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FALL 2016 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

Lost World

*Taras Grescoe's Jazz Age
Romance of 1930s Shanghai*

INSIDE

JIA QING WILSON-YANG'S *SMALL BEAUTY*

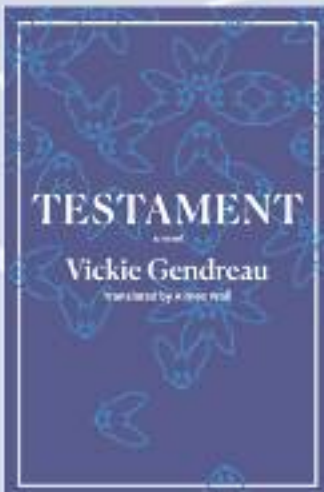
PASCAL GIRARD'S *NICOLAS*

CHELSEA VOWEL'S *INDIGENOUS WRITES*

VICKIE GENDREAU'S *TESTAMENT*


BEAUTIFUL LOSERS AT FIFTY

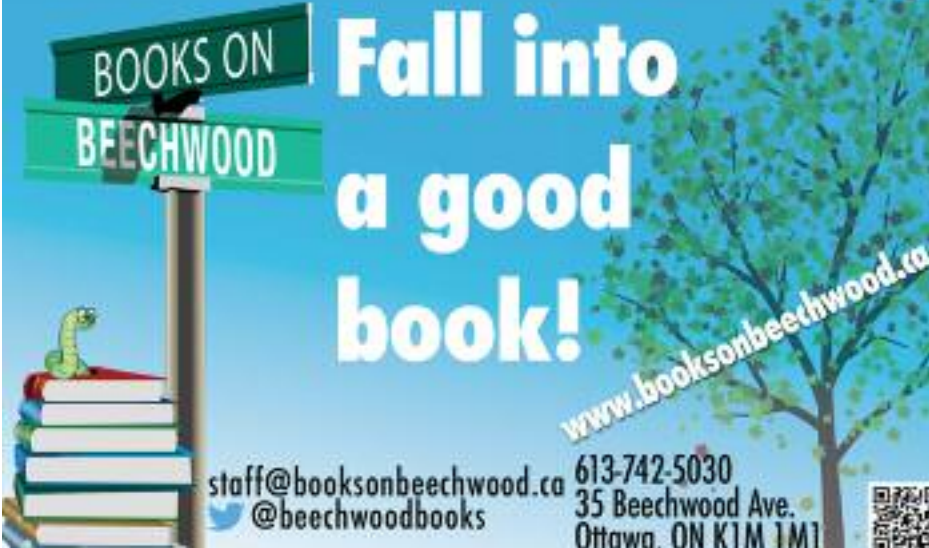
QWF'S AWARDS GALA See page 7 for a complete list of this year's QWF Literary Awards nominees



On June 6, 2012, Vickie Gendreau was diagnosed with a brain tumour. In between treatments, between hospital stays and her "room of her own," she wrote **TESTAMENT**, an autofictional novel in which she bequeaths to her friends and family the fragmented story of her last year in language as raw and flamboyant as she was.

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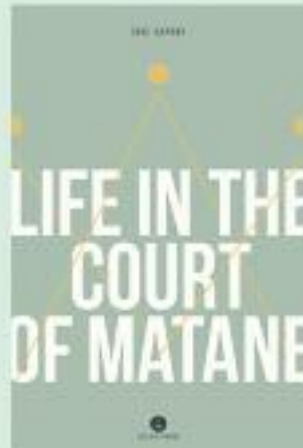
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BROTHERS
David Clerson
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David LeBlanc Designer

Michael Wile Advertising Manager, National

For editorial inquiries contact:

AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3

Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4

Telephone: 514-932-5633

Email: editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

For advertising inquiries contact:

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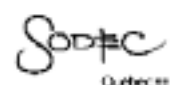
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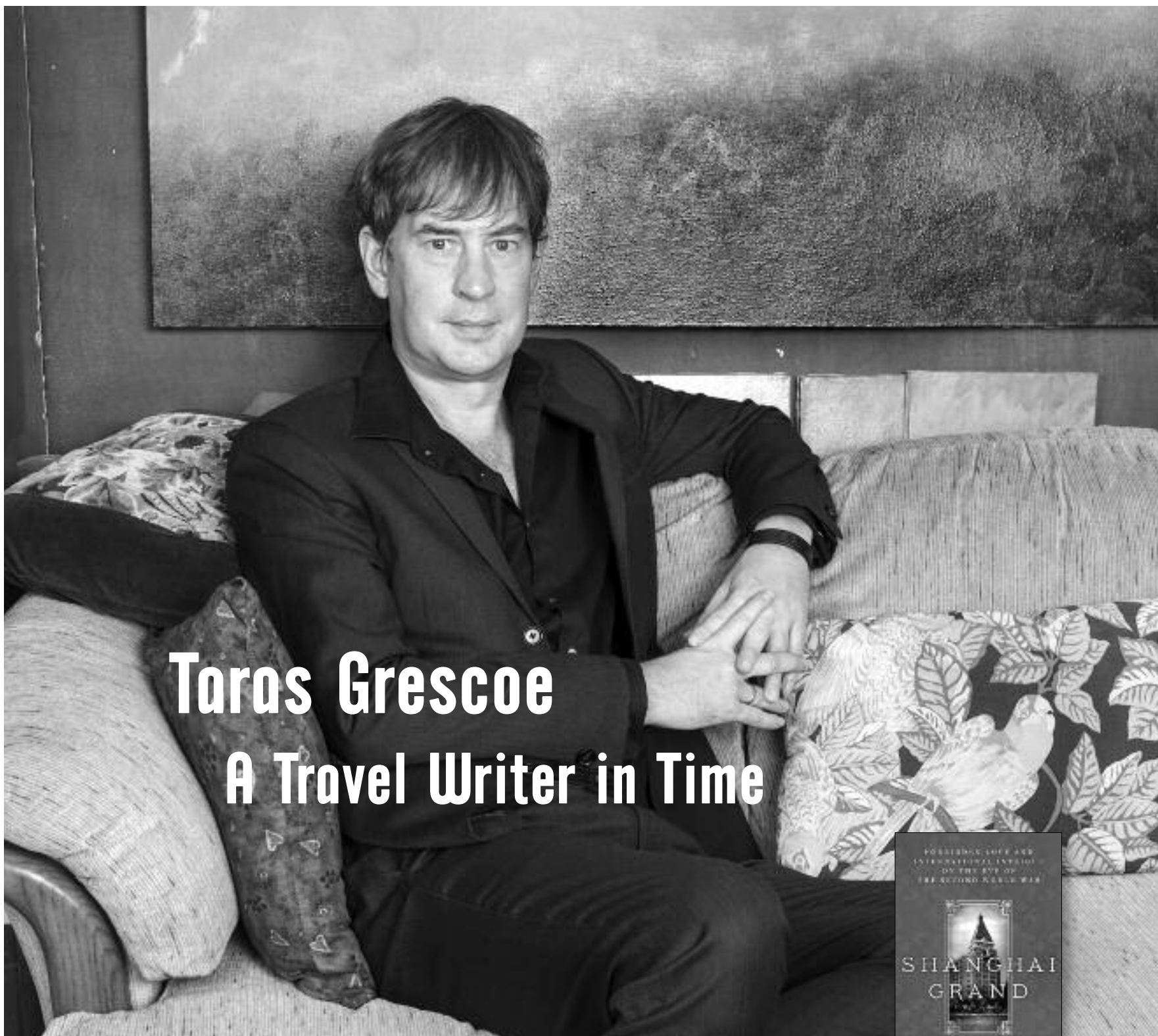
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19 Beautiful Losers at Fifty

By David McGimpsey



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which this publication would not exist.



Taras Grescoe A Travel Writer in Time



“ was looking for a book that didn’t involve so much travel because my wife and I had had our first baby,” says Taras Grescoe, describing the origins of his latest, *Shanghai Grand: Forbidden Love and International Intrigue on the Eve of the Second World War*, over a messy plate of Mexican tortas.

SHANGHAI GRAND
Forbidden Love and
International Intrigue on the
Eve of the Second World War
Taras Grescoe
HarperCollins
\$32.99, cloth, 480pp
9781443425537

In the course of writing six books and countless articles and travelogues, Grescoe has criss-crossed the globe, tracing urban public transit systems in *Straphanger*, following the supply lines of seafood in *Bottomfeeder*, and hunting taboo culinary delicacies in *The Devil’s Picnic*.

Shanghai Grand still takes Grescoe and his readers far from Montreal – not only to a distant land but also to a very different time. Its story unrolls in the streets, nightclubs, luxury hotels, and *shikumen* lane courtyards of Jazz Age Shanghai. Set mostly in the international settlement, the book presents this exceptional semi-colonial trading port on the eve of the Japanese invasion during World War II, with Mao’s communists gathering forces and Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalists strengthening their grip on the country.

This setting serves as a backdrop for a rich cast of real-life characters: a hyper-social iconoclastic proto-feminist writer, an aristocratic opium-smoking decadent Chinese poet, a double agent arms dealer-turned-Buddhist monk, and a fabulously wealthy Baghdadi Jewish baronet, to

name just a few. They offer prime cinematic fodder, with a love story worthy of the big screen and enough side plots to be spun out into a serial – one reviewer went so far as to cast the principals. Digging deep into archives and period accounts, Grescoe transports his reader into the city’s sensory atmosphere and unique social climate.

“It allows you,” he explains, “to travel in your imagination and in time.”

The work had a long genesis, its seed first planted during a visit to China while Grescoe was researching 2008’s *Bottomfeeder*. Wandering amid the supertall and megatall high-rises that form the skyline of Pudong’s more recent build-up, he remarked upon the older buildings scattered in Shanghai’s old core across the river, prime examples of art nouveau architecture, the monuments of bygone figures and fortunes.

“One of them,” he says, “was a hotel that’s now called the Peace Hotel. One night I went in there to this old bar, and there were a bunch of Chinese jazz musicians playing old standards like ‘Begin the Beguine’ and

'Slow Boat to China.' I ordered a badly mixed drink and got a little drunk and hung around all night pretending to be a romantic old China hand. But I fell in love with the hotel, which had obviously been beautiful in its time."

Once known as the Cathay, this splendid building on the Bund was constructed in the 1920s by textiles magnate Sir Victor Sassoon. In its prime, it was the elegant cornerstone of his considerable domain and among the most glamorous addresses in the Far East, a symbol of the era it still evoked on Grescoe's visit three-quarters of a century later. It stirred his resolution to write something about the city's quixotic heyday and to seek a subject who offered him access to that world. Grescoe finally found Emily "Mickey" Hahn, a peripatetic American bon vivant who regularly published in the *New Yorker* and wrote some fifty-four books over the course of her lifetime.

Hahn travelled widely, independently, and very unconventionally. Before going to Shanghai in 1935, a two-year stint in the Belgian Congo saw her learn Swahili, temporarily "adopt" a Pygmy child, and navigate a lengthy jungle trek alone on foot. Her well-documented time in China afforded Grescoe connections to a cluster of themes: her opium addiction hinted at the scourge of the Middle Kingdom that cracked China open to European trade; she lived lavishly as an expatriate among impoverished locals; and she was well-connected in Chiang Kai-shek's inner circle, as well as in the expat community of the international settlement.

While *Shanghai Grand* is primarily about the history and political trajectories that shaped the city, it's the tale of Hahn's interracial love affair with poet Zau Sinmay that conjures the spirit of the place. This tactic structures the book, which offers a portrait of geopolitical turmoil, then triangulates between its cosmopolitan characters to show how their lives were shaped by this upheaval. Sassoon builds and later forfeits the Chinese corner of his empire, while Hahn begins then abandons her liaison with Zau, takes up with a British intelligence agent, and barely escapes intact as the war finally reaches the international enclave.

"If I couldn't do the travelling myself, couldn't travel back in time to this lost Shanghai, I needed someone who was really present and really taking notes about the place," says Grescoe. Hahn's copious journals gave him insight into her thoughts, impressions, and sensations, and she also wrote several times weekly to various members of her large family. Additionally, nearly twenty local daily newspapers chronicled the minutiae of the city, from incoming ships to movie listings. Victor Sassoon also kept a detailed daily record, complete with snapshots of the people he met.

"I didn't really know how to do historical literary non-fiction with scenes that read like a novel, so I wanted to figure out how much I could let myself get away with in reconstructing the characters' thoughts and minds," Grescoe explains. "I was lucky, because these people recorded their lives quite frequently, so I didn't really have to colour outside the lines very much at all. Mostly I was reconstructing scenes that they had recorded – like, there's a scene with Victor Sassoon in the hotel in 1932 when a bomb goes off, and he recorded that very well in his journal. And Mickey Hahn was such an inveterate self-chronicler that often one incident in her life would be recorded in several ways, in published things in the *New Yorker* or in other magazines, in her books, in fiction, in non-fiction, and in letters, too, so you kind of get at the truth."

Shanghai Grand is the story of a passionate romance that's also an augur of China's political landscape at an extraordinary and decisive moment in the country's recent history. This era, Grescoe argues, is a key period for anyone who wants to understand China's geopolitical status now.

"If you don't understand Shanghai's history, you're not going to understand China today. And if you don't understand China today, then you're not going to understand what's going to happen in the world tomorrow."

The real star of *Shanghai Grand* is the internecine metropolis itself, a place that burned brightly before being extinguished by a swift succession of revolutions and wars, eventually being rebuilt as something wholly different. Grescoe is clearly smitten with a Shanghai that's already lost but only now disappearing. When the city fell to Japan, so did an era, and this book is also a eulogy for that lost moment, captured in what he calls the "vanishing architecture" of the period.

"The time had passed," he writes toward the end of the book, "when a person could step off a ship and talk his or her way into a garden party or a brand new career, bluffing the world with a convincing manner and a compelling cover story. Shanghai continued to exist, but in name only. Never again would it be the world's most fabulous haven for fabulists. What the world gained in probity, it lost in romance." mb

Emily Raine is a Montreal-based writer, editor, and scholar who holds a PhD in Communication Studies. She's currently working on her first book, about philosophy and waiting.

"If you don't understand Shanghai's history, you're not going to understand China today. And if you don't understand China today, then you're not going to understand what's going to happen in the world tomorrow."



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Todd Gordon & Jeffrey R. Webber

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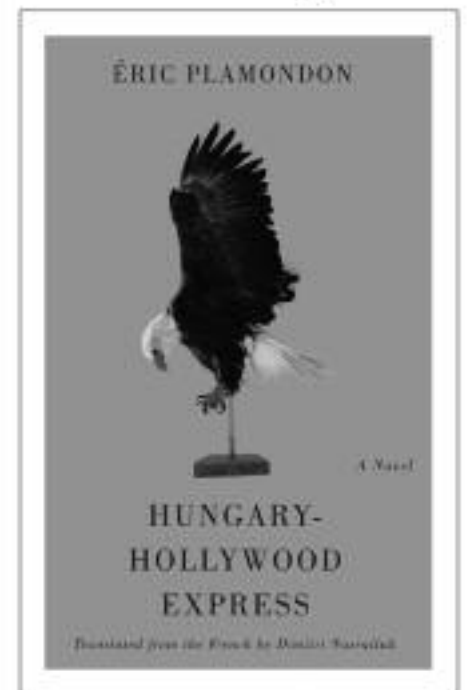
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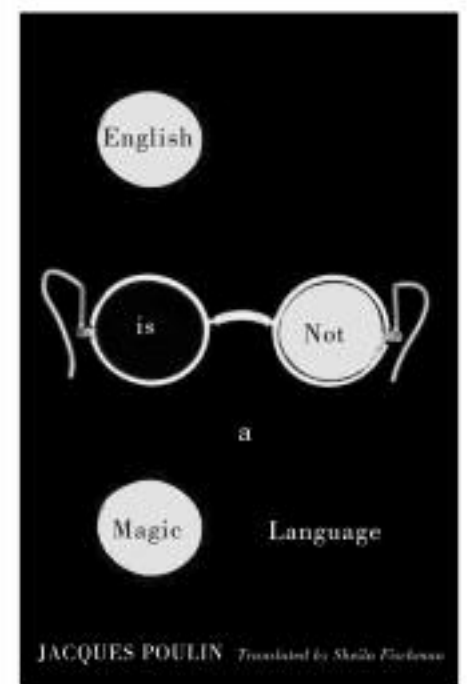
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Strange Mythologies

BROTHERS

David Clerson

Translated by Katia Grubisic

QC Fiction

\$19.95, paper, 150pp

9781771860864



We all have family mythologies. Those stories told and

retold of previous generations: a grandmother who survived perils to immigrate to North America, or the tale of how our parents found each other. These stories colour how we see ourselves and the world around us. They're often born out of struggle, or loss, and we defend their veracity as we would our very honour, no matter how distorted they may become with the retelling. In the novel *Brothers*, David Clerson harnesses the power of these stories and amplifies it with the force of fable to create a tale of violence, loss, revenge, and ultimately rebirth.

The two eponymous brothers of the novel are never named. They live – the older brother and the younger brother – on the shores of a salt marsh in the valley of Hinnom, gathering all manner of obscurities brought in by the Great Tide to trade in the local village for honey or smoked herring. They play in a bone yard, forming chimeric creatures from the skeletal remains of animals that died during famine. Their fading mother constantly tells them the stories

of their origins. How their father, a beast of a dog, emerged from a sea full of unspeakable monsters. How she had borne them “at an age beyond motherhood” and ritualistically removed the older brother’s arm to form the younger brother, as a way to ensure he would never be left alone with the world’s cruelty.

These stories cast a spell over every aspect of the brothers’ lives, even invading their dreams, where their father enters their bedroom, black and imposing, “sticky spittle drip[ping] from his murderous maw, the jaws that looked like they could kill.” The reader is left to question the truth behind these tales, yarns seemingly woven from pain, isolation, and their mother’s twisted imagination. But the brothers soon acquire their storied father’s taste for risk and his temptation for forbidden things. Spurred by the younger brother’s embellishments to the family canon, they seek to make a sea journey to the fearful far-away in search of him. What ensues is a quest that can only be described as a catastrophe, a tale suffused with mythical symbolism, both classical and literary: a puppet pulled from the ocean depths, cruel pig-children, human-to-dog transmogrification, star-crossed love, patricide, a raven saviour eaten out of desperation.

The novel wears multiple skins, each of the four sections an evolutionary stage towards the breaking of the mother’s spell. Katia Grubisic’s translation of the text offers flowing, unadorned prose that sings with the depth and simplicity of the story. And though we know we’re under the same spell as the brothers, Clerson’s narrative charms lead us wilfully



to unknown and unthinkable places. Pushed beyond the brink beneath the weight of hunger, exhaustion, guilt, and exposure to the elements, new lucidities are wrought through layers of hallucinatory revelation. At times, the human degradation is so extreme the reader wishes the fabulist elements to be true because the alternative is too horrific to imagine.

Brothers shows us the power of personal and collective mythologies to shape our destinies, if only as a result of the actions they can manifest. Unfortunately, reality often has crueller things in mind for us when we fail to engage with it on its own terms. By following the fate of Clerson’s brothers, we are witness to the horrific and fantastical extremes of this phenomenon. In the end, the reader is left with a single feather of hope, and the knowledge that beautiful monsters lurk at the fringes of CanLit. msb

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

Of Moose and Men

THE MINTED

Will McClelland

Blue Leaf Press

\$20.00, paper, 180pp

9780991873807

Will McClelland’s self-published debut novel *The Minted* is set in a surreal futuristic Canada, where animals talk and the country is under the control of a shadowy villain named Argent. The story takes place during “The Great Burning” of the early 2030s, when an uprising of wild animals, led by an immortal moose, briefly cripples the infrastructure of the nation’s cities and towns. A mash-up of the paranoid speculative fiction of Philip K. Dick and a profanity-laced episode of *Hinterland Who’s Who*, the book is a uniquely Canadian take on dystopia.

The novel begins with a note from the book’s fictional editor, Nicholas A. Cibiades. Thirty years after the animal rebellion, he explains how he first encountered the notorious talking moose – known variously as The

Original, the Great Black Beast, and Ollie – in the wilds of north-western Saskatchewan. Fresh from escaping the RCMP, who held him captive in a Via Rail car, the moose was on the run and took Nicholas as his unlikely travelling companion.

Now Nicholas is compiling a history of the rebellion from two diaries in his possession. The first belonged to the moose, written during the time of his incarceration by the Mounties. The second was written by the human-born android Marianne Brûlé, who was once romantically involved with the moose. Marianne was also held captive, in her case by Argent at the Royal Canadian Mint in Ottawa. These two narrators alternate throughout the novel, with Nicholas’s voice appearing in the guise of footnotes, which inform the reader about the finer points of this futuristic world.

The moose’s writing style is polemical. He views himself as a political prisoner, explaining what motivated his violent actions. The animal rebellion, he reveals, was primarily an effort to depose Argent, an immortal French aristocrat who, in this alternative account of Canadian history, is behind every major capitalist development from the fur trade to the railroad and beyond. The country’s wild animals were fight-



ing back against the despoliation of the northern hinterlands and wresting power from the citizens of “downtown Canada.”

Writing from the Mint, Marianne gives us further insight into Argent’s dark reign and reveals the members of his inner circle, made up of several animals featured among the country’s official symbols, including the unicorn, lion, and beaver from the Canadian coat of arms. Marianne also encounters several other animals slaving away on the production floor; she watches as loons, polar bears, and caribou manufacture the very coins that bear their images. While this satire isn’t always elegantly rendered, McClelland nevertheless draws attention to an important contradiction between the valorization of the

natural world in Canada’s official iconography and the fact that, since its inception, the majority of the nation’s wealth has been produced through destructive resource extraction.

The Minted is teeming with resonant themes and compelling narrative threads, but by presenting his richly imagined dystopia as a series of diary entries, McClelland obfuscates as much as he reveals. The author clearly enjoys writing from the points of view of these rambling characters, but at times their overheated prose and manic tangents crowd out the actual story. A return to Nicholas’s straightforward narration near the end of the

novel comes as a relief. Tighter editing would have done wonders for this ambitious and original work.

In her groundbreaking survey of Canadian literature, *Survival*, Margaret Atwood identified a prevalent anxiety that the natural world is silently waiting for a moment to destroy us. *The Minted* brings this anxiety to life, and then some. Hopefully it will prompt more writers of speculative fiction to dig deep into the mythology of the Great White North. msb

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

Dystopian Enlightenment

UNDER THE STONE

Karoline Georges

Translated by Jacob Homel

Anvil Press

\$18.00, paper, 152pp

9781772140361



In a world devoid of affection, the word “gentleness” reverberates like a blow to the head when it materializes suddenly in the final pages of Karoline Georges’s novel *Under the Stone* – newly translated into English by Jacob Homel. “I had never imagined such... gentleness,” writes Georges, leading up to the unexpected tenderness with the emphasis of ellipses, a break in syntax that isolates kindness to a mental space far removed from comprehension. This is a typical post-apocalyptic world. People live in identical concrete cubicles in an infinitely large Tower. They are monitored, surveilled, fed abstracted “nutrients,” and drugged with “numbing agent.” They are trained to accept their conditions categorically, “to crush all questions, all intentions, all thoughts.” Fear and pain reign.

The unnamed narrator is a child, the son of murderous parents, an abusive father and an impassive mother wracked by anxiety of aging and eviction. In quick succession, the mother strangles the little sister; the father drowns another sister in the toilet bowl, wraps and suffocates two brothers in plastic and disposes of them in the trash chute. The extremity of physical and sexual abuse, described repeatedly throughout the book, is hard to read at times. Assault is normalized, never critiqued, just blandly stated as a predominant facet of life. “Kicks, punches. His feet stomping on my stomach, my head, my heart. I absorbed the blows, took the shape dictated by his feet, by his large open hands.” Again, “he would drag me into the lavatory, hide me from the security system behind his suddenly immense presence and promptly deposit his soil on me.” The father aims to beat an understanding of the primacy of physicality into the child. “The sensation of having an interior is a residue, a barbaric mental anomaly” and the pragmatic functioning of the body is the only consequential factor of existence.

The philosophy behind Georges’s dystopia pivots on the refrain “Total Concrete.” While concrete refers to the supposedly indestructible quality of the material used to construct the Tower, it can also be interpreted as solid, physical form, in opposition to a more abstract, metaphysical state. Of course, it is exactly by way of mental activity that the child is eventually able to break free of his nightmarish existence. The moment that he becomes critical of the existing state of affairs, he is able to distinguish himself from the status quo and articulate the smallest word of resistance: “Why?”

Transfigured into consciousness without a body, the child is then able to transcend the Tower, experience the world beyond, and engage in pseudo-theoretical words of wisdom with a deity. In contrast to the steady, if claustrophobic, majority of the narrative, the child’s transformation, emancipation, and adventures happen very quickly and without much detail. Although Georges feigns to explain the sequence of events, these clarifications seem contrived and deliberately obscure. “*You are exactly in You.*” “*The fundamental vibration of energy.*” “*A thread intrinsic to every body, hidden in the heart of each one’s molecules.*” Uncompromisingly pessimistic, Georges portrays existence as a repetitive cycle of suffering. The slight variations between one life story and the next are negligible and can easily be simplified to a narrative of imprisonment, whether in the Tower, in the body, or in the mind.

Although thematically this novel is not a relaxing read, it is beautifully written in short, sparse sections that cumulatively build toward a horrendous, yet engaging, alternate reality. Homel’s translation progresses fluidly so that the language never distracts from the narrative, but rather lodges the reader deeper and deeper *Under the Stone*. mb

Klara du Plessis is a poet and critic in Montreal. She is the author of the chapbook *Wax Lyrical* (Anstruther Press, 2015) and curates the monthly Resonance Reading Series. Follow her on Twitter @ToMakePoesis.



18th QWF AWARDS GALA 2016

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Sara O'Leary (Julie Morstad, illustrator) This is Sadie (Tundra Books)

Mélanie Watt Bug in a Vacuum (Tundra Books)

Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction

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Liam Durcan The Measure of Darkness (Bellevue Literary Press)

Jack Hannan The Poet is a Rajja (Linda Leith Publishing)

Madeleine Thien Do Not Say We Have Nothing (Knopf Canada)

Jacob Wren Rich and Poor (BookThug)

Concordia University First Book Prize

Kelly Norah Drukker Small Fires (McGill-Queen's University Press)

Sylvain Neuvel Sleeping Giants (Del Rey, New York)

Chelsea Vowel Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada (HighWater Press, an imprint of Portage & Main Press)

Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-Fiction

Taras Grescoe Shanghai Grand (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.)

Daniel J. Levitin A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age (Allen Lane Canada, Penguin Random House Canada)

Chelsea Vowel Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada (HighWater Press, an imprint of Portage & Main Press)

A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry

Sarah Burgoyne Saint Twin (Mansfield Press)

Kelly Norah Drukker Small Fires (McGill-Queen's University Press)

Alison Strumberger & Gillian Sze Redrafting Winter (BuschekBooks)

Prix de traduction de la Fondation Cole

Daniel Canty Petits théâtres (Les Éditions du Nordit)

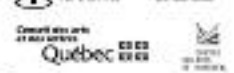
Erin Moore Little Theatres (House of Anansi)

Lori Saint-Martin et Paul Gagné Joshua (Les Éditions du Boréal)

Mordecai Richler Joshua Thénos (Now (McDalland & Stewart))

Lori Saint-Martin et Paul Gagné Solomon Gursky (Les Éditions du Boréal)

Mordecai Richler Solomon Gursky Was (Penguin Random House Canada)



Nothing Sacred

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Keith Henderson

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\$21.95, paper, 195pp

9781927599372

Everything in Italy is “old and broken,” says Suzanna’s niece, encapsulating a motif in Keith Henderson’s latest novel. Suzanna can relate. It seems everything about her life in Montreal is crumbling, too. When her ex-husband threatens to curtail support payments, the newly divorced forty-two-year-old must scramble to find a job – no small task since she long ago abandoned her studies for motherhood and hasn’t worked outside the home since. To top things off, she needs to make frequent trips to Acqua Sacra, in Italy’s Abruzzo region, where, at her mother’s request, she has taken charge of restoring the family home after an earthquake.

Through it all, the heroine struggles to salvage her relationship with her teenage sons along with her self-esteem. Her ex, Len, is a conniving accountant and selfish cheat, yet sheep-

ish Suzanna perceives her “failed” marriage as a personal shortcoming rather than a chance for emancipation. Phone calls to her sons only intensify her self-reproach: “After she hung up, one of those waves of guilt washed over her whenever she thought about her failed marriage.”

Acqua Sacra, which follows *The Roof Walkers* (2013), is Henderson’s fourth novel and sixth publication with DC Books in Montreal, where the author also acts as Managing Editor. His short story collection, *The Pagan Nuptials of Julia* (2006), which focuses on English-speaking Quebecers as a Canadian minority group, won a gold medal for best fiction from Eastern Canada from the US Independent Publishers Book Awards, and his collection of political essays, *Staying Canadian* (1997), stems from his days as political columnist for the *Financial Post*. Quebecers may also remember Henderson as the leader of the now-defunct Equality Party, through which he fought for English-language rights during the 1995 Quebec Referendum.

Politics clearly inspire this author’s work, and *Acqua Sacra* makes no exception, zeroing in on themes of public corruption and multinational delinquency. When Suzanna is pressured by her ex to take a job with a Montreal law firm, she finds herself

unwittingly witnessing, and thus entangled in, underworld schemes involving mafia infiltration, locally and abroad.

Suzanna’s dire predicament, and the tough moral choices with which she is faced, spark the reader’s interest, though her character could be better fleshed out. Only a third of the way into the book do we finally get a brief, incomplete description of her physical appearance. Her internal dialogue also lacks definition, leaving us little chance to develop empathy.

Still, some will enjoy the book’s whistleblowing tone as Suzanna uncovers and denounces wrongdoing. While this is a work of fiction, Henderson’s imagined underworld calls to mind real-life events, giving the novel a timely feel. It’s only been a year since the release of the Charbonneau Commission’s report, for instance, so issues of corruption in Quebec’s construction sector are still fresh in people’s minds. Certain parts of the story, conveyed from the point of view of Suzanna’s shady boss, Robert Bliss, will inevitably stir up Montrealers’ memories: “He was as aware as anyone of concrete falling off provincial bridges and killing innocent people. Was that the kind of place he wanted to live in?”

Thanks to a bizarre scene in which Suzanna is knocked unconscious by a sheep in Italy, the heroine may strike the reader as a metaphor for a world



that’s had the wool pulled over its eyes, but, despite itself, is starting to see. Alluding to Psalm 51:8, she muses that things are undoubtedly broken “so that they ‘may rejoice,’ probably in the mending, that small, humble fixing and repair people everywhere had to care about.” Ultimately, Suzanna’s struggle and apparent misfortune serve as catalysts for new levels of awareness and growth, suggesting that things sometimes need to fall apart before they can be built back up, stronger than before. **mb**

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based writer and songwriter. Her second EP, *Heart Wave*, with Kimberly and the Dreamtime, comes out in November 2016.



Life, Death, and Foxes

TESTAMENT

Vickie Gendreau

Translated by Aimee Wall

BookThug

\$20.00, paper, 152pp

9781771662529

Fennec foxes are the smallest of the canids and are characterized by disproportionately large ears, which amplify the sound of approaching prey. Fennecs weigh between 1.5 and 3.5 pounds, a range into which most books, including Vickie Gendreau’s *Testament*, would fall. That *Testament* might weigh about as much as a miniature fox would have suited Gendreau because fennecs were, for her, both an *objet d’amour* and a kind of currency. *Testament* has now been translated into English by Aimee Wall, who has, in doing so, brought a raw and inventive world from one side of Saint-Laurent Boulevard to the other.

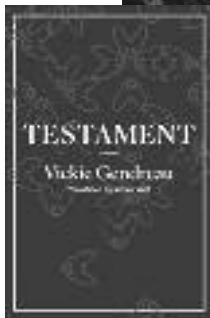
In the first part of the book, the protagonist, Vickie, has one hundred hungry fennec foxes in her car. A small boy

dressed in black gives her another fox on a leash. A man working at the metro has fifteen more to give her out by the bike racks. Her friend Max dies because a bag meant to catch him when he jumps off a viaduct is already full of fennecs.

In the second part of the book, Vickie is dead. The brown envelopes she had prepared for her loved ones have been delivered, each containing a USB key, several hundred fennec foxes, and other items irreverently given – an inflatable doll, a flowered bikini. On the USBs, files give voice to Vickie, who becomes *Eye’s Wide Twat.doc*, *Fuck Meow Harder.doc*, *Jean Short Party.doc* and so on. Throughout, Vickie writes of the man of her life and how she wasn’t the woman of his. We see her bawling in a bookstore; we see her planning extravagant seductions involving smoked eel.



LE QUARTANIER-CHRISTIAN BLAIS



While *Testament* may find readers everywhere, it will be of particular interest here in Anglophone Montreal, where

word of Vickie Gendreau’s extraordinary life and death may have already been heard. Midway through 2012, at the age of twenty-three, Gendreau was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. Less than a year later, she had succumbed to it, but not before writing two books that would make her the darling, the shooting star, the

fennec fox of Quebec literature. That she’d worked as a nude dancer in Quebec and Ontario, been raped in Val-d’Or, and recounted this in works that blended fact and fiction, put her in conversation with Nelly Arcan and a broader autofiction family in Quebec and France. For those who read *Testament* in French, it was inseparable from the media storm that surrounded it. Life and book were one. For most English readers, this will not be the case.

English readers will encounter a translation that faithfully captures Gendreau’s slangy French, and they might note its parallels with works by Sheila Heti or Kathy Acker because of its defiance of a patriarchal literary world, of the so-called rules of self-representation, of what constitutes “women’s writing.” *Testament* blurs fact and fiction, defying not just how life

should be portrayed, but death, too. Don’t be reverent. And don’t pretend that this isn’t a world where “A girl’s skin is being bruised by a man in a van / somewhere.”

Testament won’t be for everyone. In particular, it won’t be for the prudes or the judges, but it might be for the man Gendreau loved, and it was certainly for her mother, to whom she confessed everything, and her brother, whom she sagely advised, “Don’t talk bullshit to seem interesting. Be yourself. Big or small. Without makeup. With morning breath. The soul has no need of Colgate.” *Testament* is for anyone bored of dictates that women’s writing must be lyrical, tender, or psychological. Wall’s translation lucidly captures the spiky agony of the early twenties – how everything seems to be life and death – which, for Gendreau, it was, because death was approaching, and she was listening for it. **mb**

Jocelyn Parr’s writing has appeared in *Brick*, *Grain*, and abroad in literary publications in Germany and France. Her novel, *Uncertain Weights and Measures*, is due out in 2017.

Storm and Stress

SEVEN DAYS DEAD

John Farrow

Minotaur Books

\$36.99, cloth, 298pp

9781250057693

ROD FERGUSON



The opening line of John Farrow's *Seven Days Dead* booms: "Time and tide wait for no man and no woman." Difficult driving conditions materialize from this weighty truism for Madeleine Orrock, as she races through a violent storm on the Bay of Fundy. She's hoping to reach her dying father, whom she calls *bastard*.

The bay is shaped like "the opening jaws of a shark." Winds have staggered ships in the water and the tempest is wicked against the "craggy shores." Wild wind and water are literally everywhere. It's a filmic beginning that aligns Madeleine's Porsche with a champion thoroughbred in a losing race.

The opening scene sets the tone for the book and simultaneously positions the dying patriarch in a place of relative calm and clarity. The electricity has gone out in most places, but Alfred Royce Orrock lies on his deathbed with a generator providing a source of light and heat. Housekeeper Ora Matheson and Reverend Simon Lescavage are close by. Orrock's inevitable death appears to be of natural causes but it quickly becomes a murder investigation. What are the motivations for the crime? He is the richest, most contemptible man in the small community of Grand Manan, New Brunswick. He owns most of the island, including its chief means of livelihood, a dulce seaweed harvesting business.

The case is complicated when Reverend Lescavage is discovered dead on the same morning as Orrock. Orrock's wife was murdered many years ago and her case seems connected, too. The number of deaths rises and unexplainable events continue. Madeleine becomes the main suspect in her father's death. The reclusive Aaron Roadcap, who was out for a walk during the storm, is suspicious. So is the group of people who always dress in white and were gathered out in the storm. The local Mounties are ill-equipped to respond to the seemingly divergent case details and retired Montreal detective Émile Cinq-Mars is enlisted as lead investigator.

Fans of earlier Cinq-Mars stories will know of his demanding career. The tension this has caused in his marriage hasn't disappeared, even with retirement. He's determined to make a new start with his wife, Sandra, and their trip to beautiful Grand Manan is a rare vacation. But when the call from the Mounties for his expertise and time becomes too loud for him to ignore, even Sandra concedes to it.

Cinq-Mars is known for his equanimity and ability to resolve the unknown. But he does lose his patience. In one of the more gritty scenes in the book, Cinq-Mars takes a tough-love approach with a junior investigator, Mountie Corporal Louwagie, who is suffering from PTSD and battling his demons with booze. A mentorship evolves between them, which helps Louwagie rise to the challenges of the complicated investigation.

Seven Days Dead features common tropes of the mystery genre: it's set in a small town with a tight-knit community. The novel is populated by quirky, secretive, and reliable townspeople. Whereas the unravelling of Aaron Roadcap's life story is compelling, the staid archetype of Ora Matheson as the loud-talking town gossip is less so. Although she performs a certain function to help illustrate the mechanics of the mystery, her characterization might have been more nuanced.

The story that unfolds is a quick and enjoyable read. *Seven Days Dead* features an engaging cast of characters upon a captivatingly written landscape. To ride alongside Cinq-Mars in the proverbial passenger seat as he thinks through various scenarios and learns about the lives of the townspeople makes for a satisfying and entertaining rainy day read. mb

Deanna Radford is a writer and poet. She is the coordinator of the Atwater Poetry Project.



Sleeping with the Enemy

THE KEYS OF MY PRISON

Frances Shelley Wees

Ricochet Books

\$14.95, paper, 208pp

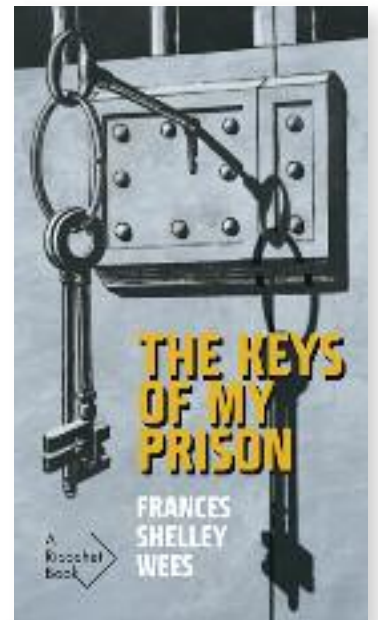
9781550654530

The Keys of My Prison is the latest Canadian noir thriller to be resurrected by the Ricochet Books imprint of Montreal's Véhicule Press. Established in 2010 and curated by Brian Busby, the Ricochet series has brought such long-lost titles as *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street* and *Blondes Are My Trouble* back into the public consciousness. These novels were originally published by imprints such as Harlequin (before it found its calling in the field of romance novels) and News Stand Library. Once, they were tempting fare for bored travellers, gracing wire racks in train stations and bus stations across the land. In recent years, these books were only available as rare, tattered copies circulating in collectors' circles.

The Keys of My Prison was originally published by Doubleday in 1956, and it is notably the first in the Ricochet series by a woman author. Frances Shelley Wees was a practised writer, whose first novel, *The Maestro Murders*, appeared in 1931. She produced some two dozen books (romances, mysteries, and more) over her long career, during which she also worked as a schoolteacher, wife, and mother.

The book works on the reader's subconscious doubts and fears about the presumed integrity of the male patriarchal figure. Rafe Jonason is the perfect man – in the words of his loving wife Julie, "He was a wonderful person, sweet and good and kind and thoughtful and clean and loving and perfect. He was simply perfect." He loved Julie despite her hideous facial blemish (only recently corrected with cosmetic surgery); he was a loving father to their son Hugh; he took over the management of the family business under the stern guidance of Julie's father; he didn't drink or smoke or chase women – in every way he was exemplary.

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By Morgan M. Page

jia qing wilson-yang

In Search of Hidden Stories



“Like most trans women I know, I have a great deal of anger and grief that I’m perpetually trying to manage and reconcile,” jia qing wilson-yang admits while we discuss her debut novel, *Small Beauty*. “I wanted to offer a discussion about the way anger and grief affect trans women and hopefully offer some empathy and ways to move through it. Both for myself and potential readers. At some points in the story I felt like I was creating something that I needed to hear.”

Small Beauty follows the story of Xiao Mei, a young mixed race Chinese trans woman coming to terms with the loss of her cousin, Sandy. Abandoning the city – along with its labyrinthine welfare system and the complicated community of trans women she’s fought hard to become part of – Mei runs back to the small town where she and Sandy grew up in order to try to work out her feelings. Holed up in the now empty house three generations of her family once inhabited, Mei’s story begins to unravel, moving hazily back and forth through time, exhuming the histories of queer ancestors, violence, grief, and love that brought her to the present. Wilson-yang deftly deploys recurrent motifs throughout the text – including the somewhat ominous portent of Canada geese – to sew the novel’s non-linear structure together.

Breaking away from many trans stories that are set in major metropolitan cities, or are focused on the move towards them, *Small Beauty* revolves around the fictional small town of Herbertsville, Ontario. Asked about the choice of rural setting, wilson-yang explains, “many of us queer and trans folks of colour tend to go to bigger cities to be the fabulous people we are. When we think about rural spaces we think of them as white and straight, and they very often really are. But that thinking often means that we end up erasing the racialized folks that are there and have been there for generations, and in the case of Indigenous peoples, been there longer than the white folks we associate with the areas.”

That both real and perceived whiteness and straightness, wilson-yang says, extends even to the entry points of queerness within rural spaces that many queer and trans people of colour first encounter. “I have been pleasantly surprised at the little ways that rural spaces are much queerer than we may expect,” wilson-yang says, “but have also been put off by the whiteness of that queerness. When I think about Chinese people in Canada, I know that there are so often Chinese folks in small towns – we are there. And for sure some of us are queers.”

These ideas materialize within the plot of *Small Beauty* through chance encounters that unearth hidden queer histories in Herbertsville. Shopping at the grocery store, Mei is confronted by Diane, a “woody dyke” she comes to learn was her late, seemingly straight aunt Bernadette’s on-again, off-again lover of many years. The revelation of her ancestor’s secret queer life, and the later discovery of a cache of photos of trans women from decades past concealed within the lining of an old suitcase, throw Mei’s entire perception of her life and history off balance. The photographs Mei discovers bring to mind the real-life discovery of photos documenting the previously unknown Casa Susanna – a secret resort for presumably middle-class cross-dressers that operated during the 1950s and 1960s in the Catskills, New York.

“Unearthing those histories is tremendously important. They are



SMALL BEAUTY
jia qing wilson-yang
Metonymy Press
\$16.95, paper, 176pp
9780994047120

The book cover for 'Behold Things Beautiful' features a yellow background with a scorpion and a woman's face. The title is in a large, elegant font. Below the cover, there is a portrait of the author, Cora Siré, and the publisher's name, Signature Editions.

You can't go forward
when you can't go back

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Cora Siré

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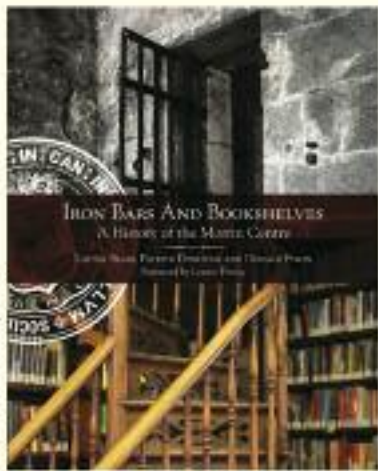
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BARAKA BOOKS
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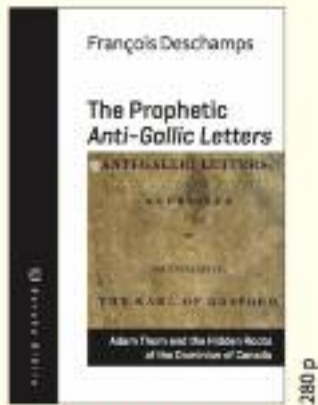
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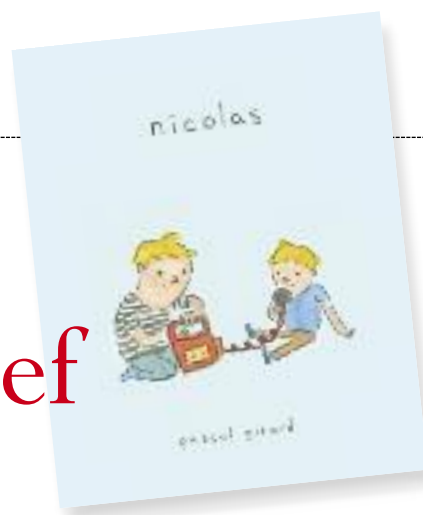


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By Ian McGillis

Pascal Girard
The Gift of Grief



NICOLAS
Pascal Girard
Translated by Helge Dascher
Drawn & Quarterly
\$16.95, cloth, 112pp
9781770462625

“First thought, best thought.” Allen Ginsberg coined the phrase. Probably influenced by his studies in Buddhism, he was essentially saying that the best way for an artist to get at the truth is by not letting the left side of the brain trip up the right. Just get it down. Don’t overthink. There can be few better demonstrations of the adage in action than Pascal Girard’s *Nicolas*.



First published in 2008, the small, sparsely rendered story of a nine-year-old boy’s attempts to come to terms with the death of his five-year-old brother did more than just launch the comics career of Jonquière-born Girard; it became a word-of-mouth cult item inspiring a rare devotion in its readers. People press *Nicolas* on friends, give it as a gift, revisit it in times of need.

Grief is one of the hardest subjects to render convincingly: err on one side and you’re left with little more than despair, err on the other and you can easily tip over into the maudlin. A big part of *Nicolas*’s power lies in its uncanny evoking of a young boy’s emotional landscape and thought processes. Girard avoids the common trap of imposing an adult sensibility onto a child: his nine-year-old self, as portrayed in the book, is as bewildered by the world as any of his contemporaries, a feeling compounded by his dealing with an unimaginably huge trauma in a setting where those best equipped to help him appear determined to keep him in the dark.

Now, to mark the tenth anniversary of the book’s 2006 creation, comes a new edition, with an addition: Girard has picked up the story to show his adult self – he’s now in his mid-thirties – still struggling with the fallout of *Nicolas*’s death, his chief foil being his fellow surviving brother, Joël. You’re put in mind of the *Seven Up* documentary series; but where Michael Apter revisited his subjects every seven years, Girard picks up his own story after skipping a quarter century, leaving his audience to imagine what might have transpired in the meantime. (As it happens, the curious can fill in part of the picture via some of Girard’s largely autobiographical works in the interim. *Bigfoot*, *Reunion*, and *Petty Theft* are especially recommended.)

Happily, the original is not tinkered with, and the new story doesn’t try to ape the visual signature or naive voice that made the book unique in the first place. We’re not allowed to forget that, not only has the central character aged from childhood to adulthood, but the artist is also ten years down the line artistically from where he was: his line and

composition have evolved, his sense of how much to put in has expanded but remained powerfully economical. You can still “read” *Nicolas* in roughly fifteen minutes. But you’ll probably find you can contemplate it for years.

“I said, ‘I’m going to try to do a story – not a book – in a weekend,’” Girard tells me over the phone from his home in Mile End, remembering the low-key origins of *Nicolas*. “It was just an exercise for myself. I wanted a subject that I already knew.”

Such an unassuming and private origin story chimes nicely with the way Girard first discovered his talent – on his own, in the Saguenay community where he grew up.

“It’s funny, my girlfriend is from Saskatoon and she always says I grew up in a small town,” he says. “But if you add up the population of the surrounding communities, Jonquière is about the same size. I have memories of it, but I don’t have too much attachment. I was in school, drawing at night, playing in the fields and woods. Most people enjoyed hockey. I didn’t. Mostly, my head was in comics, and in movies like *Ghostbusters*.”

In the nature-versus-nurture debate, Girard’s experience would seem to represent a firm case for the former. “My father worked for the city,” he recalls. “He was also a hunter and fisherman, and I guess I never really cared for those things. My mother worked for Alcan, the big employer there, as a computer programmer. There were no books and no music in the house, and that’s interesting, because my brother Joël eventually did a master’s in classical music. So I don’t really know how people pick up on these things.”

Girard was drawing from as early as he can remember, though he makes no great claims for his first efforts. “I was mostly doing it for myself. I didn’t really show it to anybody, though my mother was aware of it and encouraged me. A lot of it was just copying comics, mostly action comics like *Batman*. In one of them, Asterix was in Lac-Saint-Jean because

continued on page 16

graphic

A War by Any Other Name

SUCH A LOVELY LITTLE WAR

Saigon 1961–63
 Marcelino Truong
 Translated by David Homel
 Arsenal Pulp Press
 \$26.95, paper, 280pp
 9781551526478

In this ambitious book, Marcelino Truong tells his family's story, intertwined with a history of the onset of the Vietnam War and contemporary reflections about that time. Truong offers a rare perspective for Western readers – that of a Vietnamese French person who experienced the conflict first hand. Originally written in French, the book has been translated to English by David Homel.

Truong had an eventful childhood. Son of a Vietnamese diplomat and a French woman, he spent his early childhood in Washington, DC, where the Truongs enjoyed a peaceful life in “a quiet middle-class suburb, something Norman Rockwell might imagine.” Truong describes this period as nothing short of idyllic: jazz on the car stereo, picnics by the water, white

Christmases. But things take a turn for the worse when his father is summoned to Saigon by the South Vietnamese government and the family has to leave America, under the protests of his mother.

They arrive in Saigon in 1961, amid a divided Vietnam. Truong describes a tense city, with a strong military presence, but no signs of the direct conflict that was taking place in the countryside. It's still the “Lovely Little War” of the perversely ironic title, a conflict to which the world was not paying very much attention, even as it was taking the lives of a thousand Vietnamese people a month.

We do not learn about the hard facts of war from little Marcelino's perspective. Instead, he is occupied with the typical activities of a privileged child: visiting the ice cream shop or the pho parlour, hanging out with his siblings or nanny, taking swimming lessons at the elite Cercle Sportif de Saigon. These are all depicted in black and red washes that perfectly capture the vibrancy of city life as well as a certain inevitable melancholy. The expressive line drawings have a gestural quality, rendering the scenes with tenderness and grace. Attention to detail is strong: ships, planes, cars, furniture, architecture, even the fash-



ion of the period and military garb are richly characterized.

Truong approaches the war itself as a historian, narrating the conflict after years of careful research. We are also privy to the unique perspective of his father who had extraordinary access to the inner workings of power thanks to his role as President Ngô Đình Diêm's interpreter. Truong uses a colour device to switch

between the personal story and the big picture of history: testimonies, dialogues, maps, newspaper clippings, etc., are shown in a colder wash of black and blue. This blue-red oscillation is

only broken by the full-colour panels that are found at the opening of each chapter and in the conclusion, which depicts a contemporary conversation with his elderly father.

In Saigon, the children live a sheltered existence, punctuated by the war. When the Americans escalate the conflict by sending more weapons and troops, the Truong boys become increasingly more

enthralled by the grandiose machines of destruction. They show a resilience that can only be attributable to the innocence of the very young. The occasional bombings in Saigon affect the children less than their mother's nervous condition. Yvette has undiagnosed bipolar disorder and Truong's characterization of her tends to hit on the single note of her temper tantrums. If not for the inclusion of her eloquent letters to her parents at the time, her character would fall completely flat.

His father's portrayal is much more nuanced. A deeply reflective and kind man, he strove to understand the regime with which he collaborated, a regime that committed so many atrocities. It was this search for understanding that moved Truong to create this ambitious project, and the result presents the reader (and perhaps the author) with more questions than answers. A second volume, not yet translated to English, may offer some closure. **mb**

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



BASTIEN ORTOLA

Knipf's Newsprint Nostalgia

CHEAP NOVELTIES

The Pleasures of Urban Decay
 Ben Katchor
 Drawn & Quarterly
 \$26.95, cloth, 112pp
 9781770462632



JEFF GOODMAN

Ben Katchor's *Cheap Novelties* is considered to have been one of the first modern graphic novels. First published in the late 1980s as a series of strips in the alternative weekly *New York Press* and then as a *RAW* one-shot in 1991, the comic has finally received the full Drawn & Quarterly treatment on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary. This beautifully designed hardcover edition is a testament to the enduring appeal of Katchor's thoughtful tales of urban exploration.

Our guide is Julius Knipf, an aging real-estate photographer, who travels his city on foot and by public transit, remarking on the fading vestiges of pre-war urban culture both real and imagined: drugstore soda fountains, flop houses, sign painters, door-to-door rubber band salesmen. Knipf's world is somehow both precisely New York and vaguely every city in North America at the same time.

Occasional bird's eye view perspectives reveal nonspecific but authentic-feeling streetscapes and when Knipf flips through a squeaky rack of postcards, the glossy photos depict fictional but entirely plausible tourist destinations such as Binocular Park and Smolt Bridge.

Katchor usually stays at street level, highlighting the details of storefronts – always independent businesses with unique signage, most notably the countless diners, delicatessens, and cafeterias that still dotted the urban landscapes of the late twentieth century. His scratchy lines, crowded panels, and often off-kilter framing create a dreamy world where the boundaries between past and present seem to blur. The dominant grey washes give the sense that it is perpetually overcast, or evening, reinforcing the melancholia and gauzy nostalgia of the dialogue and captioned narration.

This is a decidedly analogue world of boxy Jewish men in fedoras reading newspapers over cups of thirty-five-cent diner coffee – a world that was slowly but surely passing out of existence when Katchor was creating *Cheap Novelties*. One strip shows Knipf at a series of soda counters trying in vain to order his favourite drink, “Herbert Water,” while the narrator observes, “As one soda fountain drink was born another would fade into oblivion. What were common names, are suddenly archaic terms in the mouths of old men.” The strip ends with an ominous portent: a soda jerk pointing to a glowing fridge and telling Knipf “the fountain's broken all we have are cans.”

Knipf solemnly observed a world already in the process of disappearing; but now, nearly three decades later, it is a world that is all but gone. While Knipf laments the disappearance of the “communal sugar dispenser” in favour of individual sugar packets, one can't help wondering what he might make of the third wave coffee bars that have long since replaced his beloved diners. The twenty-first-century reader of *Cheap Novelties* experiences a kind of double-layered nostalgia – for the fading customs and places Knipf was documenting, but also for the transitional geography of the late twentieth century, before the hardening of gentrification, when generations-old family businesses were still common in urban streetscapes. When a hot dog with mustard and sauerkraut cost fifty cents. Likewise, scenes of Knipf using phone booths and developing photos in his darkroom, of a man reading a TV guide, and the general prevalence of newspapers in the strips, have a very different resonance today than they did when they were created in the late 1980s, their original melancholy overlaid with new layers of significance.

I would have welcomed a short preface to the collection, but such a text is certainly not necessary to enjoy or appreciate the strips. *Cheap Novelties* speaks for itself. It is a wonderful archive of twentieth-century urban life – both the idiosyncrasies of pre-war culture and the now-charming banalities of the pre-digital city of the 1980s. **mb**

Sara Spike is the associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*.



non-fiction

A Necessary Conversation

INDIGENOUS WRITES

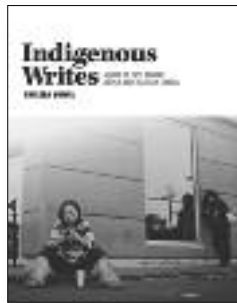
A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada

Chelsea Vowel

Highwater Press

\$26.00, paper, 240pp

9781553796800



Considering the complexities and difficulties surrounding questions of Indigeneity and non-Indigeneity in Canada, few would have the expertise and courage required to write “A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues.” But this is exactly what Métis author and educator Chelsea Vowel has done. With a law degree, an influential blog (apihtawikosisan.com), experience teaching the Cree language, and frequent op-eds in national media, she is uniquely situated and qualified for the task. Her first book, *Indigenous Writes*, is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the history and present of Indigenous-Canadian relations.

I teach a large course at the University of Ottawa introducing students to Indigenous studies and expend much energy in the course asking students to carefully examine their own place in the history and future of Canadian-Indigenous relations. *Indigenous Writes* perfectly complements this approach with a

conversational style that invites the reader to rethink what they think they already know. Vowel begins the book with two chapters on the “Terminology of Relationships,” in which she addresses questions of vocabulary such as *Indigenous* versus *Aboriginal*, as well as different words used to describe non-Indigenous peoples. Students are often anxious about using the right words, and by starting the book in this way Vowel opens up the conversation and invites readers to participate. The subsequent chapters summarize current issues and histories of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and dive into hot topics including cultural appropriation, blood-quantum reasoning, authenticity, and two-spirit identities.

Some readers might be surprised to find that Vowel spends nearly twenty percent of the book debunking myths about Indigenous peoples (including the alcoholic, nomadic, freeloader, tax-free, lazy Indian myths), but this is absolutely necessary since many readers harbour these assumptions to some degree. There are also chapters on the history of state violence (residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, Inuit relocations, etc.), as well as the continuing state violence against Indigenous peoples (unsafe drinking water, underfunded education, discrimination against



Indigenous children in state care). Finally, there are chapters discussing continuing colonialism in the Canadian legal system and in legislation aimed at assimilation, chapters giving essential background to historic and modern treaties, a chapter refuting the idea that reserves themselves are the problem, and a chapter on Indigenous efforts to take control of their schools.

Many of my students, expecting a dry textbook, were pleasantly surprised by Vowel’s conversational style. With chapter subheadings like “Confused yet?” and transition sentences like “Now wait a minute, isn’t jiggling an Irish thing?” Vowel succeeds in distilling extremely complex subject matter into dense chapters of just a few pages each, while still throwing in jokes and keeping it real.

Indigenous Writes is a timely book – it appears at a moment when many Canadians are hungry to learn more about Indigenous peoples and colonialism in Canada. Each of Vowel’s short chapters can be read in a few minutes, and each one contains enough critical information to challenge harmful assumptions and facilitate understanding. This is a book for everyone – but particularly for non-Indigenous people wishing to better understand their own place in the history of violence against Indigenous peoples, and to find ways to move toward true solutions and right relationships. mb

Daniel Rück is Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Institute for Canadian and Aboriginal Studies at the University of Ottawa. His ancestors were Germans from Central Europe, and English from Yorkshire.

Fighting to Belong

ACCEPTED

How the First Gay Superstar Changed WWE

Pat Patterson and Bertrand Hébert

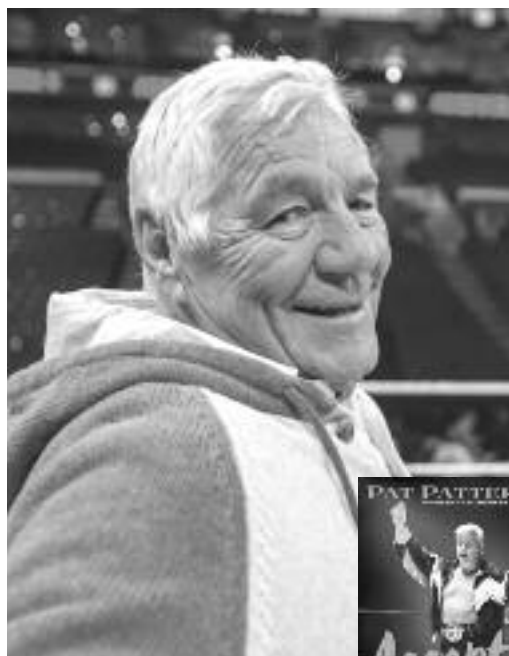
ECW Press

\$27.95, cloth, 272pp

9781770412934

Pro wrestling is inherently homoerotic. As a boy watching wrestling on TV, the sight of these muscle-bound, oiled-up men grappling with each other caused some strange stirrings – and I’m straight. There have also been gay wrestling characters through the ages – Gorgeous George in my parents’ generation, Adorable Adrian Adonis in mine – who played up mincing stereotypes for villainous effect.

But Montreal’s own Pat Patterson is the real deal: a veteran wrestler (he was in the ring through the sixties and seventies before becoming a behind-the-scenes ideas man with WWE, which he remains to this day) who was openly gay, at least within the industry, from the start. And as indicated by the title of his memoir, *Accepted*, his sexuality was never an issue in the outwardly macho wrestling world. With an introduction by WWE head honcho



Vince McMahon and a cover blurb from wrestler-turned-movie star Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, the book shows this acceptance is real.

Born into a working-class Montreal family with eight siblings, Patterson (who changed his name early on from Pierre Clermont) left home at seventeen after his father refused to accept his coming out. Despite barely speaking any English, he moved to the United States and began his wrestling career in desperately hardscrabble circumstances; his early years on the road

give the book some of its most colourful stories. Early on, he met the love of his life, Louie Dondero; the two would remain a couple for forty years.

The book assumes a certain familiarity on the reader’s part with the wrestling world, its past and present major players, as well as its lingo. As a relative outsider, I would have liked more detail on Patterson’s mid-career transformation from “heel” (bad guy) to “face” (good guy), as well as some info on how the wrestling storylines are crafted. Then again, Patterson is not interested in revealing trade secrets. He is so old school that he maintains a gentlemanly silence on the staged nature of pro wrestling, referring only once to “the entertainment part of what we do” and stating repeatedly that, “for us, wrestling is as real as it gets.”

Celebrity autobiographies are usually “co-written” with a professional writer (in this case, local wrestling scribe Bertrand Hébert), whose role is often to transcribe spoken recollections, ask follow-up questions, and shape the stories into a more or less coherent form, ideally in something resembling the subject’s voice. Keith Richards’s memoir is like listening to

a charming old drunk spin yarns on a barstool for hours. (David Lee Roth’s is like that as well, except he’s the guy you want to run out of the bar to escape.) As captured by Hébert, Patterson’s tone is conversational, no-nonsense, profane, and inflected with the kind of linguistic idiosyncrasies that Quebec Anglophones will recognize. He refers at one point to wrestlers teasing him for not pronouncing the *s* on plural words, and intentionally or not, a few of these creep into the text (e.g., “all kind of” for “all kinds of”). The resulting voice is no one’s idea of smooth or literary, but it suits the subject and makes the book’s poignant moments that much more powerful.

Ultimately, the value of *Accepted* is twofold: as a goldmine for wrestling nostalgists, with its span from the fifties to today, and as an inspirational tale of Patterson’s life as a gay man in a less enlightened era. Even if he was accepted in wrestling, he had to open a lot of people’s minds, including those of his own family. The story of how he patiently worked hard to do so is touching, and his plain-spoken style just makes it all the more human. mb

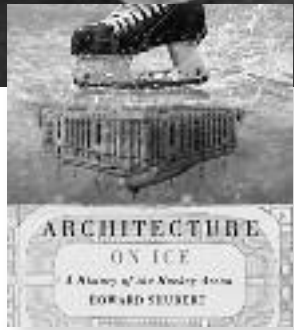
Malcolm Fraser is a writer, filmmaker, and musical entertainer. His book *Wooden Stars: Innocent Gears* was published by Invisible Publishing in 2013.



The Big Chill

ARCHITECTURE ON ICE

A History of the Hockey Arena
Howard Shubert
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$49.95, cloth, 328pp
9780773548138



The hockey arena has fairly humble and perhaps predictable origins. Sheds erected over naturally occurring ice surfaces provided shelter and comfort for recreational skating and other amusements, eventually evolving into more robust (though largely nondescript) buildings. Initially it may seem difficult to get excited by the subject. But Howard Shubert's book *Architecture on Ice: A History of the Hockey Arena* is beautifully illustrated with a carefully curated selection of paintings, prints, photographs, and architectural drawings – no surprise given Shubert's background as an appraiser and curator of architectural print material.

This, however, is no coffee-table book. Shubert weaves a fascinating narrative in which architectural history, cultural landscape studies, the history of sport, and political, social, and cultural histories coalesce. The lacklustre appearance of hockey arenas might explain why this is the first book to address their history, but Shubert argues that these buildings are at the crux of a larger story about memory and culture. They are containers for collective experience, historic moments, and strong emotions. The cultural significance attached to hockey arenas is really what makes the buildings what Shubert argues they are – transformative spaces for sport, entertainment, and cultural activity.

Hockey arenas lack the opulence of opera houses, the solidity of civic architecture, or the marvel of skyscrapers. Yet Shubert argues that they may be North America's most important overlooked cultural buildings. This is an interesting claim to reconcile from the perspective of architectural history, which typically focuses on emerging architectural styles, cutting-edge design, innovative developments, and architects with vision. Shubert sees something quite different in the development of the professional hockey arena, and this is what separates his study from others that fall more easily within the traditional concerns of architectural history. As Shubert reiterates at various points throughout the book, he does not believe that the hockey arena ever truly existed as a unique and fully defined building type. Instead of form following function, the building itself determined spectator interaction, user experience, and the overall consumption of ice sports. Uniquely, Shubert shows the trajectory of a sport through architecture and in doing so turns the standard script for architectural history on its head.

If you're looking for a history of the community arena or hockey rink, this is not the book for you. Shubert is upfront about limiting the scope of this book to the spaces that showcase professional hockey and ice sports and not the community arenas and rinks many of us recall fondly. It is the transformation from naturally occurring ice surface to postmodern multi-complex that captures Shubert's attention. An important piece of this story is his focus on hockey arenas as "flexible containers for undefined mass spectacle." Shubert effectively highlights the place of the arena as the lines between the worlds of sports and entertainment became increasingly blurred.

Starting with hockey's Golden Age in the 1920s and 1930s, through the rise of pop culture and arena rock from the 1960s to the 1980s, to the massive corporate entertainment complexes that now host professional hockey, among other mass entertainments, the humble hockey arena is the nexus for the meeting of sport, commerce, and culture. That Shubert's narrative encompasses such a range of factors will make this book a compelling read for multiple audiences, whether scholars of the built environment, historians, or sports enthusiasts feeling nostalgic for the Golden Age of hockey. mb

Valerie Minnett holds a Master of Architecture from McGill University and has published several scholarly articles on architecture and the history of health in Montreal.

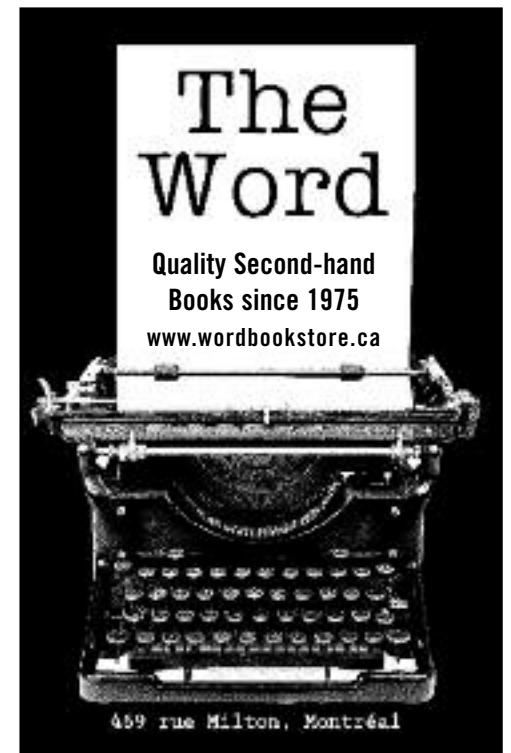
Of course, "too good to be true" is the phrase that immediately comes to mind. Only days before he was to formally take control of his late father-in-law's business empire, Rafe has a car accident, leaving him in a coma with a serious concussion. His eventual return to consciousness brings to light a side of his character previous hidden from sight. Again, in Julie's words, "He seems hard, cruel, bitter, vindictive, coarse.... Where did he come from? [...] Are we all two souls, warring in one body? [...] All last night I kept seeing this new face. It had evil in it. Evil!"

Loss of memory and even a profound alteration of character aren't unprecedented in cases of brain injury, but Julie Jonason is unable to set aside her deep misgivings, even when Rafe seems to have recovered his former sweet self. With the aid of the Holmesian psychologist Doctor Merrill and his assistant Henry Lake, Julie delves deeper into the secrets her husband has kept from her and, indeed, from the world.

Well before the second wave of feminism, *The Keys of My Prison* imaginatively probes the discontent that Betty Friedan would later address in *The Feminine Mystique*. Wees, writing in crisp, economic, modern prose, uses a culturally scorned genre to unpack the fears underlying the expectation that women should be unthinkingly loyal to

husband and father. Its slow-burning climax exposes the subterranean social forces that can prey on such naive trust. "She had not known it was possible. When people acted with serenity, apparently easy and relaxed, she had thought they were truly so." The germ of a new awareness might be born from such painful revelations.

Vince Tinguely is a writer currently living in Montreal. mb



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histories that are intentionally buried. The result of that burying is that those of us left in the present day have to find examples that we are not an isolated incident of human weirdness. Something that I wanted to show was that for Mei, the histories of the kind of person she is are hidden." No longer a sole island of Chinese trans weirdness in white straight cisgender Herberville, Mei's discoveries lead her on a path to something like healing.

But still, Wilson-yang reminds us, those histories don't provide a perfect and idyllic reflection for racialized trans women like Mei. Much like the real-life Casa Susanna photographs, both Diane and the women depicted in the pictures Mei finds are white. "These histories are fragmented, compartmentalized. She doesn't find a stack of photos of queer trans women of colour because part of what made things like Casa Susanna possible was whiteness. For me, and I think for other queer and trans folks of colour my age, who came of age in smaller places, and probably in cities too, entry points into LGBT spaces, queer spaces, trans spaces, were all white. Mei can find recordings of her history in pieces, but an example of something close to the entirety of her being is much more rare." Only through reaffirming her links to the trans women she left behind in the city will Mei truly be able to feel connected to the land of the living.

Small Beauty is the first novel published by Montreal-based Metonymy Press, and Wilson-yang has nothing but praise for the small press. "My experience with Metonymy has been fantastic," she says. "I came into my relationship with them not knowing a thing about publishing and the more I speak with other writers the more I am impressed with the ways that they have involved me in the process of producing a book. And they are connected to and a part of the communities I was connected to and a part of

when I was in Montreal. I knew Ashley [Fortier, one half of Metonymy's publishing team] years ago when we were both in Guelph. There is a sense of shared history that I love about working with Metonymy." Though their stated mis-

"Unearthing those histories is tremendously important. They are histories that are intentionally buried."

sion is to "reduce barriers to publishing for authors whose perspectives are under-represented," with the publication of both Wilson-yang's *Small Beauty* and Kai Cheng

Thom's upcoming *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, Metonymy are quickly becoming the premiere publisher of trans fiction in Canada.

Wilson-yang's novel takes its place beside such books as Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) and Jamie Berrout's *Otros Valles* (2014) in the emergent genre of trans lit. These novels, written by trans authors with trans readers in mind, stand in stark contrast to what writer Casey Plett refers to as the Gender Novel – narratives crafted by cis writers that appropriate some of the trappings of trans experience to make arguments that often have little to do with actual trans people. Well-known examples include Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy* (2014), which, like *Small Beauty*, focuses on a Chinese-Canadian trans person in rural Ontario, but, as Plett describes in her article in *The Walrus*, idolizes a Christ-like experience of exceptionalism rather than telling "stories about real, struggling people."

Already awarded an Honour of Distinction from the Writers' Trust of Canada's Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBT Emerging Writers, *Small Beauty's* quiet power is well on its way to much-deserved acclaim. The first-time novelist remains humble: "I'm moved by the response this book has received, it's been a lovely surprise. I'm deeply grateful for the opportunity to write." mb

Morgan M. Page is a writer and artist based in Montreal. She was a 2014 Lambda Literary Fellow, and hosts the trans history podcast *One From the Vaults*. Her website is Odofermi.com.

he needed blueberries. I did that kind of thing until I was twelve or thirteen, and then I pretty much stopped drawing for ten years."

When the creative bug came back it was more or less at random, in Chicoutimi, where Girard had gone to study film.

"There was a little bookstore, no longer there, and I discovered some books by Jimmy Beaulieu, an artist who's maybe not that known to English readers but is well known in the Quebec comics scene. He eventually became my first publisher." The epiphany moment came when Girard first met Beaulieu at a book fair. "He was drawing on cheap paper with a cheap pen, the cheapest Bic you could buy. That opened something up for me. You don't need a big drawing table, you don't need anything fancy. I had never pictured the process could be that direct."

As already implied, deciding to do a story about the loss of his brother wasn't as emotionally complicated for Girard as might be assumed. To hear him tell it, practicality was the deciding factor. "It's funny, sometimes you're in a better spot than at other times with grieving, and I was at a good place in my life, so the choice of subject was actually pretty easy," he says. "I had many years' worth of little stories already, so I made a list of things I could tell, started drawing, and at the end of the weekend it was done."

Once it was on paper, Girard says, "I thought, 'Well, this is raw, but maybe I could show it to somebody.' So I showed it to my girlfriend at the time. I don't remember if she liked it. When it was published and started having success, I thought, 'This is happening too fast. I've only just started with comics.'"

And was there a feeling of exposure on putting such a personal story out into the world? "Not the way you might think, no. I don't get much of that 'Is this really true?' thing that I think a lot of writers probably get. I found very quickly that people were not talking so much about the book itself; they were talking about their own grieving experiences."

That special connection shows no sign of waning, as Girard discovered at the new edition's launch at Librairie Drawn & Quarterly in September. "People were coming up to me saying 'I lost my brother,' 'I lost my mother,'" he recounts, clearly humbled. "My day job is as a social worker at a hospital, so I work with a lot of emotions there, people dealing with trauma and disease and loss, and there I was at the launch, hearing some of the same things. It's like my role is listening to people." mb

Ian McGillis is the author of the novel *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry* and writes a weekly books column for the *Montreal Gazette*. His next book will be published in spring 2017 by Biblioasis.

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ACCORDÉON
KAIS KELLOUGH

Have you heard about the flying canoe?

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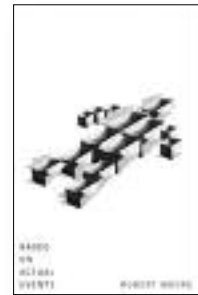
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poetry



I WANTED TO BE THE KNIFE

Sara Sutterlin
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WINNOWS

Maxianne Berger
Imago Press
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9780920489482

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Edward Carson
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BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS

Robert Moore
Signal Editions
\$17.95, paper, 88pp
9781550654615

STRANGER

Nyla Matuk
Signal Editions
\$17.95, paper, 80pp
9781550654547

Sara Sutterlin's *I Wanted to Be the Knife* is a provocative collection, originally published in 2015, that sold over five hundred copies (a staggering number in the poetry world). In this new edition, the poet expands on key concepts and theoretical frameworks and features twenty-eight new poems.

This is poetry made of sexuality, power, and nerve. While Sutterlin pits the debate between love and survival, stating they “have nothing to do with each other,” her poems frankly describe sex, lust, and masturbation. She writes, “Men are always looking for purpose / jerking off into webcams.” While existentialism and orgasms mingle, Sutterlin poetically intervenes. In the poem “Intimacy As I Understand It,” intimacy boils down to a crooked dick, admitting to being bullied, and bullying. The speaker of the poem notes, “You smell bad. You smell Alive,” ending on an unexpected note: an offering of forgiveness, which doesn't seem entirely earned.

In a list poem, Sutterlin writes “Lie's I've Told,” a confession to things like not being hungry, falling in love, hate, liking pickles (but not really), and apology. Though lying can be a creative objective, *I Wanted to Be the Knife*'s strongest lines are in the universality of love's expression:

“When it comes to Love, everyone sits at the same table. I call him baby but he spans me.” However, it's the unspoken words, “my emotional labor bill,” that are the crux of this collection. Sutterlin explores what it means to move towards, and away from, desire. The consequences of modern intimacy are stark and unsettling – what goes on between bodies, and what goes unsaid.

Maxianne Berger's *Winnows* is a meditation on water and memory, a poetic homage to Herman Melville's timeless masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. In a series of haikus, Berger has artfully adapted ideas, concepts, and language to re-vision and reinterpret the novel, while creating a whole new text. In “Winnowing The Whale: A Preface,” Berger positions her objective to “abstract” words from each chapter “while maintaining their original order.” She writes, “an entire world / from this summit / emerging in light.” Berger's careful consideration of language, style, and diction sings. She describes the moon in various states: “watery” and “ghostly,” continually charting the elements, seasons, and sensualities.

Invested in silence, Northern Lights, and patterns of emergence, she hones what it means to be “too restless / for a poem.” Berger eloquently delves into the sea of existence. Lines like “however long / the voyage you take there / starts in this world” and “my dear shadow, / all that tossing in bed – / seems you need your lover” soothe. While Berger took an intellectual and poetic challenge, to adhere to form and to work with a classic text, she gave herself creative permission to explore an oceanful of poetic passages.

Edward Carson's *Knots*, published in the Hugh MacLennan Poetry Series from McGill-Queen's University Press, is tied somewhere between cerebral and emotional knowing. This is a philosophical and quizzical look into digressions. Both question and answer, *Knots* is a text concerned primarily with paradoxes, riddles, and dualities. Carson is invested in the self, strategic thought patterns, love's evolution, and the rationalities of reason. He writes through love's surfacing, its unconscious answer, “wider than / the water answering itself.”

Carson invests in recognition – how love is both an act and a witness. He looks to the constellations, art, the unpredictable nature of humanity and

divisions. In the poem “Looking For Love,” he explores a mind and heart rising, an intellectual and spiritual discovery. He writes, “By way of recognition, / and though unmoving / or even relocating, our // love is soon revealed,” letting the questions – “(how near and how far, / how close to or where?)” – breathe in their own parenthetical space. The answers to these questions aren't determined, merely poised in relation to love's oscillation.

While matters of a buzzing mind carry the weight of poetics, a consequence of gravity and memory, *Knots* enlarges a wayward heart. In “Crossroads,” Carson writes, “Love will know / the answer. Love insists / on something other than the separation // of here and there, curious / to find all distances collapse, nourishing / the hope of more to come.” *Knots* will orient and re-orient readers, dizzying in universal delights and poetry's auspicious nature.

It's the season for poets to pay tribute to Herman Melville – Robert Moore's collection, *Based on Actual Events*, took inspirational root from Melville's famous line “if man will strike, strike through the mask!” Based in Saint John, New Brunswick, Moore has written a colloquial collection that is bold and unforgettable. *Based on Actual Events* charts Greek myth, autobiography, popular culture, human nature, and tips its hat to poets past and present.

Poetry is most successful when it's authentic, poignant, and self-reflexive. Moore writes, “Ever since beauty went futile / poets write for other poets; / serial killers, mailing each other clues.” Here we are, murderers, mailing packets of language to one another. Moore continues to muse on the poet's role, both as an observer of truth and a storyteller. “In a culture of image and simulacra / the poets offer to sharpen your scissors / and knives so you can cut your losses / from last week's flyer.” Moore's wit is cocky and clever. His best line: “Our methods obscure, even to us. Especially to us. Yes, / when it comes to our methods, we prefer to be the last to know. / The lengths we're willing to go to protect the delicate / mechano-receptors of our ignorance are lengthy.” This book-length collection of poems strikes directly through the masquerade in us all.

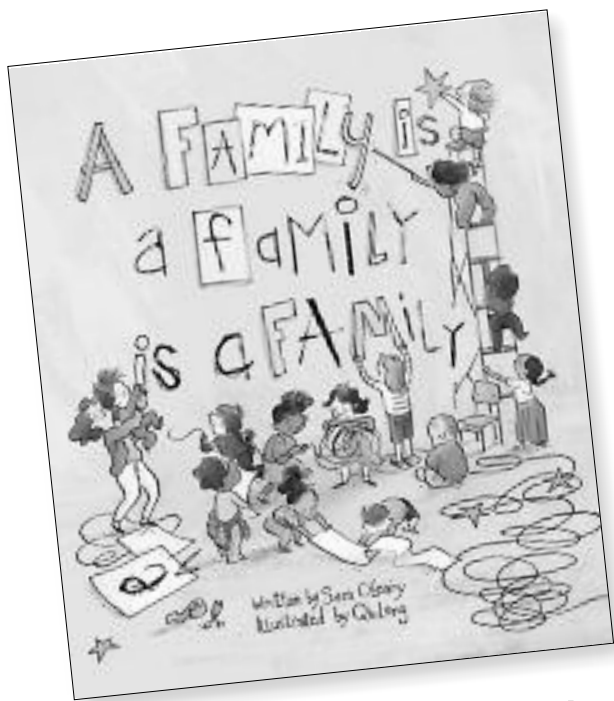
We're all strangers, even if we think we know each other. Poet Nyla Matuk artfully meditates on our disconnected digital age, while awakening a sensuality to this vulnerable state of unknowing. She prefaces the collection with a quote from British psychologist Adam Phillips, “You can only recover your appetite, and appetites, if you can allow yourself to be unknown to yourself,” which reads as the perfect invitation to the text.

Stranger's opening poem, “Appetites,” is for the sleepless, those who lay awake at night sifting through the layers of their mind, rummaging in the what ifs, should haves, could haves, and would haves. For those moments when, “You realize you haven't organized your life. / You've forgotten yourself entirely. / You wake up and try to pick up the thread.”

Matuk beautifully balances reality and magic, past and present, the various states of the self. Her poem “Then and Now” mixes nostalgia and nuance, politics and perseverance. She writes, “Forty-eight and finally, I learn / how to start living if that's / what it's called. / I mean, spring clean, / bras / cup-side up in the drawer,” only to chart “nationalist dreams / taken down by the usual / ethnic vote,” before the poem lands on “a clear view of sky / as if the sky was / the whole view – / (it wasn't, then; / it isn't, now).”

Whether contrasting art and politics, or engaging the inevitable question of adulthood, Matuk toys with form. She works in the villanelle, a song-like structure, in “Bad Sex Villanelle,” tugs at the manifesto with “Manifesto,” and draws on found observations in “Happenings on the Cover of the *New Yorker*” and, a personal favourite, “Bestsellers in Poetry.” Matuk creates space for the mundane hum of the every day, and opens towards a sense of curiosity. *Stranger* harnesses the unknown within, and makes it safe to uncover an estranged self. mb

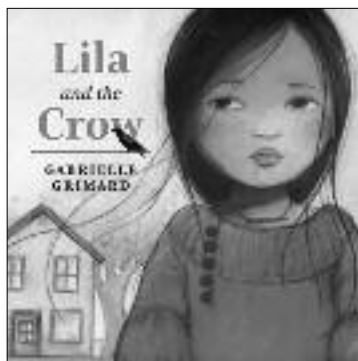
Shannon Webb-Campbell is a Mi'kmaq poet, writer, and critic. *Still No Word* (Breakwater, 2015), recipient of Egale Canada's Out In Print Award, is her first collection of poems.



YOUNG READERS

magnificent costume of her own making for Lila to stand proud of who she is. Written and illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard, Paula Ayer provides the poetic English version. (VB)

No kid should have to feel ashamed of his or her family. When the class in Sara O'Leary's *A Family Is a Family Is a Family* is asked what makes their family special, our narrator hesitates to share about her family because it's different. Families can be dysfunctional, but when you look at what makes them unique, it's easy to find the good. In two-page spreads and a few sentences, each student in the class explains what makes their family special. Some descriptions are concrete, others dig deeper at the complicated feelings we have for the people we come from: "My mom says that before I was born I grew in her heart." It begins traditionally enough with a student whose parents love each other very much (too much?). There's a family with a ton of kids, another with two tone-deaf moms. Qin Leng's illustrations create a visually appealing watercolour atmosphere, with sweet faces and details worth scanning the pages for. At the end, when we find out what is different about the narrator's family, the reader will be satisfied to hear her mom's smart retort to a nosy outsider. This book makes it a little more okay to be different. (VB)



On the first page of *Lila and the Crow*, readers meet both Lila, a pretty, dark-haired child with rosy cheeks, and a crow. Lila is enduring the common childhood experience of having moved to a new place. She starts school, anxious to make new friends. It's only when a bully points out her dark hair and eyes that I realized she is Indigenous (it's never made explicit). This fable is set among the secret lives of children, where adults can't intervene. Day after day, Lila is taunted and grows more miserable, trying to find new ways to hide herself. From page one, the crow and Lila share something. She rejects the bird time and time again, but on the eve of an autumn festival in a magical encounter with a murder of crows, something changes. It takes a

Lucy & Company, by Quebec children's author Marianne Dubuc, follows Lucy and her four animal friends on three adventures. The first begins with Lucy looking for a nice spot to have her snack. One after another her four friends join her. The tale follows the ups (up a tree is a nice spot) and the downs (food goes down into bellies, but not if it's dropped down on the ground) of snack time. In the second tale Lucy takes her friends on a treasure hunt that ends with a sweet surprise. The last is my favourite, with the most at stake, involving three parentless eggs. Recalling the charm of P. D. Eastman's classic *Are You My Mother?*, the image of Adrian the snail trying to brood the eggs is a high point. Visually, Dubuc creates a bright, park-like world of adventure for its rosy-cheeked inhabitants. The stories can be read individually or as a whole, tracing a friendship that evolves from breaking bread to celebrating a birthday to caring for little ones. (VB)



the microbes to life as bubbly, bug-like creature with expressive eyes. Microbes live in the viscera and other murky places and Eamer doesn't shy away from the gross factor; the word *poop* is a regular occurrence. Other than edifying middle readers and spreading scientific knowledge, this book has an agenda that's easy to get behind. "Play outside.... Eat lots of fruits and vegetables.... Don't use antibiotics that you don't need." This is how you nurture the trillions of microbes living on you. Now back to hand washing – with non-antibacterial soap, of course. (VB)

It is remarkable that the now-common system for plastics recycling – from the process for collecting and grinding down used materials to the numbered triangle logo that differentiates the seven kinds of plastic – was initiated and refined, not by scientists, but by a "white-haired" volunteer from a small town in Wisconsin. In *What Milly Did*, Elise Moser shares the little-known story of Milly Zantow, who revolutionized recycling in the 1980s, and encourages young readers to consider their own ecological footprints.

Milly's charm and intelligence shine through the book, whether she is sitting on top of a garbage heap counting trucks or bundled in a long winter coat in her freezing warehouse. True to life, the narrated facts of her story are not always exciting reading (she cashes in her life insurance policy, she meets with local business owners) but it is a credit to the author and publisher that Milly's slow and steady progress is plotted out on the page like this. Changing the world doesn't happen in a glamorous instant. While the moral of Milly's story is that anyone can make a difference, the more important lesson here is that doing so takes dedication, hard work, and time.

Educational takeaways about the science of plastic and the mechanics of recycling are set into informative sidebars, illustrated with impressionistic greyscale line drawings by Scot Ritchie. A glossary of terms and a list of suggested books, videos, and websites for further study round out the pages of what will undoubtedly be a welcome teaching resource and an important addition to any library for children. (SS)

Vanessa Bonneau lives in Montreal. Sara Spike is the associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*.

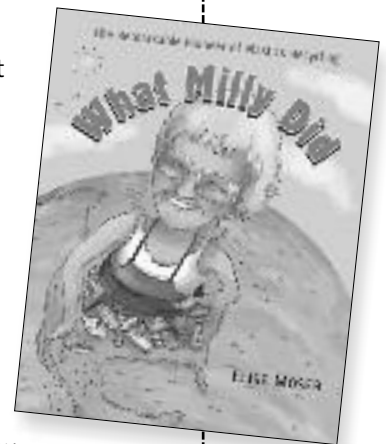
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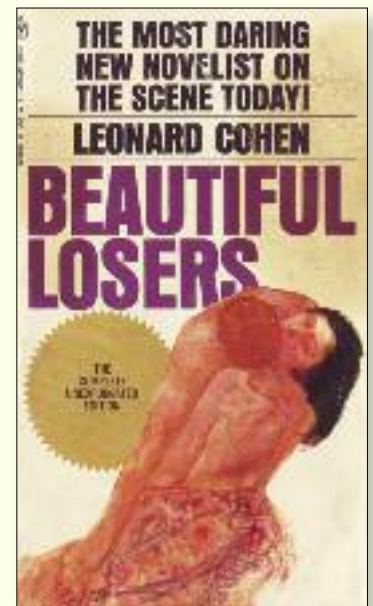
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Leonard Cohen's Montreal and *Beautiful Losers* at Fifty

Fifty years after the publication of Leonard Cohen's groundbreaking and notoriously difficult postmodern novel, poet David McGimpsey reflects on its enduring relationship to the city of Montreal.




and the flesh is sweet and white, like wood under green bark. From the streets a sexual manifesto rises like an inflating tire, “The winter has not killed us again!”

The Cohenesque paradox, where every articulation of sacred longing and historical definition will inexorably be paired with the matters of bowel movements and erections, is, after all, a rather profound paradox of life, whether you live in Montreal, Toronto, or Burnaby for that matter. *Beautiful Losers* is frequently profound, larded with pausing speculations on death and despair, sexuality and art. As it is not erotic, or orientated to sex-comedy resolution, its precise language still represents a challenge to those who express a desire for honest discourse but still demand coded euphemism. But, for Cohen, the specific words and phrases are an important part of the novel's dare-to-concept of liberation. Considering all the recent Internet hub-bub about the use of the words *crap* and *orgasm* in a short story submitted to *The Walrus*, what indeed would one make of Leonard Cohen's use of *girlcock* and *cuntflower*?

The narrator of *Beautiful Losers* poetically boasts “I'm tired of facts, I'm tired of speculations, I want to be consumed by unreason. I want to be swept along.” This, too, is the dream of Montreal, even fifty years later – that weariness with our divisive history will lead to moments of what Cohen, in his poem “French and English,” suggests is a “mother tongue” that exists beyond the view of “dead-hearted turds of particular speech.” The threats of revolution in the Montreal of the novel (“Action was suddenly in the streets! They could all sense it as they closed in on the Main: something was happening in Montréal history!”) are far less compelling than a competing song by the great Ray Charles.

Beautiful Losers is set in Montreal but it is not the vivid Montreal of Mordecai Richler – not that his Montreal is any less fictional. But, in its “seedy elegance,” to borrow a phrase from poet Louis MacNeice, it remains a gloriously unteachable, difficult-to-read and problematic text that, perhaps owing to its reputation as an eye-poker, is as neglected today as it was back when Lester Pearson was Prime Minister (“Why can't I memorize baseball statistics like the Prime Minister?”) and Leonard Cohen decided that singing was his best bet. Where it remains a classic Montreal book, perhaps, is in its spirit of unecstatic bodily pleasure and debauched defiance, like drinking *dépanneur* wine in the park or smoking beside a swimming pool.

David McGimpsey's latest book, *Asbestos Heights*, was the winner of the A.M. Klein Prize for poetry. 

It's been fifty years since the publication of *Beautiful Losers* and fifty years since Montreal's Leonard Cohen last wrote a novel. Cohen is still working (and working well) at the tender age of eighty-two and may surprise us soon with *Beautiful Losers II: Electric System Theatre Boogaloo*. Of course, after publishing the novel, Cohen set out on his career as the seductive and depressive pop idol who would become an icon of Montreal every bit as prepossessing as the cross on the mountain or, at least, the Guaranteed Pure Milk bottle. In the fifty years since the publication of *Beautiful Losers*, one might feel that Montreal has been greatly transformed, what with surviving two referendums, one massive ice storm, and at least ten Stanley Cup parades. But, I can't be sure that's true. Looking back today, *Beautiful Losers* has a striking *plus ça change...* feel, and while Canadian literary production is particularly good at canonizing the cultural legends it wants, it's quite refreshing to report that *Beautiful Losers* remains a really dirty book.

On the face of it, it shouldn't be so. Saying *Beautiful Losers* is a novel set in the Montreal of the Quiet Revolution that looks back on the life of seventeenth-century Mohawk saint Kateri Tekakwitha makes it sound like the Canadian novel *par excellence* – weaving past into future, bringing the birch forests of our colonial past to the city streets of our alienated today. But, it's not quite like that. The first person narrator comes out swinging with earnest postmodernist ambition, asking “Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you (1656–1680)?” – troubling the narrative early with an assertion of the impossibility of reputation and the intercession of competing histories. But, before you get ready to smell the cigarettes that Camus left ashing, the novel starts with its signature riffing, finding phrases like “fuck her on the moon with a steel hourglass up your hole,” which, when you think about it, may be a reasonable metaphor for the hypocritical junctures of history and desire, but not a Farley Mowat flag-waver that's going to be typified as CanLit.

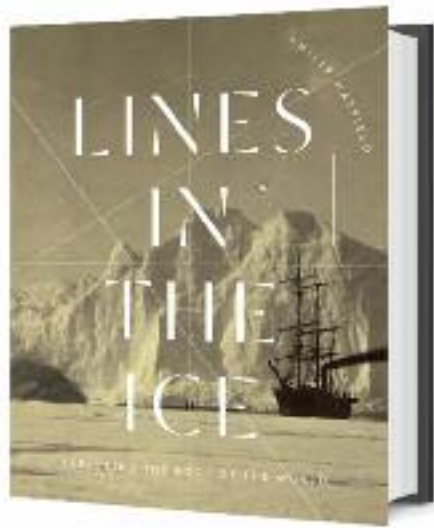
Beautiful Losers is, in many ways, Cohen's most accomplished literary work, particularly if we steer away from debating whether or not the lyrics to “In My Secret Life” constitute literature. It is a fully expressive, detailed, researched, sincere novel that takes Cohen's classic mixing of the sacred and the profane (i.e., is “Hallelujah” a hymn or a song about a break up?) to its greatest limit, all the while frustrating readers not just with its blasé statements which seek to end “genital imperialism” but with its obdurate composition. There are no copies of *Beautiful Losers* whose pages are so well thumbed they automatically fall open to the sauciest scenes. There are no “saucy scenes” *per se* and the bulk of the book is mostly a series of near-Joycean gestures, full of wonderful asides and unforgettable poetic drifts (Veil imagery! Sexy saints! We're all losers!), but a

complete disaster if one was expecting, you know, a novel that had pleasure outside the context of an English class or a commemorative retrospective.

Not that *Beautiful Losers* would be high on any college teacher's list of Canadian novels to teach (“Excuse me, professor, what does he mean when he says ‘The sexual Hit Parade is written by fathers who shave?’”) any more than it would be chosen as a *Canada Reads* title or as a title for history's greatest book recommendation source, *Oprah's Book Club*. That consistent discomfort could be *Beautiful Losers*' greatest unchanging bragging right: the staunch sense that it exists outside of the ameliorative construct of literature itself and lives in a lumpen pile of sixties and seventies pocket books that were weary of such persistent decency. After all, what could recommend it better than the *Globe and Mail's* initial review, which went so far as to tag it with the most finger-wagging of all creative school put-downs, “verbal masturbation”?

It, of course, suits Montreal to be looked at as the source of such wholesome tsk-tsking, as if *Beautiful Losers* was the pulsing neon of the Club Super Sexe sign, reddening the faces of visitors from Grimsby. But, that is probably more about the idea of *Beautiful Losers* as a risqué farce and not about *Beautiful Losers* an earnest, experimental novel. In the book's memorable graf about Montreal/Quebec, Montreal's well-worn claim to be the hedonistic antidote to the dull certainties of English Canada is as elemental as the change of seasons:

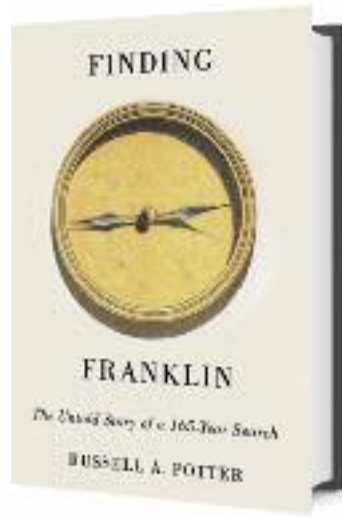
Spring comes into Québec from the west. [...] it sneaks into Québec, into our villages, between our birch trees. In Montréal the cafés, like a bed of tulip bulbs, sprout from their cellars in a display of awnings and chairs. In Montréal spring is like an autopsy. Everyone wants to see the inside of the frozen mammoth. Girls rip off their sleeves



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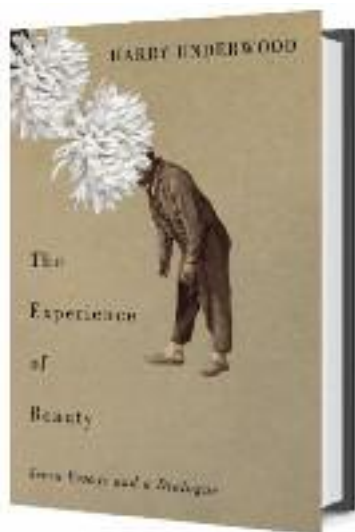


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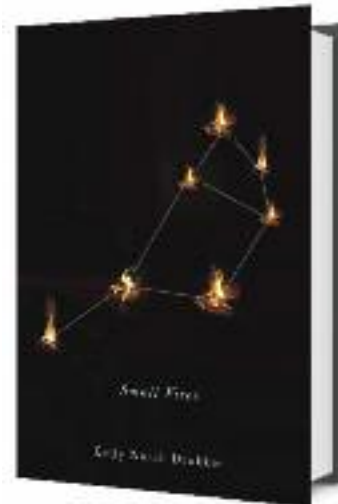
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