

SPRING 2017

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MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

# Multivocal Montreal

Kaie Kellough's *Accordéon*

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ARIELA FREEDMAN'S *ARABIC FOR BEGINNERS*

JOSIP NOVAKOVICH'S *TUMBLEWEED*

LAURA BROADBENT'S *IN ON THE GREAT JOKE*

HEATHER O'NEILL'S *THE LONELY HEARTS HOTEL*

ROBYN MAYNARD: BLACK WRITING MATTERS



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Lisa Czech is a Montreal illustrator and the creator of the comic *Punk Village*.



ACCORDÉON  
Kaie Kellough  
ARP Books  
\$18.95, paper, 168pp  
9781894037839



## Kaie Kellough

### Montreal's Word-Sound Systemizer and the Voices of the City

Standing on the stage at Casa del Popolo, surrounded by blinking sound mixers and effects controllers, Kaie Kellough begins reading from his debut novel *Accordéon* in a low, even tone. It is a snowy night in late January, but the dimly lit room is warm and full of affection for the Montreal poet and self-identified word-sound systemizer. Soon a recording of Kellough's own voice reading the novel overtakes him. The live sound performance intersperses distortion and other effects, at times contorting the recorded voice, an unnamed Montrealer's anxious monologue about the city. Audience members nod their heads in agreement, laugh, and finally erupt into applause.

It was an ideal launch for a book that practically leaps off the page, its long careening passages and rhythmic, precise language demanding to be spoken. It also revealed the seamless connection between Kellough's ongoing work as a poet and performer and this, his first foray into fiction.

*Accordéon* is a smart experimental novel with a timely message. Our narrator is an anonymous itinerant who stands downtown, at the corner of Sainte-Catherine and Saint-Mathieu Streets, delivering monologues mostly ignored by passersby. Having come to the attention of the ominous Ministry of Culture, which seeks to catalogue and thereby shape and control Quebec culture, the narrator has been kidnapped and their monologues have become testimony about the state of Quebec society. What readers have before them is a transcript, sporadically annotated by three ministry agents, each of whom has their own ideas about national culture.

Over espresso in Little Italy the week before his book launch, Kellough tells me the novel was inspired by events of the recent past, particularly the tensions that exploded around the proposed Charter of Values. "That whole moment was very dramatic and I think it really resonated deeply with a lot of people in Montreal," Kellough says. "It was an attempt to curate a vision of society, down to reaching into people's personal lives." Readers in Quebec will recognize the fictional Ministry of Culture as a thinly veiled version of efforts by the real government to police acceptable forms of cultural expression. Kellough imagines his narrator as someone who has been acutely affected by these conflicts, and whose testimony dramatizes the tensions of contemporary Quebec.

Kellough, who has lived in Montreal since 1998, was born in Vancouver and grew up in Calgary with family roots in Guyana. He tells me much of his work has been concerned with how people move – or are restricted from moving – through the city. People of colour, immigrants, and particularly those without citizenship, experience Montreal very differently from white, middle-class Quebecers. Kellough says he wanted *Accordéon* to express the "presence and contributions that different people have made to the society we live in" but also to highlight that "people's positions are often very precarious." Montreal is not one place but many. Early on, the narrator of *Accordéon* declares their monologue "is about the city right now, as a dynamic entity." It is this dynamism – the sense of a city narrated in multiple registers – that drives the novel. While the Ministry of Culture wishes to isolate one true version, *Accordéon* reads as a counter-archive, emphasizing the multivocality of Montreal.

The conversation that emerges among the annotators creates the book's forward narrative motion, but the testimony itself is non-linear, a series of looping, self-reflexive fragments full of non sequiturs, sense and nonsense, a clairvoyant stream-of-consciousness that weaves details from the present into

those of the distant and recent past. The narrator insists that everything in the history of the province is happening at the same time – has happened and is still happening. The ease with which Kellough blends past and present is extraordinary; the first two pages of the novel left me breathless. They include references to buying moisturizer at Jean Coutu, the Plains of Abraham, the École Polytechnique massacre, the martyrdom of Brébeuf and Lalemant, a video posted to YouTube of an Arab boy being beaten by police on the metro, the fur trade, the student strike, and the mythical *chasse-galerie*, or flying canoe, soaring over the city.

Countless references to real historical and contemporary people, places, and details in Montreal litter the prose. These are not characters or settings; rather, they are invocations that energize the psychogeography of the novel. Anarchopanda, Bixi, Marie-Joseph Angélique, Fredy Villanueva, Ellen Gabriel, Nomadic Massive, Lafleur, Pop Montreal, Jaggi Singh, Stéfanie Trudeau, the list goes on and on.

"I didn't set out deliberately to include certain people or entities," Kellough tells me. "They appeared naturally. They are part of the popular imagination of Quebec, like cultural landmarks. And they also stand for more than themselves. They're like little chaos machines in a narrative, because you never know how they're going to explode." Depending on a reader's personal history, certain names will bring to mind any number of memories, emotions, or ideas. "That adds additional sub-narratives and subplots I might not have intended."

Among the historical and contemporary figures who appear in *Accordéon* are numerous Montreal writers, whose presence has a particular resonance. For instance, an early scene in which the narrator sees Dany Laferrière floating through a metro station evocatively mirrors Laferrière's own description of seeing Henry Miller in *How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired*. But Kellough also had a more prosaic reason for including it: it really happened. "I saw him – in the metro," he tells me with a laugh. "People in the arts in Quebec are part of the physical landscape of Montreal. Montreal's a small place. So that's part of the reason for

putting them in the book: you *will* run into them." Throughout the book, this combination of playful intertextuality with fantastical elements and realistic details of contemporary Montreal – a short scene in which the narrator eats a croissant is magnificent – underscores Kellough's ingenuity and thoughtfulness as a writer and is among the great joys of the novel.

Kellough mentions Nelly Arcan, Hubert Aquin, and sound poet Claude Gauvreau as Montreal writers whose work he admires, but he is more inclined to position his own writing in a broader tradition of African American and Caribbean poetry. Kamau Brathwaite and Harryette Mullen are among his favourite writers, and the label *word-sound systemizer* comes from Jamaican dub poetry. He also feels a kinship with Laferrière: "he was an immigrant, living here, and a writer, and I kind of identify with that. I'm not from Quebec, but also part of my family is not from Canada either. So I feel like I'm an outsider here writing within and about this culture, and he was in a similar position."

The many voices of the outsider are central to *Accordéon*. This finds its clearest expression in recurring stories about the flying canoe, which Kellough represents as an Indigenous technology and a decolonial space, rather than beholden to Quebec mythology. The numerous canoe trips – diverse collections of people paddling up and over the moon – include some of the most lyrical writing in the book. Importantly, the canoe also confounds the annotators from the Ministry of Culture. Whereas we're told "one of the main functions of the Ministry is to maintain a hierarchy among narratives," in Kellough's version of the canoe, "all stories are equal." "The flying canoe baffles them," Kellough tells me. "They lose their proprietary hold over Quebecois culture."

Kellough's vision of the canoe is embodied by *Accordéon*. It is a remarkable work of experimental fiction that pushes back against those who would forward a singular narrative of this unabashedly contradictory city, celebrating instead the messy multiplicity of Montreal. **mb**

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



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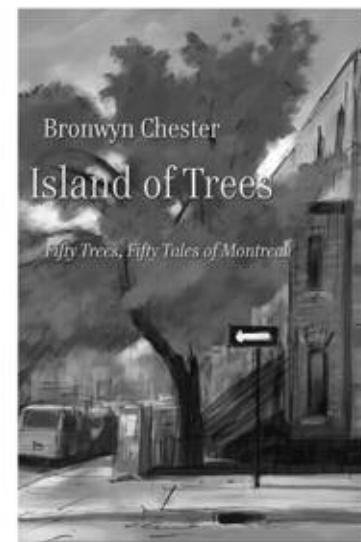
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BRONWYN CHESTER



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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JEAN-LUC TRUDEL  
AND CHARLES L'HEUREUX

MAPS THROUGHOUT



BRONWYN CHESTER wrote a weekly column on trees for the *Montreal Gazette* and gave numerous tree walks in Montreal parks and neighbourhoods. She also published *A Leafy Legacy: The Trees of McGill University*. Bronwyn Chester died in 2012.

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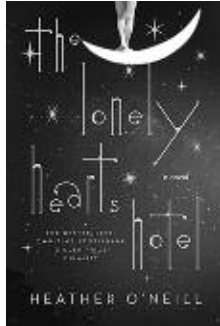
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# fiction

## Lovers in a Dangerous Time

### THE LONELY HEARTS HOTEL

Heather O'Neill  
HarperCollins  
\$32.99, cloth, 400pp  
9781443435864



Between 1920 and 1940, an estimated three thousand orphans were left in the care of nuns at the Hôpital de la Miséricorde in Montreal's east end. This is where Heather O'Neill's latest novel, *The Lonely Hearts Hotel*, begins: in the grim, grey orphanage, where even the most fragile babies are seen as little more than evidence of sin. Two such children – Pierrot, a presumed stillborn who miraculously comes back to life, and Rose, named for the marks that bloom on her cheeks when she's found abandoned in the snow – manage to thrive in the orphanage, entertaining the other children and turning contemptuous remarks into words of affection.

Together the two children are a rather fabulous act. So good, in fact, that they perform at the homes of wealthy families around the city to the financial benefit of the institution. It's a fairly decent existence, one that allows the children to dream of a future when they can take their show on the road. But their dream is not to be. Cruelly separated, the two live out their teenage years getting into petty crime and heroin (him) and transitioning from nanny to mistress (her).

O'Neill first made a name for herself with her heart-wrenching debut, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, about a twelve-year-old girl, her junkie father, and her slide into prostitution. She revisits many of the same themes – sexual abuse, addiction, prostitution – in *The Lonely Hearts Hotel*, but with the Great Depression as backdrop, the dark themes feel somehow lighter and less distressing. When the whole world is in the gutter, it's only natural that some are looking at the stars.

Those stars, however, are the siren call of the underworld. The seedy underbelly of the city is controlled by gangsters, and Rose quickly starts scheming ways to join them. Following her touching reunion with Pierrot, the two sweethearts begin to plan their touring show. *The Snowflake Icicle Extravaganza* is a showcase for the city's saddest, most absurd clowns. They ride out on bicycles, arrive naked in bathtubs, and drunkenly tightrope walk over the audience. O'Neill is known for her whimsy, and nothing is as whimsical as this – think proto-Cirque du Soleil.

That same playfulness runs throughout the novel and is most affecting when used as a coping mechanism, for instance, when we see Rose, the nanny, wandering the garden blindfolded, her charges following blindly along. This wonderful imagery continues with striking metaphors on almost every other page: "The orchids hung over the cast-iron gates like girls in just their petticoats yelling at the postman for a letter." Such imagery is one of her strengths, but O'Neill is at her most confident describing the lives



of the down-and-out: their shabby underwear, threadbare suits, and decrepit one-room apartments. The beautiful contrasted with the vulgar creates a world that feels more make-believe than real – a world in soft focus.

As Rose's commitment to the *Extravaganza* grows, Pierrot recedes. There's little room for a dreamy, kind-hearted junkie when you're on a mission to control your future. Rose and Pierrot are on course to rule Montreal's underworld, but where Rose is willing to do anything to secure her place, Pierrot is uninterested in becoming a gangster. The choice both characters face is simple and universal: do you choose to create your own future or continue to be controlled by your past?

By placing this question at the centre of her story, O'Neill challenges the overall tone of the novel, positioning Rose as a woman battling for equality, rather than a victim of circumstance. While *The Lonely Hearts Hotel* remains a novel about two lovable eccentrics, Rose's drive and feminist spirit balance out the novel's fantastical aspects; the result is both more genuine and more meaningful. **ms**

Sacha Jackson is a writer and the former editor of Invisible Publishing's Bibliophonic series on Canadian music.

## Lies in Technicolor

### FIERCE FEMMES AND NOTORIOUS LIARS

A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir  
Kai Cheng Thom  
Metonymy Press  
\$16.95, paper, 200pp  
9780994047137



It would be hard to put it more concisely or accurately than Trish Salah does on the back cover: "The first lie is that this book is a memoir, the second is that it is not." Another way to say it might be to use Audre Lorde's evocative term "biomythography." *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* by Kai Cheng Thom is a book that uses its warm-hearted critique of the conventional tropes of the trans memoir as a way to reinvent those very tropes in fabulist Technicolor. It effortlessly changes the rules, cracking open a space of freedom, the kind of freedom that can only come from entering a game al-

ready in play and breaking each played-out rule with greater and more playful impunity. A dark fairy tale told by a "notorious liar."

It begins with the very first line: "I don't believe in safe spaces. They don't exist. I do, however, believe in dangerous stories." After a list of the many glamorous, dangerous stories that might be conjured, including those "that made your poor starving grandfather cross an entire ocean in search of the unbelievable riches someone once told him were waiting on the other side," the first page ends with a question: "Where are those kinds of stories about trans girls like you and me?" This question strongly suggests who this book is written for, and its

mile-a-minute engagement with its desired audience is one of its greatest strengths. But, of course, simply because it is such a thrillingly pleasurable read, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* can't help but also be a book for any thoughtful reader who chooses to pick it up.

The questions continue: "Where are all the stories about little swarthy-skinned robber trans girls waving tiny knives made of bone? About trans teenage witches with golden eyes ...? About trans girls who lost their father in the war and their mother to disease, and who go forth to find where Death lives and make him give them back?" A list of questions conveying that this book is just the beginning, that this book intends to start an avalanche of stories that will keep going forever. Also, a list of questions revelling in the power of fantasy to alter reality, to question so-called reality and make it, at least momentarily, more bearable.

One of the joys of *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* is not knowing what might happen next, so I'm not going to give anything away. Instead I'd like to briefly grapple with the complexity of character, and motivation, which drives so many of the relationships in this book, all conveyed with almost epigrammatic precision. These

characters are simultaneously simplified types and complex realities, and often the dynamics within and between them occur so swiftly that it is only later we realize just how much emotional intensity has been expressed.

For example, when the narrator says goodbye to her sister, she reveals to readers the real reason she hadn't announced her plans earlier: "It wasn't because I was trying to spare her feelings. It was because I was selfish. ... I had to run away into a world where she could not follow." All of this takes place against a backdrop of giant, dying mermaids. "It was because I was selfish." How many of us are so honest with our secret selves during such dramatic moments? This "notorious liar" might lie to others but rarely lies to herself, and this tension between fantasy and self-awareness energizes so much of the prose.

I can't end this review without mentioning the strikingly gorgeous cover art by Samantha Garritano. It screams "this book is something different from every other book on the shelf." They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but in this case you can. **ms**

Jacob Wren makes literature, collaborative performances, and exhibitions. His most recent novel is *Rich and Poor*.

## Lest We Forget

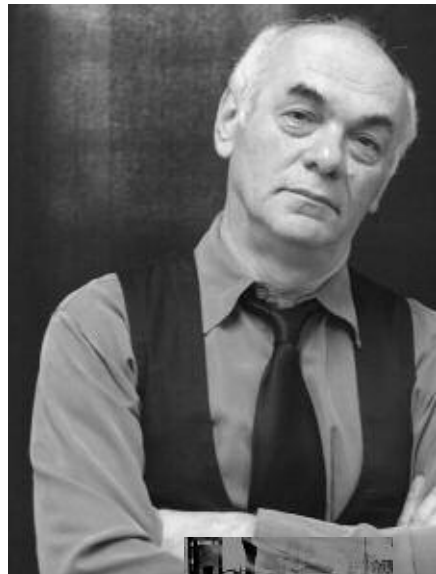
NEVER, AGAIN

Endre Farkas

Signature Editions

\$19.95, paper, 216pp

9781927426869



In Endre Farkas's novel *Never, Again*, the protagonist Tomi, a young Hungarian Jewish boy, tries to digest the history that has abruptly been unveiled to him: "He wants to ask his parents so many questions. He wants to know the meaning of big words like de-se-cra-tion. He wants to know what a ghetto is, and what people concentrated on while they were in a concentration camp. But something tells him he isn't supposed to be asking these questions now. Maybe that's what it means to be a grown-up ... knowing when to ask questions and when not to." This reflection captures the heart of the novel's central themes: When, and with whom, should knowledge of atrocities be shared? Is it always better to possess such knowledge; and is the idea that knowledge of history will keep us safe merely an illusion?



The novel is set during the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. The uprising began as a student revolt against the Soviet-controlled government that had been established at the end of World War II, and quickly escalated into nationwide violence. The conflict led to significant loss of life, as well as many Hungarians fleeing as refugees. Of those refugees, an important percentage were Jewish; many of these individuals were alarmed at how the unrest of the uprising emboldened anti-Semitic sentiment, and feared the possibility of a return to Nazi-era politics.

Farkas chooses to frame these events from twinned perspectives of innocence and experience. Tomi has enjoyed a relatively stable life in a small rural town, and is preoccupied with playing soccer and beginning his education. His parents, Sanyi and Hannah, are both Holocaust survivors; at first, they are mainly seen through Tomi's perspective, but as the novel progresses, the details of their past traumas are revealed. These are details that have been deliberately withheld from Tomi, who has only a vague idea of what it means to be Jewish, and he is shocked the first time he encounters anti-Semitism. His lack of understanding means that when his parents decide to leave a country that has now betrayed them too many times, the abrupt flight from the only life he has ever known is even more confusing and terrifying for him.

The figure of a child protagonist not yet fettered by the burdens of history lends the novel its greatest strength: a subtle balance between everyday ubiquity and unimaginable horror. Sparse, straightforward prose effortlessly captures the voice of a young boy but can also be redolent with details when it switches into the perspective of the parents. Scents and tastes play a particularly prominent role, such as when Sanyi recalls the first time he met his wife: "He inhaled the lavender fragrance of her hair and the fat flavoured steam of chicken soup, the sweetness of boiled carrots, and the meat-rich sholent. He fell in love." This emphasis on capturing sensory impressions, as well as the sincerity and simplicity of Tomi's emotional reactions to moments like receiving hockey jerseys from his aunt in Canada, imbue the novel with a nostalgic fragility. Even while Tomi remains ignorant of both the horrors that have come before him and those that lie ahead, the reader cannot help but see the events of the plot unfolding through a lens of historical knowledge.

The certainty of Tomi's eventual loss of innocence haunts the novel, as does an even darker sense of cyclical repetition. The strategic punctuation of the title raises the spectre of inevitability. Farkas leaves readers both with the implication that knowledge alone will not guarantee a better future and a lingering unease about what, if any, recourse can ensure that historical catastrophes are not allowed to reoccur. **msb**

Danielle Barkley holds a PhD from the Department of English at McGill University and teaches topics including writing, rhetoric, and critical analysis.

## Timeless Tale

THE LONGEST YEAR

Daniel Grenier

Translated by Pablo Strauss

House of Anansi Press

\$22.95, paper, 384pp

978148700153

Daniel Grenier's ambitious debut novel spans thousands of kilometres across North America and hundreds of years of history as it reflects on the nature of memory, love, and mortality. *The Longest Year* received several prize nominations and won the prestigious Prix littéraire des collégiens when it was originally published in French in 2015, and it is a worthy addition to the current gold rush of contemporary Quebecois literature now becoming available in English translation.

*The Longest Year* is made up of two separate narrative threads, one set in the contemporary world, and the other stretching back through the centuries. The initial story is set in motion when young Gaspésien Albert Langlois arrives in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1980, drawn to the American south by his genealogical research on a mysterious ancestor. Albert marries a young woman and the two have a son, Thomas, who is soon left an orphan to be raised by his devout and emotionally distant grandparents. Thomas takes these traumas in stride, and the first quarter of the novel charts his suburban coming of age.

The novel's main storyline focuses on the subject of Albert's research, a distant ancestor who, through a celestial accident, is still very much alive more than two hundred years after his birth. Born on leap day in 1760, Aimé Bolduc is nearly immortal, only aging one out of every four years. The novel delights as it weaves back and forth through the many misadventures of Aimé's life, including his stints as a weapons smuggler for the Lower Canada Rebellion, a Union soldier in the American Civil War, and a Hollywood bootlegger during Prohibition. Grenier also charts the quieter moments of Aimé's life, such as his work as a small-town newspaper publisher, and tenderly relates his star-crossed romance with a young woman in Montreal's Saint-Henri during the 1860s.

Throughout the book, Grenier evocatively differentiates the many historical periods in which Aimé's story is set. The cold and dismal streets of occupied eighteenth-century Quebec City feel completely different from the bustling streets of prosperous Montreal a century



later. In particular, Grenier's description of the building of the Lachine Canal is a bravura performance.

Written in a stylish narrative voice, conveyed here through an excellent translation by Pablo Strauss, *The Longest Year* evokes the literary yarns of the nineteenth century. Relying heavily on exposition with little dialogue between characters, the novel tells far more than it shows, a perfect technique for spinning the tall tales of Aimé's world. This panoramic view is somewhat less successful at capturing the life of Thomas Langlois, whose story bookends the adventures of his larger-than-life

**Written in a stylish narrative voice ... *The Longest Year* evokes the literary yarns of the nineteenth century.**

ancestor. Even with some ups and downs, Thomas's humdrum daily life in Chattanooga appears to be in black and white next to Aimé's Technicolor adventures.

At times it might seem that Aimé is at the centre of far too many significant mo-

ments of the past; for instance, his experiences during the Civil War serve as the basis for both Stephen Crane's landmark novel *The Red Badge of Courage* and Buster Keaton's classic film *The General*. But such coincidences are common in historical fiction, and it's to Grenier's credit that, although far-fetched, these moments are skillfully crafted, allowing readers to happily suspend disbelief. Another enjoyable aspect of the book is the frequent references to existing fictional characters, such as the bootlegging Gursky brothers of Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here*.

*The Longest Year* is widescreen historical fiction at its finest. Grenier's inventive fabrications are richly compelling, and the novel is full of wit, whimsy, and a wellspring of historical detail, both real and imagined. **msb**

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

## Lives in Poetry

THE END, BY ANNA

Adam Zachary

Metatron

\$14.00, paper, 108pp

9781988355023

BALONEY

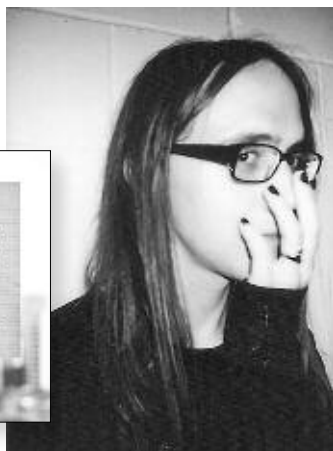
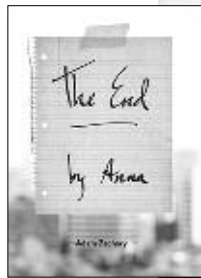
Maxime Raymond Bock

Translated by Pablo Strauss

Coach House Books

\$18.95, paper, 96pp

9781552453391



“The End” was to be Anna’s greatest work but she has died before having the chance to create it. Her friend has set out to inspire someone else to perform this unrealized work, in which the artist, alone on the tundra, live streams their death from exposure. In *The End, By Anna*, Adam Zachary’s narrator gives us the story of Anna, her short life, and her prolific two-year career, its roots in rebellion against a poetry professor who admonished students that writing a poem is like building a house. Anna’s contribution to class in response was a video of the fire she’d set in an abandoned house. “This poem took the form of a house burning down,” she says as she steps into the frame.

Part catalogue, part biography,

Zachary’s novella is an elegy in the form of a tenderly presented archive. Their prose is spare and resonant. The narrator cataloguing Anna’s work is clear-eyed and sensitive and occasionally uncertain in their curatorial role – both artistic executor and confused friend, still trying to make sense of it all. After poetry, Anna had turned to photography, film, and conceptual performance. Some of this work was insightful, some of it, notes the narrator, of questionable “artistic merit.” The book becomes a meditation on youth, art, beauty, death, purity, and performance – the dominant themes of Anna’s oeuvre, and of her life story. The power of “The End,” perplexing and infuriating to those close to her, is that it remains “a dream that Anna did not have the chance to realize.” It exists only in the realm of the purely possible, left to the narrator of this

intelligent and melancholic work to offer up to the reader – a suggestion, a provocation, a way to finally understand what Anna was hoping to achieve.

The narrator of Maxime Raymond Bock’s *Baloney* is a young, failed poet looking for a way back to writing, his days now spent parenting, earning money. When he meets Robert Lacerte at a reading one night, he wonders if he’s found the person to guide him.

Lacerte – “Baloney” to the poet set – tells the narrator the story of his life, from rough and raw weeks in a logging camp to youthful camaraderie in 1960s Sherbrooke and travels in South America that ultimately went horribly, tragically wrong. The second half of Lacerte’s life has been quieter; he cleans public pools by day, drinks by night, and clings to the fringes of the poetry world. He has written poems every day of his life.

The narrator first hopes for a mentor to help him find a way back to poetry, but quickly adjusts his expectations – “I’d found a clown, a character, a subject to objectify.” Lacerte is rather less ridiculous a character than his nickname would have him, however, and when the persona falters, revealing a vulnerable old man, they both “cut the shit” – they’ve become friends. But



the young poet is still also hoping for some kind of artistic salvation; whatever else Lacerte’s archives may hold, they are full of “the thing itself, writing, a stubborn impulse that survived under any circumstance, because it had to.” He has a kind of certainty irresistible to someone seeking validation that poetry is worth spending a life on.

Bock gives this story of a small, sad existence all the glorious complexity and contradiction it deserves. Pablo Strauss, who translated Bock’s previous novel, *Atavisms*, brings us *Baloney* in spirited English that fully captures the rich and energetic language of the original, an empathetic study of a life in poetry, the dogged commitment and magnificent failure. MRB

Aimee Wall is a writer and translator living in Montreal. Her translation of *Testament* by Vickie Gendreau was published in 2016.

## Beaming Inward

BEHOLD THINGS BEAUTIFUL

Cora Siré

Signature Editions

\$19.95, paper, 256pp

9781927426890

“Turn out the lights... words emerge fragile as sprigs...and behold things beautiful. You exhale. Close all doors and enter illusion... the words pull you elsewhere. To a desk, clean hands holding a book, your former self, safe and sane. Briefly you remember who you are.”

These are some of the thoughts of Alma Álvarez, a CEGEP teacher and the protagonist of *Behold Things Beautiful*, as she begins to understand why she has returned to her home country of Luscano. Initially she thought she was returning to deliver a lecture on the poet Delmira Agustini, and to visit her moribund mother. In 1991 the military junta had imprisoned Alma for a week. She was one of the lucky ones who got out alive; 387 others did not. She fled to Montreal immediately after. It’s now 2003.

The novel portrays a gallery of characters: torture survivors, relatives of the

*desaparecidos*, beneficiaries of the torture and assassinations, members of the secret resistance, and even the torturers themselves. *Behold Things Beautiful* is also about femicide, which Siré keeps in the foreground through Alma’s obsession with the poet Delmira Agustini, who was shot by her husband in a murder-suicide. The title of the novel is a fragment from a line of an Agustini poem that’s quoted at length towards the end of the novel. Exile is another subtheme, conveyed through Alma’s own feelings of exile in Montreal; we sense it too in the character of Gabriel, whose brother Roberto is one of the *desaparecidos*.

At the novel’s core is the question: Why does humanity repeatedly commit such atrocities? We overhear Alma’s old friend Flaco reflecting on this as he enumerates a long list of the atrocities committed by military regimes around the world. He concludes, “Evil never dies, it simply relocates.” But Flaco, for all his desire to prosecute the torturers, belongs to the country’s oligarchy and is told in very clear terms that he must comply with its wishes. And comply he does, for his survival depends on it. But there are those who resist valiantly and mostly futilely. And in the calm that follows, monuments are erected to the victims with the tacit approval of the



oligarchs, provided they function largely as tourist attractions and are not blatant reminders of the murdered and missing.

Writing this novel was an ambitious but successful undertaking. Siré wanted Luscano, which “is an amalgam of Uruguay, Argentina and Chile in miniature,” to be a stage where readers witness – and contemplate – the self-inflicted atrocities of humanity. Even so, the scenic beauty of Luscano is graphically depicted. Siré even invents a history for Luscano, one that parallels the bloody and tumultuous histories of the region. Importantly, Agustini’s poem, placed strategically at the end of

the narrative, urges readers to “Turn out the lights and behold things beautiful; / Close all doors and enter illusion.” When the lights are out our vision turns inward, to our inner selves. What do we then see? But there are also those who turn out the lights to avoid seeing at all.

Siré’s omniscient narrator is effective for the novel’s purpose. For the narrative to achieve its impact, it’s essential that we be privy to the thoughts of the more important characters, observe the games they play with themselves, and discover

what they are afraid to reveal. But the most enthralling sections of the novel are those where Alma speaks in her own voice. This reviewer wonders whether the discrete sections on Agustini – interesting to read in themselves – wouldn’t have been more effectively integrated into Alma’s own story.

This is a richly textured novel that reflects extensive knowledge of the performing and visual arts. Siré’s creation of ambiance is impressive. MRB

H. Nigel Thomas is the author of four novels and three collections of short fiction. His latest novel *No Safeguards* was a finalist for the 2015 Paragraphe QWF Hugh MacLennan Fiction Prize.



By Claire Holden Rothman

## Ariela Freedman

# Crossing the Line in the Sand

Israel has always been a complicated place. With the occupation of the Palestinian territories entering its fiftieth year and the most right-wing, racially divisive, and pro-settler government in Israeli history poised to retain power in the upcoming elections, it's more complicated than ever.

*Arabic for Beginners* is Montreal writer and scholar Ariela Freedman's attempt to explain some of these complexities. Which is not to say that she simplifies things. Her book is a nuanced and penetrating exploration of life in Israel today. Billed on its cover as a novel, *Arabic for Beginners* reads more like a memoir than fiction. But whatever the genre, it's well worth reading.

Its genesis was a year Freedman spent with her young family on sabbatical in Jerusalem in 2008–2009. Freedman had visited Israel as a child and adolescent, but now, returning as an adult after a long absence, she found herself experiencing two versions of the country: the Israel of her youthful, idealizing imagination and

the country actually before her. Contradictory feelings of intimacy and ambivalence, connection and distance, compelled her to sit down and write.

From the start, form was an issue. What kind of book could possibly contain all of the conflicting experiences, memories, and ideas assailing her? Freedman, who teaches modernist literature at Concordia University's Liberal Arts College, took inspiration from Samuel Beckett. "He has this phrase I love about finding a shape to accommodate the mess," she tells me over tea in a west-end Montreal café.

The shape she eventually found for her book is borderless, which is ironic given her subject matter: a country where lines in the sand are sacrosanct. *Arabic for Beginners* is part of the current literary trend of genre-crossing. "I read a lot of autofiction," she explains, "writers like Karl Ove Knausgaard, Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, and Rachel Cusk, who shift between memoir and fiction and also incorporate other genres in their writing, like art criticism and travel literature. I wanted the plasticity of fiction, the ability to create composite characters, to shift timelines, to invent."

At the centre of this shape-shifting fictional narrative is Hannah, a thirty-four-year-old PhD student from Montreal, who, in a slight twist of fact from the author's own life, follows her professor-husband to Jerusalem, where he's been invited to teach for the year. Hannah's own career is on hold, sidelined by childbirth and motherhood.

She enrolls her youngest son in "The Peace Preschool," an institution located in West Jerusalem that boasts Muslim and Jewish students and a bilingual Hebrew-Arabic curriculum. Hannah is Jewish. She speaks Hebrew but is keen to learn Palestinian Arabic and to have her sons learn it too. As it turns out, Arabic has been dropped from the curriculum. Not enough Arab children attend the school to warrant it, and the local Jewish and Christian families aren't interested.

Hannah befriends one of the few Palestinian mothers at the school, Jenna al-Masri, ten years her junior

with three children already in tow. Friendships between Arabs and Jews are rare, Hannah learns. She also learns why.

The first barrier is language. People aren't offered the tools to communicate. After scouring the city, Hannah discovers that it is "oddly difficult to find beginner Arabic classes in Jerusalem."

It turns out that Israel's Jewish and Arab school systems are segregated. From a young age, Jews and Arabs are separated physically from each other. And within their separate schools, second-language training is low on the priority list. "A child growing up in West Jerusalem will learn only rudimentary Arabic," Freedman says, "while one in East Jerusalem may not learn Hebrew at all."

Soldiers in the Israeli army are required to learn a little Arabic. But what they learn isn't exactly conducive to amicable relationships. *Machsomite*, it is called: "Checkpoint language." *Machsomite* consists "only of commands," Freedman writes. "Open your bag. Take the car seat out of the car. Step outside. Hands up."

The Arabic Hannah ends up studying, once she manages to locate a teacher, is a more inviting, poetic language than the one the soldiers speak. She delights in "the many modes of greeting: 'good morning,' 'bright morning,' 'rose morning,' 'jasmine morning,'" and appreciates that "when someone fed you, you 'blessed their hands.'"

The second barrier separating Arabs from Jews is literal: a seven-hundred-kilometre wall running along the Green line in the West Bank. "The Wall was built to improve security," Freedman explains, "and in certain ways it succeeded. But at a price. The kinds of encounters that people had enjoyed for more than a generation with their neighbours disappeared. There were all kinds of other really serious consequences to the Wall, but that was the one that concerned me. You couldn't visit anymore. You couldn't see people. When the Wall



**ARABIC FOR BEGINNERS**  
Ariela Freedman  
Linda Leith Publishing  
\$18.95, paperback, 310pp  
9781988130330

was built, all these natural humanizing encounters ended."

Hannah's movements are not curtailed the way those of an Israeli or a Palestinian would be. Thanks to a Canadian passport, she is able to explore cities in the West Bank like Bethlehem and Ramallah, and visit Jenna's home in East Jerusalem. On these trips, she meets people, listens to their stories, and shares her own in faltering Arabic.

As the months go by, her friendship with Jenna deepens, despite the fact that she and Jenna have little in common except for motherhood. Relentlessly curious, hyper-educated, ironic Hannah sometimes wonders what she is doing with an uninstructed woman full of unexamined superstitions. And Jenna's mothering style appalls her. Jenna routinely gives her kids Red Bull energy drink in their baby bottles, refuses to strap them in while driving, and smokes like a chimney in front of them.

By comparison, Hannah and her friends back home in North America are a bunch of perfectionists, mashing only the best ingredients for baby food, installing water filters on their taps and all manner of safety gadgets in their homes. Eventually Hannah concedes the delusional nature of these efforts. "The organic baby food and the obsessive baby proofing had the quality of magical thinking," she admits. "We might as well have hung charms against the evil eye on their doors, or tied red strings around their chubby wrists."

continued on page 11



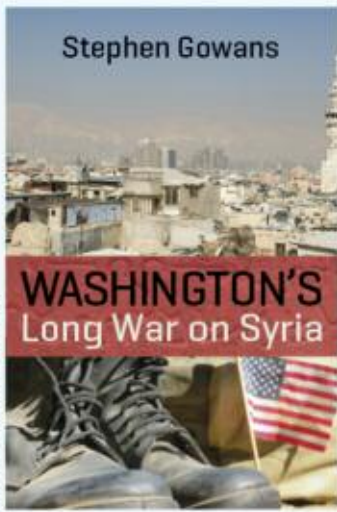
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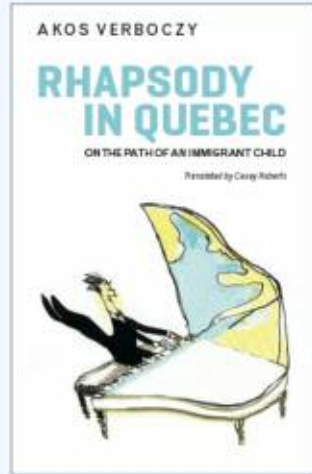
ON THE PATH OF AN IMMIGRANT CHILD

Akos Verboczy (translated by Casey Roberts)

Foreword by Toulia Drimonis

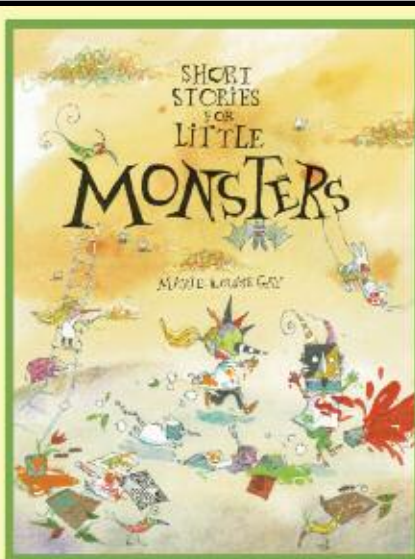


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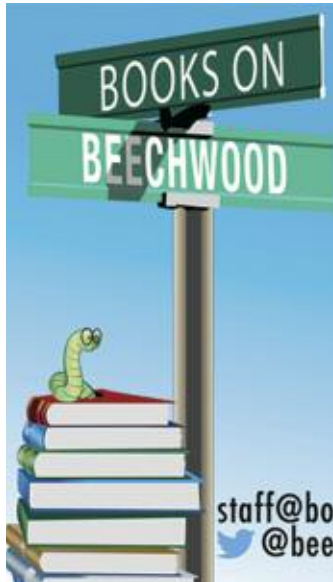
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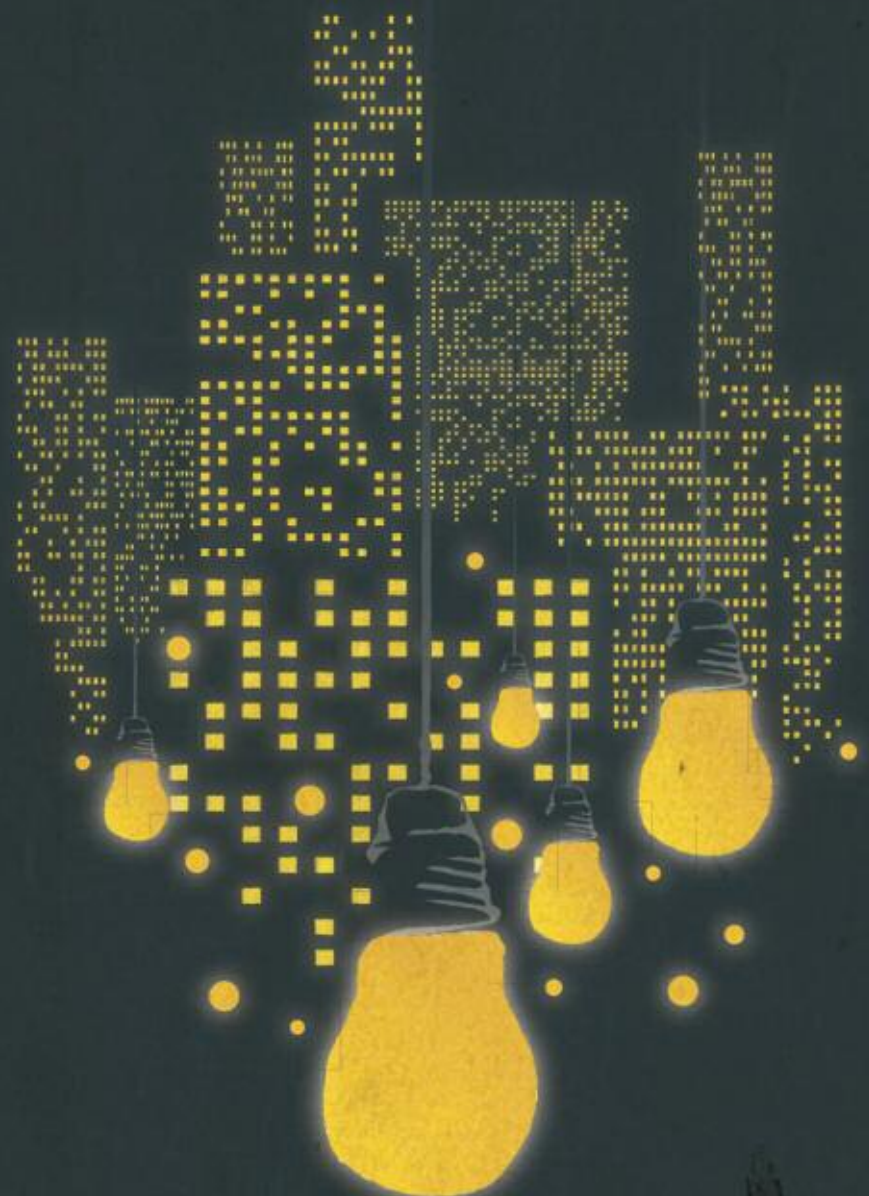
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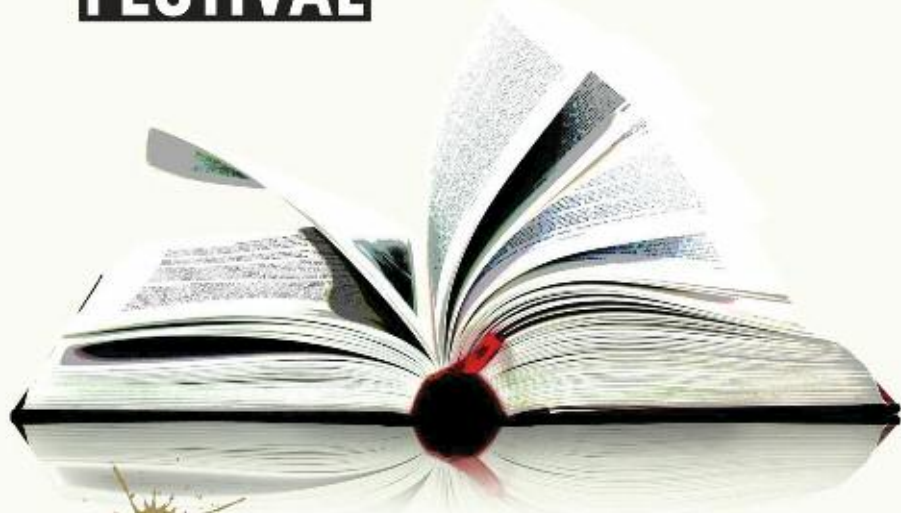
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## Ariela Freedman continued from page 9

When war breaks out in Gaza, the truth of human vulnerability hits home for Hannah. During three weeks of Israeli bombardments, she is stunned by the devastation she witnesses, and by how “the flattened buildings of Gaza City, the children without water, the hundreds – soon over a thousand – Palestinians dead,” go unreported in the local news.

When asked how much has changed since the events recorded in her book, Freedman averts her eyes. “I wish I felt that more had changed. Netanyahu, who was elected for a second mandate in 2009, is still in power.

Abbas has been Palestinian President since 2005. The Gaza wars seem less like separate conflicts than the resumption of an existing one, with periods between not of peace, but stalemate. It’s been an extremely interstitial period, with flare-ups of conflict and terror. The longer things don’t change,” she adds, “the harder it is to imagine change.”

Despite the current political climate in Israel, Freedman remains hopeful that peaceful coexistence is possible. *Arabic for Beginners* hints at what is needed for that hope to be realized. mb

Claire Holden Rothman is a Montreal novelist and translator.

### DC Spring Launch! Bring yourself and bring your friends



Writers, readers, friends of the press – all are welcome to celebrate our spring launch during the 19<sup>th</sup> Blue Met Festival in April. Hosted by Jason Camlot, the line-up begins with Tom Abrey’s deft *Where I Wanted To Be*, a subtly humorous and real portrait of a nice guy in ordinary circumstances, going through the stress of daily living and job.

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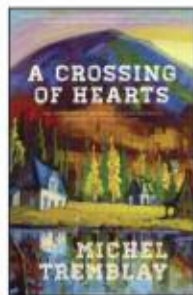
concerns in *Acqua Sacra*, Keith Henderson’s brisk new novel about private deception and public corruption. Just what is Suzanna Ricci to do when the mob and their extralegal cross-border political shenanigans invade her life?

At the podium will be Kenneth Radu, reading from his short stories, *Money Matters*, soon to appear from DC Books. Also featured: poets Steve Luxton and John Emil Vincent, whose collection will appear this Fall.



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### A Crossing of Hearts

MICHEL TREMBLAY  
translated by Sheila Fischman

August 1915. Montreal is stifled by a heat wave while war rages in Europe. The three Desrosiers sisters – Tititte, Teena, and Maria – decide to take a week of vacation in the Laurentians. Reluctantly, Maria takes her children, Nana and Théo, along. As the reader views the journey through young Nana’s eyes, we come to understand the impoverished circumstances they leave behind in Montreal, only to find poverty ever more present in the country.

*A Crossing of Hearts* continues Michel Tremblay’s Desrosiers Diaspora series of novels, a family saga set in Montreal circa World War I.

ISBN 978-1-77201-011-4 • \$16.95 • 240 pages • May 2017  
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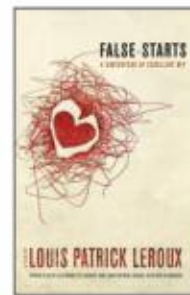
### The Envelope

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Vittorio Rossi’s new comedy-drama exposes the bureaucratic institution that is the Canadian film industry, and we follow the character Michael Moretti, a veteran playwright, as he struggles to get his new play, *Romeo’s Rise*, turned into a movie.

Michael must decide between a multi-million dollar offer from his Canadian-friend-turned-movie-producer Jake Henry, or a low-budget offer from an independent producer in Los Angeles. Will Moretti take the big bucks and compromise his work, or will he stand firm in his artistic and personal integrity?

ISBN 978-1-77201-031-2 • \$18.95 • 112 pages • 2016  
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### False Starts

A Subterfuge of Excellent Wit

Louis Patrick Leroux  
translated by Alexander St-Laurent & Katia Crubisic

False Starts presents a series of determining moments between two people stuck reliving the same scene over and over, but in unexpected ways and in different genres. Their interdependence and fundamental inability to say how they feel about one another over twenty years – in spite of their eloquence, in spite of their creativity – constitutes the background of the ongoing spectacle of their relationship.

interdependence and fundamental inability to say how they feel about one another over twenty years – in spite of their eloquence, in spite of their creativity – constitutes the background of the ongoing spectacle of their relationship.

ISBN 978-1-77201-027-5 • \$18.95 • 144 pages • 2016  
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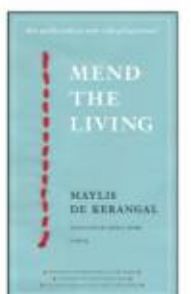
### In Search of New Babylon

DOMINIQUE SCALI  
translated by W. Donald Wilson

In this atmospheric, post-Cormac McCarthy western novel, four disparate characters criss-cross the desert in pursuit of impossible ideals.

All the main characters in this novel are invented, except one. All the towns are real, except for New Babylon. But if such a place were to exist, it would be a Wild West town where gunfights are fair play and the law bans only the lawman. It would be a perilous place, where the beauty of the desert landscape takes your breath away with the same power as an open blade and a gash to the throat.

ISBN 978-1-77201-124-1 • \$18.95 • 336 pages • March 2017  
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### Mend the Living

MAYLIS DE KERANGAL  
translated by Jessica Moore

*Mend the Living* is the story of a heart transplant, centred around Simon Limbeau, the boy whose heart is given, and his family. Taking place within exactly twenty-four hours, the novel traces the thrill of an early-morning winter surf session, the terrible accident that follows, and all the urgency and compassion of the hospital workers, and shock and grief of Simon’s family as they negotiate the question of organ donation.

ISBN 978-0-88922-973-0 • \$16.95 • 224 pages • 2016  
ebook also available • Fiction



### Running on Fumes

CHRISTIAN GUAY-POLIQUEIN  
translated by Jacob Homel

When the electricity inexplicably goes out nationwide, the mundanities of life gradually shift to the rigours of survival. In this post-apocalyptic setting, an unnamed mechanic jumps into his beat-up car and drives east, journeying 4,736 kilometres to reach his dying father. Parallels are drawn between his own journey and Theseus’s journey through the primeval Labyrinth. However, the beast that our narrator seeks to slay might not be one of flesh and horn and blood, but instead of his own failing mental state, of his thirst for this apocalypse around him.

ISBN 978-0-88922-975-4 • \$16.95 • 160 pages • Summer 2016  
ebook also available • Fiction

## Josip Novakovich Of Animals and Men

In the title story of Josip Novakovich's new collection, a Croatian immigrant, near-indigent after failing to secure expected seasonal employment, hitches a ride with a drunk driver in the American Midwest, gets drunk himself, and winds up in a small-town jail. If this is an allegory for the immigrant experience in contemporary America, with the titular weed serving as a metaphor for the transplant who can't quite find purchase in new soil, the image it calls to mind looks a lot closer to a scowling Donald Trump than to the Statue of Liberty.



BENJAMIN DOBUTOVIC

The prolific Novakovich, a Montreal resident and professor of creative writing at Concordia University, left his native Croatia in 1976 and had a lengthy odyssey through American academia, garnering multiple literary accolades before moving to Canada in 2009. His profile was given a considerable boost in 2013 when he was named a Man Booker International Prize finalist; the honour brought added attention to 2015's *Ex-Yü*, a stylistically varied collection unified by the common thread of war and exile.

*Tumbleweed* at first appears to be a logical continuation: when an introductory vignette set in Belgrade is followed by the story described above, it seems we're in for another collection of finely wrought tales spinning variations on what is probably the central theme in contemporary world literature. But then, quite unexpectedly, comes a long sequence of stories, broken up by a few interstitial bits of

autofiction, where the focus is on animals: a rat in a squalid New York apartment shared by music students in "Strings"; another rat in another home, this one granted a first-person voice in "My Hairs Stood Up"; an unsprayed rural troublemaking cat in "Byeli: The Definitive Biography of a Nebraskan Tomcat"; a cat named for a Soviet dictator in "Stalin's Perspective"; a far-ranging farm dog in "Son of a Gun"; a ram named for a head-butting soccer immortal in "Zidane the Ram"; and an orphaned kitten saved from the streets of St. Petersburg in "A Cat Named Sobaka."

It's an unconventional strategy, and a risky one. But Novakovich, equipped with a deep writer's arsenal – a sharp eye for the telling detail, a subtly rhythmic prose style remarkable for a non-native English writer, deadpan humour – makes it work. You can expend as much energy as you like looking for hidden meanings here. Are the narrators of these tales, men whose backstories in most cases resemble the author's in significant ways, sublimating their new-arrival anxieties by obsessing on their pets? That's for readers to decide, or at least to mull over. Rest assured, though, that a more literal reading can be just as rewarding. This reviewer, for one, has seldom felt so invested in the emotional well-being of dogs, cats, rats, and sheep.

"They tell us about us," says Novakovich in a Laurier Avenue café near his Plateau home. The subject is animals and their profusion in *Tumbleweed*. "They're a mirror for humans. How we treat animals tells us a lot about what kind of people we are. I also think animals have adventurous lives. If you really follow what an animal does, you'll have a lot of stories to tell. I'm in favour of total freedom, and when I was living in some of these isolated settings I

couldn't have it, but my animals could. They were living my dream in a way. We live such sublimated, unspontaneous lives, so it's admirable to see an alternative – something that is actually in us, after all. We're all animals inside."

It should be pointed out that the menagerie thins out a bit toward the end of the collection. "Crossbar," about the aftermath of a hotly contested soccer match in Zagreb, is a study



**TUMBLEWEED**  
Josip Novakovich  
Esplanade Books  
\$19.95, paper, 212pp  
9781550654516

in the pathology of sports fandom that's all the more effective for having been written by an actual sports fan. Until the scene that involves a beheading, it actually had me thinking it might be a true story. (And even here animals play a part, in this case two bears in a zoo.)

The closing story, "Café Sarajevo," named for the now-defunct establishment in Montreal's Petite-Patrie, is an affecting retelling of an encounter with a fellow émigré, a man who had remained in Sarajevo throughout the siege despite being a Serb, and who now suffers a form of PTSD, walking the streets of his new city eight hours or more every day because he can't stand confinement. The image of two former Yugoslavians being unsure of the other's ethnicity is a poignant one. "It's kind of symbolic that there was a

continued on page 15

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By Gillian Sze

# Laura Broadbent

## The Alchemy of Language



**"R**ight words sound wrong," Laura Broadbent opens in her latest book, *In on the Great Joke*. Borrowing Lao Tzu's words, Broadbent explores this "wrongness" of language, its limits, mistranslations, and shortcomings.

Underpinning the collection is the problematic first line of the *Tao Te Ching*, which poses a number of paradoxes. Firstly, Lao Tzu tells us right off the bat that the Tao (or "Way," referring to the mysterious, essential process and structure of the universe) cannot be named. Language, as Broadbent remarks, "is a limited system." If there is already an inherent disjunction between the word and the thing, or naming the unnameable Way, then there is a challenge when it comes to the tricky business of translation. As Broadbent notes, there are over 170 English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, each of which translates the first line differently, and often with a note about how the Way cannot be talked about. Nevertheless, the *Tao Te Ching* (a text that has been translated more frequently than any work save the Bible) continues to be discussed. Thus, "the Great Joke" about language and human endeavour (and inevitable failure) emerges. Broadbent, aware that she, too, has been caught in this conundrum, participates in this ongoing Joke.

The first half of the book, "Wei Wu Wei / Do Not Do / Tao Not Tao," is a poetic engagement with Lao Tzu. The latter half, "Interviews," celebrates the collaborative task of reading and includes imagined interviews with Jean Rhys, Clarice Lispector, and W. G. Sebald. Treatments for five short films are interspersed throughout the book.

The joke defined in Broadbent's introduction touches on an overarching question of identity and definition. How – in a "limited system" – does literature push limits? Where are the borders between genres? How absolute are the categories? When asked, Broadbent replies, "Fuck 'lines' or borders! Everything flows." Indeed, Broadbent lays bare the lines that encompass "Poetry" as she departs from traditional verse to dabble in essay, interview, and cinema. "This is That' / is a phrase I attempt / to understand," Broadbent reiterates.

While the book is described on its cover as "a palace of hybridity," Broadbent admits, "in my head it more resembles a Bosch painting, a cacophony, a tower of Babel except in one language." Her poem, "Getting in the Way of the Way," aptly illustrates this cacophony as excerpts from the *Tao Te Ching* are splintered with dialogue, anecdotes, and observations. But the title also offers an alternative reading of "getting in the Way" – not so much Broadbent impeding the flow of Lao Tzu, but *accessing* the Way. Her careful juxtapositions generate and offer a concrete base for the otherwise difficult and cryptic Tao. For example, between excerpts in which Lao Tzu makes reference to the infant and primal mother (principal symbols for the Tao), Broadbent inserts her own image:

A mother with a bountiful ass  
chases her toddler who runs,  
maniacally, toward the busy street,  
his arms raised in suicidal delight,  
the mother's ass moving in all  
directions at once  
as she runs and grabs the lifted arm  
so violently  
he hovers and dangles at an odd  
angle  
and for a moment we can see  
how the mother wants to kill the  
child  
she just rescued from being killed.  
How does the heart even.

The final line touches on not only the immensity and complexity of maternal love, but also love in general. (Broadbent echoes an earlier sentiment in the poem in which someone explains that "the heart is able to hold so much / because of its holes.") The paradox of the heart and its capabilities work together with Lao Tzu's excerpts, sharing recognizable borders of mystery and ineffability. But Broadbent is not naïve in believing that she has so easily clarified or "accessed" the Tao. She modestly undercuts her efforts, such as when she writes:

Let's just take a moment  
to honour the Great Joke.  
Is this an allegory?  
Absolutely nothing makes sense.

Perhaps the sharpest execution of "the Great Joke" is the anachronistic letter, "Lao Tzu Applies for a University Teaching Position," in which Broadbent cleverly yokes the ancient philosopher with the rigid and formulaic structure of the institutional letter of application. (The real joke may be that scholars formulate exactly such a letter when applying for university positions.) Broadbent's imagined Lao Tzu describes his syllabus and pedagogy – typical of the "genre" – and the result is hilariously enigmatic:

... sometimes I will come to class  
with a clay pot; the lesson is called  
'Where the Pot is Not.' It is said you  
can double the size of the universe  
by understanding where the pot is  
not. Hollowed-out clay is where the  
pot is not and where the pot is not is  
where it is most useful.

Lao Tzu's description of the sage as being "detached, thus at one with all," rings true for Broadbent's view of the poet: "The poet speaks – ideally – from 'where the pot is not.' Emphasis on

IN ON THE GREAT JOKE

Laura Broadbent  
Coach House Books  
\$18.95, paper, 88pp  
9781552453360

IN ON THE  
GREAT  
JOKE

'ideally.' Speaking from where the pot is not is obviously intensely more elusively difficult than it sounds. A difficult effortlessness. Oxymorons get close to describing this."

*In on the Great Joke* plays along with the contradictory position of the poet. While the first chapter, "Wei Wu Wei / Do Not Do / Tao Not Tao," highlights a negation, a "not" that cancels something out as a way to emptiness, a zero-sum, or a Taoistic "detachment," the second chapter emphasizes attachment. The introduction to "Interviews" pays homage to "the alchemy of reading" and includes a number of binding elements and relationships: reader/text/author, interviewer/interviewee, and film/viewer. The pull between the two chapters is, for Broadbent, two sides of the same coin: "Language binds – it can at once be a tool for bonding or one of imprisonment. Language is a magic I think we are all aware of enough to use carefully because of its power." The transformative magic of language is described by Broadbent as having the "effect of a fragrance." Reminiscent of Anne Carson, who also describes reading in synaesthetic terms ("a fragrance of understanding you come away with"), Broadbent distills and blends with the "fragrances" of other writers in a series of inventive and beautifully elliptical interviews.

When asked to describe her own scent, Broadbent replies, "My fragrance of writing probably stinks if speaking literally. It stinks like toil." This stirring and captivating collection is no doubt marked by her erudite and intimate engagement with other texts and writers, but the scholastic and creative "toil" is also boisterously amusing and witty. Broadbent adds, "in that stink is also a lot of play – donkeys saunter by, things fall from the sky ... what would 'play' smell like? I suppose it would maybe smell like a fresh breeze carrying the scent of berries and citrus maybe."

*In on the Great Joke* may be read alongside notions of imperfection, paradox, and joy – "the perfect soundtrack / to the mockery of all things" – where nothing is off limits: scholars, dogma, love, death, even the poet herself:

I am the marching band and  
I am what the marching band  
perfectly mocks, off key. ■■■

Gillian Sze is the author of eight collections of poetry. She has a PhD in Études anglaises from Université de Montréal. ECW Press will publish her book, *Panicle*, this fall. [www.gilliansze.com](http://www.gilliansze.com)

# non-fiction

## City Between Languages

### SPEAKING MEMORY

How Translation Shapes City Life

Edited by Sherry Simon

McGill-Queen's University Press

\$34.95, paper, 328pp

9780773547896

**S**peaking Memory: How Translation Shapes City Life, edited by Concordia University professor Sherry Simon, collects scholarly perspectives on the multilingual city, ranging from historical and political to activist and creative points of view. Readers in Montreal will empathize with the idea of a city that operates on more than one linguistic plane, with vastly disparate lingual experiences and narratives that coexist and interact, and the disenfranchisement that can occur when languages are in conflict. Whereas the polylingual city is often coded as positive, as a vibrant, multicultural arena, these essays highlight that it also exists in a constant state of translation, with the concomitant potential of mistranslation, misrepresentation, and even suppression. As Simon summarizes, “Multilingualism points to pure diversity, the number of languages spoken, but translation speaks to the relations of tension, interaction, rivalry, or convergence, among them as well as the particular spaces they occupy in the city.”

This is a substantial volume with a wide spectrum of essays and it is impossible to do justice here to

each author and argument; however, the book is structured around three main concerns. In the first section, various multilingual cities – Vilnius, Trieste, Prague, and urban spaces during the Habsburg reign – are studied as geographical palimpsests, considering the layers of linguistic memory that grow over, replace, and compete with one another. For example, Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, has, over time, been baptized as Wilno, Wilna, Wilda, Vilna, Vilno, and Vilne. As Laimonas Briedis writes, it is “a place of runaway translations.” These names represent the city’s history of violence, colonization, war, and religious antagonism. A useful dichotomy for reading multilingual cities is the coexistence of horizontal and vertical translations – whereas the former embraces the intersection of languages, of Babylonian multiculturalism, the latter unearths the painful memories of dissent inherent to linguistic plurality, thereby defining the fraught identity of a city like Vilnius.

In the second section, movement enters the translational city as a vector of either connectivity or constraint. The conditions under which a speaker enters a city have a major influence on that speaker’s subject position within a community and the resultant modes of communication that are allowed. As Simon Harel points out, “Translation is not the inevitable outcome of plurilingualism.” A migrant, for example, embodies the potential of linguistic reciprocity;

Michael Cronin notes that the continual mobility of migration enables a fluidity of translation. The migrant introduces language to a space, assimilates language from that space, and exits to be linguistically influenced by the next space they enter. In contrast, the refugee is framed within a deterministic mode of language acquisition. Harel argues that the “refugee who is ‘charitably’ welcomed into a community is obliged to compromise his or her linguistic idiom and make it an instrument of negotiation”; the refugee is ultimately trapped within a monodirectional, static field of communication, of being translated.

The final section explores what Simon calls “the generative powers of multilingual milieus,” such as New Orleans, Montevideo, São Paulo, and Montreal. This section studies the multivocal literature and art inspired by the gap between coexisting languages, bridging the variety of rhythms and textures present in pluralistic urban spaces. Andre Furlani’s concluding essay, for instance, absorbs the democratic texture of different languages on a walk through Montreal; the excursionist experiences language, but never stops to listen, compare, and impose interpretation.

Overall, *Speaking Memory* is a well-researched and engaging anthology intended primarily for an academic audience. While the subject matter is at times restricted to a small niche of inquiry, the scope of the collection is ambitious, emphasizing the omnipresence of language and the fact that it is truly a central force when it comes to experiencing the multiplicity of the city. Language translates the city. **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.



## Break the Mold

### SERIAL GIRLS

From Barbie to Pussy Riot

Martine Delvaux

Translated by

Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

Between the Lines

\$26.95, paper, 184pp

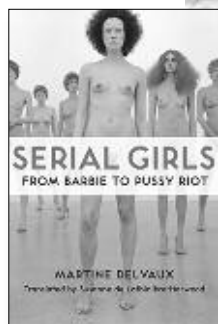
9781771131858

**W**hat does it mean when images of femininity are staged as near clones or repeating figures? That’s the question novelist and UQAM professor

Martine Delvaux tackles in *Serial Girls: From Barbie to Pussy Riot*, recently translated into English by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood.

From Barbie dolls to Playboy Bunnies, there are legions of undifferentiated women presented as a group or type, usually sharing a name. Dubbing these *serial girls*, Delvaux argues that the trope is structural and normative, imposing a generic femininity: it is “not about shaping girls as they are; it is about shaping girls into what we want them to be.”

In these systems, female figures



become nearly identical and interchangeable, choreographed to move in sync as part of a seductive “geometry” – think of a Busby Berkeley number, cheer-leading routine, or cancan line. Serial girls are framed as ornamental compositions rather than as individuals, which Delvaux argues makes them titillating but inaccessible. Lacking individuality, they become thing-like, commodified for easy consumption, and prone to violence: both the symbolic violence of non-recognition and the actual physical harm that befalls those whose identities don’t matter.

*Serial Girls* is written as a series of profiles. In each chapter, Delvaux zooms in on girls she pegs as serial – Hellenic caryatid statues, Vanessa Beecroft’s living installations, coordinated tap-and-kick dance troupes like

the Tiller Girls, a long line of cinematic blonde bombshells – reading them through concepts drawn from political philosophy and feminist critical theory. This structure is effective for exploring the manifold expressions of her subject, but the unitary premise sometimes gets lost when essays stray from the topic she’s defined, such as in a lengthy chapter detailing the various self-transformations of Quebecois auteur Nelly Arcan. The writing has a novelist’s attention to imagery, sometimes rendered a little jerky in translation. But Delvaux frequently lapses into vitriolic hyperbole that disrupts her argument. Take, for instance, her analysis of sex dolls, which she compares to both rape and the Holocaust, with distressing disrespect for the sentient victims of real violence.

Non-cisgendered people and women of colour get short shrift in Delvaux’s analysis, a glaring omission given the aspirational whiteness inherent in the serial girls she describes and a missed opportunity to enrich her analysis by considering how racism, transphobia, and heteronormativity structure these formations. Delvaux’s position on men is also oversimplified; there’s no need to dismiss how boys are oppressed by structural gender norms while choosing to focus on the ways that girls are. It’s a shame, too,

because contrasts in how gender is performed in groups set the stage for some of the book’s more interesting moments, such as an account of how choreographed spectacles of women complement men’s military formations to provide the pageantry that makes fascism palatable.

The topic of *Serial Girls* is cool and ambitious, but the book offers little accessibility to an audience beyond academics and already-convinced old-guard feminists. The work is strongest when Delvaux turns to serial girls’ revolutionary potential by championing figures who express idiosyncratic and politically charged femininity, pointing to Femen, HBO’s *Girls*, and Pussy Riot. She holds that the serial girls are a motif that allows femininity to be invented, so while uniformity encloses girls within imposed generic standards, refusing these hegemonic images creates spaces where marginal modes of being can proliferate, where individuality becomes self-constitution. Citing work by scholars of exception like Giorgio Agamben and Deleuze and Guattari, she finds hope in serial girls when they step out of the roles they’re assigned, in all of their messy specificity. **mb**

Emily Raine is a Montreal-based writer, editor, and scholar who holds a PhD in Communication Studies.

## Un Canadien errant

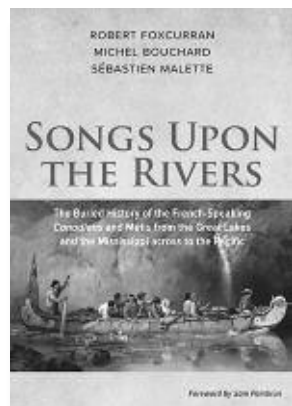
### SONGS UPON THE RIVERS

The Buried History of the French-Speaking  
Canadiens and Métis from the Great Lakes  
and the Mississippi across to the Pacific  
Robert Foxcurran, Michel Bouchard,  
and Sébastien Malette

Baraka Books

\$34.95, paper, 448pp

9781771860819



In *Songs Upon the Rivers*, Robert Foxcurran, Michel Bouchard, and Sébastien Malette reframe the American West from a perspective focused on the contributions of French colonizers and their descendants. Instead of repeating Anglo-centric chronicles underplaying the legacies of French America during critical moments in US history, the authors propose a new narrative emphasizing the unity of the French fact throughout North America. The authors blend *Canadien* (French-Canadian, or people of French descent born in North America) and *Métis* (a legally recognized post-contact Indigenous nation of Western Canada), arguing, “the concept of *métissage* is, in our opinion, incorporated in the ethnonym *Canadien*.” This book asks for a “wider usage of the term ‘Métis’” expanding the geographic scope of its use across North America.

This is a controversial position rejected by many Métis people in Canada and by most scholars of North American Indigenous history. The French language uses *métis* and *métissage* to describe the “mixing” of racial categories via sexual intercourse. *Métissage* therefore continues today the same way it appeared in the archival documents cited by the authors and is a by-product of an upheld societal belief in the concept of race. But *métissage* does not make one Métis, or a member of the Métis Nation, which is a specific historical Indigenous polity defined in the nineteenth century. Even if New France was not as “*pure laine*” as Lionel Groulx argued, unions between French men and Indigenous women in the early colony did not create a widespread culture of people that maintained kinship ties and treaty obligations towards their Indigenous relatives throughout North America. One can argue for the significance of the *Canadiens* to the history of the continent without insisting on the indigenization of that identity.

The authors criticize prevailing scholarly research, but their own methods do not stand up to scrutiny. Oral histories supporting a revision of *Métis* and *Canadien* labels are mentioned but not incorporated into the analysis. And a number of specific historical jumps and jabs raised eyebrows and pointed to a broader pattern of omissions and selective readings. For instance, skipping over the statehood histories of the Minnesota and Dakota territories (both of which involved the Métis Nation, big time!), is unusual in a book that purports to be about the French and Métis in western North America. The authors also criticize the record keeping of Joseph Kinsey Howard, an early twentieth-century historian of the Métis, erroneously suggesting one of Howard’s important primary sources is “unknown.” (The source is “The French Half-Breeds of the Northwest,” by V. Havard, published by the United States Senate in 1880.) Omissions and errors such as these allow the authors to sideline historical understandings of post-contact Métis communities in North America as a distinct polity alongside other diverse Indigenous nations.

Errors also appear at the level of basic facts. For example, students and speakers of *Anishinaabemowin*, the language of the Anishinaabeg (baptized Ojibwa, Saulteux, and Chippewa by settlers) will cringe to see their greeting, *boo-zhoo*, described as an “Algonquinized French term.” It is well known that the word’s origins are rooted in Anishinaabe history, not French. Here and elsewhere, this book whitewashes Indigenous cultures, languages, and politics.

It also undermines Indigenous sovereignty and laws, such as when the authors write: “*Canadiens* continued to move west into the *Pays d’en Haut* which was still *de facto* ‘their West.’” Such descriptive language paints the American West as an empty French colonial space and implies the French and their descendants moved into unoccupied lands. The result is essentially a French version of American Manifest Destiny, the belief that God’s will made the American expansion of the United States possible and legitimate, through violence and the legalized oppression of Indigenous peoples.

While this book engages readers in an important and timely conversation about the legacies of French colonialism in North America, its unorthodox methods and questionable historical approach should leave readers with more questions than answers. mb

Émilie Pigeon is wrapping up a doctorate in Métis Catholic history at York University. Although a *Canayenne* settler whose family came to North America in the 1660s, she is not Métis.

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### Josip Novakovich continued from page 12

Café Sarajevo here and now there is just its ghost,” said Novakovich. “There also used to be a Serbian café. A couple of Slovenian delis still exist, but in general there aren’t enough people from the former Yugoslavia to maintain an ethnic business like that.”

As an established writer with a growing profile, does Novakovich ever feel himself perceived as a putative spokesperson for Croatians in North America? “During the war, maybe,” he tells me, “when I was in the States and Croatia was in real trouble and really did need people speaking for it. NPR once called me, but they didn’t call me back. *Esquire* was going to send me to write a story, but they ended up sending a Brit, I think because they were concerned that they were going to get a biased view. There was a lot of that at the time – people deciding they would rather have unbiased ignorance than biased knowledge on the subject.”

For Novakovich, having what amounts to a pre-sold readership, even if it’s not a huge one, comes with advantages and disadvantages. “Publishers always ask ‘What’s your platform?’ and if you have an ethnic audience, that’s a plus,” he said. “But I don’t always get along with the community. Promoting *Ex-Yu* in Toronto didn’t turn out well. I was asked to do a talk as well as a reading, and in that talk I quoted (Samuel) Johnson saying,

‘Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.’ As far as I’m concerned, first be a good human, then be good at what you do, then worry about the other stuff. The best Croatian is someone who’s a bad Croatian. They didn’t like that. I sold six books before the speech, and none after.”

Novakovich has written relatively little fiction set in his adopted country, but says that may well change: “Sometimes it takes years before you feel you are ready.” In the meantime, he’s keeping up his exemplary pace. Not long after we met he was due to leave for a six-week writing retreat in Bulgaria, where four of his books have been translated; while there he’ll be making side trips to some old Croatian haunts and doing revisions on an almost-finished novel set in Putin’s Russia. But for all his international interests, he’s looking settled in Montreal: he obtained Canadian citizenship three years ago and even wrote a book of essays, *Shopping for a Better Country*, about the process. Choosing against our southern neighbour may not have been easy at the time, but it’s a decision he doesn’t regret. “Trump has made Canada great again. If I had any doubts about being here, they’ve been lessened.” mb

Ian McGillis is books columnist for the *Montreal Gazette* and author of the novel *A Tourist’s Guide to Glengarry*. His memoir *Higher Ground* will be published by Biblioasis in 2017.

# poetry



## A TEA IN THE TUNDRA / NIPISHAPUI NETE MUSHUAT

Joséphine Bacon

Translated by Donald Winkler

BookLand Press

\$16.95, paper, 96pp

9781772310351

## BORROWED DAYS

Marc Plourde

Cormorant Books

\$20.00, paper, 85pp

9781770864689

## SONNETS ON A NIGHT WITHOUT LOVE

Yusuf Saadi

Vallum

\$10.00, paper, 24pp

9780987919991

## WE ARE ALL JUST ANIMALS & PLANTS

Alex Manley

Metatron

\$12.00, paper, 72pp

9781988355016

Like many Indigenous people of her generation, Joséphine Bacon attended a residential school for most of her childhood, isolated from her Innu family and the seasonal rhythms of their culture. She went on to work as an interpreter for an anthropologist doing research in Innu communities. Working directly with elders made it possible for her to re-establish a connection to her culture and the land. This ongoing process of rupture and repair has had an enduring influence on her work as an internationally recognized poet and storyteller.

Bacon's 2014 collection of poems in French and Innu, *Un thé dans la toundra / Nipishapui Nete Mushuat*, was a finalist for that year's Governor General's Literary Award as well as Montreal's Grand Prix du livre. It is now available as *A Tea in the Tundra / Nipishapui Nete Mushuat*, a bilingual volume that maintains Bacon's Innu alongside Montreal translator Donald Winkler's interpretation of the French text. The poems are rooted in the concrete worlds of nature and the body, but evoke the presence of a larger, living spirit. Many are odes to the tundra itself:

The tundra at last  
Resound my heart  
Your music, the river  
Your light, the stars  
Your carpet, the lichen's tender green

Others kaleidoscope between city and wilderness, subtly tracing the lines of Bacon's own biography. "I must be absent / From the teaching of what I am," she laments, remembering returning to school after a visit home, but then celebrates that "Today is today ... I am myself once more / In laughter."

Bacon has said that she writes her poems first in Innu, then rewrites them in French. The process is not one of translation so much as adaptation, moving the text not only between languages, but across space and time, between cultural contexts. Winkler's task was likely similar. These short, unelaborated lines recall the vastness of the tundra and create a similarly unadorned space of contemplation, one that evokes a longing for a home, where self is found in relationship with others.

"How strange our present / and past coexist / and never merge," Marc Plourde writes in *Borrowed Days*. Plourde's poems are narratives of memory, snapshots, heavy with the weight of time. Character sketches such as "Cousin Jerome," "For Monnie," "A Soldier's End on de L'Épée Street," and "The Art of Departure" are almost devotional in their tenderness. "A Cowhide Mitten Made in China" recounts the burial of a pet bird inside the titular mitten and wonders at the keen freshness of grief from decades' remove:

It's not a thing you forget in an evening  
though I tried  
I took the cage, gravel, seed and  
my friend in his leather coffin  
and threw them away,  
I mean  
I threw them from my heart

Plourde's poems operate like short films or dreams, re-hersing a single moment in time that would be unremarkable but for its being remarked upon with such sweet specificity. More than his own internal life, what seems to interest Plourde is the mysterious persistence of such moments in memory.

*Borrowed Days* is Plourde's second collection of poems and, as forty years have passed since his last outing, it is a welcomed return. While the book consists of a combination of new and selected work, the distinction between the two would be imperceptible if not pointed out to the reader. Plourde's early work bears none of the marks of juvenilia, and his new work contains the same reliable melancholy. The poet's faithful interest in the external world, however, keeps his poems surprising and full of empathy. A dog weaves between the chairs at a party celebrating the closing of a neighbourhood tobacco shop; a woman adjusts her hat at a funeral reception; a traveller on a bus watches mist crawl across mountains and wonders, "Tomorrow, who will remember this?" Consistently and sharply elegiac, Plourde's poems search for the tether that connects the present to the past or for the mysterious weight that tips the scales between memory and forgetting.

Montreal's biannual *Vallum Poetry Journal* curates a chapbook series that has included works by Canadian and international poetry stars such as Franz Wright, George Elliott Clarke, Jan Zwicky, and Fanny Howe. The series' latest edition is a collection of a dozen poems by Yusuf Saadi called *Sonnets on a Night Without Love*. Comprised half of sonnets and half of longer poems, the chapbook is quiet and intimate in its smallness, but its reach into physics and metaphysics makes it feel expansive. Love poems are addressed to light or fabric, or spoken by a discarded candy wrapper. The sonnet "Amperage" imagines a world where sound is harnessed for energy, where cars run on "lovers' / arguments, a mother's non-stop babble / could jolt a Macintosh, a faucet's dribble fly a warplane." There is a lightheartedness here that the chapbook's scale could make cute, but Saadi's command of his craft gives poetic heft to this small serving of his poetry.

This is a nocturnal collection, filled with moons and stars, shadows and constellations. Its upward gaze imbues the poems with awe. In "Posthuman," as a civilization both collapses and coalesces, people look at their bodies and outer space with equal wonder:

... Someone unchained  
the sun from its orbit. We watched it drift  
like a curious child beyond the Oort cloud.  
Dimming  
until it was another star in the night's freckles  
and even the day lost its name. We looked  
at our hands with unfamiliarity. Trying to  
understand

The way star gazing shifts one's sense of scale, Saadi's balance between the immense and the insignificant deftly shifts the reader's scope of vision, evoking the smallness and fragility of human life.

*Sonnets on a Night Without Love* is the best kind of chapbook: to the reader who lacks ambition or fears commitment, it offers poetry in an unthreatening and digestible quantity, one that somehow feels at once lighter and more concentrated than a conventionally sized volume. It is an amuse-bouche that whets the appetite for more of Saadi's work.

One size up from a chapbook, Alex Manley's debut, *We Are All Just Animals & Plants*, is a lean and cohesive collection of poems that search the natural world for the meaning of modern love and relationships. "Instead of writing a poem about this mess I made / what if I wrote a poem about the natural sciences?" asks the speaker of one poem. Nature is a prism that refracts the pathetic absurdity of waiting impatiently for the beloved's texts.

If nature is also a safe retreat from the madness of contemporary society in Manley's poems, it is primarily because you don't find nature on social media. The speaker of the long poem, "All I Want," proclaims:

All I want to do is write about the things in  
the ocean, the plant and animal life,

the dust motes slowing making their way  
through sunbeams, glinting,

skin cells from all the people who were born  
on land and died in the water.

No one ever tells you not to date the ocean.

Romantic love lacks the immensity, mystery, or majesty of the ocean. Its pace is frantic and insecure: "Are four hundred texts too many to send in a single Groundhog / Day and night of misfortune?" The repeated phrase "All I want ..." suggests that the speaker is controlled by desires that he is incapable of identifying with any precision.

There is navel-gazing here, but the fact that these poems are frustrated with their own obsession with the personal, with their own trivial and mundane sadnesses, is their saving grace. They kvetch with enough self-effacing charm to keep the reader moving to the last poem, "Noahitic," which suggests that the triviality of our desires is precisely what will kill us all off in the end, to Mother Nature's great relief. **mb**

Abby Paige is a writer and performer. She lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick.



# graphic

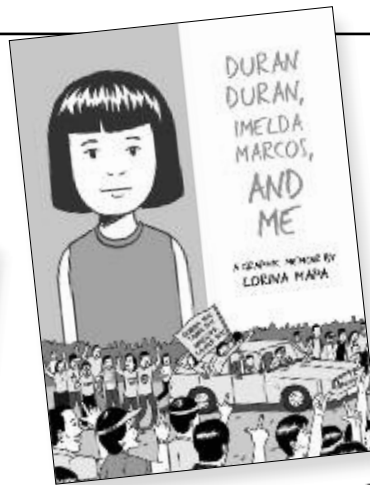
## Bio-Graphical

### THE ABOMINABLE MR. SEABROOK

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\$18.00, paper, 140pp  
9781772620115

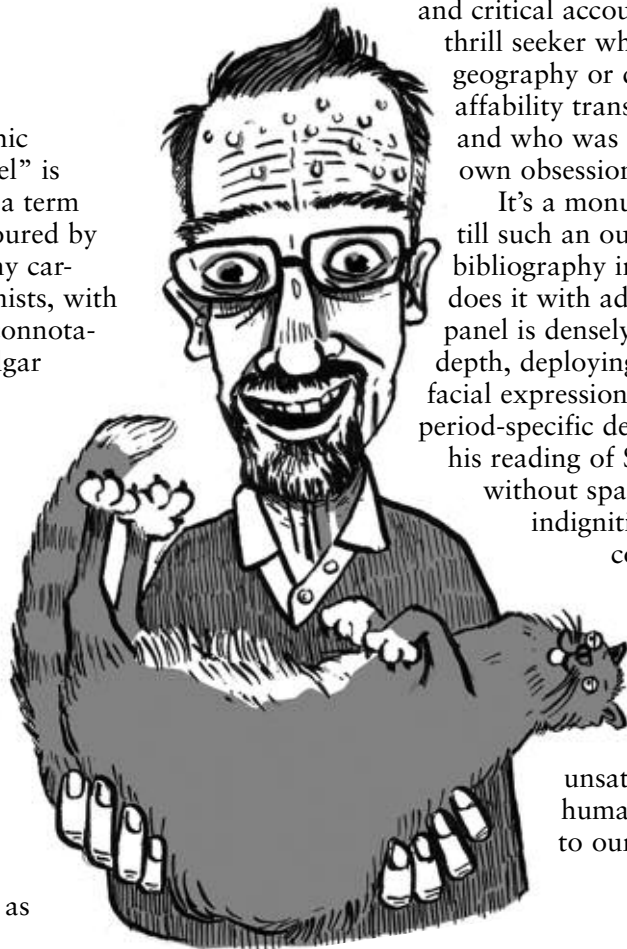


vernacular of the time, went out of print long ago (and have been out of fashion for even longer), but his own story remains compelling. Ollmann

weaves a clear-eyed and critical account of a world traveller and thrill seeker who knew no boundaries of geography or desire, a southerner whose affability transcended cultural differences, and who was ultimately undone by his own obsessions.

It's a monumental undertaking to distill such an outsized life and sprawling bibliography into one book, but Ollmann does it with admirable economy. Every panel is densely packed with emotional depth, deploying a range of subtle gestures, facial expressions, weighted postures, and period-specific detail. He's compassionate in his reading of Seabrook's body of work without sparing the shortcomings and indignities, and, in a way, Seabrook

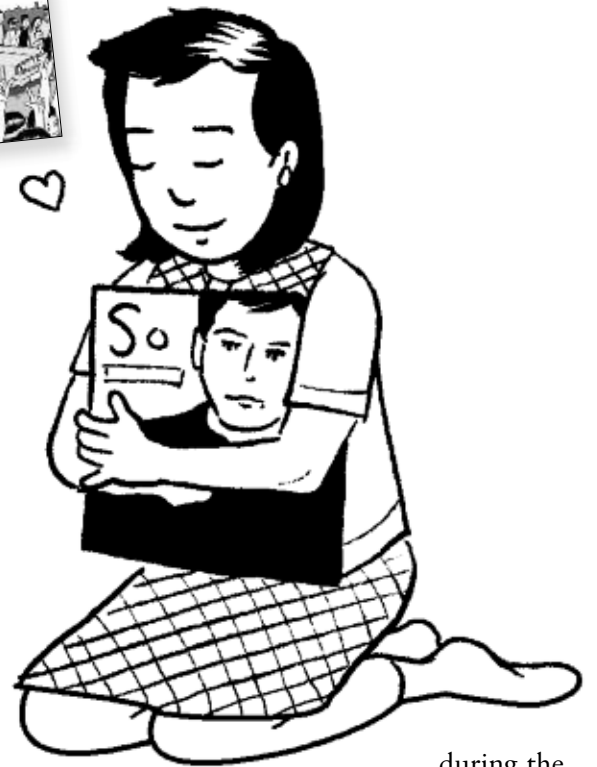
comes off even better for having received this treatment. Seabrook's work is a fascinating time capsule of the first half of the twentieth century, but his ceaseless yearning, unsated ego, and deeply flawed humanity belong just as much to our era as to any other.



**"G**raphic novel" is not a term favoured by many cartoonists, with its connotative whiff of being a vulgar hybrid of two more respectable disciplines. But Joe Ollmann's books might bear the designation better than most. Perhaps lesser known than his Canadian contemporaries Seth and Chester Brown, Ollmann has few peers when it comes to pairing visual sequences that pulse with expertly timed rhythm and text that is as lyrical and trenchant as any prose fiction.

*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*, Ollmann's first full-length non-fiction work, is the sort of ripping adventure yarn that would do its titular character proud. A household name in the 1930s and 1940s, William Seabrook published sensational accounts of voodoo rituals in Haiti and cannibalism in the African jungle, and kept company with Gertrude Stein, Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, and Aleister Crowley, among others, but is scarcely remembered today. His lurid ethnographies, indelibly rooted in the American exceptionalist

In February 2010, Lorina Mapa was feeling estranged from herself during a brutal Montreal winter and decided to do something about it by putting pen to paper. A designer and translator by trade, she had never written much about her own life, much less attempted to sketch it out in sequential imagery. Before long, she knew the memoir would be both an antidote to her melancholy and a story worth telling. *Duran Duran, Imelda Marcos, and Me* details Mapa's upbringing in the Philippines



during the era of Ferdinand Marcos, her formative pop culture obsessions, and her later immigration to Canada. Bookended by an account of her father's passing, the story is woven through with a cathartic sense of narrative-as-process, of using storytelling as a means to stabilize and heal.

Mapa's own account of her early years in the Philippines is immediately endearing, with her pop star crushes annotated in an appendix at the end of the book like a *Tiger Beat* who's-who from the early eighties. It's a delight to take in her lucid recollections of the thrilling tension between the strong conservative values of her family and the subversive attraction of bands like New Order and Depeche Mode.

While it's fascinating to consider the universal appeal of young Rina's pop culture obsessions, the way they play out against the backdrop of the Marcos regime is where the story draws its power. With wide-eyed clarity and teenaged innocence, Mapa shows readers the rise and fall of a totalitarian state from her unique perspective: the awkward schoolyard conflicts, the upheaval of normalcy during days of general strikes, and the palpable tension of a family caught in the middle of a military coup. It's both a vivid revisitation of the recent past and a harrowing omen of days that many young people the world over may soon face for themselves. **mtl**

Mark Streeter lives in Toronto, where he writes about music and comics.

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# YOUNG READERS

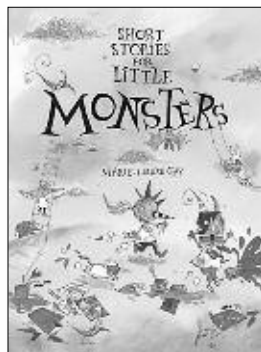
to make sure everyone in *Colette's Lost Pet* lives happily ever after, while also reminding readers that when it comes to sharing imaginary worlds, it's more fun when everyone plays along.

Not everyone is a morning person, and *Good Morning, Grumple* is a story in rhyme that offers a solution to those grumpy feelings that overtake many of us when forced to greet another new day. Written by Victoria Allenby and illustrated using a combination of mixed media and collage by Manon Gauthier, this picture book introduces us to Grumple at his worst. When it comes to waking up, Grumple fights it all the way. He squirms, he twists, he flops, and grumbles; his cute little rosy-cheeked face wears a permanent scowl. Fortunately his mother is full of kisses and hugs and stories and songs and by the end of it all Grumple is ready to "dance out the door and see what's in store." *Good Morning, Grumple* is a sweet spin on what can be a stressful morning routine that is sure to please both pre-school kids and their parents.

From the opening pages of the charming urban tale *Colette's Lost Pet*, we are drawn into a bird's-eye view of the back alleys of Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood. The rectangular garden spaces that line the alleyways are as unique and diverse as its population. Isabelle Arsenault's pencil, watercolour, and ink drawings take us into these backyard places where children spend their summer days: a full-on vegetable patch, a tropical paradise of potted plants arranged around a stone fountain, or a hard dirt track for remote-controlled cars. It is in one of these rectangular garden spaces – the only yellow rectangles amidst a scene otherwise painted in grey and black – that the story begins. We see an empty packing box and hear Colette's mother's stressed out response to her daughter's latest demand for a pet. It's moving day and Colette is promptly ordered out of her new apartment and sent off to make friends.

It's impossible not to love little Colette in her bright yellow hooded jacket. Having no pet to keep her company, she ventures out into the alley and tells the lie that ultimately succeeds in winning her a whole neighbourhood of friends. But will Colette's new pals desert her when they realize she's taken them on an impossible search for a lost pet that never really existed? Arsenault manages

*Short Stories for Little Monsters* is a visual pleasure. In this large format hardcover collection of stories, Marie-Louise Gay has once again used a combination of watercolour, ink, pencils, and collage to create a whimsical world. This one is populated by cats who are terrorized by socks, trees who want to be ballet dancers, and adventure-loving kids in all kinds of shapes and sizes. Each story is told using word bubbles and panels laid out like a comic strip or graphic novel. As always, the drawings are delightful and skillfully executed. This collection works best when the strong visuals are left to tell the story. In "Zombie Mom" we see the perfect balance between Gay's drawings and minimal text. While the little boys upstairs ruminate over mom's possible superpowers, the mother in question keeps them in line with a few well-aimed interjections and some well-placed maniacal laughter. In "Jump!" a classic older-younger brother moment is played out at the end of a pier, high above shark-infested waters, and "Snail Nightmares" goes deep into the psyche of the common gastropod. *Short Stories for Little Monsters* is another colourful and creative look at the world around us from the award-winning Marie-Louise Gay.



Tired of books that perpetuate the myth that all little girls aspire to sugar and spice and everything nice? Meet Olga, the heroine of *Olga and The Smelly Thing from Nowhere*, Elise Gravel's combination graphic novel and chapter book for eight- to twelve-year-olds. Unlike her enemies, the pop-culture obsessed Shalala and Farla, Olga saves her passion and energy for the observation and protection of animals. For Olga, Rita, the French-speaking spider who lives under the sink, is a far superior choice for a friend than any of the annoying and self-absorbed humans around her. When Olga finds Meh, an unidentifiable being that looks like a cross between an inflated hamster and a potato drawn by a three-year-old, she thinks she has found not only her very own new species but also a soulmate who will make up for her lack of human friends. So when Meh disappears, Olga must do everything she can to find her missing smelly, rainbow Skittle-pooing buddy. Her search leads her to



form an alliance with Chuck, a boy her age who has a pompadour of scribbles for hair and a strange wolf/chipmunk cross with a bladder problem for a pet. Together they set out to discover where Meh could have gone. Gravel's charts and pseudo-scientific observations and inquiry introduce kids to the concepts of scientific research and reporting. And while Meh might be a figment of Olga's fertile and hilarious imagination, there are some real lessons to be learned here about friendship, the importance of protecting all living beings no matter how smelly, and how even our enemies can possess admirable qualities and abilities. Leave it to this prolific writer and illustrator to create Olga, a girl who gives weirdos a good name.

In *Lightning Lou*, twelve-year-old Lou is a talented young hockey player in early twentieth-century Quebec with a dream of leaving provincial Saint-Christophe to work his way up through the amateurs and onward to the big leagues. It is a dream he shares with his charismatic older brother and hockey mentor Georges. But when World War I breaks out, Georges signs up against their father's wishes and Lou is left behind, afraid that now his dreams of hockey fame and fortune will never come true. Georges is no longer around to help Lou and because so many young men are being sent overseas, amateur hockey has largely been put on hold. But then Monsieur Robichaud turns up in Saint-Christophe to recruit girls for the amateur Montreal Bakers women's team. Despite the loss of the young men's teams, Quebec is still hungry for hockey and any girl who makes it on the Bakers gets a ticket to Montreal and an invitation to a glamorous and exciting life in the city. When Coach Robichaud mistakes Lou for a girl, it doesn't take much for Lou to decide to keep up the pretense and join the Bakers.

Author Lori Weber was inspired to write this novel for middle readers by the true story of Ada Lalonde – a seventeen-year-old boy who also tried to play hockey as a girl before being publicly exposed. In *Lightning Lou* she gets into a male protagonist's head as he struggles to understand what the world looks like when you happen to be a girl who loves hockey above all else. The book ends with Lou leaving the team and vowing to help girls in Saint-Christophe realize their own dreams of playing hockey at the highest level. Weber admits to being a lifelong fan of the game, and her passion for the sport and for Quebec history is obvious in the tale of *Lightning Lou*, a story that resonates as strongly today as it did a hundred years ago.

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

**GOOD MORNING, GRUMPLE**  
Victoria Allenby  
Illustrated by Manon Gauthier  
Pajama Press  
\$15.95, cloth, 24pp  
9781772780147  
Ages 1–3

**COLETTE'S LOST PET**  
Isabelle Arsenault  
Tundra Books  
\$22.99, cloth, 48pp  
9781101917596  
Ages 4–8

**SHORT STORIES FOR LITTLE MONSTERS**  
Marie-Louise Gay  
Groundwood Books  
\$19.95, cloth, 48pp  
9781554988969  
Ages 4–8

**OLGA AND THE SMELLY THING FROM NOWHERE**  
Elise Gravel  
HarperCollins  
\$15.99, cloth, 176pp  
9780062351265  
Ages 8–12

**LIGHTNING LOU**  
Lori Weber  
Dancing Cat Press  
\$12.95, paper, 180pp  
9781770864627  
Ages 9–12



# Black Writing Matters

Inspired by the Black Lives Canada Syllabus, activist Robyn Maynard explores the past, present, and future of Black writing and resilience in Montreal.



LA PETITE SUCEUSE, D. MATHIEU CASSENDO (berber1313.com)

As a Black activist and writer, I was grateful for the emergence of the Black Lives Canada Syllabus. This resource does more than identify places to find information on Black lives in Canada. Looking over the titles, generated through the hashtag #BlackLivesCDNSyllabus and assembled by Anthony Morgan and Huda Hassan, it becomes painfully obvious that Black writing and realities remain largely absent from mainstream Canadian society.

To write about Black lives in Canada is an attempt to insert oneself into a canon that largely erases or distorts our very existence. Beyond the liberation narrative of the Underground Railroad, Black history and the Canadian Black experience are too often sidelined, perhaps because Black writers' denunciations of racism trouble popular conceptions of Canada as a land of multiculturalism and racial equality. Until recently, Black writing was largely excluded from mainstream Canadian publishing. Even so, despite a lack of public attention and resources, writers in Canada's African diaspora have documented and celebrated Black resilience, pushed Canadian society to reckon with its own racism, and imagined transformative Black futures for the coming generations.

Montreal is often absent from national discussions about race and anti-Blackness, which tend to centre on Toronto and Halifax. This city, home to Black persons for over four hundred years, demonstrates little official recognition of the significant historical and literary contributions of

Black writers and scholars. Despite organizing efforts by Black students, including a present-day push at Concordia University, there is no Black Studies program in Montreal, and less than one percent of full-time faculty at the two English universities are Black. Even the basics of Black Montreal history – such as slavery – are still absent or minimized in most school curriculums.

As in other Canadian cities, Black communities in Montreal have been subject to centuries of structural violence, including two centuries of enslavement, ongoing targeting by police, over-incarceration, and over-representation in child apprehensions by welfare agencies. These realities are inextricable from Black visions of past, present, and future Montreal, and continue to inform both non-fiction and creative writing.

Uncovering the complex histories of Black Montreal often involves tracking down books that are not regularly sold in stores, locating long-shelved theses, or gleaning bits of our elders' lives and organizing over afternoon tea. The Black Community Resource Centre, the Black Studies Centre, and the Centre International de Documentation et d'Information Haïtienne, Caribéenne et Afro-canadienne are excellent, though underfunded, resources. And the in-progress Librairie Racines in Montreal-North aims to make Black writing more accessible.

What follows is not a comprehensive list, but a few pertinent titles, some easier

to find than others, that introduce readers to Black realities and Black resilience in Montreal. In the spirit of a Black Lives Montreal Syllabus, I have chosen to feature all Black writers, and mostly non-fiction works, interspersed with a few creative and literary writings, all of which touch directly on Black politics in Montreal.

One of Montreal's most identifiable landmarks, the Old Port shows little visible trace of Black life or death. But it is marked forever by Marie-Joseph Angélique, an enslaved Black woman, believed to have been responsible for burning much of Old Montreal in 1734 in an attempt to flee her mistress. She was tortured and publicly hanged for the alleged crime. Her incredible story, as told by Black Canadian scholar Afua Cooper in *The Hanging of Angélique* (2006), is set against the backdrop of an equally important and under-recognized history of enslavement in Montreal. This resuscitation of the ghost of Angélique still has ongoing resonance for Black Montrealers, such as poet Kaie Kellough, who writes in *Maple Leaf Rag* (2010), “from the vieux port at midnight, I flex forth and froth back as *angélique's* ashes.” This history of slavery is also explored in detail by Montreal art historian Charmaine Nelson in *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (2016), which makes visible the isolation and violence experienced by enslaved (and free) Black women and men in Montreal.

Angélique is not the only Black Montrealer whose resistance has been documented by Black writers. Montreal has long been a transnational hub of Black organizing – indeed, both of Malcolm X's parents were involved in the pan-Africanist Garveyite movement in Montreal. There are a number of should-be classic works on the history of Black Montreal in the twentieth century worth seeking out. Dorothy Williams, born and raised in Little Burgundy, provides a thorough history of Black life and activism in *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (1997). Williams writes that early twentieth-century Montreal was home to Caribbean, Black American, and continental African activists involved in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), beginning a local tradition of Black radical politics with significant international connections. The organization of Canada's first Black union for sleeping car porters in the 1940s serves as the backdrop for Mairuth Sarsfield's novel *No Crystal Stair* (1997), the story of a widowed Black mother raising her children in Little Burgundy's tight-knit Black community.

Dennis Forsythe's *Let the Niggers Burn!* (1971) is an edited anthology of Montreal-based Black activists responding to the “Sir George Williams Affair.” The book was a response to the burning of now-Concordia University's computer laboratory and the arrest and eventual deportation of many Black student activists. Unique because it captures a flashpoint in Montreal's history, the collection explores the Black Power activism of the time. Its raw texts are unapologetic and harshly

critical of the exploitation and subordination of Black lives in Montreal, as well as the hypocrisy of Canadian policy in the Caribbean. Although it overlooks Black women's contributions to organizing around this incident, Forsythe's collection nevertheless writes Black resistance into an era far better known for the conflict between English and French. More recently, Desiree Rochat's booklet *Caribbean Life in Quebec: A Pictorial History of the 60s, 70s and 80s* (2014) recentres the important role of Black women in Montreal community organizing in the late twentieth century.

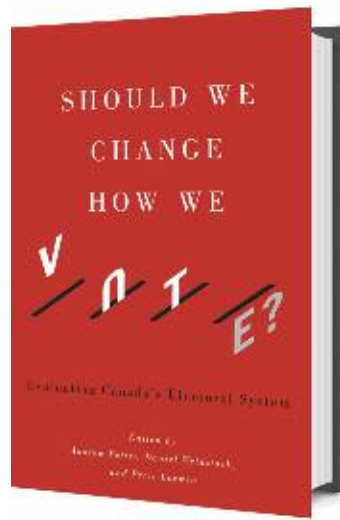
The #BlackLivesMatter movement has brought Black lives marginalized by gender, religion, and sexuality to the forefront of a more public conversation on Blackness. Writing in less traditional formats, young, Black Montreal-based women have made important contributions toward this end. Blackness and queerness are explored through the Black fantastic in *La petite suceuse* (2016), by the highly talented writer and illustrator D. Mathieu Cassendo. This Afrofuturist graphic novel fuses issues of race and politics with vampires in a dystopian 2302 Laval. *Somali Semantics* (2015–), a thought-provoking zine written by Sumaya Ugas and Yasmin Abdulqadir, uses creative personal narratives to address racism, Islamophobia, and erasure. Their writing asserts agency against dominant depictions of what they call “sad East African girls,” and instead explores, to use their words, the “intersections between girlhood, blackness, and ‘authentic’ somalinimo” and “ruminations on sex, patriarchy, and the policing of women's bodies thru culture, religion, etc.”

This list is far from comprehensive. For a more thorough list, including the works of critically acclaimed writers like Dany Laferrière, Marie-Célie Agnant, and others, I've compiled a Black Lives Matter Montreal Syllabus on my blog, dedicated to writing by and about Black Montreal: <http://robynmaynard.com/blacklivesmtl-syllabus/>

It is important to celebrate the contributions of Black writers who have dared to interrupt dominant national narratives of inclusion and tolerance by writing the Black imagination into the past, present, and distant future of Montreal. Yet if Black writing matters, it is because Black lives, too, must matter: we can't celebrate culture without also combatting systemic racial injustice, particularly as contemporary Black organizing continues to shift the realities of Black women and LGBTQI Black communities from margins to centre. Moving Black culture and Black genius out of the shadows is important. But it is also essential to support Black communities fighting to end the conditions constricting Black life and freedom in Montreal and across Canada. MB

Robyn Maynard is a Black writer, activist, and educator living in Montreal. Her first book, *Policing Black Bodies*, will be published by Fernwood Publishing in 2017. Her work can be found at [www.robynmaynard.com](http://www.robynmaynard.com).

# The Real World



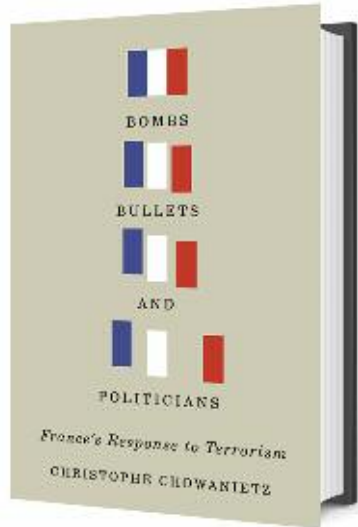
## Should We Change How We Vote?

*Evaluating Canada's Electoral System*

Edited by Andrew Potter, Daniel Weinstock,  
and Peter Loewen

Published for the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada  
Paperback, eBook

The Liberals may have abandoned electoral reform but the issue remains: how best to represent every voter in this country?



## Bombs, Bullets, and Politicians

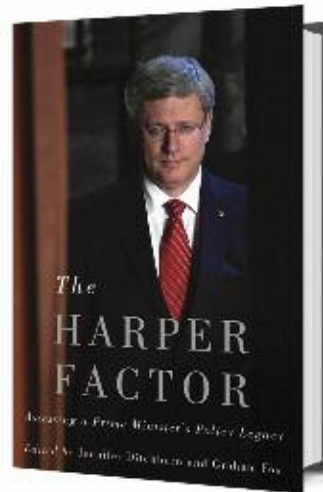
*France's Response to Terrorism*

Christophe Chowanietz

Cloth, eBook

"... adds a new dimension to studies of counterterrorist policies and practices. No other author has specifically addresses the issue of how terrorist actions impact upon party politics in democracies ..."

Reg Whitaker, University of Victoria



## The Harper Factor

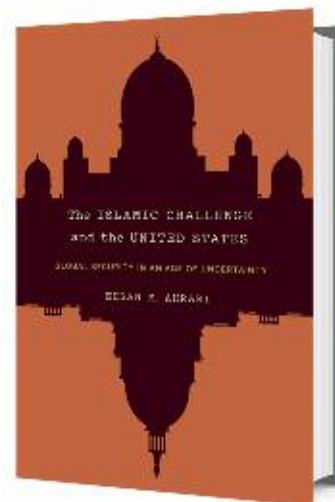
*Assessing a Prime Minister's Policy Legacy*

Edited by Jennifer Ditchburn and Graham Fox

Cloth, eBook

Provides an authoritative and nuanced reference for Canadians on Harper's imprint on public policy while in office, and his political legacy for generations to come.

"Any fair assessment of the Harper years begins here." *Choice*



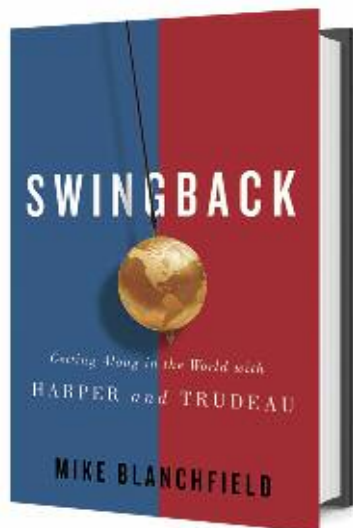
## The Islamic Challenge and the United States

*Global Security in an Age of Uncertainty*

Ehsan M. Ahrari

Cloth, eBook

Examining the sources and prospects of the dominant conflict of our era: the confrontation between Islam and the United States.



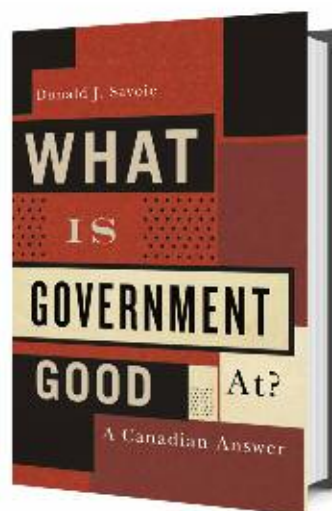
## Swingback

*Getting Along in the World with Harper and Trudeau*

Mike Blanchfield

Cloth, eBook

How Stephen Harper changed Canadian foreign policy, and how Justin Trudeau is trying to turn it around.



New in Paperback

## What Is Government Good At?

*A Canadian Answer*

Donald J. Savoie

A thorough examination of where government succeeds and where it fails.

WINNER Donner Prize for Excellence and Innovation in Public Policy Writing, 2016

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