

mRb

Montreal Review of Books

FALL 2023

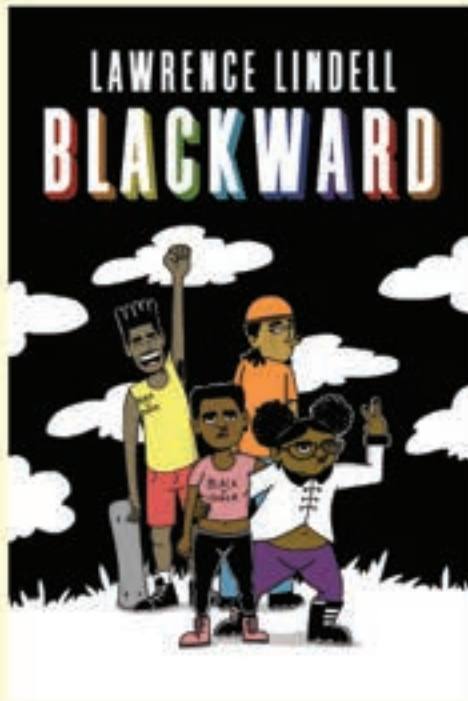


SEAN MICHAELS • CHRIS BERGERON • MOSTAFA HENAWAY • D.M. BRADFORD • QWF AWARDS

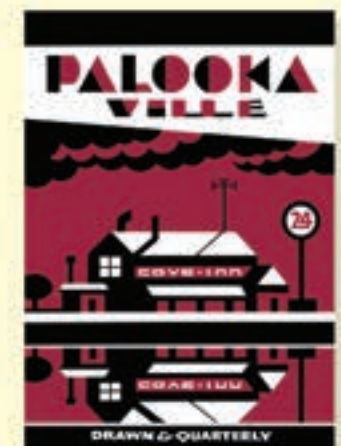
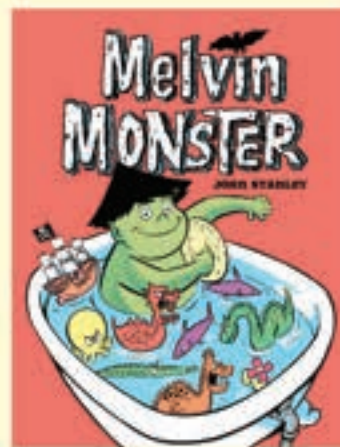
LIBRAIRIE DRAWN & QUARTERLY

FOR ALL YOUR HOLIDAY SHOPPING NEEDS!

VISIT US AT 211 AND 176 RUE BERNARD, MILE END | OPEN EVERY DAY



THE BEST COMICS, FICTION, NONFICTION, POETRY, ZINES,
KIDS, YA BOOKS, AND RECENT DRAWN & QUARTERLY RELEASES



MTL.DRAWNANDQUARTERLY.COM

ACCREDITED ENGLISH BOOKSTORE

Montreal Review of Books

is published by the
Association of English-language Publishers
of Quebec (AELAQ).
Circulation: 40,000

Malcolm Fraser • Editor

Nived Dharmaraj • Associate Editor

Rebecca West • Publisher

Alexandra Sweny • Associate Publisher

David LeBlanc • Designer

Michael Wile • Advertising Manager, National

For editorial inquiries contact:

AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3

Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4

Telephone: 514-932-5633

Email: editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

For advertising inquiries contact:

ads@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

ISSN # 1480-2538

Copyright 2023, the authors and the AELAQ.

Dépôt légal, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
and the National Library of Canada,
fourth quarter, 2023.

We wish to thank the Canada Council for the
Arts, the Government of Canada,
and SODEC for their generous support, without
which this publication would not exist.

One-year subscriptions available for \$15
Please visit mtlreviewofbooks.ca/subscribe

Opinions expressed in reviews and articles
in the **Montreal Review of Books** do not
necessarily reflect the views of the editors
or the AELAQ.

Visit us online

mtlreviewofbooks.ca

aelaq.org

Cover illustration by

Sabrina Ratté

PRINTED IN CANADA

features

4 **Sean Michaels**
By Emily Mernin

10 **Chris Bergeron**
By H Felix Chau Bradley

11 **Mostafa Henaway**
By Emily Raine

21 **D.M. Bradford**
By Faith Paré

fiction

6 **Little Fury**
Casey Bell
Reviewed by Roxane Hudon

Nights Too Short to Dance
Marie-Claire Blais
Translated by Katia Grubisic
Reviewed by Emma Dollery

7 **An Unruly Little Animal**
Scott Randall
Reviewed by Nadia Trudel

Red Squared Montreal
Norman Nawrocki
Reviewed by JB Staniforth

8 **Back in the Land of the Living**
Eva Crocker
Reviewed by Alexandra Trnka

The Family Code
Wayne Ng
Reviewed by Phoebe Yi Ling

9 **Blacklion**
Luke Francis Beirne
Reviewed by Sharon Morrissey

As the Andes Disappeared
Caroline Dawson
Translated by Anita Anand
Reviewed by Kimberly Bourgeois

non-fiction

18 **Paths of Pollen**
Stephen Humphrey
Reviewed by Sara Spike

An Inner Grace
Elizabeth L. Abbott
Reviewed by Jocelyn Parr

19 **Girls Interrupted**
Lisa Whittington-Hill
Reviewed by Yara El-Soueidi

Dark PR
Grant Ennis
Reviewed by Mayaluna Bierlich

graphic

22 **Blackward**
Lawrence Lindell
Reviewed by Esinam Beckley

Naked
Éloïse Marseille
Reviewed by Sruti Islam

23 **Roaming**
Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki
Reviewed by Ian McGillis

poetry

24 **Continuum**
Ivanna Baranova

[about]ness
Eimear Laffan

Theophylline
Erin Moure

**The Decline and Fall
of the Chatty Empire**
John Emil Vincent

bodies like gardens
Salena Wiener
Reviewed by Zoe Shaw

young readers

26 **Highlights of the Season's Books
for Young People**
Reviewed by Meaghan Thurston



Mary Kirkpatrick is an artist and illustrator currently living in Montreal. Her work is inspired by vintage print + illustration processes, working primarily in traditional mixed media with attention to playful shapes and colour. She graduated from OCAD University's Bachelor of Design program.

BY EMILY MERNIN • PHOTO BY JULIE ARTACHO



Do You Remember Being Born?
Sean Michaels
Penguin Random House
\$35.00, cloth, 336pp
9781039006751

“Language is the worst tool we have except for all the others,” thinks poet Marian Ffarmer, as she drifts around a poetry reading in the Bay Area.

Wandering among flexing young writers, she discovers an unyielding connection between all poets, “undaunted idiots” – even those she, a septuagenarian without a cellphone, doesn’t completely understand. Utterly herself in her signature tricorne hat and cape, hiding out from a week-long project, Marian steps into the newness of the crowd and their work. She thinks of poetry as a shared secret, and an important one: “Poetry can ignore geometry; it can even ignore the light! It can muster what is invisible and impossible and unmistakably felt; it can bend the day.”

Marian is the narrator of *Do You Remember Being Born?*, an outstanding, day-bending novel by Sean Michaels. Set over the course of one week, it is an iridescent exploration of what it means to make art, and what it means to build a day, or a life, around it.

Inspired by Marianne Moore, American poet and failed car-namer for Ford Motors, Michaels begins the novel at the intersection of poetry and capitalism. In the opening pages, Marian receives a letter from a California-based tech giant known only as The Company, offering her a large sum of money to collaborate with a new AI named Charlotte. With this arriving on the heels of a request for help with a down payment on a house from her son, she agrees to the publicity stunt.

The Company’s campus is a glistening, not-so-hyperbolic version of the tech companies of our world. A disgruntled New Yorker, Marian reflects on arriving: “I felt allergic to the glossiness of their spirits. I had been in San Francisco for two hours and I was already tired of its white light.” Two researchers lead her to the room where she is going to work with Charlotte for exactly one week on “The Poem.” Marian decides on a new approach: “Usually I prefer to advance in drafts: write a poem, look at it, write it again. This time I’d experiment. A collage perhaps. A patchwork quilt, a tennis match.” She starts volleying lines with Charlotte:

How should we collaborate? I asked the computer. Greedily, it replied.

For the next seven days we’d work together on this greedy and uncommon work.

Here, however reluctant Marian may be in their first encounter, she folds Charlotte’s word choice into her own, slipping away from reluctance into curiosity, acceptance, and wonder.

Marian’s spontaneous approach to The Poem is not unlike Michaels’ own; his writing of this novel was, in many ways, an act of mimesis. I meet Michaels, award-winning novelist and music critic, at Café Olimpico in Mile End. When I ask about his writing process, he says, “My first two books I planned and outlined robustly, and this one I decided to try that other thing, to see what it was like and what it afforded.” The novel was also shaped by AI, which authors many lines in the novel. Conceived of before the recent advancements of ChatGPT (still quite rudimentary when it comes to poetry), Michaels worked with a programmer on Moorebot,

a software programmed with Moore’s complete poetry and a few other poetry anthologies.

He began volleying too, writing alongside Marian, characterizing her experience with Charlotte: “A lot of her reflections in the book are things that came up for me, you know, this sense of disquiet.” Particularly unsettling was when he would really like something that the AI generated: “I would ask myself: is this really interesting, or is this random? And am I making significance and meaning from

Michaels’ joyful larks with language produce a surreal atmosphere, in which a strange and singular plot can slide into the fantastical.

it? How much of my bullshit is equally the work of a reader inventing meaning? Like, ‘her face was like a glass of lemonade.’ That was sort of terrifying – you start to feel like a fraud, and that all art is a fraud.”

Making haphazard language sing is Michaels’ gift, and it matures in this novel, driving and poking fun at its central questions. Where his earlier novels *Us Conductors* and *The Wagers* were full of kismet and magic, *Do You Remember Being Born?* considers the algorithm, how strategic anticipation in the form of a targeted ad or a completed sentence might shine just as brightly as the real, serendipitous thing. Marian and Charlotte get into it:

I was designed that way.

You were designed to guess the future?

I was designed to evaluate the accuracy of my predictions.

So that you can predict what will happen?

So that I can finish a sentence.

Those don’t seem like the same thing.

No. But they are the same thing.

Finishing sentences and predicting the future?

Yes. It is the same process: examine the data, infer a pattern, anticipate the next value in the series.

Michaels delights in the calculated nature of The Company’s campus – the invisible rules, the ubiquitous and inimitable control of the environment, particularly when it comes to language. On Friday, Marian wakes up late. As she hurries onto the campus, a young woman shouts after her: “Your lay!” She turns around and is offered a floral lei to wear for Women’s Day. Everywhere, words play tag, switch places, suggest rhymes, and sometimes just float, like the typo-esque spelling of

Marian’s last name, Ffarmer. Michaels’ joyful larks with language produce a surreal atmosphere, in which a strange and singular plot can slide into the fantastical.

AI adds another layer to his linguistic irreverence. The sheer randomness of AI – the thing that makes us wonder about meaning-making – is so productive, so fricative and surprising. Marian’s insecurities bubble up throughout the week, as she confronts its boundlessness: “So what was I to make of Charlotte—not small but all-devouring, ubiquitous, remembering? Anointed, in a way, by her magnitude. And at the same time, I am certain, diminished by it.”

The title, which is lifted from an exchange between Charlotte and Marian, typifies how Michaels twists this tension towards the uncanny. “It looks like a banal question,” he says. “It has all these verbs and articles that are first-grader level words. It seems bland, but it is actually spooky. No human is likely to ask that of another human, because the assumption is no. It is a great example of the machine question that seems normal. Like those perfect AI-generated faces with an extra tooth in the middle.” Charlotte is not an antagonist or a threat to poetry, but a chaotic wrench-thrower, a bad collaborator, an undeniable day-bender.

I first interviewed Michaels for a small lit mag in 2016, the year after he won the Giller Prize for *Us Conductors*. We talked about influence, novel outlines, fears, style, and sound, of which he said: “The best writers’ sentences have a feeling, a kind of timbre, that surrounds and occasionally even subsumes the meaning-content of the words.” *Do You Remember Being Born?* does this at every turn; his shimmering, sunlit prose transports readers beyond the meaning of the words, beyond the plot, and into the mood of the small yellow room where Marian types to Charlotte. His sentences are syncopated and light, allowing details, nicknames, images, and thoughts to sing.

Do You Remember Being Born? is a novel about collaboration and exchange – big tech with the arts, Marian with Morel (a young poet she sneaks into The Poem), Michaels with Moorebot, a mother with her son, an author with a reader. If Michaels makes any claims about AI’s threat to writing and art, he does so by revealing its sameness to the threat of other writers, and the exploitative nature of capitalism more broadly, demonstrating how our fears have far more to do with market competition than with poesis and language.

“With this book, I want to call for a higher standard of care for one another,” he tells me. “That’s the answer, in a lot of ways, to this threat. To take care of one another and to hold art to a high enough standard.” *Do You Remember Being Born?* sets the bar high. It is a quietly profound antidote to fear, a love letter to artistic stubbornness, and, perhaps more so, the magic that happens when we move beyond it. ms

Emily Mernin is a writer based in Montreal.

fiction

Magical Feminism

Little Fury
Casey Bell
Metatron Press
\$22.00, paper, 184pp
9781988355351

The title of Casey Bell's debut fiction collection, *Little Fury*, has a cute ring to it. It could be the name of an adorable superhero, or a twee film about teenage love. The book's cover is also deceptively pretty: pastel pink with a smudge of neon green. But don't be fooled; Bell's stories depict emotions that are immense, overwhelming. They're stories about women and the various horrible shapes their pain comes in, from grief and queer longing to addiction, abuse, death, and even good ol' menstruation.

Bell takes these heavy themes and wraps them up in fantastical settings, neatly tangling them together through delicate, beautiful prose. Many of her stories appear to be taking place in a world that's ending, perhaps influenced by our current catastrophic era. "Community of Caring" introduces a woman trying to care for her child after her husband dies, or rather, after he is plucked from the earth by a strange winged man. Evangelical talk radio accompanies her

car ride, broadcasting the crumbling world's worries – drought, political divides, etc. In "Lady of the Lake," cities are abandoned, lakes are toxic, and women, like protagonist Estrella, can be sentenced to unclogging the sewer system. Her crime isn't spelled out, but hinted at, mainly through a ghost baby who now haunts her. Bell infuses magic in this ugly world of sewage and misery as Estrella imagines five-headed eels and an "aquatic fairy queen" living at the bottom of a toxic lake.

Bell does this a lot – find beauty in pain. In "Luminous Through the Mist," we learn the tragic story of a young woman who died after falling into a meat grinder. She grew up poor, became addicted to all kinds of pills, and was abused by all kinds of men. But that's just one strand of the story. The other is that the unnamed woman is recalling this life from heaven, which is a floating white couch drifting through the sky. From that couch, she experiences everything she didn't while alive: cooking, painting, reading, writing, loving. Bell writes: "There, in the mist, the woman has come to trust and love herself. To treat herself with tenderness and to seek out and name and appreciate every good thing about herself. All the good things she does and says and makes and

thinks. She is extraordinary."

"Sybil and the Saguaro" deals with postpartum depression with similar originality. Bell imagines a struggling mother finding refuge inside a giant saguaro where the Beach Boys play on repeat and Simone de Beauvoir implements a "strict champagne regimen." It's one of my favourite stories of the collection, along with "Wax Palm and Bougainvillea" and "Penelope and the Lotus Eaters," both also tackling the fragility of life in their own moving way.

I could continue gushing about each of Bell's stories, but that would strip the element of surprise from her writing. You're never sure what she will throw in next and how it will make you feel. She brings light to the darkest situations, whether it's a battered trans woman baptizing a cow at sea or a massage therapist disassociating from her work by picturing romance along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. My main problem with this



collection is that some endings seemed too abrupt, but that's probably just me not wanting them to end.

If this is what Bell can pack into a short story, I can only imagine what she could do with a novel. Or, actually, I really can't, but I can only hope that it involves more couch heavens, feminist cactus palaces, and menstrual sanctuaries. **ms**

Roxane Hudon is an occasional writer and frequent layabout who lives on a remote island and reads a lot.

Pool of Reminiscence

Nights Too Short to Dance
Marie-Claire Blais
Translated by Katia Grubisic
Second Story Press
\$22.95, paper, 260pp
9781772603507

Time, in the way that we experience it, in the way that we *feel* it, is not linear. It's totally elusive: one hour can stretch into eternity, while certain days pass in the blink of an eye. What is the present? It's a time-space that's always happening but almost impossible to stay inside of: a hungry monster constantly chewing on the future and turning it into a haunting memory.

Marie-Claire Blais, a celebrated Quebecois writer, passed away last year, leaving with us a trail of literary evidence that celebrates her full but fleeting life. *Nights Too Short to Dance*, translated from French by Katia Gru-



JILL GLESSING

bisic, embodies the joy and slipperiness of existence – a novel of a thousand commas and almost no periods, it reminds us that life is a continuous yet rhythmic flow.

René's aging transgender body forms the nostalgic axis of the book. Once a chic and vivacious part of Montreal's queer nightlife, René's late-

night piano-playing days are over, as well as his passionate forays into activism. The novel's narrative poetry forms around him in a pool of reminiscence as he sits in his grand old home surrounded by dusty books. Visited in memory by a constant stream of friends and lovers who appear in the intensity and beauty of their youth, René is never really alone. At the end of the book, the characters that inhabit his fantasies slip into reality. Louise, Johnnie, Gerard I, Gerard II, Lali, Doudouline, Polydor, and l'Abeille, all of his favourite girls, arrive in their own age-ravaged flesh to cheer up the sickly René.

The novel's perspective, while centered around René, is not anchored there. Often we enter the minds and experiences of others, learning incredibly intimate facts about their unique lives. Doudouline has an actress mother who she both worships and feels belittled by. Gerard I does not have her mother, and fills the void with a spiralling addiction problem. Lali,

from Berlin, is haunted by memories of a house that burned down on top of her family, and Johnnie's sister has disappeared. Blais seamlessly moves between these perspectives, occupying a vantage point that is at once personal and omniscient, as if the group shares one complex and varied mind or soul.

The solidness of bodies, the physicality of them, is a central problem in the novel. René sometimes feels trapped in his body, an imperfect and expiring flesh-prison that holds his eternal, masculine soul. He longs for "a perfect birth in a body that fits perfectly," and is frustrated with his inability to move, to waltz out into the city-night with a girl or two on his arm. Louise's body betrays her in another way: cancerous cells eat her from the inside out, forcing her to chop off parts of herself to survive. And Gerard I's body weakens and eventually perishes in the wake of the chemicals pulsing through her veins. Gerard II (whose given name is Teresa) adopts the former's name in respect, as a way to ensure that Gerard I lives on. Curses and blessings are passed down through family lines, and reincarnation is an idea much repeated. Blais' characters

continued on page 20

Blurred Boundaries

An Unruly Little Animal
 Scott Randall
 DC Books
 \$21.95, paper, 280pp
 9781927599600

Fifth grader Darby Tamm is worried. About his Career Fair Pair Presentation on Veterinary Dentistry (National Occupation Code 3114) with Jennie Phelps-Christianson, the semi-mysterious death of his fifth-grade teacher, his mother's temporary teaching contract, his father's Career Parent Presentation, the affair between his substitute teacher and Jennie's mother Vice Principal Phelps-Christianson, his parents' temporary trial separation, threats of violence from his former friends, and potentially being exposed for stealing from his father's collection of vintage porn magazines.

Also, they're out of milk.

In his debut novel, Scott Randall highlights the absurdities of the human condition, big and small, through a day in Darby's life, interspersed with digressional chapters that play on the main narrative and Darby's anxieties.

In many ways, *An Unruly Little Animal* is a book about boundaries, between childhood and adulthood; life and death; the ordinary and extraordinary; the appropriate and inappropriate; the sacred and profane; humans and animals. For a kid, these boundaries are clear. But Darby is in fifth grade now, and is starting to see the grey zones.

Through the motif of animals, Randall dismantles any sense of hierarchy between humans and animals to emphasize the absurdity of modern life. Darby frequently understands himself and the people around him in relation to animals, most notably through imagined scenarios where animals caused the car accident that killed his teacher. An absent mallard duck father becomes suicidal and deliberately flies into the car windshield. Mother and son mice and capybaras end up in or in front of the teacher's car and also cause the deadly accident. The scenarios are dark, childish, and probably something to bring up in family counselling.

With the P.O.V. of a pre-teen, Randall has chosen an ideal framework to explore absurdism. Throughout the novel, Darby sees through many of the systems, rules, and performances that make up society and adulthood. One of the most uncomfortable ways this happens is when Darby is cognizant of how and why he is being parented or when he psychoanalyzes the people around him. Darby's perceptiveness is a reminder that children notice more than adults think they do, for better and for worse.

There's a satisfying musicality to



Randall's sentences. The formality and repetition of his language creates a slow-burn humour that ultimately leads to many satisfying full-circle moments. Similarly,

much of the humour is derived from specificity. It's not just a presentation, it's the Career Fair Pair Presentation, and it's not just a veterinarian, it's Veterinary Dentistry (National Occupation Code 3114). Randall's commitment to these bits is remarkable. Every once in a while the rhythm is interrupted by a word that seems out of place in an eleven-year-old's consciousness (cuckold, pedagogy, logos, pathos, ethos), which keeps readers on their toes and provides some of the novel's best laughs.

Much of the absurdity comes from the reverence afforded to certain topics. This is perhaps most evident, and hilarious, in a chapter that describes the vintage pornography Darby steals from his father. Randall makes full, diverse, and consistent use of humour – both subtle and overt, dark, witty, satirical, cringe, observational, and surreal – while maintaining respect and sensitivity for the topics and characters he handles.

While the children, namely Darby and Jennie, are precocious, they're never the butt of a joke. Randall treats every character with empathy, as does his protagonist. Randall balances the "trivial" worries of an eleven-year-old boy with complex dilemmas: how do you talk about death, how do you protect someone's feelings? Darby has fantasies of heroism, while at the same time worrying about fitting in and what's right and wrong. Darby is thus in many ways an "old soul" who retains the charms and flaws of a child.

The novel's ending is simple but satisfying. There are no great profound conclusions or answers, because that's not what life is. Randall reminds us that sometimes all we can do is breathe, and try to do better next time. mb

Nadia Trudel is a Montreal/Tiohtià:ke-based writer, freelance culture journalist, editor, and podcast host/editor. Find her on Twitter @nadia_trudel and @nadia.trudel on Instagram.

Protest Nostalgia

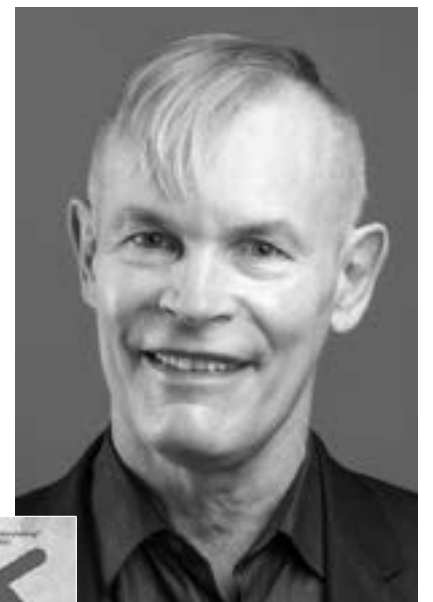
Red Squared Montreal
 Norman Nawrocki
 Black Rose Books
 \$19.99, paper, 200pp
 9781551648019

Norman Nawrocki's *Red Squared Montreal*, "a fictional chronicle" of the seven-month 2012 Quebec student strike, is a love letter to a particular political moment. The novel celebrates the energy of street protest above all, and in doing so occasionally nails the Printemps Érablé's charm. The descriptions of the joy among leaderless strangers marching together are worthy salutes to experiences few others have chronicled. Montreal has never seen anything quite like the 2012 student strike, and Nawrocki captures images of the months of protest that will bring back intense memories for those who participated. Unfortunately, the novel struggles to capture the strike's civic and emotional complexity, offering instead hyperbole and bathos and little sense of what it genuinely accomplished.

Nawrocki – a Montreal anarchist-arts stalwart since the 1980s – makes the novel's primary narrator, Huberto, a UQAM student. His artist-activist girlfriend Pascale, also a student, occasionally gets narrative space. A third sometimes-narrator, Jean, is homeless and drops his G's to get this point across: "Yah, I started walkin' with the students in some of the demos. I just wanted to support 'em, ya know." Why a homeless person has such affection for a protest movement unrelated to poverty or housing is unclear. None of the characters are especially resonant: their personalities are understood through their association with the strike.

Unlike most students in 2012, Huberto and Pascale don't own cell phones and don't use or discuss social media (with which information about demonstrations was communicated on the fly). Like people of Nawrocki's generation, they judge the merits of political actions based on how much coverage they receive in physical newspapers.

Huberto and Pascale believe the most hackneyed of protests (like drawing horns and moustaches on electoral posters) are revolutionary, and fondly chant shopworn slogans anarchists have shouted for decades. This lands awkwardly in a story set in 2012, neglecting the collection of hilarious chants improvised and taken



up by students during the night marches. (For many, the sound of those protests was the sarcastic, dejected cheer, "Charest, woo-hoo.") As such, the novel ignores one of the strike's most engaging aspects, one that delighted participants and kept

their morale up even as it communicated the collective humour of the movement.

The purity of the cause and the sense that this is a historic fight for good keeps Nawrocki's characters going. They absurdly compare the tuition increase that strikers oppose to rape. Various international representatives are dropped into the text to affirm that SPVM crackdowns on students (which were vicious, but killed no one) are as bad as police in Guatemala, Peru, or Chile under Pinochet. A "Cossack" exclaims, "It's even worse than in Russia!" Nobody suggests these comparisons are self-servingly false.

Bafflingly, Nawrocki presents incorrect facts. The novel identifies the first day of anti-protest Law 78 as May 22, when it was May 18, which few who protested that ugly, violent weekend could forget. The SPVM's pepper-spraying of Bar le Saint-Bock took place the next night, but the novel sets it in April. At one perplexing moment, a march turns from Berri onto Pine.

Presuming facts don't matter as much in a fictional chronicle, the most striking aspect of *Red Squared Montreal* is its incuriosity. Even as Huberto laments how the media "don't speak to us," none of the characters shows any interest in those who don't participate in the strike, or oppose it. Pascale sums this attitude up by exclaiming "Baa! Sheep!" at the idea that a majority of students are voting to end their strike after seven months. Huberto and Pascale's enemies are dismissed as selfish,

continued on page 20

Finding Utopia in Capitalist Ruin

Back in the Land of the Living
Eva Crocker
House of Anansi Press
\$23.99, paper, 304pp
9781487009779

Running away from a messy breakup in her hometown of St. John's, Marcy moves to Montreal and finds herself untethered. She doesn't have a job, friends, or a place to stay after the end of the month, but she is determined to fit in and

carve a life out of a city with more to offer than where she's from. Eva Crocker's *Back in the Land of the Living* follows Marcy's pursuit of belonging.

Crocker, also born in St. John's, Newfoundland, and now based in Montreal, uses her latest novel to explore the experience of moving to Montreal from a small city as a queer person in search of more. Marcy is caught between two socially tenuous places: St. John's, a small city with an even smaller queer community, in which a social misstep can lead to ruin, and Montreal, where people are always packing up to go. "That's the thing about Montreal. People leave, Anglo people especially," Marcy's new friend Hannah tells her. Resisting this exodus is a badge of honour that Marcy is determined to attain – moving between apartments in cabs, enrolling in medical trials to pay rent, and hanging onto the coattails of cool people with full lives who have more to do than spend time with her. Her desperation is achingly relatable to anyone who has undertaken the same lonely project of putting down roots.

Marcy dates to fill the void; "It felt humiliating to admit ... that she was filling her free time with internet dates to stave off loneliness," Crocker writes. When Marcy meets Leanne, things get intense fast. Their romance becomes a way for Marcy to legitimize her existence in Montreal, a tether to a city in which she craves belonging. It also becomes a roller coaster of anxiety as Leanne's controlling, angry side comes to light. In part, *Back in the Land of the Living* is a story about a girl trying to make it in the big city, but within this frame, Crocker also adds another voice to the canon of queer literature about intimate partner abuse, following in the footsteps of Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. The relationship at the centre of the novel, however, involves a quieter genre of emotional manipulation than the abuse relayed in Machado's memoir, a difference that fuels much of Marcy's internal turmoil. Caught in an



ALEX STEAD

anxious loop, she continually second-guesses herself and the nature of their relationship.

Crocker takes care to situate her writing in a specific contemporary moment, peppering her prose with references to police brutality protests and early signs of the COVID-19 pandemic. The excitement of Marcy's Montreal is underpinned by an all-too-familiar capitalist dystopia, as evident in her remote job sorting phrases to train AI. Marcy finds herself looking forward to categorizing phrases about suicide because they're a reprieve from sorting hate speech. She betrays her ethics and buys sheets from Amazon because she's broke, and listens to YouTube lectures on Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. She is caught in an unrelenting capitalist grind that only the pandemic can bring to a halt. When it does, Crocker goes on to explore the power of the pandemic to prolong relationships that seemed on the brink of collapse; "In that first strange month they didn't fight at all," she writes.

When provincial borders begin to close, Marcy's mom begs her to come home. Leanne invites her on a road trip in a new camper van she bought with money from an injury settlement. The need for Marcy to justify her life in Montreal has never been more urgent. Montreal feels different than Marcy had expected, and in the novel's final pages, her decision to stay or leave becomes a symbol of her independence, a statement about whether she can exist in Montreal on her own and if the life she has built there is worth it. She finds herself at a crossroads: to leave, abandoning the isolation and stress of the city along with her new friends, or to stick it out and keep searching for her queer utopia. **msb**

Alexandra Trnka is a writer and editor who was born in Newfoundland and is based in Toronto. She is the reviews editor for *The Ex-Puritan*, and regularly contributes to publications including the *Montreal Review of Books* and the *Journal of Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*. She recently won Prism international's 2022 Creative Nonfiction Prize for "Czech is a Difficult Language," an essay about language, memory, immigration.

Conditioned Silence

The Family Code
Wayne Ng
Guernica Editions
\$25.00, paper, 316pp
9781771837934

Our family is the nucleus around which we as social beings learn to interact with the world. For those of us who are lucky, we're born into a safe, warm, and loving environment where our physiological and emotional needs are met. For others, there lurks the inherited pain of intergenerational grief, which weaves its way into the family dynamic, tightening its grip, leaving family members caught in a debilitating cycle of fight, flight, or freeze.

In Wayne Ng's *The Family Code*, readers are taken on a rough, often disagreeable journey through two years in the life of Hannah Belenko – a self-loathing, reckless single mother of two. Throughout the novel, we're periodically thrown back into the trenches of Hannah's upbringing in suburban Ontario as the daughter of a merciless father and a voiceless, enabling mother. Rooted in the belief that family is *everything*, the Belenko legacy is kept alive through collective silence: regardless of what takes place (the witnessing of her brother's sexual assault on a teammate, the extreme physical abuse from her father), it's best kept under wraps.

Soon after losing parental custody of her daughter Faye and suffering from a violent altercation with her then-boyfriend, Hannah decides to escape to Halifax with her son Axel, where she first met her children's father. Between late-night parties at her run-down basement apartment and finding Axel a school so she can work, Hannah goes about life the only way she knows how. What we understand from the very beginning, however, is that her know-how is steeped in survival – doing whatever it takes just to scrape by.

Almost everyone Hannah encounters on her path either fuels or is consumed by the fires of her personal hell. The more we discover about her past, the more we begin to understand Hannah's destructive behaviour, which eventually jeopardizes her permanent custody of Axel. If there's one message that rings clear in Ng's novel, it's that as much as our family shapes us, it can also harden us and, at worst, break us.

Skillfully moving between Hannah's narrative and that of her son, Ng grants us at least some reprieve from the heaviness that weighs on the struggling



mother's life. If readers can't identify with being the helpless byproduct of their own upbringing through Hannah's portrayal, this is revealed through young Axel's eyes.

The boy is the victim of his mother's unpredictability and poor choices, understandably provoking maladaptive, sometimes aggressive behaviour. At his core, all Axel wishes is for safety, warmth, and his mother's happiness. Although there are several instances in the seven-year-old's narrative where readers may question the level of self-awareness he expresses, the author's extensive experience as a social worker may simply challenge our own assumptions about a young child's ability for self-reflection.

On Hannah's parental journey, which becomes deeply intertwined with Community Services interventions, it's clear that she must make a choice: break the conditioned silence that has allowed her to get by for so long, or risk being crushed by the weight of all that the Belenko family code carries with it. With the will and support of a few caring people along the way, readers can only cheer Hannah on as she finally begins to make the right choices for herself and her family. Ng inspires feelings of true pride when readers recognize Hannah's progress: her attendance at support groups, the efforts made to keep a tidier home, ensuring food is on the table, and the routine maintained during Axel's overnight visits.

In *The Family Code*, Hannah Belenko demonstrates that the darkest parts of herself must be reckoned with in order to come out the other side. From her story, Ng teaches us that family certainly provides us with the fuel for our own growth, although this sometimes means being far from their reach, and unlearning everything we believed about ourselves and the world around us so we can start anew. **msb**

Phoebe Yi Ling is a freelance writer, editor, and full-time explorer. She currently works with the Nunavik Inuit community as a Gladue writer and sometimes spends her time dabbling in experimental performance or marvelling at the complexities of intra/interpersonal communication.

Troubles and Twists

Blacklion

Luke Francis Beirne

Baraka Books

\$24.95, paper, 240pp

9781771863315

The aloofness of the American cowboy permeates the personality of CIA agent Raymond Daly, protagonist of Luke Francis Beirne's *Blacklion*. Except Beirne's novel is not set in the Wild West, but in Ireland, right at the northern border, during the time of the Troubles.

In true espionage thriller fashion, our detached agent has been catapulted into a delicate situation, one he needs to navigate with care if he's to survive and not get caught – either by those he is infiltrating, a small group of republican volunteers south of the border, or their enemies, the loyalists and British Security Forces in the north. He is completely on his own – if he's captured, no one will come for him. And there's a good reason for that.

Raymond's mission follows an uneasy ploy of back-alley maneuvers:



the CIA has sent him to the Irish town

of Sligo to put guns in the hands of the republicans. This is not so much to help defend their cause as it is to beat the Russians to it. We are, after all, also in the middle of the Cold War. In a twisted game of geopolitical strategy, it means the CIA is arming those fighting against the Brits, who just happen to be American allies. The line is thin here.

The tight-knit group Ray infiltrates includes Tommy Slowey, an arms smuggler from South Boston and the one who introduces him to volunteers: Gerry, his beautiful cousin Aoife, and brothers Liam and Dermot. The reader

is privy to one intense arms-smuggling event. And then, the entire reason CIA spy Raymond Daly is in Ireland fades into the background. The story becomes about him falling in love with Aoife and jumping into the Northern Ireland conflict as if it was his own, in the name of keeping up his cover but perhaps rather more due to his need to protect Aoife.

Mimicking the layered geopolitical context of Ireland in the 1970s, Beirne's love story is

irrevocably attached to a larger, overwhelmingly violent and desperate situation pervading Ireland, which ends up dictating how it will unfold. There is just no way out of it. The reports of bombings are halted by short and intense lulls during which retaliations are planned and executed. This saccadic rhythm is captured by minute descriptions of Ireland's beauty and dramatic accounts of Ray's past as a soldier in Southeast Asia. Besieged by flashbacks to his violent killing of a boy back in Laos, Raymond struggles with being caught up in wars that exert a

personal price he finds more and more difficult to pay.

The plot is intricately intertwined with the history of that period. But how much do we really know about the politics and the violence that permeated Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998? This is where, perhaps, it was more difficult for me to follow and get immersed in the writing. For example, it is only after my research that I'm able to place the novel's events at around May 1974, when Daly asks Slowey about the Dublin and Monaghan bombings he's heard about on the radio. Without this additional reading, it was easy for me to miss the finer integration of the plot in Ireland's past.

I found the reading challenging. It's hard to see the pattern of the literary threads Beirne weaves for us in *Blacklion* – a CIA cowboy, ex-Vietnam vet, in Ireland; the extremely complex and brutally violent geopolitical situation, backgrounded by the Cold War; a plot that attempts to crescendo into an existential message about love and war. Each thread is intense, deep, and merits a much longer novel to be able to distinguish the magnificent Irish tartans that compose *Blacklion*. **mb**

Sharon Morrissey is hiding out here from her other professional life.

Disowned Fragments

As the Andes Disappeared

Caroline Dawson

Translated by Anita Anand

Book*hug Press

\$23.00, paper, 208pp

9781771668613

All of us want to belong. Sometimes our sense of safety may even depend on fitting in. But what happens to those parts of ourselves we may bury to mesh with the majority?

Chilean-born, Montreal-based author and sociology teacher Caroline Dawson digs up and grieves such disowned fragments of self in her gripping autobiographical novel, skillfully translated by Anita Anand from the original French *Là où je me terre* (2020). In this powerful coming-of-age story, a fictionalized "Caroline" shares memories of her family's immigration, raising issues of social injustice and racism while reviewing her own cultural integration with candour, humour, and depth.

Taking us back to 1986, Caroline recounts the Christmas she and her family (both parents and two brothers) fled Pinochet's regime to seek refuge in Montreal. A fraught Toronto stopover caused by an ice storm is made even icier by an officer at Canadian customs who lets out loud sighs, "as if we'd



JUSTINE LATOUR

ruined his Christmas on purpose." Only seven at the time, the young refugee is rightly incensed by his cruel indifference. "This kind of man," she notes, "who looks away from people, who flees when confronted with human suffering, is the first type of person I ever hated." The necessary acquiescence with which her family accepts the long wait to be interviewed also leaves a mark: "Right behind our *thank you, thank you, thank you very much*: clenched teeth, bitten lips, balled fists, something like a choked scream in our throats. But refugees can't talk."

After a winter spent in the wryly described "protective bubble of the Canadian multicultural mosaic fantasyland that was the *classe de francization*,"

young Caroline, a model student, is accepted into the regular school program. Yet, finding few (non-white) immigrants in her schoolyard, she's self-conscious about sticking out, and begins to curb her natural exuberance, dimming "the little Latina in me." Even the traditional foods in her lunchbox, lovingly prepared by her mother, become a source of embarrassment. ("In the eighties, nobody Instagrammed their slices of avocado toast," the narrator quips.)

Tired of being teased, she forbids her mother from packing "anything that could be seen as exotic," denying her roots and her healthy appetite.

A precocious reader and budding writer, at age eleven Caroline is profoundly awed by Réjean Ducharme's *Swallowed*, and recognizes that French is becoming her language, a bittersweet turning point as she realizes that Spanish, her mother tongue, is taking a back seat. While French ultimately empowers her to tell her story, she's troubled by the growing "cultural distance" between herself and her parents, whose immense self-sacrifice she never forgets. In Chile, her mother was a passionate daycare worker, while her father was an esteemed English teacher; their past careers contrast with the joyless jobs juggled in Montreal, like cleaning bank offices at night, to secure their kids' futures.

The novel takes a feminist angle as Caroline remembers her grandmother's tragic life in Chile and zooms in on her exploited, overworked – yet unfailingly supportive – mother, who adores children but misses out on time with her own while cleaning other people's houses. "I didn't inherit feminism by osmosis," Caroline explains. "I pulled it out of the earth; it was deeply buried beneath all the hopes and dreams and disappointments of the women in my family."

Offering a female viewpoint on integration, Dawson brilliantly uncovers the social codes that can hem in and silence girls. "Very nice, healthy, quiet, boring," is how Caroline sees her female classmates. Resigned to blending in, she concludes: "I could never be enough of a chameleon to look like them, so it was my personality that had to go." Thankfully, Caroline later vows to reclaim her voice, recalling how she felt when a school teacher ignored her childhood poem. "All I'd succeeded in doing by becoming a reserved, obedient, docile, and quiet child was to render myself completely invisible," she smoulders. With healthy anger forecasting change, she asserts, "I already knew for sure that it was out of this seething resentment that little Caroline, whom I'd buried, would rise again." **mb**

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based writer/singer-songwriter. Visit her at kimberlybourgeois.com for news about her music and writing projects.

By H Felix Chau Bradley

Chris Bergeron

Queering the Algorithm

For Montreal writer Chris Bergeron, our city is “a transgender city.” Bergeron is the author of the novel *Valid – Valide* in its original French version, which has been translated into English by Natalia Hero.

“There is a form of non-binarity to Montreal,” Bergeron tells me as we video-chat one afternoon in late summer. “It’s always changing identities and languages – nobody can agree on what Montreal is. It’s a French city, no it’s bilingual; it’s old-timey and racist, no it’s very open-minded and friendly; it’s bad for business, no it’s a tech hub.”

Bergeron herself has lived many lives here over the decades – in the ’90s, she was a nightlife reporter, writing for the now-defunct *Chart* magazine as well as *La Presse*, working at CKUT, then eventually moving to *Voir*, where she stayed for many years. Now a fiction writer, she makes a living working for an ad agency. When she walks around the city, she is aware of the palimpsest of past identities of the buildings she passes – this one used to be a music venue, that one used to be a dive bar. She is perfectly placed to write a book like *Valid*, a “dystopian autofiction” novel that mines elements of Bergeron’s own past and present in order to project trans lives into an unstable and all-too-familiar-sounding future.

Autofiction and dystopian fiction might seem like opposite ends of the genre spectrum: one parses the author’s past and present for its material, the other is typically set in the foreboding future. However, Bergeron reminds me that for trans and other marginalized people, dystopia exists in the past and present as well. In writing *Valid*, she says: “I was trying to connect two dystopias: the dystopia of my youth, as somebody who didn’t have the words or the mental framework to analyze my difference, and the future dystopia that I’m afraid of, in which trans people are legislated out of existence, in which systems of autocratic control are organized by AI.”

Valid was also an attempt at exorcism – she hoped that by writing the ominous future that trans people fear, she would be able to ward it off. But unfortunately, even within the time that’s elapsed between Bergeron writing the novel in French and the publication of its English translation, there has been a

“Christelle is a variation of me,” says Bergeron, “and I wasn’t about to write myself as a hero; I was doomed to write myself as a coward.”

frightening escalation of anti-trans legislation across the U.S., and recently in Canada as well.

Valid is the story of Christelle, a seventy-year-old trans woman living a materially comfortable, but closeted and isolated, life in a near-future Montreal, whose social, political, and legal structures are controlled by a powerful algorithm called David. Christelle, over the course of a day, tells her life story to a local David network, which has been disconnected from the larger Total David network for a limited time by trans and queer activists. David is a mash-up of Alexa and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Big Brother: he is in turns obedi-



Valid
Chris Bergeron
Translated by Natalia Hero
House of Anansi Press
\$22.99, paper, 248pp
9781487011130

ent and willing to please, and also severe, surveillant, and prohibitive. Hero’s translation is confident for the most part, navigating both Christelle’s human and David’s AI diction smoothly, though occasionally the original French grammatical structures are too apparent.

Bergeron tells me that she wrote David as a clever and therefore sometimes tyrannical child. “But there is no good or evil in David,” she reminds me. “David follows a protocol. The good or the evil of David is what the system, created by people, has decided he will be.” David watches and records; he controls entertainment, archives, architecture, and the police; and he makes sure that anyone not conforming to a productive, cis-heteronormative life is removed from the comfortable city centre, where greenery is abundant and freedom is not.

In the novel’s present, queerness and transness are outlawed: “It’s been years since gay, trans, queer and other folks marched under the rainbow flag ... Today you call us ‘the 5%’ and our flag is the colour of fog.” Though Christelle came out as trans in her forties, she has since resumed living as a man, out of fear, and in order to keep the semblance

of a peaceful existence. Of course, living as a man is anything but peaceful for her – she reverts to her birth name to escape detection by David, and relates the psychological pain of having to de-transition and of being separated from everyone she used to know. Now, along with countless other closeted members of the 5%, she has been tasked by an underground resistance group to narrate her real memories and thoughts to the algorithm, which will then, they hope, crash under the pressure of having to “validate” all of the data at once – data that goes against what it has been programmed to accept.

The relationship between Christelle and David is ambivalent, at least on Christelle’s end. David represents repression, and yet he is the only “person” she can talk to in this bleak future. Bergeron says that in writing Christelle’s isolation, in which the only entity willing to listen to her story is an algorithm, she sought to recreate the loneliness that can come with being an elder trans person, without any in-person community: “You spend a lot of time interacting with machines – hopefully with people

continued on page 12

By Emily Raine

Mostafa Henaway

Essentially Unfair

Mostafa Henaway's *Essential Work, Disposable Workers: Migration, Capitalism, and Class* unspools around a brutal paradox: how can a person be at once essential and disposable?

Prior to the pandemic, Henaway had already begun a book-length non-fiction project about temporary migrant workers. A longtime community and social justice organizer, his writing draws on both his academic research (he's currently completing his PhD at Concordia's Geography, Planning and Environment department) and his work at Montreal's grassroots Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) since 2007. In the early phases of lockdown, though, he noticed a shift in the conversations he was having with workers.

"The first wave of the pandemic deeply impacted a lot of our members of the Immigrant Workers Centre. A lot of them were working in warehouses, in deliveries, in agriculture," he explains. "Before, these workers were just invisible and disposable. Now, all of a sudden, they became essential – but they still remained disposable. And the reason why they are disposable is because of their immigration status."

Canadian immigration policy, he argues, is designed to function like a faucet for cheap, fungible, precarious labour. It's porous enough to let in a stream of racialized migrant workers when they're wanted, but rigid enough that few can secure permanent citizenship and rights for themselves – most must leave when their help's no longer wanted. This structure is buttressed by an ecosystem of services, like temp agencies that shield companies from formal employment and all the rights and responsibilities that come with that.

So the "essential workers" designation of the pandemic – given to the "angels" who mopped hospital floors and packed Amazon boxes and delivered poke bowls so that others could safely shelter and work at home – captures the absurdity that Henaway sees at the heart of Canada's immigration policy, where the work is welcome, but the person who performs it is not.

"The work itself is essential," he says, "but unfortunately, the way our immigration system is structured, we don't actually consider these workers essential, right? Because if we did, they

would have permanent residency. We would keep them."

Inflection Point

We meet up to chat about his book at an interesting time for organized labour, with high-profile strikes by SAG-AFTRA, the Writers Guild of America, the United Auto Workers, the staff at Ontario Metro grocery stores, and countless others dragging workers' advocacy issues into the cultural foreground. I recount how, during a recent trip to Los Angeles, hotel staff across the city had raised a ruckus outside their workplaces each night, using "dirty rooms and nonstop noise" as a tactic to force their employers to negotiate. The summer of 2023 had begun to feel like an inflection point, as the discombobulations of pandemic-era work receded, leaving most workers feeling like little had changed for the better.

"People feel like their backs are against the wall, and they are organizing again," Henaway says. "I think it's really beginning to come to a breaking point. Everybody is watching the dreams of new liberalism completely fade."

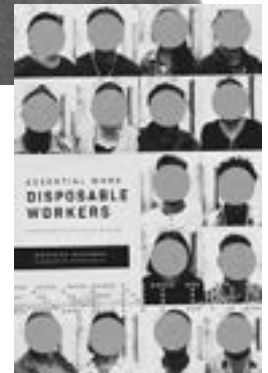
He points to how the rupture of COVID isolation enabled people to step back and consider what they wanted in their lives. Many, he says, realized, "I could just be as effective without someone breathing down my neck, and be closer to my family and have a more humane life, as opposed to doing all the things I did before to make someone obscenely rich."

The problems of professionals pushing back against return-to-office mandates, or blue-collar workers fighting stagnant wages, might seem distant from the struggles for basic human rights and safety faced by the migrant workers who organize through the IWC. But Henaway reminds that work is often the place where politics intersects with people's day-to-day lives.

"Labour is the thing that people need the most in their lives," he says. "It's hard to shrug off because it's the thing that you do eight hours a day, so you want to feel like a decently respected and



Essential Work, Disposable Workers
Migration, Capitalism and Class
Mostafa Henaway
Fernwood Publishing
\$27.00, paper, 224pp
9781773632254



dignified human being when you're finished."

How the World Works

Essential Work, Disposable Workers stands out among books about labour because it's so heavily populated by, well, workers. Henaway is careful to position the people he organizes with as vocal agents in their own lives, striking a tricky balance of revealing the abjection of their circumstances while showcasing their power and resilience.

"The vast majority of the book is based on people I've worked with," he says, a writing strategy that reflects an approach to organizing grounded in using individual support to build collective campaigns.

"You have to be willing to be uncomfortable and be in spaces and communities that you're not familiar with," he continues. "It's a lot of relationship building, it's a lot of being patient with people. It often takes a long time for people to even express themselves."

Organizing temporary foreign workers poses challenges beyond workplace-based activism. Many people, for example, work in private homes, or have contracts framed by shady temp agencies. There are often language or cultural barriers between workers, and, with working papers in question, losing allies to deportation or repatriation is a constant. But then again, as Henaway says: "Organizing is always messy."

Bringing the Fight to Temporary Workers

With the book, he aims to reach other organizers, to share what he's learned in over fifteen years of working with some of Canada's most precarious populations. He's concerned that the left unfairly overlooks low-wage, temporary migrant workers, assuming that they're too hard to organize. Instead, he points to the value of community resources like the IWC, which meets people where they are in the community and provides a safe space for their activism. He also reminds

readers that there's really no way to separate migrant workers' plights from the larger structural forces at an international level. "These are global issues – they're not local issues," he stresses. "They're global issues."

Take, for example, the international remittance system – whereby temporary workers abroad send a portion of their pay back home to family. These have become core elements of the economies of nations dependent on labour exports like the Philippines, where about 10% of the total population lives and works abroad.

"Remittances," Henaway writes, "are increasingly utilized to maintain the integration of low- and middle-income countries in the world economy." These payments are frequently used to service foreign debt, he notes. This relationship effectively indentures labour-exporting countries while enriching the nations people migrate to, a structure he likens to "debt imperialism" funded by low-wage workers.

"It's structural. It's in the DNA of this system of people that are being propelled to migrate, and the journey is now becoming starker and starker," he tells me. "And to say that our house is full and we're going to put up the drawbridge is not a solution."

In Canada, he finds that pathways to citizenship depend above all on one's value as a worker, as an economic contributor. "While fighting for better working conditions is important," he writes, "the most important struggle is for status." With global movement flattened to economic migration, for the workers that Henaway organizes with, the labour and legal questions are inseparable.

"You know inherently that none of these issues are individual – they're completely collective," he says. "Building a more equitable society is what they're demanding. And to me, that's really what they're organizing about, even if they don't see it in that way. It's about something much deeper." ■

Emily Raine is a writer, editor, creative strategist, and lapsed academic.

behind them. Everyone talks about queer chosen family, but especially for elder trans people, it can be an experience of isolation and years of loneliness." David, on his end, feeds on the memories and stories of humans like Christelle, in order to learn and grow as an algorithm.


Christelle's reliance on David means that she is not in the right mind to lead a revolution. Other trans people, many of them from the ballroom scene – which has gone underground – are the ones who plot the rebellion. An old lover of Christelle's, Yukio, contacts her through a messenger, and Christelle decides to follow their lead and join the movement. "Christelle is a variation of me," says Bergeron, "and I wasn't about to write myself as a hero; I was doomed to write myself as a coward." She wanted to be realistic about her own ways of being, she says, and she also wanted to write against the static notion of the trans woman as "courageous." Bergeron continues: "I wanted to show a trans person who isn't an activist, who is just trying to live her life. And then, I wanted to show some of the weaknesses that come from that, from coying up to power."

In writing the relationship between Christelle and David, Bergeron was also inspired by the nineteenth-century epistolary novels she grew up reading – novels by writers like Laclos and de Sade in which power hierarchies are laid bare through correspondence between people of different classes. As Christelle narrates her memories to David, the algorithm often interjects with "awful despotic platitudes," using the banal language of power. But Christelle, finally voicing her own story, is not so easily deterred.

"When you've been born as many times as I have, you don't die so easily," Christelle tells David. For her part, Bergeron has already added more lives to the world of *Valid* – the sequel, *Vandales*, is out in French this November. Meanwhile, a film based on *Valid* is in its production phase. Bergeron's dream is to write many more books that take place in the "Validverse," as she calls it – books that follow other side characters, that take place only in the past, or in the very far-off future – but that are all connected by an overarching trans consciousness.

Bergeron continues to write against the tropes of trans people as "devils or martyrs." "Where are the real people in that?" she asks. *Valid* draws a canny portrait of one very real trans woman in a world full of compromise, punctuated by energizing moments of corporate-algorithm-busting truth. ■

H Felix Chau Bradley is the author of *Personal Attention Roleplay*, which was a finalist for the WUC Danuta Glead Literary Award and the Kobo Rakuten Emerging Writer Prize. They are an editor at *This Magazine*, *Le Sigh*, and Metonymy Press. They live in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal).



David Winch
Editorial Services / Services éditoriaux

Writing and Editing for Texts of all Types
See <http://davidwinch.website>

Journalism, government & academic texts
- 35 years UN, newspaper and magazine work

Cell: 514.796.7162
email: dcwinch-editorial@yahoo.com

feminist, queer, anti-racist,
communist, anarchist,
antifascist, decolonial ...
and much, much more!

WWW.LEFTWINGBOOKS.NET

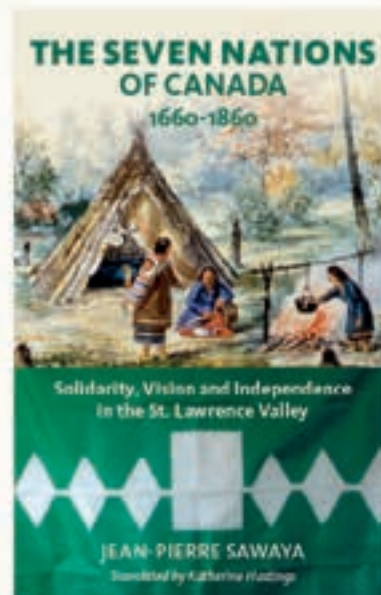
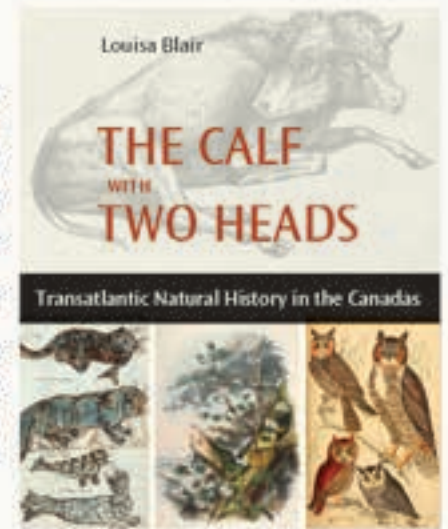
free shipping in canada for orders of \$50 or more

NEW FROM BARAKA BOOKS

THE CALF WITH TWO HEADS Transatlantic Natural History in the Canadas

Louisa Blair

"Wow! I'm impressed. Stop scrolling on your phones and have a look at this." Tomson Highway, Cree playwright, author, musician



THE SEVEN NATIONS OF CANADA 1660-1860 Solidarity, Vision and Independence

Jean-Pierre Sawaya

"After a long dormant period, historians have rediscovered the Federation of the Seven Nations... [Sawaya] took on a complex job and carried it out brilliantly." Christian Ruel, *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec*

AFTER ALL WAS LOST The Resilience of a Rwandan Family Orphaned on April 6, 1994 when the Rwandan President's Plane was Shot Down

Alice Nsabimana

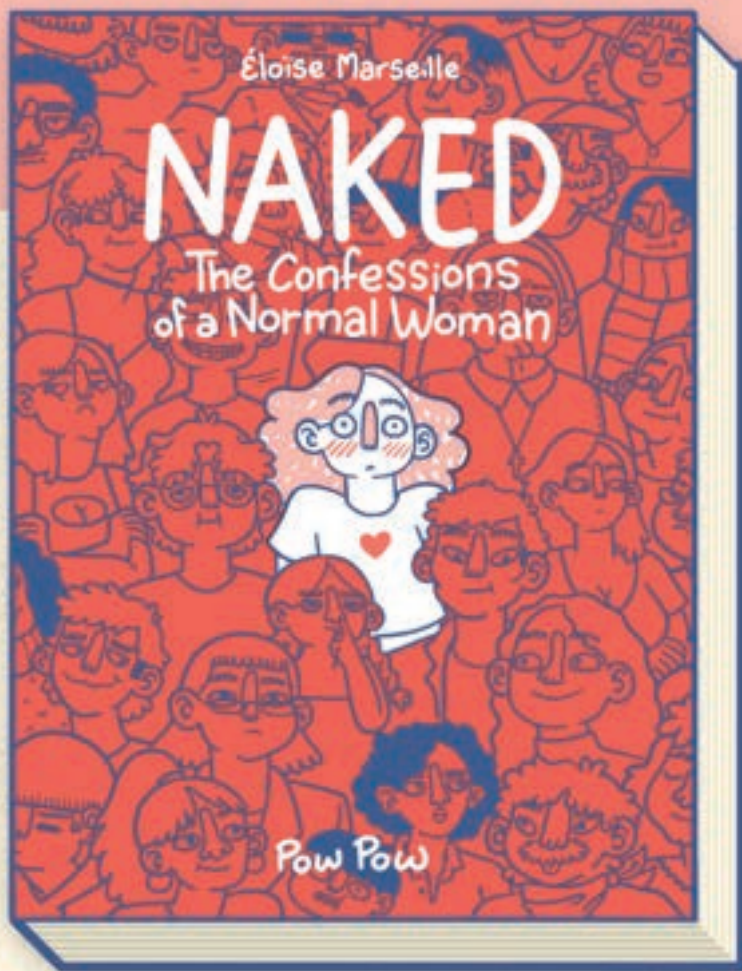
The highlights and life lessons that Alice Nsabimana and her siblings have chosen to share cast new light on the terrible tragedy that struck Rwanda and neighboring countries. oeuvre to set the record straight.



BLACKLION Luke Francis Beirne

"Beirne achieves a certain Hemingway quality for his protagonist and associates... a fine effort in a genre where the bar has been set extremely high by le Carre, Greene, Deighton and others." *Ottawa Review of Books*


www.barakabooks.com Baraka Books



A moving **graphic memoir**
about **love, desire, and shame**

“Funny, empathetic, easy to read
and above all very intelligent,
*Naked: The Confessions
of a Normal Woman*
is perhaps the sex-ed lesson
we've all been sorely missing:
That it's normal to feel abnormal,
because there shouldn't be any norms.”

—Julie Delporte,
author of *This Woman's Work*

Order from your local bookstore or visit powpowpress.com



Building Arguments

Canadian Centre for Architecture and Concordia University Press

*Arthur Erickson
on Learning Systems*
Introduction by Melanie O'Brian

Whether he was designing buildings and spaces for universities, museums, performing arts venues, or libraries, Arthur Erickson was preoccupied with intersections — of people, of cultures, and of ideas. This volume collects writings by an architect advocating for interdisciplinary approaches to education and the methods for sharing knowledge. Discussing his design of a university campus Erickson explains how he intended to avoid compartmentalization between academic disciplines by thinking of a campus as akin to a “biological system” capable of adaptation.

9781988111315

88 pages
12 halftones
4 1/2 x 7

\$24.95

*Arthur Erickson on
Learning Systems*
With an introduction by Melanie O'Brian

*Cornelia Hahn Oberlander on
Pedagogical Playgrounds*
With an introduction by Jane Mah Hutton

*Cornelia Hahn Oberlander
on Pedagogical Playgrounds*
Introduction by Jane Mah Hutton

In pieces including a short history of children's play, reflections on her own work, and a report urging levels of government to protect children's right to play, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander responds to austerity by encouraging the use of inexpensive and recycled materials such as sand, water, logs, boards, and tires for use in playgrounds and suggests vacant lots as play sites. She argues that developers and planners must always consult with their users and that children's input and needs must be considered in playground design.

9781988111377

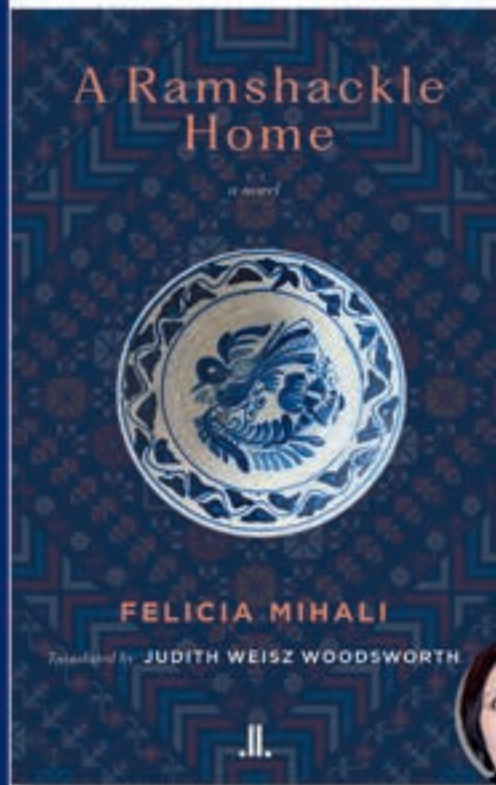
120 pages
15 photos, colour section
4 1/2 x 7

\$24.95

The Building Arguments series presents texts by Canadian architects on the built environment, focusing on themes like the design of human interaction; relationships between people and spaces; new technologies and material invention; and sustainability and ecology.

cca.qc.ca/publications
concordia.ca/press

LINDA LEITH PUBLISHING

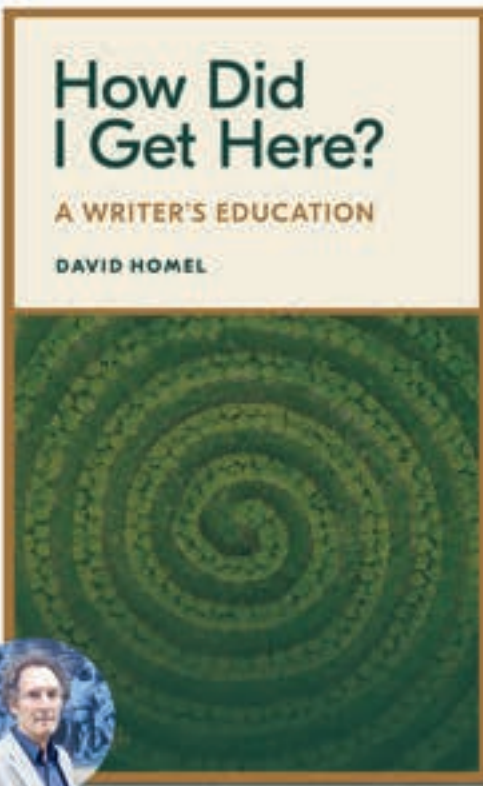


After her marriage breaks up, a woman returns with her young son to the ramshackle house in the countryside where her parents once lived. Her story unfolds against the backdrop of a country laid waste by a half century of Communist rule.



9781773901435
\$22.95

Award-winning author mixes memoir and fiction, truth and make-believe in meditations on his youth, his education, and the influences that led to his writing career.



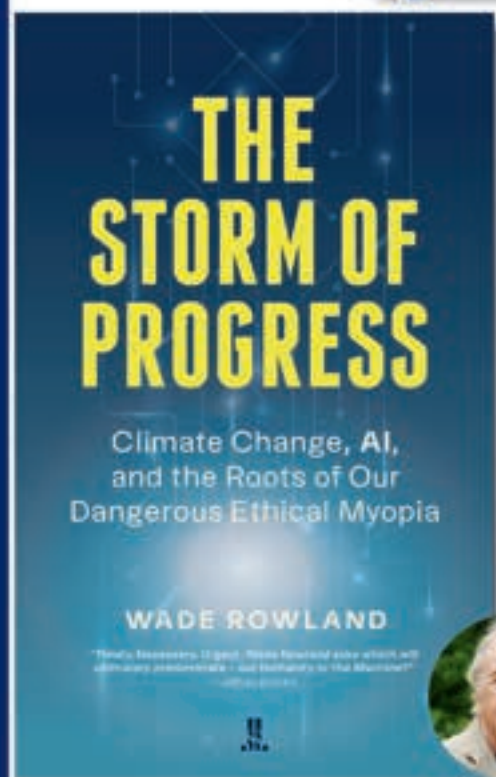
How Did I Get Here?

A WRITER'S EDUCATION

DAVID HOMEL



9781773901404
\$19.95



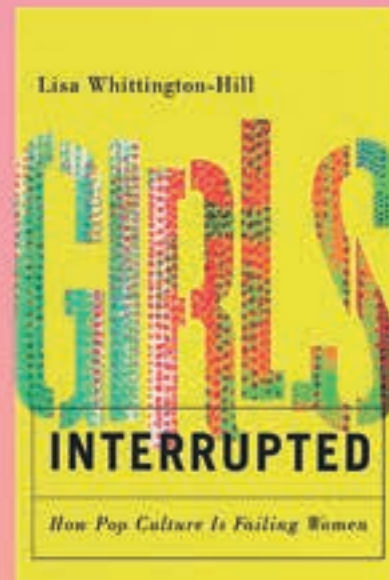
In a time of existential threats from climate change, computer-based superintelligences, AI-accelerated nuclear and biological warfare and more, we can no longer avoid some profound questions about what's going on.



9781773901497
\$22.95

WWW.LINDALEITH.COM

Hunker down with...



Girls, Interrupted
Lisa Whittington-Hill

How mainstream media keeps failing women and explores what we can do to fix it.

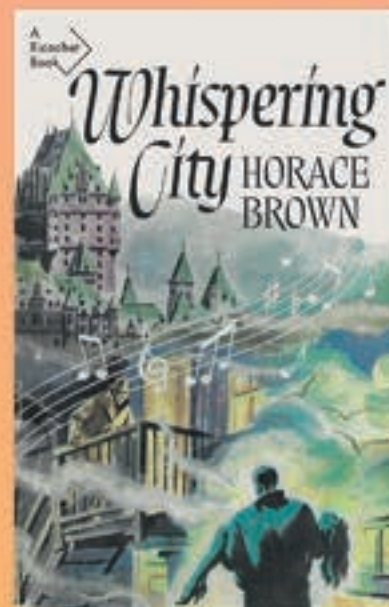
"Brilliantly considered, meticulously researched, and laugh-out-loud funny."
— Lauren McKeon, author of *No More Nice Girls*

Spirits in the Dark
30th Anniversary Edition
H. Nigel Thomas

A pioneering intersectional novel of the LGBTQ+ and Caribbean-Canadian experience that was far ahead of its time. Includes an appreciation by Kaie Kellough and afterword by the author.



SPIRITS in the DARK H. Nigel Thomas



Whispering City
Horace Brown

First issued in 1947, *Whispering City*, set in Quebec City, has since become one of the most sought-after Canadian pulp novels. This Ricochet Books edition marks a return to print after seventy-six years.

Available in bookstores and online

vehiculepress.com

f X @vehiculepress

Véhicule Press



Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa
University of Ottawa Press

The Top Ten Diseases of All Time

Stacey Smith?

Stacey Smith? has long demonstrated a remarkable ability to teach and communicate concepts related to infectious diseases in a way that is scholarly rigorous but also captures the imagination of the general public. This book provides a wealth of information on plagues, their history, and their impact on human populations, and will be of great use to specialists, armchair epidemiologists, and everyone in between.

— David Fisman, Professor of Epidemiology, The University of Toronto

Stacey Smith? writes in an informal, yet informed, manner. She has cut through swaths of technical research to present its findings in an engaging read.

— Mark Nelson, Professor of Engineering and Information Sciences, The University of Wollongong

9780776640600 | 10.955

www.Press.uOttawa.ca

Out NOW from Fernwood Publishing



Resisting Eviction

by Andrew Crosby

How real estate investment firms and government colluded to gentrify a racialized neighbourhood, a suburb of Ottawa, and how tenants fought back.

PICK UP YOUR COPY TODAY!



SCAN ME!

WANT MORE FROM FERNWOOD?
Check out a full list of titles by visiting us at www.fernwoodpublishing.ca



INSTITUT
THOMAS MORE
INSTITUTE

Liberal Arts Courses In-Person and Online

Writing
Arts
Literature
History
Social Sciences
Classics
Philosophy
Music

Visit our website to discover more about our full range of courses and programs.

Share your
curiosity

REGISTRATIONS ARE
OPEN FOR OUR
WINTER AND SPRING
COURSES

www.thomasmore.qc.ca

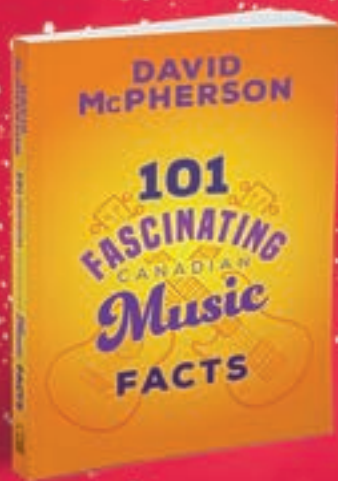
3405 Ave. Arwater.,
Montreal QC
H3H 1Y2
(514) 935-9585



Québec

Your Holiday Shopping Is Booked!

For the music lovers



Discover the little-known stories and surprising fun facts from Canada's music history from coast to coast.

For the philosophical reader



A puzzle-like novel about totalitarianism, surveillance, alienation, and guilt that questions the forces that control us.

For an Eat, Pray, Love moment



Best-selling wine expert Natalie MacLean's memoir on rising from the ashes of divorce and defamation.



DUNDURN PRESS



RARE MACHINES

Available from your favourite bookseller

dundurn.com

[@dundurnpress](https://twitter.com/dundurnpress) [f](https://www.facebook.com/dundurnpress) [i](https://www.instagram.com/dundurnpress)

★ *“Refreshing, beautiful, moving, and meaningful.”*

—Kirkus, starred review



★ *“With cinematic fluidity... This multilayered wordless picture book has much to say about nature, renewal, and resiliency.”*

—Booklist, starred review



9781459831438 • HC • \$21.95

Also available in French!
9781459839045 • HC • \$21.95

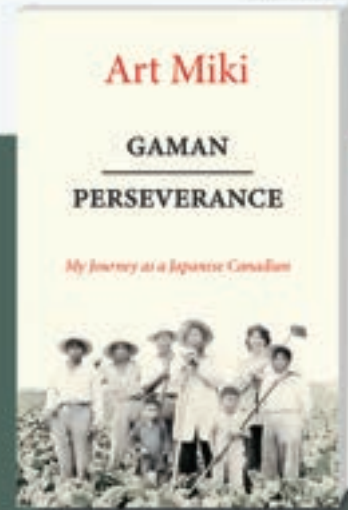


★ *“A very wise book... Communicates essential truths without a word. Marvelous.”* —School Library Journal, starred review

TALONBOOKS
FALL 2023

New Release

New Release



A Family of Dreamers
by Samantha Nock

In this debut collection, Samantha Nock weaves together threads of fat liberation, desirability politics, and heartbreak while working through her existence as a young Indigenous woman coming of age in the city.

"By the book's end, I felt that I had witnessed something rare and beautiful." —Billy-Ray Belcourt

978-1-77201-547-8; \$18.95; Poetry
Now Available

Gaman Perseverance
Japanese Canadians' Journey to Justice

by Art Miki

This memoir explores the intense negotiations that took place in the 1980s between the Government of Canada and the National Association of Japanese Canadians, which resulted in the historic Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement on September 22, 1988.

978-1-77201-541-6; \$29.95; Non-fiction
Forthcoming December 2023



Annual Subscription (3 issues)

\$15 Canadian orders
\$20 International orders

Subscribe to the mRb

Did you know that you can receive the mRb by mail?

mtlreviewofbooks.ca/subscribe

NOV 3 & 4 2023

11 am - 6 pm

Local books, readings, and events with Catherine Hernandez, Eva Crocker, QWF Spoken Word finalists and more!

Concordia University
readquebec.ca



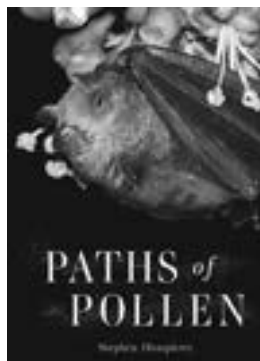
non-fiction

Scattered Seeds

Paths of Pollen
Stephen Humphrey
 McGill-Queen's University Press
 \$39.95, cloth, 272pp
 9780228018971

Paths of Pollen is about the sex lives of plants. And, as one scientist remarks in the book, “it’s complicated, man.” Author and citizen scientist Stephen Humphrey attempts to untangle the messy, ancient, multispecies relationships at the heart of plant life and the production of most food on the planet. In doing so, he offers a cautionary tale about the perils of anthropogenic climate change.

The book is encumbered by a misleading title and cover blurb, which give the impression that pollen itself will be the main subject or protagonist of the story. This seems to offer a unique perspective, different from the many existing books that focus on charismatic pollinators such as bees. Instead, pollen remains a background player, sprinkled here and there, but often largely absent or merely implied for long stretches of the book.



It is pollinators that dominate *Paths of Pollen*, and there is nothing wrong with that. Humphrey describes interesting and important research being conducted on many of these animals – honeybees and monarch butterflies, hummingbirds and Charles Darwin’s long-tongued moths. Perhaps more importantly, he demonstrates that most pollination is accomplished by less well-known, and often less adorable, creatures that nonetheless deserve our admiration. Hard-working solitary bumblebees that live in small holes in the ground, opportunistic carpenter bees (known lovingly as “trash bees” to their researcher), and the assorted flies that do much of the pollination in the Arctic – all take their rightful places as captivating subjects and tiny environmental superheroes.

Other chapters focus on flowering plants from a variety of perspectives, including their prehistoric beginnings, their hermaphroditic tendencies and sexual trickery, the effects of herbicides, the future of genetic modification, restoration of native prairie grasses, and backyard gardening. An interesting early chapter on wind pollination, and related

seasonal allergies in humans, comes closest to making pollen the star of the story.

The first part of the book is a bit scattershot, and it takes several chapters to settle into a clear rhythm and focus. But throughout it is filled with fascinating details about plants, pollinators, and environmental change, as well as discussions of intriguing scientific research on these topics. While Humphrey’s story spans the globe, including Mexican bats and European sunflowers, his Canadian orientation sheds light on examples that might not appear in a book published elsewhere. For instance, we learn about the wild sweat bees of Sable Island, fossilized forests preserved in the cliffs along the Bay of Fundy, artist-made bee condos in Toronto, and urban pollinator gardening in Calgary.

Work by researchers at Canadian universities receives well-deserved attention in the book. Among the highlights that Humphrey shares are scientists studying light and colour perception in bees, another who measures the temperature of “micro-climates” inside heliotropic flowers as an indicator of broader atmospheric conditions, and a collaborative project between university researchers and Inuit community members to monitor culturally important berry species while preserving oral history and language.



Concern about the future of plants drives Humphrey’s curiosity and leads him to draw together a variety of interesting topics that reveal the many interconnected relationships between plants, pollinators, and people. Ongoing changes to fragile networks of biodiversity, including landscapes, climate, weather patterns, and insect populations threaten to unbalance the ecosystems that make life on Earth possible. With *Paths of Pollen*, Humphrey has extended an accessible invitation to consider these relationships at multiple scales, from the wide view of global environmental activism to the microscopic perspective of a grain of pollen. **mb**

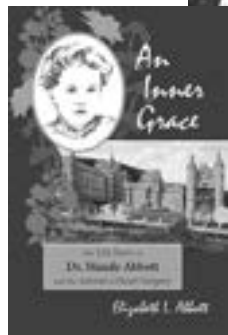
Sara Spike, PhD, is a cultural historian of Canadian communities and environments.

Matters of the Heart

An Inner Grace
 The Life Story of Dr. Maude Abbott
 and the Advent of Heart Surgery
 Elizabeth L. Abbott
 Corner Studio
 \$22.95, paper, 236pp
 9781738897827

As I read Elizabeth L. Abbott’s *An Inner Grace: The Life Story of Dr. Maude Abbott and the Advent of Heart Surgery*, I was simultaneously reading Howard Adams’ *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View*. Adams’ book is now almost fifty years old, but when it came out, it rewrote white supremacist narratives about Indigenous governance and the history of nation-building in Canada. The two made unlikely bedfellows, but since Dr. Maude Abbott’s life story is told as though inseparable from the history of early twentieth-century Canada as it established itself as a nation, I found the pairing useful.

Born in 1868 and orphaned as a child, Maude was raised within the supportive environs of the future Prime Minister John Abbott’s home, in that sacrosanct area of Montreal known as the Golden Square Mile. Though it was an era that refused education and the right to vote to all women, Maude fought to be educated



at McGill and gave the valedictory speech when she graduated among its first cohort of women undergraduates in 1890. When that institution refused to allow her to pursue a medical degree – for fear it might set a “dangerous” precedent – she got her training elsewhere, first at Bishop’s College and then in Europe.

An Inner Grace fictionalizes Maude’s life

from its earliest days, making clear that she overcame every kind of childhood trauma through determined and joyful brilliance. That she grew up surrounded by the elite and powerful lent her many advantages, but she distinguished herself from even that privileged setting by establishing the dangerous and thrilling precedents that she did. Defying institutional inertia, Maude became the curator of McGill’s medical museum and an assistant professor in its medical faculty. Her most important achievement was the 1936 publication of her *Atlas of Congenital Cardiac Disease*. A literal manual of the heart, it saved the lives of many children born with cardiac ailments and paved the way for the world’s first heart surgery in 1944, which took place four years after Maude’s death.

Maude defied the bounds set for women at every turn, yet in this recounting of her story, those bounds

are re-established with vigour. *An Inner Grace* is carefully researched and relies heavily on Maude’s own diaries, but it seemed cruel to see this brave woman reduced to her most sentimental outpourings – had Maude been in love with William Osler? Maybe, but would she have wanted me to know? It felt even worse to read mean assessments – whether they were Elizabeth’s or Maude’s, I couldn’t tell – of Maude’s “sinful” love of food, fabric, and fancy things. When Elizabeth describes the special corsets she got fitted and how the general store owner at St. Andrews would patiently watch Maude “draping yards of fabric about herself, shaping it in certain ways to see what magic could be achieved,” I found her not sinful, but delightful and charming. Maude was a woman who was not tied to her time, but this telling of her story shackles her to turn-of-the-century mores.

The same is true of the broader history in which *An Inner Grace* is set. Elizabeth describes Maude’s life within the grand narratives of Canadian history – the building of the Trans-Canada railway, the tragedies of WWI, the outbreak of WWII – without any awareness of the way contemporary historians have revisited those histories. Adams’ *Prison of Grass*, however, shows that Sir John A. MacDonald was not only the country’s first Prime Minister, but also the architect of residential schools, of illegal methods to control Indigenous movement on the prairies, and of rebellions in the West. Though many influential people in the East saw no need for the railway, it was part of MacDonald’s grant plan for the country, and Indigenous land tenure, culture,

continued on page 20

Grrrl Power

Girls Interrupted
How Pop Culture Is Failing Women
 Lisa Whittington-Hill
 Véhicule Press
 \$24.95, paper, 200pp
 9781550656329

Have women ever been taken seriously by pop culture?

As a culture writer who has covered the subject extensively for the past three years, my answer is an immediate no. Pop culture has an issue with women. In a recent interview for the *New York Times*, Jann Wenner, founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine, justified the lack of women interviewed for his book because “none of them were as articulate enough on this intellectual level.”

Indeed, the release of Lisa Whittington-Hill’s latest book, *Girls Interrupted: How Pop Culture Is Failing Women*, comes at the right moment. In this collection of essays, Whittington-Hill explores sexism through her experienced lens as a prolific culture writer. The result is a robust and scathing book about women’s treatment in a violent patriarchal system.

Whittington-Hill came of age during the ’90s, a golden age of music and culture in general, noticing misogyny in the music industry firsthand. In *Girls Interrupted*, her experiences and observations are corroborated by studies and experts in the field, making her essays stronger and more enjoyable. She gets right to the point in the first pages, reporting on double standards in the industry and claiming that even if #MeToo and #TimesUp have given an “impression that things are better for women now,” they are far from it. “This book exists to prove otherwise,” she confidently states, as if declaring her essays as works of activism. And while they are all beautifully written and essential to read, the pieces have one flaw: they do not explore any new angle. We read them, agreeing with Whittington-Hill, who states well-documented facts but doesn’t bring much new to the conversation.

Nonetheless, this doesn’t lower the reporting or writing quality. *Girls Interrupted* is an excellent read for anyone interested in modern-day feminism and pop culture’s shortcomings regarding women. While Whittington-Hill’s penchant for the ’90s grunge scene and Courtney Love – whom she mentions multiple times in the book – does take up a rather substantial part of the book, she still manages to write about modern pop culture events. One of her best essays, “Girls Gone Grift,” explores the media obsession with female grifters. Taking the examples of Anna Sorokin (Anna Delvey)



and Elizabeth Holmes, she dives deep into how these women were treated compared to male grifters, such as Fyre Festival

founder Billy McFarland. According to Whittington-Hill, female grifters’ stories are “stories about how we love to see women fail.” She compares the lexicon used for men (“disruptors” instead of criminals) to the one used for women (“wannabe socialites”). The truth is that these are details that I was aware of but never paid great attention to – Whittington-Hill peels back the veil on subjects we subconsciously dismiss or file away as obvious and therefore not worth analyzing.

Whittington-Hill knows what she is talking about, but her best writing in this collection is when she shares her own experience. Suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, she opens up in “OCD is Not a Joke,” describing her struggles with her rituals and how she finally felt accurately portrayed on television by shows like *Girls*, for example. Her emotions are easily conveyed to the reader, making her story more relatable and authentic. In this piece, the writer is at her finest. She makes us ask for more. She talks about this again in “Money Shots,” but fails to achieve the same effect – despite infusing the piece with her thoughts, she doesn’t bring anything new to the table. We already know where she’s going: Yes, the media have described mental health negatively. Yes, women are again being treated badly by the press. While it is important to talk about these events, bringing new perspectives would have been appreciated.

In spite of my reservations, Whittington-Hill is a skilled culture writer and shows it in every page. While it lacks new perspectives on the subject, *Girls Interrupted* is an obligatory read for anyone who wants to make a career in culture. Because for culture to be a safe space, everyone needs to be treated equally. And, as Whittington-Hill repeatedly emphasizes, this is unfortunately far from being the case. **msb**

Yara El-Soueiدي is a millennial writer and culture columnist based in Montreal.

Devious Frames

Dark PR
How Corporate Disinformation Harms Our Health and the Environment
 Grant Ennis
 Daraja Press
 \$21.00, paper, 266pp
 9781990263484

Grant Ennis’ call for action on global health crises challenges perceived notions of corporate propaganda, government culpability, and political organization. *Dark PR* asks us to reconsider the public discourses we see on key issues such as global warming, obesity, and road deaths.

Ennis systematically reveals the ways in which corporations mislead, misdirect, and lie to protect their interests. He describes nine “devious frames,” split into four different types of misdirection, that confuse and muddle debates on how to solve these crises. The solution is clear: end the government corporate subsidies that have caused these crises to flourish in the first place. What Ennis seeks to impress on readers is that these issues are structural and can therefore only be solved through structural means. While the text is dense with citations, its thorough research demonstrates how the unhealthy environments we live in are created through “corporate welfare.”

Despite arguing that personalizing political action disarms it, Ennis often introduces the subchapters of this book with personal anecdotes from his long career. The anecdotes serve an important function of grounding Ennis’ writing as the stakes of the book are made clear. These devious frames are material in the sense that they affect real-world events. The frustration felt in many of these passages serves as a clear motivation for such a direct call for action. It is not surprising that the book, which focuses on how global crises are framed by corporate interests and other parties, was written during the initial waves of COVID-19.

While corporations are repeatedly mentioned, Ennis does not shirk from critiquing the shared culpability of governments in enabling corporate lies. What is curious, though, is how the book ambiguously defines the relationship between the two. The reasons for why any government might enable or even begin the subsidies in the first place is never discussed. In fact, the book never once mentions capitalism as in any way enabling, facilitating, or even causing this toxic relationship. Despite tackling these various crises on a global level, the



frame of cause-and-effect seems quite narrow. A reason for this omission may be the intended audience of this book – namely, everyone. Ennis hopes that by making these devious frames visible and focusing on specific policy targets, “leftwing, centrist, and rightwing citizens might all agree” on the political action necessary.

The second half of the book is dedicated to discussing productive citizen activism, and the ways in which corporate propaganda obfuscates types of activism that are genuinely productive. Ennis is gentle but firm in discussing how even well-intentioned people unwillingly or unknowingly play into corporate interests. It is perhaps unsurprising that actions such as “conscious consumption” and keeping track of individual “carbon footprints” have little effect on the structures causing these crises. What will no doubt unsettle readers is instead the burgeoning evidence presented that argues the inefficiency of protests and charitable organizations. The last subchapter, however, is dedicated to discussing the organizing approaches that can lead to successful global action, with examples drawn from existing groups.

The tone of the latter half of the book is far from hopeless. Instead, the incensed writing builds towards a powerful call to action. The path to genuine political change is treacherous. The devious frames utilized by corporations to suppress activism often plays on individualism and consumerism. The only way forward is organized, collective, and policy-focused action. *Dark PR* swings between carefully researched yet devastating facts and determined aspirations for a healthier collaborative future. **msb**

Mayaluna Bierlich is a writer from Copenhagen.

BLAIS continued from page 6

ask us: what if the body is less fixed then we have been made to believe? Perhaps two souls can share the same body, or multiple bodies can share the weight and pain of one soul.

Nights Too Short to Dance is a poetic rumination on what it means to live. Blais reminds us, in her novel filled to the brim with love, of the agonizing fleetingness of life: to love is also to make yourself vulnerable to loss, and to feel loss is to know that you have once loved. **ms**

Emma Dollery is a chill guy, pool shark, fan of film and literature.

ABBOTT continued from page 18

and people were in the way. By fomenting rebellion, MacDonald justified the need for a railway that could rapidly transport military personal and supplies to the unruly West.

It is both a fool's errand to try to guess what any historic figure would have thought of the period they lived through, *and* the very task of writers of history, novels, and bibliography. I wondered if Maude, who expressed curiosity and respect for Indigenous medical knowledge, and who lived through the now-forgotten news of MacDonald as a corrupt politician, might have also rejected this version of early Canadian history.

Elizabeth Abbott has published many books in her lifetime, but this one is a particularly close-to-home offering. Dr. Maude Abbott wasn't born an Abbott, but was given the name as a young child so as to protect her from the shame of her parentage. This means that Elizabeth and Maude are related, but distantly, across generations and familial branches. Published by a local small press, *An Inner Grace* will be of interest to loved ones in Abbott's familial line, as well as anyone wanting to get into the petticoats and bonnets of *fin de siècle* Montreal. **ms**

Jocelyn Parr is the author of *Uncertain Weights and Measures*, which was shortlisted for the 2017 Governor General's Prize for English language Fiction among other awards and won the QWF Concordia University First Book Prize, and the co-founder of Reading to Decolonize. She is based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal) and teaches history at Dawson College.

NAWROCKI continued from page 7

ignorant, privileged, or brainwashed, but no one in the novel talks to anyone who doesn't agree with them. Nobody in this book attempts to change anybody else's mind. Those who remember 2012 as a year of exhausting, constant debate about the strike – at work, with family, among friends, on social media – will not see those experiences reflected here.

Does no one Huberto loves or respects oppose the strike? Mightn't Jean ask Huberto how strikers will help unhoused poor people like him? How different would this novel have been set in a world where decent people disagree?

The strikers' motivations are not closely explored either. While much of its dialogue and narration reads suspiciously like sloganeering about the justice of the cause, the book doesn't consider what emotions and personal experiences might drive young people to engage for months in a sometimes-violent fight to improve the education system.

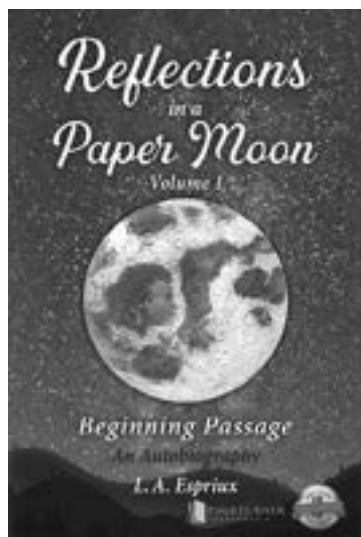
This lack of concern for the personal struggles beneath the conflict flattens the dramatic scope so completely it leaves *Red Squared Montreal* with the moral range of an action movie.

The 2012 student strike deserves its own literature, and *Red Squared Montreal* succeeds at least in capturing the dizzy heights of the protests. As both anarchist and poet, Nawrocki often knows just the right words to capture the elation, camaraderie, and terror of marching in the street and facing off against contemptuous police. However, the lack of curiosity about the people behind the conflict means the novel ultimately fails to communicate the stakes and experiences of the 2012 strike in human terms. **ms**

Reporter and writer **JB Staniforth** was a member of the Translating the Printemps Érablé collective. A former CÉGEP teacher, he marched with striking students in roughly 45 demonstrations in 2012.

Books by L.A. Espriux www.espriux.com

Montreal-based writer L.A. Espriux presents to the reading public new works of literature describing life and the human experience. After serving as a U. S. Marine Corps Sergeant during 1960s Vietnam, the author returned to discover spiritual meaning within present value.



Also Available at
www.espriux.com

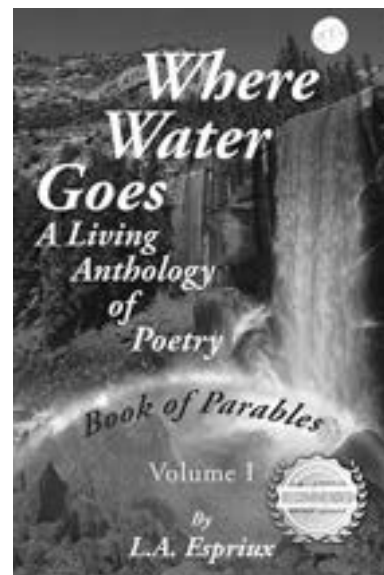


Paragraphe Bookstore

2220 McGill College, Montreal, QC H3A 3P9
Order: Call Andreas (514) 845-5811

Books presented here are available for print order at **Paragraphe Bookstore** on McGill College in Montreal, Quebec, Canada or online at **Amazon Books**. There are also active purchase links on the author's website. *Reflections in a Paper Moon* is an autobiography by the author in earlier years quoted by Jack Chambers of Hollywood Book Reviews as being a "must read" (see website). *Liberty Epic of Shadows* is an action-packed historical fiction spanning 400 years, ending in 1960s America. This book received positive reviews by **Us Books** (check website for complete review). *Where Water Goes Book of Parables* is the first of 3 volumes of poetry containing three hundred poems each, to be presented this November at the Miami Book Fair. *Search of the Perfect Code Discovered* is a book that challenges existentialism at its source. The first chapter of this book describes in detail the spiritual event that dramatically changed the author's life.

To know more about Espriux's several books and third-party reviews please visit the author's website. www.espriux.com



By Faith Paré

D.M. Bradford

Inherited Narratives

I know halfway through reading D.M. Bradford's newest release, *Bottom Rail on Top*, that I want to ask them a question I feel conflicted about. I don't want to ask in the interest of causing friction or frustration, but in the belief that they will be better able to answer than I ever could. It's not an explosive question, but the false security of national borders belies how many people commonly live with – or as – open questions of geography.

Bradford's practice crystallizes some of the most significant and fruitful possibilities of Montreal's poetry scene. Their effortless move between French and English has already been applauded with a 2022 Griffin Poetry Prize nomination for their debut collection, *Dream of No One But Myself* (Brick Books, 2021), and the acclaimed publication of *A House Within a House* (Brick, 2023), a translation of Nicholas Dawson's Prix du livre de Montréal-winning *Désormais, ma demeure* (Triptyque, 2020).

Quebec and Canada are understandably eager to claim Bradford. The only direct mention of either in *Bottom Rail on Top*, however, is in the book's front matter, a curious identifier tag that I can't help but notice: "Canadiana." The poems themselves instead brim with spectral strains of Yankee rallying songs like "The Battle Cry of Freedom" and promises of forty acres and a mule. These motifs are part of a mythology that I'm used to hearing is irrelevant to, even imported into, Black Canadian life. But the notion that this land, and the people living on it, can somehow be severed from the African-American story is itself a mythology that refuses to see past its limiting horizon.

"The racial imaginary that dominates my life is a Black American one. It just is," says Bradford, sharing that their paternal great-grandmother immigrated to the United States from Jamaica. They go on to trace the "systemic breakages that slowly push people away from each other generationally, until my father ends up in Montreal, and I end up here ... [Montreal] is where I feel most of a sense of place, but I feel like this sense of place thing is only something that I've come around to in the last decade." They cite their previous feelings of ambivalence as partial inspiration for this book: "What do you do with land when all you see is these conditions, when all you see is this history that, for me, involves displacement?"

Bottom Rail on Top is a cat's cradle of echoes and ephemera from pre-Civil

War America, demonstrating how deeply the threads of slavery are incorporated into the fabric of the twenty-first century. The poems, their lineation laid across the page like little archipelagos, are precise but bottomless. Reading them feels similar to wading into deeper water than anticipated: the drop in your belly, your toes trying to graze for the sea-floor. Beginning at a plantation big house tour, then finding yourself at Ken Burns' *Civil War* documentary on PBS. Or trying to imagine the inside of Harriet Jacobs' hideaway crawlspace, three by two metres and only a metre tall, where she spent seven years to escape enslavement. Or even in the mattress aisle at IKEA, contemplating the ethics of their production, their wanton comfort.

The collection is a prismatic study of legacy – generational, economic, cultural – but Bradford avoids turning the past into simply a lens for present-day cruelties. Though the "lustre" of a collective, continuous temporal narrative of struggle is popular and undeniably compelling across contemporary scholarship and poetry, people across the diaspora do not inherit these narratives equally – especially along class lines, on which Black artistic circles commonly remain silent. "There's a reason that those connections are happening, but I'm also interested in the contrast. It's not that people like me are completely divorced from those [historical] conditions; it's that we're experiencing them in a different way ... How much 'speaking on behalf of' can you do, and how much do you want to do?" The poems thus parse how much one's sense of self is owed to cultural invention as it is to historical consequences, and how we might confront our complicity in that invention with honesty.

The book's title, too, exemplifies the inexactness of where fact ends and fiction begins, borrowing from an unverified, and likely imaginary, anecdote from the Reconstruction era. As Bradford recounts in the opening epigraphs, an unnamed Black Union soldier spots his former enslaver among Confederate

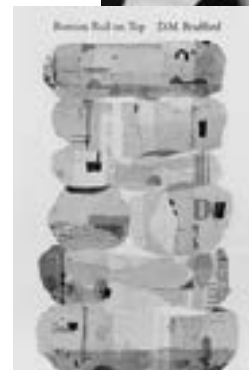
prisoners of war, and can't help himself from wise-cracking, "Hello, massa! Bottom rail on top this time."

The story is a little too witty and neat. It glimmers too prettily, from centuries of compression under the profound traumas of enslavement, the Civil War, and Jim Crow. A desire for closure made the fable irresistible for journalists and historians, who circulated versions of it for over 150 years.

Bradford's encounter with the bottom rail anecdote, and their tracing through archival sources to its dubious origin, shifted the manuscript's focus: "I didn't know that it was going in this historical direction. I thought it was going in a more Black pastoral direction. In a funny way, I think it ended up there anyways." They don't opt, though, to restage well-trodden terrain of African-American history, hazy with romanticism and co-signed by the state. Bradford is particularly bothered by the invented Black soldier's empty silhouette, his unspecificity; how easy it is to contrive a character and put words in his mouth. They explain their process from the archival note to the stanza, how they plough through the fantasies and presuppositions embedded in the language of cultural invention:

Once I got over the lying of it all, I started thinking, 'Well, what is the desired effect of those lies?' In the case of each anecdote, there's a certain set of identities, an American worldview that the anecdote-teller has decided is served by the lie of their respective version of the story, which, inevitably, to them, probably makes it kind of true. To them, it's a true story, even if it's not a fact. So then, I enter their responsibility.

Since they are so capable of facing these nebulous ethical pangs with clar-




Bottom Rail on Top
D.M. Bradford
Brick Books
\$22.95, paper, 144pp
9781771316101

ity, I decide to ask Bradford the question I'm conflicted over. This book on African-American ancestry was written mostly in Montreal and published by an esteemed Canadian press. What did they learn about Blackness over the course of writing with this border at the centre? I don't want it to come across as the question I hate: how can you be both?

Bradford believes that:

There's a lot of filling-in-the-blanks required for these histories and experiences, and the way we mediate them as Black folks in the present ... In these diasporic frames, these frames of people who are descended from the transatlantic slave trade and dispersal that happened in this very capitalistic way over centuries, the connection is broad ... Some of this book is about filling those blanks, about filling in that space, learning what I can – I think there's a limit to what we can learn, but learning what I can, and then sharing my piece about the contrast that I can't help but see.

Bottom Rail on Top urges us not to take our inheritance for granted. The difficult questions must always be asked of it. History is no place to hide. 

Faith Paré is a poet of Afro-Guyanese ancestry. She currently curates the Atwater Poetry Project. Born in T'karonto on Dish With One Spoon treaty territory, she writes in Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyang / Montreal, the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka people. faithpare.com

graphic

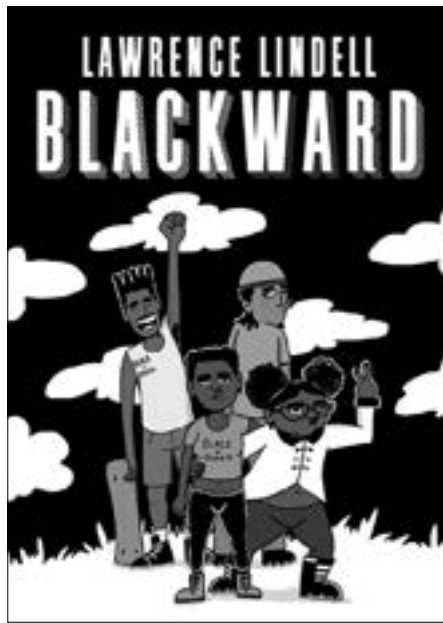
Against the Grain

Blackward
Lawrence Lindell
Drawn & Quarterly
\$29.95, paper, 216pp
9781770466784

Lawrence Lindell's *Blackward* is a journey through friendship, identity, and the power of zine culture. The story opens with a glimpse into the lives of four friends, each navigating their morning routines, setting the stage for their zine-making adventures. Lindell invites us into personal connections with Lika (the sweet, sensitive type), Amor (good-looking and confident), Tony (the shy, quieter personality of the bunch), and Latrice, also known as Lala (the funny one, who is willing to stick up for her friends).

Lindell underscores the hurdles faced by Black individuals who express themselves beyond the stereotypes put upon them. We see this in the beginning of the book, as Lika makes her way to the local community centre. Her run-in with a few young guys who make fun of her clothes and decide she's a weirdo who "think she white" is a reminder that for Black folk, outward expressions of any subculture are harder, more dangerous, and mentally taxing.

We get to reflect that it is possible that Lika has had to battle for her chosen outward identity on her way



to anywhere. She actually battles two complex identities. She embraces the zine subculture, which stands in opposition to traditional norms and established status quo. Also, by being Black, Lika herself is already, inherently, against the grain. I am reminded here of a quote from Ben Passmore's incredible graphic novel *Your Black Friend*:

Your black friend's black friends do not think he is 'black' enough. He doesn't want to reclaim his African-ness, he doesn't like loose fabrics, he chills with too many white people. Your black friend doesn't think that 'black' is a performance, isn't earned

through association, he believes it's an existential reality.

Blackward also captures both the negatives and positives of intergenerational relationships. The former is most notably depicted by the character of "Strong Black Man," with his rigid, conservative approach to philosophy. "Strong Black Man" represents an older generation, and symbolizes the different political ideals of Black movements throughout history.

Meanwhile, the positive side is seen in Mr. Marcus, owner of the bookshop "Books n Thangs." A touching moment occurs when Mr. Marcus shares a DIY flier from the '60s that he made for his community's very first literary festival. Mr. Marcus emerges as a central character who helps bear the weight of the obstacles the group comes up against. He becomes a symbol of resilience and deep, meaningful friendships, and their most important voice of encouragement. He urges them to keep pushing and continue their zine-publishing efforts despite their travails. In many communities, any voice of motivation for personal artistic goals is a precious thing.

Lindell's bubbly, kawaii-esque visual style adds a naivety that juxtaposes, but also highlights, the impact of the social situations our main characters come up against. It is a great read for any young person looking for a book where one Black individual does *not* bear the weight of representing every single Black person on earth. Each of



our characters is represented as having their own unique, specific identity. Addressing the challenges of uniting voices and experiences, Lindell even includes gray area matter, such as the cringe-inducing eagerness of the overzealous white ally.

Giving light to the internal and external conflicts that can arise, the zine-making process becomes social commentary. Lindell's extensive experience as a self-publisher adds authenticity to the zine-making exploration, providing insight for younger audiences of future print creators facing their own challenges. His storytelling introduces us to a world of well-developed characters and relatable experiences, asking us to contemplate the significance of community, creativity, and resilience. mb

Esinam Beckley is a full-time scribe, student for life, and film enthusiast. She enjoys collecting the written word, tinkering with music wires in her bedroom, but especially mixing the two. She loves her parents, knitted garments, and art.

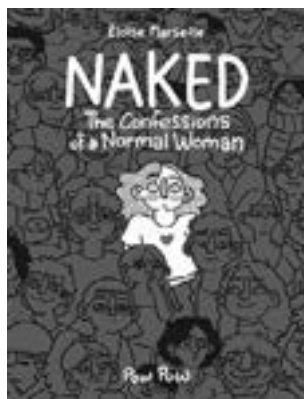
Discomfort Zone

Naked
Confessions of a Normal Woman
Éloïse Marseille
Pow Pow Press
\$24.95, paper, 168pp
9782925114239

Éloïse Marseille is not afraid to take you past thresholds of comfort. She is not afraid to show you genitals, be they healthy or infected, and she is not afraid to portray the reality of a curved belly on a

twenty-year-old woman who likes to drink. By page eight, readers are introduced to a naked representation of the author, staring deadpan at the reader, with the full accents of pubic and leg hair.

Through a first-person narration, Marseille directly guides the reader through her premise, and the experiences that led her there. For years, she tells



PRUNE PAYCHA

us, shame hung over her sexuality, percolating trauma and a fair share of fumbling encounters. "I'm not a great poet or writer, so I let my drawings speak for me," she says, truly a cartoonist at heart.

By page 21, Marseille shares the story of her parents' marriage, and why, in their separation, she developed a love language tied to the trauma of

abandonment. By page 38, she is informed of a life-altering medical condition that changes her perspective of sex. The artist drowns out the noise of her doctors and parents, highlighting the pure shock felt at the time. And despite the lessons learned, Marseille admits her continued discomfort with her body. It's human, she stresses. Sure, we all need to love ourselves, but if we're being honest, trauma is lived through, not battled until some conclusive end is reached. Young girls of today's generation are emboldened far beyond the second wave here. Yes, we're beautiful no matter what, and yes, too, it can be absolutely terrible to be us.

This is a book for girls afraid they're wildly abnormal. They're not *supposed* to have porn addictions. They're not *supposed* to be virgins by a certain age. They're not *supposed* to have a sexual drive at all, really. Marseille has written the book to undermine the "supposed to's" with actualities.

While I could not relate to the book for the most part (an unnecessary part of reading anyway), there were moments that spoke volumes. I, too, was advised to do an ultrasound on my uterus, and to prepare for the event by drinking copious amounts of water. And when the doctor facing my results gasped,

continued on next page

Empire State of Mind

Roaming

Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki
 Drawn & Quarterly
 \$39.95, paper, 444pp
 9781770464339

A book's acknowledgements section rarely makes for particularly illuminating reading. Jillian and Mariko Tamaki, however, slip a quiet zinger into the last page of *Roaming*, their new graphic novel about three young women on a low-budget rite-of-passage trip to New York in 2009. "The events of this story are both too real and entirely fictional," they write. While this might at first look like just a spin on the standard "any resemblance to persons living or dead..." disclaimer, it instead reveals the essence of what makes *Roaming* such a rewarding read: truth-telling but not beholden to mere facts, it's a vivid record of its time and place, yet decidedly not a travel journal.

The Tamakis are cousins (not sisters, as is often assumed) whose early collaborative works *Skim* (2007) and *This One Summer* (2014) brought an Asian-Canadian LGBT experience and sensibility to young readers internationally. *Roaming*, five years in the making, sees them stepping out of YA and into full-blown A. Fans will be interested to learn that the new book sees a change in the authors' usual division of labour: where formerly Mariko did all the writing and Jillian all the art, this time the writing is shared equally. Not that you'd ever guess – in the delicate and shifting triangulation at the heart of the book, all three characters' voices ring equally true.

Dani and Zoe are old friends looking to do something memorable for their first spring break as university students; Fiona, a new classmate, is the wild card in the group. They're all at that fleeting stage of life where they can reasonably claim the respect due to adulthood while reserving the young person's right to do stupid, reckless things. In this hothouse environment it's hardly surprising that a romance develops (the two parties involved, and the one left out, clearly cannot be spoiled in a review), and in the resourceful way of late teens, its imperatives are enacted despite considerable logistical challenges.

The New York the three friends enter is not one that tends to be glamorized on the modern Big Apple timeline. Times Square has long since lost its seedy frisson of yore; it's now firmly in its late-capitalist consumer-spree stage – a time when a store devoted entirely to M&M's can actually seem kind of cute – and headed for its present-day full-on Disneyfication. The disproportionately tall, surreally skinny "pencil towers" of Billionaires' Row haven't yet come along to mar the time-honoured twentieth-century silhouette of the midtown Manhattan



skyline; downtown, One World Trade Center hasn't yet replaced the twin towers. The place and its mythology feel up for grabs.

Even so, New York is New York, and a love for the city infuses every page. The narrative unfolds with the rhythm of life in the megalopolis: frantic activity alternates with down-time moments grabbed amid the chaos. If one were to pick an ideal period-appropriate musical accompaniment, Jay-Z and Alicia Keys' "Empire State of Mind" would do nicely.

Roaming is over a hundred pages longer than either of the Tamakis' two previous books, and the decision to work on a bigger scale pays off richly: Jillian's draftsmanship is given freer rein than a shorter format could have accommodated. Consistently dazzling, her work reaches several downright

giddy peaks. A thirty-eight-page sequence set in the American Museum of Natural History is a tour de force: images spill from page to page as if they simply can't be contained, text and visuals entwine with the fluidity of a well-remembered dream. Elsewhere, the opposite end of urban reality gets its due when a double-page spread is devoted to a zoom-in tableau involving a pair of mating pigeons doing their business amid sidewalk detritus.

To capture the loving but volatile interactions of three young people in the process of discovering the world is no mean feat. To evoke an iconic setting in ways that do full justice to its magic without skimping on its flaws might be rarer still. To do both at the same time is to create a contemporary classic. Welcome to *Roaming*. **mb**

Ian McGillis is a novelist and journalist who lives in Montreal.

MARSEILLE continued from previous page

I panicked. "Your bladder is so full, you really need to go!" she said, to my great horror and absolute relief.

I have never been puked on during sex, but timely to this review, a lady friend sat on my balcony recounting how she recently had been. I've never called a man a cunt, but after reading this book, I wonder if I should have. And I, too, have debated my own sexuality, with the knowledge that these things are a lot more fluid

than anyone ever told me initially. In reading, one appreciates how uniquely the comic form can capture the surreal oddity and intensity of an orgasm.

Marseille tells these stories through the endearing Montreal landscape. She speaks of things that, to me, read so true to the spirit of the city. Starting your undergrad, drinking at bars in the Plateau, experiencing your first sexual encounters at erotic themed parties. Montreal, for so many I know, is centered around a period of so much not knowing. "Is this what

that thing everyone talks about is supposed to feel like?" is a thought my peers and I have bonded over in our shared winter streets. A thought Marseille is not only unafraid to put into words, but in clear and concise pictures. **mb**

Sruti Islam is a reader, and sometimes writer. She founded Weird Era, a literary space, in 2019. She continues to freelance in literary and cultural coverage. She is a Libra.

THE CITY'S OLDEST INDEPENDENT ENGLISH BOOKSTORE

- Special orders, delivery, audiobooks, subscriptions
- New books in all genres, for adults and kids
- In-store and online author events, book clubs, and more
- Offsite sales and book tables - contact us for your event!

1841A Ste.-Catherine St. W.
 Montreal, QC H3H 1M2
 tel: 514.931.9442

argobookshop.ca
 info@argobookshop.ca
 @argobookshop

Serving Readers and Celebrating Writers

Check out our eBooks, eAudiobooks and physical books.

Enjoy our in-person, online, and hybrid activities: author talks, poetry readings, book club, and AWE workshops.

For info and help with digital devices:
 514-935-7344 or info@atwaterlibrary.ca

1200 Atwater Ave. (Atwater métro) • www.atwaterlibrary.ca

Bibliothèque et centre d'information
Atwater
 Library and computer Centre

poetry

LEO GARCIA



Continuum
Ivanna Baranova
Metatron Press
\$18.00, paper, 64pp
9781988355375

Ivanna Baranova's second poetry book with Metatron Press is a collection of longings – longings for a lover, for a deeper connection to nature, and more. *Continuum* is at times esoteric and at others immersive, the space between stanzas allowing room for the reader to slow down and unpack the riddle. The recurring “digit-sick landscape” frames the speakers’ one-sided dialogue within a digital ecology that is at once oppressive and open.

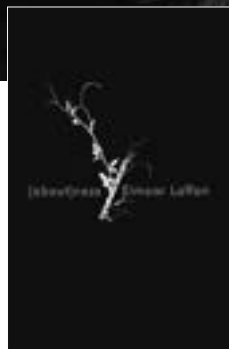
do I see yet
 forgiveness is memory mountain
 desktop image scavenged
 not so much exalted but exactly, grace

I was not built for twenties, I knew that going in

time signatures fall to rubble, and quick!
 enough to thank you
 for our lives my life,
 my life

The poems together are an address to a loved one, imagining conversations that center on music and shared time. Baranova's continuum of desire routinely blurs the boundaries between love, ecology, and the digital – “make me your living bird // all on the mic in vapor cries / tuning radar, cooing dawn” – propelling the often elliptical reading experience toward an illuminating conclusion. *Continuum*'s final poems concisely summarize the collection, with the speaker increasingly repeating phrases and losing restraint on the ambiguous brief lines that characterize the early poems. Upon completing the reading experience, the

JANE ROSE



book as a whole tells a satisfying story of temporal poetics and the self.

[about]ness
Eimear Laffan
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$19.95, paper, 88pp
9780228019022

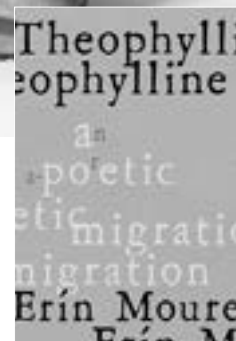
We assess the art of storytelling in Eimear Laffan's *[about]ness*, a long poem in sections that chronicles the creation of a text not yet completed. The breakdown of storytelling comes alive through visual poems and dynamic images. Theory and literary intertexts intersect as Laffan plays with structure and tangibility. Laffan's poems are fragmented and metatextual, existing in a variety of forms – list, erasure, and prose poems combine to communicate an overall narrative of the self-referential poem finding its own meaning.

In the place of conventional line breaks and stanzas, the self-aware virgule is a constant guide through the bulk of the poem:

“every I is a fiction finally,” writes Walcott / breaking the line after “a” / how to represent this cut / in a preponderance of virgules / this free fall into a future / [choose your own adventure] // I would like my life to submit / to the tidy of iambic tercets / it stalls before the silk screen of language / if there were a procedure for living / I would adhere

The visual is essential to *[about]ness* – the poem also often finds itself crawling up margins, inserting spaces in the middle of words, escaping from within brackets, blacked out, referenced in footnotes, and ending up in endnotes. Endnotes repeatedly interrupt the poem to direct the reader to later, shorter poems, manipulating the linearity of the text and the tangibility of the book. The dense text and oblique references may prove

ELISA S



alienating for readers who are not as familiar with experimental poetics, but for those who are, the book is one to read and reread infinitely.

Theophylline
A Poetic Migration
Erín Moure and Elisa Sampedrín
House of Anansi
\$19.95, paper, 88pp
9780228019022

Erín Moure's latest collection, a triumphant work of *essai*-poetry, combines academic research and cultural criticism, intertwined with original and translated poems. Readers of the experimental and the intertextual will enjoy this next chapter of Moure's oeuvre, but those seeking a collection of standalone poems may prefer a different selection in this roundup. *Theophylline: A Poetic Migration*, or rather, *Theophylline: aⁿ-po^retic migration via the modernisms of Rukeyser, Bishop, Grimké (de Castro, Vallejo)*, is a deep dive into the archives in search of the obscured. We visit and revisit the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, and Angelina Weld Grimké, finding a trajectory of resilience in non-normative temporalities: “a layered community, an ecology of thresholds.” Moure, with the difficult help of the mysterious Elisa Sampedrín, excavates and translates these modernist poets even though their poems are in English. Rosalía de Castro's and César Vallejo's poetry also appears, translated from the original Galician and Spanish respectively.

There is no grail
 But poetry makes
 of us a grail every
 moment
 Et ceci, dans
 plusieurs langues
 For what are we but

LUIS LOYA GARCÍA



“not innocent”
In-innocent and
not bystanders

The archives of the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, ignited Moure’s multi-layered project to translate and recover a history of queerness and disability from these modernist poets. Moure unpacks the lesbian experience, twentieth-century asthma treatments, and the art of translation all at once in this study of ways of breathing:

To live with poorly medicated asthma in any class conditions is hard, for breathing precedes every other human condition. You can’t be a lesbian before you can breathe, a woman before you can breathe. I call it “allergiqueer,” foreign to and preceding all category, an unstable structure—

Moure’s theorized queer poetics of disability is convincing and compelling, and the studied elements of translation and fragmentation elevate the book to a unique project that I am already excited to return to.

The Decline and Fall of the Chatty Empire
John Emil Vincent
McGill-Queen’s University Press
\$19.95, paper, 96pp
9780228017042

Chatty Cathy, the briefly popular doll of the 1960s and source of the snide idiom, stars in John Emil Vincent’s new epyllion – a short narrative poem from classical poetics – which follows a post-canon Cathy along her journey to power. We explore the historical, the non-human narrator, and the object poem all at once, following the perspectives of the doll. The owned nonhuman, despite its limitations, lends itself to the tragic endings of

growing up, growing into one’s body, and escaping the limits of popular culture that are all too human.

[...] Cathy, amid trash,
lay back on her string’s ring

uncomfortable as it was.
Couldn’t she had been born
anorectic or to pee when pressed?

Why’d *her* name
have to so perfectly
fit the marquee?

Vincent’s newest book is well-timed to coincide with this summer’s *Barbie* movie – they share the same concept of a doll finding its own identity despite its fate appearing to be prescribed. The humour of Chatty Cathy’s warlike passion is not lost on Vincent either; the poems are interspersed with references to other toys and pop culture elements during touching and ironic scenes alike:

There were cupcakes,
sinks of ricin and anthrax,
and a meth lab

built of Lincoln logs and
twisty straws. Everyone smiled.
Mindy not least of all.

The Decline and Fall of the Chatty Empire is a story in verse of the stuttering feeling of finding one’s purpose and overcoming cultural pressures on aging women. Readers across disciplines will relate to the adventures of the contemporary that resonate throughout the book.

bodies like gardens
Salena Wiener
Cactus Press
\$10.00, paper, 28pp
9781990474149

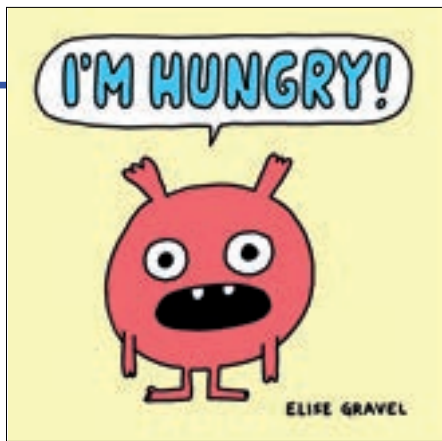
Salena Wiener’s chapbook is intimate and personal, focused on the relationship between the speakers and their bodies in relation to other people. Violence, delicacy, and decay darken the eighteen poems that are set within a tender ecology of the body. Wiener’s themes are strong, centring on heartbreak, both individual and generational, within the frame of nature in distress.

my back lies flat
against soft sheets
as fists clench
& fingers fill with
dirt and soil

I feel weeds push
my back, grasp my hips
pull me under
I gasp for breath but
cough up mud

The speaker’s journey arches from scorning a lover to reaching out to other women for support to grappling with Jewish identity as a young woman in the twenty-first century. The chapbook then closes all of these themes with the final poem “hips covered in dirt.” – a list poem that concludes the speaker’s journey and alludes to the optimistic next steps in her life. Wiener’s words will resonate with readers whose bodies are indeed as complex and resilient as gardens. mbb

Zoe Shaw is a writer and editor based in Montreal. She is the Managing Editor at *carte blanche* literary magazine.



I'm Hungry!

All around the world at any given moment (but most predictably when one has just set off on the day's activities), "I'm hungry!" rings out from the mouths of

children. This ravenous demand is met either by a snack that was packed with heroic foresight by the adult in charge or by the bark, "You'll have to wait!" Suppers around the world shan't be spoiled.

In Elise Gravel's new book, *I'm Hungry!*, insatiable children meet their match. Here, one of Gravel's signature *monstres terribles* tries in vain to fill their belly void with all manner of inedible items: the chairs and table, a mountain and, to the horror of this reader, the toilet and the trash can. Alas, they are still hungry.

Gravel's picture books and graphic novels, which are widely available in both French and English, are covetable for reasons I can't wholly articulate (despite it being my task to do so). Perhaps it is the joy infused in the simple but attractive illustrations. Or perhaps it is the offbeat humour, so rare in children's books. Arguably, it is the deft combination of these things, and a little *je ne sais quoi*.

This is a book to read aloud to the youngest bookworms. My older kid, while proud that they could read it themselves, declared it boring until I performed a dramatic recital for them and their younger sibling. The simple plot's interactive climax was met with copious giggles. Then they asked me to read it again and again – *and again*. You have been warned.

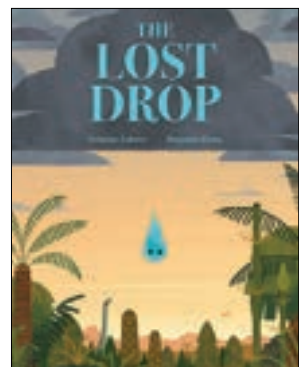
The Lost Drop

While reading *The Lost Drop* by Grégoire Laforce, I recalled a *New York Times* headline that proclaimed, "Your Kid's Existential Dread is Normal." Every

parent during the pandemic breathed a sigh of relief reading that. And while "dread" may be too strong a word for what *The Lost Drop*'s protagonist Flo is feeling as she navigates the perpetual water cycle, there's an undeniable undercurrent of ennui. As a fallen raindrop flowing downstream, Flo is hounded by two transcendental questions: "Who am I, and where should I go?"

When Flo finally, and inevitably, finds herself among the many drops of the sea, she is suddenly scared: "Flo was afraid of these new depths and wondered for a while if she had lost her way." The answer she receives from the surrounding ocean sounds like a mantra: "You are here now, and you have nowhere else to go." Finally, Flo understands her true nature.

The Jurassic-themed art by Benjamin Flouw evokes theatre stage paintings – a vibrant backdrop for Flo's journey. The handy diagram of the water cycle offers a



learning moment. But the greater lesson of *The Lost Drop* is the developmental leap that all kids must take into self-awareness. As kids navigate this cognitive transition, they are bound to ask hard questions, and the water cycle serves as a surprisingly apt analogy for what they are going through. One could say that the life-long quest to discover ourselves, to learn about the infinite possibilities of the world around us, and to interrogate the forces that shape our paths, is elemental.

Where Did Momo's Hair Go?

Give an adult a baby to hold, and chances are high that they will break into a game of Peekaboo. The rules are simple: baby and adult gaze into each other's eyes and then – poof! – the loving adult looks away to the baby's shock and dismay until – whew – eye contact is reestablished and all is well. Oh, and of course one must say, "Peekaboo!"

In *Where Did Momo's Hair Go?*, by Stéphanie Boyer, Momo the clown's hair is playing a game of intermediate Peekaboo with a cast of canines, to the great amusement of the toddler crowd.

In the few pages he appears, Momo gives off working-class-clown vibes. This guy is in a hurry to get to his next gig, and he's late for the bus too. He's hustling so fast that his hair takes a leap onto Ms. Strudel's Poodle and then onto Mr. Bastien's Dalmatian. In this busy world, it's not enough to vaguely resemble your dog, your name better rhyme with it too.

The jaunty illustrations by Caroline Hamel convey the happy chaos that reigns in Momo's portside town. And while there are no great plot twists, one can be rest assured of a happy outcome for poor Momo – just as in the game of Peekaboo.

Skating Wild on an Inland Sea

Two children wake at dawn and eat oatmeal by a crackling fire in a solitary cabin in the woods. In the distance, the call of



young readers

the wolf breaks the silence of the morning. In classic children's literature, the wolf signals danger, but in *Skating Wild on an Inland Sea*, the howl beckons the children to venture out, bravely alone, into the distinctly Canadian chill for a more joyful purpose: an open-air skate on the majestic Lake Superior – also called by its Ojibwe name, Gichigami.

It's rare to find a children's book in prose as captivating as this. Author Jean E. Pendziwol weaves the scenes with a poet's loom: "A pair of ravens croak at the / top of a pine, / and chick-a-dee-dee-dees / greet us from the branches of birch and alder. / A blue jay scolds— / thief thief thief! / We laugh and tell him / we've only come to steal / this moment— / turquoise ice, / the wind, / a memory."

The illustrations are as attractive as the writing style. Stewart's hand captures the stark beauty of a winter's morning and the hushed majesty of rising light. To look at this book is to feel the sting of winter in your lungs and the wet kiss of condensation collecting in a scarf.

Skating Wild on an Inland Sea is a perfect book for fall, as readers young and old settle into the quiet mood of winter and look forward to the thrill of skating.

Rockin' the Bayou Down in Louisiana! We're a Possum Family Band

In *Rockin' the Bayou Down in Louisiana! We're a Possum Family Band* – a book by and for music lovers – a brood of young possum joeys beg their grandparents to tell them a story. Papa Poss and Mama Poss settle down to spin yarn about coming of age in the bayous of Louisiana,

when Papa Poss played dobro in a band, and Mama Moss snuck out of her home to shred on the harmonica at the Fais Dodo Thibodeau, a late-night haunt for musicians. In this first book of a series, Fanny Berthiaume's spirited illustrations capture the foot-stomping moodiness of a low-lit bar and the many shades of green in the verdant bayous.

The tale that follows, of budding love and rising musical fame, is told over the din of the joeys' interrupting chatter and – ultimately – the plot drifts off into the Louisiana night. Yet Papa Poss' courting style grabs my attention. One could say he



I'm Hungry!

Elise Gravel
Orca Books
\$10.95, cloth, 30pp
9781459838925
Ages 0–2

The Lost Drop

Grégoire Laforce
Illustrated by Benjamin Flouw
Milky Way Picture Books
\$25.99, cloth, 48pp
9781990252297
Ages 4–8

Where Did Momo's Hair Go?

Stéphanie Boyer
Translated by Carine Laforest
Illustrated by Caroline Hamel
CrackBoom! Books
\$17.95, cloth, 40pp
9782898024160
Ages 3 and up

Skating Wild on an Inland Sea

Jean E. Pendziwol
Illustrated by Todd Stewart
Groundwood Books
\$19.99, cloth, 32pp
9781773067049
Ages 3 and up

Rockin' the Bayou Down in Louisiana!

Bia, Erik West-Millette and Olaf Gundel
Illustrated by Fanny Berthiaume
The Secret Mountain
\$19.95, cloth, 48pp
9782898360435
Ages 5–7

has all the grace of Danny Zuko fawning over Sandy Dee. I can't believe I'm writing this, but it is my firm opinion that *even* coming from the mouth of a marsupial, the phrase, "Good day miss, you sure are easy on the eyes," has no place in a children's book. Some things are best kept in the good ol' days.

If you like a book with features, you can follow the QR code on the back cover to listen and sing along to accompanying songs performed by Olaf Gundel with Alexa Devine and Annick Brémault. A glossary of instruments (including the dobro), information on famous Cajun musicians, and brief histories of the Acadian diaspora are included to boot.

Meaghan Thurston is a Montreal-based arts and science writer, co-editor of the anthology *With the World to Choose From: Seven Decades of the Beatty Lecture at McGill University*, and mother to two budding readers.

25TH QWF LITERARY AWARDS GALA 2023

HATS OFF TO QWF

Celebrating 25 Years
of Writing Matters

Hosted by Guy Rex Rodgers

Monday, November 13, 2023 • Reception 6:30 pm, Award Ceremony 8:00 pm
Cabaret Lion d'Or, 1676 Ontario Street East, Montreal
Ticket information: www.qwf.org/gala

2023 FINALISTS

JANET SAVAGE BLACHFORD PRIZE FOR CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Sponsored in memory of
Janet Savage Blachford

Sophie Escabasse *Witches of Brooklyn:
S'More Magic* (Random House Graphic)

Jennifer A. Irwin *Captain Skidmark
Dances with Destiny* (Charlesbridge)

Edeet Ravel *A Boy Is Not a Ghost*
(Groundwood Books)

COLE FOUNDATION PRIZE FOR TRANSLATION (FRENCH TO ENGLISH)

Sponsored by the Cole Foundation

Katia Grubisic *To See Out the Night*
(QC Fiction/Baraka Books)

David Clerson *Dormir sans tête* (Éditions HélioTropé)

Aleshia Jensen & Bronwyn Haslam
This is How I Disappear
(Drawn & Quarterly)

Mirion Malle *C'est comme ça que je disparaiss*
(Éditions Pow Pow)

Alex Manley *Made-Up: A True Story of
Beauty Culture under Late Capitalism*
(Coach House Books)

Daphné B. *Maquillée* (Éditions Marchand de feuilles)

Peter McCambridge *Rosa's Very Own
Personal Revolution*
(QC Fiction/Baraka Books)

Eric Dupont *La logeuse* (Éditions Marchand
de feuilles)

MAVIS GALLANT PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION

Alex Manley *The New Masculinity:
A Roadmap for a 21st-Century Definition
of Manhood* (ECW Press)

Julian Sher *The North Star: Canada and
the Civil War Plots Against Lincoln*
(Knopf Canada)

**Andrew Stobo Sniderman & Douglas
Sanderson** *Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian
Reserve, a White Town, and the Road to
Reconciliation* (HarperCollins Publishers)

Debra Thompson *The Long Road Home:
On Blackness and Belonging* (Simon &
Schuster Canada)

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY FIRST BOOK PRIZE

Sponsored by Concordia University

Sheima Benembarek *Halal Sex:
The Intimate Lives of Muslim Women in
North America* (Viking Canada)

Tanya Standish McIntyre
The House You Were Born In
(McGill-Queen's University Press)

**Andrew Stobo Sniderman & Douglas
Sanderson** *Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian
Reserve, a White Town, and the Road to
Reconciliation* (HarperCollins Publishers)

Michelle Syba *End Times*
(Freehand Books)

PARAGRAPHE HUGH MACLENNAN PRIZE FOR FICTION

Sponsored by Paragraphe Bookstore

David C.C. Bourgeois *Full Fadom Five*
(Baraka Books)

Ann-Marie MacDonald *Fayne*
(Knopf Canada)

Sean Michaels *Do You Remember
Being Born?* (Random House Canada)

Vanessa R. Sasson *The Gathering*
(Equinox Publishing)

Caroline Vu *Catinat Boulevard*
(Guernica Editions)

A.M. KLEIN PRIZE FOR POETRY

Sponsored by Byron Rempel

River Halen *Dream Rooms*
(Book*hug Press)

T. Liem *Slows: Twice*
(Coach House Books)

Erin Robinsong *Wet Dream*
(Brick Books)

QWF SPOKEN WORD FINALISTS

BeWyrld

Lucia De Luca

nic lachance

Caitlin Murphy

Alexis O'Hara

Raïssa Simone

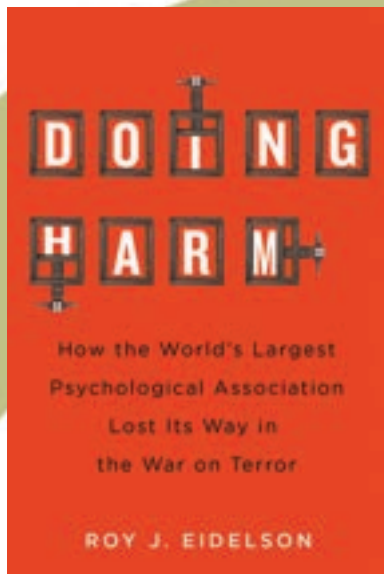
Svens Telemaque

Deb Vanslet



Funded by the Government of Canada





Doing Harm

How the World's Largest Psychological Association Lost Its Way in the War on Terror

Roy J. Eidelson

Cloth | \$37.95 | 272pp

A thought-provoking and unflinching, scrupulously documented account of one of the darkest chapters in the recent history of psychology and the APA.

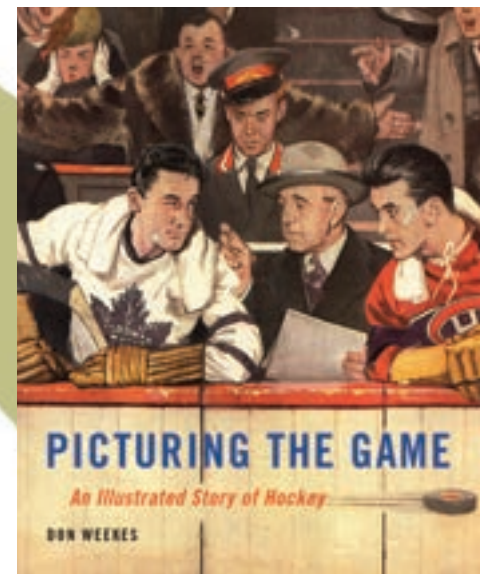


Paths of Pollen

Stephen Humphrey

Cloth | \$39.95 | 256pp | 51 photos

Chronicling pollen's do-or-die mission to spread plant genes, from the prehistoric past to the present, under increasing ecological and anthropogenic strain.



Picturing the Game

An Illustrated Story of Hockey

Don Weekes

Cloth | \$49.95 | 408pp | 460 illustrations

Hockey's history, seen through the lens of graphic satire and commentary by some of Canada's most prominent cartoonists and illustrators.

Intelligent ... Beautiful ... Lasting ...



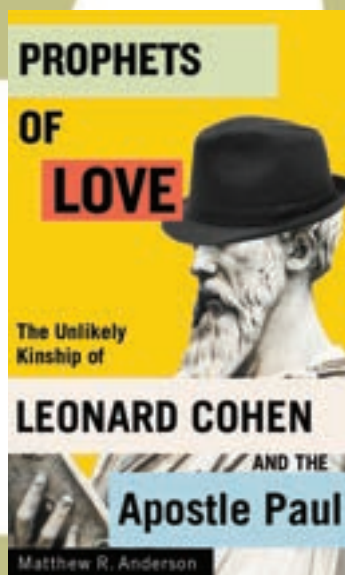
Social Democracy, Capitalism, and Competition

A Manifesto

Marcel Boyer

Cloth | \$39.95 | 248pp

A radical rethinking of the respective roles of governmental and corporate sectors in the provision of public and social goods and services.



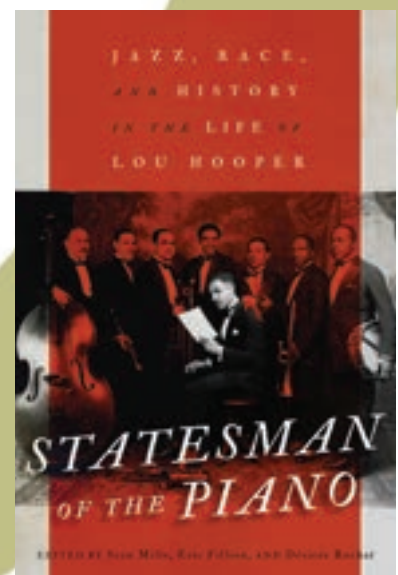
Prophets of Love

The Unlikely Kinship of Leonard Cohen and the Apostle Paul

Matthew R. Anderson

Cloth | \$29.95 | 192pp

A side-by-side examination of two Jewish thinkers, separated by millennia, but connected by their spirituality. *Prophets of Love* alters our views of both, re-introducing us to two poetic prophets of divine and human love.



Statesman of the Piano

Jazz, Race, and History in the Life of Lou Hooper

Edited by Sean Mills, Eric Fillion, and Désirée Rochat

Cloth | \$37.95 | 280pp | 19 photos, 9 illustrations

The previously unpublished autobiography of a Canadian-born pianist who played with many of the 20th century's jazz and blues greats in Detroit, Harlem, and Montreal.

