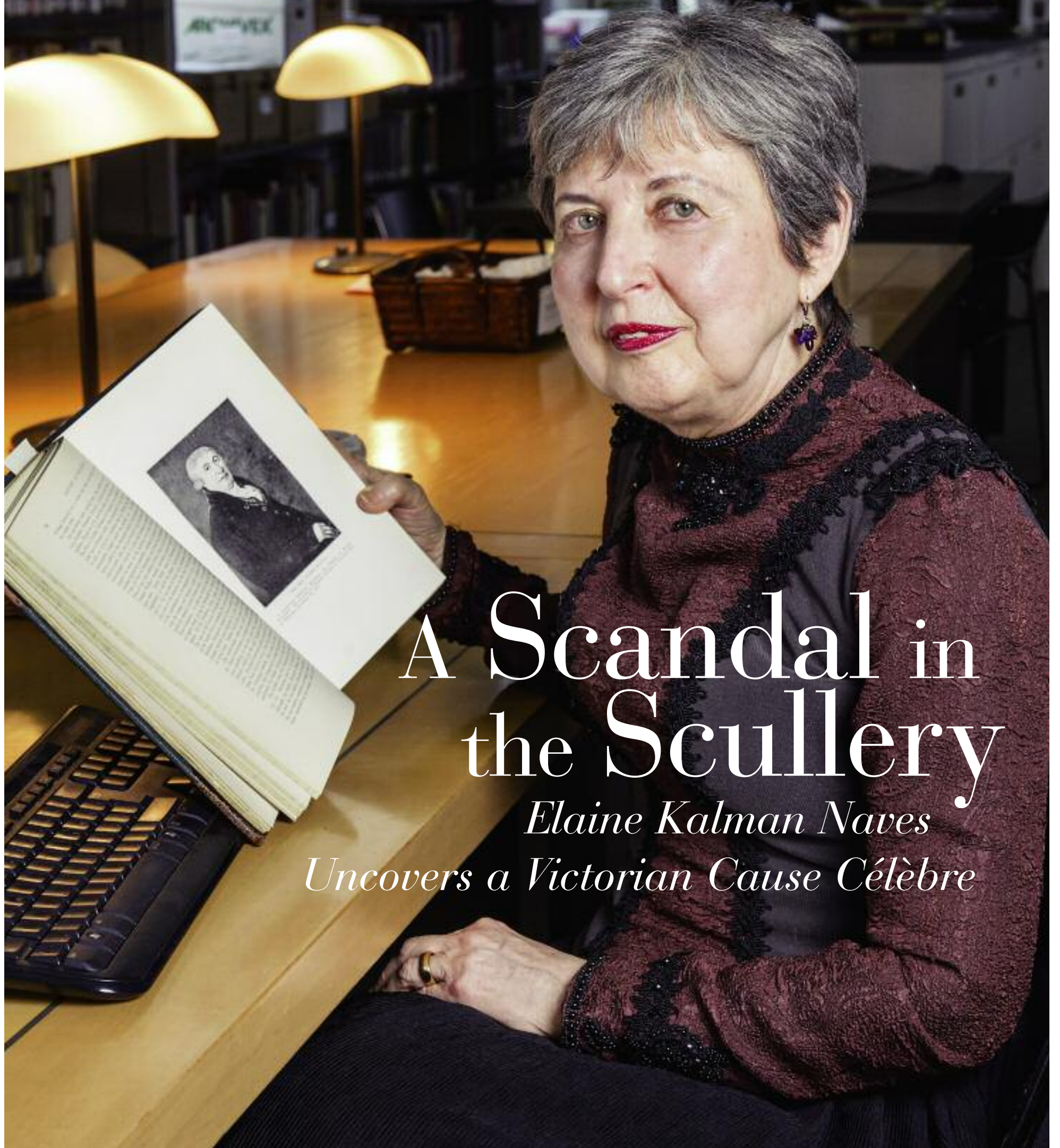


# mRb

SPRING 2014 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

This issue is dedicated to Judy Mappin,  
pioneering bookseller and supporter of the arts,  
who died February 14, 2014.

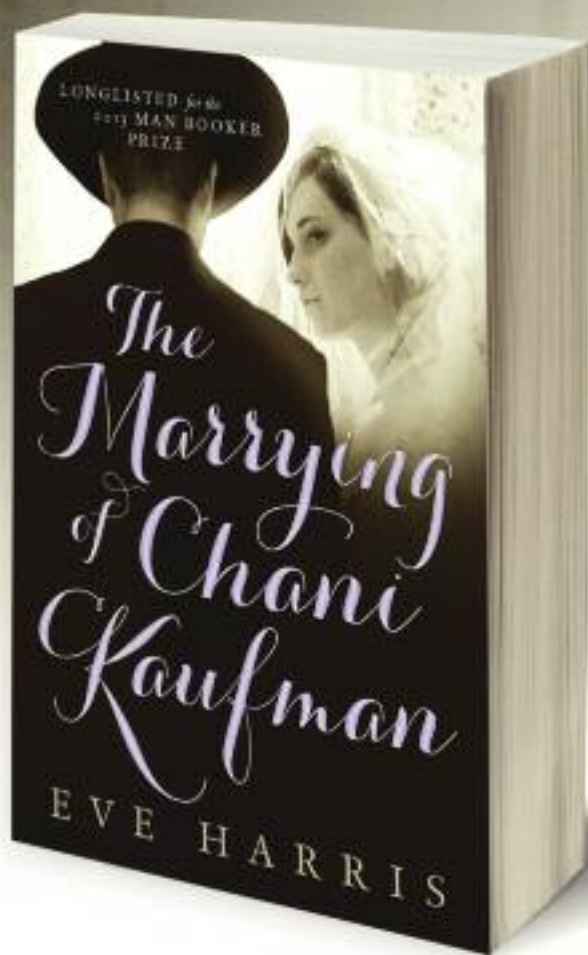


## A Scandal in the Scullery

*Elaine Kalman Naves*

*Uncovers a Victorian Cause Célèbre*





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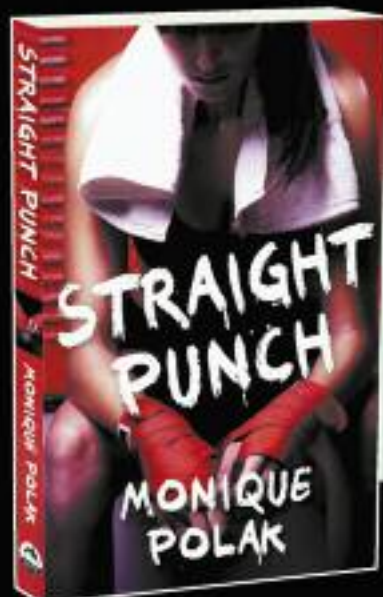


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We would like to thank the Segal Centre  
for lending us the Victorian dress pictured  
on the front cover.

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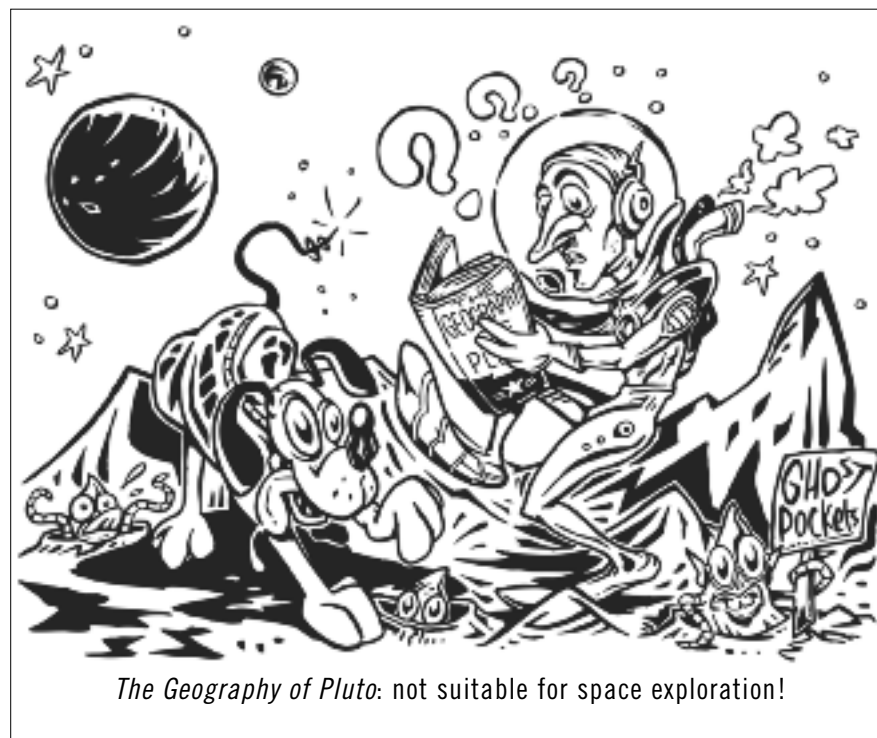
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*The Geography of Pluto: not suitable for space exploration!*

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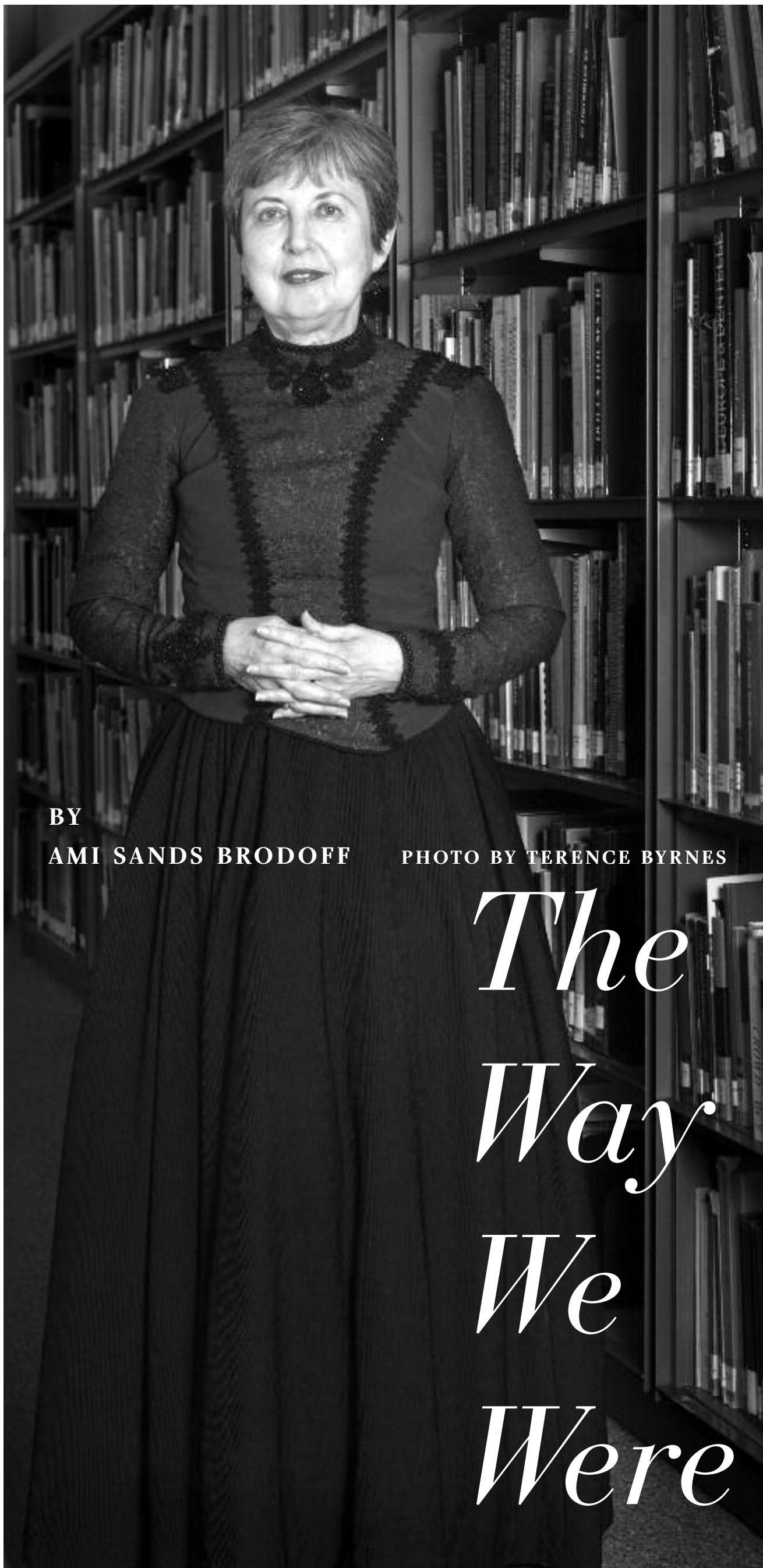


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BY

AMI SANDS BRODOFF

PHOTO BY TERENCE BYRNES

# The Way We Were

When the cacophony of modern culture – the relentless buzz of infotainment – leaves me longing for escape, I read. My preference: a book, made of ink and paper with pages I can actually turn. Often, a bygone era beckons and history provides an effective form of time travel. Elaine Kalman Naves' latest work, *Portrait of a Scandal: The Abortion Trial of Robert Notman*, throws the reader back to nineteenth-century Montreal. This history has it all: desire and illicit sex, privilege and penury, fame and infamy, the dramatic momentum of an absorbing novel.

On one of our many *mon pays, c'est l'hiver* days, when the sidewalk is a black-iced crevasse flanked by soiled, crusted snowbanks, I visit Kalman Naves at her home in NDG. Her manner is a rare and welcome mix of modesty and confidence. We settle in her sunroom burgeoning with well-tended plants and chat for several hours over hot tea and homemade blueberry muffins. In our rather clannish community, Kalman Naves is known for her generosity toward both peers and protégés: a few years back, she raced around town on a single autumn evening to attend no less than three book launches so that she could support all three writers.

The provenance of *Scandal*, her seventh book, is every writer's dream. While researching a CBC radio *Ideas* documentary on William Notman, one of Canada's premier nineteenth-century photographers, Kalman Naves asked an expert at the McCord Museum if there were any "black sheep in the Notman family." As a result, she uncovered the scandal surrounding Robert, William's younger brother, who had an affair with a servant in the household, arranged for her to have an abortion, which led to the *doctor's* suicide and then to Robert's own imprisonment and trial for murder. By serendipity, Kalman Naves had found "a tale far more intriguing than a gothic whodunit."

Though the events of *Portrait of a Scandal* took place nearly 150 years ago, the multidimensional characters and the themes of desire and downfall make this tale of our city both timeless and familiar. The book took Kalman Naves six years to write. "The research was challenging," she tells me. "I had to find relevant pieces from archives, letters, and newspapers, which were nearly illegible; there were three separate accounts of what everyone said. Understanding the legal and medical complexities, not to mention finding all the clues to piece together the story, was demanding." There were moments, she confesses, when she almost gave up. "My rule of thumb: If I can get to page 100," she laughs, "I finish the book!"

In an incantatory rhythm reminiscent of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the story opens with a portrait of Montreal during the late 1860s. "In summer it was a city of melons, strawberries, and sweet corn grown in backyards and bucolic outskirts.... It was a city of snow, ice, and tinkling sleigh bells.... It was a city of domes and spires.... It was a city of fur barons and clergymen, of nuns and belles...."



Kalman Naves has a novelist's eye and a historian's sleuth-like instincts, with the tenacity of both. Wisely, she presents the scandal through the lens of its time, rather than imposing contemporary views. Though this is a work of non-fiction, Kalman Naves deftly employs the tools of the fiction writer – intuition, empathy, and imagination – to create the thoughts and feelings of her characters where motivations and events are unknown or unclear. Many of these speculative sections, indicated by italics, compose the richest parts of the book. Here, Robert Notman is first beguiled by Miss Margaret Galbraith, a country girl hired to help with his father's ablutions, who attended the McGill Normal School with dreams of becoming a teacher:

*Again she recoils, so eager to flatten – even erase – herself that through the thin stuff of her blouse she can feel the nub of the rose-embossed wallpaper against her shoulder blades.... He craves to dissolve her reserve, unlock the secret cry that a woman shrieks when it goes well with her.... What the French... call la jouissance.*

Kalman Naves took a risk by using her invented passages as mortar between historical facts. These interludes add layers to the characters and deepen the emotional resonance of the story.

Two-dozen photographs illustrate the text and help the reader step into the drama of the past, imagining what transpired beneath the surface of carefully arranged portraits. They highlight the dichotomy between the famous brother and the infamous one, “in whose wake tragedy inevitably followed.” What's more, the black and white pictures underline a fascinating link between photography and scandal: both arrest time, both capture a moment and make it indelible.

The story abounds with irony and sly wit. William Notman flees Paisley, Scotland, for Montreal following his family's bankruptcy and subsequent disgrace. While he becomes a renowned photographer, his brother Robert creates a scandal far worse than the one the family fled to escape. Sadly, the doctor who committed suicide unintentionally lays bare the sin he was trying to conceal. While society judged and vilified Robert Notman and Miss Galbraith, it wallowed in every juicy detail of the couple's disgrace.

Though Kalman Naves' books vary in subject matter, the common thread is history, whether personal, familial, literary, or Canadian. Born in Budapest, the child of two Holocaust survivors, she came to Montreal in 1959 at age eleven. Like many writers, she grew up a bookworm. “Both of my parents were great storytellers,” she says. “I thought it might be interesting to be a writer, but you had to suffer.” Kalman Naves studied North

American History at McGill and her first job was at the *Centre d'études du Québec*. She began writing book reviews and had her own column in the *Montreal Gazette*. Nonetheless, her path to authorship was hard won with the proverbial papering of walls with rejection slips. In fact, *Journey to Vaja*, her family biography set against the backdrop of Hungarian history, was rejected sixty-seven times. “Journalism helped me hone my craft,” she tells me. A tighter, more trenchant version of *Journey to Vaja* was eventually published by McGill-Queen's University Press (one of the original sixty-seven passes). The book was awarded the 1998 Elie Wiesel Prize for Holocaust Literature, was adapted for radio, and made into the documentary film *Paradise Lost* for the Canadian History Channel.

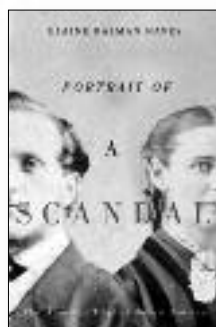
Its sequel and perhaps Kalman Naves' best-known book, *Shoshanna's Story: A Mother, A Daughter, and the Shadows of History*, is a wrenching memoir about her complex childhood in Hungary, England, and Montreal, set against the horrifying backdrop of the aftermath of the Second World War and the looming threat of the Communist Revolution. By dramatizing scenes and eschewing easy interpretation or analysis, this book reverberates long after its covers are closed. *Shoshanna's Story* won the 2003 Quebec

Writers' Federation's Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-Fiction, as well as the 2005 Canadian Jewish Book Awards Yad Vashem Prize for Holocaust Literature.

Kalman Naves says that she wasn't intending to write about the Holocaust, but rather longed to “find the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and half-sister whose faces surrounded me in photographs as I was growing up and about whom my parents spun tales from my youngest years.”

For Kalman Naves, writing is a practice. “What fulfills me most is the process,” she says. When I ask about her future goals, she pauses awhile before answering. “It's kind of a prayer,” she says. “Please let me keep doing this.”

Ami Sands Brodoff recently completed her fourth book, the novel *In Many Waters*. Visit her at [amisandsbrodoff.com](http://amisandsbrodoff.com) and [chez-ami.blogspot.com](http://chez-ami.blogspot.com) for news and events.

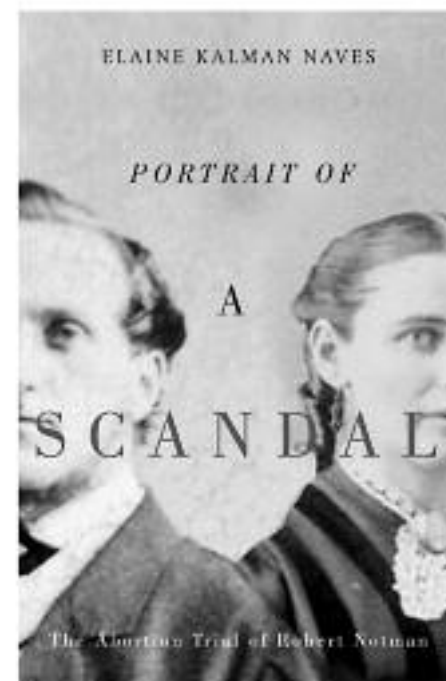


**PORTRAIT OF A SCANDAL**  
The Abortion Trial of Robert Notman  
Elaine Kalman Naves  
Véhicule Press  
\$18, paper, 214pp  
978-1-55065-357-1

Two

VERY DIFFERENT

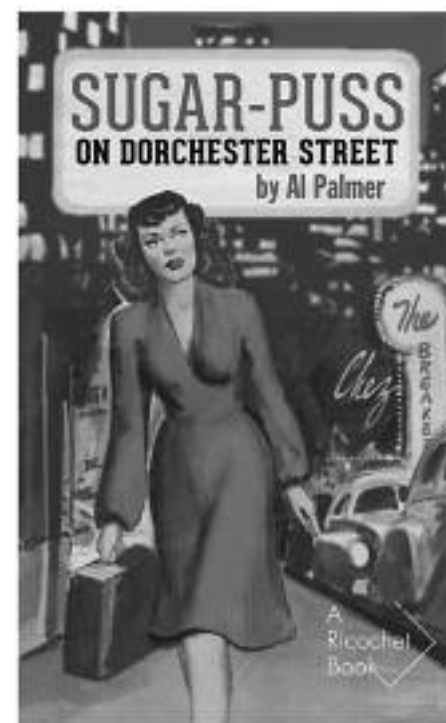
## Urban Tales



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The Abortion Trial of Robert Notman  
Elaine Kalman Naves

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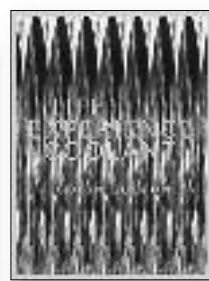
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# poetry

## Pushing Against Form



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John McAuley  
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### RUA DA FELICIDADE

Ken Norris  
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Peter Richardson  
Icehouse Poetry  
\$19.95, paper, 88pp  
978-0-86492-490-2

### LIFE EXPERIENCE COOLANT

Colin Fulton  
BookThug  
\$18, paper, 112pp  
9781927040850

### HOURS

Fernand Ouellette  
Translated by Antonio d'Alfonso  
Guernica Editions  
\$20, paper, 116pp  
978-1-55071-828-7

John McAuley, one of the Vehicule Poets who were so influential in Montreal circa 1975–80, published four books from 1977–79. His new collection, *All I Can Say for Sure*, is so good that the long silence must be regretted. The first of the four sections comprises what appear to be autobiographical reflections on the childhood, youth, and career of the poet. These somewhat garrulous poems, however, are less interesting than the ones that follow. The second part, *Northern Love*, has a youthful intoxication checked by the sobriety of age and experience. One phrase sums up the tone: “Eden Interruptus.” The joy in love poetry is tempered by an awareness of mortality, as Shakespeare showed in his sonnets. McAuley’s love poems rely brilliantly on figurative language with comparisons drawn from astronomy, nature, and even grammar. In fact, the third section of McAuley’s book is called *A Poet’s Grammar*. It is as if this Canadian poet wanted to rewrite Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, emphasizing basic units such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Most poets since the early days of modernism shun adjectives and employ adverbs sparingly, but McAuley actually catalogues some of the uses of adverbs in poetry. These few pages on grammar are followed by a group of free translations from Latin poets: Catullus, Tibullus, Virgil, and Ovid. The translations are thoroughly enjoyable – freedom here means exuberance – and must have nourished McAuley’s *Northern Love* sequence. He can make a translation into a poem of his own by judicious expansions of the text. For example, his version of Ovid’s story of Daedalus and Icarus gets an original concluding line: “Everyone has a dead bird story / close to heart.” McAuley’s book is rounded off with a set of poems on historical and scientific subjects – ranging from Virginia Woolf to Percival Lowell (the astronomer who thought he saw canals on Mars) – as well as tributes to Leonard Cohen, Leo Kennedy, and, of course, the late Artie Gold, a member of the Vehicule Poets. He also presents entertaining poems about moon exploration, Theodor Kaluza’s theories of the fifth dimension, and “Ma Yu Ching’s Bucket Chicken House, Kaifeng, China, the World’s Oldest Restaurant.” These objective works balance the subjective tales of the opening section.

The world since the 1970s has not passed him by: he writes an *ars poetica* in tweets and a lipogram: “For Socrates This Lipogram in A.” The only shortcoming of the poem, a touching account of the death of the great philosopher, is that the reader would probably not notice the complete suppression of the vowel “a” in the poem if the title had not pointed to it. The constraint is not extreme enough to be noticed.

Ken Norris is another Vehicule poet. He has written at least two dozen books and chapbooks. *Rua da Felicidade* is his best work in years. As usual, he has written a book full of travel poems, set in tropical regions: Macau, Bangkok, Singapore. But the amorous element is not so conspicuous as before. In

place of current love affairs, he remembers old ones with nostalgia. The book has a pervasively sombre tone: he expresses compassion for beggars and, most of all, for tsunami victims. The title of the book, meaning “street of happiness,” is ironic: it refers to the red light district of Macau. “Friends, it’s a surprise / to all of us / that this book could possibly end / on the Street of Happiness.” The irony comes because the preceding poems are so melancholy. In a different key, Norris’s “Pushing Against the Form” offers interesting insights into the art of poetry, declaring that “we” (perhaps the Vehicule Poets) were best when pushing against form rather than merely serving it.

Peter Richardson is a virtuoso of form and he pushes it hard in *Bit Parts for Fools*. So many of his poems are written in neat stanzas, but he stretches the forms over and over by letting the syntax of his long sentences run on from stanza to stanza. When contemplated on the page, the stanzas suggest self-containment, but the sentences often overflow their banks, carrying the reader along with the stream. He can use remarkably long lines with skill in an age given to rather short ones. Richardson likes to create dramatic monologues and narratives. Only in the third and final section of his book does he turn to personal narratives about suburban life (especially bird watching) and colourful relatives. The erudition in his invented stories and monologues ranges widely: he deals with poison gas in World War I, trains on the Eastern Front in World War II, and the lives of renegade Roman legionnaires in AD 9. The poison gas poem, “Song of the Canister’s Contents,” is particularly powerful, although the full effect comes only when the reader encounters the note on the poem at the end of the book. Richardson’s poem about the late Ralph Gustafson, “Of Cordwood and Chrysanthemums,” is a fine tribute to one of Quebec’s best poets. Richardson shares Gustafson’s precision and his astringent view of the world, as

well as his interest in birds and backyards. He brings the man and his somewhat neglected work alive for us. Amusingly circumstantial titles are a feature of Richardson’s writing, and two of the best are “Dr. Gomez’s Return from a Sunday Botanist’s Field Trip” and “Listening to a Recently Dried-out Lena While Watching Harold Lloyd Hang from a Clock Face at The Mayfair.” As for the title of his book, he makes fun of human folly, but participates in it, as displayed in “Test Flight,” a poem in which the speaker’s model plane has a comically catastrophic journey.

Colin Fulton works with unusual sources to create poems that are compilations based on found materials, reminding us of Nennius, the ninth-century Welsh monk who said of his *Historia Brittonum*: “I made a heap of all I could find.” The title poem of *Life Experience Coolant* is a heap of complaints and provocations drawn from the comments sections of online blogs and forums. There is even a jargon expression for such carping writers: Internet trolls. Fulton takes such materials (rambling, irascible, or pedantic) and turns them into comedy. The pages are divided into four squares with materials running on from square to square: upper left to right, then lower left to right. The typography in these blocks is justified even if the complaints are not. The only complaint to make about his poem is that a little of this material goes a long way. More interesting is the work called “36C 8A,” his redactions of John Ruskin’s long notes on the capitals of columns. Fulton works not from the Victorian writer directly but from Jan Morris’s redactions of Ruskin’s writing; we are therefore twice removed from actual objects. Fulton’s typography turns the descriptions of the capitals into visual simulations of the architectural feature. Typography illustrates content. The other sizable composition in the book is “Red Horse/Judges,” a series of prose poems reworking texts from Open Parliament, an online

archive of everything said in Canada’s legislature. Needless to say, the level of the prose – a heap of public language – is not elegant, which is surely the point. The parliamentary materials are often complaints; although, they are a little more sophisticated than the griping of Internet trolls. Fulton is very skilled at what he does. Readers of mainstream poetry will probably grow bored with this book, but those who love experimentation will be drawn in by his ability to play freely among the signifiers and push the notion of form through typography.

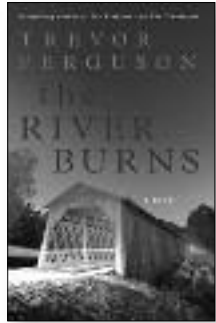
Fernand Ouellette is one of Quebec’s finest poets. His *Hours* commemorates the death of his father. It is much less detailed than Pierre Nepveu’s long elegy for his parents in *The Major Verbs* (reviewed in *mRb*, Spring 2013), but it has an austere self-possession. Ouellette does not approach his father’s passing with the sort of clinical information that we often receive in poems about dying parents. Rather, he sees his father’s passing as a solemn and solitary event in spite of the presence of the grieving family. In so much contemporary poetry, the description of tubes, monitors, and extreme interventions makes a death scene more vividly present to the reader, but Ouellette seems determined to preserve the dignity of the dying man, to value his spiritual isolation. As he becomes a “strange planet,” a dying person can offer a certain access to freedom to those he leaves behind, by the example of his solitude. The translator, Antonio D’Alfonso, has produced a readable work in English. His afterword suggests that the French original bends the language in innovative ways. That does not come across in the translation, but D’Alfonso conveys a strong sense of the solemnity of the occasion and the way that it is commemorated. mrb

Bert Almon was elected to the City of Edmonton Cultural Hall of Fame in 2013 on the basis of his poetry and his work as a mentor.

# fiction

## Bridging Genres

**THE RIVER BURNS**  
Trevor Ferguson  
Simon & Schuster Canada  
\$29.99, cloth, 480pp  
978-1476751849



This is the first “Trevor Ferguson” novel that Trevor Ferguson has written in nearly twenty years. Once described by the *Toronto Star* as Canada’s best novelist, Ferguson more recently dropped his name to publish a crime mystery trilogy under the nom de plume of “John Farrow.” The last book in that series was *River City*; *The River Burns*, his return to literary writing, retains the feel of genre fiction, but it’s a thriller that takes a quieter form.

Like many of his novels – such as *The Timekeeper*, winner of the QWF’s Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction – this is a rural morality tale, though this time set in Quebec. It revolves around Wakefield’s crime of the century: the burning of a historic covered bridge, a real-life unsolved arson that took place in 1984. Here, in this fictionalized

account, it is masterminded by local loggers who see it as a justified evil since the inefficiency of the one-lane bridge is costing them business.

Ferguson tells his story using a biblical arc, through segments he titles *Transgression*, *Reckoning*, and *Redemption*.

At the core of the narrative is the O’Farrell clan. Alexander Gareth O’Farrell is a wise but conflicted patriarch, overseeing two sons whose roles pit them against each other. Denny becomes a criminal while Ryan is a policeman. A former “river rat” who guided logs downriver from a raft, Alexander passes on his “infatuation with the river” to both his sons; this infatuation guides the clashing of many players, including a tribe of drug dealers who are also the resident environmental activists. Conflicts surface just as a “straightforward, shining beauty” with “breeze-tossed hair” floats into town, a Miss Raine Tara-Anne Cogshill.

As such language suggests, this tale is more potboiler than literary novel:

an enticing read promising shorthand characterizations, a convenient plot, and spicy romance. Not surprisingly, *The River Burns* started as a film script, but a movie wouldn’t have been able to capture its ornate narration. Here, for example, Ferguson describes a night where, “under a waxing gibbous moon, as a wry dalliance of stars reflects on the silvery, oily black river below them, people of this town will labour through a night that casts a lurking judgement on their lives.” Even if they seem to overload the language, these quaint poetics can be charming and appropriate for the small town setting.

Ferguson – much like author Louise Penny – rewards readers from Quebec with local colour, complete with bilingual dialogue. (French dialogue is mainly indicated in the narration without being written out.)

Ferguson’s embrace of multiple genres does, however, muddy the plot. Swerving from flowery romance to community politics calls for some perplexing asides and shifts in tone. Some may also find a bridge too slight a hinge for such dramatics. New to Wakefield, Cogshill wonders, “What could sufficiently interest this spectrum of diverse people.... A bridge?” Some readers may ask themselves the same question.



Perfect for a daytrip to the Eastern Townships or a picnic by the St. Lawrence, *The River Burns* makes for a fast and tasty read. After all, we could do with more stories where the burning of bridges leads to the renewal of communities, rather than their unravelling. mrb

Crystal Chan has been published by the CBC, *Montreal Gazette*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Maisonmeuve*, among other publications. She was the managing editor of *La Scena Musicale* magazine and the program coordinator of ELAN.

## Dancer in the Darkroom

**SERAFIM AND CLAIRE**  
Mark Lavorato  
House of Anansi Press  
\$22.95, paper, 336pp  
978-1-77089-365-8



Mark Lavorato’s delicious new novel, *Serafim and Claire*, opens with two characters on the brink of life-altering decisions. Claire lies in her shabby apartment in Montreal in the dead of winter, her body fighting a deadly fever, the cause of which is unknown to us. Serafim sits in a tavern in Oporto, Portugal, stunned by some news we are not privy to, drinking his way to numbness. Who are these people and what has led them to these fateful points? Inherent in the title of the novel is the promise that the decisions these disparate characters make in the next few moments will put them on an inexorable path towards one another.

The majority of *Serafim and Claire* unfolds in the rich and vibrant world of Montreal in the late 1920s. The city is a hotbed of social change – we meet artists and agitators, thugs and moralists, nuns and suffragettes – and the title characters are trying to find their places in it. Serafim, a poor immigrant photographer, is fascinated by the new candid style of photography that is all the rage in Paris but that hasn’t caught on yet in the New World. Claire, a gift-

ed dancer stuck in the cabaret scene, will use any means to overcome her lack of social connections and get herself into a respectable dance troupe. Both are driven by an all-encompassing desire to discover and create.

The novel first reaches into the recent past, recounting how Serafim and Claire came to be in their life-altering positions. It then moves swiftly forward, pulling the reader down into the fetid third-class cabins of a steamship, through the sequin-filled backstage areas of various cabaret theatres, and along the busy streets of Montreal. Each chapter about Claire is preceded by a short letter from her devoted older sister; each one about Serafim is slated with the description of a photograph he has taken. Eventually, the main characters meet and hatch an audacious plan to inflate their social capital. Will it work? If it does, they will both have the freedom they need to flourish as artists. If it does not, the consequences could be ruinous.

Lavorato’s pacing is excellent and his characters deftly wrought (of a future suffragette, he writes: “[she] wasn’t exactly sure how one formed an opinion, though she became increasingly certain that an opinion was an important thing to have”). But what makes *Serafim and Claire* such a delight is his lush description. Lavorato brings Montreal in the Roaring



Twenties to life, from the stately mansions of Westmount to the raucous burlesque theatres in *Le Red Light* to the echoing halls of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, staffed with judgmental nuns.

The book has clearly been painstakingly researched, but Lavorato has resisted the ego-driven impulse to put all his background work on display. Instead, he curates his historical details with care. Every reference that is made, from the efforts of the Montreal Local Council of Women (a coalition of primarily Protestant Anglophone wives “bent on weeding out the sordid vice of prostitution from the city’s streets”) to the tragic Laurier Palace Theatre fire that left seventy-eight children dead, is present-

ed because it is an integral part of the narrative.

Readers familiar with modern Montreal politics will catch themselves thinking, as they read, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” *Serafim and Claire* may be set eighty-five years ago, but many of the themes, from bribery of city officials to the prejudicial treatment of cultural minorities, are relevant today. One cannot help but wonder if they will be any less so a century from now. mrb

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer specializing in medical writing, travel writing, and personal essays. Her latest passion is setting cryptic crossword puzzles.

# Rampant with Memory

## THE FLEDGLINGS

David Homel  
Cormorant Books  
\$21.95, paper, 288pp  
9781770863828

David Homel's new novel, *The Fledglings*, spans three generations of a family's history. Alternating between the middle-aged Joey Krueger's placid search for what he calls his "secret garden" and his mother Bluma's scrappy, Depression-era hijinks, Homel tenderly stitches together a patchwork of real, invented, secret, and recounted recollections.

The book opens at Bluma's seniors' residence in suburban Chicago, where Joey visits her daily before heading off to his environmental catastrophe solutions business. It's a routine his estranged wife derides him for; she mocks him for being a mama's boy. And maybe he is, but Joey also nurtures the kind of respect an only child can harbour for their single parent. "I don't know anything about you," he tells her candidly. Perhaps he grasps just enough to know she's earned her mettle. Inspired by this desire to know Bluma better, Joey decides he will write her life story. Not to publish a book, but rather to conserve her transcribed memories in a time capsule to be buried. As a testament, a memorial, or perhaps simply to invent a project that will occupy them both: "The perfect pre-retirement project, fitted to a man his age."

Bluma's story begins in the Lithuanian village of Shukyan, where her father, "a man as big as a horse and as strong as a bull," Abraham Tabiliak, and her mother, Rachel, are betrothed by their Orthodox Jewish community and eventually marry. From Lithuania, first Abe, and then Rachel, Bluma, and her two siblings travel by ship to America. They take up residence in impoverished, ramshackle Burnside, outside Chicago. "Life in Burnside was ruled by the railroad tracks. When three freight trains came by and closed off all three level crossings at the same time, they might as well have been living on an island."

America's first imprint: renaming the clan. "Abe Goldberg – it was a joke of a name, a Jewish joke, a joke played on a Jew.... Goldberg's real name was Tabiliak, but Tabiliak was too big a mouthful for the customs man, so Tabiliak magically became Goldberg at the point of entry." The family settles stateside just in time for Prohibition, and the newly christened Mr. Goldberg needs to make ends meet. He fills a vacuum; he becomes his town's bootlegger. Abe often leaves Bluma in charge of his rickety speakeasy, the Chicken Coop. The Coop is where Bluma grows up pouring Irish cops dollops of hooch in coffee cups, cutting and dealing cards and dreaming of a vague, eventual freedom.

The novel's most engaging moments are

MÉLANIE MORAND/OPALE/ÉDITIONS ACTES SUD



the scenes between Bluma and her cousin Bella. The two-member, all-girl gang wear each other's clothes and promise one another never to marry. They call themselves The Fledglings, and their friendship, cemented by both their familial bond and the chemistry of their complementary survival skills, is the book's emotional pulse. Bluma and Bella are rich, riveting characters, and they are all the more alive, for the reader as much as for themselves, when they are together.

As the novel careens between past and present, the scars and tragedies of Bluma's life begin to seem almost like a kind of initiation from which her son has been spared. Is his life, as a result, tepid or simply subtler in its shifts? Joey, unlike his mother, has had the opportunity to choose individuation. He is not only the first of his family to attend college, but he may also be the first to fall in love. And while Joey's journey may seem more benign than his forebears' raucous adventures, in his family romantic love is a delicate luxury, a gentle emotion, and it is his alone.

It took three generations of Tabiliak-Goldbergs for middle-aged love to bloom one evening at dusk, among the fireflies and geraniums of a suburban neighbourhood. At last, Joey plants his mother's history in his girlfriend's yard, and his mother's stories seed the secret garden he sought. **mrb**

Melissa Bull is the editor of *Maisonneuve's* "Writing from Quebec" column. Her poetry collection, *Rue*, and her translation of Nelly Arcan's *Burqa de chair* are both forthcoming from Anvil Press.

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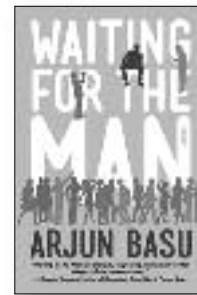
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# Mal de whatever

## WAITING FOR THE MAN

Arjun Basu  
ECW Press  
\$24.95, paper, 296pp  
978-1-77041-177-7

"This is how people end up becoming managers at Arby's. This is how people end up becoming Willy Loman."



Joe is an average Joe. New Yorker, mid-thirties. Works for an ad agency, good at his job. He one time branded a beer so brandfully, he more or less invented it. He's well-surrounded ("I drank with the right people," he cracks ironically). And when Joe cracks *for reals*, he does so ironically. Welcome to *Waiting for the Man*.

Arjun Basu's second book hinges on the same in-betweenness as did many of the stories in his 2008 debut collection *Squishy* (DC Books). When Joe, disillusioned and lacking more promising options, begins to experience visions, he obeys his hallucinations' instructions. "The Man," who stars in these dreams, is a thin black fellow in seventies pimpwear with "a smile you couldn't outrun." Wait, he tells Joe, so Joe sits on his front steps and waits for the Man. After two days on his stoop, Joe has an entourage. Women begin to bring him Tupperware containers. A week into his loitering pilgrimage, Joe accidentally acquires a press attaché, Dan-from-the-Post, who secures a pizza sponsorship and eventually wrangles Joe's cross-country odyssey, media bus in tow. The police close the street, food carts pop up, groupies arrive.

"Wanting to become famous used to be an aspiration and now it's a career."

As if someone can struggle with their visions without a camera crew and a blog! Certainly not in New York; not in the twenty-first century. The quest story is timeless, but *Waiting for the Man* is a novel of its time. The quest narrative today has more possibilities than ever, untethered from didactic or moral imperatives, with almost endless socioeconomic strata to escape into and from. But Joe's mission exposes the peculiar-

ities of contemporary spiritual awakenings: the modern quester is ever aware of the spiralling pileup in his inbox; before the cameras, the quester makes sure to shave.

"Who wants to share their most intimate forms of lunacy," Joe asks, but the reader doesn't empathize as much as watch the passing news unfold (which leads to some weaker expository passages in an otherwise well-styled book). Joe can't even emerge from a rest-stop bathroom without having to give a press conference, but the paradox is that no one – not the canny Dan, not

the Japanese hitchhiker Joe picks up, not the wise and lovely one-who-got-away Angie – really gets it, or tries to.

This layer of conscious performance undermines the protagonist's loneliness, which would seem fundamental to the genre: Joe is never not surrounded and contextualized. As a consequence, Basu's reader becomes just another spectator in the crowd – a lonely place, from which one might start having visions, obeying imagined pleas.

"The joy of being ignored was a joy I had never even imagined."

Basu's narrative unfolds in two directions, finally converging at the end of the cross-country trip and the beginning of the rest of Joe's life. In alternating chapters, Basu gives us Joe in the future, working a menial kitchen job at a chic resort in Montana, having evaded the lies he told himself to get through life. He relishes this new anonymity, but still struggles against the media machine that employed him and made him famous. You can come from anywhere, you can go anywhere, but in the end you'll always come back to yourself.

This is how we quest – we, Generation Something. This is how we live our *mal de siècle*, midlife crisis; *mal de whatever*. *Waiting for the Man* is observant and clever, and doesn't take itself too seriously. Basu toys with his readers, pushing us away to point out the distance at which we hold the characters and stories that populate our pages and screens, and reminds us there is always more to the story. **mrb**

Katia Grubisic is a writer, editor, and translator.

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## Lost and Found

### A TRAVELER'S TALE

Byron Ayanoglu  
DC Books

\$18.95, paper, 167pp  
978-1-897190-92-0

In a seaside resort in southwestern Turkey, a man awakens one day seemingly bereft of his former identity. His name and memory are voids, his sole possession a single valise. He finds a hefty stash of American dollars inside his valise, procures a fake passport, and sets out for Istanbul. In cafés and restaurants, former business associates recognize the traveler, helping him back to knowledge of the crime he willed himself to forget.

So begins Byron Ayanoglu's *A Traveler's Tale*, a jet-setting novel with more than its share of cosmopolitan cuisine, financial intrigue, and erotic trysts. After an earlier novel (*Love in the Age of Confusion*), the book is Ayanoglu's second published work of fiction. Ayanoglu's two great passions, food and travel – amply evident in the numerous cookbooks, restaurant guides, and travel books he has written – fuel the narrative, making for a compelling though somewhat disjointed reading experience.

The book is structured in two halves arranged in reverse chronological order. In the first half, the peregrinations of the first-person narrator lead the reader through the cafés of Istanbul, where the narrator dines with strangers and receives a slap in the face from an angry former lover. On a whim, the traveler goes to Mumbai where a wealthy Indian aristocrat invites him back to his ancestral palace, after having surprised him at the airport: "People seem to know more about me and my movements than I [do]," the narrator thinks. With the help of a woman he follows to southern India, he begins to admit that he has committed a crime involving a large sum of money and that he has been "trying to submerge the shame and hopelessness of it in a state of willful amnesia."

In the book's second half, the focus



shifts to Steve Hunter, an investment banker living in Singapore at the time of the 2008 financial crisis. He trades recklessly, sometimes on insider information, and goes on jaunts to Mumbai and Istanbul to dine and bed mistresses. As the mystery of Hunter's amnesia dissipates, the story's interest slackens. What remains is

a series of belaboured descriptions of Hunter's glamorous lifestyle set out in insipid prose. Though many passages in the book's first half are exceptionally well written, the same can hardly be said of the second half, especially of its several sex scenes. Consider for instance the following passage describing Hunter's mistress awaiting him in a limousine: "Varsha was sitting back smoking a cigarette on a long holder, Felliniesque in a stiletto-tight, black two-piece with slitted skirt and a diaphanous mini-bustier that propped her bare breasts to the forefront—just short of the nipples—like a pair of ripe melons framed by the black 'v' of the fitted jacket. A flopping felt hat, high heels, thick sunglasses and elbow-length kid gloves—in pink—completed the illusion." Many such descriptions in *The Traveler's Tale* foreground glamour, with little substance – besides the book's sacred trinity of food, travel, and sex – to complement or accompany them.

Nevertheless, amidst all the glitz and gourmet, there is an underlying moral: you can run from your past, but you can't escape it. Through white-collar crimes, Hunter tries to distance himself from his childhood and then disavows his crime and his former self. The weight of the past is the book's central theme, but it remains woefully underdeveloped. Instead, *A Traveler's Tale* luxuriates in the beauty of surfaces, namely carnal pleasures and epicurean delights. **mrb**

Jacob Siefring is a freelance literary critic and blogger living in Ottawa. He received MA in English and MLIS degrees from McGill University. His website is bibliomaniac.com.

## Said the Theremin

### US CONDUCTORS

Sean Michaels

Random House Canada

\$22.95, paper, 368pp  
9780345813329

*Us Conductors* is the debut novel by Sean Michaels, a Montreal-based author who founded the popular music blog *Said the Gramophone*. It's a fictionalized story of Lev Termen, the Russian engineer, physicist, and inventor of the theremin – the musical instrument whose pitch and volume is controlled by the proximity of the player's hands to two antennas. But, as Michaels puts it in the author's notes, the story "is full of distortions, elisions, omissions, and lies."

The story, told from Termen's first-person point of view, has two parts. The first of these takes place in 1938 while Termen is on *The Stary Bolshevik* ship back to Russia after having spent eleven years in New York City. In it, he recounts his student days in Russia, moving to America to introduce the theremin to a new audience, and selling his other inventions to American investors. This takes place against a backdrop of the Wall Street crash, Prohibition, and the Jazz Age. In New York City, he meets Clara, a violinist and, under his tutelage, a budding theremin virtuoso.

The writing in part one is mechanical – "They would smash in the door and thunder up the stairs" – and the descriptive rhythm soon becomes predictable, offering a tired-poetic tone: "my life whirred and dinged, accelerated and decelerated." Furthermore, in the rush of historical settings and celebrities ("We toasted tomorrows. We got drunk. Gershwin asked me about Russia"), Michaels forgets to give character or depth to the people important to Termen. Here, two very important characters are referred to in a flat, uninteresting way: "I thought of Sasha in Leningrad, reviewing new data. I thought of Katia growing older in New Jersey."

The second part, which is much stronger (it is where the interesting characters can be

found), takes place eight years later. Termen is in Marenko prison, outside Moscow, describing the remarkable events that followed his return to Russia, including some time in a Siberian Gulag. The writing is minimal and punchy, and has a philosophical sensibility, enabling the suspense to neatly unfold: "We wrapped our rags closer, for warmth, trying to add months to our lives." It viscerally recreates the violence and suffering in a Gulag camp.

The novel is addressed to Clara (via the pronoun "you") as if Termen were making a declaration of love. Unfortunately, there is a jarring conflict between his descriptions of New York: some detailed descriptions create the illusion of a mock present tense for the reader, while others – told in retrospect from the ship/prison – are glossed over. Termen goes from intensely remembering pointless and impersonal details, as if Clara had total amnesia (which she doesn't), to expressions like, "Before long it was

another year." The result is that it doesn't feel like love. Rather, it feels like it wasn't really written for her, which undermines the story greatly. Regrettably, the authorial solution to the problem fixes this structural flaw very late in the book, at page 272: "Sometimes I am writing you a letter, Clara, and other times I am just writing, pushing type into paper, making something of my years."

Furthermore, instead of creating a particular way of seeing, efforts to integrate a scientific sensibility into Termen's thought-stream don't go very far and remain superficial: "My mind and hands were following the directives of my wakeful loosened heart and I was solitary, moving, a free particle that spins, that feels the weak and the strong forces exerting gravity upon it."

Termen's life is indeed remarkable, but, in this version of it, you have to read 200 pages before it becomes engaging. At that point it's very engaging. **mrb**

Martyn Bryant is a writer and teacher based in Montreal. He has an MSc in Physics and an MA in Creative Writing and is currently working on his first novel.



### Heavens by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Linda Gaboriau

The fourth and final instalment of Wajdi Mouawad's critically lauded Blood of Promises cycle.

"[Heavens] concerns are timely, the means for portraying these are gripping, and the philosophical framework is engaging." —Molly Grogan, *The Paris Voice*

### Flesh and Other Fragments of Love by Evelyne de la Chenelière, translated by Linda Gaboriau

"A beautiful, poetic piece. The writing is in equal parts sophisticated, sensitive, and ironic." —Marie Labrecque, *Le Devoir*

"Evelyne de la Chenelière's play is magnificently well-written, triggering deeply-felt emotions. A superb piece... as troubling as it is moving." —Louise Bourbonnais, *Journal de Montréal*



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By Joel Yanofsky

# Finding the Motherlode

Content determines form, or, more precisely, the multiple forms that comprise Carolyne Van Der Meer's unique and moving new book, *Motherlode: A Mosaic of Dutch Wartime Experience*. Juxtaposing essays, poems, journal entries, letters, interviews, and short stories, Van Der Meer demonstrates how our life story is seldom, if ever, set in stone. Instead, it's a moving target, a kaleidoscope of the complicated ways in which we choose to remember.

The story begins, however, with Wilma Van Der Meer, the author's mother, trying not to remember. "It's hard to go back and think about all these things," she tells her daughter, referring specifically to her childhood in Nazi-occupied Holland. "I've tried so hard to forget." Despite this, she persists, at first grudgingly so, but eventually both mother and daughter set out on a journey toward a better understanding of the past and of each other.

Van Der Meer knew some of the facts of her family history, facts explored in poems such as "The SS Came at Night," and short stories such as "Marijke's Song," about Nazi sympathizers. She knew about the daily hardships, hunger, and fear that her family endured, and also of their efforts to hide Jews. But what she didn't know was the emotional toll this history had taken on her mother throughout her life. "What she has given me... [is] a key," Van Der Meer writes in her prologue. "A key to who she is—and, ultimately, to who I am. It's a cultural inheritance.... And now that I'm aware of this inheritance, I can understand its richness and share it."

*Motherlode* is part of Wilfrid Laurier University Press's Life Writing Series. With more than 50 titles to its credit, the series aims to "foreground the stories of those who may never have imagined themselves as writers." That said, this is a writerly book. Van Der Meer may not have started out with literary intentions, but by mixing fact and fiction, by involving a cast of peripheral characters – including other Dutch war children, participants in the Dutch Resistance, and Canadian war veterans – she gives a voice to the previously silent "voices of the time."

A journalist, public relations professional, and university lecturer, Van Der Meer met me at Café Shāika in NDG to discuss her first book.

**JOEL YANOFSKY:** Your mother was initially reluctant to tell her story. What made you push her to tell it?

**CAROLYNE VAN DER MEER:** My mother would talk about her past in an anecdotal way, but never in any depth. I have a son, who's 13, and he started asking me about his grandmother's stories. About the Dutch Resistance, for example. I couldn't really answer. I knew what the Resistance was, of course, but I couldn't tell him what her family – our family – did.

**JY:** Were you worried about what would happen to these stories if you couldn't convince your mother to tell them?

**CVDM:** Yes, I realized they'd be lost. I didn't

want that, in large part for my son. It was also really important for me to try to get inside her experience as a child. And that became more important to me when I had a child of my own. I started thinking about what growing up in that environment, the war, the occupation, would do to a child. The war ended when my mother was seven; she came to Canada when she was 15. She married, had a family. Everything seemed fine. Everything seemed to have turned out for the best. Still, her experience during the war could never be erased. It was always there. It shaped – shapes – everything.

**JY:** Why do you think she was so resistant to talking to you at first?

**CVDM:** She was afraid, afraid of what this kind of exploration would bring up. She's a very sensitive person and she told me she didn't want to dream about it, which she did. After she read the manuscript she didn't sleep for two nights. Of course, I didn't want my mother to have sleepless nights. But it was a validation for what I was trying to do with the book. Besides, she said, "I am not telling you this to upset you. I want you to know that's how much the book affected me. Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down."

**JY:** You employed a lot of different literary forms in *Motherlode* – a "mosaic," as you say, of poems, short stories, and essays in addition to your journals and interviews with your mother and others. Why did you compose the book this way?

**CVDM:** I realized pretty early on if I tried to write something historical I'd just be doing what was already done. I didn't want to focus so much on actual fact but on emotion and there was a lot of emotion in the stories my mother and other people were telling me. The poems, for example, were my way of trying to imagine what it was like to grow up during this time. I mean, how else could I ever understand?

**JY:** When did you begin to see *Motherlode* as a book?

**CVDM:** What I was thinking initially was that this would truly just be my mother's story. I didn't think there was enough material about my mom's past to fill a book. That's when I contacted Herman Ganzevoort, a professor at the University of Calgary, who's written a lot about Dutch



immigration. He told me about a group I could contact for more information. That was the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies. Through the Association, I had a whole number of people, other war children, contacting me and allowing me to interview them.

**JY:** Did the act of telling their stories affect them?

**CVDM:** Well, there's the example of Libby Boelen. She was eighty-seven when I spoke to her, a teenager during the war, and she'd never told her children her stories, not in a detailed chronological way. Her kids had been bugging her to for years. I visited her at her home in the Eastern Townships and we sat in her garden and talked for five hours. She let herself go. Later, her husband convinced her they should listen to our conversation and, although she admitted she was afraid to, she listened to the whole thing in one sitting. She said it was almost like an out-of-body experience. "Like it's not me, but it's me," she told me later.

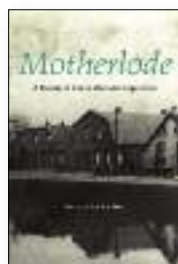
**JY:** So you managed to get her to do what her children couldn't?

**CVDM:** Yes, people like my mother and Libby don't always realize how much their stories mean to their kids and grandkids. In the end, I feel like I was able to facilitate conversations in families. I had the same thing happen with a Canadian Jewish war veteran who told me about his experience liberating Holland. He told me he had not been able to talk about it before. He saw a lot of hard things.

**JY:** I guess it's fair to say you really did hit the motherlode with this book?

**CVDM:** Yes, the title does reflect the fact that I was finding nuggets of treasure in all the stories I was hearing and writing down. Another unexpected treasure, as I write in the book, was that "I have also become closer to my mother than I have ever been." ms

Joel Yanofsky is the author of *Bad Animals: A Father's Accidental Education in Autism*.



**MOTHERLODE**  
A Mosaic of Dutch  
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Carolyne Van Der Meer  
Wilfrid Laurier University Press  
\$19.99, paper, 146pp  
978-1-77112-005-0

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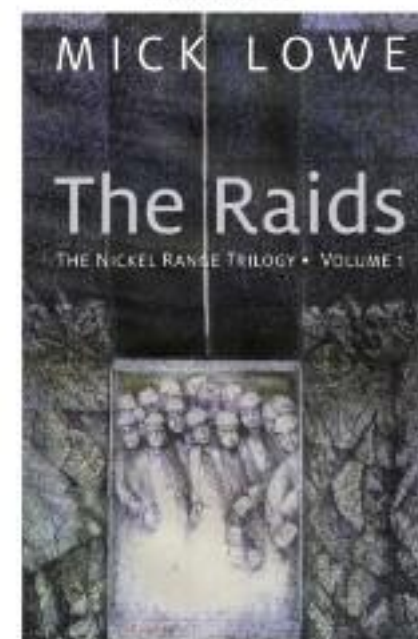
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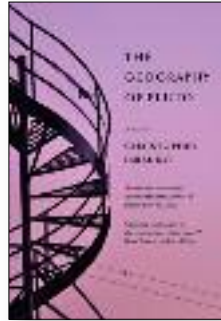
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By Rob Sherren

*"I want to pick up a book and read about someone else's life; what they live and experience; what I will never know; because I'm not that person."*

These are the words of Christopher DiRaddo, spoken on the coldest night of 2013, over beer and bourbon in the eternal happy hour of Sky Bar. They could have, however, just as easily been spoken by Will Ambrose, the protagonist of DiRaddo's forthcoming debut novel, *The Geography of Pluto*. Sitting down to talk about the novel at Sky is perfect since Will may actually have been born here – a zygote moment scribbled on a cocktail napkin with a pen borrowed from a waiter. That said, the details are sketchy and he might also have been scrawled on a party handbill at one of the other clubs that have come and gone along St. Catherine E. since 1995: the Adonis, Parking, Stud, all places where Will might have looked down on the dance floor from above, feeling like an explorer and an outsider as he prepared to wade into the fray. Why is it so right to be talking when it's -42 outside? Will is living the eternal suffering that follows the end of his first real love, and the worst part of heartbreak, besides being lonely and hopeless, is that it's like a Montreal winter – it won't fucking end!



**THE GEOGRAPHY OF PLUTO**  
Christopher DiRaddo  
Cormorant Books  
\$21.95, paper, 288pp  
9781770863644

*"I used Slaughterhouse-Five as an emotional guide ... war catapulted [Billy Pilgrim] into a non-linear way of living his life ... that's how Will feels too ... when you fall in love it's not war, but you're doing things you never thought you were going to do."*

The book's crystalline prose makes for an incredibly smooth read but the most impressive technical accomplishment is the timeline. Picture a young man watching TV in his mother's humble Plateau apartment, or marking high school geography exams – guts churning in the introspective hell of heartache – until he's suddenly catapulted into the past, recalling a moment of discovery, intimacy, or regret. The lucidity of the remembered scene is so profound that it flings him out into yet another recollection as vivid as the first (think *Inception's* dreams within dreams). The overlapping waves of the recursive emotions build, and build, and build, until they finally spill over and swamp Will in

## Uncharted Territory



whichever level of present he is living.

It's important to say that there is no authorial attention drawn to this impressive feat, in fact you almost never catch DiRaddo playing his temporal tricks; it's much more subversive. In *Blindness*, Saramago left out visual dialogue cues to make the reader "listen" for who was speaking, as the blind must. DiRaddo doesn't shift verb tense or point of view when he moves through the Russian-doll past(s), and the action is always equally present and descriptive. This forces the reader to navigate Will's timeless purgatory by feeling for whichever emotional mass is strongest at that point in his recollection: "this must be when he was still with Max," or "this is when his mother was going through chemo the first time." It's

sneaky and effective, because it's utterly transparent.

*"At one point, what we think is a curse in our lives, we end up celebrating..."*

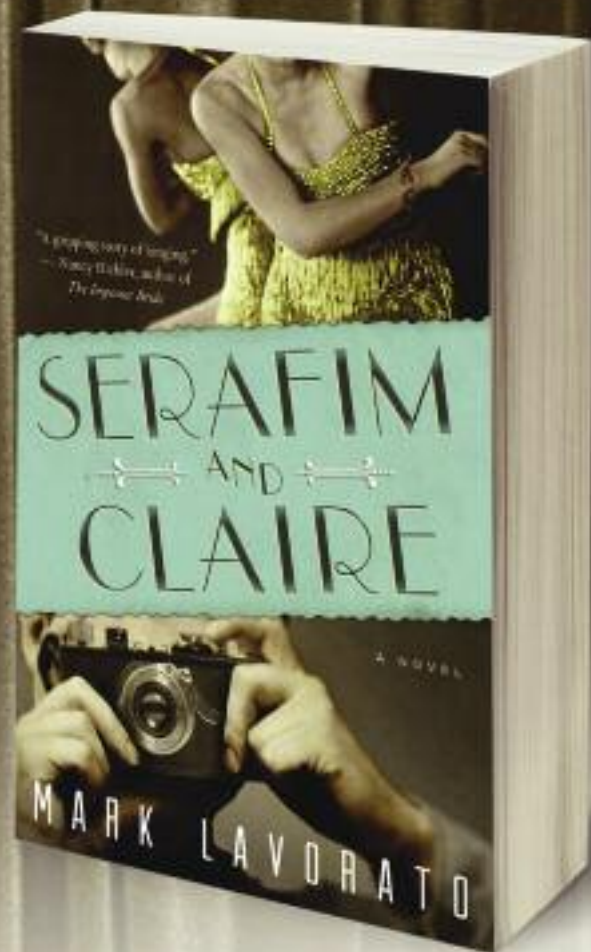
DiRaddo won a Mr. Hairy Chest contest in a bar – it might even have been at Sky. The short story it inspired ended up in *First Person Queer*, a Lambda Literary award-winning anthology. He studied Journalism and worked freelance as a PR agent with groups like Blue Metropolis Foundation. He's active in the Quebec Writer's Federation and he works for CBC's Canada Writes. All this to say: DiRaddo got his chops the old-fashioned way. He gives a great deal of

continued on page 14

"Lavorato writes with a poet's eye and a lover's heart, evoking the beauty and violence of 1920s Montreal."

— Nancy Richler,  
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*The Imposter Bride*

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By Kimberly Bourgeois

## A Hard-Earned Precocity

**F**or some people, life's challenges are much greater than for others. Yet, even among those who face calamity, quite remarkably, a few will always manage to thrive.

If, like Ann Charney, you've ever wondered about these irrepressible types, you might enjoy diving into *Life Class*, a novel well populated with characters who reverse their fortune. "Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well," says a formerly homeless character, summing up one of the book's themes with a Robert Louis Stevenson quote.

On the day I set out to meet Charney for an interview, I'm reminded of life's changeability as the mercury plummets by about 20 stinging degrees, and a dislodging January wind tosses violently through the streets, unsettling another one of *Life Class*'s motifs: displacement.

"Yes, I'm very interested in the whole idea of displacement because I think it's the big theme of our time," says the author when I comment on the cultural hybridity of her characters. Serving chai at her dining room table, Charney, who herself arrived from Poland with her parents at age eleven, con-

tinues: "Everybody is moving, populations are shifting. You know, there's a lot of migration, a lot of refugees, and societies that were homogeneous before, like Quebec used to be, and other places, even Sweden, are suddenly being infiltrated by all sorts of people who are not part of the culture. So, I'm interested in the people who arrive from distant places and how they sort of had to reinvent themselves to fit into the new culture."

Exemplifying this kind of shift is Charney's savvy heroine, Nerina, who reinvents herself more than once to improve her conditions. When *Life Class* opens, Nerina is an illegal immigrant, biding her time at an exploitive hairdressing salon job in Venice. Being an orphan from the war-torn former Yugoslavia only fuels her dream of starting fresh in America. Resourceful and adaptable, she is quick to seize opportunities, unafraid to roll up her sleeves for the hard work of redesigning her destiny.

"Well, it's resilience that interests me



**LIFE CLASS**  
Ann Charney  
Cormorant Books  
\$21.95, paper, 224pp  
978-1770862968

most," says Charney, when I ask about the recurring theme of turning things around. Having spent early childhood in German-occupied Poland, she writes with first-hand experience of war: "The very first book I've written [*Dobryd*, an autobiographical novel] was a book that had to do with a family caught up in the Holocaust, and what happens to them afterwards. And I was absolutely determined not to write about them as victims ... I don't ever want to create heroines in novels who are victims, who sort of let life act upon them rather than acting upon life."

While Charney says she hasn't got the answers as to why some people are better than others at surmounting hard obstacles, it's a trait she admires: "I feel we can learn from the people who show this kind of resilience, and I think they're good role models."

True to the author's vision, Nerina is a courageous overcomer. After several moves, and a number of tedious jobs to make ends meet, she eventually begins to shape a career in the contemporary art world, making allies along the way, including the equally enterprising Helena, a stoic seventy-ish woman with a Polish-Jewish background.

Like her protégée, Helena is driven, despite a dark past. Serving as "Canada's honorary consul in Venice," she has a knack for spotting hidden talent and has carved out a niche for herself acting as a liaison between



artists and rich patrons. Observing Nerina sweeping up hair at the salon, she senses there is more to the girl than meets the eye, and finds her a job keeping house for wealthy Americans in Venice, thereby upgrading her network.

Although the road to success is serpentine, and Nerina's initiation to America is hardly glamorous, the heroine turns even unsatisfactory situations to her advantage. Tucked away in a sleepy village for the winter, she uses the long, lonely hours to read and improve her English. From a favourite find, *Vanity Fair*, she copies, "She had the dismal precocity of poverty," later gaining Helena's approval when she recalls the line in conversation. "Substitute the word 'war' for 'poverty' and you have the same result.... Precocity, no matter how hard-earned is always an advantage," notes her benefactress.

Charney, who counts *Vanity Fair* among her own favourite novels, says that something about the line has always resonated

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# non-fiction

## O Son of Jerusalem

### THE BELLS OF MEMORY

A Palestinian Boyhood in Jerusalem

Issa J. Boullata

Linda Leith Publishing

\$12.95, paper, 100pp

978-1927535394



Issa J. Boullata was nine years old when he saw a Palestinian rebel open fire on guards at the Government Printing Press across the street from his family's house in Jerusalem. Soon, armed British soldiers began searching (and often ransacking) Palestinian homes in his neighbourhood. One day the soldiers arrived earlier than usual, and Boullata watched as his father was taken away in pyjamas with shaving foam still on his face.

In Boullata's memoir, *The Bells of Memory: A Palestinian Boyhood in Jerusalem*, such details illustrate the tense atmosphere of Jerusalem during the 1930s and 1940s, a period when Palestine was under British control. Everything changed in 1948; the events of that year, called the *Nakba* in Arabic, are central to Boullata's narrative. "No year is burnt into the memory of the Palestinians as deeply and as painfully as 1948," Boullata writes.

For them, the *Nakba* was "the catastrophe of being dispossessed by Israel of their livelihood, their homes, and their homeland."

Before getting to the political, however, the narrative delves into the personal, beginning with a brief family history. Boullata's paternal grandfather was a master mason whose work included a school and a shopping complex in the Old City of Jerusalem. His maternal grandfather, a goldsmith, was the last person buried in the Orthodox Christian cemetery before it became part of the Israeli-controlled area of Jerusalem in 1948, which meant that his family could not visit the grave. A few chapters describe Boullata's ascent through school, and the teachers who influenced him and his love of literature, at some length.

The narrative flow picks up steam in tandem with the rising tensions between Palestinian rebels and the British military. Palestinians take action by, for example, sprinkling small nails on the main highways to hamper British vehicles. "British soldiers often compelled Arab civilian passersby to sweep the nails away with their bare hands," writes Boullata, a "forced labour" that he and his father participated in.

Descriptions of elaborate meals (including, for example, a "traditional lamb soup containing spicy meatballs and parsley" and "sweet semolina cookies") tantalize the senses, and one chapter offers a fascinating portrait of the Old City of Jerusalem:

One had to go on foot through the Old City's cobbled alleys and markets, trying to avoid laden donkeys and camels, porters carrying heavy burdens of crates of goods on their backs tightly tied by ropes to their heads, or carriers transporting dripping water-skins or large carcasses of animals from the slaughterhouse.

The Old City of Boullata's youth is depicted as a harmonious blend of cultures, a place where "Jerusalemite Christians did not eat publicly in the presence of Muslims in consideration for their fast" and where Christians and Muslims alike enjoyed the Ramadan pastries and sweetmeats. The Jewish quarter, however, was outside Boullata's "circle of daily life and boyhood experience."

Written in a straightforward manner, the prose is very readable. As a whole, however, the book suffers from some structural awkwardness, shuffling



around in time and sometimes repeating itself, producing somewhat uneven results. The author seems to apologize for this in the preface, stating that it "is presented to the interested reader with all the simplicity with which its parts were originally written."

Yet, overall, the author accomplishes his stated goal of portraying what it was like to grow up in Jerusalem at that time, while he was being "unwillingly made into a person without a country." The reader may be left hungry for details about what happened to the author and his family after the fateful events of 1948. In some ways, it feels like the first half of an autobiography, leaving ample room for a sequel. **mrb**

Lesley Trites is a Montreal-based fiction and freelance writer.

## DiRaddo

credit to the people who have influenced him: Andrew Holleran, a writing idol who blurbed the *Geography of Pluto*; Peter Dubé with whom he worked in the QWF Mentorship Program; Marc Côté, his editor and publisher at Cormorant.

"Marc told me to never underestimate my audience... he said to me: it's a story of the heart – let it be that way... and Pluto, more Pluto."

Will's emotional meandering leads him to the most serendipitous of philosophical destinations – Pluto, for instance. Why Pluto? It starts with the New Horizons probe launch, which will finally photograph the planet's surface sometime in 2015, but it leads to musings about the loneliest planet. It's cold. It's part of the solar system and then it's not. It's the archetype of an outsider. And from there it leads to Pluto as god of the Underworld, the god of deviancy, death, and rebirth; Pluto who created winter when he tricked Proserpine into

eating pomegranate seeds in Hades. More Pluto, indeed. And why "Geography"? It's the subject Will teaches, but this reference seems to have much more to do with his fascination for pathways, and footprints, and maps. He never leaves Montreal, but tramps like an anthropologist through the snowy streets and alleys on the east shoulder of Mount Royal, between the St. Lawrence River and Little Italy.

"In life, a man comes into many ages. Coming of age happens all through life..."

DiRaddo spent a great deal of time thinking about what kind of story he wanted to tell: fourteen years elapsed between those embryonic napkin scribbles and the pending publication. He and Marc spent two and a half years editing. DiRaddo didn't want to tell the story of a young gay man coming out or coming of age in 1990s Montreal. (Does anyone want to have their novel described as a coming-of-age story?) The novel's most concrete storyline starts and ends with Will entering his early/mid 30s; Will is coming into his

next age, not middle age, but the one before that, wherein a fellow raises his eyes from the chaos and delight of spreading his seed and realizes that life is both longer and shorter than he first thought and recognizes that new responsibilities and more complex opportunities await. The story is universal but utterly specific in what it chooses to tell us about Will. It's a simple story of romantic loss, of family loss, of friendships stretched to the limit, almost for the purposes of seeing

if they're truly worth the effort. *The Geography of Pluto* is a 3D map of an outsider's complex terrain – better yet, it's a 4D map when you consider the depth that time lends to things. It's a trip through a man, and into a man. Quite literally. **mrb**

@robsherren reviews for the *mRb*, builds wind farms, and is seeking a publisher for his novel *Fastback Barracuda*.



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# Cracking the Code of Dieppe

ONE DAY IN AUGUST

The Untold Story Behind Canada's Tragedy at Dieppe

David O'Keefe

Knopf Canada

\$35.00, cloth, 496pp

978-0345807694

The 1942 Allied raid on Dieppe was one of Canada's worst military disasters: after less than a day's fighting, 3,367 Canadian men (over two-thirds of the Canadians participating in the operation) were killed, wounded, captured, or listed as missing. The purpose of the raid has remained a mystery for over seventy years. "This was too big for a raid and too small for invasion," said a puzzled German interrogator to a captured prisoner. "What were you trying to do?" The prisoner's response is quoted near the beginning of David O'Keefe's *One Day in August*: "If you could tell me ... I would be very grateful."

O'Keefe's book gives a provocative answer to the question that baffled the prisoner and that has continued to baffle historians and veterans. A Marianopolis College professor, television documentarian, and former Black Watch infantry officer, O'Keefe argues

that the raid was planned as a secret "pinch" operation to capture cryptographic materials. These were needed to break the code of the Enigma machines, which the German military used to send encrypted communications.

British intelligence officers had achieved great success in deciphering the code of an early Enigma model, but in February 1942 the Germans introduced more sophisticated Enigma machines that seemed virtually impossible to crack. The British were no longer able to predict the movements of German U-boats, which now roamed almost unimpeded in their quest to sink Allied merchant vessels. British shipping losses skyrocketed, leading to critical strains on an already overburdened economy. Cracking the Enigma code became a military imperative for the Allies.

O'Keefe claims that the retrieval of cryptographic materials was the central goal of the Dieppe raid. He argues that the operation's scale was magnified in order to hide its true intent, because the Germans would swiftly change their communications codes if they knew the Allies had discovered crucial cryptographic secrets. The raid was therefore given the cover of a larger and more conventional military campaign. As O'Keefe puts it, this subterfuge blinded both the German military and "generations of observers long after the war ended."

Although O'Keefe's thesis may sound fanciful, he makes a compelling case. Having sifted through almost 150,000 pages of documents (including recently declassified files), O'Keefe defends his position through a careful accumulation of facts, some of which had been unknown to historians.

Many colourful personalities figure prominently in this book, including Lord Louis Mountbatten, Sir Winston Churchill, and computer pioneer Alan Turing. The most surprising character is Ian Fleming, who gained fame after the war as the creator of James Bond. Fleming turns out to have played a central role in the Dieppe raid and in wartime British intelligence operations as a whole.

Like his fictional secret agent, Fleming was fond of risky and theatrical intelligence activities and showed a cold-blooded willingness to treat humans as expendable. With the encouragement of his superior, Rear Admiral John Godfrey (sometimes cited as the inspiration for 007's boss "M"), Fleming helped concoct a variety of outlandish schemes. Some of these were successful, but the Dieppe raid ended in catastrophe. It failed in its objective, it led to a staggering loss of life, and it gave the Nazis a propaganda victory.



*One Day in August's* extensive endnotes show a mastery of the subject that will impress professional historians, yet non-specialists will find the main text accessible and gripping. O'Keefe writes like a skilled novelist: his sentences are brisk, his character portraits are memorable, and he has a flair for dramatic detail. Even readers with no previous interest in military history will enjoy this book.

Jean Coléno holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Toronto and teaches in the Humanities Department at Dawson College.

# Rewriting Rwanda

RWANDA AND THE NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

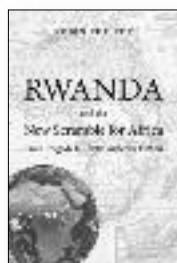
From Tragedy to Useful Imperial Fiction

Robin Philpot

Baraka Books

\$24.95, paper, 282pp

978-1-926824-94-9



Deep-seated ethnic enmity erupted in a hundred-day genocidal rampage during which Hutus killed

Tutsis, a rampage that was stopped by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). A noble Canadian general tried to end the bloodletting, but a dysfunctional United Nations refused to give him resources. Washington was caught off guard by the slaughter, but it has since apologized for failing to intervene and has committed to never again avoid its responsibility to protect.

In *Rwanda and the New Scramble for Africa*, Robin Philpot demolishes this version of history.

Philpot points out that while the official story begins on April 6, 1994, any serious investigation must go back to at least October 1, 1990. On that day, an army of mostly exiled Tutsi elite invaded Rwanda. The Ugandan government

claimed that 4,000 of its troops, including the defense minister and the head of intelligence, "deserted" to participate in the invasion. This unbelievable explanation has largely been accepted since Washington and London backed Uganda's incursion into Rwanda.

More than 90% Tutsi, the RPF could never have gained power democratically in a country where only 15% of the population was Tutsi. Even military victory looked difficult until economic adjustments by the International Monetary Fund and Western-promoted political reforms weakened the Rwandan government. The RPF also benefited from the United Nations Assistance Mission For Rwanda (UNAMIR) being dispatched to keep the peace. According to Gilbert Ngijo, political assistant to the civilian commander of UNAMIR, "He [UNAMIR commander General Romeo Dallaire] let the RPF get arms. He allowed UNAMIR troops to train RPF soldiers. United Nations troops provided the logistics for the RPF. They even fed them."

On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President of Rwanda Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, both Hutu, was shot down. A French judge pointed the finger at Paul Kagame and the RPF, but the head of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Canadian Louise Arbour, refused to investigate evidence implicating the RPF. When the ICTR prosecutor who took over from

Arbour, Carla del Ponte, did look at the RPF's role in shooting down Habyarimana's plane, the British and Americans had her removed.

Habyarimana's assassination sparked mass killings (but no planned genocide, according to the ICTR). Five days after Habyarimana's death, an internal US memorandum warned of "hundreds of thousands of deaths," but Philpot notes, "even though they knew that the massacres would occur and that millions would flee to other countries, the Americans devoted all their efforts to forcing the United Nations to withdraw its UNAMIR troops."

If left to its own devices, UNAMIR would have blocked the RPF from capturing Kigali; however, Washington was motivated to undermine French influence and improve the prospects of North American companies in the nearby mineral-rich eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Rarely heard in Canada, Philpot's version of events aligns with those of former UN head Boutros Boutros-Ghali, civilian head of UNAMIR Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, and many French investigators. Presumably, many Rwandans also

agree but it's hard to know since Paul Kagame ruthlessly suppresses opponents, regularly labeling them *génocidaires*.

Ottawa has supported this witch-hunt, and Philpot points to the example of Faustin Twagiramungu, a former Rwandan prime minister denied a Canadian visa: "The Prime Minister of the government that supposedly ended the genocide had now become a *génocidaire*. Canada had already received Prime Minister Faustin Twagiramungu [sic] with all honours in December 1994 when he was looking for funding to rebuild Rwanda under the RPF. Either Canada's institutional memory is short and selective or, more likely, the country has a policy of supporting the RPF government at all costs."

All told, Philpot has provided us with an invaluable resource for understanding the Rwandan tragedy and for countering those who cite the tragedy in order to justify Western military interventions.

Yves Engler, dubbed "Canada's version of Noam Chomsky," is the author of seven books, including *The Ugly Canadian: Stephen Harper's Foreign Policy*. For more information visit [yvesengler.com](http://yvesengler.com).

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## Borduas *Global*

PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS

A Critical Biography

François-Marc Gagnon

Translated by Peter Feldstein

McGill-Queen's University Press

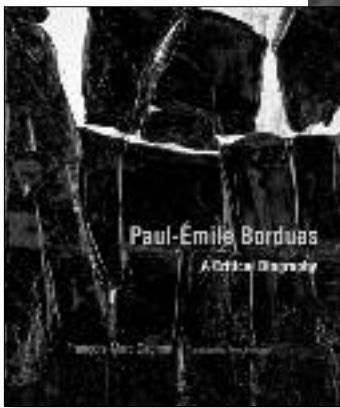
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Walter Benjamin argues that a translation is the transposition of a text from one language to another as both a renewal of the original work and a revival for succeeding generations or alternate cultural contexts. With this in mind, the recent translation of François-Marc Gagnon's biography of the celebrated modernist painter Paul-Émile Borduas offers a rich art-historical resource to a potentially global audience of English-speaking readers. At the same time, the effect of this linguistic "displacement" on our understanding of Borduas as a historical figure becomes a reoccurring theme within the content of the text itself. There is no question of the seriousness of the scholarship that *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography* represents, nor of the extent of the contribution to the study of Canadian and Quebecois art history. The French-language version received a Governor General's Award in 1978 and Gagnon is widely respected as the foremost scholar of Borduas and the Automatiste movement. Collectors and specialists will appreciate the gorgeous colour reproductions, which complement Gagnon's precise enumeration of Borduas' works and their pedigrees. Taking this as a given, the question that arises is then: what can this substantial tome offer readers with a more general curiosity?

Gagnon eschews speculative exploration of the artist's psyche, nimbly sidestepping a pitfall of celebrity biography. Instead, he uses letters exchanged between Borduas and his friends and colleagues to show how the artist's personal and professional struggles are articulated by people present in defining moments of Quebec's recent history. Likewise the narrative largely follows the succession of the artist's production, taking into account both works of visual art and writing. One significant choice made by Gagnon during the process of translation was to replace the earlier structuralist analysis with a formal approach to describing Borduas' works. Rather than traversing literary interpretations of the non-figurative paintings, the reader makes their way through descriptions that link visual effects of composition to features that marked Borduas life, such as the regional landscape surrounding Saint-Hilaire where the painter began his career under the tutelage of the church-decorator Ozias Leduc. On the one hand, this approach can make the pace of the biography feel like a slow progression through a catalogue checklist. On the other, there are moments when this chronology of works intersects with events in Borduas' life in a way that illuminates larger cultural questions of the period. This occurs, for instance, in the section covering his authorship of the *Refus Global* manifesto and subsequent dismissal by a government official from a long-term teaching position at the École du meuble de Montréal.

A stated goal of this translation is to "overcome a gap" between intellectual traditions underpinning French and English modernities in Quebec, Canada, and ultimately, beyond national boundaries. Gagnon demonstrates that this concern preoccupied Borduas himself, as the artist resided in New York and then Paris, where he passed away in 1960. Published in 1978, the French-language book responded to a context that had claimed Borduas and his sharp rebuke of stagnant social conditions as an inspira-



tional model for the reinvention of Quebecois identity during the Quiet Revolution. Gagnon dispels some of the effects of this mythification through an astute juxtaposition of the *Refus Global* (and its post-WW II, Surrealist-inspired, anti-state anarchistic pronouncements) against the co-existing ideological patterns of conservative nationalism and *rattrapage*. Gagnon's careful contextualization emphasizes Borduas' response to a stifling intellectual environment imposed by an authoritarian bind between the clergy and the state under Premier Maurice Duplessis. Gagnon's analysis complements recent scholarship on Quebec, such as studies by historian Sean Mills and sociologist Jean-Philippe Warren, which distinguish between the ideological battles and the socio-economic conditions of modernization in the province.

Gagnon, through the translation work of Peter Feldstein, presents Borduas to us as an aspirant to world citizenship and global consciousness. In this current iteration of cross-cultural translation, Borduas' life and work encourages the reader to reflect upon the complexity of multiple modernities converging across geographic, linguistic, class, and ideological borderlines. **mb**

Felicity Tayler is an artist and PhD Candidate at Concordia University. She is a contributing author to *Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)*, *Actions That Speak*, *Ciel Variable*, and *C Magazine*.

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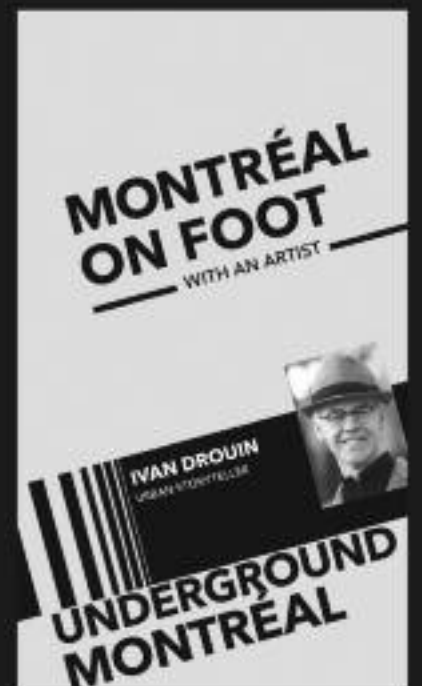
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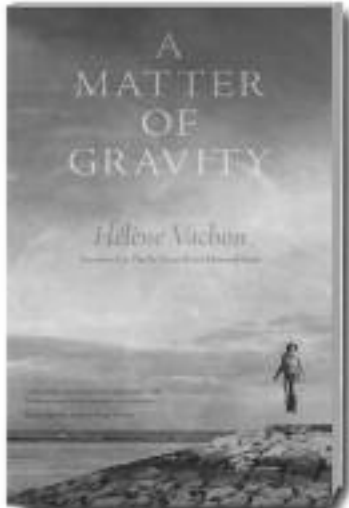
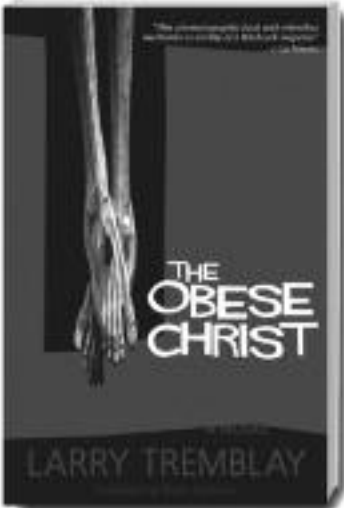
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### The Obese Christ

Larry Tremblay

Translated by Sheila Fischman

Edgar, a timid, asocial thirty-something, witnesses the brutal rape of a young woman and subsequently bears the unconscious victim home. Haunted by the death of his overbearing mother, he pledges to act as the mysterious woman's saviour. Gothic and darkly humorous, *The Obese Christ* explores the nebulous divide between Good and Evil, while demonstrating a powerful mastery of suspense.

\$14.95 / 144 pp / Fiction / 978-0-88922-842-9

### A Matter of Gravity

Hélène Vachon

Translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott

This charming intrigue starts with an enigmatic manuscript that brings together two disparate characters. The first is an embalmer who, unable to look after the living, devotes himself to the dead. The other is a sickly pianist consorting with the ghosts of his past. Their tragic encounter is brilliantly illuminated by black humour and compassion. Crazy and original.

\$16.95 / 256 pp / Fiction / 978-0-88922-840-5

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## Charney

with her and proposes that "misfortune can be very bracing." Comparing Nerina to "a sort of contemporary version of Becky Sharp" (though perhaps "not as complicated and maybe a little nicer"), she contemplates the street smarts that may result from early adversity: "It kind of spares you of illusions and romanticism; you have kind of an idea of human nature. You know, I mean Nerina is about 10 when the war is over in Sarajevo, and she's old enough to have heard and maybe seen that neighbours turn on neighbours. That makes you look at the world very differently than somebody who grows up in a house where they're told about brotherhood and everybody loving each other and being good neighbours and all that kind of stuff. It doesn't prevent you from being any of these things, but it spares you from false illusions."

Echoing her heroines' no-nonsense manner, Charney's writing is spare, unsentimental, and greatly propelled by dialogue: "I'm not conscious of style; I am conscious of language," explains the author. "I rewrite everything I cannot tell you how many times. Everything has to be totally clear, and as simple as possible; I don't like, you know, lyrical prose or poetic prose; I like things to be absolutely limpid and clear and easy to understand; and that does not come easy ... the simplest sentences are the ones you spend the most time on, perhaps."

Charney's linguistic tendency to expunge superfluity is consistent with her heroines' practicality. In *Life Class*, "Nerina can sympathize with Helena's desire to wipe the slate clean. She herself doesn't go out of her way to tell people she was born in Sarajevo." Asked whether this is a necessary component of self-reinvention or a symptom of denial, Charney favours the former. "For Nerina, it's that she doesn't want to be defined as the person who was born in Sarajevo. Because it conjures up instant reactions in people's heads. So, I don't think it's denial ... in order to move forward, you can't have too much baggage with you. And the past is kind of a burdensome valise."

I am still contemplating Nerina's metamorphosis when Charney sees me to the door and points out a piece of artwork on her wall – *Trees* – by her late husband, to whom *Life Class* is dedicated. Walking to the metro, I note the nimble sway of bare branches against the wind's wild whippings, and my mind gets swept back to Melvin Charney's *Sculpture Garden* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, a place I've been especially drawn to over the past year, and where I've often photographed a particular tree, dazzled by its transitions throughout the seasons. Stepping into the underground, I recall a comment Ann Charney made earlier, "Life is all about change, and how people cope with change," and, on this night, I decide to try a new route. mb

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based artist who paints poems that sometimes turn out like songs: [kimberlyandthedreamtime.com](http://kimberlyandthedreamtime.com).

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# young readers

## Catching the Reading Bug

**S**ome provinces have an embarrassment of mountains, some an embarrassment of beaches, and others an embarrassment of oil. Our province has an embarrassment of award-winning women who write and illustrate children's books. We're talking rock stars of the picture book world – Marie-Louise Gay, Robyn Schwartz, and Mélanie Watt, to name a few – women who have created memorable characters whose faces and antics have inspired television shows, theatrical productions, and thousands of young readers.



It's hard to know why Quebec is so blessed in this way. Maybe we can attribute it to the two languages at play here. Perhaps each province has their quota of excellent author/illustrators and since both English and French writers live and work in Quebec, we got a double dose. Whatever the reason, it's great to know our province is home to so many successful artists writing for children ages 0–9.

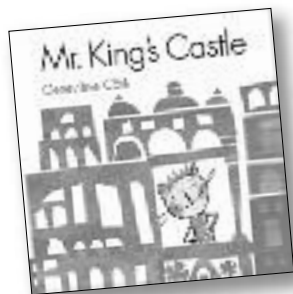
The three women featured here have all won the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Illustration. Marie-Louise Gay is the best known and established of the three. She has won an impressive number of international awards and her *Stella* and *Sam* books have been translated into twelve languages. Smart and sassy *Stella*, with the curly red hair, and her industrious tow-headed little brother *Sam* can be enjoyed on the page, on the stage, and on the screen.

*Read Me a Story, Stella* is the latest *Stella* adventure, but calling it an adventure is a bit of a misnomer. This picture book with its large watercolour and ink panels is really a collection of moments in *Stella* and *Sam*'s day. A day spent roaming around in an idyllic pastoral environment surrounded by benign beasts and bugs. There are no adults around to say things like, "Be careful by the water," or, "Don't let the dog put the kite string in his mouth."

If you're after a narrative arc, this book is not for you. It is really a series of scenes loosely arranged around all the things *Stella* has learned about the world from reading books. At the end of the book, *Stella* reads *Sam* a story about a boy just like him, which proves to *Sam* just how satisfying reading a book can be.

Geneviève Côté's drawings have also won her Canada's highest honour for illustration and her own books, *Me and You* and *Without You*, have received glowing reviews across the continent and in the pages of the *mRb*. *Mr. King's Castle* continues to showcase Côté's charming illustrations, this time featuring a whimsical, if misguided, lion named *Mr. King*. The dominant colour is green to represent the lush forest landscape around *Mr. King*'s modest home.

But *Mr. King* likes big things so he cuts up the environment around him into building block shapes and uses them to realize his dream of a big castle. Not surprisingly, *Mr. King*'s building plans cause consternation and anxiety among his forest friends. They eventually get through to *Mr. King* and convince him to put the forest back the way it used to be. The message is gentle and clear, with disagree-



ments resolved and forgiven with a simple, "I'm sorry." Côté's world is pleasant and appealing and this book is appropriate for the youngest readers who will appreciate the clever way the illustrator uses a multimedia approach to depict both the destruction of a natural environment and its miraculous restoration.

Elise Gravel won the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Illustration in 2013. In her newest series, *Disgusting Critters* (an English translation of the French *Les petits dégoûtants*), she successfully nails the holy grail of children's books by writing books that work for readers of all ages. *The Worm* and *The Fly* are the first in the *Disgusting Critters* series, soon to be followed at six-month intervals by *The Slug*, *The Toad*, *The Leech*, *The Rat*, and *The Spider*. Born out of the author/illustrator's personal fascination with bugs and other critters, these are books that teach us something, make us laugh, and sometimes make us say "Ewwwww."



Gravel's books are a bold and hilarious mash up of solid scientific evidence and wacky flights of untamed fancy. Think *The Magic School Bus* meets *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. When introduced to the worm, we meet a ten-inch long fuchsia-coloured invertebrate wearing a black beret who greets readers with a charming, "Enchanté." From there we move on to anatomically correct cartoon drawings of the different varieties of worm – so that's what a tapeworm looks like! – to historical facts about worms (scientists think that they've been around since the dinosaurs), to a detailed explanation, with illustrations, of how worms get themselves from place to place (it's all about the muscle tube). By the end we can't argue with Gravel's assertion that worms, while slightly disgusting, are in fact friends of the human species.

Gravel suggests, however, that we be more careful when it comes to befriending the fly. Despite the common house fly's gifts – the ability to walk on ceilings thanks to bubbles of liquid at the ends of their feet, as well as eyes that allow them to see in all directions at once – we learn that the fly can't be trusted and that they cause hundreds of diseases. The author deftly manages to show us the humour in the fly's revolting habits and makes us laugh and feel queasy at the same time. Full of bright colours applied in a natural style, Gravel uses digital printing

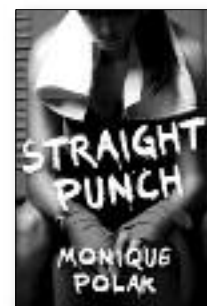
techniques to mimic her original acrylic and pen drawings. This author/illustrator's intelligence and energy leap off the page and make the reader impatient for the arrival of the next disgusting critter.



If Quebec had a patron saint of poetry, Gilles Vigneault would definitely be in the top three. Poet, songwriter, and publisher, this long-haired, idealistic icon is credited with helping to create the chansonnier tradition in Quebec. *A Gift for Sophie* is an opportunity for him to exercise both his storytelling and his songwriting abilities. The story is sad and beautiful – a young girl's friendship with an old man and a boy; a gift that is given, lost, prayed for, and found again. The illustrations by Stéphane Jorisch are simply beautiful, evoking childhood memories of the most delightful kind.

Unfortunately, the CD that accompanies the book is disappointing. The songs are co-written by Vigneault and collaborators, but those collaborations are largely unsatisfying. Luckily, the book can be enjoyed and appreciated alone without the musical distractions.

*Straight Punch* is Monique Polak's second literary release in less than a year. The prolific and passionate author, journalist, and teacher has earned a reputation for writing YA books that are smart and satisfying. Her protagonists are girls on the verge of womanhood; girls who are struggling, but who keep on dreaming anyway; girls who survive. Tessa McPhail is the protagonist in *Straight Punch*. Because of her proclivity for "tagging" (a form of graffiti), she's been sent to a school for kids who have nowhere else to go, a school she initially hates but eventually fights for. While Tessa is spunky and endearing, as all Polak's protagonists are, the plot lacks the writer's usual dramatic flair and page-turning momentum. Monique Polak has written excellent novels for young adults, books like *What World We Have Left* and *So Much it Hurts*, but *Straight Punch* is not one of them. mrb



B.A. Markus is a writer, performer, and teacher living in Montreal.

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By Anna Leventhal

# Sketching Sanger

**M**ARGARET SANGER: proto-feminist, activist, loudmouth, eugenicist, racist, socialist, visionary, practitioner of free love, founder of Planned Parenthood, pro-lifer, friend to the poor immigrant and to the KKK. Some of this is true, some is half-true, some is straight slander, and all of it is just a Google search away. While Sanger's name has come to symbolize reproductive justice and early-twentieth-century feminism, lately it has also taken on a darker gloss. She's been posthumously accused of being a proponent of eugenics and racism, of advocating the forced sterilization of "genetically inferior" citizens, and of trying to decimate the African-American population. Most of these aspersions have been cast by anti-abortion groups who had tried to discredit Planned Parenthood by dragging its founder through the mud (rather ironically, since Sanger herself was pro-life and concentrated her efforts on preventing unwanted pregnancy). But these hatchet jobs only obscure the really troubling parts of Sanger's era, an era whose ethics she both reflected and transformed.

A new cartoon biography of Sanger, written and drawn by underground comics luminary Peter Bagge, attempts to rescue Sanger from the online maelstrom that has her putting the so-called undesirable and unfit under the sterilization knife. *Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story* breathlessly takes us from Sanger's childhood in Corning, New York, to her death at age eighty-six; a mere seventy-two pages covers her activism, advocacy for contraception, run-ins with the law, and various love affairs, in bendy, urgent lines and funny-pages palette. Bagge states in his afterword that he wants to cut through the nonsense that surrounds Sanger to tell the story of a woman who, as he puts it, "lived the lives of ten people."

Sanger was a practicing nurse at a time when it was actually illegal to give women information on contraception, and when everyone from the family doctor to Mahatma Gandhi suggested that if women didn't want to get pregnant they should stop having sex. (Okay, that suggestion doesn't sound so unfamiliar.) In one panel of Bagge's book, a woman, half-dead from a self-administered abortion and fearing that another childbirth would kill her, pleads with Sanger: "I can't go through that again! Tell me how I can prevent it! Rich women know how to prevent it! Prostitutes know how! Why can't I know how?" Sanger went on to research contraception, publish her findings, and fight the laws that prevented her from distributing her work. She also helped to create and supervise reproductive health clinics that served women in poor communities, including working with African-American leaders to distribute information and care to their

constituents (which is more or less the origin of the rumour that she was trying to rid America of black people through pregnancy prevention/abortion).


Bagge's portrait doesn't sanctify Sanger, nor does he shy away from her more controversial or unpleasant aspects. Sanger comes off as a bit of a harpy – shrill, single-minded, blind to anything outside her cause. Of course, these are all characteristics that in a male figure would be read as iconoclastic, straight-shooting, visionary. And that's part of the point – that Sanger took more than her fair share of flak for being a woman, and had to be twice as loud and pushy as male activists to get her point across.

Bagge also tries to contextualize eugenics and Sanger's involvement, noting in his afterword that it was both a popularly-held viewpoint at the time (and that Sanger's position was likely less extreme than the majority of its followers) and that it was a response to early-twentieth-century problems the likes of which had never before been

seen: overcrowding, rapid industrialization, urbanization. He points out that "eugenics" was not a specific school of thought but rather a blanket term for a variety of practices, many of which we now take for granted, such as contraception and hygiene. It's not Sanger's fault, he argues, that today the term evokes forced sterilization and death camps for society's marginalized people. Bagge's contextualization shouldn't be read as an attempt to justify eugenics; nevertheless, the term rankles. It's basically impossible to try to explain eugenics without sounding like a Nazi apologist, and with good reason.

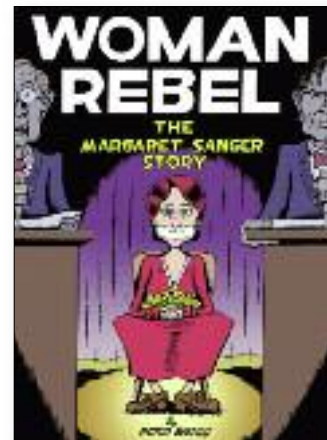
Bagge only really addresses the eugenics question in the afterword; he's reluctant to give airtime to the conspiracy theorists and mudslingers, which is fair enough, but a reader who reaches the end of the comic and skips the afterword will be left with a lot of questions. Why, in fact, have the accusations against

Sanger gained so much traction? Is it because they feed into liberal guilt, as Bagge suggests? Or is it because we know tacitly that most of our institutions and figureheads are somehow tainted by imperialism and prejudice? Scratch the surface of any do-good organization and you'll find self-interest and greed. However, that doesn't mean these organizations don't do actual good, or that the people who created them were monsters.

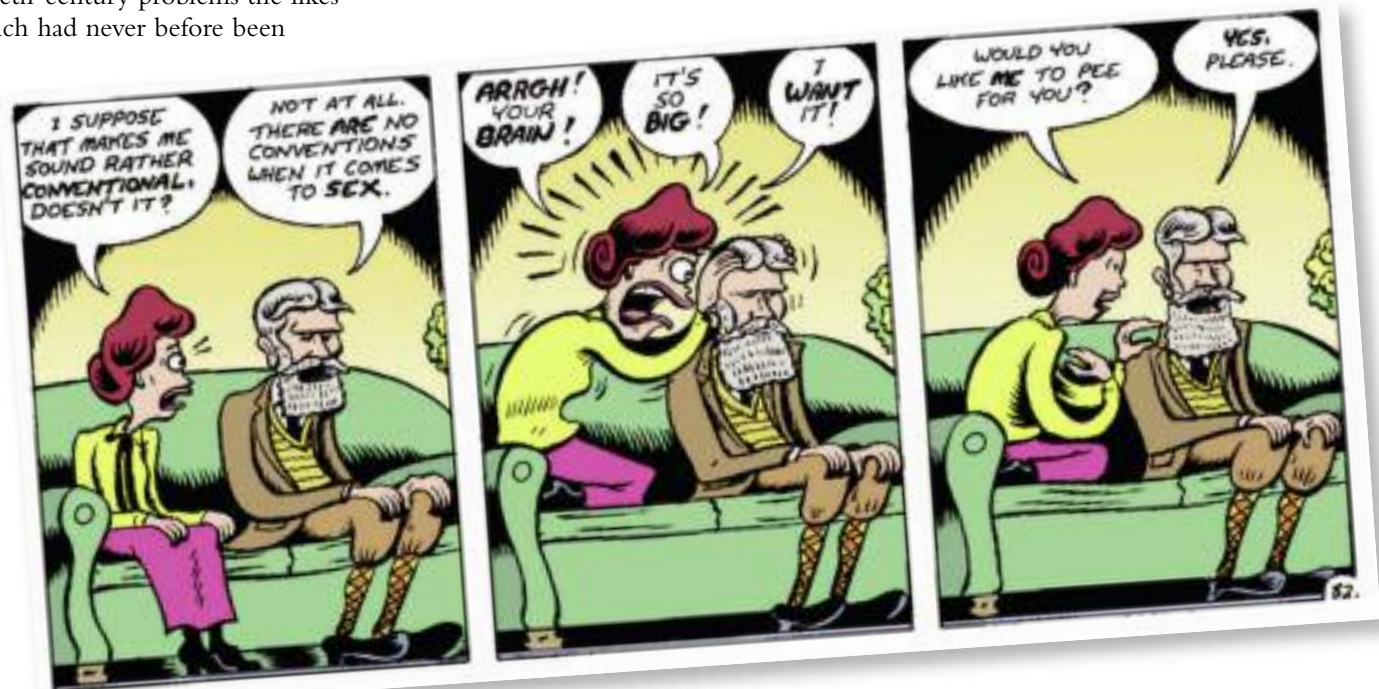
Bagge's biography locates Sanger as a force for change within a rotten system. It doesn't set her apart from that system. It invites us to think about how we got where we are, and what the people of the future will think of the choices we make today. 

Anna Leventhal is a Montreal-based writer. Her book of short stories, *Sweet Affliction*, comes out this April with Invisible Publishing.

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# Montreal Comes Alive in Spring



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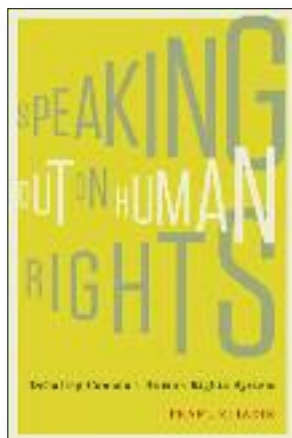


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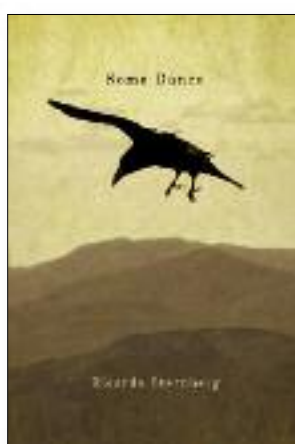


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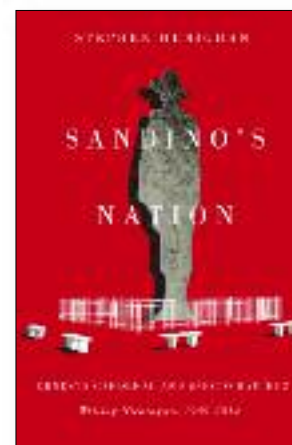
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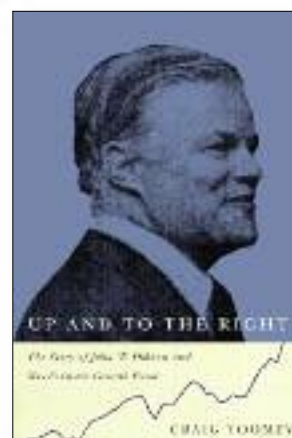


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