

mRb

SPRING 2018 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

Regime Change

*Dimitri Nasrallah
Stages a Literary
Coup d'État*

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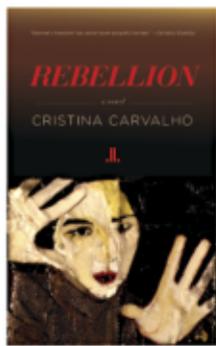
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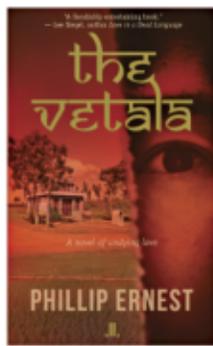
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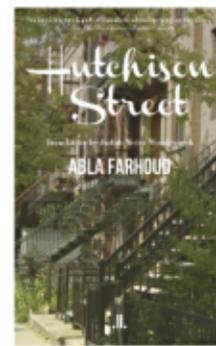
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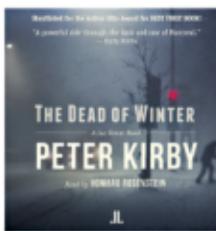
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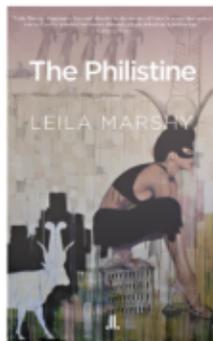
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—Lee Siegel
A Sanskrit vampire
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A Hasidic girl and
other members of
a diverse Montreal
neighbourhood.



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Peter Kirby
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The first Luc Vanier
novel, and our first
audiobook!



The Philistine
Leila Marshy
"Spans—and
transgresses—
sexuality, culture,
and countries."
—Ann-Marie
MacDonald



**The Apocalypse
of Morgan
Turner**
Jennifer Quist
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and laugh out
loud."
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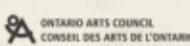
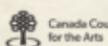
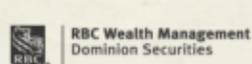
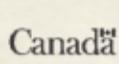
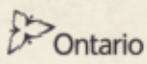
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Our featured illustrator this issue is **Nicole Aline Legault**. Nicole's work examines our need to revive our relationship to the natural world and expresses a bond between beauty and the absurd.



The Great Dictators

BY JEFF MILLER • PHOTO BY ALEX TRAN

The political turmoil of the Middle East has been the backdrop for much of Dimitri Nasrallah's work. He returns to it with a new perspective in his latest novel, *The Bleeds*.

His two previous books explored the legacy of the Lebanese civil war, a conflict that Nasrallah witnessed firsthand. Both his debut, *Blackbodying*, and second novel, *Niko*, focus on the intimate experiences of average people navigating corrupt governments and military violence. In *The Bleeds*, however, Nasrallah goes straight to the top, training his focus on the leaders who create those conditions. The novel examines a family dynasty of iron-fisted dictators with the chillingly apropos surname of Bleed, tyrants motivated solely by self-interest and profoundly unconcerned about the citizens they rule. Set in a fictional Middle Eastern dictatorship on the eve of its own Arab Spring, the novel represents an important transformation in Nasrallah's fiction.

"After writing about a child whose life is altered by war, the greatest contrast of that experience would be focusing on the type of person who controls the war," Nasrallah tells me, explaining the transition in his writing from *Niko* to this latest work. Winner of the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction and longlisted for the prestigious International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, *Niko* charts the epic journey of a child displaced by conflict, drawing from Nasrallah's own childhood experience fleeing Lebanon. His family spent time in Kuwait, Dubai, and Greece, before finally making their home in Canada. Nasrallah acknowledges that it was "a difficult book to

write" and that "a lot of pain went into *Niko*'s crafting." For *The Bleeds*, he wanted to do something different. "I wanted to get outside of myself and change the process this time around."

Strongman leaders have long held a place in Nasrallah's imagination. "To some degree I've always had this kind of persona [in mind], shaping the events that resulted in me moving so many times as a child," he says. One of the guiding questions of his writing process was "how did they come to be so far removed from the people they affect?"

One needs to look no further than the opening scenes of the novel to find answers to this question. Nasrallah's

dictator perfectly fits the image of the post-colonial strongman. Mustafa Bleed has led the country his father founded with an iron fist through eight mandates, suppressing the nation's ethnic minority and lining his pockets with money from public coffers. He is petty, vain, and completely out of touch with the people he rules. He begins his day in his private helicopter, admiring the landmarks of the capital city. Among them is an enormous statue of his father in Revolution Square, as well as "the Bleed cinemas, the Bleed National Library, Bleed Stadium." The country, it would seem, was built in his own image.

But he is ailing. Following a major stroke, the octogenarian has handed over the presidency to his only son, Vadim, a coked-up playboy with zero political instincts. Young and inexperienced, Vadim is a pure narcissist. He has little interest in his native country or the monuments that bear his family name. We first encounter him riding home in his limousine after voting for himself in yet another rigged election. Instead of looking forward to his next mandate, Vadim retreats into his memories, reliving his glory days as a race car driver on the Formula One circuit. Confident that his father is arranging his victory, the thought of losing the election never crosses his mind.

The Bleeds isn't a mere burlesque of a dictatorship, but is instead a fierce political satire with real teeth. It has bite because, as clueless as they might be, Mustafa and Vadim are fully realized characters, and the ramifications of their callous actions always have consequences for them and for their country. "We tend to simmer satire down to its basic ability to mimic and make fun," Nasrallah observes. But instead, he believes, it is "the most political of all the genres – the only form that grants an individual the necessary cynicism to comment upon the political world."

Essential to the success of this satire is Nasrallah's remarkable literary world-building. The fictional country of Mahbad is a former British colony turned client state of the Americans, who mine the nation's plentiful uranium deposits. Unequally divided between warring ethnic groups, the nation feels unnervingly real. Nasrallah, a keen observer of global politics, cites events in the recent history of Iran, Zimbabwe, and Lebanon as informing his invented country, but for *The Bleeds* he didn't want to be beholden to real people and histories. Moreover, for Nasrallah, "to set the story in one of these places would seem like a low form of ideological tourism."

From the reader's perspective, it is clear that a lightly fictionalized version of one country's travails would not have served this novel. Nasrallah's goal isn't simply to mock one dictator, but rather to satirize the idea of the strongman, as well as the international powers that allowed them to flourish in the post-colonial era, whole cloth. A satirical country worthy of Swift, Mahbad gives us a clear-eyed view of how dictatorships are Potemkin states, built to impress the eye of the dictator only, and ultimately hollow. Mahbad is a portrait of political power gone awry.

The counterweight to the self-obsessed myopia of Mustafa and Vadim are the fictional news articles interspersed throughout the novel's first-person narratives. Articles from the state-funded daily newspaper gone rogue and an independent blog give us a glimpse of street-level life in the capital. The decision to include these fictional arti-

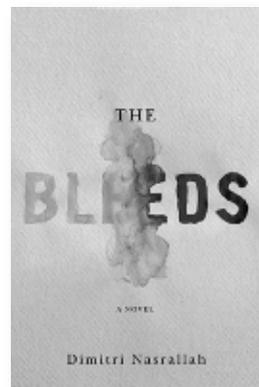
cles and to set them apart on the page, mimicking newspaper design features such as mastheads and columns, emerged early in Nasrallah's creative process. They allowed him to create what he calls "a different kind of novel, one actively engaged with the larger cultural phenomenon of using language to actively shape ... the world." When Mustafa delays announcing the election results, these news sources capture the people's outrage at his flagrant abuse of power. After Vadim leaves the country on a wild goose chase, the media reports on the activist movement taking to the streets of the capital and being brutally suppressed by the regime.

While there are almost no women in the Bleed camp, all of the novel's crusading journalists and opposition politicians are women. "Authoritar-

ian regimes are perhaps the most far-reaching embodiments of structural patriarchy that we have," Nasrallah observes. Even when facing threats to their personal safety for speaking truth to power, the fierce women in this novel persevere in denouncing the Bleed regime. "Women do so much of the thankless pushing against the status quo in society," Nasrallah says, and so he knew that "the elements of progress in the novel needed to be female, as a push toward a wider future for all."

The Bleed regime is destabilized over the course of the novel, but the prospects for real change in Mahbad are uncertain at the book's end. Nasrallah believes that reports of the death of the Middle East dictator are greatly exaggerated. "Calls for change result in chaos, create a power vacuum, which is then readily filled in by more military intervention. ... The reality is, in the end, nothing substantial changed beyond the deepening of disillusionment." As the novel closes, only one thing is certain: that laughing in the face of dictators offers a brief consolation from the horror of their crimes. **mb**

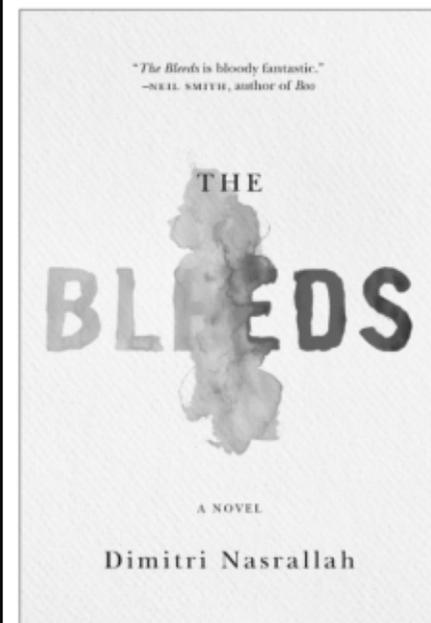
Jeff Miller is the author of the short story collection *Ghost Pine: All Stories True*.



THE BLEEDS
Dimitri Nasrallah
Esplanade Books
\$19.95, paper, 244pp
9781550654806

45

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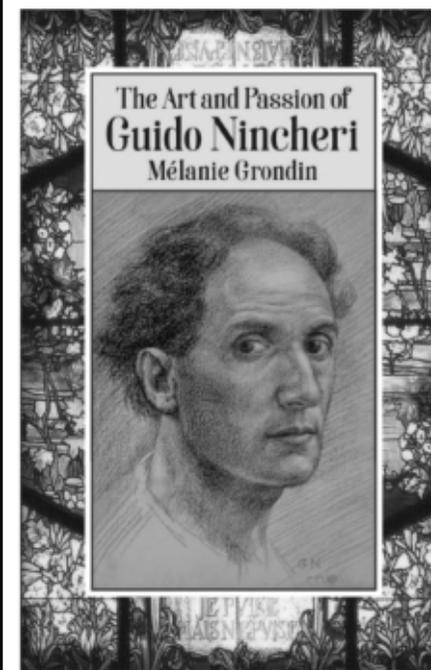


The Bleeds

A NOVEL BY
Dimitri Nasrallah

Nasrallah overturns the political thriller to focus on the corroded power structures framing the lives of those most affected by war and insurrection.

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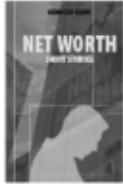
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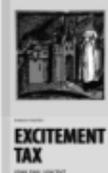
Writers, readers, friends of the press – all are welcome to celebrate our spring launch during the 20th Blue Met Festival in April.

Hosted by Jason Camlot, the line-up begins with Kenneth Radu's latest collection of short stories *Net Worth*. Linked by a common need, or lack of money, the stories move with grace and subtlety into the mind and heart of a disparate range of characters from the impoverished to the wealthy, and often lead to unexpected but convincing conclusions.

BLUE MET METROPOLIS BLEU FESTIVAL

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JOHN EMIL VINCENT is a Montreal-based poet, editor, and archivist. *Excitement Tax* uses a series of tonally varied prose sonnets to trace the deeply uneasy relationship of a grown-up person and his imaginary friend, Walter Weaselbird. The pair crash through thickets of erudition in search of candy. Often they find candy. At the podium from Milan, will be Fiorella Paris, reading from her Italian translation of Keith Henderson's *Acqua Sacra*. Also featured: poet Steve Luxton, reading from his collection *The Dying Meteorologist*.



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fiction

An Antidote to Hope

DESCENT INTO NIGHT

Edem Awumey

Translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott

Mawenzi House

\$20.95, paper, 160pp

9781988449166

You may be looking for a bit of literary escapism to lighten the depths of winter, a “fun romp” to distract from the drag. I can say with confidence that Edem Awumey’s *Descent into Night* does not fit that category. However, if you seek something harrowing and suffused with poetic elegance, this may be the book for you. With a sensual realism that at times bleeds into fantasy, Awumey lays before us the life of West African playwright Ito Baraka. Shifts in tense and voice mark the separation between Ito’s existence in Hull, Quebec, and his deeply tragic past. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott have done an exceptional job translating Awumey’s prose, maintaining a style that is lyrical, yet never overwrought. This is a novel of emotional complexity, of what it means to survive through trauma, and the repercussions of that survival.

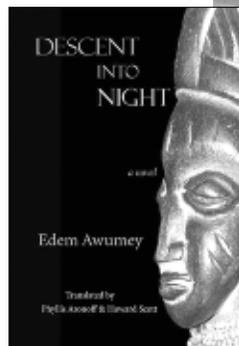
Ito returns to Hull from a reading in Quebec City and scribbles feverishly in his notebook, recounting a previous life in an unnamed West African capital city. In his student days, idealistic and naive, he discovered a faith in the power of literature to incite real change in the world. While journalists were being gunned down in the streets, Ito and his friends were “dreaming with eyes open,” envisioning the shape of the country to come. Surely, a series of flyers using quotes from Beckett’s *Endgame* would more effectively express the absurdity of the political climate than run-of-the-mill sloganeering. And though they knew they were poking the monster with a stick, youthful hubris didn’t allow them to see their powerlessness, the riots that would devour an entire city, or the victims – Ito included – who would arbitrarily be swept up and taken away. The Ito of the present is burdened by the yoke of guilt, dying slowly of alcoholism and leukemia, “playacting at a normal life” with his equally troubled girlfriend, Kimi. And though writing his story resurrects the horned beast that fed on him and those he loved, Ito is compelled to put it onto the page as an act of both redemption and surrender.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this novel is Ito’s love for his blind prison camp cellmate, Koli Lem. Koli the fallen oracle, to whom Ito reads by lamplight, reigniting his passion for the written word. Koli, to whom Ito made love because his beautiful body was “the picture of dignity and noble bearing.” Koli, who risked everything to help Ito escape, who warned him that once he got out, “the people who don’t go crazy are the ones who make music or books.” Ito would spend years after the camp pursuing Koli’s shadow, finding him in a Malian street hawker or a Parisian busker, talking deep into the night with him, deceiving himself about his presence in order to spend just a little more time with him. And while writing would become Ito’s obsession, a way to move forward and his ticket out of the country, it would also be the thing that isolates him from the love of a family and leaves him shivering through the Quebec winters in a musty basement apartment.

This is a novel of emotional complexity, of what it means to survive through trauma, and the repercussions of that survival.

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mRb blog**

mtlreviewofbooks.ca/blog



Cruelty, degradation, betrayal, regret, grief, and self-pity are just words. But Edem Awumey shows us the ways these abstractions can live and breathe in the bones, blood, and mind of a person, in time poisoning every aspect of their existence. If all of this seems a bit heavy, I can assure you that it is. But there’s an undeniable power pulsing through this novel that rewards those who can see beyond suffering and find beauty. **mrb**

Dean Garlick is a fiction writer living in Montreal. His novella *Chloes* launched in the spring of 2014, and a French translation of his first novel, *The Fish*, was published by Les Allusifs in the fall of 2015. He is currently working on a new novel.

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The Shifting Self

THE PHILISTINE

Leila Marshy
Linda Leith Publishing
\$18.95, paper, 320pp
9781988130705

Early in Leila Marshy's novel *The Philistine*, the protagonist, Nadia, abruptly declines to board a return flight from Egypt to Canada and arranges instead for an open-ended ticket allowing her to stay indefinitely. What looks at first glance like a refusal to go home becomes far more ambiguous because of how the novel unsettles the categories of home and away, travelling and arriving, belonging and exile. Marshy deftly explores how moving between places always means moving between different versions of one's self, including versions that may seem unrecognizable.

Nadia is the daughter of a Palestinian father and Canadian mother, born and raised in Montreal, but with her worldview and identity intensely interwoven with her Middle Eastern heritage. When her father abruptly returns to Egypt, leaving her and her mother behind, Nadia is left with gaping questions that she finally seeks to answer, five years later, by planning an impulsive trip to Cairo to seek him out. The initially short duration of the trip is extended because of two complicating factors: her father's reticence to welcome her into his new life and the start of a love affair between Nadia and Manal, a young Egyptian woman with aspirations of studying art abroad. When Nadia decides not to board her flight, she is driven by multiple intersecting forms of desire: desire for Manal, desire for a deeper relationship with her father, and desire for an understanding of her own Palestinian identity. As she comes to understand during the time she spends in Egypt, "we are always travelling towards something ... and it was more often than not the past."

Marshy's style gives a lyrical but keen-eyed representation of a collision with a culture, language, and history that is both totally outside of Nadia's expectations and at the same time achingly familiar. Readers are similarly left to navigate the gap between the Egypt of popular imagination and a tense but vividly alive city. The Nile and the pyramids appear in the novel, but mostly in juxtaposition to Nadia's at first ambivalent, and then increasingly appreciative, response to the urban contradictions of life in Cairo. As she muses: "a city of sixteen million and yet she'd never felt safer. More harassed, yes, but safer too. And, strangely, seen." This multiplicity is reinforced by the play of languages threaded throughout the text: French, English, and Arabic. At a pivotal moment early in their courtship, Nadia speaks to Manal in French and then reflects: "Another language was needed, another lexicon that wouldn't, for the moment at least, know what it was doing." The vocabulary characters have available to them becomes another way to categorize what is foreign and what is familiar as those categories become increasingly intertwined.

Refreshingly, Nadia's relationship with Manal blends seamlessly as one theme among many in a narrative focused on growth, exploration, and the navigation of identity. Nadia's recognition that her sexuality is more fluid than she had previously understood reinforces that perhaps everything about her is likewise mutable. Marshy's controlled prose underscores this complexity: "I guess I'll stay in Cairo as long as it takes." Then [Nadia] added, realizing *it* could be anything: "Whatever *it* is." The beauty of *The Philistine* is the novel's ability to recognize and celebrate journeying across places and into one's self, even when the destination is perpetually shifting. mb

Danielle Barkley holds a PhD from the Department of English at McGill University. She has taught writing, rhetoric, and critical analysis, and currently works as a graduate career educator at the University of British Columbia.



Shine on Me, Little Star

KARIS SHEARER

SITTING SHIVA ON MINTO AVENUE, BY TOOTS

Erin Moure
New Star Books
\$21.00, paper, 160pp
9781554201419

When an intrepid explorer of language and thought sits down to shine light on the nature of memory and grief, you suspect you're in for an extraordinary voyage. In this intricately layered book, a cross-genre narrative encompassing memoir, biography, goodbye letter, and poetic socio-historic treatise stretching from Vancouver to Montreal, Erin Moure reminds us that memory transcends mortality, that in our rawest grief, love and reflection can offer the greatest shelters. The disclaimer upfront avows that "memory is a work of the imagination." Moure, author of two dozen books, including many poetry collections, delivers an artful feat of the imaginary anchored in truth and authenticity.

Beginning with the title, Moure introduces elements of mystery and intrigue. Most of us know that sitting shiva refers to the Jewish tradition of mourning over a seven-day period during which the bereaved does not leave the house. But where is Minto Avenue and who on earth (or in heaven) is Toots? All we know at the outset is the one clue given on the book's back cover: "No one alive now knows who Toots is." Among the pleasures of reading the book is the process of discovery and revelation related to the characters and their settings.

Early on, the narrator draws us into the story as we learn she's just received the phone call that nobody ever wants to receive. The caller informs her of the death of a friend she once loved and who loved her back. Paul Émile Savard, born in 1943, died in December 2015, alone in a Vancouver hospital. From the moment she receives the call, the narrator embraces the act of remembrance, excavating memory and exposing her grief.

For seven days straight, the structural timeline of the book, she delves into her past relationship with a person she affectionately calls "the little man," retrieving her memories of meals and conversations shared, good and bad moments lived, and the significance of his seventy-two-year lifespan. Born in Quebec into a family whose struggles expose the failed policies of church and state, Paul Émile Savard grew up in the Montreal neighbour-



hood of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce back when the streetcar ran from pre-expressway Décarie all the way up to Belmont Park, an amusement park and local landmark that – like the deceased – no longer exists, except in memory.

In this book, the very act of remembering, moving back and forth through time and geography, lends an immediacy and believability to the narrative. The reader feels present, sitting shiva at the narrator's side in Montreal as she reveals the characters and emotional texture of their story while exploring all manner of ideas and relevant facts, meticulously researched and sourced, on historical events and philosophical questions, on sites like Belmont Park, and on restaurants and buildings in Vancouver and Montreal, to confirm and authenticate her memories of scenes such as this one:

In the Gasthouse on Robson Street west of Burrard, we'd eat big schnitzels and drink Blue Nun wine. One night we left the restaurant and he was very drunk and stopped in the street and looked up at a streetlight and thought it was the sun and said what he used to say to the sun: Shine on me, little star.

I still do that to streetlights in his honour. Shine on me, little star.

The specificity of such moments reflects the nature of memory, how thinking back to the times spent with the little man during the seventies conjures details that yield further details to create a portrait that clarifies before our eyes, enriched by recurring images and metaphors written with the precision and instincts of a poet. mb

Cora Siré is the author of three books. Her latest novel, *Behold Things Beautiful*, was a finalist for QWF's Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2017.



Laurentian Legacy

BLUE LAKE

Janet Savage Blachford

John Aylen Books

\$24.99, paper, 229pp

9780995334113

In *Blue Lake*, Janet Savage Blachford has written a poem in the shape of a novel, anchoring her story within a vivid and magical Laurentian setting.

Blue Lake is a place where the land belongs to everyone, where people “considered need or want more significant than ownership.” In *Blue Lake*, history and tragedy threaten to repeat themselves in each generation, with each character “doubled and shadowed by past, present and future.” In this community, it’s considered perfectly reasonable to camouflage your cabin with paintings of trees or to cultivate a garden of poisonous plants, fertilized with the ashes of family and friends.

The story focuses on Ted Gault, a middle-aged literature professor whose family has owned a cottage on Blue Lake for generations. When Ted’s

mother dies, he is stunned to discover that she has cut him out of her will. Instead, she has left the cottage to his estranged ex-wife, Béa, who fled the marriage and the country after the drowning of their toddler son, Minnow.

Determined to reclaim his birthright and confront his past, Ted returns to Blue Lake for the first time in years. Despite his concern about whether it will be “fair or even possible to layer their lives over the scrim of the earlier one with Béa and Minnow,” Ted convinces his wife Caely and their teenage son Rob to leave their comfortable life in Vancouver and spend a whole summer at the lake.

Over the course of this summer, each character develops their own obsessions: Rob relives his father’s youthful fixation with canoes and the Franklin expedition, while his mother Caely designs a fanciful rock garden, complete with a theatre and a plexiglass pyramid. Ted, meanwhile, roams the lake, brooding over his past and trying to make decisions about his future. Ted and his family are gradually absorbed into the Blue Lake community, interacting with a varied cast of neighbours who include a precocious preteen tomboy, an enigmatic hunter, an artistic divorcée, and an ancient matriarch.



Everyone watches everyone else as they set off on personal quests towards self-realization.

This is a book where setting is more important than plot, and Blachford’s glowing prose animates her descriptions of Blue Lake. Each season is beautifully depicted, with “iced-up bushes and trees sparkled in tiny shakes of air, rattling like bird bones” in winter, a springtime field of blue flowers “burning as blue as cognac on plum pudding,” and finally summer, when plants, like children, begin “pulling away from their nurturing roots.”

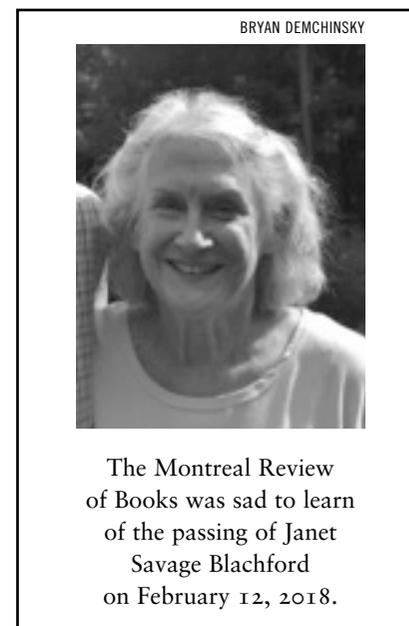
Interwoven with the daily lives of Ted’s family and neighbours are elements of magical realism. Characters speak in the language of legend and allegory, dropping allusions to Celtic and Egyptian mythology as well as the Garden of Eden, Prospero’s island from *The Tempest*, and the classic French-Canadian flying canoe described in *La Chasse-galerie*. The symbolism is particularly noticeable with the book’s animal life, from the pet dog who is repeatedly mistaken for a bear to the wildlife living alongside the people at Blue Lake: a dying baby moose, an unpredictable black bear, and a shadowy lynx.

At times, the narrative falters under the burden of these double meanings, leaving the reader bewildered by the dream-like logic that animates

Blachford’s novel. Several subplots seem to evaporate midway through the story and some characters are sketched too thinly, never quite coming to life.

As a whole, *Blue Lake* succeeds as a poetic meditation, a figurative pilgrimage rather than a plot-driven novel, transplanting themes of life and death, guilt and luck, time and inheritance into the hinterlands of Quebec. **mb**

Rebecca Morris is a Montreal writer. Her short story “Foreign Bodies” won the 2017 Malahat Review Open Season Award and she is currently working on a novel. Visit her at rebeccamorris.ca.



The Montreal Review of Books was sad to learn of the passing of Janet Savage Blachford on February 12, 2018.

Hedunit. Now what?

THE APOCALYPSE OF MORGAN TURNER

Jennifer Quist

Linda Leith Publishing

\$18.95, paper, 300pp

9781988130620

From the first page of Jennifer Quist’s new novel, we know who the murderer is.

“These events were not random and there is currently no threat to public safety,” a police spokesperson says in a prepared statement. Brett Finnemore, the victim’s murderous boyfriend, has been caught and charged, and is awaiting his day in court.

So now what do we do?

What do we do in a crime novel where there is no hard-boiled detective working the case? No tenacious cop playing cat-and-mouse with the killer, no small-town spinster shrewdly putting together clues? What do we do when we walk into the story after the thrill of the chase?

In *The Apocalypse of Morgan Turner*, we sit with the people left



behind, the family of the murdered woman, as they struggle to find a way to live in the lengthy purgatory between the murderer’s arrest and his conviction.

Grief has changed them in different ways. The victim’s mother, Sheila, burning with fury, has become “a sound-bite machine for outrage at the criminal justice system.” Her ex-husband Marc, the victim’s father, has gone in the opposite direction, preaching solace and serenity and forgiveness on a speaking circuit and in his new self-published book. (“Being nice

when things are going wrong is something he does for money,” the victim’s brother, Tod, says sardonically of his father. “He’s a crisis gigolo.”) Tod carries on much as he did before. Or so it seems. In the privacy of his bedroom where no one can see, he stops using the sleep apnea machine that safeguards his life every night when he closes his eyes.

And then there is Morgan Turner, the victim’s younger sister and the title character of the book, who is poor and poorly educated, intensely private, and has no friends other than her brother. As the months between Brett Finnemore’s arrest and the start of his trial drag on past a year, Morgan struggles to make some sense of what happened to her sister. She takes a job at the local abattoir, seeking “a proper horror movie—one with a storyline she can watch unfolding with a beginning, a middle, and someday maybe, an end.” She puzzles over whether exorcism and the devil and holy water are real and if so, what they look like. She becomes friends with a man whose schizophrenia makes it impossible for him to keep his life together – an interesting counterpoint to the fact that Brett Finnemore, the killer, is putting forward a defence of Not Criminally Responsible by reason of a mental disorder.

There is sensitivity and lyricism in Jennifer Quist’s writing. There are keen observations and scenes of exquisite compassion, particularly the ones that involve Morgan’s interactions with her unexpected new social circle of Korean-soap-opera-loving Chinese immigrants. There is grim humour, too. In the courtroom, Tod refers to the half of the gallery behind the prosecutor’s desk where they sit as “the bride’s side.” When Morgan’s anxious fingers wander to the bottom of the bench, she finds that “someone has left a wad of gum as a protest, sticking it to the court system the best way they could.”

Readers wanting a fast-paced whodunit should look elsewhere. *The Apocalypse of Morgan Turner* is for those seeking something graver and richer, more nuanced and thought-provoking, something with no easy ending, however the verdict comes back. They will leave it feeling, as Morgan did after finally seeing the inside of the abattoir, “like any new initiate, considering something that was much less and much more than expected, all at once.” **mb**

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based author, essayist, medical writer, and cryptic crossword setter. She blogs about the latter at www.sarahlolley.com.

By Abby Paige

Susan Elmslie

Lashing and Balm

A question from a friend was the catalyst for *Museum of Kindness*, Susan Elmslie's latest book of poems. "She asked me, 'What's your genre?'" the poet recounts, "And she meant, essentially, what metaphor speaks to where you are in your life right now?"

With *Museum of Kindness*, her second poetry collection, Elmslie responds to that question and explores how we find the metaphors we need to make sense of lived experience. In a generous, extended email correspondence, Elmslie told me about her approach and expanded on her notion of "genre."

"How does a genre *become* a genre?" she wonders. "How do the contours of the thing, the experience that we confront, take shape, until the phenomenon can be recognized and named in a word or phrase that encapsulates its gestures and conventions? Holocaust. Active Shooter. Fetal Abduction. These terms came after the phenomena."

Many of Elmslie's poems chart the course from raw experience to more serene understanding, even epiphany. "At least you got a poem out of it," quips the speaker of "Material," suggesting the fraught relationship between the moments we live and the stories we tell about them. A poem is "one of the perks of pain," the only consolation for the "endless supply of material" life unfailingly supplies.

Much of the material from which Elmslie draws is personal, although she, like many poets who write in a similar vein, puts quotes around the descriptor "confessional." "Poetry's still artifice, even if it does intersect with lived experience in significant ways."

To call these poems "confessional" is to say that they mine the poet's interior, but it is not to say only that. As poet Rachel Zucker has said, "surgery is not an act of intimacy." A poem is not made by self-exposure alone. Rather, these poems explore and sometimes undermine the boundaries of the self, scraping down private experience until something more human (perhaps "generic") than individual is revealed.

With the book's second section, entitled "Trigger Warning," Elmslie explores one of the grimmest examples of how a specific event, particular and even anomalous when first experienced, is codified by repetition into a genre; here she pioneers the sub-genre of the school-shooting poem. (American poet Bob Hicok, who provides epigraphs to two of the poems, is another such pioneer.) Elmslie teaches English at Dawson College, and she was teaching there in September 2006 when a gunman attacked the school, killing one student and wounding nineteen others before commit-

ting suicide. This portion of the book moves narratively, from the event itself to its immediate aftermath to its recollection in retrospect. It opens with "School Shooting," its stanzas in couplets like the barrels of a gun and lines that seem to have broken under tension:

I can tell you there is a static silence
between reports of a gun; bullets

pierce drywall; we were too afraid to move
a filing cabinet to block the door;

when the smooth-jawed SWAT officer
ordered me to hold it open for my students

then swung around to cover my back I felt
his core hot and trembling through Kevlar.

The poem feels utterly controlled and unflinching, even as trauma radiates heat from underneath. It is a recollection broken into short breaths, the reality of the experience accumulating, snowflakes into snow, as images land one by one. Elmslie often operates this way: a careful accounting of images, sensations, and ordinary moments that coalesce into a sum more meaningful than its parts. The effect can be satisfyingly surprising, but it is a premeditated kind of surprise, like someone appearing in a doorway before you hear their footsteps.

"I can spend years on revisions, approaching the poem totally coldly," Elmslie reflects. "And then suddenly *click* or *sproing*. I feel a sense of 'yes, that's it,' when a poem coalesces and there's a match between what gets down on the page and what I didn't know I knew about my subject or experience ... As Frost said, 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.'"

The aim of reworking poems over such a long period – *Museum of Kindness* "came together over eleven years," Elmslie says – is to depersonalize the material and evaluate it more dispassionately. Interestingly, the poems often embody such shifts our perception takes over time. The section related to the Dawson shooting closes with "The Worst," which asks, "How do we get a handle on the worst / when it's a moving target"? The horror of the incident

diminishes in retrospect as it is assimilated into the larger, ordered arc of a life, into which other traumas present themselves for comparison.

The subsequent section of poems, entitled "Threshold," follows a similar narrative arc from chaos to order. Beginning with a difficult pregnancy and birth, the poems trace a child's diagnosis ("My baby's perfect but his brain won't let him talk," moans the voice of "Broken Baby Blues") and his parents' struggle to find footing on the steep slope of their new reality. Here, too, Elmslie draws from personal experience, that of parenting two small children, the younger of whom has autism. These poems walk a more delicate line of self-exposure. While the "gestures and conventions" of a school shooting are familiar to most of North America by now, these poems describe a more obscure "genre," the experience of loving and caring for a child with a disability: the initial, disorienting grief; the grinding exhaustion; the scrutiny of doctors and well-meaning strangers; the harrowing uncertainty about the future. From "Going Under":

Infant, from the Latin for *unable to speak*.
At five and nonverbal, our boy's still golden.
People like to say, *No one ever goes to college in
diapers*.

These poems feel resolutely truthful, yet appropriately protective. Elmslie never lets it all hang out; she is aware of the stakes of revelation.

"These poems, to some degree, put me out in the world as a mother of a child who is differently abled, who is different," she acknowledges with a tinge of dread. "Some people may be curious. Some people will turn away. And some people will see their own experiences reflected. I expect that there will be judgement. There may also be connection, an opening."

The "confessional" core of the book is bookended by poems that explore less loaded themes, giving the collection an arc of its own, a course plotted into darkness, but then methodically back out again. Many individual poems chart similar journeys, the



MUSEUM OF KINDNESS
Susan Elmslie
Brick Books
\$20.00, paper, 113pp
9781771314671

Continued on page 17

By Helen Chau Bradley

Paige Cooper

World-Blocking and Writing Monstrous Men

ZOLITUDE
Paige Cooper
Biblioasis
\$19.95, paper, 248pp
9781771962179



Montreal writer Paige Cooper grew up in Canmore, Alberta, a tourist town, so she learned from a young age to dislike tourists, but also to recognize the tourist in herself when she eventually moved away. This awareness gives her writing an expansive quality, no matter whether her stories are set in her hometown, in Latvia, or on Mars. *Zolitude* is Cooper's first short story collection, but it reads like the work of a far more seasoned writer. Her stories are painful and wise, ugly and moving, and at their best, reveal uncomfortable truths about human connection and its limits. We meet up on a sunny January day at Dispatch Coffee in Little Italy, where, over the industrial thrum, we discuss ugly emotions, playing with genre, world-building versus world-blocking, and writing monstrous men.

Zolitude is startling in its range and scope. It's not a themed collection, but Cooper's ultimate aim is present throughout and serves to unify: "I'm often writing towards an emotion," she tells me. "I'm trying to pinpoint the constructed world and the dynamics and aesthetics that will lead to a certain feeling." The emotions that result are neither simple nor comforting. "The uglier the emotion, or the more complex, the more revealing it is," Cooper says. Having decided during her BFA in Creative Writing that she did not want to write auto-fiction – though she admires those who choose to lay themselves bare in that way – she instead writes in a diversity of voices, across and through an array of genres.

I ask her where she finds inspiration, if her stories are not plucked from her own biography, and she paraphrases the painter Agnes Martin: "It's important to, in almost a childlike way, sit around and wait for a moment of surprise. You pay attention to everything, and wait for that one idea that seizes you. If you're lucky, you get seized by two ideas at once, and though they may not immediately make sense together, you use that friction to generate a story." Cooper uses this friction to great effect. In "Spiderhole," a smug white Vietnam veteran rails against dinosaur tourism in Southeast Asia, but is unable to recognize his own colonial attitudes towards his surroundings; in "Moriah," justice for sex offenders comes in the ancient form of a roc.

Some of this generative friction comes from Cooper's flexible approach to genre. She was an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction as a child, and, though not a fantasy or science fiction writer herself, she boldly experiments with elements of myth, occult horror, space exploration, spy thriller, and adventure tales, all of it infused with her own poetic rhythm. Her influences range from Jack London to Angela Carter and Steven Millhauser, to Kathy Acker and Ottessa Moshfegh.

The stories in *Zolitude* are both unforgiving and generous. Each one drops the reader into the churning centre of things, with little explanation; we are provided with snippets of conversation and sensation, and must work to get our bearings. Cooper admits that the lack of clarifying detail baffles some readers, but she subscribes to the concept of "world-blocking" recently

put forth by Tyler Malone in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. "World-blocking is an alternative to world-building," Cooper explains. "It's more about the interface between the mind and the physical world; it's about obscurity, a certain fogginess. Only so much can be known by a person at a given time, so the writer presents only a certain amount of detail, and the reader is left to fill in the gaps."

The work we are required to do in this collection is welcome, ultimately, because of the generosity of Cooper's language. She is just as adept at imbuing old myths with new life as she is at spinning descriptions of objects and processes into refractive poetry. In "Moriah," I am spellbound by this passage about the roc's offspring:

Her diamond egg, white enough to fall through, bright enough to snowblind, filled with an evil and naked creature that breathed warmly through its shell, utterly beloved.

In "La Folie," the narrator describes her mode of transport – her frustration is palpable but the image is strangely gorgeous: "Her motorbike, she knows now, is not even a Honda, but a knock-off from China. The cube with aortic valves is a carburetor. The fingerling in the wheel well is a spark plug ... the gas must be choked via a toggle deep in the beast's phlegmatic chest." Animals and their likenesses prowl the pages, adding to the tone of myth, without ever tipping the stories into the actual realm of fable. Their appearances are just brief and odd enough, natural yet inexplicable. A character's pet snake is a "living noose with a yearning knob of brain at the end." The audience at a frenetic concert is "shrieking like a bat colony." The young sex workers taken in by a house mother in "The Tin Luck" are "an undersea pack of beaks and long arms ... They devour whole nights at a time and spit out the unpalatable survivors."

There is harshness to the stories as well. These are not tales of success or enlightenment – characters are often doomed to failure, accidents, misplaced love, and regret. They wrestle with their own shortcomings. A character in one story laments that, "there are some symptoms of himself that are hard to hide." The death-

avoidant time-machine inventor in "Thanatos" admits: "I have no money, but all of my cruelty is intact."

Monstrous men are abundantly present in this collection. Cooper plays with the tension of representing gendered ugliness and violence by getting so close to it that the reader is uncomfortable with the implications of this proximity. "I am fascinated by how compelled I am by men and the power that they hold, and that leads me to question my complicity in that power dynamic," Cooper tells me. She references Evan, the protagonist of "Retirement" – a one-time Olympic champion who has descended into self-pity, blaming and mistreating all the women in his life. "He sees himself as the victim. My current suspicion, especially with the Time's Up movement happening at the moment, is that most of the men who have abused women see themselves as victims, explicitly now that they are being called out but maybe even when they were committing the acts themselves. I want to examine and peel that back, look at the self-pity that's involved, the misery of that."

In "Record of Working," Cooper reimagines Jack Parsons, who was the head of the Jet Propulsion Lab at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in the 1970s, and also led a pagan sex cult that gave rise to Scientology. The rambling occultist screeds of the Parsons-esque character are driven by a deep misogyny and provide a twisted justification for the abuse that happens in the research facility. Cooper struggles with the political implications of writing about these men: "I've either been really hard on the male narrators, or not hard enough, and I have no idea which it is. You can't absolve yourself of responsibility for the politics of a story and how it may be read; but I feel like literature is the place to ask these questions about power."

When all else fails, Cooper is tempted to move away from narrative altogether. The last story in the collection, "Vazova on Love," is brief and sharp in its yearning, and barely structured. It is told by a spy who falls in love with her target, and reads like an echo of Anne Carson's *Short Talks*. In a section titled "Autobiography," the spy reveals herself: "Yes, I have walked into unlocked rooms and executed the men who waited for me there. I have soothed evil in its night terrors. I abase myself. I beg you. Lead pours from my mouth. My project is reconciliation."

A few stories – "Slave Craton," "The Roar," "Thanatos" – don't land quite as well as the rest; the sinuous drive of the other stories gets mired somewhat in confusing chronology, or a lack of tension. Overall, though, Cooper is a master of balancing reader disorientation with the heady thrill of the unknown. With each opening paragraph, she pitches us into a new atmosphere, full of gorgeous detail and emotional rawness, a world that feels too real to be a fantasy, or perhaps just fantastic enough to be real. ▀

Helen Chau Bradley is a former bookseller. She works at POP Montreal and plays in the band Heathers. For her tiny book reviews and reading recommendations, follow @notesofacrocodyle on Instagram.



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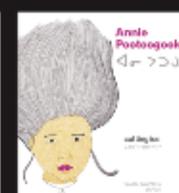
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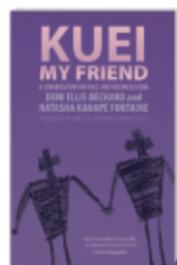
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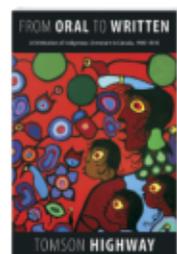


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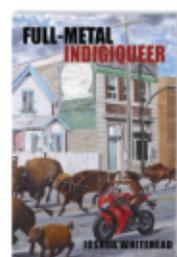


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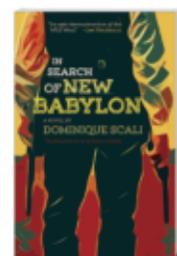


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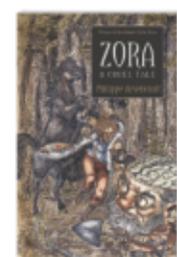
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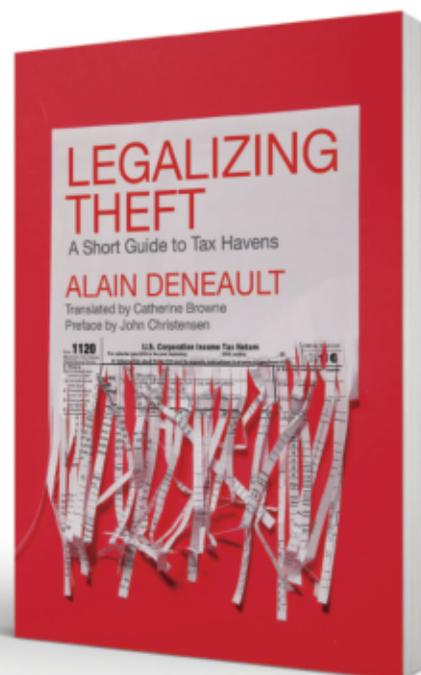


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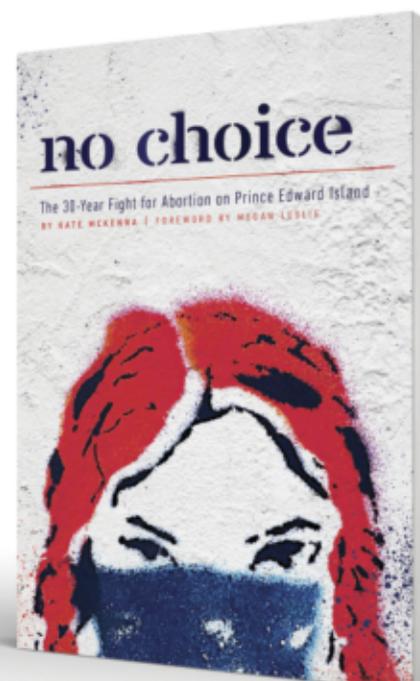


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translated by Catherine Browne, foreword by John Christensen

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foreword by Megan Leslie

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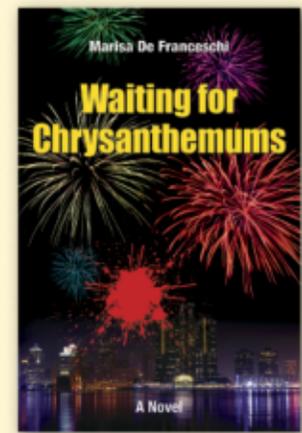
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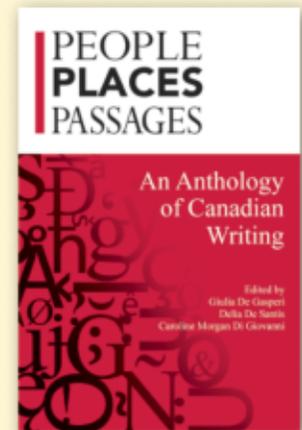
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Licia Canton



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Licia Canton is the author of two short story collections, *The Pink House* (2018) and *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008).

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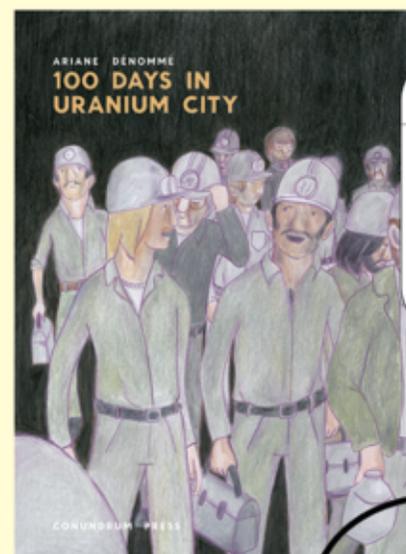


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Mélanie Grondin

Rediscovered Art

Guido Nincheri is recognized as the most prolific Montreal artist of stained-glass windows and frescoes, but it was not his intention to settle in Montreal when he arrived with his bride in 1913. The newlyweds were originally headed to South America when the possibility of war in Europe changed their plans. The artist is most often cited for his fresco depicting Mussolini in the apse of the Madonna della Difesa Church in Little Italy, a work that caused the Nincheri family much grief during World War II. In *The Art and Passion of Guido Nincheri*, biographer Mélanie Grondin describes the artist in various phases of his personal and professional life. She examines Nincheri's artwork, in Canada and the United States, in great detail and includes thirty-two colour plates of his art.

Grondin, a translator and the editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*, has also published short fiction and poetry. She has spent the last seven years immersed in Guido Nincheri's world, becoming well versed in his artistic production. I recently spoke with Mélanie Grondin about her passion for the artist and the making of her book.

Licia Canton: *The Art and Passion of Guido Nincheri* is written with enthusiasm and tenderness. It was a very pleasant read. I really appreciate the amount of detail in the descriptions of Nincheri's artwork. It's evident that this was an enormous project and that you've done a lot of research. You took Italian-language, Renaissance art, and stained-glass window classes to better understand Guido Nincheri's world. You visited numerous churches and buildings to see Nincheri's art, and you've walked the streets of Florence to better imagine his years as a student. How did you decide to take on such a huge project?

Mélanie Grondin: In a way, I felt as though I had no choice. I first discovered Guido Nincheri by hanging out with the Nincheri family – the artist's great-granddaughter is a high school friend of my husband and a dear friend of mine – and the more I found out about him, the more I wanted to bring him to light. I felt a book was needed, but nobody else was writing it, so it had to be me. The desire to write a book about Nincheri took hold of me and didn't let go. It *was* a huge project, but it only feels so in hindsight. When I was in the middle of it, it was great fun because it

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By Erin MacLeod

Elaine Craig

More than a Trial: The Canadian Justice System and Sexual Assault



I once charged someone with sexual assault: a man grabbed my breasts and then raised his fist to punch me as my friends pulled him away. I was nineteen and it was at a university party. The cops were called, and one of the things that sticks out in my memories of that evening is a police officer saying to me, “This happens so often, but so few women lay charges; please do this.” My experience encapsulates two facts underlined in Elaine Craig’s thorough *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*: those who experience sexual assault are overwhelmingly female, and only a small fraction of women end up taking the accused assailant to court. I did, and it was not a positive experience.

Reading Craig’s book, it appears that I am not alone. The legal system in Canada is stacked against justice for sexual assault survivors in a range of ways. But this book, though quite scathing, is also constructive. It develops an argument for reform of the present ways sexual assault is treated. Trials seem to be beset by a range of different rules, regulations, and traditions: the public, whether complainant or accused, requires counsel to navigate the process. But Craig demystifies this process and, in doing so, is able to win over the reader as a supporter of what becomes an obvious, essential, and very possible reform that would help create a far more fair and just situation for all parties in the courtroom and society at large.

Though it is written as instructions for those working within the system, it is by no means limited to that audience. *Putting Trials on Trial* provides a readable, though oftentimes disturbing, look at the Canadian criminal justice system’s problematic treatment of sexual assault. For a society rife with criminal procedural television shows and films dealing with these types of crimes, this insider exposé makes for gripping material. Beginning with a description of the context and commentary surrounding sexual assault trials, Craig immediately discusses what is commonly referred to as the “twin myths” about rape, which are reflected in the so-

called “rape shield” section of the Canadian Criminal Code. These myths are quite clear: first, that “women who are sexually active are less trustworthy,” and second, that “women with sexual experience are more likely to have consented to the sex at issue in the allegation.”

Craig goes on to demonstrate and provide shocking examples of how the defence, the Crown, and the judiciary are all responsible for reinforcing these beliefs, as well as creating and maintaining a trial environment that seems to leave little room for fairness to come into play. Invoking the two myths to question complainants’ credibility is an unfortunate pattern that disrupts the nature of the trial – the actual purpose of finding out the truth of what happened. It actually veils the truth.

Craig agrees that the defence must be an advocate for the accused, but maintains that they should not resort to being unethical

in order to be a strong advocate. She describes how cross-examination in preliminary trials can be used in the interest of preventing the complainant from continuing with the process, and enumerates a number of occurrences where defence lawyers advertise their abilities to silence complainants on firm websites. Craig acknowledges the occurrence of so-called whacking of the complainant, defined as aggressive questioning meant to disturb and distress;

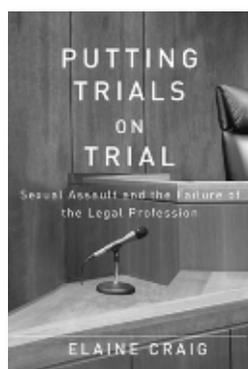
Marie Heinen’s discussion of this style of lawyering was brought to light by the media at the time of the Ghomeshi trial. Craig takes great pains to suggest that though Heinen was seen as encouraging the use of “whacking” in a video circulated online, this is not necessarily borne out in Heinen’s courtroom style. Whacking is also not very effective in terms of accessing the truth and can thus limit the ability to uncover legitimate information on both sides.

Craig is not calling for an all-out destruction of the system; rather, her very commitment to it means that she focuses on the rights of all parties. The accused has no right to a “discriminatory defence,” she writes, and calls for “clear ethical obligations on defence counsel.” But the failure of the Crown is taken as seriously as the problems of the defence. Recognizing that the role of the Crown is to seek a fair trial over everything else – according to the Model Code of Professional Conduct from the Federation of Law Societies of Canada – there is a responsibility that lies on their side as well.

I felt like I was reading about myself when Craig talked about how so many complainants have a lack of familiarity with the rituals of the court system and do not realize that the Crown is not their lawyer. The complainant is a witness for the Crown, and therefore needs to have some level of preparation. Craig underlines a need for specialized education to avoid the risk of coaching a witness, what she calls a “trauma-informed approach,” and resources that would provide independent legal advice for complainants. Judges, according to Craig, also need to “humanize the courtroom setting.” The physical set-up of the court can impact the ability to achieve a fair trial. The idea that complainants must stand without break seems extreme. Even the imagery of the court – how it underlines the white, Western, male, colonial history of the judiciary rather than the reality of the diversity of Canada and First Nations experience – will have an impact on complainants who do not reflect that history.

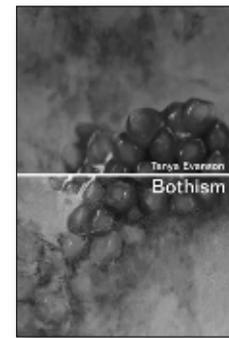
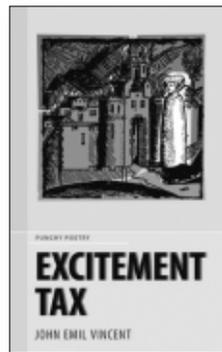
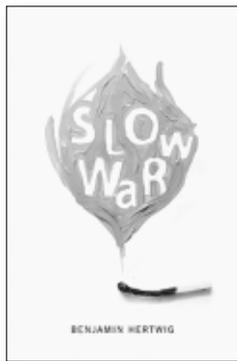
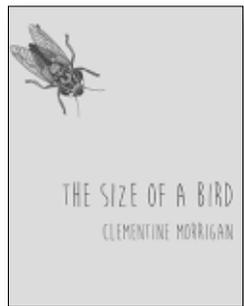
Facing this, Craig calls for what reads like basic civility. “Compassion and intervention” are her terms: she wants judges to protect the process as well as the complainant and make sure that this civility is not biasing the trial. Of course, “trial judges must balance the duty to intervene with the need to ensure that the accused’s right to a thorough cross-examination is not unduly compromised.” But this means stopping irrelevant, badgering questions,

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PUTTING TRIALS ON TRIAL
Sexual Assault and the Failure
of the Legal Profession
Elaine Craig
McGill-Queen’s University Press
\$34.95, cloth, 320pp
9780773552777

poetry



THE SIZE OF A BIRD
Clementine Morrigan
Inanna Publications
\$18.95, paper, 102pp
9781771334570

SLOW WAR
Benjamin Hertwig
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$16.95, paper, 134pp
9780773551428

EXCITEMENT TAX
John Emil Vincent
DC Books
\$18.95, paper, 94pp
9781927599440

BOTHISM
Tanya Evanson
Ekstasis Editions
\$23.95, paper, 52pp
9781771712194

THE CHEMICAL LIFE
Jim Johnstone
Signal Editions
\$17.95, paper, 88pp
9781550654820

The *Size of a Bird* begins with an imperative. "Write a Place for the Pain" is affirmation as much as it is invocation. The muses being called forth are "the things that didn't fit into the narrative, that didn't quite make sense." Clementine Morrigan continues to write directly about trauma, toxic relationships, sex, queer desire, and the attempt to accept one's own memories.

Morrigan alternates between forms for each section of the book. The prose sections are immediate, often written in the present tense, and musical. In "Dead Raccoon on the Highway," they contemplate their body next to another on a park bench and "sounds of shimmering sentences fill the space between silences." Language hisses; the speaker is distracted by their own mind and the title image interrupts the present moment. This is how time and memory work in *The Size of a Bird*. The speaker occupies two realities simultaneously. One on the park bench and another in which her "body is not a dead raccoon." This tension wavers throughout the collection and makes the reader a witness to the ways in which memories cannot be contained by past tense.

It's worth noting the phrase that ends the first poem and the last: "I'm still alive." Survival and the ways in

which it is precarious amid relentless men, masculinity, and trauma frames this book. In "Mountains on the Moon," they write, "I think I need his approval. I'm not even sure I like him." With extraordinary clarity, Morrigan explores how this cognitive dissonance, the desire to please men who harm, is learned and reinforced, how "we talk about rape using academic words," but also how there is a necessary "insistence on magic / in the midst of what / we were living with." (TL)

Slow War, Benjamin Hertwig's debut collection of poetry, addresses the many ways in which war warps youth, hope, and desire. The soldier speaker considers how "war fucks with geography," which is to say, war fucks with the way we position ourselves in the world. The gaze of the soldier is particular, different from the civilian, or the journalist, or the politician. In this collection, Hertwig remembers, in lyrical detail, moments of violence, fear, and respite. He traces violence from the schoolyard to war, and its aftermath for the soldier.

There is an especially interesting moment of lucid self-awareness, when poetry itself is addressed:

simile and metaphor –

tracks to get around
the fact
that the suicide bomber
was effective
that coyotes eat what they can,
that a man's head was split
bright like a persimmon and
a foot was resting on the road
like a bird with a broken
wing.

The consequences of the indiscriminate violence of war are made delicate in spite of an uneasiness with making poetry of it.

In "iconoclast," "the war is over / and we are still // here." Of course, the war is not over, even if it has been declared as such. This fact is demonstrated in the way the line breaks. Hertwig uses "and" to connect declaratives so there is a moment of stillness, but it is undercut by that devastating "here." And even if the soldier leaves the front, the war is not over. This is especially true in the last quarter of the book. In "sunday mornings," the violence of war becomes inseparable from literature:

you start to think: the man in
Kafka's

metamorphosis must have been a soldier with his legs blown off. How else could he hate himself so much? (TL)

In *Excitement Tax*, John Emil Vincent has written a collection of prose poems with complex skeletons, each phrase connected to its context. He manages tone shifts precisely. Poems follow through on such premises as inventing an instrument "inspired by my daycare choir, that sort of presses, almost steps on, children," dialogue between Walter Wimple Weaselbird (one of the book's characters) and Socrates, and a child who "never wanted to rehear a single story."

"King Midas's Idiot Brother" takes King Midas out of his fairy tale and imagines him doing a kind of alt-comedy routine in which "he'd pose as the suicides of famous writers and the audience would guess how." But a familiar reality creeps in, the narrator notes that "relevance is a bitch," and King Midas must do a bit about Carver instead of Chekhov. Even in such fantastic ideation, we can be dulled down, taxed. This poem ends with an invitation that carries throughout: "Behold the life of the mind."

"The Wild Hunt" displays Vincent's skill with mixing registers: "The huntsmen in full cry would set upon any spirits whatever and devour them. And woe unto the living people in the road. It was kind of funny." Then a "salted, cured human leg" is bestowed upon the "you" of the poem, and the relationship with the leg is lived through. About change, the possibility of abandoning the leg, the narrator says, "it is what makes the world the stinking pile of shit that it is, but you temper your language a bit, since seriously this is your life and your love and your leg."

Through these tone shifts, seeming non sequiturs, absurd situations, and syntax variation that will hold the interest of anyone who likes being led down the garden path, these poems enact the very excitements and disappointments they describe. (TL)

Bothism is Tanya Evanson's debut poetry collection, but it is by no means Tanya Evanson's debut; she has been a cornerstone of the spoken word community for years, a musician, a teacher, and even a whirling dervish. Her background as a performer is evident here – the dynamic wordplay, the dips into concrete poetry, the visual movement in the layout – these poems ache to

be read aloud. And yet there is a soft introspection to them; solitude hides in plain sight, but Evanson is never locking us out. Rather, she invites us to the festivities.

Luscious images are pulled one after the next from a bottomless basket of beauty, and force us to reflect on the bounty of the Earth, its deliciousness. In "Finishing Salt," the end of a relationship is consummated with a feast:

Fresh tomato, olive oil, broken
bread and Turkish tea beneath the
Bozcaada sycamore

Even the deepest losses bring wholeness, a sense of a journey completed or about to begin.

A student of Buddhism and Sufism, Evanson imbues her work with inquisitive spirituality. Whether it's through literal inquiry, as with "75 Questions," or an observational visit to a sheikh in Istanbul, she finds a tender playfulness with language that recalls the minimalism of divine texts: "an exit without exit," and leaves that "drop loud."

While *Bothism* is focused on the presentation of contradiction – "the truth and its opposite" – there is no sense of distance between them. Rather than posing contradictions as a way of showing difference, she is posing them as a way of showing harmony, as with "the reverence of abandonment." Instead of two points on a line, Evanson shows us two points on a circle, and spins us until they come together. (MH)

There is a shimmering layer of violence in Jim Johnstone's fifth poetry collection that serves as connective tissue for the very dark introspection that occurs throughout. We see this violence in the natural world ("Birds sucked into engines / and gorged by blades") and used against others:

Glory,
or as near I know it,
is bloodshed
after an attack

But it is just as often perpetrated against the self. There is an overwhelming sense of a body in limbo, constantly shifting between states of decay, "the bloody nose / its cartilage."

That fascination with the self, and the abuses a body can sustain – whether from the world, from mental

Continued on page 19

slow progress of hindsight, the process by which we order our moments to create meaning. Trauma is metabolized here rather than raw. An initial sense of having driven off the map evolves into acceptance and intuitive knowledge of new terrain.

“It takes me time to process experiences,” the poet replies when asked about the difficulty of airing personal pain in her work. “With appointments and daily encounters, the words are sometimes painfully superficial and perfunctory. Speaking from a place of exposure lets me go deeper, to where we feel the impact of those exchanges, to where we are changed by them.”

Elmslie’s work suggests that this is poetry’s function: to give shape to those human experiences that lay outside of language. The act of naming the unnameable is a consolation for facing the terrifying unknown. Poetry, as her poem of that name contends, contains both “lashing / and balm.” mb

Abby Paige is a writer and performer currently based in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

and understanding that inconsistencies do happen, especially when one is thinking through trauma – this reflects a trauma-informed approach.

Judges also need to be informed of the law. The understanding of consent, which is presently much discussed in the media, is very clear under Canadian law. Consent must be contemporaneous. It cannot be implied. That cannot be a defence. Section 273.2 (b) of the Criminal Code makes it plain that “an accused can only rely on an honest but mistaken belief in consent if he took reasonable steps under the circumstances to ascertain whether the complainant was, in fact, consenting.” Some of the situations mentioned by Craig go far beyond the idea of error and are simply based on misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of the law, or a reliance on basic stereotypes about women, sex, and consent. Leaving what is perhaps the most shocking fact until last, Craig describes how the majority of judges appointed to try criminal matters have very little (and sometimes no) criminal law experience. Thus training and assessment are also necessary. Educational programs need to

be transparent and data must be available to demonstrate that judges are indeed being trained and assessed.

For us, as readers, the overview provided by Craig can help in gaining an understanding of how and why sexual assault is such a fraught crime from a legal perspective. In her final chapter, she explains that her goal is to provide “measures that could be taken by the legal profession to make sexual assault trials less stressful, less traumatizing, and less inhumane.” None of these suggestions require transforming the legal profession or restricting the rights of the accused. Revealing that the majority of lawyers interviewed for the project were well aware of the trauma of sexual assault cases and “would have serious reservations about recommending that a loved one endure this process,” Craig’s book behooves the legal profession as a whole to think seriously about these recommendations. mb

Erin MacLeod is a writer and journalist. She is the author of *Visions of Zion: Ethiopians and Rastafari in the Search for the Promised Land*, and she teaches literature at Vanier College.

combined everything I love doing – learning languages, doing research, travelling. It never felt like a chore.

LC: What gave you the most satisfaction while working on this book?

MG: Whenever I discovered something that nobody else knew about. For instance, nobody really knew when Nincheri arrived in Montreal. Many were saying it was in 1914, but I discovered that it was in November 1913. On the *Ancestry* website, I found a “Declaration of Passenger to Canada” form he filled out when returning to Canada in 1923. In it, he wrote that his previous entry into Canada had been “Nov. 1913.” I also found the passenger manifest of the SS *Canopic*, the ship he took from Italy to Boston. But I was most excited about the discovery of eight letters he sent his mentor in Italy. They contained information about his stay in Boston and his first years in Montreal. Information that was, until now, unknown.

LC: How much time did you spend researching the book versus writing it?

MG: I started working on the book in earnest in 2011 and I started writing in 2013 when Nancy Marelli, my editor, said I needed to stop researching and start putting things on paper. Of course, I never really stopped researching, but if it hadn’t been for her I might still be only reading about Nincheri. Even during copyediting I had to research and double-check a few things. There is still so much research I could do, so many things I could add. I had to make choices.

LC: What was the greatest challenge working on this project?

MG: The biggest challenge was probably deciphering handwritten letters. It’s hard enough to understand old,

European handwriting when it’s in your own language, but trying to read it in Italian was very difficult for me. I had to hire a native-speaking Italian to transcribe the important letters so I could read the typed words and make sure I understood them correctly.

LC: You spent time in Nincheri’s art studio on Pie IX Boulevard. How did it

feel the first time you were alone in the studio where Nincheri created his masterpieces?

MG: The first time I saw it, in 2004, the studio took me by surprise. It was a very odd-looking building on the outside – it didn’t fit with the surrounding buildings – and when I first walked in, the vestibule and hallway were dark and plain. I didn’t expect to find much aside from archives because the studio had been closed since 1996 and the building uninhabited since 1998. But when I entered the first room on the right and found a completed stained-glass window at my level, I was taken aback by its beauty and proximity. Then I visited the rest of the studio and saw that it was still just that – a studio. Where I had expected an empty building, I saw Nincheri’s office with his name on the door and some of the reference books he used on the bookshelf behind his desk. I didn’t expect to see a kiln or a workshop with tools and glass samples lying about. I was fascinated by everything, but I hadn’t started working on the book yet, so much of what I saw didn’t make much sense to me. I guess my first visit to the studio convinced me that, more than ever, Nincheri

needed to be reintroduced to Montrealers. We had a complete, historic stained-glass studio in the city of Montreal – not in Europe – and nobody knew about it.

LC: Guido Nincheri was a very passionate man. He lived for his art. Your own passion for Nincheri and his art comes through in your prose. You

write that “the overall effect of Nincheri’s work is peace.” How has working on this book affected or changed you? Besides the pride and satisfaction that goes hand in hand with having completed a long-term project, what is the book’s lasting influence on Mélanie Grondin?

MG: For one thing, I’ll never look at a church the same way. Now, whenever I happen to enter a church, I walk around and take the time to look at the windows and art that adorn it, even if it wasn’t decorated by Nincheri. I used to only

have that state of mind when I visited Europe. I travelled to the UK, Paris, Austria, and Italy, and I would make it a point to visit their historic churches, but whenever I went to a church here – for a wedding, a funeral, a christening – I never looked around. Granted, some churches were never elaborately decorated in that way or were whitewashed in the 60s, but now I look, I examine.

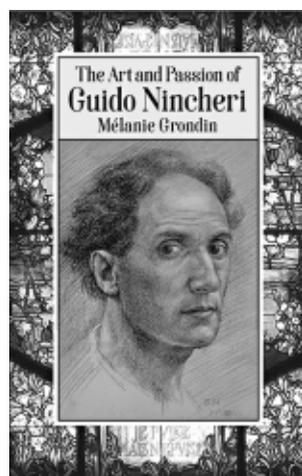
Another takeaway for me is a deeper understanding of the art of stained-glass windows. It’s always been considered a lower art and I never really bothered looking at windows, aside from scanning them, but now I know

all the work that goes into them; all the decisions that need to be made; all the precision, skill, and artistry required, and I can better appreciate the results. I remember visiting a church in Galway, Ireland, a few years ago, as I was writing the book, and looking at a window that represented William Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World*. In it, a piece of lead slashed across Jesus’s robe in a very, very displeasing way and I thought: “Oh, Guido wouldn’t have accepted *that* kind of work!” In a way, for bad or good, he defined my sense of aesthetics.

LC: With all the information that you’ve collected, you had to make very definitive choices about what to include and what to leave out. Do you have any thoughts about a second volume on the topic? Any ideas about putting on an exhibit or giving talks about Guido Nincheri? A virtual museum or website?

MG: Nincheri has become a lifelong project for me. I don’t know if another book is in the cards, but if one is needed I wouldn’t be opposed to writing it. At the moment, Roger Boccini Nincheri is giving church tours and talks on his grandfather, and I may take over at one point. In the meantime, I’m helping him analyze his grandfather’s art and write about it. Last spring, we wrote a booklet on Madonna della Difesa that can be purchased at the church. I have a feeling we’ll be writing more of those. I’ve also created a website (guidonincheri.ca), which, I hope, in time, will become a kind of database of his art. mb

Licia Canton is the author of *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018) and *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008). She is founding editor-in-chief of *Accenti Magazine* and (co)editor of ten volumes.



THE ART AND PASSION OF GUIDO NINCHERI
Mélanie Grondin
Véhicule Press
\$24.95, paper, 240pp
9781550654851

non-fiction

The Two-Headed Balm of Greek Tragedy

ANTIGONE UNDONE

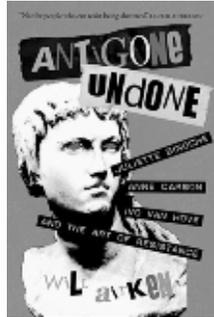
Juliette Binoche, Anne Carson, Ivo van Hove,
and the Art of Resistance

Will Aitken

University of Regina Press

\$24.95, cloth, 240pp

9780889775213



Will Aitken does something remarkable in his new book: he brings together a keen critical eye and an open heart, and – in doing so – creates a unique hybrid of critical essay and memoir. And though Aitken begins with strong material – a classic play in a new translation by a major poet, staged by a renowned actor and director – it's what he does with the material that is most striking.

Antigone Undone's occasion is a 2015 invitation from Anne Carson for Aitken to travel to Luxembourg and observe the rehearsal and first night of the stage version of her new translation of Sophokles's *Antigone*. Unsurprisingly, Aitken accepts, and he captures the experience with nuance and insight. The author is particularly sharp on fine points of performance and staging; his experience as a film writer shows in his precision. He notes, for example, the way the face of a great actor is a "palimpsest" in which one watches a performance through the layers of past performances still living in memory, and brings forward meaningful details such as the moment the actor playing Kreon pulls his suit jacket over his head during a crisis point. However, it

is his sensitivity not so much to the *techniques* of art, but to its *effects* that lend the account power. That sensitivity makes the book more than cultural journalism; it turns it into a quest to understand the way the human heart makes meaning out of trauma.

Following the performance, the author heads to Amsterdam for some holiday time and finds his memories of the show pulling him toward depression. He considers how the victimization of the less powerful by the more so rushes on unabated, even two and a half millennia after Sophokles imagined the tragedy of Oedipus's daughter. So deep does this depression become that thoughts of suicide haunt him while he struggles with the play's impact, and through it, the impact of a world still filled with suffering. Working through these feelings, the author parses Carson's translation and pages through considerations of the play by writers and philosophers as diverse as Hegel and Virginia Woolf, Judith Butler and Kierkegaard in later sections of the book. His touch here is light, and readers with both more and less interest in philosophy will find something compelling in watching the search for meaning unfold.

So, *Antigone Undone* has great strengths – and many of them – but no book is free of issues. Here they are largely structural in nature, or involve shifts in tone which sometimes disrupt the emotional power that keeps one reading. But Aitken's sentences always shine. His command of cultural history and language, and his psychological honesty, are unwa-



vering. This moment near the book's close demonstrates it:

[a] terrible sadness comes on slow. A different kind of sadness from what I felt eight months ago in Luxembourg. Not overwhelming but simply intrinsic to this little world onstage and to the larger one beyond it. The melancholy of having lived, the irreparability of the world.

In the end, it is the book's rigorous gaze, both *knowing* and so knowledgeable, along with its vulnerability, that compels us while simultaneously pointing out how timely *Antigone* is, how relevant its message is now, and how any simple parallel or easy summary, even this one, still needs to be questioned, still needs to be rethought and made anew. That is no small thing, because it reminds us of what much critical writing neglects: the way in which there is something in art, despite its limitations, that one still turns to when one faces troubles. And everyone, sooner or later, does. **mb**

Peter Dubé is the author of the novels *Hovering World* and *The City's Gates*, the novella *Subtle Bodies*, a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award, and *Conjure*, a collection of prose poems shortlisted for the A.M. Klein Prize. His most recent work is *Beginning with the Mirror*.

Free Ticket to Ride

FREE PUBLIC TRANSIT

And Why We Don't Pay to Ride Elevators

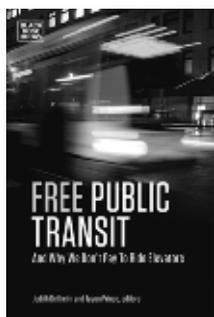
Edited by Judith Dellheim

and Jason Prince

Black Rose Books

\$23.00, paper, 250pp

9781551646503



"Once we regarded traffic as a purely technical problem," said Mauro Formaglini, Bologna's Traffic Counsellor in the early 1970s. "We have now realized that every traffic question has a political side too."

In 1972, Bologna was bursting with automobiles: second only to Turin, the city had one car for every two and a half residents. Each day, 200,000 cars flooded the city's downtown. Two years later, that number had dropped by 25 percent. In the same period, public transit usage increased by 50 percent. After an extensive, decentralized democratic planning process, Bologna's city council, relying on the support of a coalition of left-wing and communist members, had begun a pro-

gram that provided free public transit during morning and evening rush hours and extremely low fares at other times of day.

Bologna's success is just one of several interesting stories in Judith Dellheim and Jason Prince's engaging, if at times frustrating, *Free Public Transit: And Why We Don't Pay to Ride Elevators*. The chapters, written by academics, journalists, and activists, delve into the "political side" of the question of how best to address the mobility needs of a city.

Three opening chapters set the context for the case studies and activist accounts that follow. Wojciech Kęłowski establishes that free public transit, defined as systems where transport is free for most users, on most routes, most of the time, is already a reality in at least ninety-seven cities across the world. Jan Scheurer looks at new technologies, including driverless cars, which may radically reshape how people move through the city. Judith Dellheim reviews the political economy of transportation.

These short chapters are the weakest among the collection. Kęłowski's, at three and a half pages, is too quick a summary. Scheurer takes a surprisingly optimistic (one could say uncritical) view of how automobile automation would play out, downplaying its potential for increasing gridlock. Dellheim writes that

"the issue of (free) public transport cannot be separated from the broader issues of social inequality, [and] structures of production and consumption." Unfortunately, her deluge of statistics about pollution, automotive manufacturer profits, and natural resource exploitation read more like a laundry list of capitalists' crimes than building blocks for a compelling argument. Her piece would have benefitted from more space.

Brevity better suits the narrative chapters, which focus on activist agitation and transit policy implementation in places from Sweden to Brazil, Mexico City to Toronto. Prince offers a detailed, play-by-play history of the Montreal Citizens' Movement, a leftist municipal political party created in the 1970s, and the push for free public transportation. Initially demanding *transport gratuit pour les personnes du troisième âge*, the movement expanded after a transit rate hike spurred student involvement.

Montreal students began jumping turnstiles to disrupt the transit system in defiance of the fare hike. The same tactic was adopted by Planka.nu (whose name roughly translates to *fare-dodge.now*), a Stockholm-based grassroots organization profiled by Anna Nygård. The activist group, which rallies around a strident critique of neo-liberal economic policies, was formed in response to transit fare increases in 2001. *Free Public Transit* also

includes illuminating discussion of wider movements, such as Right to the City in Mexico, who include mobility rights and fare-free public transportation in their platforms.

But who pays, if not the bus rider or metro user? Jan Scheurer answers both this question and the one embedded in the title with her final chapter, "Value Capture: Linking Public Transport to Land Value." We don't pay to ride elevators in shopping malls; the building owners do, because they are the ones who benefit from our business. In the same way, argues Scheurer, a well-connected transit system "increases the *value* of [land] parcels ... – and perhaps principally – benefits the *owners of land* in the city." Scheurer makes a convincing case for further investigation by policy makers and activists of a "betterment tax" charged to land owners to finance public transit in perpetuity, calculated using comprehensive data on transit connectivity.

Free Public Transit is an intriguing, if too brief, snapshot of what a transit system that served the needs of everyone in the city could look like and how it could be realized. **mb**

Yutaka Dirks is a writer and editor living in Montreal. He has written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *THIS*, *Briarpatch*, *Ricepaper*, *rabble*, and other publications.

The Vibrant World of Quebec *bédé*

BDQ

Essays and Interviews on Quebec Comics

Edited by Andy Brown

Conundrum Press

\$25.00, paper, 224pp

9781772620184



As editor Andy Brown sets out in the foreword of this collection of essays and interviews, BDQ refers to Quebec comics or *bande dessinée québécoise*, just as *manga* refers to comics from Japan. Unsurprisingly, Quebec is unique in its comics culture, which draws heavily on the Franco-Belgian tradition due to the shared language, and is also strongly influenced by North American trends, in particular the US underground comix movement of the 1960s and zines in the 1990s. Brown, also the publisher at Conundrum, acknowledges that the collection is only “a smattering” of what is available on Quebec comics. But obviously the featured artists, images, and essays, in his view, reflect important moments in BDQ history. The collection is divided into four time periods, with the longest section devoted to “The Nineties,” evidently an ebullient period for sequential art, particularly in Montreal.

“The Early Years” focuses on Quebec comics that were published in newspapers with little or no text. The strips published between 1904 and 1909 were intended for adults and mirrored the social concerns of the day, such as urbanization, the woes of the working poor, and the arrival of new Canadians. This section includes a particularly interesting essay on the style, technique, and influences of Albert Chartier in his well-known strip *Onésime*.

“The Middle Years” takes us to the 1980s and introduces us to artists including Réal Godbout, the creator of *Red Ketchup*, and Jimmy Beaulieu, a principled creator who refuses to turn his back on Quebec comics. One of the most interesting pieces in this section is a previously unpublished letter from Julie Delporte to Sylvie Rancourt about the feminist significance of Rancourt’s *Mélody* and the sensitive intelligence of her work.

The party really gets started in “The Nineties,” and the two reigning stars of this section are underground superhero Henriette Valium and internationally acclaimed comic artist Julie Doucet. But the BDQ community apparently had its cultural clashes. In response to an article penned by Marc Tessier, “The Montreal Comix Scene,” published in a 2005 special edition of *The Comics Journal*, a group of people took issue with Tessier’s portrayal and let him know, point by point, in Letters to the Editor of *The Comics Journal* #274 (February 2006). In a previously unpublished essay on *Fish Piss*, Andy Brown refers to the zine that ran from 1996 to 2006 as truly bilingual. Its comics, essays, poems, and stories were published in French and English without translation, since its audience was as bilingual as its editor, Louis Rastelli.

The final section, “Modern Times,” introduces comic artists who have had some recent commercial success. It features interviews with the late Geneviève Castrée, Michel Rabagliati, Zviane, and Diane Obomsawin, in addition to essays on the creator of *Mile End*, Michel Hellman, and the collaborative work of Zviane and Iris in *L’hostie d’chat*.

This collection is a great primer for anyone interested in graphic novels or sequential art from Quebec. Among the essays, I preferred those that touched on the artist’s approach to stories and their work methods. As editor, Brown also did a commendable job of focusing on comics created by women when the BDQ scene has long been dominated by men.

Personally, I found the interview with Henriette Valium unreadable, but I’m nevertheless interested in seeing more work by this apparent iconoclast. Another unsatisfying read was “A Round Table on 1990s Quebec Comics.” Although some interesting points were made, the number of participants made it hard to follow. My final criticism is the collection’s very small print.

As the publisher at Conundrum, Brown has a vested interest in the success of BDQ, but it’s also apparent from this collection that he has made an almost selfless commitment to the vibrancy of this community. Conundrum has translated many high-profile Quebec *bédéistes*, including Michel Rabagliati and his seminal work *The Song of Roland*, for the English-speaking world to discover. With support like this, we might soon see comics finally recognized as a true art form in Canada. mb

Heather Leighton has written for the *Globe and Mail* and the *Montreal Gazette*.

Québec 2018

imagination

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Poetry continued from page 16

illness, or from one’s own hand – gives *The Chemical Life* its hypnotic quality. Bodies are constantly surprising, the impacts of suffering reaching new heights, and all the while “mania splits / the mind’s roof.” The juxtaposition of a body and mind in discord is built into the structure of the book; one’s embodied reality is always in conflict with one’s perceptions. This contrast finds its expression in a “second state,” as shown by the “tinted eye,” or the fish “fighting its reflection / in two- / way glass.”

Johnstone is at his most heartbreaking when he speaks on masculinity and on relationships between men, looking at the emotional distance between fathers and sons, the way they “hardly know each other, have never shown / weakness—not convinced of its existence.” The scorpion’s venom that hides a deeper, more permanent anguish:

*If you think I'm ungrateful, try being betrayed
 by the orthodoxy, your children*

and everyone else

who doubts the scorpion's malice

After the fact.

The Chemical Life is a painful read, with images so visceral, primal – yet controlled – that they leave us disoriented, seeing double. This bold and self-reflexive collection allows us to experience a personal history as a slow release of pain, felt over the course of a lifetime. (MH) mb

Tess Liem’s debut full-length collection of poetry will be out from Coach House in fall 2018. Her chapbook, “Tell everybody I say hi,” is available from Anstruther.

Marcela Huerta is the author of *Tropico*, a collection of poetry published by Metatron Press in 2017. She has worked at the Museum of Anthropology and Working Format as a Graphic Designer, and at Drawn & Quarterly as an Assistant Editor. She is the proud daughter of Chilean refugees. Find her online @marsmella.

graphic

Cold Wars

RED WINTER

Anneli Furmark

Translated by Hanna Strömberg

Drawn & Quarterly

\$24.95, paper, 168pp

9781770463066

The heartfelt and melancholic story in *Red Winter* covers just a few days of a passionate love affair during a frigid winter in a small Swedish steel-mill town in the 1970s. But it is broader in its emotional scope: it delivers a lovely snapshot of the lives of ordinary people, including their stifled desires, isolation, loss of prospects, and political hopes.

It is the first comic book by Anneli Furmark to be translated into English. Furmark, who is also a painter, is one of the most celebrated cartoonists in her country. She published several books in the last two decades and won an Adamson Award and three Urhunden Prizes from the Swedish Comics Association, including one for *Red Winter*.

The two clandestine lovers in *Red Winter* are Siv, a married woman pushing forty with three children, and Ulrik, a much younger communist activist. Politics complicate everything: Siv is a member of the Social Democratic Party and her husband is a Social Democrat union member, while Ulrik is a staunch Maoist. Siv and Ulrik's romance is central in a narrative that is dominated by Siv but approached polyphonically, with each chapter told from the point of view of a different character: Siv's children and husband, Ulrik's communist comrades, and Ulrik and Siv themselves.

This technique works beautifully not only in terms of rhythm, allowing subtle changes from action to contemplation, from togetherness to solitude, but also gives the reader a sensation of totality, as if the story of individuals is inescapably connected to the people around them and to historical and political events. It is quite an accomplishment for the format, and even though the term "comic book" ceased to be derogatory ages ago, it is rare that the description "graphic novel" fits a book so perfectly.

Furmark is a gifted writer, and the translation feels natural and gracious. She has an excellent ear for dialogue that feels genuine without being trite. She depicts small moments with depth, and large moments with tenderness. When Siv's daughter, Marina, is alone at home snooping or hanging out with a friend, we feel that odd, sombre nostalgia of childhood: the playful doing nothing that teaches us who we are, the anxiety of not knowing enough of the adult world and wanting to know more, while at the same time knowing perhaps too much (she finds out about the affair; she discovers "forbidden" magazines in the house). Peter, Siv's son, immersed in his own teenage alienation from people and his environment, is presented with great compassion. Börje, the betrayed husband, personifies the ethos of a working-class man who "knows his place" in society, who is dependably boring. And Siv and Ulrik are just disoriented in their divided loyalties to

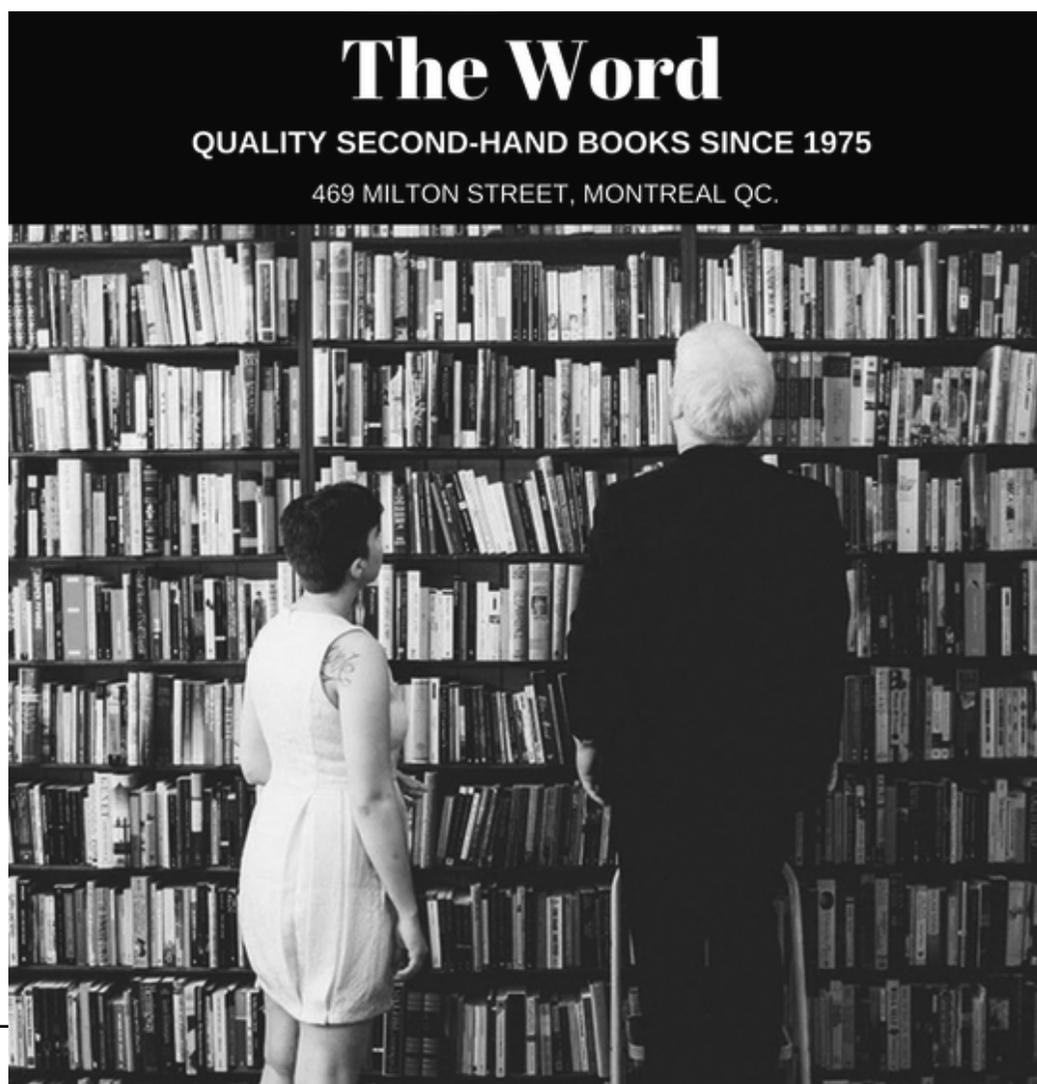


family, to the Party, and to each other, and in the end they have little control over their destiny in a world where his idealism does not pay off and her pragmatism is insufficient.

The art delicately conveys those moods. Mainly in cold blues of the outdoors with warm red and orange highlights in cozy interiors, it wraps the narrative in loose and spontaneous watercolours. The relaxed lines make even harsh moments tolerable, while the sweetest scenes remain restrained – and slightly claustrophobic. The drawings are textured and layered, much like the situations, and express Furmark's affection and generosity toward her characters.

Red Winter is the first book in a trilogy about the lives of ordinary people in northern Sweden. Here's hoping that publishers will offer English readers an opportunity to appreciate more work from this talented author. mrB

Eloisa Aquino is originally from Brazil, where she worked as a journalist and translator. She currently lives and works in Montreal running the micro press B&D Press and making the zine series *The Life & Times of Butch Dykes*.



The Word

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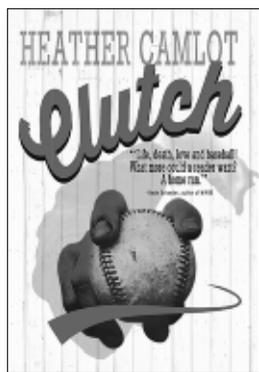
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young adult

Brave New Worlds



CLUTCH
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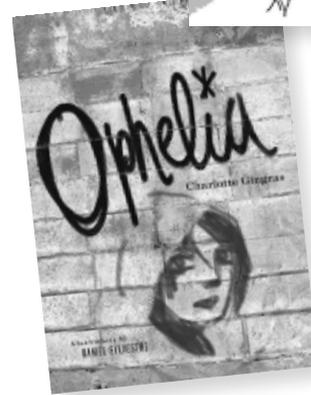
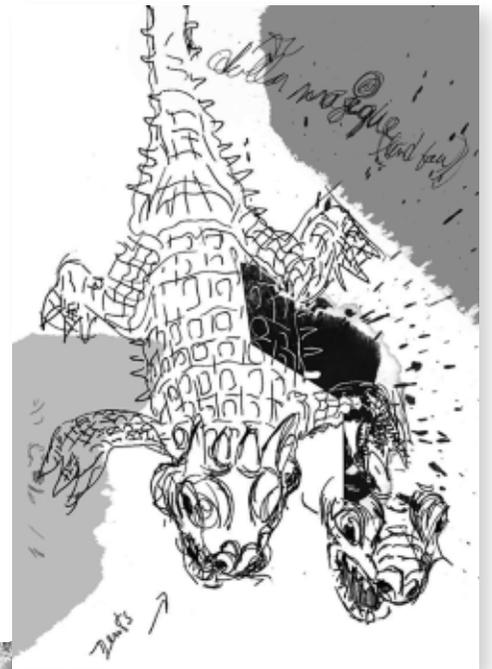
Heather Camlot's meticulously researched and lovingly crafted debut novel *Clutch* transports readers to Montreal in 1946 – the year Jackie Robinson played for the professional minor league baseball team the Montreal Royals, as the first African American to join modern organized baseball. In Camlot's story, it's also when twelve-year-old Joey Grosser's dad dies. Readers follow Joey around his Jewish neighbourhood on his difficult but transformative journey into manhood. The story dazzles with tight, pithy writing and accurate historical details that are smoothly woven in. Even without his father, Joey is committed to doing everything he can to make

the grocery store his family owns a financial success. Each chapter opens with a historical newspaper quote about Robinson – creating a sort of parallel between Joey and Robinson's trials (Robinson faced opposition and racism that season and beyond). They also help paint a picture of what it could have been like to live in the city during that momentous baseball season.

There's a genuinely touching moment when Joey and his brother David finally get close to Robinson, and an impressive account of the Royals' Junior World Series victory. Camlot's writing never lags or falls to generalizations: "I don't even remember turning onto Park Avenue, but here I am, right in front of the angel statue. I look up at the mountain. The rising sun tears along Rachel Street, through Fletcher's Field, and straight for Mount Royal, all that light making the leaves of the red oaks and sugar maples burst with the brightest reds and oranges and golds."

Everyone is struggling to make their way, including a small-time criminal who tries to rope Joey into his shenanigans, and there's a lot at stake. In time Joey comes to his own realizations about his dad, money, and friendship: perhaps in many ways, buying your seven-year-old super-fan brother peanuts and Cracker Jack at the ball game is pretty much as good as it gets.

OPHELIA
 Charlotte Gingras
 Illustrated by Daniel Sylvestre
 Translated by Christelle Morelli
 and Susan Ouriou
 Groundwood Books
 \$18.95, paper, 264pp
 9781773060996
 Ages 14+



It's a notebook that takes us into the inner sphere of Ophelia, the protagonist of Charlotte Gingras's eponymous novel, something the fifteen-year-old would not – or could not – otherwise allow.

Through written entries, sketches, and poems addressed to a writer who gives her the notebook, Ophelia shares her palpable pain. Secrets come out: an incident of sexual abuse, her complicated relationship with her mother, dealings with the "herd" at school. Credit is due to the translators for giving English readers access to Ophelia's unique voice.

Although written in a stream-of-consciousness style, the short chapters are carefully crafted. Each contains black and white doodles, drawings, and collages that give visual life to Ophelia's thoughts. Gingras's descriptions of the abandoned building Ophelia comes to reluctantly share as a workspace with a schoolmate who calls himself Ulysses are particularly vivid: "The setting sun shone through the big grid windows. I sat on a stool,

my back to the windows, staring at the wall in front of me. It was gray. I held a piece of white chalk in my hand and let the drawing that's been inside me for so long bubble to the surface." The building provides Ophelia with the kind of space, physical and figurative, she needs to create.

It's painful to watch Ophelia push people away and hurt them with insults, especially Ulysses, who's overweight and bullied. But it also makes the growing closeness between the two teenagers all the more satisfying. Although Ophelia's notebook culminates in a love story, it doesn't happen at the cost of her development as a person and artist.

"I'm discovering the light that exists in certain people," Ophelia says. Her first love does all the opening and healing it should, as she and her boyfriend replace their idealized and theoretical notions of love and lust with the reality of one another.

Vanessa Bonneau is a writer living in Montreal.

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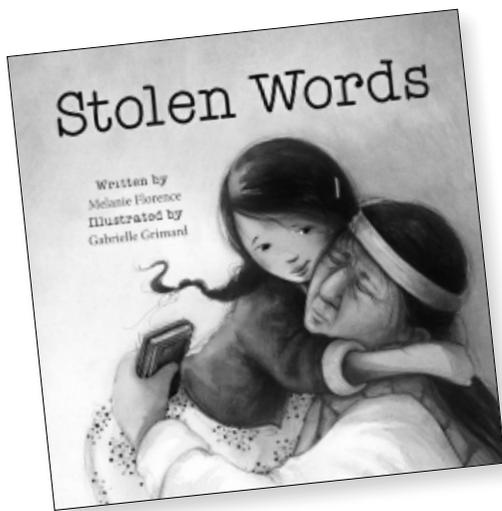


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YOUNG READERS

Melanie Florence's *Stolen Words* is a modern story, a hopeful exploration of one way the Cree people may begin to reclaim their language and culture. The stolen words of the title refer to the practice in residential schools of forcing all First Nations children, including the Cree, to speak only the white person's languages. "They took our words, locked them away; punished us until we forgot them, until we sounded like them," Melanie Florence writes.

The author, who is of Cree and Scottish descent, dedicated the book to her deceased grandfather and to the idea that a healing relationship between generations can lead to positive change. While the story of how the Canadian government destroyed the lives of First Nations children is harsh, the subject is handled with dignity and love. The emphasis is on how children can help their elders heal rather than on the pain and abuse. The illustrations by Gabrielle Grimard are suffused with warm tones of yellow, green, and brown, the lines playful and full of movement.

Like *Stolen Words*, Jan Bourdeau Waboose's *The Spirit Trackers* is a modern story that has clear connections to First Nations culture and history. In fact, *The Spirit Trackers* is two stories in one book. One story is the tale of the northern Windigo: The Wandering Spirit of the Winter. The second story is about what happens when two young boys visit their uncle and decide they are ready to follow the family tradition and become trackers. The character of the uncle connects the two stories, one ancient and one new.

The uncle's terrifying description of the Windigo both horrifies the boys and galvanizes them into action: "It has a heart of ice and its teeth are like steel. It will eat anything in its way." Despite the strange sounds they hear and the unsettling shadows they see during a sleepless winter night, the boys put on snowshoes and dare to venture out in search of the Windigo. They find more than they bargained for, and in the process learn about themselves and their ancestors.

A well-respected illustrator and winner of multiple awards, François Thisdale showcases his unique blend of drawing, photography, digital imagery, and printing in *The Spirit Trackers*. The artist's technique, already impressive, is only getting better and better. The expressions on the boys' faces are hilarious, and the textures of snow and hair sparkle and pop, almost appearing to be three-dimensional.

The moral of the Anishinaabe tale the uncle tells about the Windigo remains relevant to all of us who occupy this wintry province. Respect and honour The Wandering Spirit of the Winter,

because it is more powerful than mere humans will ever be.

In 2011, inspired by something he saw during a visit to the Montreal Holocaust Museum, filmmaker Carl LeBlanc released a critically acclaimed documentary called *The Heart of Auschwitz*. What he saw was a daisy-sized, heart-shaped card that unfolded like an origami flower to reveal the messages written inside. The cover was made of purple fabric and embroidered with an orange F on the cover. The F stood for Fania, who was the twenty-year-old recipient of the gift. The nineteen messages inside were written by Fania's friends, all of who worked beside her as slave labourers in the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke and, like her, were prisoners in one of the Nazi's most infamous death camps.

Holocaust historians have said it would have been impossible for the women who signed the card to have made this intricate heart-shaped gift. They've also said that Fania could not have hidden the card from the camp guards or concealed it during the death marches. And yet, the card remains, a tactile testament to resilience, survival, and love.

Anne Renaud's *Fania's Heart* tells the story of the heart-shaped card from Fania's perspective. The story is an explanation to Fania's young daughter, who finds the card in her mother's drawer and asks to hear the story of where it came from. As Fania explains, the card is important both on a personal level and as a symbol of the unbelievable power of friendship, loyalty, and courage. Given the content of the story, which goes into detail about the conditions at Auschwitz, and the amount of text on each page, *Fania's Heart* is appropriate for older kids. The illustrations are reminiscent of drawings from the 1950s, intended perhaps to invoke the era when Fania's daughter originally found the card. And for children and adults who are interested in this amazing story, you can watch Carl LeBlanc's wonderful film or head to the Montreal Holocaust Museum and see this inspiring object for yourselves.

Something magical happens when music brings people together. In David Gutnick's *Mr. Mergler, Beethoven, and Me*, a common love for the piano results in a friendship between two unlikely strangers. Mr. Mergler is a seventy-six-year-old bachelor and piano teacher. His new friend is a young child who has recently arrived from China. The girl, who remains unnamed in the book, has already taught herself to play piano but knows her immigrant parents can't

afford to pay for her lessons. After a chance meeting in a city park, Mr. Mergler agrees to teach the enthusiastic girl for free. Despite their differences in age and life experience, the two share a profound love of classical

music that transcends time and place.

Cinq-Mars's illustrations, in gentle shades of green, gold, and pink, do a beautiful job of weaving musical symbols and luxuriant foliage together on every page. The student's playing produces a verdant entangling of vines with green leaves and bursting petals laid over a sheet of faded musical notation paper. The girl zooms home when she finds out that Mr. Mergler

will teach her, her bicycle wheels following the curving lines of a musical staff – she leaves a trail of notes that stretch behind her all the way back to her new teacher. This is a sweet story about the transformative power of music. Readers who are interested can also check out the film version of this true story on the National Film Board website under the title *Mr. Mergler's Gift*.

For the first time, publishing powerhouse Drawn & Quarterly has put together the definitive collection of *Anna and Froga* comics. Originally issued as five shorter books, the comics are now brought together so readers can indulge in 210 pages of non-stop fun. Anouk Ricard is both writer and illustrator, and her deceptively simple-looking drawings manage to create a whole universe. Children will love picking out all the quirky details, from the tiny insects to the sheer variety of flowers and plants that fill this silly world. Stories that talk about poo, extol the pleasures of hitting things with sticks, or reveal what to do when a werewolf moves in next door are sure to entertain both kids and the adults around them. Ricard has also included full-page cartoons after each story that add to the fun. A surefire hit for fans of *Anna and Froga* who want what they love in one place and a great introduction for readers who haven't yet experienced the pleasures of Ricard's charming universe. **mb**

B.A. Markus is a writer, teacher, and performer. She is currently writing a collection of monologues about how mothers survive the realities of mothering.

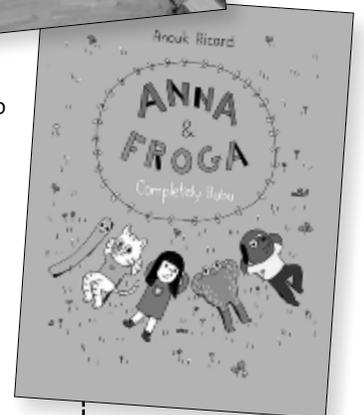
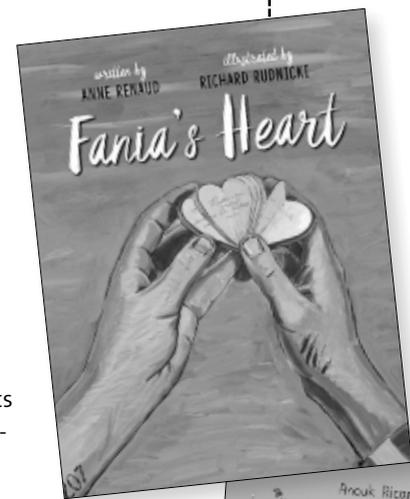
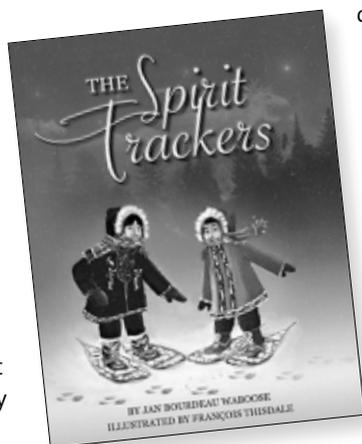
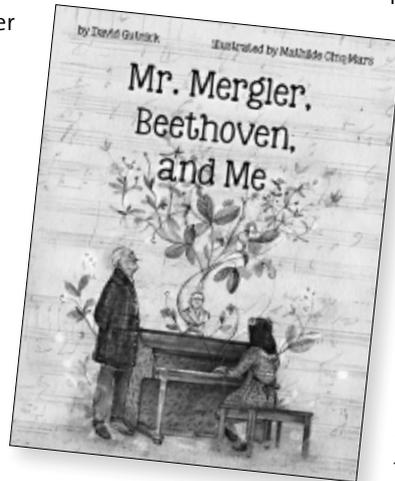
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Finding Space at Kwahiatonhk!

Shannon Webb-Campbell Visits
the Salon du livre des Premières Nations

This past fall I was invited to read at Salon du livre des Premières Nations in Wendake First Nation. At first, I was hesitant to go. Not because I wasn't honoured by the invitation, but because I wondered if I was Indigenous enough. At moments, I questioned whether I was even poet enough.

Being a newcomer to Montreal, and an Anglophone at that, I'm certainly an outsider within the context of Quebec, an uninvited guest on Mohawk territory. As a Mi'kmaq poet who relocated from the East Coast and speaks no French (yet), it was both a privilege and a reality check to be invited into a mostly Francophone area, and on top of it all to be a guest on Huron-Wendat territory.

Salon du livre des Premières Nations (also known as Kwahiatonhk!, which in the Wendat language translates to "we write!") is a three-day festival and book fair hosted at Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations that offers opportunities for French and English writers, poets, and translators to mingle. Originally founded in 2011 by Daniel Sioui from Librairie Hannenorak, the festival eventually expanded into a collective run by Sioui, Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui, and Jean Sioui, which was incorporated into a non-profit in 2015. This past fall, in its sixth incarnation, the festival was a transformative gathering of spirit, poetry, language, and translation.

Salon du livre des Premières Nations was born out of necessity. "It was quite difficult to get the literary world and the general public in Quebec interested in Indigenous literature from here. Beautiful things were happening, but nobody was taking notice," says Picard-Sioui. "Sometimes festivals would invite Indigenous authors, but mostly big names from Canada or the United States who worked in English. There was no place for Indigenous writers who write in French. Aboriginal events elsewhere in Canada weren't interested either. It's like we didn't exist at all."

At its heart, the mission of Salon du livre des Premières Nations is to promote Indigenous literature from Quebec, and help build the infrastructure for French Indigenous writers to develop, evolve, and "become a cultural force," says Picard-Sioui. This year's festival offered a playwriting element, highlighting the work of Drew Hayden Taylor, Dave Jenniss, and Yves Sioui Durand with round table conversations and public interviews. There was a special tribute show to Durand, the founder of Ondinnok, Quebec's first French-language Indigenous theater company, and recipient of the 2017 Governor

General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement in the Theatre category.

For Picard-Sioui, it's a privilege to honour the trailblazers, yet he imagines someday the festival will outgrow itself. "I hope one day it won't be necessary – that Indigenous literature will be everywhere and there won't be a need for such a festival. We are still the only festival of its kind in French in the country. There's still a lot of work to do. I would love to tighten our relations with Indigenous writers across Canada who publish in English. We must work together across the colonial linguistic divide."

As the only annual event in Quebec where French and English Indigenous writers can gather, Salon du livre des Premières Nations is a celebration of culture, literature, and Indigeneity. The vast majority of published Indigenous writers in Quebec are based on reserves, or in isolated areas where literature is not a hot topic. The festival offers an opportunity to connect with publishers and other Indigenous writers.

"It's become a big family for the authors, but also for the publishers, scholars, translators, and the public. Each year we welcome new writers to share new points of view about Indigenous writing and what it can be," Picard-Sioui says. "A lot of writers tell me how the festival has been important for them. How it helped their careers, and breaks the solitude of writing."

This year CBC Radio host and Cree poet Rosanna Deerchild read from a borrowed copy of her book *Calling Down the Sky*, as her baggage and books were lost in transit en route to Wendake. Like the Indigenous Wonder Woman that she is, Deerchild improvised, in new boots bought on the reserve at Giant Tiger, and shared stories of her mother's painful experiences in the residential school system. Whether she's interviewing Buffy Sainte-Marie on air or performing poetry at a bar, Deerchild is a firecracker, an embodied poet and a public figure. After meeting Deerchild, I wrote a letter-poem for her that will be included in my book *Who Took My Sister?*, forthcoming from Book*hug.

During my time at Salon du livre des Premières Nations, one of the many conversations I had was about the possibility of having my work translated into French. As

a non-Mi'kmaq-speaking poet who knows very little French, I am not surprised that the opportunity to potentially publish in French came before Mi'kmaq. Why? Why aren't more books published in First Nations languages? Will more publishers be publishing books in Indigenous languages? Perhaps. While at the festival, Deerchild let audience members know she was offered a French translation before Cree, and objected. She insisted *Calling Down the Sky* be published in Cree before it was released in yet another colonial language.

As I was sitting next to Innu poet, songwriter, and documentary filmmaker Joséphine Bacon at an author signing, she leaned in close and told me I speak too quietly. I needed to learn to speak up to be heard. She said this as her kind eyes twinkled, even though I started to burn with shame. Part of how I became a poet is because poetry is the place where I've learned to speak from. I think of Bacon's poem "ma richesse s'appelle," from *Nous sommes tous des sauvages*, and these lines:

my headdress is called
eagle
my song is called
drum
and I am called
human†

Both her presence and poetics are made of resilience, and sitting next to her, I was reminded of language, and how I am poet, not savage, that I'm called human, and like hers, my voice matters.

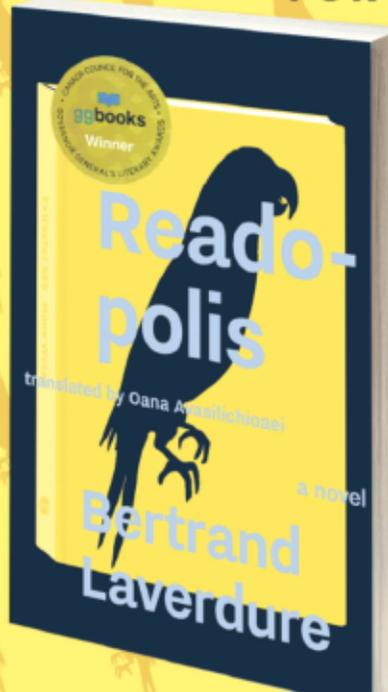
† The English version of this poem was found at <http://humanrights.ca/blog/poetry-josephine-bacon>

Part of my experience at Salon du livre des Premières Nations was an arrival, a place where I was met with other Indigenous writers, translators, artists, scholars, and thinkers. I wasn't alone in my room, bound by the confines of my mind, or seated at the colonial table. The thing is, this fear of not being Indigenous enough is much like the fear of not being poet enough. I am looking outside of myself to be framed. To be given permission. To be seen. That's part of a colonial lens, a gaze that looks outside for validation rather than within. Gatherings like Salon du livre des Premières Nations offer a place for a Mi'kmaq poet like myself to claim the space I've written myself in, as both insider and outsider.

Some of the challenges of a multilingual literary environment are exactly what makes it rich, diverse, and decolonial. No one is on solid footing. No one is an authority. Every writer and audience member becomes closer to the land, and in turn to one another, through the relationship of poetics. Each language pays respect to the ancestors, as we continue to honour seven generations through publishing and orating our stories, poems, and songs. 

Shannon Webb-Campbell is a Mi'kmaq poet, writer, and critic. Her first book, *Still No Word* (2015) was the inaugural recipient of Egale Canada's Out In Print Award. *Who Took My Sister?* is her second book.

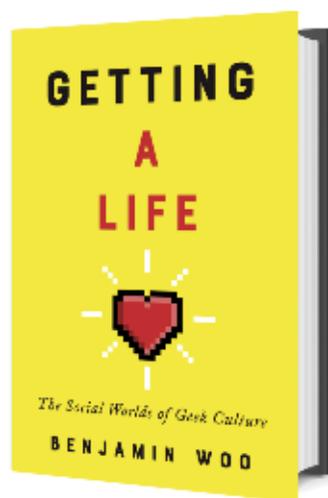
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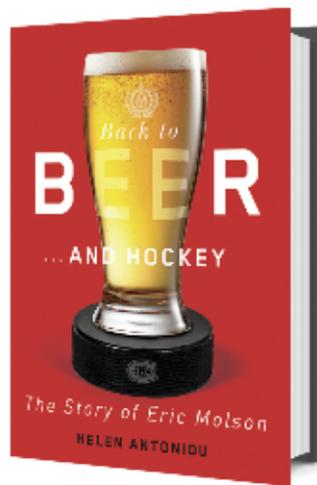
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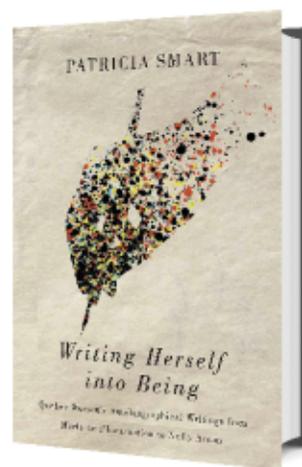
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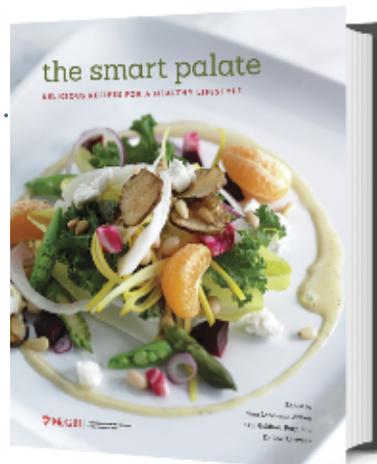
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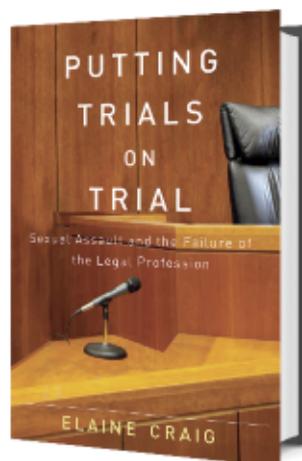
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