puisque de toute façon il s'agit d'une fiction. . .

Le récit construit son suspense à travers des bribes de passé qui nous sont jetées une à une au détour d'une phrase, reconstituant en quelque sorte le processus de l'oubli, de l'effacement et de la répression du souvenir, quand les acteurs tentent de survivre à l'événement, mais que c'est au prix de leur âme, de leur esprit, comme de leur corps. En bref, ce n'est pas un roman pour les âmes sensibles, aimant, comme la Margot de l'histoire, les intérieurs bien propres et sentant bon la rose et la lavande. . .

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## Migration as Muse

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**J. Pivato**

*F.G. Paci—Essays on His Works. Guernica \$12*

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**Vilem Flusser**

*The Freedom of the Migrant—Objections to Nationalism. Illinois UP \$26.95*

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Reviewed by Jim Zucchero

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Exploring the dominant themes and the dynamics of ethnic minority writing in Canada has been the focus of Joseph Pivato's critical writing. Here he provides a

useful and wide-ranging collection of essays, by various authors, on the works of F. G. Paci, a major writer in the Italian-Canadian community, but one whose novels are not widely known. His introductory essay ("Invisible Novelist") sets out the historical and social context for Paci's writing (eight novels since 1978) and speculates on reasons why Paci is not better known: first, he shuns publicity; second, he writes in a direct, transparent style of prose at a time when narrative experimentation is in fashion. The strength of Paci's writing, however, comes from his powers of observation (of life in the Italian immigrant community) and his capacity to convey "the mysteries of life . . . these enigmas" through the development of psychologically complex characters placed in often difficult circumstances. Pivato has made judicious choices here. Two are comparative essays: Enoch Padolsky considers the representation of Italy and Canada in novels by Paci and Atwood. Gaetano Rando's essay examines the father figures in Paci's *The Italians* and Australian novelist Antonio Cassella's *The Sensualist*. Rando points out the similarities that inform the value system that Italian immigrants bring with them (whether to Canada or Australia), but also notes what happens when these values are transplanted in different landscapes and cultural contexts. Two essays deal directly with matters of style and imagery: novelist Caterina Edwards provides an insightful analysis of two of his later novels and notes that, while there is an absence of "fashionable irony" in Paci's prose, his style "demonstrates the value that Calvino calls exactitude." Anna Carlevaris applies an art historian's eye and unpacks the meaning of specific religious objects and symbols in Paci's writing, demonstrating the ambiguity that "both respects and mocks the high drama of Roman Catholicism." Several essays focus on character analysis: the Great Mother figure, the Padre Padrone figure and the ways

in which Paci uses archetypes and myth in the development of characters. The most extensive character analysis is Marino Tuzzi's detailed discussion of the "ironies of identity" in Paci's *Black Madonna*. Taken together these essays do much to convey both the complexity and the value of Paci's impressive body of fiction. They will be of interest not only to those who follow Italian Canadian writing, but to those who have an interest in the development of ethnic minority writing in Canada and in post-colonial literature and theory.

Vilem Flusser's *The Freedom of the Migrant—Objections to Nationalism* approaches issues of migration from a very different perspective—in brief essays that reflect on the nature of exile, nationalism, and movement. This collection is intended to provide an introduction to his writing (in translation). We might well ask why Flusser's work is not more widely known. Flusser's imagination was engaged by a wide range of subjects that he often juxtaposes in fascinating ways. He often begins with simple observations ("To Be Unsettled, One First Has to Be Settled"), and uses these as points of departure that draw him toward seemingly radical conclusions: "Truly rooted and settled people . . . are experientially impoverished shrubs . . . To be a human being in the true sense of the word, one has to be unsettled . . . being expelled is a good way of becoming a human being." He argues that "We Need a Philosophy of Emigration" precisely because the emigrant, in his unsettled state of being, is most open and can teach us much about how to truly live (and how to live truly). Flusser emerges out of these writings as an engaging and playful thinker, one who moves deftly from deeply personal reflections to abstract theory often within the same paragraph. This is at once part of the charm and the difficulty of his writing; his simple observations gesture toward rich layers of meaning that lie beneath the sur-

face awaiting excavation. The reader perceives the extent to which the ideas presented here sprang directly from his life experience of migrancy, upheaval and relocation. As Anke Finger notes in the introduction, "Flusser's life and work embody the turmoil of the twentieth century." Certain themes emerge from Flusser's writing about home, nationalism, exile and creativity such as the essential reciprocity of migrancy, that although the migrant is changed by the society he or she moves to, the countervailing impact of the migrant on the host society is still greater. In Flusser's view "we, the countless millions of migrants . . . recognize ourselves not as outsiders but as vanguards of the future." Given current levels of interest in issues of migration, nationalism and ethnic identity, this is a timely translation of an important collection of writings. Interestingly, both these books close with interview segments. In each case these interviews add another dimension, the voice of the author in the first person and a welcome glimpse of the personalities behind these stimulating, creative works of fiction and essays.

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## The Kamikaze Father

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**Kerri Sakamoto**

*One Hundred Million Hearts*. Knopf Canada

\$32.95

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Reviewed by Roy Starrs

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I am somewhat of two minds about this novel. Kerri Sakamoto is a talented and insightful novelist with a fine eye for detail, and she tells a story that I am sure most readers will find both absorbing and moving in itself. It is quite fascinating for the light it throws on some dark corners of Japanese and Japanese Canadian history. After her father's death, the protagonist, Miyo, travels to Japan and discovers some of her father's shocking secrets, including that he had served in a kamikaze squadron

(even though he was born in Vancouver). She also gets to know the strange memorial subculture that has developed around Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan's war dead, among them kamikaze and war criminals. On the basis of this rather limited experience of present-day Japan, which doesn't seem to go very much deeper than that of any short-term tourist, she returns to Canada wiser about her father but glad that she wasn't born a Japanese.

Since Sakamoto has chosen here to represent Japan through such clichés and stereotypes as cherry blossoms and kamikaze, she risks being accused of pandering to the long-established Western taste for what seems most quaint, exotic, extreme, and even grotesque in Japanese culture, rather than what is ordinary, everyday, and universally human. She does not treat these clichés and stereotypes ironically or satirically, as many Japanese writers and artists have done in recent years. Rather, her strategy seems to be a "compensatory" one of providing nuance and psychological depth, as in her depiction of the doubts and ambivalences of the kamikaze on the eve of their suicidal missions. But is this enough, given that these images are loaded with such a supercharge of cultural and racial prejudice in the Western context? One still comes away from this novel with a generally negative impression of Japanese culture if not entirely of the Japanese themselves. It is, after all, a negative impression based on the same old stereotypes implicit in so many other popular Western representations of Japan. In other words, it is a negative impression ultimately based, if not exactly on ignorance, then on a rather limited understanding of the total reality of Japan. Of course, one could argue that this merely gives a faithful impression of the *sansei* woman's sense of alienation on visiting her ancestral homeland and being confronted by its unexpectedly "alien" culture.

At one point, for instance, she calls the Japanese “crazy” and, as already noted, expresses her gratitude at not having been born as one of them.

Certainly this issue is tricky: to what extent should we hold an author responsible for her character’s myopia? But the author needs to take into account a heavily-laden historical and cultural context here. In this case, the protagonist’s myopia combined with the novel’s stereotypical themes and negativity towards Japan left me at least with a rather disturbing aftertaste.

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## The New World

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**Virginia Frances Schwartz**

*Initiation*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside \$22.95

Reviewed by Beverley Haun

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The young adult novel *Initiation* invites the reader in through a title page that states “The New World, Northwest Coast.” Immediately, with this descriptor, the reader is cued to a Eurocentric point of view. The novel fulfils this expectation by fusing a pre-contact Kwakiutl transformation myth of human sacrifice with conflicts rooted in contemporary issues of class, gender, power, and patriarchy, set in a 1440s coastal village. It is told in alternating chapters by three children, as they pass from childhood obedience to adult independence: the village Chief’s male and female twins Nanolatch and Nana, and Nana’s slave, Noh. The highly stylized and descriptive first person narration evokes past times and places, holding the reader at a distance from the emotions normally associated with the themes at play in the text: identity and fulfilment, hero and victim, forbidden love and sacrifice, intense initiation ritual and death. Such distance is welcomed in the face of the bleak existence of the female protagonists in this androcentric world. They are constructed as victims seeking escape. “Success in war depends upon the

women at home.” Loveless marriages are arranged for political expedience. Class or captivity determines occupation regardless of desire or talent: weaver, fishwife, or slave. Nana finds herself with a choice between a forced marriage and a sacrificial suicide for her village. Noh cues us to Nana’s fate early on: “I have heard that salmon sometimes travel unknown streams and lose their way, die without spawning far from home. . . . *She is just like them.*” This morbid vision and its fulfilment is countered by Noh’s memories of her own village life before her capture when her gentle father shared power with her Shaman mother. The novel ends with hope: Nanolatch as the new chief chooses Noh and Noh’s “Way.”

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## More than a Patchwork

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**Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson, eds.**

*Dropped Threads 2: More of What We Aren’t Told*.

Vintage Canada (Random House of Canada)

\$24.95

Reviewed by Judith Plessis

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When I attended a reading of the original *Dropped Threads* in Vancouver, I was directed to the overflow room of a modest church in Kitsilano as the main congregation hall was packed. This “standing room only” reception represented the enthusiasm felt all over the country about women’s story-telling. We were eager to hear secret narratives—stories we hadn’t been told! After the success of the first collection published in 2001, many Canadian women wanted to tell their stories, and the editors made it possible by inviting submissions for *Dropped Threads 2*.

But one does not have to have read the original *Dropped Threads* to enjoy the sequel. *Dropped Threads 2* has used the idea of reader participation to produce an even broader and more inclusive anthology than the first. The new collection draws on the insights of women from many walks of life

and depicts more multicultural and diverse experiences than the original collection. The second generation of *Dropped Threads* contributors could look to the first stories, gain confidence in writing about experiences they hadn't previously felt comfortable sharing, and fill in what was missing from the original collection.

*Dropped Threads 2* is slightly longer than the original, with an organised table of contents divided into four chapters: "End Notes," "Variations," "Glimpses," and "Nourishment." Each of these categories is a loose grouping of about nine stories, on a similar theme. The insights come from the experiences of each author, but many of the stories have strong political overtones. "End Notes" deals with feminist topics such as rape, brutality against women, child abuse, and attempted suicide. "Variations" focuses on several challenges for women, including widowhood, psychiatric illness, breast cancer, and single motherhood. "Glimpses" shares musings and private thoughts that have shaped the authors as adult women writers. "Nourishment," as its title indicates, explores motherhood and the friendships between women here in North America as well as in third world countries. The final story in the last chapter, "Speaking of Dying" by Shelagh Rogers, is a poignant tribute to its subject, Kate Carmichael, and posthumously to Carol Shields herself.

The writing by all the contributors in *Dropped Threads 2* is honest and eloquent. The book includes several well-known Canadian authors such as Jane Urquhart, Sandra Martin, and Michele Landsberg. It is hard to forget the horrific description of child rape and the victim's emotions in Pamela Mala Sinha's "Hiding" or the anguish of being unable to conceive a child, in Lisa Majeau Gordon's "An Exercise in Fertility."

There is also humour in this anthology. For In "Ten Beauty Tips You Never Asked

For," Elizabeth Hay discusses skin creams and lotions before lamenting that nothing really works to stop the process of decay. In C.J. Papoutsis' "They Didn't Come With Instructions," the author's self-deprecating wit nudges us to think of examples of our own trials in child raising.

In her thoughtful foreword, Adrienne Clarkson explains the power of these individual "vignettes": "Perhaps that is what women's lives are really like—snowflakes with infinitely different patterns, complete in themselves." I did not discover these "snowflakes," however, by reading the collection chronologically. I explored essays from one chapter and then moved on to another section, often returning to reread a story with a new awareness a second or third time. Readers of *Dropped Threads 2* will be amazed to partake in such illuminating conversations with complete strangers.

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## Satire, Sex, and Smith

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**Russell Smith**

*Muriella Pent*. Doubleday Canada \$29.95

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Reviewed by Greg Doran

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Forget what you think you know about Russell Smith. Smith is known for his acute social observations and sartorial advice in *The Globe and Mail*, as well as for two well-received novels, *How Insensitive* and *Noise*, and a strong collection of stories, *Young Men*. However, *Muriella Pent* is a mature novel that marks his arrival as an accomplished novelist. His earlier fiction only hinted at this complex, multi-voiced narrative work. As opposed to his previous "insider" novels, *Muriella Pent* is immediately more accessible to a larger audience. You do not have to have gone "club-hopping" with Russell Smith to understand the satiric focus of this latest work.

The most marked difference between *Muriella Pent* and his earlier work is the

absence of the “Smithsonian” hero. The over-educated, hip, cultured hero of his earlier fiction is absent from *Muriella Pent*. In his place, Smith has created a cast of rich, diverse characters. Foremost in the cast of characters is the novel’s heroine, Muriella Pent, a wealthy widow coming out of the shadow of her late husband. The novel follows her development from a stereotypical society wife passively supporting the arts to a strong critic of and advocate for the arts. The pivotal moment in her journey is the arrival of the novel’s other central character, Marcus Royston. Royston appears to be very loosely modeled on Derek Walcott, and through him Smith unleashes his satire. Smith’s central satiric target is the role of “political-correctness” in the artistic community and its stifling effect on creativity.

Anyone familiar with Smith’s columns will know that he is well versed in the language of the artistic world, and he uses this knowledge to present a keen satire. Royston is brought to Toronto, Smith’s urban muse, as part of a writer-in-residence program. Despite his recent creative inactivity, Royston is considered the perfect candidate by the ironically titled Arts Action Committee. In its attempt to bring in the politically correct candidate, the committee unleashes a drunken, bitter figure into the unsuspecting Toronto cultural community. Smith uses Royston, as an outsider, to comment on the absurdities of various cultural policies, such as the mandate of the local arts community to create art “for divorced ladies’ condos.”

Smith skewers the artistic, cultural, and academic communities of Canada in the novel. He even takes aim at his own position as a member of the “Torontocentrism that’s just so commercial and so dominates the publishing world.” No target is safe from Smith’s piercing gaze. *Muriella Pent* is a work of exceptional humour, sex and satire. It marks the fulfillment of the promise Smith showed with his earlier work.

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## An Uneven Rhetorical Flourish

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**Heather Spears**

*The Flourish*. Ekstasis Editions \$22.95

Reviewed by Tracy Wyman-Marchand

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*The Flourish* is the product of Heather Spears’ raid on nineteenth-century Scottish police files, and the effort to re-member the last two years of her murdered great-aunt’s life. “Flourish” has multiple meanings in Spears’ narrative lexicon: botanical, musical, and rhetorical; but mostly, it is metonymic of a promising life cut short by violence. As a project of recovery, *The Flourish* is intriguing. However, the novel, written from the templates of nineteenth-century domestic and sensation fiction, is often overburdened by Victorian clichés. Further, any sense of immediacy that Spears tries to establish is interrupted by her awkward grammatical manoeuvres.

In her introduction, Spears tells readers that events in *The Flourish* are true and moreover that she is “necessarily convinced that the parts [she has] imagined are true as well.” Yet it is always risky business when an author confuses truth and imaginative licence in the same breath. Add to this Spears’ suturing of original text—denoted by italics—and the result is a less than seamless narrative, a confusing prospect given that Spears takes such great pains to stake out her claim to authenticity. In any event, *The Flourish* is much too self-consciously constructed a novel to effectively sustain a desired reality effect.



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## The New You: How and Why

**Kathy Stinson**

*Becoming Ruby*. Penguin \$16.00

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**Gordon Korman**

*Jake, Reinvented*. Scholastic \$22.99

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Reviewed by Hilary Turner

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The fashion industry did not need to invent the total makeover: teenagers had already done so; and having at least one is in each of their job descriptions. As with the adult version of the process, however, there are good reasons and bad for undertaking it, and the price can be high. In these very readable books, Gordon Korman and Kathy Stinson take a sympathetic look at the 15- or 16-year-old's approach to self-fashioning, showing its risks and its rewards.

*Jake, Reinvented*, like many of Korman's books, brings an element of slapstick to a tense situation. Jacob Garrett, a former nerd and "Mathlete of the Year," has transformed himself into Jake, a hot-ticket item at his new high school. Shedding his glasses and his geeky reputation, he plays football, throws insane parties, and achieves that look of ruffled grace that is the essence of cool. When he succeeds in stealing the quarterback's girlfriend—the impossibly self-centred *femme fatale* he has been scheming to attract all along—Jake's arduously constructed edifice is vengefully smashed to smithereens by those he has tried so hard to impress. From riches to rags in a single evening, Jake is ambushed and framed by his fair weather friends. His story is narrated from the sidelines by Rick Paradis, a clear-headed and skeptical analyst reminiscent of Kerouac's Sal Paradise. And, like Dean Moriarty, Jake is a noble and quixotic hero whose fate is to resume his solitary quest—still clinging to his illusions, misunderstood, and grand.

Kathy Stinson is more subdued in her portrait of adolescent metamorphosis, but

more realistic as well. She sidesteps the problem of up-to-date teenage argot (something of a distraction in Korman's book) by setting her story in the mid-1960s, a period rich in the music and accoutrements of youth culture, which her protagonist is nearly ready to enter. Ruby, who has renounced the childish name "Nanny," and is trying very hard to grow up, is cursed with an anxious and controlling mother whose own disappointments in life compel her to crush any sign of autonomy in her children. They battle over bathing suits, boots, and bedtimes. Then, Ruby meets a wonderful boy named Daniel, and his good nature, resourcefulness, and genuine affection seem about to assist her in moving beyond childhood and the family tangle. Their relationship grows deep and powerful. When her mother derails the romance, Ruby falls for a slimy teenage predator named Blake, and escapes his designs more by good luck than good management. The resolution of the story, brought about by Ruby's insights into her mother's shortcomings and by confidence in her own potential, is unforced and satisfying. Stinson is a fine observer of the details of ordinary life, and her characters are complex and credible. Both she and Korman richly deserve the popularity they have achieved among young adult readers in search of themselves.

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## Downtown Jews

**Karen X. Tulchinsky**

*The Five Books of Moses Lapinsky*. Polestar \$34.95

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Reviewed by Norman Ravvin

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Karen X. Tulchinsky's *The Five Books of Moses Lapinsky* reflects a turning point in Canadian Jewish writing. For a number of years—as many as 20—the breakout careers of the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s represented the Canadian Jewish literature that readers were familiar with. This meant a

regular serving of A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, Mordecai Richler, Leonard Cohen, and Matt Cohen, with a little Adele Wiseman or Miriam Waddington on the side. This Montreal-heavy group, which, aside from Richler, had little impact on the scene after the middle 1980s was mainstream Canadian Jewish writing. New offerings abound. Among them is the Toronto-born, Vancouver-ensconced Tulchinsky, who, in early career, has written a fat, realist, multi-generational novel of immigrant Toronto in the pre- and post-World War II years. One might argue that *Moses Lapinsky* picks up where books like Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* and Henry Kreisel's *The Rich Man* left off—investigating the meaning of Jewish ethnicity on Canadian soil, while giving mainstream Canadian readers the rambling, Dickensian narrative they seem to want from many of their writers. The outcome is a book full of lively characters—strivers, losers, and old-worlders, trapped or bent on escaping the streets around Kensington Market and what is now Toronto's Little Italy. The most intriguing of these is Sonny Lapinsky, a small-time boxer with a big chip on his shoulders, who seems to exemplify the insecurities and energies of youthful ethnic outsidership.

At a comfortable geographical and generational distance from this material, Tulchinsky explores it in loving detail. Her research is thorough, to the point where it sometimes juts through the narrative at odd angles. This is the case in long, documentary-style lists, somewhat reminiscent of John Dos Passos, of the material culture of 1930s and 1940s Jewish Toronto. Of 1933, the narrator tells us:

"42nd Street" was playing at the Uptown, George Raft was appearing in person at The Imperial, Baby Yack of the Elm Street Athletic Club was duking it out with Sammy Fier of the YMHA, cotton shirts were going for \$1.29 each, you could have a three-piece suit dry cleaned at

Varsity Cleaners for ninety-five cents and buy a floor lamp for \$5.95.

In the novel this list is much longer than in my quotation, and the reader may wonder if some of the material might have found its way in the narrative via, say, a shopping trip to Bathurst Street. On the other hand, it may be that the cost of a floor lamp is something we don't need to know.

If one yearns—as I do—for an equally cinematic view of Spadina and College, circa, say 1933, the reader will be disappointed. Tulchinsky is not an atmospheric or overly descriptive writer. She moves her action through dialogue, and by uncovering her characters' predicaments and entanglements. Their era comes through most directly in their talk, in the way they treat one another, and in the tensions that develop between old and new world values. These writerly choices may contribute to a slightly underwhelming climax centred on the notorious Christie Pits riot of late summer, 1933. The outcome of a baseball game between one largely Jewish ball team and its non-Jewish competitors, the riot took place against the backdrop of anti-semitic baiting by a self-styled swastika club based in Toronto's Beaches area. Tulchinsky tells this part of her narrative in flashback—the novel has worked its way to the late 1940s before the impact of the riot on the Lapinsky family is made fully clear. Buried in these events, there may be some as yet unmined social history related to Canada's resolutely anti-Jewish immigration policies during the 1930s. But *The Five Books of Moses Lapinsky* is not focused on such themes; rather, its aim is to convey a particular place, at a particular time, as it was experienced by a group of loosely Canadianized Jews. The model for such fiction might be said to be Mordecai Richler's novels and memoiristic essays, where Richler famously wrote of his own relation to his past: "No matter how long I continue to live abroad, I do feel forever rooted in

Montreal's St. Urbain Street. That was my time, my place, and I have elected myself to get it right."

Immigrant Toronto is not, of course, Tulchinsky's place or time, but she helps us recognize what the old neighbourhood, for a couple of sharply delineated decades, meant to the forging of Jewish culture in Canada.

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## Lourd secret

**Isabel Vaillancourt**

*Les enfants Beudet*. Éditions Vents d'Ouest \$19.95

Compte rendu par Elise Salaun

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Les enfants Beudet, Adèle, Édith, Rose et Olivier, personnages éponymes du roman d'Isabel Vaillancourt, taisent un grave secret. Que savent-ils au juste de la disparition de Lucie Mackoy, une adolescente de Rouyn-Noranda qui s'amusait à séduire les hommes de la ville, dont le père des petits Beudet? Pour le découvrir, un homme écoute attentivement la « confession » de Rose Beudet, dix ans, qui se croit obligée de tout lui raconter puisqu'elle le prend pour un prêtre. Cette situation constitue le motif de départ de l'intrigue des *Enfants Beudet*.

Chacun des seize chapitres du roman est divisé en trois sections—Jour, Soir, Nuit—à travers lesquelles le passé, le présent et l'avenir sont évoqués. Dans la section Jour, Rose raconte la triste histoire de sa famille qui erre d'un logement à l'autre en Abitibi, s'enfonçant de plus en plus dans la pauvreté. Les enfants sont témoins de disputes incessantes entre leur père irresponsable, qui parie et perd le peu d'argent de la famille, et leur mère enceinte sur qui retombe entièrement le soin des enfants. Pour ajouter à la tristesse et à la misère, les enfants assistent à la mort de leur frère Jacô, renversé par une voiture sous leur yeux alors qu'ils allaient, comme tous les jours, mendier leur nourriture à la cuisine de l'hôpital de Rouyn. Comme dans *L'Assommoir* de Zola,

la pauvreté entraîne irrémédiablement la famille Beudet dans une déchéance grandissante. Vers la fin du roman, le père, incapable de soutenir les siens financièrement, les abandonne à leur sort et la mère épuisée met au monde un enfant difforme et mort-né avant de sombrer dans la folie. Les enfants Beudet exhumeront leur frère Josué qu'on leur a interdit de voir, ne serait-ce qu'un instant, simplement pour le rencontrer et lui dire qu'ils l'aiment par-delà la mort. Ils redonnent ainsi la dignité à cette trop brève vie humaine : « On a longtemps examiné les minuscules moignons qui avaient poussé au bout de chaque épaule. On y a distingué un début de quelque chose, comme des poils blancs, du duvet de plumes, peut-être . . . Monsieur vous croyez aux anges vous aussi n'est-ce pas ? » (p. 200) Après le récit de cette scène d'une étonnante tendresse, la petite Rose révèle enfin le secret des enfants Beudet, capables aussi de beaucoup de cruauté pour se défendre et, surtout, pour préserver leur dignité. La boucle est bouclée et le roman se termine sur l'explication de la captivité des enfants dans ce pseudo-orphelinat qui est en fait une prison.

Après la section Jour vient celle du Soir dans chaque chapitre. Très différente au niveau formel, la section Soir est livrée au présent et constituée majoritairement du dialogue entre Rose et Adèle, sa soeur aînée. Cette dernière tente de réfréner la confession de Rose pour éviter que le dévoilement du secret ne fasse éclater la famille Beudet à tout jamais. Très autoritaire, Adèle oblige sa petite soeur à toujours parler correctement—« Tu t'exprimes comme je te l'ai appris ? Avec des mots recherchés ? sans oublier la négation ? [ . . . ] C'est une question de dignité, Rose. » (p. 17) En effet, pour faire advenir la noble condition de « Citoyen » dont les prive leur pauvreté, les enfants Beudet se doivent de parler le plus correctement possible. Un langage châtié

représente pour eux un passeport vers un monde plus riche sur tous les plans, tant matériel que culturel ; c'est en quelque sorte la voie de leur salut. Les soirées où les enfants sont laissés seuls à eux-mêmes traduisent leur angoisse de la captivité et leur désir acharné et dérisoire de protéger ce qu'ils ont perdu : leur famille.

Enfin, la section Nuit qui termine les chapitres apparaît de prime abord comme la plus naïve et même comme la plus insignifiante du roman, car elle est consacrée aux rêves de Rose. Ceux-ci sont peuplés de parents affectueux, de frères et soeurs unis, de liberté, de richesse et d'amour. Or, tous ces désirs acquièrent une profondeur au fil du récit, alors que la pauvreté affective de Rose se manifeste de façon de plus en plus criante, à l'instar de la pauvreté matérielle de sa famille. La petite fille désespère d'avoir un peu d'attention et d'affection. Elle prend donc, en rêve, l'initiative de gestes tendres entre elle et sa mère : « Je viens d'ouvrir les bras de maman et je les ai refermés sur moi. Je me sens rougir autant que la plaque du poêle qui pète de chaleur. Maman rit, me berce ensuite en chantant *Belle de Cadix* [...] » (p. 165). Rose devra se résigner car ses rêves de liberté et d'amour familial ne se réaliseront pas et c'est sur une famille de chats qu'elle reportera toute son affection d'enfant délaissée.

*Les enfants Beaudet* est un roman infiniment triste mais très bien réussi, ce qui en soi constitue un tour de force. En effet, il n'est pas aisé d'évoquer la tristesse sans tomber dans le misérabilisme et la manipulation des sentiments, surtout quand on met en scène des personnages d'enfants. Isabel Vaillancourt a donc évité les pièges du sentimentalisme facile pour traduire la douleur engendrée par la pauvreté et l'injustice ressentie par les plus faibles, par les enfants qui ne comprennent pas les causes de leur situation mais en ressentent fortement toutes les conséquences négatives.

Il est rare qu'un roman réussisse à mettre la pauvreté en fiction de cette façon, c'est-à-dire en l'associant avec une légitime et profonde quête, non pas de richesse, mais de dignité humaine. *Les enfants Beaudet* parlent de grandes et douloureuses choses : la misère, la trahison, la lâcheté des hommes, la mort des enfants, la folie des femmes ; tout cela à travers l'évocation d'une famille de gens pauvres errant en Abitibi au tournant des années soixante. Rose Beaudet, petite fille de dix ans, incarne, quant à elle, la fragilité et l'innocence. Elle reste là, dans la mémoire du lecteur, pour témoigner du chagrin immense causé avant tout par la privation d'amour.

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## Absent Fathers

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**Fred Wah**

*Alley Alley Home Free. Writing West Series. Red Deer College P \$8.95*

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**Tom Wayman**

*My Father's Cup. Harbour \$16.95*

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**Patrick Friesen**

*the breath you take from the lord. Harbour \$16.95*

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Reviewed by R. Alexander Kizuk

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The second half of the last century saw Canadian poetry diverge along two paths: an experimentalist project and a more traditional poetics. Until recently, it has been the latter that has wanted wear. Near the beginnings of modernist poetry in Canada, A.J.M. Smith labeled these lines of development "cosmopolitan" and "native." When modernism in Canadian poetry entered its post-structuralist phase, the *Tish* poets of Vancouver Americanized the notion of an "outlaw" cosmopolitan Canadian verse while at the same time belittling the native, more traditional vein as Universalist. Despite having inspired Michael Ondaatje, bpNicol, and Frank Davey in the early 1970s, the outlaw idea never really caught on in Canada. Nonetheless, the poetry of Fred Wah, a student of Olson and Robert

Creeley, is best understood in this context. The theme of deceit or *Faking It*, pervasive in Wah's work, is related to this poetics.

Wah has carved out a position for himself in western Canadian literary culture that is all but unassailable. Reminiscent of A.J.M. Smith or Louis Dudek in another place and in a previous generation, his influence is significant. Among his former *Tish* confreres, furthermore, he is perhaps the finest poet. Certainly, the lyricism that subsumes his verbal exuberance rings true consistently in all of his work. *Alley Alley Home Free* is a continuation of the earlier collection of poems and prose poems *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987). Taken together, these texts invite an audience that is highly educated and hip to the latest developments in literary theory—in other words, eclectic, detached, and academic. The gesture here is to subvert formal meaning to create a series of linguistic “surprises.” This is the outlaw gesture that Wah took from his American teachers. Yet the profoundly Oedipal nature of this gesture in American poetry is absent here. If the waywardness of the signifier is an emblem of castration anxiety, Wah's poems are remarkably unanxious. Perhaps he can break the vessels because they are not his. But like a cat landing on her feet, Wah always comes back to the “speaking singing / soul carried forward / lines of a life, truth written / in the lie of a word” (*Music at the Heart*). “Sometimes all it is is a simple interpolation,” as he says in the new book,

not so falsely drawn from the laws of narrative since you don't name her her perfumed head . . . but maybe reading her she's my girl this pursuit meant to include marriage . . . car job house . . . all the happinesses prior to life and death love's same old story could be that's when meaning starts.

One might think that the poetry of Tom Wayman would fall into a category oppo-

site to Wah's experimentalism, native as opposed to cosmopolitan, yet the assumption would be inaccurate. Wayman's poems have been delightfully plain and Purdyesque from the beginning. But this folksy, colloquial style also serves to subvert formal meaning, and, as in Wah's poetics, the intention is ideological. Wayman is Marxist or socialist in his move against the Father; Wah is post-Universalist or posthumanist. Of the two, Wayman is perhaps the more original, as Milton Acorn was always more original than Smith, even though Wayman's linguistic astonishments are more low key. Wah would deny the veracity of the origin entirely. Wayman is not so sure; he wants to see the Phallogocentric Origin struck down with his own eyes. He's got Him in his sights. And that's the problem.

Wayman's *My Father's Cup* is a hefty volume of poems that is generally elegiac in tone and mature in execution. If Wayman began his career as a gormless leftist ingénue, here he is serious, dignified and moving. At the heart of this book are poems in which he responds to his father's death. There are poems on the deaths of both parents, but it is the father who takes pride of place, as we see in “Absence”:

If my parents had to be lost,  
I wished for them to go missing together  
like the elderly couple found dead  
in their overturned car down an  
embankment  
of a mountain highway.

But my father lived on by himself  
when there was no more news of my  
mother,  
heating his lonely can of soup at noon.

This emotional current bears upon its proudly blue-collared back several other elegies including “In Memory of A.W. Purdy” and “Cup,” the poem from which the book takes its title. The Father passes on His cup to the son, and it contains darkness, as we see in “The Anti-Prometheus,” that is anxious, edgy,

and new things will be created  
and expand under these conditions, things  
that would have been better had I not  
taken with me  
the fire.

Patrick Friesen is more traditional than Wah or Wayman, though he has some stock in the experimentalist project. Friesen's subjects are traditional—love, nature, domestic life, creativity, God—but his poetic has been spare, unpunctuated, lapidary. Over the years he has evolved a long, supple, and sinuous line, in this book used to beautiful effect. The book is divided into two parts, a series of 26 “clearing” poems and a sequence of 14 “day dreams” or *traumerei*. The first poem in the book sets the tone for what follows:

you know how it works how you have to  
stand still letting the light climb up your  
trunk  
you have to forget most things human  
this is not a place where anything has  
happened  
you are a man you don't know how else  
to say it you are a man who has always  
sought god

In each poem in the first part of the book, a clearing is made in the poet's awareness, where Friesen attempts to find truths to live by. These are poems of acceptance and consolation, and the series ends with an answer: “who is it you hear speak as you speak sing as you sing what voices live in you? / a harsh call in the clearing and that breath that deep breath you take from the lord.” The *traumerei* are winter poems that celebrate family and nature. In “kaddish for the old man,” Friesen longs for an absent father, “I wonder who you are or where because I can see you're not there you're lost and I have no father.” Then he realizes that “you are my father calling me into the world the world you are so afraid of,” and he consoles the old man. *The breath you take from the lord* is a well-constructed book of poetry, very readable and well worth the investment of a little time and money.

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## Paging Dr. Tin

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Tom Walmsley

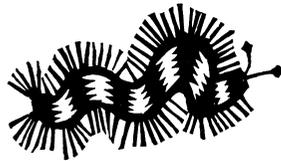
*Kid Stuff*. Arsenal Pulp P \$24.95

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Reviewed by Blair Munro

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Tom Walmsley's *Kid Stuff* is a morose and unsettling novel that explores the formative years of three adolescent protagonists in small-town Ontario in the 1960s. It seeks to demonstrate how abusive families and dysfunctional communities stultify any positive development in the lives of their unfortunate members, but its author is reluctant to delve into the grittier aspects of the abuses that drive Moth, Beryl and Terry to commit their anti-social acts. The novel's strongest episodes are Moth's flights into the ancestral consciousness of pugilists during his boxing matches, but these are too infrequent to satisfy the reader's anticipation of what might have been the work's central focus. Walmsley's reluctance to embrace these vital tensions results in a narrative that fails consistently to engage the reader's concern. While the author flirts incessantly with juvenile violence and sexuality, his treatment of those themes is a rather conservative approach to such transgressive material. Walmsley's excellent first novel *Dr. Tin* displays a far more disturbing (and consequently engaging) attitude toward these recurrent motifs, but since *Kid Stuff* rejects the visceral in favour of the mundane, its unadventurous tone rarely rises above the routine rhythm of its protagonists' lives.



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## Public Radio

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**Marylou Walters**

*CKUA: Radio Worth Fighting For.* U of Alberta P  
\$29.95

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Reviewed by Robert M. Seiler

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Scholars increasingly regard media studies as the examination of modern communications technologies, such as film and television, but also radio, video, and the emerging interactive technologies, with an emphasis on their origin, structure, and impact on society. This well-researched and richly-illustrated volume contributes to this line of scholarship.

Marylou Walters, a distinguished freelance writer, tells the story of CKUA, arguably the oldest publicly owned radio station in Canada. In trying to explain how this institution has survived a number of life-altering crises, she throws light on the dynamics of public broadcasting generally. Interestingly, she has had a close connection to CKUA via her son, Mark Antonelli, a veteran programmer.

The University of Alberta created and the Extension Department operated University Radio Station CKUA, an attempt to bring the university to the people. In chapters 1 to 4, Walters sketches the growth of the Edmonton-based station during the period 1927–44, when it offered rural listeners a variety of cultural and informational programs. CKUA wrestled with financial problems during the Great Depression and political meddling during the years 1935–44: William “Bible Bill” Aberhart, the premier, was determined to control the media. Moreover, the board regulating broadcasting rejected CKUA’s application for a commercial licence, concerned that Aberhart would use the station for political purposes. In 1944, the Manning government solved the dilemma by taking over the station.

In chapters 5–8, she delineates CKUA’s growth between 1945 and 1972, when the

station broadcast under the auspices of Alberta Government Telephones (AGT). CKUA gained a private commercial FM licence in 1948 (the first in Alberta) and moved to the Alberta Block on Jasper Avenue in 1955. CKUA then developed the style of presentation—eclectic and intellectually playful—that would become its trademark. During this “golden age,” a number of inexperienced but talented young on-air personalities, including Robert Goulet and Tommy Banks, cut their teeth as broadcasters. Responding to a CRTC directive to alter the station’s structure, the Alberta government created (in 1970) the Alberta Communications Centre for Education (ACCESS), which incorporated the facilities and personnel of CKUA.

In chapters 9 to 13, Walters delineates CKUA’s growth between 1973 and 1994, when under ACCESS Network the operators tried to re-invent the station. She describes the impact of the recession on CKUA, which was attracting 58,000 listeners. Don Getty, premier from 1985 to 1992, pursued a course of deficit-reduction, and in January 1987 the Alberta government announced its desire to sell CKUA. In response, staff, and listeners founded “The Committee to Save CKUA,” which argued that CKUA should be operated by a new, independent, publicly accountable body.

Walters is very good at describing the turmoil CKUA experienced during “the Hinchliffe years.” Gail Hinchliffe, a Calgary-based property developer with strong Conservative party ties, served as the chair of ACCESS from 1991 and (simultaneously) as the CEO of CKUA from October 1994. The staff resented her lack of broadcasting experience. In forcing the station to shift to a business paradigm, she set up a clash of cultures that destroyed morale. On 20 March 1997, days after the provincial election, Hinchliffe suspended the station’s operations, citing a lack of funding. Journalists across the province sensed a scandal. An audit

found that, contrary to the terms of their agreement, the board of directors had bungled the transition, mismanaging the interim grant of \$4.7 million. Angry that the money raised during the previous fundraising campaign had gone toward the huge salaries of Hinchliffe (who was going through personal bankruptcy) and her colleagues, employees and friends of CKUA established a "Save our Station" coalition, conducted a major fundraising campaign, and put the station back on the air on 25 April 1997.

In short, this station evolved from an amateur operation into a self-sustaining, professional broadcaster attracting 137,000 listeners via 17 transmitters strategically located across the province and over 60,000 in 37 countries via the Internet. CKUA became a station that turned interactivity into participation.

Walters tells this story clearly and directly; occasionally, readers will be frustrated by a lack of documentation and a skimpy index. A master storyteller, Walters brings people and events to life. However, she tells only part of the story of public radio. Others, more analytical, will have to pursue questions as to how public broadcasting fits into a world where fewer than a dozen global commercial media systems dominate the market. Others will situate CKUA amidst these daunting forces.

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## Histoqueerographies

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### Tom Warner

*Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada.* U of Toronto P \$35.00

### Stephen Harold Riggins

*The Pleasures of Time: Two Men, a Life.* Insomniac P \$21.95

Reviewed by Philipp Maurer

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At first, when I was asked to review the two books *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* by Tom Warner, a

detailed account of (the) queer movement(s) in Canada, and *The Pleasures of Time: Two Men, A Life* by Stephen Harold Riggins, a very personal auto/biography of his partner and himself, I didn't have the slightest idea what the two works might have in common. I was therefore, challenged with the question of how I could manage to sensibly cover both of them in a single review. That was until I quite suddenly realized that the answer to this question could easily be found in the titles—a bit more apparent in Warner than in Riggins. Both titles deal with the same general topic, which is, of course, history.

And yet, even though both books take a long look into the past, their methods differ substantially. While Warner looks back, closely observing and analytical, Riggins takes a glance into a past that is—though not a bit less observational—nostalgic and lingering.

Tom Warner, long-time activist with the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario (CLGRO), provides a broad and in-depth analysis of queer activism in Canada, focusing on political as well as cultural elements. He works his way from discussing terms and pointing out the roots of homophobia in moral codices of church and state, to facing conservative backlash, the AIDS crisis and human rights campaigns, identity politics, and the legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

One of Warner's main focuses is on the numerous gay advocacy groups that have been founded country-wide since the 1970s. With great detail, he recounts the history of all those groups in every province and territory. He addresses many core issues that were the foundations of these groups during the past 35 years, for instance, decriminalization and age of consent laws, police harassment, censorship of gay expression in art and literature, same-sex marriage, and child custody. Warner does not, however, focus only on political and legal elements

of queer activism. He also points out many cultural and non-institutionalized avenues of queer activism, such as gay pride parades, art, theatres, and bookstores.

Apart from his detailed listing of groups and issues and his account of the history of queer activism, Warner's core theme is that, virtually from its beginning, gay activism has been divided into two different approaches: assimilation and liberation. Whereas supporters of the former tried to establish equality through political lobbying and legislative means (implementation of human rights and amendment of laws and codes), supporters of the latter approach locate the roots of inequality in hetero-normative notions of sexuality. By challenging Canadian society through more radical activism, liberalists try to create a counter-culture with a more tolerant understanding of sexuality.

At this point, Warner's argumentation becomes problematic. Apparently aligning himself with the assimilationists, Warner neglects and dismisses several pivotal moments of criticism concerning this approach. He neglects, among other things, the fact that attempts to obtain legal and social equality might have been achieved at the expense of other goals; not to mention the fact that these attempts did nothing to challenge the underlying basis of sexual inequality. He does, however, admit that by now, assimilationist strategies might have achieved their potential and that a liberalist approach might be the road into the future.

Warner's attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the history of queer activism is also an act of historiography. After all, recounting history has often been equated with "re-writing" it. As such, it resembles Riggins' *The Pleasures of Time*, a 'historiographical' recounting of his life with partner Paul Bouissac that actually "re-creates" history.

Riggins' book is a multi-layered phenomenon. At first glance, it seems to be a mere

(auto)biography. This book is, in fact, much more. It tells the story of *Two Men, a Life*, and, at the same time, is a kind of involuntary—and, yet, most likely quite intentional—essay on the character of autobiographies and biographies, a historical document, and a statement on the importance of personal life (hi)stories and their intertwinement with civil, social, and cultural history.

From the beginning, the reader learns that *The Pleasures of Time* is primarily based on journals that Riggins started to keep in 1972 as a graduate student of sociology. He focuses mainly on recording the life and ideas of his lover, French-born Bouissac, a professor of French at the University of Toronto and an entity in the field of circus semiotics. Thus, the beginning of the book resembles a biography of Bouissac, though it soon becomes obvious that he is not exactly fond of this undertaking. Additionally, we learn about the author's dissertation research (on nineteenth century French composers) and Bouissac's attempts to run a circus in Canada, conversations with famous (Michel Foucault, Allan Bloom, John Cage) and not-so-famous people, as well as, Riggins' own story of life and his growing up in rural Indiana.

As interesting as this book is, even to a reader less fascinated with circuses and/or the making of the reputation of French nineteenth century composers, the most exceptional and attractive aspect of the book is the way it is written. None of the writing is in the least chronological. Riggins moves back and forth across time. Some episodes even stand completely alone, without any apparent connection to the context they are embedded in—a fact that makes the work a remarkable yet quite confusing read. Riggins quite intentionally chose this approach. It emphasizes the personal character of the book, but more importantly, his deliberate stirring and even "de"construction of expected coherent

narrative in the “auto”biography illustrates the imperfection and subjectivity of what is generally the source of all history and historiography: memory.

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## In the Elegiac Mode

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**Christopher Wiseman**

*Crossing the Salt Flats*. Porcupine’s Quill \$12.95

**Glen Sorestad**

*Today I Belong To Agnes*. Ekstasis \$12.95

**David Helwig**

*Telling Stories*. Oberon \$18.95

**Douglas Lochhead**

*Weathers: Poems New and Selected*. Goose Lane \$24.95

Reviewed by Paul Milton

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The journey back dominates this grouping of poetry volumes, whether it be the return to poems from the past in the Lochhead and Helwig volumes, or the return to homelands and parents in Wiseman and Sorestad. The poems of Christopher Wiseman’s *Crossing the Salt Flats* represent variations on the theme of coming to terms with a rapidly receding past. For Wiseman, this past is personal, familial and, on few occasions, cultural. The collection is shot through with the nostalgia of a middle-aged Canadian for his British boyhood. The salt flats of the title poem serve as his metaphor for memory: “We’ve read about wagon tracks near here / Still fresh after a hundred and fifty years.” The wagon tracks are the remaining traces of earlier journeys left etched on the landscape. The second important motif in Wiseman’s collection is the journey, often the journey back to places which feature in the personal or shared past.

Nostalgic journeys take the poet to familiar places from a lost past: old school yards, dance halls, the home of a former piano teacher. A return journey to Britain takes him to the graves of his grandparents and his father. He reclaims the heroes and the books of his childhood. Yet the familiarity

of things can be overwhelmed at times by the randomness of memory and by the mature perspective re-evaluating his youthful perceptions. He wonders why he remembers the dull alto sax player in the band from his church hall dance days: “Because I can see your face / Up there as you played—it’s never left me. / Because life’s never been like that again, / So urgent, so important, with that steady / And steadying beat.” So too, memories of parents are revisited and revised from the mature perspective of the poet’s own parenthood. The sonnet “Departure Gate” connects the poet’s experience of seeing his son off at the airport with his own earlier departure from his own father. The recognitions and re-evaluations emphasize the poignancy of time passing.

Wiseman demonstrates his commitment to and facility with standard formal models (including the villanelle and the rondel), but he balances poignancy and form inconsistently. The octave of “Departure Gate” deftly explores the speaker’s moment of parting from his son, while the sestet develops the generational parallel. Yet in “The Visitors,” the poet’s commitment to rhyme creates hesitations in the poignant description of his return to his father’s grave. Perhaps his least successful efforts are his rhyming couplets in “The Duchess Takes the Waters, 1732” and “Not My Department.” The latter poem fires a volley in the direction of contemporary theory-influenced colleagues (“Theorists, post-feminists and more”) who “will never be forgiven / For reducing people more and more / And using poetry as a whore.” The second part of the poem, parodying language poetry with its disaffection for upper case letters, idiosyncratic word spacing, abbreviated spellings, and inclusive back slashes, blames those colleagues for reducing to tears students who prefer novels and poems. I seem to recall from my undergraduate days students reduced to similar

frustration by Chaucer, Dryden, and Carlyle. *Plus ça change . . .*

I find Glen Sorestad's *Today I Belong to Agnes* more consistently satisfying despite its difficult subject: observing an elderly mother as she is moved into a care facility where she will ultimately die. Sorestad handles the tricky task with aplomb by focusing on material details and allowing the experience to speak for itself. Only rarely does he veer into broad attempts to explain. He also resists the temptation to emphasize his own grieving and frustration as though recognizing that to do so would be to appropriate her story for selfish ends. The result is a dignified and poignant examination of his mother's last days:

Some days I can see  
perceptible changes in Mother,  
or in one of her companions:  
a tangible faltering of speech,  
a sudden memory gap,  
an unsteadiness that wasn't  
there the day before.

Sorestad describes events without embellishment, knowing full well that elaboration is not necessary. For those of us who have experienced such moments, not much more need be said.

The collection follows an episodic narrative of the progress of his mother's final days from the point at which she is moved into a care facility, through her time there up to the "stroke that is the beginning of the end" and the eventual death. Throughout, Sorestad carefully records the experience of engaging not only with his mother, but with the other women in the same facility. On occasion, though he comes to visit his mother, he spends time with others, the Agnes of the title, for instance. The specificity of each experience contributes to the poignant realism of the whole. No woman is made to be exemplary, and so the variety of experience is maintained.

A similar specificity marks Douglas Lochhead's poetry as it appears in

*Weathers: Poems New and Selected*. This selection covers a 15-year period in Lochhead's writing career, a period that reflects the experienced poet in full control of his style. Lochhead's style is marked by an almost imagistic spareness that emphasizes the emotional impact of the elegiac collage "Black Festival," a poem about the illness and death of his wife. The poem collects moments of searing intensity, fear, anguish, and powerlessness in the face of inevitable death. There is a synergy to the collage that transforms each individual section; words that might seem slight out of this context take on a radiance from within the emotional context.

There are also, as a reader of Lochhead might well expect, poems deeply evocative of place, built again on an intense vision of the detail, but balanced with a sense of the history of the lived place and the human geography. Lochhead's vision is omnivorous as is suggested by the brief poem "Everything is" which might be, in his own style, a manifesto:

You understand?  
sure,  
sure you understand.

everything is poetry.

The collection is also distinguished by editor David Creelman's introductory essay providing an overview of Lochhead's work.

David Helwig's collection *Telling Stories* focuses more on a communally shared history rather than the personal histories of Wiseman, Lochhead, and Sorestad. *Telling Stories* collects and re-releases a variety of poems engaging with historical subject matter ranging from the biblical history of King David through a story drawn from nineteenth century myth popularizer Thomas Bulfinch, "The Boy Inventor." But the book is worthy of attention for the mere fact that it recirculates Helwig's multi-voiced historical narrative *Atlantic Crossings*.

The poem explores four episodes in the history of European immigration to the

new world. The first is narrated by a member of St. Brendan's company, the second by a European slaver, the third by Christopher Columbus on his journey to Jamaica, and the fourth by a Viking widow transplanted to Vinland. Although perhaps much has been written and thought on colonial issues since Helwig composed this poem in the 1970s, there is an imaginative-ness to his interweaving of centric and ex-centric voices that invites insight.

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## Of Note

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### Beth Hill with Cathy Converse

*The Remarkable World of Frances Barkley.*  
Touchwood Editions \$18.95

This is an expanded edition of a work originally published in 1978 on the life of Frances Barkley, wife of Charles Barkley who commanded a commercial trading vessel that visited Nootka Sound in 1786. Barkley was one of the first naval wives to openly accompany her husband aboard ship, and may have been the first British woman to circumnavigate the world. This book uses the available sources (such as ship's logs, family legends, and the accounts of other explorers and traders) to piece together a narrative of her life. Although the authors highlight the role of research in their work, the cover of this book suggests a popular, or even a young adult audience, confirmed by the somewhat sentimental and clichéd writing style. The work is of limited usefulness for scholars: while it offers extended quotations and transcriptions from original sources, including the entirety of Barkley's autobiographical "Reminiscences" (held at the BC Archives), it is not a scholarly edition, and offers no account of its own editorial practice. The expansion of

the book did not include consultation of the work of recent historians of the region nor even revision of the terminology (Nuu-chah-nulth peoples are still referred to as "the Nootka"). Difficulties like this compromise the book's enjoyability, even for the popular reader. —MISAO DEAN

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### Helen Mourre

*What's Come Over Her.* ThistleDown P \$16.95

In one of the ten stories in this impressive collection, a middle-aged farm wife desperately treads water as she tries to figure out how to save her husband from drowning after a canoe accident. In another, a restless high school teacher tries to discern the meaning of an Alice Munro story in the *New Yorker* as she finds herself drawn towards the "crop duster" who has temporarily moved in next door. All of the characters in these stories "tread water," in a way, as they attempt to stay afloat in lives touched by bizarre and sometimes tragic circumstances.

The note on the book's cover describes Mourre's stories as possessing "a universality that is both mythical and ordinary," but I would argue that, like Munro's stories, they also remain firmly rooted in a particular place and time—in this case rural Saskatchewan in an area midway between Swift Current and Saskatoon, and today in this case as these small towns fade along with the farm life that has sustained them. Mourre situates her stories within the consciousness of a fresh variety of female characters. In all of the stories, small moments of wonder counter dilemmas to which no solutions are provided. —PEGGY MARTIN

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### Val Ross

*The Road to There: Mapmakers and Their Stories.*  
Tundra Books \$28.99

In this short book for children from age 11 and up, Val Ross confronts the issues that

map makers have to deal with: How do I best present the available information? How much detail should be included? What can be left out?

For good reasons, Ross highlights intrigue, danger, and imagination, especially in the early years of mapmaking, and since the gathering of information for maps is, in most cases, more exciting than the actual drawing of maps, Ross devotes more space to the adventures of travellers and explorers than to the technical details of mapmaking.

Thirteen chapters (around 10 pages each) provide a context for the development of a particular map or maps. Ross mentions well-known explorers such as Captain Cook, Alexander von Humboldt, David Thomson, and Lewis and Clark, as well as lesser-known figures like Al-Idrisi, Cheng Ho, and John Murray, a Canadian who was knighted for his contribution to oceanography. She describes the political travails of Gerard Mercator and other early mapmakers, and outlines the role of technology in the history of mapmaking.

Nevertheless, remote sensing, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), infrared photography, and scanning processes used to “map” the human body are exciting aspects of contemporary mapmaking, and their absence diminishes the book somewhat, as does the lack of full-page visual examples of the many wonderful maps that have been produced over the years. —GORDON FISHER

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**Richard Stevenson**

*Hot Flashes: Maiduguri Haiku, Senryu, and Tanka.* Ekstasis Editions \$14.95

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Richard Stevenson spent the years 1980 to 1982 teaching in Maiduguri, Nigeria, before returning to Canada and settling in Lethbridge. The African experience has provided him with poetic material for a long time: his collections *Driving Offensively* (1985), *Horizontal Hotel: A*

*Nigerian Odyssey* (1989), and *Flying Coffins* (1994) are also about these two years. His new book is called *Hot Flashes*, he tells us in his preface, to allude to “male menopause” and to indicate how the returning images and memories of Africa produce “moments of red hot prickly heat,” which in turn lead to poems.

Where the texts in his earlier African collections are generally much longer, this time Stevenson has chosen three short Japanese forms to distill the essence of these moments of recall: the haiku, the senryu and the tanka. These forms are skillfully used to provide brief glimpses of African life, often focusing on incongruities to comic effect: “another semi— / inside back tire the wrong size / doesn’t touch pavement.” Stevenson often produces a surprise or ironic juxtaposition in the last line: “airline logo / an elephant with wings— / we just clear the tarmac.”

The details of everyday life captured in these miniatures provide more vivid insights into the culture than broad generalizations: “staying in Lagos— / hotel clerk proffers room key / and bathtub plug” works better than “overweight women / are desired, much prized here / well-fed means well-healed [*sic*].” Sometimes the humour catches differences between Canadian and Nigerian cultures: “You Canadians! / You always want things done right!” / the Hausa clerk says”; or “Trudeau lays a wreath— / photo on the front page / shows his ass.” But my favourite in the collection is “Tender lion steak? / *Sah? Is beef— / e come from de cow.*”

Though there are serious undertones at times, the comic poems centered on small details and brief dialogues really make the collection and stay in the mind. Stevenson shows himself to be a virtuoso of the haiku, and also shows how in a globalized culture a Canadian poet can successfully use Japanese forms to illuminate African realities. —GRAHAM GOOD

**Maria Tippett**

*Bill Reid: The Making of an Indian*. Random House \$39.95

In narrating Bill Reid's "mixed heritage," Maria Tippett often seems less willing to embrace the paradoxes and complexities of hybridity than to lament its constructedness. Yet, despite being written without access to Reid's own papers, Tippett's biography shows more balance, admiration, and sympathy than some of the first reviews proposed.

Several *writers* play a part in the story. Ralph Connor, Frances Herrings and A.M. Stephens represent the novelization of Native people during Reid's early years. Tippett uses George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1966) to indicate the political and social climate that welcomed the exhibition "Arts of the Raven" (Vancouver Art Gallery 1967). George Woodcock, Roderick Haig-Brown, Ira Dilworth and Northrop Frye have walk-on parts. More revealingly, Albert Camus is seen as Reid's "intellectual" companion; David Watmough as friend and observer; and Leonard Cohen as a concert favourite.

As an executive member of the Literary Arts Society (with Pierre Berton) at Victoria College (BC), Reid gave a talk on "the fantastic, the modern fairy tale." Tippett identifies his favourite authors as James Stephens, Roark Bradford, Vachel Lindsay and James Branch Cabell, mystic visionaries writing the flamboyant. Readers of *Canadian Literature* might see possibilities here for a resonant and textured study of Bill Reid as writer, or of Bill Reid and the mainly male literary arts. Tippett provides no indication that Emily Carr's example *as writer* had any impact or significance for Reid. More surprisingly, Robert Bringhurst, who would be the central figure in any study of Reid as writer, appears only through incidental quotations and an insinuation that his Haida is poor. Bringhurst makes his own eloquent beginning to the interpretation of Reid the writer in his collecting, annotating, and perceptively introducing *Solitary Raven: Selected Writings of Bill Reid* (2000), in my view an essential companion piece for reading Tippett's *Bill Reid*.

—LAURIE RICOU

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## What Remains: Anne Simpson's *Loop*

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Kevin McNeilly

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In a review in a recent issue of *The Fiddlehead* (no. 220, Summer 2004: 163–166), M. Travis Lane praises Anne Simpson's second poetry collection *Loop* (McClelland and Stewart, \$19.95)—the winner of the 2004 Griffin Prize for poetry—as a key document in the re-emergence of a Canadian formalism. Simpson, she asserts, possesses a remarkable talent for “closed forms” that goes beyond affecting tidiness or decorative technique, using traditional metered verse, for example, “to underscore and convey the meaning of the poem”—a claim that nicely relocates the neoclassical imperatives of Alexander Pope's “An Essay on Criticism” (which has every sound in a poem seeming an echo to its sense) to present-day Antigonish. However, I'm a bit uncomfortable with this rather reactionary reading of *Loop*, which suggests that such formalism marks a latter-day refusal of the “old-fashioned hippie connotations” of free verse and open form. I find very little evidence of any such refusal in the poems themselves. While Simpson's book certainly contains a number of sharply crafted sonnets, a villanelle and a handful of stanzaic forms, the main portion of the volume consists of descriptive free verse and brief prose poems (as Lane also takes care to acknowledge). The loop in the title epitomizes Simpson's

emphasis on the cyclical and the recurrent: imagery of clocks and circles—temporal and spatial loops—reasserts itself throughout these 30 poems, but, more significantly, also gestures toward Simpson's concern with recurrence as a mark of verbal shaping, of rhythm and poetic structure. Still, many of Simpson's poems sound to my ear neither free nor strict, but are really acts of grasping for form itself; they describe an emergent poetic, a voice discovering and asserting shape in lived textures and untutored sensations.

But the poems also exceed the merely descriptive to become verbal acts of attention, on their own terms. They both produce and enact, I think, a phenomenology of rhythm, or what the French psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham once called a rhythmizing consciousness. (See his *Rhythms* [Stanford UP, 1995]: 65–103.) For instance, in the eighth section of “Trailer Park,” the twelve-part sequence with which the volume closes, flashed details from an erotic encounter in a tent are intercut with arch abstractions:

Elbow, eyelash, ear. The symmetry  
of details, things  
that match.

The quiddity of these body parts, intensified and isolated as “things” by the brief blazon, is offset by a claim to be marking out symmetries and balances, which on first pass might appear here to be belied by the clipped and fractured lines. But listen

again: when they're read across the line-breaks, Simpson's fragments coalesce into a contingent iambic pentameter, fleetingly stable but stable nonetheless: "The symmetry / of details, things / that match." Momentarily, a rhythm inheres and holds. The ear finds a brief but audible symmetry, a sound-loop so to speak. In the same poem, this aural coherence happens immediately again—"Every kiss / an ellipse. How he loves her"—and then again—"Each thing grips / space until it learns to curve." This voice wants to take hold, to grip. But Simpson's lines are hardly force-fit; instead of pushing words toward a metric, rhythm emerges as a kind of learning curve, a training of human attention as it learns to respond to, and speak with, its world.

More often, rhythmizing also means releasing the will, releasing the contrivance of technique and practice, to acknowledge the possibility of a mismatch, an asymmetry. Measure, by clock or rule, tends to come up short, and not every utterance is countable: "Time / falls to pieces, / one, / two, / three." Simpson describes Johannes Kepler's craving for surety, to see "the universe folded and unfolded / every numbered thing" but the world outstrips its paper representations, any attempt to comprehend it or to write out its structure. ("Well," Simpson sighs, "get that on paper too" [36], knowing full well she can't.) Words tend to fail ("Kepler could not say"), and such discoveries as the moons of Jupiter, for the early astronomers, would remain "unnamed, unnumbered"—not infinite so much as uncertain, beyond the limited reach of human instruments. So too with these poems. While this vocabulary of uncertainty tends to mystify the unknowable—at times converting late romantic cliché, what's "just out of reach" (I hear an impoverished Robert Browning here), into a gesture at the transcendent in the commonplace, "A miracle: small event"—it also more significantly points up

a nascent humility in any sincere effort to attend to what happens; Simpson never pretends to have access to any tremendous mystery. Instead, she tries to open her language to the pulse and surge of an animate world, and to map the interchange, the conversation, with what lies at the edges of whatever she can claim she knows: "Don't say a word and look / for what can't be seen." Rhythm, as aspiring measure, becomes a form of give-and-take ("Voices see-saw"), a species of proactive listening: "We take whatever shape we find." That is, as conscious beings who want to find form in an uncertain world, we both apprehend and acquiesce, and often in the same verbal gesture.

Her poetry, despite appearances, remains gestural rather than expressive, dwelling on and in the impedances of language, those recalcitrant moments at which the all-too-human need for meaning gets thwarted, rebuffed. The thirteenth section-number of "Little Stories" actually cuts a sentence in half, pointing up the fractal disparities that often characterize Simpson's line: "All the things / XIII / we can't say." The effect, if a little cute, is to inhabit a hiatus in the articulation, a lacuna through which those small events fall mute, as if a "silence follows through / the rooms of when and how," the domesticating architectures of sense. A sequence of seven ekphrastic sonnets on Breughel's paintings—neatly cross-rhymed Shakespeareans, linked in the closed circuit of a corona—are assembled from fragments and *non sequiturs*, pointing to the brutality that inheres in willful elegance. The poems, she notes, were occasioned not by the paintings but by photographs of the WTC landfill site on Staten Island, and are thus, we could imagine, offerings of failing speech in the wake of atrocity, of the unspeakable. But even if "she can't tell," she still does speak, still craves meaning even as such ambition, such hubristic "desire / is weary of itself." If we are to "take the shape

of soil, / abandon words," her poems still seek out that abandonment in words.

Her texts figure desire as shortfall, but still insist on extemporaneous risk, on saying something, anything: "No matter what happens / we'll improvise." Much like Tim Lilburn, although in a markedly different idiom, Simpson calls out an erotic interdependence in the material world, as "Each thing, moving, / tugs something else" ("The Trailer Park" III 82). If "[t]hings don't stay the same," if temporality and mutability disable the symmetries of word and thing, marking out the impossibility of accuracy, of description in any real sense, this kinesis is also a form of linkage, an ecology, that asks to be named, and renamed, to take on forms that keep "inventing and re-inventing" its mythical analogues:

It's not the end  
of desire, just the beckoning  
cruise ship of somewhere,  
somewhere else.

If myths "have a way of lulling us // with inflatable ease," they also remark a certain plasticity, the effort to catch what lies just out of reach. Simpson isn't fooled by her visionary aspirations, even if "[e]ach thing deceives," but neither will she relinquish them as senseless pursuits. Language may come up wanting, but it can still remark, however inarticulately, "Whatever bends / one body to another."

This encounter with rhythmizing, with giving correspondent shape to our need to know, manifests in the audiovisual. What you can't say is also "[t]he part that you can't see." The spatial alterity of that "somewhere else" becomes a verbal dislocation, a break in thinking itself that undoes communicative action, viable expression of any kind: "where it can't be seen, can't be heard, / can't be thought." Desire tends to turn inward, scrutinizing its aesthetic machineries, the formal crutches linking sense to sensuality, until a poem becomes

an act of "Looking into itself, again and again." In "Little Stories," this reflexive indicates a tear in the fabric of representation, but—as the poem suggests, even as it focuses in on its own blurry material, as Simpson freely rewrites Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*—also enables that improvisational gesture toward an unknown and unknowable other:

I see only  
edges, one blurred with another. We can  
make the tale  
whatever we want: I see you  
but you're different.

Clear sight comes to consist in the recognition of its own insufficiencies. Such insight comes, for Simpson, even in the most banal of situations; depicting a day at an amusement park (Disneyland?), she recalls "how we liked it," extracting from mundane declaratives like this one a complex interrogation of both desire and mimesis, of liking and likeness. Notice the byplay of representational technologies in what first might seem to be a casual description of an encounter on the midway:

A child flings  
a video camera on the ground. Stupid  
bugger,  
shrieks a woman, then a man scoops up  
the boy,  
gives him a bottle of juice, whether  
he wants it or not. The peacock imitates  
his cry. I hold my children's hands  
so tightly they ask to be released. They'd  
like  
water, but I have none.

This poem, however apparently flat or commonplace its language, is suffused with a vocabulary of mimicry, of attraction and of control. It also echoes other moments in *Loop*, as when in "The Lilacs," we find her "Yanking the leash" of her dog, regulating the unruly, refusing to release herself to the curves life throws her, to let go into an improvised humility. The liquid imagery (water, juice) recalls "The Water Clock,"

where “water’s voice / slipped through a wheel so time could talk.” Verbal shape, keeping time, is also ephemeral and slippery. Our video cameras break down; our cellphones—at moments of atrocious crisis—fail to connect: “Last wish. Someone’s cellphone. / (‘Are you still there? Are you?’) A voice falls.” Her poems, in visual terms are often spectral. Ghosts are frequent visitors: “Half- / heard, the phantoms speak.” Blurred, smoky vestiges, something akin to flickers “beyond the TV;” outside economies of representation, the networks of knowable forms, keep “Asking, / calling. / . . . / They take us to the edge / of a witching place.”

Simpson, despite herself, is never bewitched; she tries to look past the fraught narcissism of mere reflex, “[a]ll those hours / spent reading / the mirror,” toward what remains worth seeing, to “take some photographs . . . before it gives up the ghost.” A poem is like an autopsy, or even a seance, peering through “[w]hat’s left” and “opening a shutter in [the] skin to look / inside”—and out. Time, measured out in image and rhythm, converts into history as leftover, remnant: “History is whatever / lingers.” Poems name the material traces of flesh and consciousness: “Time is what we leave: your hands, your body,” even when the symmetries and formal scaffolds collapse, when “[w]e’ve run out of a little clock of words.” Poems persist in “searching for what remains,” the little stories and small miracles of coherence to which we still might cling. “After that,” someone asks in “Lot’s Wife,” “who was left / to pick up the pieces?” A poet, I think, since even if “words are ghosts,” poetry persists in sussing out those “[t]hings we can’t hold: / these watches. Ticking. Still.” If poetry refuses verbal conquest—“No one conquering the unknown”—it still gathers to itself a profound unknowing, an abyssal glancing like the request that forms the double burden of Simpson’s villanelle, “The

Grand Canyon”: “I haven’t gone there: tell me what you’ve seen. / We think we know it, but we’ve never been.”

We may come up wanting, unable to describe, but we can still attend on that profound absence, as in “A Moor, Rain,” where Simpson finds that bittersweet lack in the figure of a wife “awake, listening” to her husband “never coming back to bed.” This may be a tragic image, but it also insists on the hope that inheres in acts of unrequited “attending”—both waiting and paying attention. At a reading from *Loop* at UBC in September 2004, Simpson finished with a simple “thanks for listening,” but it seems to me now that such a small commonplace presents more than polite gratitude. “Listen,” her poems invites us, again and again. Even if “something’s gone for good,” some good even yet comes from “such faint / inscriptions, thin / whisperings,” the ghostly tentative signs of “the holy,” such as it is, of what remains.

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Neta **Gordon** is an Assistant Professor at Brock University. She has recently published on Jane Urquhart in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, and has an article on Ann-Marie MacDonald forthcoming in *Canadian Review of American Studies*.

Gayla **McGlamery**, Associate Professor of English at Loyola College in Baltimore, holds a PhD in English literature from Emory University. She has published on Marvell, Meredith, Charlotte Bronte, and Dickens and is particularly interested in Victorian fiction and film.

Linda **Morra** completed a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship last August at the University of British Columbia, where she currently teaches and researches. Her book on Emily Carr, *Corresponding Influence: Selected Letters of Emily Carr and Ira Dilworth*, is forthcoming (Summer 2005) with the University of Toronto Press.

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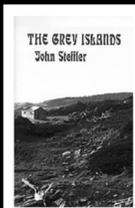
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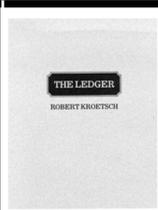
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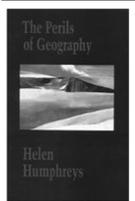
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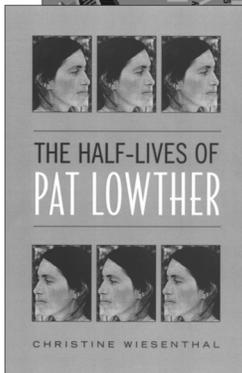


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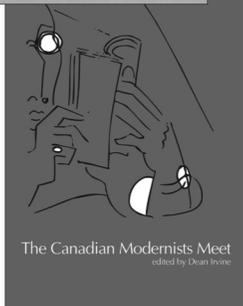
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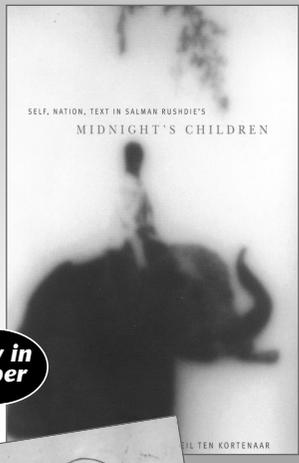
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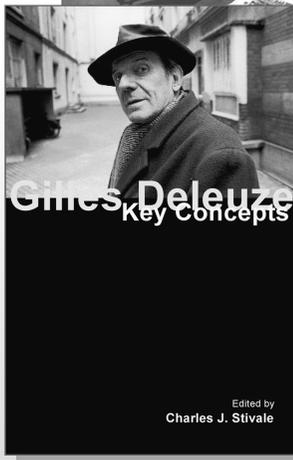
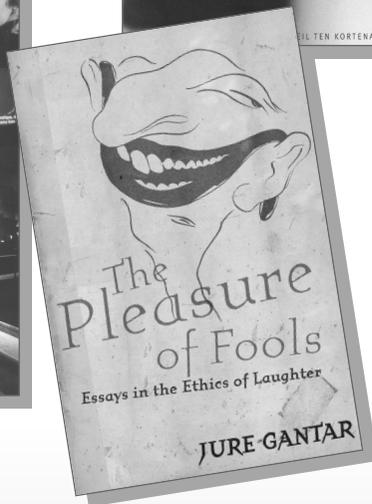
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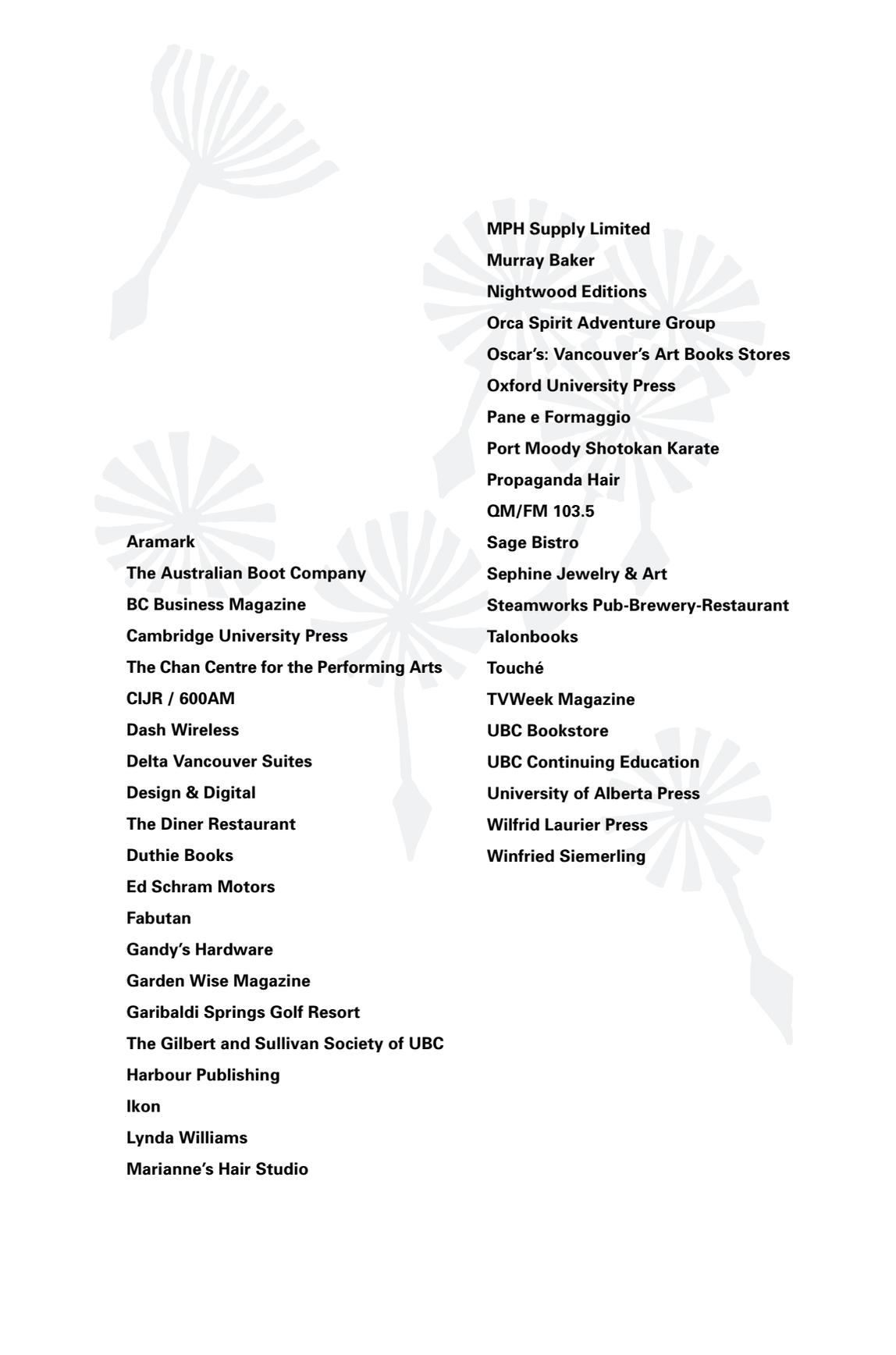
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*Canadian Literature* successfully held its first eAuction in the summer of 2005. The event was special in the sense that a collaboration among student employees made it possible.

Kristin McHale and Doug Giles (Arts Co-op), Matthew Gruman (Workstudy), and Asad Udaipurwala (programmer) along with Donna Chin, Managing Editor, worked as a team to co-ordinate the event. This novel project expands and develops *Canadian Literature's* recent efforts to enhance mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities for students.

Reciprocating the contribution of our current student assistants, *Canadian Literature* is proud to offer for the first time the "CanLit Co-op Tuition Award." Funds generated by the eAuction will be applied to Arts Co-op tuition fees for student work terms at the journal in the coming year. Depending on the success of further fund-raising projects, we hope to continue offering the award in the future, helping more students to pursue their interests in the world of publishing and scholarly journals.

*Canadian Literature* would like to thank our generous sponsors (listed on the facing page) for their much-appreciated support of our eAuction.



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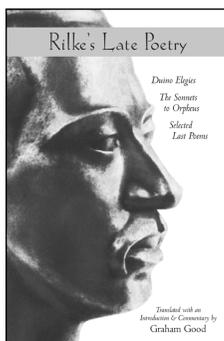
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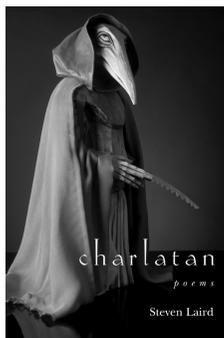
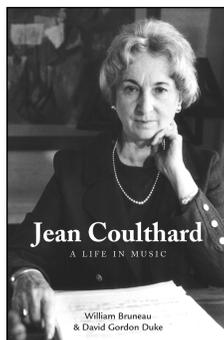
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