

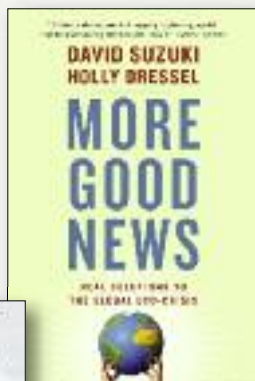
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SUMMER 2010 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

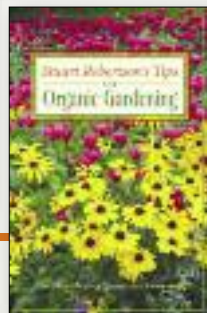
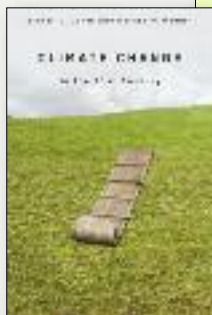


The Trials of Obama

Ishmael Reed Flies to Canada
With His Controversial New Book



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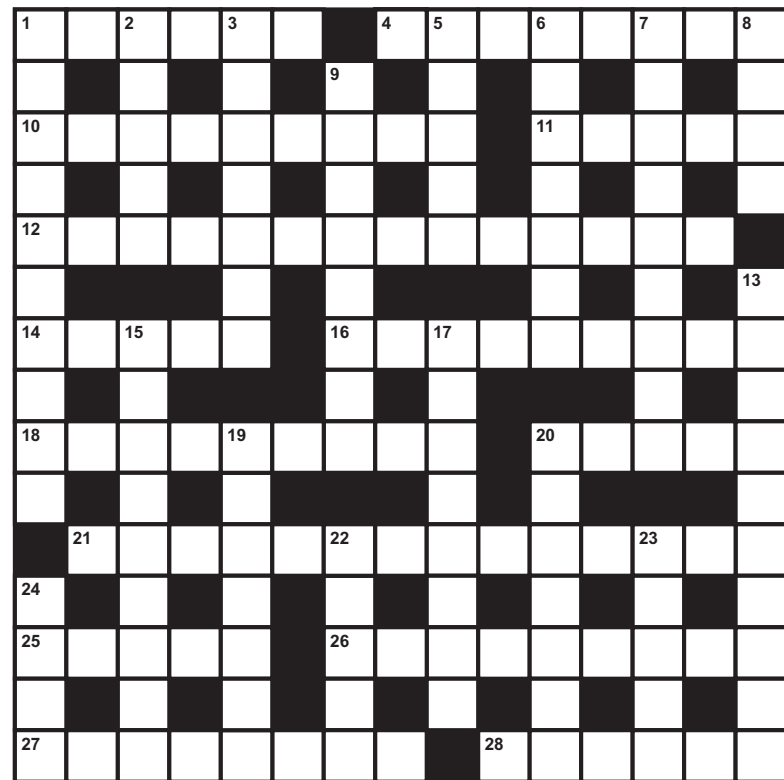


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Crosswords Clues

Across

- 1 First aim of green living (6)
- 4 Gaia author (8)
- 10 Lack of sense (9)
- 11 Glaziers' requirement (5)
- 12 Greenpeace ship (7,7)
- 14 Palm-like plant (5)
- 16 Pursues on horseback (5,4)
- 18 Speaks well of the dead (9)
- 20 Of a king (5)
- 21 Republican philosophy (14)
- 25 Second aim of green living (5)
- 26 Enjoyment (9)
- 27 "Weather Makers" author (8)
- 28 Hat (6)

Down

- 1 Limited (10)
- 2 Indian city (5)
- 3 Borrowed (7)
- 5 Aboard a ship (2,3)
- 6 Sends abroad (7)
- 7 Adherence to traditional practice (9)
- 8 Florida islands (4)
- 9 In the direction of the ocean
- 13 Craze for all things English (10)
- 15 Pot marigold (9)
- 17 Very poorly (8)
- 19 Show where to enter (5,2)
- 20 Third aim of green living (7)
- 22 More strange (5)
- 23 _____ Jones, Garden Designer (5)
- 24 German title (4)

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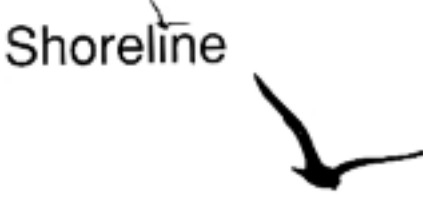
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Cover photo of Ishmael Reed

by Terence Byrnes

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Holley Dressel

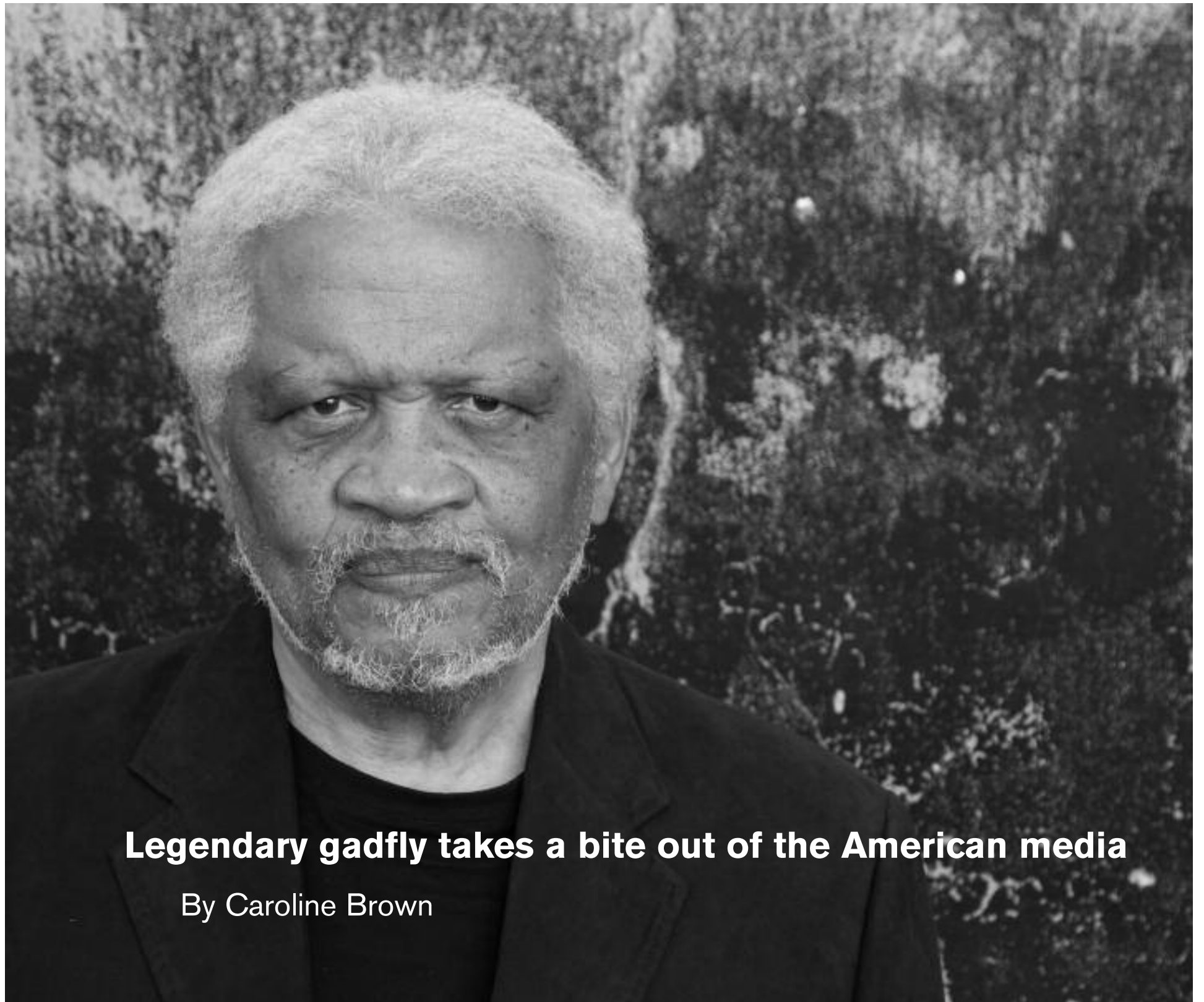


Stuart Robertson Photo: Jane Lewis

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Legendary gadfly takes a bite out of the American media

By Caroline Brown

Ishmael Reed's *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers* offers many prescient insights into the miasma that is the "post-race" United States. An unabashed mixture of political polemic, scathing wit, and idiosyncratic cultural commentary, it is a book of frequently quirky and unpredictable charms. It is not, however, the volume for those seeking a scholarly and coherent analysis of Barack Obama, the American media, and their complex and slippery relationship that is at once reciprocal and combative, adoring and antagonistic. Rather, as Ishmael Reed himself has asserted, he perceives his writing style – and this particular collection of essays, many of which have been published elsewhere – as extemporaneous, a jazz-like riff through which he "starts with a theme and improvises on it."

In Reed's view, the mainstream American media, increasingly dominated by white, corporate elites, often pass biased judgments on President Obama, whom Reed does not hesitate to critique. His book is one way to offer a counterstatement to what can otherwise be racially inflected news accounts lacking the

objectivity they claim. As he explains in an interview, contextualizing the politics behind his decision to publish this book: "I want to point out that with the disappearance of black and minority journalists what we have left is an all-white jury that passes judgment not only on blacks in general, black celebrities,

black institutions but the President of the United States. It's like the old Southern all-white jury. And that's what we have in the sense that the media is Barack Obama's main opposition. They're the ones who stirred up this Tea Party thing. The media is out to break Obama."

Reed begins *Barack Obama*

and the *Jim Crow Media* by referring to the concept of "nigger breaking," an activity rooted in slavery. As Reed points out, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an iconic slave narrative, contains one of literature's most powerful analyses of the nigger breaker in the representative of Edward Covey. A poor white sharecropper who breaks the will of rebellious slaves through beatings, overwork, and **intimidation**, Covey exploits their captive labor before returning them to their legal owners, cured. Reed superimposes this image on the media's relationship with Barack Obama, which, at the behest of **corporate** interests, humiliates him both for public consumption and to send a message to other blacks. In doing so, he returns to the crucifixion of African-American public

figures, such as Michael Vick, Tiger Woods, Michael Jackson, and Marion Barry; the smugness of the black morality police – including the president and various **celebrities**, such as Henry Louis Gates and Bill Cosby – who publicly lecture black men on their ethical failings to boost their popularity; and, **incorporates** autobiographical tidbits on his own struggle against the system. As he asserts: "You can't get Spike Lee's film, *Miracle at St. Anna's*, about black soldiers saving Italian villages. It's only showing at 10:30 p.m. in Oakland. ... You've got widespread Negromania going on. Why would the *New York Post* spend more time in its pages on Tiger Woods than 9/11?"

In fact, Reed insists that it was necessary for him to

continued on page 11

The Black-blooded Lady

L (AND THINGS COME APART)
Ian Orti
Invisible Publishing
\$16.95, paper, 138pp
ISBN 9781926743059

The label “experimental fiction” is a loose and overused one; isn’t all fiction an experiment, just the way all writers are “emerging”? But the label is a **convenient** way of referring to books like Ian Orti’s short work of fiction titled *L (and things come apart)*, for such works are designed to frustrate and twist literary conventions. L is the name of the woman who mysteriously appears and **occupies** the room over a café run by a man named Henry in an unnamed city (which may be Montreal, Ottawa, or Moncton, for a few words of French are exchanged from time to time). Henry’s wife (also unnamed) commits serial adultery with a number of her colleagues, and one of his entertainments is to creep up to the window of his house to watch the proceedings. Poor Henry can’t seem to do anything right in his own house – he belongs to that long line of hapless males – including pour wine into a glass.

But in his café, Henry is king. He is the shepherd of a cohort of equally lost men, including two fellows named Laplante and Lachaise, who could have escaped from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and various vagrants. Outside the café, transit strikes and blizzards rage, and everyone has plenty to complain about. Nietzsche said it best: “There is a small dose of revenge in every complaint.” Immobile and impotent, the men in Henry’s café participate in the outside world by complaining about it.

L’s arrival creates a small stir in Henry’s blood, though he is extremely slow out of the blocks. “I’m not asking you to sleep with me,” L assures him, and only then does she succeed in getting him to follow her upstairs. There, he fusses with his remaining plumes of hair until L suggests she might cut it all off so he’ll have nothing to **fid-**
get with. “You’re a bald man,” she tells him. “You should wear it proudly.”

Of course, a woman who turns up out of nowhere has to have a secret, a backstory, and L is no exception. For an **experimental** work, Orti makes some pretty conventional choices



when it comes to villains. A threatening-looking, faceless man begins skulking around the building under cover of darkness, and we understand that he represents L’s past. Perhaps this man is her father; perhaps he is a wronged party of some kind. In any case, he is Fate, and there is no escaping him. Henry, just as passive with L as he is with his wife, waits for the threat to show its face.

Which happens soon enough. The man attacks, and we learn that L’s blood is black. Perhaps because she is a text, since a collection of burnt papers seems to be at the origin of the man’s vengeance. If there is any central character in this book, it is the act of writing itself. Henry dies in the attack, but does not die. What is striking, though, is that when Henry’s wife hears of her husband’s death (he does return in the following chapters), we learn that he was the one who deserted her, emotionally, many years ago. The surprise is a good one: Henry moves suddenly from victim to victimizer.

The world Orti has created is absurd and claustrophobic, a place of immobility, and it conjures up images of Eastern Europe with its defeated men who come together in the few spaces left for them. This is a singular vision in our world of vast space and opportunity. MRB

David Homel’s new novel *Midway* will be out this autumn with Cormorant Books.

Love Like the Razor’s Edge

ISOBEL AND EMILE
Alan Reed
Coach House Books
\$18.95, paper, 160pp
ISBN 9781552452271



Some books leave an impression less for what is said than how it is said; are memorable less for their plot, or even their characters, than for some quality of texture, some indefinable edge, whether soft or sharp. Alan Reed’s *Isobel and Emile* is one of those books.

The novel is a brief, starkly narrated account of two people trying to put their lives back together after what seems to be – though it is never described – a painful breakup. It opens with a man and a woman at a train station as he departs, leaving his ex behind, and then follows the two of them, in more-or-less alternating chapters, as they go through their blank daily routines. Emile, the young man, moves to another town, finds an old friend in a bar, and spends time there. He returns to his work as a puppeteer. Isobel lives in a small room above a grocery store and convinces its owner, in an almost shockingly sad scene, to let her work there.

The book tracks these simple events very closely, laying them out in precise detail and in short – often very short – sentences, shorn of any ornament. The result of this stripped-down style is the elimination of overt “psychologizing” and the creation of a cool, affectless textual surface:

“It is a busy street. There are people walking down the street and there are people standing in the street. They are wearing scarves. They are huddled inside their jackets. The street is crowded with people huddled inside their jackets.”

Such a flat account is obviously intended to evoke the deadened feeling that follows the collapse of an intimate rela-

tionship, the sense that life is **mechanical**, that one is merely “going through the motions.” To a great extent, it is successful, particularly when connected to repetitive actions such as Isobel’s work at the grocery store. The effect, however, is most poignant in contrast to a series of letters that Isobel writes to Emile, which are interpolated throughout the book. These are written not in the detached tone of the main narration, but in her voice, with all of its human uncertainty:

“I don’t want to be in this place. I don’t want to be the kind of person who lives in this place. But I am. You are what makes me more than this. The way that you touched me, what is left behind in my body.”

The effect of such fervent, naked statements against the primary narrative voice is both startling and engaging.

Reed’s book is also notable for the way it is inhabited by the overarching metaphor of puppetry. Emile stages puppet shows in his room using marionettes that, it is suggested, resemble the novel’s protagonists. He films these shows, recording their movements and interactions. These scenes are artfully described by Reed, conveying something of his character’s discipline and craft, and playing the artificial movements of the figurines against the similarly empty actions of the alienated ex-lovers. If the trope is a little heavy-handed, it is still rather well deployed.

Overall, though Reed’s unwavering commitment to stylistic rigour is not likely to please every reader, for those willing to let go and slide along its carefully honed edge, his novel is sure to linger; in fact, it may be sharp enough to leave marks. MRB

Peter Dubé is a Montreal-based writer of fiction and cultural criticism; his most recent book is *Subtle Bodies*, a fictional biography of French surrealist René Crevel, forthcoming on Lethe Press (New Jersey) this summer.

Boy Meets Girl

ANNABEL
Kathleen Winter
House of Anansi Press
\$32.95, hardcover, 472pp
ISBN 9780887842368

Kathleen Winter’s debut novel *Annabel* is a journey which succeeds on multiple levels.

Literally, it explores the remote coastal region of Labrador. Figuratively, it’s a coming-of-age story tracing the passage from birth to adulthood of a character named Wayne Blake. It is also a singular exploration of sexual identity. Although, on the surface, Wayne Blake seems like an ordinary Labrador boy, he is a hermaphrodite, combining a perfect balance of male and female sexual characteristics. Just below his



skin is a shadow-self, a little girl he thinks of as “Annabel.”

Winter’s novel could not be more different from her first book of fiction, *Boys*, a collection of 24 vignettes about small-town life on Canada’s East Coast. (Winter spent much of her life in Newfoundland, though she now lives in Montreal.) Written in a minimalist style with close attention to detail if not to plot, *Boys* won the Metcalfe-Rooke Award and the Winterset Award. *Annabel*, on the other hand, weighs in at 472 pages and is driven by an adrenalin-fuelled plot as Wayne Blake tries to solve the mystery of his identity.

At his birth, Wayne’s parents vow to divulge the secret of his ambiguous nature to no one but a neighbour who helped with his delivery. This interdiction applies even to Wayne who,

throughout his childhood, is fed pills of various colours and sizes, which he believes are for a blood disorder. In fact, they are male hormones, allowing the boy in him to dominate. His father, a traditional Labrador trapper named Treadway, tries to protect Wayne by insisting on strict conformity to the male stereotype.

Only Wayne can’t do it. From the start, he is different. His best friend in primary school is a girl. At eight years old, his preferred sport is synchronized swimming, in which he cannot participate. He spends hours watching Elizaveta Kirilovna, soloist for the Russian Olympic team, on television and dreams of purchasing an orange swimsuit and gold bathing cap, just like hers.

This story of a child struggling to understand himself, when important truths are being withheld, is powerful

continued on page 11

Hijacked by PETA

THE EXTINCTION CLUB

Jeffrey Moore

Hamish Hamilton

\$32.00, cloth, 368pp

ISBN 9780670063954

Jeffrey Moore's third novel, *The Extinction Club*, features a cast of characters who are unstable at best and out of their minds at worst. One of his two narrator-heroes "sees things that aren't there ... like Osama bin Laden in an icicled cliff ... or a brontosaurus in the frosted front window." The other is a suicidal fourteen-year-old animal-rights activist. Moore's villains aren't any better off in terms of mental health: he refers to them as "homicidal inbreds" and "freelance psychopaths." Even the secondary characters have a screw loose somewhere. They babble to imaginary friends and torture animals in their free time.

These people belong perfectly in St-Davnet-des-Monts, a fictional Laurentian town named for the patron saint of – you guessed it – the mentally disturbed. The looniness of

this town serves as the perfect backdrop for Moore's quirky eco-thriller.

The narrative centres on Nile Nightingale, who has driven up to St-Davnet from New Jersey hoping to escape the law, multiple addictions, and memories from his life as a ne'er-do-well. The town's deconsecrated church seems like the perfect refuge, but, on his first visit, Nile witnesses an unidentifiable object being dumped in the cemetery next door. On further investigation, he discovers the wounded body of Céleste Jonquères, the teenaged activist. From that moment on, Nile is sucked into a world of poachers who will do anything to be rid of people who get in the way of their business: selling parts of bears and other endangered animals. What ensues is a funny adventure about the screwed-up Nile Nightingale and Celeste J. who team up to try to outwit these shotgun-toting goons.

The wacky Québécois setting in which these characters doggedly pursue the bad guys allows Moore to combine humour with menace. But the author's political agenda is a distraction: many of the sections narrated by Céleste read less like a novel than a pamphlet for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals).

This message is present in Nile's chapters too.

For example, as Nile sneaks across the Canadian border, he meets up with two illegal Chinese immigrants. They walk together for a while, conversing in Mandarin (which Nile learned during the year he spent in Shanghai – of course). This chance encounter and the intimacy that creeps into the strangers' conversation as they walk along a dark country road is mysterious and evocative. Yet the mood quickly shifts from the personal to the political when Moore suggests that Nile's new acquaintances are really entering the country to work in the bear-poaching industry. Moore creates a plausible human interaction – the pleasure to be had in a surprise meet-



The plight of endangered animals that are being poached to extinction is an important issue, and Moore's cause is a good one.

ing between strangers in an unlikely place – and then hijacks the scene with his political message.

The plight of endangered animals that are being poached to extinction is an important issue, and Moore's cause is a good one, but it's out of place in a novel. By forcing his message into his characters' every thought and encounter, Moore

makes too clear a distinction between good and evil.

In interviews, Moore has listed Philip Roth and J.M. Coetzee as two of his favourite writers, but the moral and emotional ambiguity that characterizes their writing is nowhere to be found here. *The*

Extinction Club is a fun romp in the Laurentians – and surely a distracting summer read by the lake. But despite the colourful universe he creates, Moore introduces the interesting conjunction between species extinction and insanity without doing justice to either one. MB

Eric Boodman is a Montreal writer, musician, and student.

On y danse tous en rond

PIERS' DESIRE

Marianne Ackerman

McArthur & Company

\$24.95, hardcover, 320pp

ISBN 9781552788509



Piers' Desire, the third novel by Montreal-based writer

Marianne Ackerman (*Jump, Matters of Hart*) starts with a promise of excitement. Piers Le Gris, a middle-aged author of pulpy mystery novels, is living a monastic existence. He's the only guest in a rooming house in Avignon where he pounds away at his keyboard between sunset and sunrise. His life seems good: the town is charming, his books sell well ("like stout at closing time"), and his elderly landlady, Nelly, dotes on him.

Within the first chapter, "on the night it all began to crumble like so much weary plaster," Piers' solitude is broken. Seventeen-year-old Magali, the landlady's great-niece, has moved into the rooming house and makes her arrival known to Piers through self-induced orgasmic cries that travel easily through the water-stained walls. Magali has recently terminated an unwanted pregnancy, dumped the boy **responsible** (Mouloud), and moved to Avignon to start university. She is ready to move on to the next stage of life, but her sulky, love-sick ex follows her to Avignon and won't leave her alone. He is moody, confused,

and has a violent streak.

The landlady, Nelly, has a past full of pain as well. During World War II, she fell in love with a member of the French Resistance who, we ascertain, never came back onto the scene. Shortly after the book

begins, Nelly is inspired to write down her story, which Magali discovers and surreptitiously reads with relish.

Unfortunately, after this complex and promising beginning, the characters do little. Although Magali's perky young body stirs lust in Piers, he doesn't seem to know what he wants to do about it and their interactions remain mostly PG-13. When Nelly becomes jealous of Piers' interest in Magali, she retreats into her diary writing. Magali's attempts to get to know Piers or read Nelly's journal are constantly interrupted by her melodramatic ex-boyfriend. The book jacket promises "perilous intrigue," "love and redemption," and that Piers will find himself "dangerously entangled in the cross-currents of desire," but this exhilarating emotional danger never **materializes**. Other characters wander into the book and offer some excitement (a mugging, an orgy, etc.) but these interesting side dishes do not affect the book's main course: Piers, Magali, and Nelly's relationships with one another.

Piers' Desire is extremely readable: the pacing is excellent and Ackerman's writing has a strong sense of place. Readers will taste the hot-chocolate soaked croissants at breakfast and feel the Avignon **cobblestones** beneath their feet as characters dash from one place to another. Ackerman also creates extremely engaging characters. There are the three central characters, of course, but also others: Mouloud, Magali's maddeningly sulky ex-boyfriend; Chanelle, Piers' ex-lover, a wealthy and neglected married woman whose yellow lace lingerie complements the lemon yellow sofa in her salon; and, briefly, Isabelle Tweed, Piers' editor, "a taciturn spinster with tea-stained teeth" who has "little tolerance for the clever turn of phrase, even less for the stench of irony." Point of view is sometimes a problem. In some passages it flip-flops jarringly from one character to another (or, in one brief and disorienting paragraph, to the dog), but these are the only hiccups in otherwise smooth prose.

Piers' Desire has all the makings of a great novel – exotic location, characters with shady pasts, unrequited love, and the occasional racy sex scene. In the end, however, the reader is left confused about what it is that Piers truly desires and whether or not he got it. MB

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based fiction and non-fiction writer. Her most recent short story, "3:28 p.m. at the Bar on the Corner," was shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards.

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Earth the Colour of Tamarind and All that Crap

“**B**e an international writer who happens to be a Filipino,” says a senior writer to an aspiring one in Miguel Syjuco’s debut novel *Ilustrado*. The line could serve not only as an author’s self-motivating mission statement – the aspiring writer in the novel, for what it’s worth, is named Miguel Syjuco – but as a summary of the book’s myriad strengths. This multi-layered, many-voiced story of a young man’s quest to get to grips with his tangled Filipino legacy has vaulted far beyond its principal setting, winning the Man Asian Booker Prize and garnering near-unanimous praise from readers and critics. “Truly, who wants to read about the angst of a remote nation?” asks that same irascible older writer; Syjuco has shown that the answer, when the writing is strong and true, is anyone and everyone. Recently, over beers in a Mile End café, the 32-year-old world traveler, Montrealer (of three years) and former *Gazette* copy editor talked about *Ilustrado*, sudden success, and the writing life.

On becoming a writer

“I’ve always been a reader, but never thought I had the chops to make it as a writer. I took up economics in college (in the Philippines) because I was going to go into the family business, which was soft-drink bottling. I failed because of math and had to get a new major. I thought, ‘I’m in college, I want to chase skirts and drink beer,’ so I took the path of least resistance. I took up English lit. I started writing poems and short stories. They weren’t any good, in fact they weren’t even good enough to let me write a thesis, but I found that I enjoyed the challenge, the very elusive and all-too-brief feeling of finding a rhythm while writing, finding this joy, this white heat. That’s addictive. It’s like gambling or drugs. The high is just enough to keep you coming back, even though the comedown hurts.”

On literary influences

“The first thing I ever wrote was the sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, in Grade 5. Thankfully that’s lost to history, but Tolkien got me into reading and writing. Later heroes were C.S. Lewis, Isaac Asimov, Saul Bellow, Nabokov, Borges, and very recently Bolaño. I always return to Hemingway, the rigour of the writing. He brings it back to the level of the sentence, and that is so important. A personal writing epiphany? Finishing *Ilustrado* taught me a lot. It’s such a big beast, a novel. It really is like climbing a mountain, so when you get to the summit, you realize that you can do it. It will never be as good as you want it to be, but to finish it gives you confidence – or fatalism, despair that you’ve invested so much that you might as well just see this damn thing through.”

On unlocking the key to *Ilustrado*

“There were so many fragments that I couldn’t really envision it in terms of chapters and the whole. Then one day I was watching a documentary about weavers in the Philippines. I watched as these women first created each individual thread and then fed them into a loom to create patterns. I thought, ‘That’s fantastic. This is how I need to write my book.’ So I raced to the computer, I opened up ten Microsoft Word documents, and I took my manuscript apart, developed all the single threads just as I’d seen those old women do, then wove them together. I devised a system whereby I summarized each of the fragments in one line, colour-coded them according to which narrative thread they belonged to, printed them out on card-stock paper and backed those with Velcro. Velcro plays a crucial part in all the good things in life.”

On the writer as spokesperson

“I worked on this book for four years. It was a very long trajectory. In the beginning I thought, ‘Yes, okay, I am going to be representative (of the Philippines).’ Having finished the work, having grown up a bit and become less prone to hubris, I’ve realized how unfair it is to put that on an author or a book. If I do try to do that, I’ll only always fail – it becomes more polemical, more grandiose. Now I think my role isn’t to represent, it’s to write as honestly and as **authentically** to my own little slice of the Filipino experience as I can. If I’m authentic to that then I’ll always be authentically Filipino.”

On *Ilustrado*’s reception in the Philippines

“The book was first launched there, and I went home with some trepidation because it is a satirical book, it is brutally honest. It does try to raise more ques-



ILUSTRADO • Miguel Syjuco • Penguin Canada
\$34.00, hardcover, 256pp • ISBN 978067063956

tions than it attempts answers. But for the most part it’s been accepted very well. Readers, especially, have taken to it. I can see on blogs that people are quoting the book. I get the impression that for many people it’s articulating some of the frustrations we all have. What more could a writer ask? But then there are other writers at home who are less enthusiastic with it. This book, by a Filipino, about the Philippines, received no help whatsoever from any other Filipino writer. No one wanted to help me.”

On the low world profile of Filipino lit

“We’ve been writing in English for a hundred years. You’d think that we’d have more out there. I think we’ve suffered from, first, trying to mimic the way American writers write, because we were a colony. Then we fell prey to fads – magical realism, then the whole Asian-American, Amy Tan thing, that identity boom. I think readers sensed that we were facsimiles. And we exoticized ourselves. So many books had the requisite water buffalo in the rice paddy, sunlight the colour of mango, earth the colour of tamarind, all that crap. Exotic fruit being celebrated as sensuality. I set out to write against that and I think others are now too.”

On CanLit and his place in it

“The more I read Canadian literature, the more I realize that it’s multi-faceted, a lot less homogenized than in other countries. I’m feeling like, ‘Yeah, I can be a part of this.’ I like Joseph Boyden a lot, the way he takes his background and turns it into something meaningful and universal. M.G. Vassanji too. Michael Ondaatje perfectly represents what Canadian literature is and can be. He comes from somewhere else, writes about somewhere else, but is nothing if not Canadian.”

On dealing with reviews

“It’s a contradiction, because to write you need to have very thin skin, you need to be sensitive, but to publish and promote and read your reviews and move forward you need to have very thick skin. I’m having a really hard time with that. By and large the reviews have been good, and even in the bad ones the things pointed out as weaknesses I’ve often agreed with. I don’t want to ignore (negative reviews) because I want to grow as a writer, and it’s a conversation. Good reviews are dangerous because they can go to your head.”

Ian McGillis is a Montreal novelist and critic.

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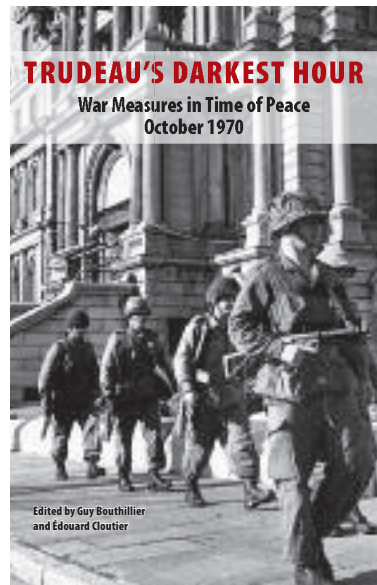
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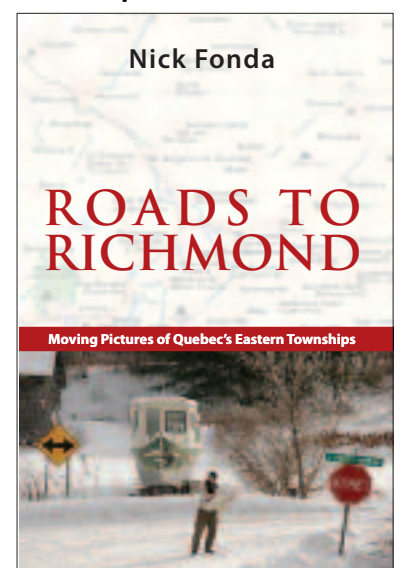
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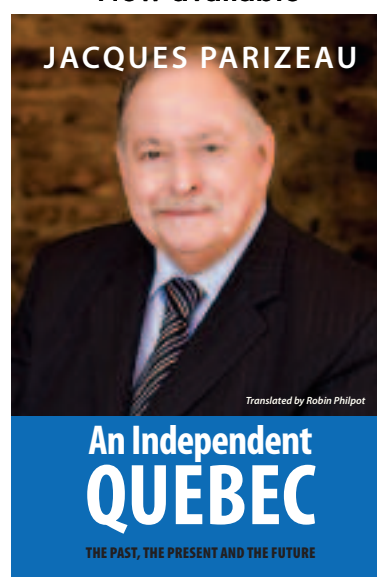
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What the Pine Beetle Is Teaching Us



Holly Dressel calls them the “green techies”: the researchers who herald newfangled technologies to solve large-scale environmental troubles. But there is no global panacea, she explains in *More Good News: Real Solutions to the Global Eco-Crisis*, a study in sustainable living co-written by Dressel, an Adjunct Professor at the McGill School of Environment, and David Suzuki.

Less than ten years ago, for instance, proponents of agricultural biofuels endorsed growing renewable fuels, such as corn or switchgrass, rather than drawing on a steadily decreasing, finite supply of oil or coal. Canada, the United States, and the European Union quickly jumped in with tax breaks and subsidies for biofuel development.

Why, so quickly afterward, were the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Resource Efficient Agricultural Production (REAP) frantically compelling governments to amend the initiatives?

I interviewed Dressel, who took on the project with David Suzuki as a follow-up to the 2003 *Good News for a Change*. “When David and I wrote our first book (*Good News for a Change*), we were skeptical. We were the only ones who weren’t on board with biofuels,” Dressel explains. The initiatives simply did not fit with the conditions they had developed for global sustainability.

In fact, though neither Dressel nor Suzuki dismiss biofuels entirely, these have proven far from the godsend environmentalists hoped for. Large-scale deforestation, rising food prices, and widespread famines and food riots followed hot on the heels of the biofuel explosion. Not only that, but the targeted decrease in fossil fuel emissions proved largely a mirage as growing, processing, and transporting biofuels demanded as much energy as ever.

“We’ve got a whole society that’s convinced people that quick fixes are possible,” Dressel says simply. “But they’re only possible in the short-term.”

A dense overview of today’s **environmental** issues, *More Good News* explains why quick fixes do not work. It dramatically and optimistically redefines the conditions for sustainability when the meaning of the word has grown opaque, lost under the spell of short-term solutions, trends, and misinformation. Suzuki and Dressel draw connections between ostensibly different themes (agricultural biofuels only scratch the surface), examining the interplay between our oceans, forests, agriculture, water supply, and **pollutants**, in order to develop lasting principles of sustainable living. The book meanders through Ecuador and India, Canada and the United States, China and Zimbabwe and traces international trends in environment to come up with reliable guidelines.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, the authors stress; solutions to local problems must operate on a local level. It feels like an impossible goal in an age of globalization

and increasing homogeneity, yet both insist that regional solutions are paramount.

A professor on the frontiers of environmental legislation and education, Dressel is relentlessly upbeat, both in print and conversation. In spite of the incredible spectre that lies ahead, she exudes an infectious enthusiasm. Talking to her is like chatting with an encyclopedia; she spills over with the information acquired in the year she spent writing, researching, and editing with Suzuki. The authors have a close personal friendship, having met twenty years ago as Dressel was doing research for an episode of *The Nature of Things*.

How did they manage the potentially awkward task of co-writing a book?

“We balance each other out,” Dressel

and increasing homogeneity, yet both insist that regional solutions are paramount.

For readers discouraged and cynical about the state of the environment – disappointed in the 2009 Copenhagen Summit, frustrated when watching the BP oil spill spiral out of control and increasingly looking towards some terribly grey future – the prescriptions and observations of *More Good News* salvage some sense of optimism. Many grassroots movements are gaining a foothold and effecting local change. Techniques for a better world are already within reach. For readers who may come to the book with skepticism or resistance, the information is intended as a proverbial wake-up call to action.

“We have very poor journalism in Canada,” says Dressel. “In Canada, a lot of people

half of the province’s interior pine forests. Over the last decade citizens have watched as a creature the size of a grain of rice has wreaked havoc on their landscape, with an estimated 80% of the forests projected to be decimated by 2013.

Similar examples and case studies abound in *More Good News*, and they confirm Dressel and Suzuki’s point – that the smallest factors have unforeseen effects in a delicate but perfect natural balance. Throw one element out of whack, and the rest fall like dominoes. Nor can these changes be predicted. Like the stock market, the principles ruling nature are multi-faceted and often interact too intricately to predict.

Therein lies the problem of legislation, and the reason why solutions like agricultural biofuels and cap and trade have proven disappointing. Top-down solutions are almost inevitably bloated with bureaucracy and out of touch with reality. Whereas local people on the margins of society, with a desperate need to develop solutions for their survival and without the benefit of subsidies, are innovating sustainable solutions to support themselves over the long-term.

“People who live within an ecosystem are the ones who know it best,” Dressel underlines. She emphasizes that any sustainable system must mimic natural processes to be viable, and that what works for one region doesn’t necessarily work for another.

How, then, to apply Suzuki and Dressel’s principles in day-to-day life? Here and there the 400-page study is peppered with advice to readers. Get involved, and support local NGOs. Cut back on consumption, and engage in all the practices that have already caught on: recycling, buying local, commuting to work, conserving energy. For Dressel, the increasing interest in environmental living and activism since *Good News for a Change* is grounds enough for optimism.

“You end up with an enormous sense of empowerment and urgency. Ultimately that’s what we hope to leave people with.”

Sarah Fletcher is a Montreal writer and reviewer for Rover Arts (www.roverarts.com).

MORE GOOD NEWS
Real Solutions to the Global Eco-Crisis
David Suzuki and Holly Dressel
Greystone Books
\$22.95, paper, 432pp
ISBN 978-1-55365-475-9



explains. “I do much of the actual writing. David gets these great ideas, and I’m the one who goes ‘wait a minute.’ It’s a bit of a good cop, bad cop dynamic.”

Though she describes herself as cynical and suspicious, Dressel’s focus on positive empowerment is refreshing in a pessimistic, even apocalyptic, landscape of eco-books.

“A lot of books will tell you all the things that are wrong, but there is a much less certain sense of what to do.”

Foremost for Dressel is the importance of moderation – cutting back, consuming less, and developing flexible and multi-faceted solutions. Even green technologies bring their own troubles, as the biofuel example illustrates. Excessive use of wind power, the **prototypical** symbol of green and **environmentally** conscious living, is known to cause “wind turbine syndrome,” inducing nausea and headaches among surrounding residents. Thus Suzuki and Dressel advocate nothing less than a radical paradigm shift from **tradi-**

don’t know what’s happening. Even the G8 and the G20 are coming around to the idea that the environmental crisis is real. Stephen Harper is very far behind.

“*More Good News* is about things that we ought to know and don’t,” she **continues**. “The media are always drama, drama, drama, or else everything is great. Sorry, but it’s not like that.”

She hesitates when I ask if journalists are blowing the environmental crisis out of proportion. “Well, we are in the biggest crisis since the beginning of humanity. We are acidifying the oceans. We are in huge trouble.”

The scale of the damage is humbling, particularly given the impressive repercussions of minute changes. Human intervention in **otherwise** balanced ecosystems frequently create unforeseen consequences. The practice of fire suppression in British Columbia, paired with unseasonably mild winters, created the perfect conditions for the pine beetle, which duly burst in population and ravaged over



Turf those SUVs

CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Stewart J. Cohen and Melissa W. Waddell

McGill-Queen's University Press

\$32.95, paper, 380pp

ISBN 9780773533271

It could be argued that any large, important issue is doomed to widespread public indifference or misunderstanding unless it moves from abstraction to fact of life. For that to occur, we need the human element: a hero, villain, or victim of the issue in question. "Global warming" remained on the fringes of public discourse until around 2007, when Al Gore became an environmental hero, appealing to tastes both middlebrow (Academy Award for his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*) and highbrow (Nobel Peace Prize). No one can claim not to have heard of climate change any longer. Whatever you may think of Gore, we probably have him to thank for that.

You can, however, park a fleet of SUVs in the gap between losing ignorance about a given topic and gaining even rudimentary insight. Climate change is a highly complex issue that is fraught with controversy, cherry-picked by headline-seeking journalists, bedevilled with scandal, and analyzed by those with hidden agendas masquerading as "open-minded." Is it any wonder that even so-called experts throw up their hands in confusion?

Climate Change in the 21st Century is an oasis of substantive information in a desert of disconnected facts and figures; a well-organized and relatively jargon-free springboard to further study. Cobbled from a series of lectures given by author Stewart J. Cohen and streamlined by science writer Melissa W. Waddell, it would make an excellent textbook for the environmental studies or economics student and should be essential reading for policy-makers. Other authors on the subject are bent on arguing – or refuting – that global conditions (past, present, and future) are worsening due to anthropogenic (human-caused) greenhouse gas emissions. Cohen takes this thesis as fact and proceeds from there.

Cohen discusses – chapter by chapter – atmospheric, social, economic, and ecological aspects of climate change and breaks down each of these into subtopics. Many aspects overlap in one way or another for the very obvious reason that interconnection is the way of the world (and we might not be in quite so much trouble were we to remember this more often).

For example, consequences to ecosystems – such as expanding deserts, with a subsequent loss of biodiversity and fresh water sources – can lead to social upheavals like emigration (environmental refugees) and commodity wars. Disrupted markets and economies can block attempts to mitigate or adapt to harm, such as when municipal budget cuts stall improvements to public transit and water filtration plants. Understanding and dealing with climate change not only involves integrating these subtopics, but doing so across many highly distinct societies in vastly different terrains – and with future generations as well as present interests kept in mind.

The book is rich with scientific and technical terms without being stodgy, and that is its primary strength. (Thus its appropriateness as a reference book.) Its breadth, though considerable, does not come at the expense of depth. Graphs, charts, matrices, and figures provide additional consolidation and tabulation of data.

One of the book's problems, however, lies with those very illustrations, all in shades of gray. The gradations of, say, ocean warming, would be better depicted in contrasting colours. Without them, certain charts are almost useless as visual tools. Another, smaller, quibble is the authors' use of "earth" instead of "Earth": if a book on the environment won't give our home planet the respect it deserves (other planets are always capitalized), what will? Editors of subsequent editions may want to consider these imperfections.

For students, major decision-makers, or concerned, college-educated voters, *Climate Change in the 21st Century* is a valuable guide to a global reality that is abstraction no more. mrb

Louise Fabiani is a Montreal science writer, critic, and avid community gardener. She has mixed feelings about any climatic changes that may benefit her tomatoes but wither her arugula.

Days of Manure and Roses

STUART ROBERTSON'S TIPS ON ORGANIC GARDENING

Stuart Robertson

Véhicule Press

\$17.95, paperback, 215pp

ISBN 9781550652352

For over 25 years Stuart Robertson was an invaluable resource for Montreal's gardeners, fielding questions from the public on CBC Radio, lending advice in a weekly *Gazette* column, and lecturing at community events. His book, *Stuart Robertson's Tips on Organic Gardening*, continues in the tradition by presenting his solutions to common gardening dilemmas, using methods as respectful to the environment as possible. His aim, as professed in the introduction, is not to pen a gardening bible: "I'm just trying to help people muddle through the gardening year, equipped with a certain amount of gardening skills, and hoping for great results," he says.

Robertson covers a wide spectrum: from building good soil to lawn care, planting and dividing perennials, keeping a thriving vegetable garden, the best procedures for tackling weeds and pests, and protecting beds over the winter. He includes simple pen-and-ink sketches to illuminate finer details such as planting patterns and compost bin structures. Because he assumes no prior horticultural knowledge in his reader, *Tips on Organic Gardening* is an excellent foundation for someone building or inheriting a garden for the first time. Robertson stresses technique over expensive trends in technology and takes the time to explain why organic techniques, in particular, are the most beneficial to home gardens and wallets. (In a province still coming to terms with new pesticide regulations, Robertson's emphasis on prevention is particularly valuable.) Yet as gardening is a never-ending pursuit, more experienced gardeners will likely glean some useful bits from *Tips* too, like any old hat conversing with another veteran.

Although he tries not to allude to conditions in specific gardening zones, his own experience is rooted in a particular place, Southern Quebec, which makes his tips most applicable to gardeners working in a very similar landscape and climate. Robertson's tone is an endearing mix of sympathy, pragmatics, and just the right measure of dry wit (his suggestions for dealing with hungry deer are particularly amusing). This was to be the first in a series of gardening books by Robertson, who died in 2009; *Tips on Organic Gardening* is some measure of balm to locals who miss hearing his elegant voice talk roses, manure, and orange worms across the airwaves. mrb

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GREEN CAREERS: You Can Make Money and Save the Planet

Jennifer Power Scott

Lobster Press

\$16.95, paper, 240pp

ISBN 9781897550182

"I'm not interested in merely pursuing a way to make enough money to get by ... I want to be doing something that I care about," says Rebecca, one of more than 30 young adults profiled in *Green Careers*. Author Jennifer Power Scott points out that her subjects, like the book's target audience, are part of a generation raised with an unprecedented respect for the environment. Her guide assists high school- and college-aged youth in determining a career path that doesn't compromise their green principles.

Green Careers is noteworthy in the scope of the eco-options it presents: a natural-resources specialist who is helping Kenyans farm trees; a bonobo ape caretaker in Iowa; a fashion designer apprenticing in L.A.; a horticulturalist who brings nature to Chicago's inner city youth; an icebreaker-riding German meteorologist; and a pack trip guide in the Rockies. Scott also explores the green potential of such diverse fields as architecture, agriculture, politics, music, medicine, engineering, and even brewing. While she does provide much supplementary information on degree programs that focus on the environment, she makes sure to include profiles of individuals who eschewed formal education for other opportunities. Readers with vague ambitions may also be comforted by the notion, exemplified in the book, that a "career" is always in flux – altering as personal, social, or environmental needs change. Although its chirpy tone can occasionally grate, *Green Careers* is a useful starting point for eco-conscious youth still in school as well as those contemplating a career switch. mrb

Andrea Belcham is a Pointe-Claire writer.



publish this book in Canada because American publishers were so resistant to its message. And for Reed, who has longstanding ties to Quebec, the decision was an easy one. Robin Philpot, the Montreal-based publisher of Baraka Books, began reading Reed's prose in the 1980s and admired the latter's opposition to "United States or North American monoculture." Believing that Reed would be attracted to Quebec's distinctive history, Philpot invited Reed to Montreal in the 1990s. The two have maintained a warm relationship over the years; they have met each other's families, have complementary political temperaments, and have published each other's work. Reed – who grew up in a working class family in Buffalo, New York, understanding the combined pressures of racism and economic marginalization – considers Quebec a second home.

Ishmael Reed is perhaps best known as the author of such unsparing satires as *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), *Flight to Canada* (1976), and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Controversial novels that challenge American political tenets and racial and gender pieties, these have guaranteed him a place within the American literary canon. An active champion of the work of other artists and writers, he has received the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship and the MacArthur "Genius" Award. He has managed to integrate political activism with cultural advocacy, serving as a founding member of the Oakland, California, chapter of PEN.

Reed thus brings a certain intellectual and moral authority to his outlook. Yet, caustic and contrarian, he is an intellectual gadfly with a strong libertarian streak. Alternately praised and reviled by both the left and the right, he refuses to squeeze himself into a one-size-fits-all rubric.

This paradox informs his most recent foray into the culture wars. On a topic demanding a sustained, objective treatment, Reed's book provides an intriguing but highly subjective interpretation of "the media industrial complex" and American values. There are no sacred cows in his pantheon, as some of his chapter titles so evocatively suggest: "Goin' Old South on Obama: Ma and Pa Clinton Flog Uppity Black Man," "The Big Let Down: Obama Scolds Black Fathers, Gets Bounce in Polls," "McCain Gurgles in the Slime." Those headings alone shimmer with a brilliance at once acerbic and hilarious. But they suggest the problem at the book's core. Once the initial laughter dies down, one can feel claustrophobically enmeshed in Reed's dyspeptic observations. It seems possible that Reed is intent on settling old scores – with feminists; black academics and public intellectuals; white liberals; the Irish-American chattering class of celebrity media commentators; and (perhaps most predictably) the Right Wing Media, which morphs into "the establishment media, progressive, right, left and mainstream."

He contends, offering a rationale for his censure of what he perceives as the status

quo: "You put something out there like *The Wire*, *The Bad Lieutenant*, *Port of Call*, where all the drug transactions ... take place in the black community like in my neighborhood. And in *Port of Call* ... you have black Americans competing with Senegalese immigrants over the drug trade. I just read that Wells Fargo had to pay \$152 million for drug laundering ... But they never make a movie about Wells Fargo. It's all about black folks."

What works in *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media*, works well. There is a brutal candour in Reed's argument, which often feels refreshing in light of the euphemisms and platitudes typically expressed in both polite discourse and the media's self-scrutiny. He writes, for example, on black conservatives:

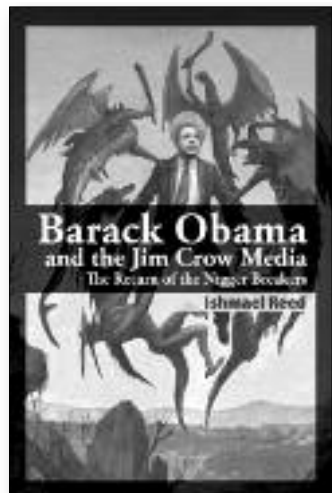
"I'm wondering where the MSNBC and CNN producers get these far-right black people. Does Karl Rove have a secret Maryland laboratory where if one could hurdle a barbed wired fence, one would find a windowless building where inside these black right-wingers are being created in tubes, ready for use by the networks as opinion stand-ins?" Whether or not one agrees with Reed, one can only be entertained by his gleeful barbs and edgy turns-of-phrase. He names names and shames with derision.

And he is unsparing in his appraisal, of both President Obama and the former's numerous critics. Significantly, he begins the book with a compelling list documenting President Obama's many accomplishments in his first year of office – too often overlooked by the media in its rush to find fault. But as Reed notes, like Obama "Frederick Douglass turned the table on Edward Covey by whipping him." He adds with more than a dash of irony, "The present occupant of Edward Covey's house is Donald Rumsfeld." mb

Caroline Brown teaches in the English Department at the Université de Montréal

BARACK OBAMA AND THE JIM CROW MEDIA

The Return of the Nigger Breakers
Baraka Books
\$19.95, paper, 256pp
ISBN 978-0-9812405-7-2



There is a brutal candour in his argument, which often feels refreshing.

and moving. Winter depicts Wayne's confusion with skill, and draws with equal dexterity a portrait of parents who, though they wound him in terrible ways, nonetheless try to love and protect him.

Winter's descriptions of Labrador, referred to as "the big land" by locals and dominated by a hyper-masculine hunting culture, are fascinating. The city of St. John's, Newfoundland, where Wayne's mother grew up, and where Wayne establishes himself after high school, is vividly portrayed: the Majestic Cinema on Henry Street has "gold-painted pillars swirling with plaster curls, leaves, and Roman faces" and the houses and fish sheds of a district by the wharfs called the Battery stand on "half-rotted stilts awash with weeds."

Offsetting these strengths are occasional lapses into sentimentality and a narrative voice that at times seems too simple to support such complex adult content. There are a few heavy-handed images, like the bridge (between the sexes?) that Wayne builds in his back yard one summer, only to see his father destroy it; or the Battery in the following passage: "The night on the Battery was a necklace of floating light, a world of dreams, part city and part ocean, a hybrid, like Wayne himself, between the ordinary world and that place in the margins where the mysterious and **undefined** breathes and lives."

But these are minor objections. Winter has written an ambitious first novel set in a little-known corner of the country and peopled by memorable guides.

Claire Holden Rothman is the author of the bestselling novel *The Heart Specialist* long-listed for Scotiabank Giller Prize and a finalist for the Evergreen Fiction Award.



BIRD EAT BIRD
By Katrina Best
\$19.95, paper, 168pp
Insomniac Press
ISBN 978-1-897178-94-2

On a sunny day in a park, with an eclectic and vocal crowd as witness, an unlikely event occurs: a pelican eats a pigeon. So begins

Katrina Best's *Bird Eat Bird*, an effective and witty first collection of short stories. Six cringe-inducing tales, Best's stories are close examinations of brief and often disastrous moments in her characters' lives. In just a few pages, Best is able to convey a setting and establish tension between characters. These characters are often weird, but Best gives them enough attention that they are also believable. Absent of cliché, the details that make up and surround her characters give them life: "Meredith watched, spellbound, as the package of tripe shimmied towards her. It was the only item on the conveyor belt moving autonomously, a quivering cube of translucence, its slimy off-white contents encased in see-through plastic." Best's commitment to her characters' trials makes this collection a compelling, though sometimes uncomfortable read. **VB**

Vanilla and Other Naughty Words

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS
The Private Lives of Words
 Howard Richler
 Ronsdale Press
 \$19.95, paper, 164pp
 ISBN: 978-5-5380-100-9



What do the words “vanilla,” “testify,” “porcelain,” “daisy,” and “tutu” have in common? Etymologically speaking, they are all named after body parts. While “testify” harks back to a man giving testimony whilst placing a hand on his testicles (what he most believes in), the history of “porcelain” begins with a pig’s vagina.

The opening chapters of Howard Richler’s *Strange Bedfellows: The Private Lives of Words* highlight words related to genitalia, farting, fecal matter, death, torture and blood; other words were originally insults. Perhaps this is for shock value (that old notion that sex and violence sell

or to show that words can be naughty without appearing so. But just as Richler’s focus on naughty words starts to feel like a tiresome obsession, he plunges into terms whose origins can be traced back to a foreign language, mythology, and/or

people’s names (the word *dunce*, for example, comes from John Duns Scotus, a thirteenth century philosopher). Richler – a long-time language journalist and former *Gazette* columnist – explores the etymology of words whose backgrounds are not only cryptic but surprising. Who would have

thought that “Yankee,” an American word if there ever was one, came from Dutch?

In his lexicon, Richler recategorizes and synthesizes information taken from the Oxford English Dictionary (among other sources), adding wit and whimsy. He attempts to get readers interested in etymology and succeeds with flying colours. But his quips sometimes feel forced, like an intruder’s annoying repartee in the middle of a riveting conversation. For instance, when explaining the origin

of the word “cereal” (the name of the Roman goddess Ceres), Richler feels the need to finish his entry with: “If Jupiter murdered Ceres, would that make him a cereal killer?” A bad joke, at best. Furthermore, his allusion to current popular events, such as Tiger Woods’ recent marital woes under the “hazard” entry and Harper proroguing parliament twice under “chagrin,” give a certain ephemeral quality to the book. While these references to timely events work in a

... “testify” harks back to a man giving testimony whilst placing a hand on his testicles (what he most believes in).

newspaper column, they don’t fare so well in a book. In fact, they will prevent *Strange Bedfellows* from ageing gracefully.

Though the lightness and humour of the book make it much more interesting than a dictionary – and

Richler’s efforts might certainly inspire readers to refer to the OED, whose gems he reveals, more than they have been used to – some entries can leave one unsatisfied. A striking example of this occurs with the entry “pretty,” in which readers learn that the word used to have a negative sense (it meant “cunning” or “crafty”) and only acquired the sense of “pleasing in appearance” in the fifteenth century. But how and why the shift in meaning occurred, Richler doesn’t say. Likewise, the section on words that come from Yiddish/Hebrew is feeble and frustrating because each word only *possibly* comes from Yiddish or Hebrew; Richler is never sure, which can make readers wonder why he bothered creating the category.

Strange Bedfellows should not be considered as a definitive reference book. Its purpose is to tantalize word lovers and motivate them to look into the private lives of words on their own. mrb

Mélanie Grondin is Associate Editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*.

Selling the First Nations

BEYOND THE INDIAN ACT
Restoring Aboriginal Property Rights
 Tom Flanagan, Christopher Alcantara,
 and André Le Dressay
 Foreword by C. T. (Manny) Jules
 McGill-Queen’s University Press
 \$22.02, paper, 224pp
 ISBN 978-0-7735-3686-9

The *Indian Act* is the iconic statute that defines the relationship between First peoples and everyone else in Canada. Considered by many to be inherently racist and colonial, despite repeated amendments, it gives the federal government exclusive jurisdiction over “Indians and Lands Reserved for Indians,” including the power to define a Registered “Indian” and his or her rights. One of the key powers retained by the Crown under the *Indian Act* is the ownership of Native reserves – three million hectares – whose title Native people in Canada do not generally own. The federal government, through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), has jurisdiction over almost all these lands and must review any transactions that involve them. As a result, burdensome approval processes and inadequate property rights laws have slowed down on-reserve development. A solution to this problem is the subject of *Beyond the Indian Act: Restoring Aboriginal Property Rights*.

The authors present their case for a First Nations Property Ownership Act in three parts. The first section of the book, written by Tom Flanagan, a political science professor at the University of Calgary and former senior advisor to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, presents a historical overview of property rights, argues that Native peoples traditionally had property rights, and analyzes

the U.S. government’s failure to give property rights to Native peoples in the late nineteenth century. In the second section, Chris Alcantara, a former graduate student of Flanagan’s, discusses the limited property rights First peoples currently have under the Indian Act. According to Alcantara these property rights “all have intrinsic difficulties that limit their usefulness.” The concluding section, by B.C. economist André Le Dressay, outlines the authors’ joint proposal for First Nations legislation that “would recognize their collective [rights] to their current landholdings while also facilitating the introduction of fee simple ownership.” “Fee simple” is the usual way in which real estate is owned in common-law countries such as Canada.

A driving force behind the proposed legislation is Manny Jules, Chief of the First Nations Tax Commission and former Chief of the Kamloops Indian Band, who wrote the book’s impassioned foreword. The proposed legislation is largely modeled on the *Nisga’a Land Title Act*, and incorporates work done by Le Dressay for Jules and the Kamloops Indian Band. Curiously, the authors seem to have ignored the experience of B.C.’s *shíshálh* Nation and the provisions of *Sechelt Indian Band Self Government Act* (passed in 1986), the first to give Native people rights to their land in fee simple. Did the authors leave out the Sechelt experience – a controversial experiment which resulted in unforeseen complications – because it does not necessarily support their thesis, or did they restrict their research to a certain time period?

The authors emphasize that restoring Aboriginal property rights would result in more Native home ownership, lower cost of Native government, higher First Nations revenues from development, fewer legal disputes arising from land ownership, and improved incentives for investment on Native lands. First Nations leaders may, however, hesitate to support this proposal. Mi’kmaq lawyer Pamela Palmater, who holds the indigenous governance chair at Ryerson University, argued in her April

2010 review of this book in the *Literary Review of Canada*: “The potential for entire reserve land bases to be lost under this proposal is significant given the high rates of extreme poverty in First Nations (impoverished families might sell land for basic necessities) ... The erosion of aboriginal territory likely to accompany privatization of reserve property would ultimately lead toward full cultural and political assimilation.”

While this well-argued work should be read by anyone with an interest in Native issues, it should be kept in mind that its central proposal reflects a right-wing ideology. Jules and Flanagan are both on speaking tours to convince Native leaders and decision-makers of its value. The federal government has made no comment. The authors, nevertheless, describe a Native-inspired initiative and, as such, it has a chance of being heard. mrb

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The Travelling Armchair

A PLACE IN MIND
The Search
for Authenticity
Avi Friedman
Véhicule Press
\$19.95, paper, 172pp
ISBN: 978-1-55065-282-6

In his most recent book, *A Place in Mind: The Search for Authenticity*, Montreal architect and McGill University professor Avi Friedman sets out across the globe to find and define the characteristics that

create “positive” or “good” places – that is, places that engage us physically, emotionally, or spiritually. By “place,” Friedman refers to spaces or built environments in which we live, including homes, offices, restaurants, markets, and other public spaces. He is not the first in this quest. The search for the perfectly built **environment** (utopia, anyone?) has occupied thinkers, dreamers, and architects for centuries. These discussions are as vital as ever in the age of globalization and cyberspace, as the boundaries blur between nations and between the real and the virtual places we inhabit. What have we lost or gained by this blurring of boundaries? What defines a meaningful place in our **contemporary** world?

A Place in Mind is divided into 16 chapters, each beginning with a description of a different location. Whether he is in Tuscany, Tijuana or Iqaluit, Friedman uses his reaction to his surroundings as a springboard to reflect on different aspects of each place. In theory, this is a winning formula. With a few sentences, Friedman conjures up a tea-house in Istanbul or a market in China and these backdrops provide natural starting points, especially for a traveler, to ask questions about what works and what doesn't in these different locales. Looking at high-density public housing in Hong Kong, for example, Friedman asks: “How did their occupants cope with noise, ventilation, garbage collection, and parking ... ?” Rather than seek specific answers from the

residents of Hong Kong, however, Friedman embarks on a general discussion about density: what it is, how the automobile contributed to the growth of the North American suburb, and so on, until readers have lost sight of the place in which Friedman started. In the end, readers learn nothing about what it is like to live in such a high-density area.

This choice to keep theory and practice separate limits the **exploration** of the very places that inspire

Friedman. His observations remain superficial, slipping at times into cliché: the slums in Tijuana are poor but they have soul; the Osteria in Tuscany is warm and lively; the streets of downtown Fargo are cold and deserted on a February morning.

Friedman spends the rest of the time citing facts, and the bulk of the book reads like a historical survey of place. Readers learn how restaurants developed, when public markets gave way to supermarkets, the nature of public art, and the history of the modern office. Much of this material is fascinating and Friedman has carefully chosen his facts to provoke readers into thinking about how Western society got to where it is today. We spend more time indoors, watching television or sitting in front of the computer; we don't walk as much as we used to; obesity is on the rise; and personal interaction is down. Things are bleak indeed.

Unfortunately, after cataloguing our modern woes, Friedman does not offer much in the way of solutions. We can, he tells us, “look to the past to discover what we ought to build in the future.” And looking to the past is essentially what Friedman does in *A Place in Mind*. While he does present examples of “good” contemporary places to emulate, the book is more an exercise in nostalgia than a guide to building the future; less a search for authenticity than an elegy to it. mrb

Maria Schamis Turner is the Editor of the online literary journal *carte blanche*.



Innocents Abroad

CANADA AND ISRAEL
Building Apartheid
Yves Engler
Fernwood Publishing
Co-published with Red Publishing
\$14.95, paper, 167pp
ISBN 978-1-55266-355-4

Countries, like **people**, can go a long way on their reputations. But according to Yves Engler, Canada's reputation as peacekeeper, honest broker, friend to the disenfranchised, and so on, is hardly deserved.

Having written such books as *Canada in Haiti* and *The Black Book of Canadian Foreign Policy*, Engler, former Concordia Student Union president and all-round activist, is creating a niche for himself by dissecting the unknown, nefarious, or hypocritical deeds that define Canada's foreign policy. Want to tour the world with a Canadian flag on your backpack? Hold that thought.

With *Canada and Israel: Building Apartheid*, Engler wades into the murky waters of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Almost every major event, milestone, and sector is explored for its Canadian angle. Keeping his editorial voice to a minimum and eschewing rhetoric and moral one-upmanship, Engler relies almost exclusively on documents in the public domain, archived media reports, and an extensive bibliography.

According to these documents, Canadians played a significant role from the beginning: among other things, leading a brigade in the new Israeli army (Ben Dunkelman), designing the partition plan (Justice Ivan C. Rand), and being credited for negotiating the final vote in the United Nations (Lester B. Pearson). Meanwhile, Elizabeth MacCallum, the only Middle East expert in the Department of Foreign Affairs at the time, was often purposefully left out of meetings and her protestations went ignored: “At the time of partition MacCallum scribbled a note and passed it to Pearson saying the Middle East was now in for ‘forty years’ of war due to the lack of consultation with the Arab countries. She underestimated the duration of the conflict.”

Unlike its British or American **counterparts**, Canada seems to always have the benefit of the dark. Engler's book demonstrates that working in the background allows Canada to carry out a foreign policy without it actually having to *be* policy. Israel is, after all, the only other country besides the United States with whom Canada shares a “border management and security agreement.” Engler reveals the breadth of Canada's relationship with Israel to be staggering: over 140 Canadian weapons makers export arms directly to Israel; Canada consistently blocks the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty from demand-

ing accountability from Israel's nuclear weapons industry; in 1997, Israel became Canada's fourth free trade partner, after the U.S., Mexico and Chile; after the March and December 2008

incursions into Gaza, which claimed over 1,200 lives, Canada was the only country to oppose a UN resolution accusing Israel of war crimes.

Engler goes refreshingly beyond the knee-jerk “Jewish lobby” **theories** as to why Canada is so supportive and intransigent, and explores some interesting avenues: Canada's historical willingness to accept the mistreatment of **indigenous** peoples; the desire to have a “western outpost” in the Middle East; a belief in Israel rooted in a Christian literalist reading of the bible; the need to be aligned with an “Empire” (whether British or American or Israeli) and all that it entails. In 1948 Elizabeth MacCallum said Ottawa supported partition because “we didn't give a hoot about democracy.”

Belying the author's activist bent, *Canada and Israel: Building Apartheid* is a neat little book, something you want to mark up and tuck into your back pocket. But the haphazardness and errors in the footnotes and bibliography don't help it graduate to serious scholarship. Engler should know better: given the contentiousness of the topic, it **doesn't** take many factual errors or sloppy sourcing to decimate an argument.

Engler's conclusion, however, that Canadians must educate themselves about their own country's policies, couldn't come at a better time. Harper's government is easily the most fundamentalist and least transparent administration we've ever had. Just a few days of reading newspaper headlines confirms what we still have a hard time hearing: Canada's reputation is in tatters. mrb

Leila Marshy is a regular contributor to Rover Arts and is the Managing Editor of the online literary journal *carte blanche*.



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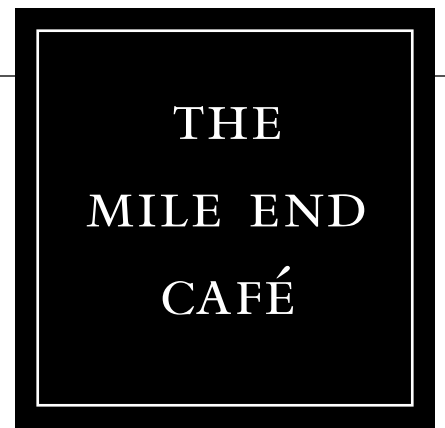
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A Worse Offence Than Writing a Bad Novel

Say what you will about the state of Canadian novels – a subject that elicits sharp opinions from the minority of Canadians who actually pay attention and virtually no opinion at all from everyone else – but any way you look at it, long-time Montrealer and college teacher T.F. Rigelhof has read more of them than most of us ever will. As a prolific reviewer for *The Globe and Mail*, he’s been given a first say on many of the big Canadian novels of the past three decades. Over those years he’s established a firm reputation as a tireless promoter – though not necessarily a very critical reader – of this country’s authors. Hence the title of Rigelhof’s new book, *Hooked on Canadian Books: The Good, the Better, and the Best Canadian Novels Since 1984*, which collects and modestly refashions his many positive reviews into one wide-ranging volume.

In assembling this collection, Rigelhof has correctly discerned that there is a need for this kind of book in the “annals of ourlit” – a term he employs to address larger issues that have characterized the Canadian novel. The act of looking back, appreciating, and assessing the Canadian novel isn’t something that happens outside of university classrooms. There is no body of popular criticism to address the subject for the average reader, nor is there much talk of canonization. There isn’t even a healthy community of publishers reissuing the many older novels out there that are worthy of new audiences.

So *Hooked on Canadian Books* fills a big hole. And while Rigelhof is not exactly operating on the level of a Northrop Frye, as *The Globe and Mail*’s Bruce Meyer would have it, his affection for the Canadian novel is hard not to admire. He really has read a lot of them, and readers of *Hooked* will find much pleasure in sorting through the many titles and authors Rigelhof has written about since 1984 – though to be fair, only 10 novels here date from the 1980s.

Rigelhof is strongest when making cases for underappreciated writers’ writers, such as Joan Barfoot, Josef Švorecký, Carole Corbeil, and Keith Fraser, or when introducing the readers to overlooked gems, such as the mammoth two-volume *An Irish History of Civilization* by Don Akenson. When championing the works of the half-forgotten, he articulates bold and convincing cases for writers whose craft and imagination extend the publicity-controlled picture of what constitutes CanLit, a term Rigelhof rightly derides as too limited.

Too bad Rigelhof rarely develops his thoughts beyond one or two pages per novel, in a collec-

tion that covers over one hundred works. The context of what connects these books to each other, how they all converge out of complementary eras and mentalities, is often glazed over. In too many cases, the writing reads as if it were culled from longer works and spliced together with quotes from the novels, or the writings of others, to create an awkward, perfunctory pastiche. The quadruple review of Zoe Whittall, Heather O’Neill, Miriam Toews, and Gale Zoë Garnett which leads off the collection takes but a mere six pages to dispense with. Certainly an avid reviewer should have more to say about *A Complicated Kindness* – one of the most popular and critically

By now, the effusively worded positive review is as much a cornerstone of the Canadian novel as the term “CanLit” itself.

acclaimed Canadian novels of the past decade – than two paragraphs that could have been gleaned off a dust jacket, plus an equal amount of space for quotations.

Ian McGillis warrants only one paragraph of original writing by Rigelhof combined with a lengthy second paragraph of what Yann Martel thinks, and then a third paragraph consisting of the publisher’s blurb for 2002’s *A Tourist’s Guide to Glengarry*. Why bother?

By now, the effusively worded positive review is as much a cornerstone of the Canadian novel as the term “CanLit” itself. But there are occasions – especially when writing about some of the country’s more respected authors – on which Rigelhof bends over backwards to deliver the most over-the-top praise a combination of adjective, adverbs, and winking classical references can muster. In less than two paragraphs, Wayne Johnston is compared to both Shakespeare and Dickens, while his storytelling

is deemed “brilliant, bravura, beautiful, mesmerizing, spellbinding, magical, splendid, entertaining, evocative, cavernous, capacious, operatic, hypnotic, and impassioned.” Never mind the sentiment itself. Apart from constituting a flagrant misuse of a thesaurus, is it at all responsible criticism – or even responsible adoration – to go overboard in this manner?

Sadly, the myriad ways to over-validate homegrown authorship run wild in *Hooked on Canadian Books*. Taken on their own, Rigelhof’s reviews in *The Globe and Mail* often read as highly articulate and loose-lipped – digestible praise gunning for the pull-quotes section of a book’s back cover. But taken as a collection of hundreds, they seem to reveal someone who tucks away his more discerning judgments and perhaps sidles up too closely to the publishing industry. CanLit is supposedly big business, so long as reviewers help out and no one hurts book sales by being too negative. Right? Once that notion rises up from these pages and gets lodged in the reader’s mind, the reader’s trust in Canadian novels gradually diminishes, which is arguably a worse offence than simply writing a bad novel. ms

Dimitri Nasrallah is a writer and music journalist in Montreal.



HOOKED ON CANADIAN BOOKS
The Good, the Better, and the Best Canadian Novels Since 1984
By T.F. Rigelhof
Cormorant Press
\$32.00, hardcover, 356pp
ISBN 978-1-897151-75-4



THE WORLD ABOVE THE SKY

By Kent Stetson

\$24.95, paper, 320pp

McArthur & Company

ISBN 9781552788516

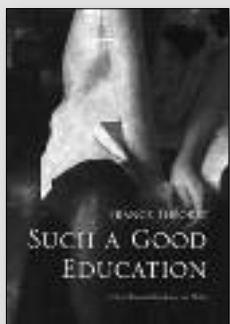
Kent Stetson's debut novel *The World Above the Sky* features Knights Templar fleeing threats from papal Rome and making their way to the Americas with their living holy grail: a gorgeous 17-year-old girl. The refugees land on what will later be known as Canada and befriend a Mi'kmaq tribe whose Native prince, along with the European Templar goddess, will rule over New Arcadia.

Though a lauded writer, Stetson – a member of the Order of Canada and winner of the 2001 Governor General's Literary Award for his tragic play *The Harps of God* – seems to overuse language in this book to make up for holes in the plot. His verbosity is exhausting: "The dark days of the goddess cults, with their blood-hungry priestesses and their castrated sycophant males, their open mouths pressed to the earth, their musky filaments sapping the virility of the Son of God's good realm had ended once and for all. Yet these fools had cast up another goddess queen."

Likewise, the abuse of references to Catholicism, the Knights Templar, and even Mohammed, which Stetson mixes with Mi'kmaq legend, leaves the reader with a dizzy cocktail of supernatural events and, above all, a craving for an actual plot.

Stetson's creativity and attention to detail are admirable, but they also kill a story with potential. In the end, readers are left with the impression that Stetson used every cliché in the book.

Desirée Enderer



SUCH A GOOD EDUCATION

By France Théoret

\$21, paper, 200pp

Cormorant Books

ISBN 9781897151488

Such a Good Education is a work so fluid and compelling that it may be best consumed, like a fortifying drink, in one gulp. This is less because of any dramatic conflict than because of the transformative effect on the reader of its searingly honest and ultimately triumphant narrative voice.

In this story of a girl growing up in 1950s Quebec, told in the first person, author France Théoret describes with stark, clipped phrases and grim images the impact of religious repression, urban poverty, and social ignorance on a highly intelligent teenager. Evelyne lives in squalor in St-Henri with her numerous siblings, a mother who is gifted but mentally ill, and a callous, voluble father who drags the family into one doomed business venture after another. The "kitchen reeks of rot"; at night, rats roam. The Church governs all aspects of the family's life, including perceptions of Evelyne's burgeoning intellect.

Her parents purchase a seedy bar in which they force the pretty fifteen-year-old, who pours over her Latin at night, to flirt and dance with drunk middle-aged men. In spite of this, notes Evelyne, "I realize that my future will be based on study and knowledge ... It is an intuition; all alone I have gained access to another way of thinking." By keeping silent and apart, observing and working relentlessly, Evelyne begins to carve out a new existence. In one of the book's many striking passages, she advises: "Don't lose sight of the North." Théoret manages in this slim volume to communicate how powerfully the inner life may combat seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

vehicle

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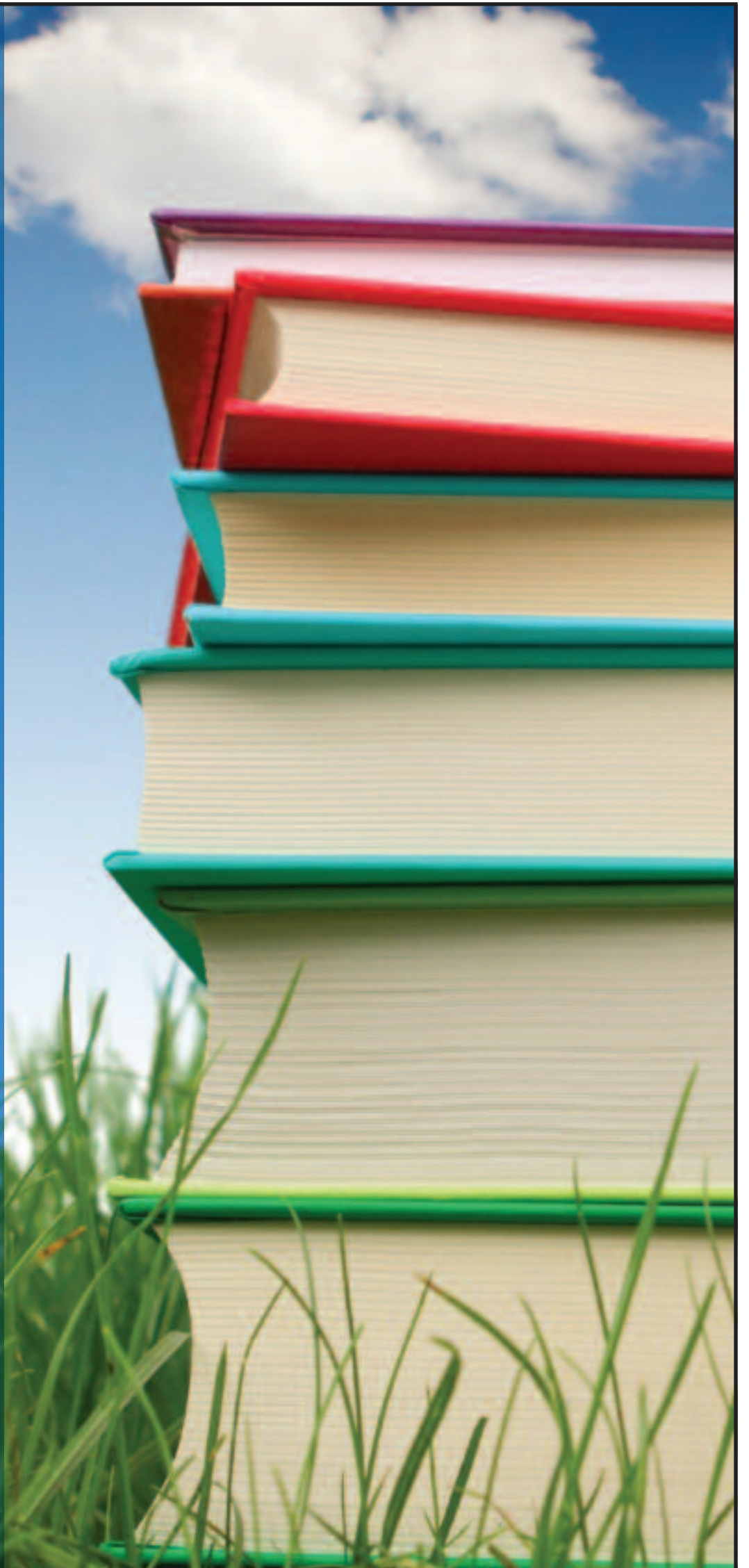
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