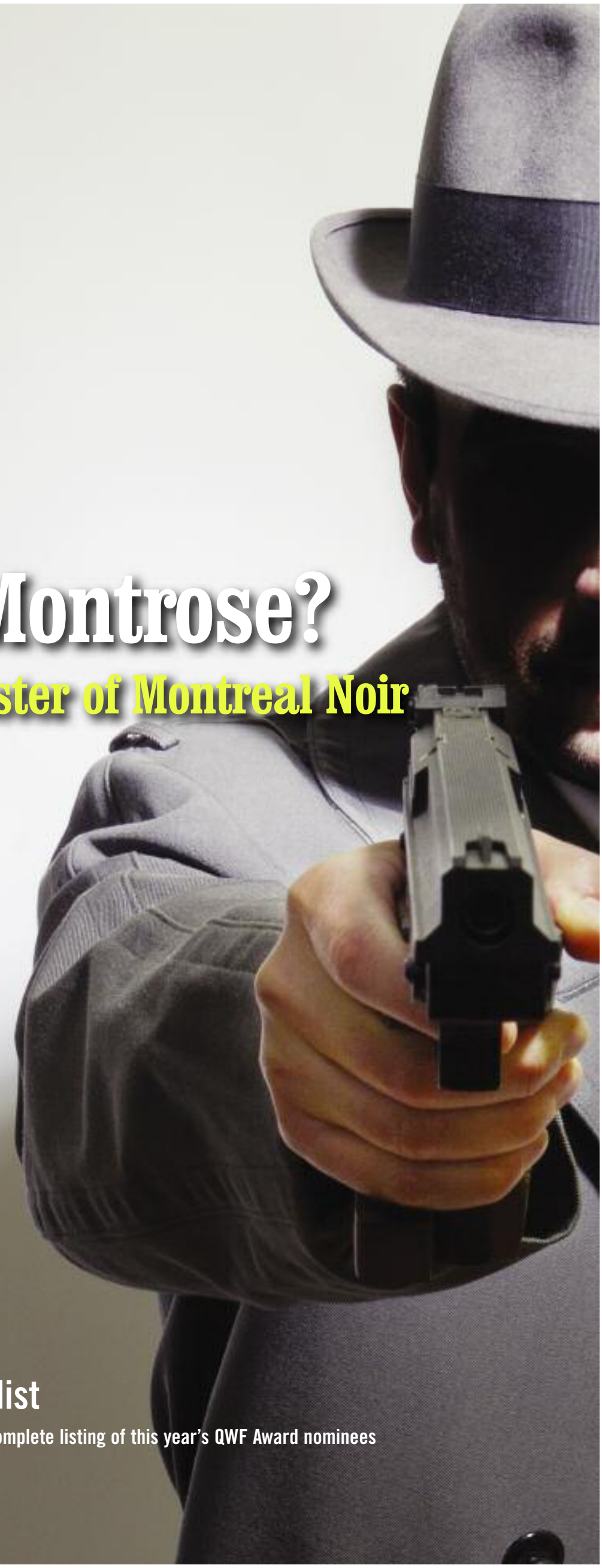
FREE/ISSUE 33

mRb

FALL 2010 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

Who Was David Montrose?

Resurrecting the Master of Montreal Noir



QWF Shortlist

See page 22 for a complete listing of this year's QWF Award nominees

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Aparna Sanyal Editor
Mélanie Grondin Associate Editor
David LeBlanc Designer
Michael Wile Advertising Manager, National
Vanessa Bonneau Editorial Intern

For editorial inquiries contact:
AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3
Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4
Telephone: 514-932-5633
Facsimile: 514-932-5456
Email: aelaq@bellnet.ca

For advertising inquiries contact:
Montreal: 514-932-5633
National: 416-531-1483
Facsimile: 416-531-1612

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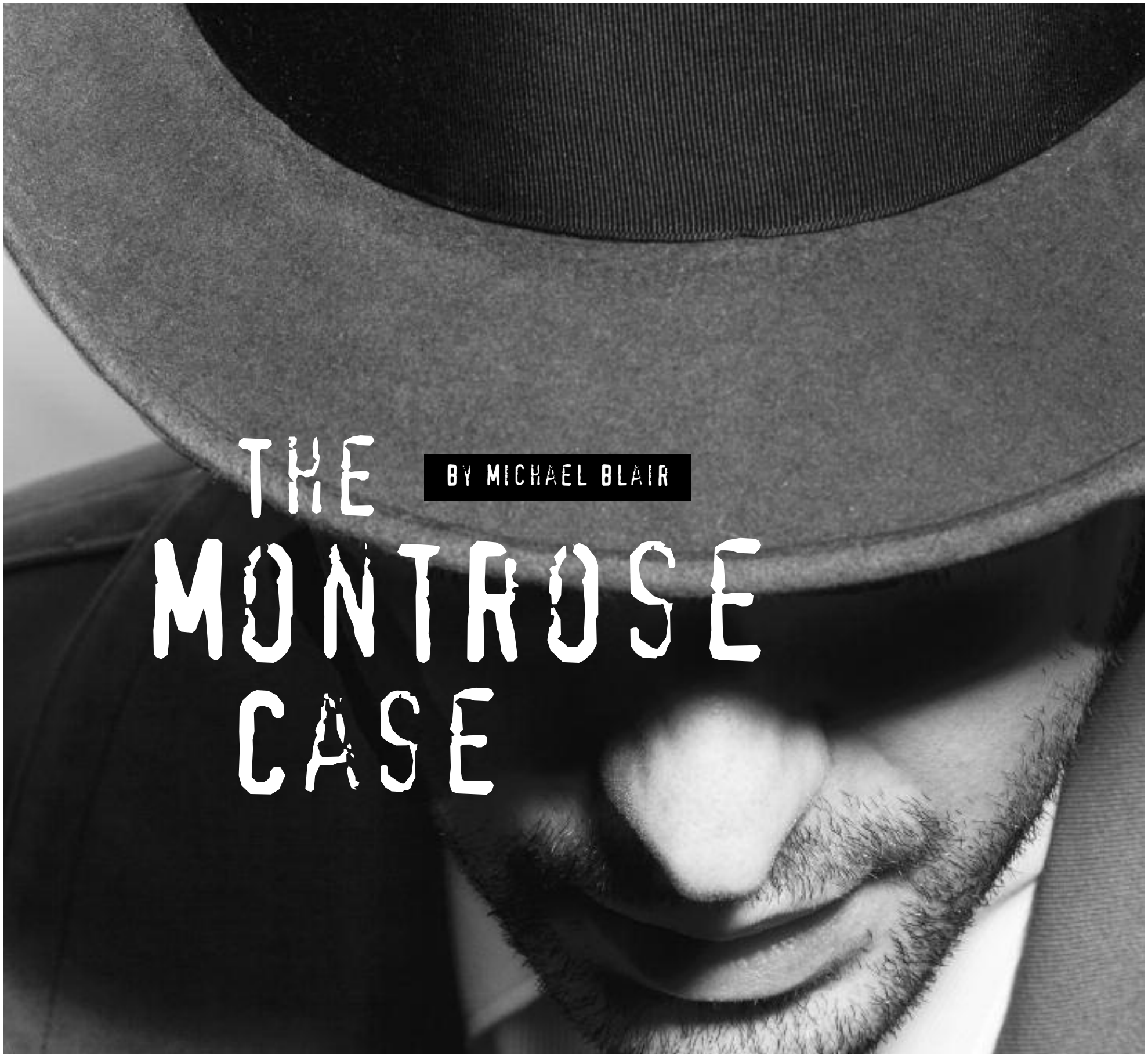
PHOTO BY TERENCE BYRNES



THE MONTROSE CASE

BY MICHAEL BLAIR

She had eyes you could get lost in and the kind of voice bankers leave their wives for, so when she asked me if I would take the case, how could I refuse? It didn't hurt that there was some money in it for me, too. The case? To dig into the life of a man who'd been dead for forty-two years.

"His name is Charles Ross Graham," she said. "In the early fifties he wrote three pulp-noir novels under the pseudonym David Montrose."

"Never heard of either of him," I said, wishing she wouldn't do that thing with her eyes.

"Few people have," she replied.

She handed me a spiral-bound stack of 8.5″ × 11″ paper. On the cover was a sultry blonde in a strapless gown and pearls, cigarette in one hand and brandy snifter in the other, very fifties-pulp.

"These are the galleys of *The Crime on Cote des Neiges*," she said, "featuring Montreal private investigator Russell Teed. It was originally published in 1951 and is being reprinted by Véhicule Press as the first in their Ricochet series of vintage mysteries. Brian Busby wrote the Foreword."

"And who's he when he's at home?" I asked.

"He's a writer and literary historian," she said. "He wrote *Character Parts: Who's Really Who in CanLit*. If anyone knows anything about Graham, it's him."

"What do you need me for, then?" I asked, smelling fish.

"We'd like to know more," she said, fanning me with her eyelashes.

"Okay," I said, not wanting to seem too easy.

I took myself back up the hill to my office, put my feet up on my desk – it was too early in the day for Scotch – and got to work.

To learn my trade, I'd read Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Mickey Spillane, so I knew what to expect from *The Crime on Cote des Neiges* in terms of character, plot, and style. But how good could it be? After all, who'd ever heard of David Montrose? If he was any good, why wasn't he as famous as his contemporaries?

When I finished the book, the answer seemed obvious: Graham simply hadn't written enough. Being in the business, I consider myself something of an expert on private eyes and figure that if Graham had continued writing (and had had better editing), David Montrose might have become as well-known as Chandler and Spillane, and Russell Teed might still be duking it out with Philip Marlowe and Mike Hammer.

In some ways, Teed is more likeable than his American counterparts. He isn't quite as tough as Philip Marlowe, nor as quick with his fists or gun as Mike Hammer. But he's as cynical and hard-drinking and drives his Riley roadster through the streets of Montreal with a casual disregard of the speed limits.

No mean streets for Russell Teed, though. He grew up in Westmount. He's university-educated. He dabbles in interior decoration: "It was the nicest living room I could put together and I liked it. One wall was dark brown and the others were heavy cadmium yellow. There was a very dark green Indian rug on the floor …. There were the usual tables, in blond walnut; lamps with straight drum shades the colour of the rug; and a chesterfield suite of yellow-green that a woman would call chartreuse."

He even cooks: "I snipped a few rashers of bacon fine with scissors and dumped them into the griddle. When they were hissing hot but not crisp I threw two eggs on top of them and scrambled everything together and …. ate it with a glass of milk and Scotch, just enough Scotch to give the milk a proper tang."

Hmm.

Teed is hired by Mrs. Martha Scaley, the top-tier Westmount mother of Teed's childhood playmate Inez Scaley Sark, ostensibly to find Inez's missing husband, night-club

continued on page 22

A Literary Séance

Subtle Bodies
A Fantasia on Voice, History and René Crevel
Peter Dubé
Lethe Press
$13, paper, 94pp
978-1-59021-330-8

Subtle Bodies is a fascinating little book, a "fictional biography" that takes as its inspiration the life of René Crevel – French writer, idealist, communist, and occasional medium. The real-life Crevel is known largely as a friend and associate of *Surrealist Manifesto* author André Breton. He was born in 1900 and committed suicide at thirty-five years of age; the book begins at the end, as a dying Crevel combs through his past in a combination of flashback and phantasmagoric hallucination. It's an ambitious premise, this committing of history to fiction, but Peter Dubé creates both a compelling story and a vivid gloss on a crucial period for art and social movements. It has elements of the portrait-of-the-artist genre, but ultimately *Subtle Bodies* is a novel about desire, possession, and the struggle toward transformation (personal, social, political), told through layers of narration that overlap like simultaneous dreams.

At the story's heart is Crevel's attraction to and friendship with the charismatic and intractably homophobic Breton. Fearing Breton's disapproval and revulsion, Crevel partly hides his self-discovery as a young gay man in Paris as well as his erotic forays into public cruising grounds and gay enclaves. But Breton remains a central force in Crevel's life, and the tension between the two men spools out into various shapes over the course of their relationship, mirroring broader tensions between convention and progress, ideas and practice.

Their alliance is cemented early on, when Crevel reveals that he has taken part in a séance – and not only that, has gone into a trance, describing "crazy things, visions of other times and places, mysterious voices coming through me, prophecies." Breton is thrilled, and this first experience sets off a string of Surrealist experiments that are ever more bizarre and sinister.

This occult research is the catalyst for Crevel's voices, the "subtle bodies" that haunt him for the rest of his short life, to emerge. They describe visions that are in turn fantastical, cynical, terrifying, and sexy. They might be manifestations of Crevel's longings – for intimacy, for revolution – or they might be completely random. Some seem straight out of science fiction, and others are coyly prescient, using a kind of retro-futurist lens. In one passage, Crevel hears of

> … the fantastic narrative of a library – a vast glittering structure of books, of writing, measureless and beyond counting … the accumulation of the art and knowledge of an almost equally uncountable number of civilizations … All of it housed in architecture composed on rigidly binaristic principles. A whole snaking, labyrinthine form built on a system of simple 'yeses' and 'noes,' blacks and whites, ones and zeroes.

Yes, these "predictions" are a bit disingenuous, but that's part of the book's charm. Dubé doesn't pretend to not know what he knows – or, he admits that he knows we know that he's just pretending not to know. Not limiting himself to historical evidence and tone, he brings all he has to bear on this novel, which saves it from being a dry lecture on art history or a bare-bones biography. Instead, it's a living work of contemporary fiction.

Dubé's writing is masterful and evocative, often walking the edge of the overblown and baroque without falling in. Though his passages on sex are among the book's richest, his eroticism spills into the novel at large, imbuing every experience with a sheen of arousal and intimacy – making us feel the texture and smell of the nightclub, the union hall, the small apartment slowly filling with gas.

Subtle Bodies is an absorbing study in "the strongest dreamers," as Dubé puts it: the visionary and occasionally insane people who shape the world. These people pass through Crevel, leaving indelible marks, just as Crevel seems to have passed through Dubé; *Subtle Bodies* is the mark he's left. mRb

Anna Leventhal lives in Montreal and writes short stories. In 2009 she was the second-place winner of the Quebec Writing Competition.

Not Just for Rose Bushes Anymore

Auricle/Icebreaker
Two Reversible Novellas
Alisha Piercy
Conundrum Press
$15, paper, 96pp
978-1-894994-45-3
Reviewed from proofs

The mid-twentieth-century German writer Walter Benjamin said: "All great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one: they are, in other words, special cases." As we lurch into the twenty-first century, one thing that surely connects us to the most change-defined century in human history is invention through the blending of distinctions. Hybridization is not just for rose bushes anymore.

As exciting as this phenomenon may be, it should not be indulged in for its own sake. Certain oeuvres definitely require walls and fences in order to believe in themselves – before they can themselves be believed. (Think of performance art: it either says something shockingly, refreshingly new, or dies trying.)

Alisha Piercy's reversible book, *Auricle/Icebreaker*, is audacious for its format alone. After reading one novella, the reader must flip it over for the other. This sounds more like a graphic novel or zine – with which this duo of novellas, although completely lacking in illustration, could easily be shelved, thanks to a markedly post-adolescent tone.

The actual dissolution of genre comes with the writing itself. In many places, Piercy's prose is so stylistic, so densely poetic, it could be prose poetry. Since the accent is on pithiness and prosody, forget about any kind of plot. A little dramatic tension propels the reader forward (or not, as the case may be).

Auricle concerns a young woman and her kooky mother in Buenos Aires. They dance, they say strange things to each other, and they entertain a Dr. Birkett, with whom the young woman falls in love. Little ear-like trumpets sprout from the young woman's neck (auricle: little ear). Eventually, she endures their surgical removal.

The episodes – some pages contain barely a paragraph or two – hardly waste a word. Pity about mistakes like "to mother and I." This sample demonstrates both the conciseness of the text and its mistakes.

> Mother goes out alone one night after being alone all day. The night air makes her drunk feel like clarity. By walking in this night she can't write to him. What she needs is to sustain an interior vision that still supports a possibility. She exhales into air which is thick with the beloved.

The accompanying novella follows the same style, but the overall writing is far less lapidary. Repeated use of "lays" instead of "lies," to cite one sign of lapsed copy-editing, makes it lazier writing as well.

In *Icebreaker*, a young woman named Alice finds herself working at a B&B in a docked icebreaker for the summer. A love interest, simply called G., turns up. They conduct their relationship in linen closets and tiny cabins, creating islands of self-containment in the larger self-containment of the ship (rather like all relationships in their early stages, it could be said). Piercy lets the characters wander without any apparent direction, and the tale – such as it is – ends on an off note, with Alice taking up with a new man.

> What if she stopped him, shored the small boat, or better yet, let the two of them drift off in any direction. Alice looks at Zeno's body, and while he daydreams the sped-up kind she now realizes as euphoria, Alice wonders what harm touching him right now would do. She scans left and right for a place to dock, but there is no land in any and every direction. So there it is; there will be no one, and most of all not G., to witness this.

If these paired novellas comprise an experiment, it's hard to say how they should be judged. Perhaps it would be best for Piercy to boil down her well-turned sentences even further, call herself a poet, and proceed from there. On the other hand, maybe this duo signifies the beginning of a new trend in fiction, adjusted to suit the devolving human attention span. mRb

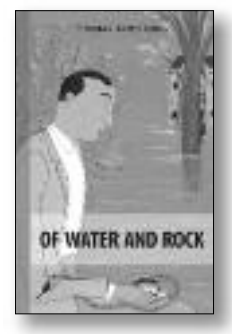
Louise Fabiani is a Montreal science writer and poet.

Return of the Barbadian

Of Water and Rock
Thomas Armstrong
DC Books
$19.95, paper, 330pp
978-1-897190-59-3

One of the delights of reading fiction is that it lets you travel at practically no cost to places you would otherwise never see. *Of Water and Rock*, Thomas Armstrong's debut novel, takes readers to modern-day Barbados, but not the Barbados of glossy travel brochures featuring beaches and resort hotels. This is behind-the-scenes Barbados, in the private homes and lives of the locals.

For the most part, the trip is worth taking. Armstrong knows Barbados intimately. Married for over thirty years to a Bajan (the local term for Barbadian) woman, he currently divides his time between the Caribbean island nation and Canada. He takes pleasure introducing readers to Bajan customs like drinking fresh coconut water and Banks beer, or eating *cou-cou* and dolphin steaks barbecued by street vendors over sectioned metal barrels. He describes island flora in lush detail – the ficus and cottonwoods, the deadly manchineels and the ancient mahoganies from which Barbadian furniture is made. He speaks knowledgeably about limbo dancing, tropical storms, and *obeah* – a term used in the West Indies for folk magic or sorcery. He shows readers landmarks like Cheapside Market in Bridgetown, and less touristy spots like the corner rum shop.



In addition to being a good tour guide, Armstrong knows how to construct plot, planting a mystery that hooks readers from the novel's first pages and pulls them along to the end. His pacing is fast and his scenes well-conceived. In terms of genre, *Of Water and Rock* is a romantic comedy and hero's quest rolled into one, shot through with a serious social message.

The novel opens with a young White Toronto man named Edward Hamblin flying to Barbados to claim a property he's inherited from the family of his estranged Bajan father. Edward has never been to Barbados before. He has mixed feelings about it, associating it with the man who abandoned him in childhood. Within a week of his arrival, he is adopted by a cast of colourful characters who make him feel more at home than he has ever felt in grey, impersonal Toronto.

But the voyage isn't all fun and games. Edward unearths dark family secrets with implications for his own life as well as for relations between the local Black and White communities.

These relations, Edward discovers, still bear the scars of Barbados's colonial past. Wealthy White landowners like Edward's neighbour, James Collymore, continue to treat their Black countrymen with scorn.

The voyage isn't all fun and games. Edward unearths dark family secrets …

Armstrong describes Collymore (whose name, incidentally, is that of a famous Barbadian writer) as an "obese older White man with a large nose and ruddy complexion," whose handshake feels "like a dead wet fish." His Black characters are more attractive. They include a poor but honest farming woman named Sissy; a prostitute with a heart of gold named Ginger; a madman, Doc, who speaks the truth in Sphinx-like riddles; and Sissy's flamboyantly gay and open-hearted nephew, RJ.

In a book that argues so cogently for nuance in race relations, the characters feel too starkly drawn. Whites from the Island tend to be bigots, and Blacks morally and spiritually unblemished. Collymore and his daughter Mary, the novel's worst sinners, eventually see the error of their ways, but lack the complexity to be fully convincing. So does saintly Sissy.

The book's greatest weakness, however, cannot be laid at the writer's feet. There are a large number of typos here, including a howler in which Ginger pulls off her shirt, revealing "an under-sized brasserie." And Armstrong's prose, which is occasionally awkward and heavy on adverbs, could have used much closer editing.

These criticisms aside, Armstrong has succeeded admirably in bringing to life a place that was once called "Little England," where guests, we are told, are still offered high tea. mRb

Claire Holden Rothman is a Montreal writer and translator whose latest novel is *The Heart Specialist*.

poetry

Discovery Channels

Indexical Elegies
Jon Paul Fiorentino
Coach House Books
$16.95, paper, 80pp
978-1-552452-34-9

Mammoth
Larissa Andrusyshyn
DC Books
$16.95, paper, 66pp
978-1-897190-63-0

I Do Not Think That I Could Love a Human Being
Johanna Skibsrud
Gaspereau Press
$19.95, paper, 78pp
978-1-554470-85-3

Maple Leaf Rag
Kaie Kellough
ARP
$14.95, paper, 80pp
978-1-894037-42-6

Plum Stuff
Charles Anderson (Rolli)
8th House Publishing
$19.72, paper, 128pp
978-1926716039

It is heartening when poets engage with philosophy or science. Kate Hall's *The Certainty Dream* (reviewed in the *mRb*, Spring 2010) explored Descartes, while Jon Paul Fiorentino's *Indexical Elegies* wrestles with Charles Sanders Peirce, an extraordinary American thinker. Peirce founded pragmatism and semiotics, but he has never gained a central place in philosophy. (He formulated four different philosophical systems because he kept finding flaws in his own thought. Wittgenstein only did this once.) Peirce's theory of signs is useful for a poet: he saw reality as a texture of socially-created signs, which he classified as icons, indices, and symbols. It is the index that fascinates Fiorentino. Icons (roughly speaking, metaphors) and symbols need not have links to real things, but the index does.

The core of *Indexical Elegies* is a set of poems lamenting Robert Allen, the beloved Montreal poet and editor, also memorialized in Jason Camlot's *The Debaucher* (*mRb* Fall/Winter 2008). Fiorentino is not interested in the conventions of the pastoral elegy – shepherds, symbolic flowers, and mythical allusions – for, as he says, "icons bore us to death," an interesting play on words for an elegist. The work resists turning Allen into a symbol; Fiorentino wants to point to a real person and a real loss. But simply stating a loss is not enough: grief should not be inarticulate. In place of mythology and conventional symbols, the poems explore the nature of language through puns, onomatopoeia, and aphorisms about meaning. This playful but serious deployment of signs is appropriate to commemorate a writer as postmodern and seriously playful as Allen.

Of course, the elegist is a survivor of the person commemorated: the paradoxical craving is to keep the object of grief present, which intensifies the sense of loss. Appropriately, then, one of the epigraphs to these elegies comes from Peirce: "the index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair."

Fiorentino's poetic structures are suited to epigrams and oracular sayings: he likes couplets, triplets, and quatrains, and he delights in antithesis. His combination of feeling and thought gives this book remarkable power.

Larissa Andrusyshyn's book is fresh and original in its language, which is drawn largely from science. Buried in the acknowledgements is a witty sentence: "My sincere thanks also goes out to the Pleistocene era." The poet places her work at the borders of DNA analysis and paleontology, with a particular interest in the projects to restore extinct species, like the mammoth. In the longest poem, she imagines a cloned mammoth going to Cal Tech. The motive for her interest is a different kind of extinction; the death of an individual, her father, who died when she was a child. The most familiar syllogism in logic says, "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal." If a species can be revived, it seems natural to long for the revival of an individual, but cloning a mammoth offers no hope for reviving a man. No syllogism leads back from the restoration of a species to the resurrection of an individual.

The back cover of *Mammoth* calls the book a post-Darwinian elegy, which is exactly what Andrusyshyn has written. There is a surreal tinge in some of the poems: she imagines a mammoth sequencing her father's DNA. She fantasizes cloning her own father, but realizes that the idea is impossible. In a strange twist on the traditional device of synecdoche, she writes body parts and gives them human roles: a heart donates blood at a clinic, a liver reads poetry at an open mic, a stomach goes to a restaurant on a date. In the second preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth said: "The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us." Andrusyshyn has written Discovery Channel poetry, and we are richer for it.

Fiorentino is not interested in the conventions of the pastoral elegy, for, as he says, "icons bore us to death."

Johanna Skibsrud's approach to the poem often seems to be, "Why use two pages when three would do?" Her book begins with elegiac poems about a friend named Ed, and they are probably the best in the book. She roots them in nature by remembering experiences while boating and mingles memories with present situations in a way that hasn't really changed since the Romantics, but can still be moving. The more meditative poems explore the tentative, problematic nature of meaning and memory, but the tentative becomes tiresome at too much length. Her brief poems are better, like the one about the passing of Robert Strange McNamara, who directed the Vietnam War; a few images imply moral comment without making it. These poems simply celebrate ordinary life. Two formally rich poems also work very well in a book full of irregular stanzas and uneven lines: "Come, Postman" makes a fine use of parallelism in its address to the postman – who stands in for knowledge of the world, presumably – and "When I Am Called to Stand" uses the ancient form of the invocation to address the speaker's own heart, taking off from a line in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* ("O my heart, do not stand as a witness against me in the tribunal"). The book shows talent, but it needs more concentration in its use.

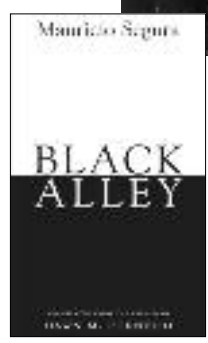
Kaie Kellough's *Maple Leaf Rag* alludes in its title to the most famous composition by the brilliant African-American musician, Scott Joplin. Kellough himself is a DJ and spoken word poet well-known in Montreal. The title is a deft way of asserting the value of Black culture and the poet's Canadian identity. For Kellough, Harlem and New Orleans are part of his cultural context, and he draws on American jazz and rock music. The pages of the book are wide and accommodate sprawling sound poems that suggest hip hop and some extravagant (as in, beyond the boundaries) visual works. One poem, "Word Sound System," is scored for reading, but it is confusing to have 4/4 time indicated when the poem is actually in triple time. Perhaps some form of syncopation is involved. The language of the poems takes in the demotic (including snatches of Québécois French) and the literary. Kellough revels in alliteration: "p pour persiflage" is a chant made up of words beginning with p, and "babylon's b-side" is built on the letter b. Here and there the poems show more rhetoric than substance, but the rhetoric is natural in a performance poet: many of the poems are only scores for recitation. He promises to put recordings of some of *Maple Leaf Rag* on his website. He is a poet worth listening for.

"Rolli," the artist and children's writer also known as Charles Anderson, has his own expansions of the art of poetry in his first published book, *Plum Stuff*. He illustrates his work with whimsical drawings that fit the playful texts. He has a fondness for food and wacky characterizations that are typical of children's poetry, although this book is meant for adults. It is torn between age-levels. Anderson's tone is close to e. e. cummings: a lot of nose-thumbing at pretension (stuffy English people are favourite subjects – rather conventional targets). Like cummings, he makes slapdash more than a conventional phrase: the poems leap and cavort and often move into nonsense. The drawings with their wavering lines and crayon colours are actually more enjoyable than the poems. Slap-and-dash sometimes works better in pictures than in language. mRb

Bert Almon teaches a poetry masterclass with Derek Walcott at the University of Alberta. His new book, *Waiting for the Gulf Stream*, is published by Hagios Press.

This Is Not the UN

Black Alley
Mauricio Segura
Translated by Dawn M. Cornelio
Biblioasis International
$19.95, paper, 214pp
978-1-897231-90-6



Every so often, a book comes along that shakes up the way we look at Montreal. Mauricio Segura's first novel, *Black Alley* is such a book. Other authors have come at Montreal from a dreamier angle, adding new layers to the city's mythology, but Segura does the opposite. What makes this book so affecting is that it feels so painfully real.

In *Black Alley*, which was translated from the French by Dawn M. Cornelio, Segura uses the perspective of new immigrants to create his own original vision of Montreal. Segura was born in Chile, but grew up in Montreal, and his take on the experience of immigrants and first-generation Canadians is hardly an optimistic one. His world is dark and claustrophobic, peopled with kids whose lives have become never-ending nightmares. Gang violence, parental neglect, drugs, suicide – these are just a few of the social problems Segura tackles in his novel. And what do you do when you come up against these things? In Segura's world, you do "nothing. You take it. That's all … Asi es la vida."

The book is set in the neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges, the home of many different ethnic communities. Segura weaves together two stories that take place in the same streets about five years apart. The first traces the friendship of two boys in Grade 5: Marcelo, whose parents are from Chile, and Cléo, who arrives from Haiti at the beginning of the book. It is narrated in the second person, as if someone were sitting with Marcelo, reminiscing about their childhood together, and the mystery of the narrator's identity propels those sections forward.

The second narrative strand tells of the mounting tension between two ethnic gangs of high-school students, one Latino, the other Haitian. These parts of *Black Alley* could be seen as Montreal's version of *West Side Story*. Segura includes all the key points: bumbling or unsympathetic adults, racist exchanges, a scene of violence at a school dance, and a final showdown, complete with switchblades, the police, and a chain-link fence. All that's missing is the music, the dancing, and ridiculously tight pants.

Segura has tried to make up for what *Black Alley* lacks in fun with added edginess, and some of his choices have produced wonderful results. Sometimes, his use of the second person creates a kind of immediacy that makes the distance between the reader and Marcelo disappear, as it does in this description of a race:

> After a moment, you heard nothing but your own breathing, the beating of your heart, your steps, and the droning of the wind. When you opened your eyes coming out of the curve, you almost stopped, thinking you'd made a false start: no one was on your heels and the deserted, desolate track seemed to take on gigantic proportions.

But it doesn't always work. The repetition of "remember, Marcelo" is not only irritating because it interrupts the flow of the scene, but it also sounds unnatural, both in the original French and translated versions of the novel.

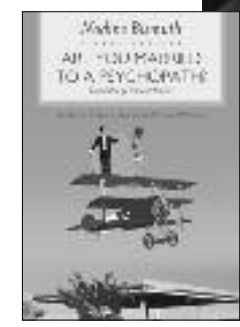
There are also some problems with the translation. Mauricio Segura perfectly captures the Québécois slang used on the street in French, but it often becomes awkward – sometimes even silly – in Dawn M. Cornelio's hands.

In the end, though, these minor problems don't really detract from the book's emotional power. Segura has brilliantly juxtaposed innocence with violence in order to heighten the tragedy of his story, and the result is devastating. The book's French title is *Côte-des-Nègres*, and it was well chosen. It is an uncomfortable title for an uncomfortable book. In *Black Alley*, Mauricio Segura is showing us the world in which many Montrealers live, and it's important that we take a good, long look. mRb

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

Kiss and Tell

Are You Married to a Psychopath?
Nadine Bismuth
Translated by Donald Winkler
McArthur & Company
$18.95, paper, 224pp
978-1-55278-869-1
Reviewed from proofs



"You can't be deep without a surface," proclaims a cheeky lover in Jonathan Lethem's *You Don't Love Me Yet*, and surface, or in this case, style, is the first thing to jump out at the reader in Nadine Bismuth's newly translated collection of short stories, *Are You Married to a Psychopath?* (Just look at the striking title.) Bismuth's persistent use of satire fills her stories with lurid and exaggerated characters and scenarios. But her stories aren't only satirical for the sake of style or entertainment; Bismuth uses her aggrandized depictions to convey human struggle, folly, and carelessness.

The stories in this collection are at once playful and depressing. Bismuth paints grotesque yet familiar portraits of people fumbling with the hearts and hopes of others. She conveys the universal pain of dissatisfaction while exposing and mocking self-indulgence in her characters. In "Come Back, Julien!" a kept woman calls on her cleaning lady for support during a moment of extreme distress:

> Fatima started to tell me that her sister, who still lives in Morocco, had developed breast cancer. I felt like crying, 'My God, Fatima, don't tell me stories like that! Give me your couscous recipe, or something!' Couldn't she see that I was just coming out of a mega panic attack?

Bismuth writes from the perspective of all kinds of people (not all of them this despicable) – lovers, cheaters, children, and mothers – and creates characters, who, at their fullest, can be sympathetic or infuriating. The breadth and diversity of the world she creates reveals her interest in what unites, divides, and differentiates people. How different are we from one another? How different is the reader from any one of these often outrageous characters?

One way to look at the questions simmering under Bismuth's prose is to view the first story as a springboard for those that follow. "Fed Up Yet?" is a collective lament for single women, a self-deprecating cry to an uncaring world whose inhabitants have smugly coupled off. The protagonist reflects, "Fed up yet? We've been fed up for aeons." Bismuth gently ridicules the protagonist's plaints and exploits, but she also elicits sympathy from the reader, and touches on the common practice of envying the lives of others.

In later stories, Bismuth provides some realities to contrast to the romantic ideals and envies of the single women in the first story. In what these women imagined to be greener pastures, Bismuth instead describes people living in various states of romantic chaos. Bismuth uses this juxtaposition to point to the folly of envy.

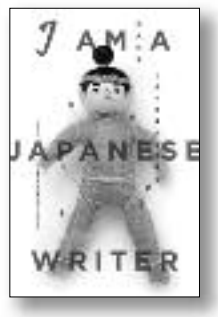
There are moments, and this is a risk of writing satire, when some of Bismuth's characters – those that are too big and too revolting – suddenly read like deflated caricatures. This occurs in "Man Unfaithful, Woman Sad," comprised of a set of hysterical emails sent by a deceived wife from a holiday resort. The protagonist recounts to her friend: "I told him what I really thought, how do you expect me, Monsieur, to bring up children along with a liar, a hypocrite … The supervisor asked me why I was crying, he said I was more beautiful when I was smiling … and one thing led to another … he locked the door to the Business Center and pulled down the shades." Bismuth may be intending to crystallize the role of hypocrisy in relationships, but it's hard not to dismiss this predictable scenario.

Such impressions are fleeting. If when taken alone, some of the stories are reduced to superficial vignettes of the love lives of individual French-Canadians, the stories when grouped together are interdependent, and play off each other, expressing the universality of Bismuth's portraiture. Although set in Montreal and its surrounding areas, the author's observations offer all readers a hyperbolic and cynical look at themselves – if they can bear it. mRb

Vanessa Bonneau is a contributor to this year's Montreal 60 Second Film Festival: www.m60.ca.

Say It Out Loud: I'm Japanese and I'm Proud

I Am a Japanese Writer
Dany Laferrière
Translated by David Homel
Douglas & McIntyre
$22.95, hardcover, 182pp
978-1-55365-583-1
Reviewed from proofs



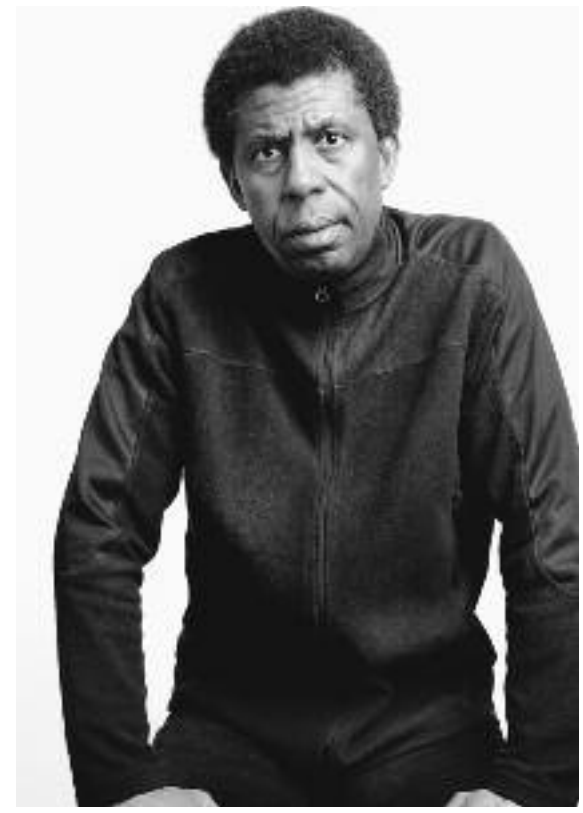
I Am a Japanese Writer is Haitian-born author Dany Laferrière's thirteenth novel, newly translated from the original French. Douglas & McIntyre is publishing the book this fall alongside a reissue of the author's first novel, 1985's *How To Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*. As part of a campaign to introduce the prolific francophone author to English-Canadian audiences, these two novels separated by twenty-three years share the distinction of being among the most provocatively titled in his catalogue.

The author must be aware of this fact, as *I Am a Japanese Writer* is essentially about an unnamed Black author who one day announces, without much foresight, that he will write a book by that very name. The contents and message of the book are beside the point; the title itself piques interest. Everyone from the author's publisher to his fishmonger latches onto the boldness of a statement that, in an ethnically defined world, will no doubt draw controversy and inspire debate.

Of course, there is one small problem in all this: our nameless author has no ambition to write such a novel, nor does he even desire to learn more about Japanese culture than the little he already knows. And so the bulk of the novel involves the author avoiding everything to do with the novel he is supposed to write, as he wanders among an improbable cast of Montreal characters, all of whom are as hastily drawn as the novel's driving premise.

Fans of international literature will find much that is familiar in *I Am a Japanese Writer*. The book bears a kinship, in terms of design, to European novels like Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night a Traveller*. In tone, Laferrière employs a poetic sensibility achieved through brief, elliptical chapters, a nod to Japanese writers like Junichuro Tanizaki and Yukio Mishima, whose names crop up in this novel (among the names of many other Japanese writers) as employees of the Japanese embassy.

Though Laferrière's literary tastes range widely, in *I Am a Japanese Writer* these influences are often employed in a watered-down form that forsakes depth for brevity, complicating his ideas about culture and identity and



ultimately blurring the novel's ambitions. Laferrière's style is as peculiar as the author he portrays, whose strident sense of minimalism can sometimes verge on simple laziness. He invests little effort in plotting, context, meaningful interaction, or characterization – the meat that could have benefited this skeletal novel of ideas – instead opting for a narrator who operates at a conspicuous distance from the world and people around him.

And what of those ideas? In *I Am a Japanese Writer*, Laferrière may very well want to provoke a transcendence of much-trodden ethnic stereotypes and the boundaries they create. He seems to be saying that these stereotypes invade all our dealings with society, and that a Black man claiming to be a Japanese writer would create an uproar in the preconceived order of ethnic ideals.

Yet Laferrière never attempts to raise his characters above these misconceptions. Koreans are easily confused with Japanese, the Japanese are consistently condescended to, the Greeks are snide and mean, and Blacks are the misunderstood victims of their perceived sexual potency and rage. It's all delivered in a manner that's too tame to be offensive, and too familiar to be eye-opening. Is Laferrière really saying anything at all about our cultural dependence on ethnic tropes, or is he simply moving around pre-existing pieces for a few laughs?

One can argue that this is the basis of satire, to reflect and make light of our world's limitations, and that the novel's metafictional elements resolve the many other questions left unanswered. But given the fact that these are questions that warrant probing, and which Laferrière seems eager to raise, that seems too easy an excuse. mRb

Dimitri Nasrallah's second novel will be published next spring.

Pride, Prejudice and Poland

Krakow Melt
Daniel Allen Cox
Arsenal Pulp Press
$17.95, paper, 176pp
978-1-55152-372-9

This novella, set mostly in Poland during Pope John Paul II's last days, contains an amazing amount of sharp observation, wit, history, sex, music, art, and politics, while using a wide variety of forms: letters, memoirs, drama, YouTube scripts, and reports from a surgery room.

Daniel Allen Cox's *Krakow Melt* is the story of Marek, a gay parkourer (practitioner of the urban physical discipline of overcoming any obstacle within one's path.) We follow Marek as he jumps over walls and gravestones and through fences all over Krakow, whose cobblestones, gates, smells, and gravestones Cox portrays both vividly and with wonderful precision. As Marek vaults, literally, over many barriers, he does so figuratively too. After several rather graphic gay encounters – some of the sex descriptions are repetitive and gratuitously detailed – he falls in love with a literature student, Dorota, with whom he plays pranks, writing graffiti on the graves of various Polish dignitaries who issued homophobic statements.

Despite many events, *Krakow Melt* does not have much of a plot; in this case, a plot is not altogether necessary, for the suspense and the narrative momentum work according to their own logic. For instance, when in the first chapter Marek's landlord brawls with Marek, suspecting him of carrying on with his wife, the scene is suspended, with the landlord holding Marek by the balls, paralyzed as Marek announces that he is homosexual. The brawl continues in the penultimate chapter, in which Marek smashes the landlord's nose into his skull, a violent moment that ends with the tender and surprising revelation that the landlord actually fantasized about Marek having sex with his wife.

The narrative is interspersed with stories of fires in London, Chicago, San Francisco – Marek is a pyromaniac, or rather, lover of fires – as well as biographical anecdotes ranging from Alexander the Great's intimidation of his enemies with elephants to the renowned installation artist Christo putting a giant and flammable condom over the Reichstag in Berlin. Thanks to the wealth of cultural and historical anecdotes, the book is reminiscent of David Markson's *Reader's Block*, in

There's a ubiquitous official and public attack on homosexuality, but there's plentiful gay and bisexual sex all over the country too.

which readers find out who among the pantheon of famous artists was anti-Semitic, how they lost their money, and how they died.

The novella uses a somewhat memoir-like first-person point of view, and it's clear that Cox is a sophisticated, playful, and inventive writer who manages to place a lot of his current experiences into the novel. He reportedly wrote it while listening exclusively to Pink Floyd, and Marek too listens to this band, analyzing its songs and history. Cox's own apartment burnt down, and he puts fire into *Krakow Melt*, which has a beautiful dedication: "For Mark and for those who can still smell the fire."

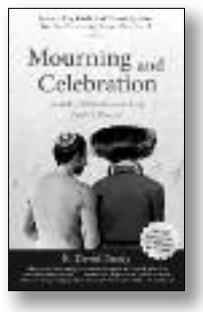
The cumulative effect of reading newspaper clippings with homophobic statements by various Polish bureaucrats, as well as homophobic Biblical verses ("If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman … they must be put to death …"), conveys the genuine threat which must have been felt by many Polish gays. While readers experience Polish religion-assisted homophobia and duplicity, this is also a whirlwind sexual tour of Poland. There's a ubiquitous official and public attack on homosexuality, but there's plentiful gay and bisexual sex all over the country too.

The publication of this well-written and intriguing book coincides with a huge EuroPride march in Warsaw. No doubt about it – a unique novel like this one contributes to a sense of liberation. mRb

Josip Novakovich, a native of Croatia, teaches in the Creative Writing program at Concordia. His novel, *April Fool's Day*, has been translated into ten languages. Snare Press is publishing his novella, *Three Deaths*, in October.

Ghosts of Boyfriends Past

Mourning and Celebration
Jewish, Orthodox and Gay, Past & Present
K. David Brody
CreateSpace
$18, paper, 266pp
978-1-448682-38-6



Really good historical fiction is needed for so many reasons: to help us understand how people made choices based on social norms that are now considered heinous, to empathize with people whose lives were completely different from our own, and to force us to reflect on whether past inequalities have been completely dismantled. But this enlightenment, sympathy, and reflection can only be achieved when the historical fiction is good: when it is written in such an emotionally engaging and honest way that the only place the reader can go is dead ahead, into the mind and heart of the character. Unfortunately, *Mourning and Celebration* by K. David Brody lacks these qualities.

Mourning and Celebration, a self-published debut novel by Brody, tells the story of Yankl Bradawka, an 18-year-old Orthodox Jew living in a small village in Poland in the nineteenth century. Yankl is a student of the Talmud and a talented violinist who develops romantic feelings for his study partner, Velvel. Velvel returns his feelings and the two boys start meeting in the woods near their village to talk, for Velvel to hear Yankl play the violin, and to share tender, forbidden kisses. Village life being what it is, however, the two are eventually discovered and discreetly reported to the rabbi, who must decide what to do about their "abominable" behaviour.

Frustratingly, *Mourning and Celebration* never gives readers the opportunity to really engage emotionally with Yankl (or any of the characters). This deprives the reader of the satisfying journey of feeling what Yankl feels – the fear of discovery, the bliss of finding one's *beschert*, the guilt of disappointing family. The third-person omniscient point-of-view is partly to blame (it gives the story a detached feeling), but mainly the downfall is that the narrator always tells what Yankl (and the other characters) feels, but never *shows* these feelings. Readers are not provided with scenes that allow them to fill in the space of what is not said with their own recognition and understanding. This is an immense shame because gay historical fiction is scarce and the emotional insights it can provide are necessary.

Some of the thoughts and feelings "told" to the reader seem unlikely. How is it possible that Yankl, who grew up in a society that believed homosexuality to be an abominable sin, and who had no role models to contradict this belief, is so assured that his own feelings are not sinful? When Yankl has his first sexual experience – a furtive exchange of hand jobs with a friend of his father who is visiting from out of town –

continued on page 12

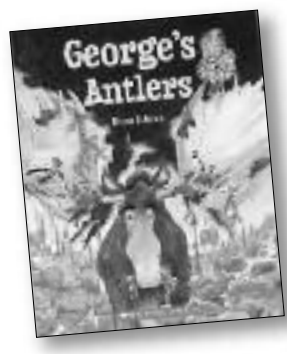
young readers

Swords, Sporks and Antlers: A Collection of Pointy Things

Illustration by Isabelle Arsenault from *Spork*

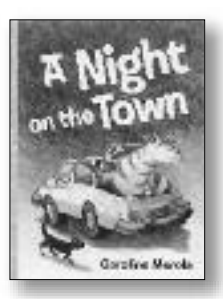
Fifteen-year-old Ariane has been bounced between different foster families and schools ever since her mother disappeared mysteriously two years ago. Now living with her Aunt Phyllis, Ariane has the chance to begin again – if only a catty clique of school bullies and, oh yes, the Lady of the Lake would leave her alone. It seems that Ariane, long prone to eerily accurate premonitions, is the modern descendent of the Faerie Lady of Arthurian legend, the creature who helped imprison the wizard Merlin centuries ago. Appearing to Ariane in a magical underwater chamber, the Lady reveals her heir's destiny: to reunite the shards of Excalibur scattered ages ago by the Lady, before Merlin does.

For Merlin has escaped from his prison and has been steadily building his empire as an eccentric Internet magnate, searching for the shards that will one day allow him to rule both Earth and Faerie. *Song of the Sword* is a gripping introduction to Ariane's quest, which she accepts only because it may help her find her mother. Joining her is the school brain, Wally, whose sister would love nothing more than to see them fail. Willett's novel will please fantasy junkies with its intricate details; yet there's also an appealing poetry to Ariane's story, best manifested when she learns to use her powers to merge with water and transport herself wherever it flows. *Song of the Sword* is a unique twist on the old subjects of teenage rebellion and self-discovery.

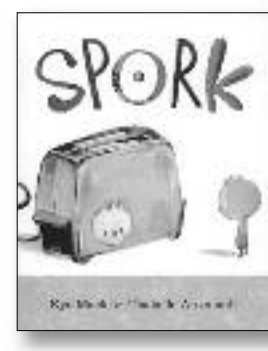


Carefree George the moose is munching his lakeside lunch when disaster strikes: a forest fire rages across the shore, sending wildlife scurrying. George bolts in a panic, and when the smoke clears, he has no idea where he is. One by one, his avian friends find him, seeking solace on his antlers because their nests and perches have been destroyed by the fire. Although happy to bear the increasingly weighty burden of owl, cardinal, jay, and company, George is driven to keep wandering in search of his smallest pal of all, Ruby the ladybug. St-Aubin's illustrations colour George as a sweet giant with a slightly cartoonish bent. Readers will also enjoy spotting the minuscule Ruby, who hides somewhere in the foliage on each page of George's travels. A light, comforting tale – especially as the fire itself is only briefly and marginally depicted – *George's Antlers* asks how we can help friends when they can't help themselves.

In Merola's nocturnal tale, Pickles McPhee is a blue-striped, rural monster who hitches a ride to the big city in search of adventure. There she meets Martha, a girl sitting by her window hoping for a peek at the tooth fairy. Martha, always up for adventure, becomes Pickles's guide, leading her to the park, the pool, and the candy store. But, under the night sky, the urban landscape transforms for Martha, who now has a new pair of eyes at her side. Their frolics take a serious turn, however, when the hungry Martha urges Pickles to break into the candy store. In no time, Pickles is being pursued by police officers and Martha is nowhere in sight. Merola's "monster" is anything but: readers can easily relate to the youthful, fun-seeking, and totally-out-of-her-element Pickles. Merola also paints the night sympathetically, giving it lushness and possibility. Without forcing morality, *A Night on the Town* does emphasize taking responsibility for wrongdoings.



In a kitchen drawer where each utensil has a clear purpose, Spork – the offspring of a spoonish mum and a forkish dad – sticks out. Spork's had it with being asked to define himself, so he resolves to pick a side. Yet the forks say he's "too round" to be one of them, and the spoons declare he's "too pointy." It seems Spork will never be used ... until the day the "messy thing" arrives, eschewing traditional cutlery and flinging food about the table. Identity and cultural divisions are weighty topics, but Maclear handles them with a gentle wit. The jokes also abound in Arsenault's retro-inspired pictures, where spoons, forks, and other kitchen denizens take on the same expressions and self-important scurrying as the humans who use them. *Spork* is a book both kids and parents will devour.



Dubuc's cyclical picture book *In Front of My House* uses bright and deceptively simplistic coloured-pencil drawings to relay a personal catalogue in which the narrator's imagination takes flight. "In front of my house," it begins, "... a rosebush. On the rosebush ... a little bird. Above the little bird ... a window" – and so it continues. We turn the page with each new naming, and it isn't long before we've left reality behind and entered the realm of fairy tale, then wildlife, then on to darkness and the creatures that dwell within it, up into space, and back home again: 120 pages of discovering what's concealed "behind," "in," "around," "under," or "on" the previous image. Dubuc uses a lot of white space to frame her images, so that they seem like a child's drawings freshly made on the page – a journal of the mundane and fantastic. Like an extended game of peek-a-boo, *In Front of My House* will keep readers wondering what comes next.

Curtain Up! takes its audience behind the scenes of a professional dramatic production by tracing a young girl's journey after she lands the lead role in a play about a birthday party in a park. In "Act I," there is much for Amaya to learn, including how a set and costumes are constructed, and what the various crew members do. She also has to work with a choreographer on her dance steps, and memorize her lines. By "Act II," Amaya feels "like part of the team," yet she still has to concentrate on getting her lines right. Despite the challenges and the long wait between audition and final performance, Amaya never loses her elation at participating in a musical. Author McLean, an accomplished actor himself, has crafted a delightful introduction for aspiring performers, even sharing a few tips on delivering believable dialogue and battling last-minute nervousness. Brassard's sensitive watercolour illustrations capture candid moments in Amaya's life as a bona fide actress. *Curtain Up!* also includes a "Cast of Characters," which defines the roles of those who help produce a play, and an equally useful glossary of terms unique to the stage. mkb

Andrea Belcham reads and writes in Pointe Claire.

Shards of Excalibur, Book 1
Song of the Sword
Edward Willett
Lobster Press
$12.95, paper, 336pp
978-1-897550-90-8
13+ years
Reviewed from advance reading copy

George's Antlers
Bruno St-Aubin
Scholastic
$7.99, paperback, 32pp
978-0-545-98687-8
3-8 years

A Night on the Town
Caroline Merola
Tundra
$17.99, hardcover, 32pp
978-1-77049-200-4
5-8 years

Spork
Kyo Maclear
Illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault
Kids Can Press
$18.95, hardcover, 32pp
978-1-55337-736-8
3-7 years

In Front of My House
Marianne Dubuc
Kids Can Press
$19.95, hardcover, 120pp
978-1-55453-641-2
3-7 years
Reviewed from proofs

Curtain Up!
A Book for Young Performers
Dirk McLean
Illustrated by France Brassard
Tundra Books
$19.99, hardcover, 40pp
978-0-88776-899-6
6-8 years

Mourning and Celebration (from page 10)

Yankl states that "he could no more think of it as a sin, an 'abomination', than the act of eating." Does he not feel any moral turmoil, especially as a religious scholar?

Other characters also have moments that are suspiciously forward-thinking. For example, when Yankl's mother finds a love letter written to Yankl from Velvel, she is so touched that she "wonders whether, at another time and in another place, such a union would ever be permitted."

Bizarrely, the author repeatedly inserts himself into the story. The novel is bookended by a prologue and an epilogue that are not about Yankl or his village but about the author, K. David Brody, his life experiences and his creative process. Throughout the book, chapters conclude with "debrief" conversations between Yankl and K. David Brody, in which the author relates the fictional character's experiences back to his own life as a gay Orthodox Jew born in the U.K. and now living in Montreal.

The practice begs the question: is this ongoing commentary from the author for our benefit or for his? Would the author have been happier to tell us the true story of his own mournings and celebrations? mrb

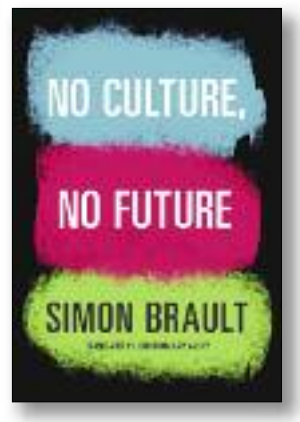
Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer. Pick up the December issue of *ELLE Canada* to read her feature article about Shannon Hayes, a Montreal-based humanitarian worker whose job has taken her to Afghanistan, Myanmar, Haiti, and now Pakistan.

THE RIGHT TO BEAR ART

Simon Brault is CEO of the National Theatre School and Vice-Chair of the Canada Council for the Arts. He has been a driving force behind a range of large-scale initiatives to increase participation in arts and culture. He describes himself as a "cultural development activist."

by Elise Moser

PHOTO: MAXIME CÔTÉ



No Culture, No Future
Simon Brault
Translated by Jonathan Kaplansky
Cormorant Books
$21.00, paper, 170pp
978-1-897151-76-1

Elise Moser: Your book is a gentle but relentless polemic in favour of the democratization of culture. You mention that only about 30% of people in countries like Canada are reached by cultural and artistic works. That's a shocking statistic.

Simon Brault: The goal of democratizing culture – the original, authentic, deeply rooted cultural expression created by artists – is difficult to attain. Most cultural policies are on the supply side. We support creation, production, dissemination, but the other side of the equation, cultural participation, is underfunded or ignored. Beyond the 30% of educated people, or people who had contact with the arts when they were young, it's difficult to reach people.

EM: You speak about elitism creating a gap between "the cultural community" and "the general population." Should artists worry about the accessibility of their work? Can public policy counteract this?

SB: There is a danger in any democracy that people will say, "if it's only good for the elite, why should the taxpayers pay for it?" We need to prevent that by developing the national conversation about cultural participation. If it's not done, it means not only that the excellent work produced by our artists won't be seen by a large group of people, but also that the values that are carried by that culture won't be shared by the majority of the population.

Studies show that we should try to reach human beings when they are young; it's easier. But it's possible to do it with adults. There's a lot of leisure time now in our society, but a lot of it is passive. When we created *les Journées de la culture* it was to give people a sense of the creative process. There are hundreds of thousands of Canadians involved in choirs. It gives them something much more powerful than just attending a concert. This notion of active participation, active engagement with art, is needed, but nobody argues for that. We have lobbies for artists, for funders, but we're not organized to promote the cultural rights of the population.

Every citizen has a need for self-expression, but we built the cultural system as if the most important clients are the people receiving the grants. We talk about our specific audience instead of the general public. It's like we accept that we'll always be marginalized, instead of trying to become more central in the human experience.

EM: How can we increase the perceived value of the arts and of cultural producers in our society?

SB: In Canada, when we talk about the arts in public, we always talk about two things. We talk about a specific cultural product, and we talk about money. It's as if, talking about food, we just talked about what's in the grocery, the price, and not why it's important to have healthy food. But with the arts we ignore those arguments. We are so concentrated on trying to survive that we forget to have the discussion about the values of engaging with the arts. We are 600,000 people working in the cultural system in this country. If only 10% of these people decided that, okay, we'll talk about these things, maybe we could change the dynamic. That's why this book is almost a manifesto. We need to talk about what really connects us as individuals, as artists, with the arts.

EM: How would you like to see artists and cultural producers organize themselves to have more political and social impact?

SB: Artists and cultural producers are over-organized in a sense. We are organized to deal with a system that is supply-oriented. But we are essentially organizing the conversation between us and the decision-makers, which is very few people in this society. The conversation we have as a sector with the general public is very poor. It's transactional. It's, you know, please buy our tickets. It's not about what we do.

Instead of just lobbying governments, we should lobby the people on the street about the importance of culture. You'll never convince your neighbour to attend a show because it's good for the economy. You'll always convince your neighbour to come because it may bring something to their personal life that will be fulfilling, transforming, exciting, challenging.

EM: You make a case that there is a special role for culture in the life of cities in this globalized world. What is that role?

SB: Cities are where the transformations of our civilization are happening at the fastest pace. Arts and culture, for me, are one of the most powerful ways to address the questions of living together. At the city level, you can have a say as a citizen.

There is a danger in any democracy that people will say, "if it's only good for the elite, why should the taxpayers pay for it?"

I've been travelling with the book, across Canada and other cities in the world, and the discussion on culture – in the media, in civic society – is very much a discussion about how we organize our city. Cultural policies, historically, have been crafted by nation-states. But now we are reinventing all that from the bottom to the top.

EM: You cite a study led by Richard Florida in 2004 that showed that Montreal has exceptional creative potential. Our bilingual culture, population density, a concentrated creative sector, and the vitality of our artistic underground were all factors. How do we capitalize on all those good things to make the leap to become a world-class cultural metropolis?

SB: Not all cities, especially in North America, have a solid underground scene. You don't have that even in a great city like Toronto, or a wealthy city like Calgary. You always have some kind of a fringe, but not an underground scene that is rich, that has a lot of space, a lot of resources, international networks – that explains, for instance, our positioning on the indie rock scene. When we started to work on Montreal cultural policy, there were a lot of challenges around protecting the underground scene. You don't manage, by definition, an underground scene, but you can protect it.

The other challenge is to align your cultural choices, like investments and spending, with what is specific to the city. Because a creative metropolis is all about authenticity.

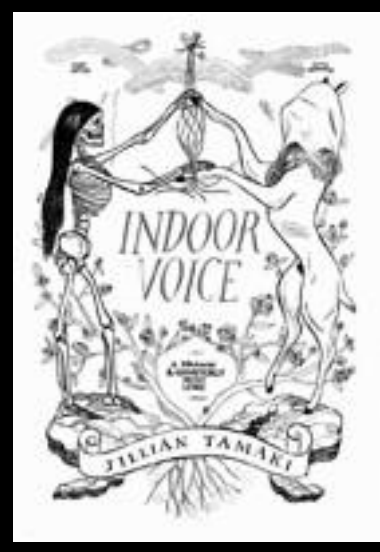
Anyone who wants to advocate for the arts, the first thing to do is to reconnect with their personal passion. Because once we can express it, we can

continued on page 20

graphic novels

Of Rabbits and Hairy Women

Reviewed by Lori Callaghan



Indoor Voice
Jillian Tamaki
Drawn & Quarterly
$11.97, paper, 96pp
978-1-770460-14-0

Hirsute women and a disdain for city life permeate the pages of Jillian Tamaki's *Indoor Voice*. This comic scrapbook is so varied and disjointed at times that it feels like the artist took out a drawer full of random doodles, dumped them on the desk and made a book out of them. You can, however, learn a lot about a person by examining the images and words they casually put to paper, the bits of themselves that just seem to fall out.

In *Indoor Voice*, for instance, there is a palpable tension between the city life Tamaki obviously feels trapped in and the communion with nature she romanticizes. A series of four-panel comic strips dubbed "Brooklyn Follies" shows such things as a woman complaining to a bus driver about someone jerking off, a guy sleeping on a bench who wakes to take a leak on a fence, and a guide to understanding the honks of NYC cars. In the author's notes, Tamaki says that it took her three years to get comfortable living in New York City: "Now when I see people behaving badly in public, as New Yorkers are wont to do, I proclaim loudly, 'Aww, Jersus, Cawmonn!' instead of going home and crying."

The image of a strong older woman, often naked and hairy, who is aligned with the natural rhythms of the world, comes up numerous times. She is a stoic figure who is untouched by the anxieties of metropolitan life. These and the wildlife drawings seem to have a serene quality that juxtaposes keenly with the anger and frustration found in the urban illustrations.

This collection is an awkward introduction to an artist, but it shows a fair amount of range and has personality. It's a snapshot look at an artist's process, one that sparks an interest to see what her more refined, finished products look like.

Eden
Pablo Holmberg
Drawn & Quarterly
$16.95, paper, 120pp
978-1-770460-08-9

If you accused Pablo Holmberg of being sentimental, I don't think he'd mind. His first book, *Eden*, brings together more than 100 four-panel comic strips set in a mythic, medieval land where a rabbit-like creature walks around wearing a crown and a Santa-esque robe. The content of these short forays into *Eden*'s universe are unapologetically optimistic and syrupy. In one strip, for example, a man sits on the ground leaning against a tree and asks the moon, "Tell me, moon, was there ever a love like mine?," but in the next panel protests, "But moon, do not nod. I could never believe you anyway." The collection also has some funnier moments, such as when the rabbit king refers to horseflies as the "birds of hell" after being bitten, or when he catches and cooks some fish that were calling him names.

Holmberg is an Argentinian cartoonist who goes by the name Kioskerman in South America, where he writes and draws for various publications. *Eden* started out as webcomic that he self-published in Spanish on his website. The illustrations are pretty straightforward, employing simple shapes, hatching, and solid colours. They're exactly what one would expect to find in the comics section of the weekend newspaper. Natural, outdoor settings are emphasized and meditative musings that strike an emotional chord are largely the focus.

Whimsical and filled with emotional yearning, this comic's overly romantic mini-plots might win over a Sunday comics crowd, but likely won't strike a chord with a comic book audience. His mushy tales are similar to Bil Keane's *The Family Circus* and his use of mythic imagery is an obvious nod to Charles Addams. *Eden* uneasily straddles the divide between warm-hearted cliché and dark-gothic fantasy. The collection could be improved by either being more sentimental or darker, but, as is, fails to measure up to either genre.

Lori Callaghan is a visual arts critic for *The Gazette* and The Rover.

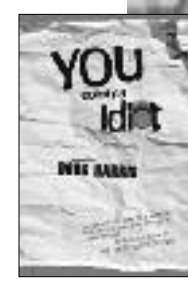
You, Postmodern Picaroon

You comma Idiot
Doug Harris
Goose Lane
$29.95, hardcover, 330pp
978-0-86492-630-2

You comma Idiot is a gutsy play for a novelist, and it's all right there in the title: *You*, because the book is narrated in second person; *Idiot* because the you in question is a drug-dealing, backstabbing idiot; and *comma*, which is a postmodern nod to the fourth-wall flirtation inherent in second-person storytelling.

Addressing the reader as "you" makes the authorial voice very present and immediate. While it's easy to suspend disbelief when reading first- or third-person narration, it is much harder with a second-person narration. In fact, when a novel tells readers how they feel, or what they've done, suspension of disbelief is constantly being tested by the readers' own feelings about what they would or wouldn't do in a similar situation. It's almost as though the narrator "looks into the camera" with each sentence (interestingly, the main character of this novel has a recurring relationship with a news cameraman).

This form, however, is risky when it comes to picaresque novels. Part of what makes some of the great rogues in contemporary literature – Ignatius J. Reilly from *Confederacy of Dunces* or Mark Renton from *Trainspotting* – memorable as characters is how relentlessly vile they are. They almost never appeal to the reader's sympathies; they don't care what readers think of them and that's what makes them cult classics. But in the second person, interaction between the character and the reader changes. How are "you," the reader, going to react to "you," the character, getting "your" best buddy addicted to smack?



Lee Goodstone, the picaroon of *You comma Idiot*, is a hash dealer in Montreal's West End who begins the story

PHOTO: FELIX REBOLLEDO

by sleeping with his best friend's girlfriend. He isn't really all that bad, he's just sort of lame. This makes him more sympathetic than an arch rogue, but less memorable because he never does the right thing, the wrong thing, or much of anything. This paralytic tension is a central theme as Lee's drug business atrophies and the plot moves through the plight of his friend Henry who may or may not have kidnapped a nymphomaniac coke-head.

The book isn't plot driven, it's much more about the interplay of an intricate gang of twentysomethings held together by connections that reach back to adolescence. This group loves to banter; the dialogues and monologues are reminiscent of a Kevin Smith script, minus the "Star Wars" references. You, Lee, do some contemptible things, but the story is less about the wrong things, and much more about the repartee that comes afterwards, which is where the book is strongest.

That's ultimately how the novel negotiates the perils and pitfalls of its form as well as the drug dealing, relationship hopping, and kidnapping twists of its plot – it talks its way out, with cool lines and quick smiles, only occasionally catching a fist in the gut. Lee Goodstone may be an idiot, but he's a witty one, and fun to cruise around Montreal with. He doesn't want to change the world; he'd rather just go down to Girouard Park, hang out with his friends, and play a bit of hockey. Maybe smoke a fatty.

There's no harm in that. mrb

Rob Sherren's 2010 QWF Fiction Mentorship reading can be seen and heard at www.youTube.com/RobSherren.

Russian Roulette

Sex in Russia
New and Selected Stories
Kenneth Radu
DC Books
$18.95, paper, 189pp
978-1-897190-65-4

In the story "A Change of Heart" – from Kenneth Radu's latest collection *Sex in Russia* – Ronald fantasizes, as he does his laundry, about murdering his infinitely charming neighbour, Bela, who has wormed his way into Ronald's family, threatening the latter's roles of father and husband. Throughout the story, he jealously recalls Bela's finer moments, including the time Ronald required CPR and Bela "began breathing into his mouth like some Carpathian mountain deity blowing life into a peasant of clay." The line captures their relationship perfectly: Ronald is indebted to and hopelessly emasculated by the same man.

The characters in *Sex in Russia* are effortlessly believable; people with familiar concerns that elicit our empathy, and quirks and flaws that pique our interest – ordinary people to whom we are drawn through the grace of Radu's prose. They struggle to balance their duelling selfish and selfless motivations and to maintain a sense of dignity and control. Many are sensing their closest relationships drift. Some are losing a connection with their children, while others worry about their mortgage or contemplate aging. Death appears in various forms – as a burden, an escape, or a revelation. Death walks the fine line between a joke and a horrific act, a passing thought and a grim reality.

These are solemn topics, yet the collection skips along with a lightness of language and a preference for hope. Sober preoccupations are lined with humour and optimism, while the lighter, more comedic tales carry a serious undertone. These subtleties are handled with an appropriate sense of restraint, such that the quiet simplicity of each story belies the complexity driving it.

In "The Rottweilers," a lonely man living in a dull suburban neighbourhood is uncomfortable with his new neighbour, the owner of two Rottweilers and a motorcycle. "The gas tank bulged," he notes, "like a goitre between the driver's legs." Yet, through this tenuous relationship with his neighbour, he is encouraged to re-engage with the world.

Often disarmingly funny, Radu has readers chuckling their way through succinct, wry observations. While the book is not overtly comedic, Radu uses humour as a sort of gravitational centre, which his stories pull toward or push against.

He writes with confidence, though the occasional meandering sentence could be reigned in, and a couple of stories would have benefited from less dramatic endings. Still, his approach is level-headed, and although he prefers to keep his writing unadorned, it sparkles here and there with gems of poetry and exquisite imagery. In the title story we are told that a tourist "fumbled among the brambles of the Cyrillic alphabet." The line concerns Delia, a spunky, elderly woman on a cruise ship docked at St. Petersburg who is struggling to maintain her sexuality among her aging peers. A senior cruise is an unsympathetic scenario, and thus a daring opener to the collection, but we immediately feel comfortable in Delia's presence.

The best stories catch lives at moments of casual existential contemplation – minds wandering from nagging concerns to daily errands, and back again. Characters become aware of and adjust to their own disillusionment, often settling on a bittersweet epiphany, or misguided, though necessary, optimism.

One of the finest stories is also one of the most unassuming: "Favourite Children" tells of a woman, Samantha, sensing the distances growing within her family. Her husband's favouritism toward their older children is pushing their youngest son away, and wife and husband from each other. Meanwhile, a recent murder both distracts her from and informs these thoughts. Like Radu, Samantha wisely sees that the story worth exploring is not the sensational murder, but the family drama unfolding quietly and dangerously around her. mrb

Correy Baldwin is the publisher of Buffalo Runs Press.

non-fiction

Around the World in 80 Years

Safe Passage
Travels through the Twentieth Century
Donald MacKay
Robin Brass Studio
$24.95, paper, 223pp
978-1-896941-61-5

It would be difficult for an aspiring journalist not to feel a certain envy at the arc of Donald MacKay's career. From a job editing local stories for the Canadian Press in Halifax, he quickly went on to work as a foreign correspondent for nearly thirty years, and subsequently wrote ten books on Canadian history.

In his eleventh book, *Safe Passage: Travels through the Twentieth Century*, MacKay takes stock of a long life and career. Beginning with his childhood in Halifax and his struggle with tuberculosis as a teenager, he goes on to describe his experiences as a reporter. He travelled across Canada to cover news as a British United Press employee, transmitting his stories using now-obsolete teletype machines. In 1950, he relocated to London, England, where his work involved "not only chasing headlines but being ready to cover any subject under the sun at any time." He was in Hungary in 1956 when revolution broke out, in Paris during the upheaval of May 1968, and in Montreal at the time of the 1970 October Crisis. He later put his journalistic skills to a different use and wrote an oral history called *The Lumberjacks*, which he followed up with nine other works of non-fiction.

MacKay has a lot to tell, and at times it feels as though he is still trying to live up to the United Press motto of "a deadline every minute." Almost any of the news stories he chooses to summarize would profit from being discussed in greater depth; instead, he often lingers just long enough to pique the reader's curiosity. Similarly, the childhood recollections that make up the first chapters of *Safe Passage* emerge as a sometimes messy cascade of anecdotes.

It is a relief when MacKay slows down, as he does in a chapter where he describes working for Radio Free Europe (RFE) in Hungary at the time of the Hungarian Revolution. On October 23, 1956, demonstrators in Budapest took to the streets and demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops. For a time, the Soviet government seemed willing to negotiate, but on November 4 it cracked down and soon crushed the rebellion.

In the aftermath, RFE, whose mandate was to "agitate for change" and "break the communists' monopoly on information," was accused of contributing to the conflict by broadcasting unfounded promises of American military help. "'In the Western capitals a practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour,'" one RFE reporter announced. MacKay provides a detailed and thoughtful overview of events, shedding light on the ambiguous role played by a radio station that – at least in its early years – walked a fine line between broadcasting information and disseminating propaganda.

Elsewhere, he chronicles the challenges of working as a reporter in a dictatorship. Under the leadership of António de Oliveira Salazar, the Portuguese government exercised strict control over the media. Despite being limited in what he could report, MacKay learned a great deal about the effects of Salazar's policies. He also provides a clear-eyed account of life in the Portuguese colony of Angola, which he visited in 1954, noting that supposedly "assimilated" Blacks "were in effect second-class citizens who must carry identity cards and were paid less than whites or mulattos."

Though brimming with observations on politics, MacKay's memoir offers disappointingly little in the way of introspection. There is no rule stating that memoirs must divulge details about one's private life, but part of their interest can be that they offer a view of world events through the prism of personal experience. *Safe Passage* reveals more about MacKay's career than it does about MacKay himself – though it is a successful and varied career, and one that could interest avid news readers. mRb

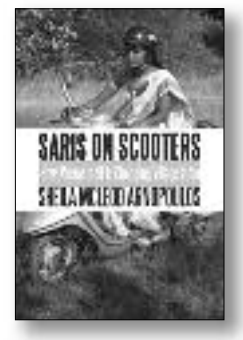
Kate Forrest is a Montreal writer, translator, and reviewer.

She-conomics

Saris on Scooters
How Microcredit is Changing Village India
Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos
Dundurn Press
$29.99, paper, 342pp
978-1-55488-7224

As an eyewitness account of microcredit at work in rural India, *Saris on Scooters* is unabashedly personal in tone, though it provides its fair share of sobering statistics as well. Montreal author and journalist Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos retells her experiences over a span of twenty-one months as she travels off the beaten path into the deepest poverty of Indian villages. But far from pessimistic, Arnopoulos hits an insistently hopeful note with each new story.

Microcredit was developed to give the poor in developing countries a financial foothold by providing them with the resources to launch small businesses. Initiatives target women, who repay loans more reliably than men and tend to invest in the welfare of their families. Since Muhammed Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for supplying microcredit to poor women in Bangladesh, estimates have placed the impact of microcredit as reaching 20% of the 600 million working poor in India.



Arnopoulos observes the effects of microcredit up close. Sleeping on hut floors and traveling on rickety buses and dusty rickshaws, she writes of her intimate interactions with the women of India with warmth and optimism – so much so that *Saris on Scooters* is as much a travel journal as an account of the effects of microcredit. Many of the women she encounters live day-to-day, earning less than C$1 a day. Lacemakers near the village of Rustumbada work every day of the year, many at a wage of C$0.60 a day.

In Tirupati, Arnopoulos teaches a journalism workshop to Indian women with elementary school education. Her account of the experience many years later rings with admiration and humility: "In fact, they had a lot to teach me, not only about village life, but also about the value of immersion in a community," she writes. In Manekchowk, she commiserates with Shantaben, who has sold produce from the same market spot for thirty years. Countless other women – farmers, vendors, housewives – cross paths with Arnopoulos, always extending a warm welcome in spite of their often crippling poverty.

In contrast to the open respect Arnopoulos expresses for the female entrepreneurs who turn their lives around with microcredit, she occasionally expresses rage as well: "We were only a few blocks away from Wall Street, where reckless and greedy financiers and their international colleagues had caused such world-wide financial havoc, yet were still looking for big bonuses." Thus Arnopoulos describes a Women's World Banking meeting in New York. Mostly, however, Arnopoulos's approach is to retell stories of women empowered against formidable odds.

After 300 pages, the unapologetically sympathetic overtones and heart-warming stories of *Saris on Scooters* begin to wear thin, but there is an honesty in Arnopoulos's tone that makes that, somehow, okay. All minor caveats about microcredit aside (there have been reservations about some microcredit organizations, which are briefly covered in the concluding pages), the book familiarizes readers with the reality of a movement occurring over 10,000 km away. *Saris on Scooters* is a noble endeavour to inject a little humanity into otherwise abstract economical concepts – and perhaps this is indeed what is missing in many a boardroom meeting. mRb

Sarah Fletcher obtained her master's degree in English literature. She is a regular contributor to Rover Arts and works as a copywriter and Web marketing specialist in Montreal.

Separation Anxiety

An Independent Quebec
The Past, the Present and the Future
Jacques Parizeau
Translated by Robin Philpot
Baraka Books
$24.95, paper, 244pp
978-0-9812405-6-5

When Maurice Duplessis died, Quebec woke up from a nightmare. Religion was set aside, resources were privatized, bombs exploded, and nationalistic pride grew. In the 1950s, the highest position a "Frenchie" could hold was foreman; a mere decade later, French-Canadian businesses flourished. Leaving the October Crisis aside, what Quebec francophones accomplished in a few decades cannot be undermined. The rise from second-class citizens to the "dominating" group is not an easy one, but is sovereignty – the ultimate goal of those who initially broke the chains – still relevant?

The rise from second-class citizens to the "dominating" group is not an easy one …

Jacques Parizeau, in his book *An Independent Quebec: The Past, the Present and the Future*, believes it is. While international trade agreements proliferate and borders disappear, many might think that sovereignty goes against the tide, but Parizeau maintains that it is necessary precisely *because* of globalization. How can Quebec uphold its values (which are often different from the ROC, e.g., the Quebec public's support for the Kyoto Accord) and preserve its natural resources (Parizeau mentions Canada bailing out the auto industry in Ontario, but leaving the Quebec forestry out to dry) without becoming master of its own house? The point is good, but it is probably the only one that non-sovereignists will acknowledge.

Translated by Robin Philpot, ex-electoral candidate for the Parti Québécois and publisher of Baraka Books, *An Independent Quebec* revisits the two referendums (their objectives, the thought process behind them, how a victory would have unfolded, etc.); why, economically speaking, Quebec is capable of being independent; and what an independent Quebec would be like.

Having earned a doctorate in economics from the London School of Economics, Parizeau inevitably focuses on the economic aspects of the issue. He is careful not to appeal to emotions – using studies and numbers instead – but this enables him to avoid the important human element. Perhaps Quebec would be solid enough to be independent (though the "Bulletin de la prospérité" of the Conseil du patronat, published on August 18, gave Quebec a C), but an independent Quebec would also have to deal with people, their egos and their fears. The stock market, backlash from Canadian politicians (who are only human), and an anglophone exodus (along with their capital and businesses) might be more influenced by emotion than logic.

Parizeau doesn't say where long-established anglophones would fit in. Though he admits that it "has become suspicious for Quebecers to use the term "nous" (we)," he uses it without explaining who this "we" is, which, given the context, does not feel particularly inclusive of anglophones. And "for those who see the spectre of ethnicity rise at the sight of the words 'French speaker,' let me reassure them," Parizeau writes, "the definition used is the same used in public opinion polls, namely those 'who speak French at home.'" In other words, immigrants who learn French would automatically fit in.

Describing a utopian scenario, Parizeau, at times, seems like someone who wants to have his cake and eat it too. An independent Quebec, he claims, would keep the Canadian dollar because "nobody could stop it from doing so," would remain a part of NAFTA and would keep the same borders. He equates any opposition with fearmongering, but the book would be more convincing if it included the possible negative consequences of an independent Quebec. Parizeau briefly mentions the drain of capital from Quebec when the Parti Québécois was first elected in 1976 and the fact that it could happen again if an independent Quebec didn't tread lightly, but he never mentions the fallout of the last two referendums or any other struggle an independent Quebec might have to wage.

Parizeau writes that "a majority of Quebecers still believe that Quebec sovereignty is desirable and viable" and that "rational, convincing and explicit arguments must be used." But reason and logic can only take Parizeau so far; politicians can make numbers say what they want them to. In the end, readers have to already believe in his arguments to be convinced. Politics, like religion, is a question of faith. mRb

Mélanie Grondin is associate editor of the *mRb*.

Ghost Pine
All Stories True
Jeff Miller
Invisible Publishing
$16.95, paper, 225pp
978-1-9267430-4-2

This collection of "true" accounts – many of which were originally published in the author's long-running zine, also titled *Ghost Pine* – exemplifies the particular contemporary Canadiana created by middle-class, suburban, alienated, nomadic, politically engaged youth. Several of Jeff Miller's stories are written from the perspective of an urbane twentysomething looking back, gently, humorously, upon his younger self. Others are travelogues depicting places both local (favourite haunts and neighbourhoods in Montreal, the author's adopted city, and in Ottawa, his hometown) and not (hitchhiking and bus trips across the country or into the States). A few of the more mature stories deal with ageing relatives and the struggle to maintain one's identity in an indifferent world.

Anyone to whom suburbs "became the symbol of everything wrong in the world," who belonged to a high school "Social Justice Club," or who marches when "evil politicians come to town" will relate to and chuckle at these slices of youthful life. While the narrator's sincere and wry style makes Miller's first short story collection enjoyable, the pieces can sometimes be directionless and self-indulgent, as when, in a story about a sojourn in Chicago, the reader is treated to almost every observation along the way.

The flaws of a developing writer, however, are easily outweighed in this book by signs of a more consequential voice. Sometimes the writing in *Ghost Pine* is stunning, making one wish that the settings for such gems were a little stronger. For example, after a pedestrian account of an on-again, off-again love affair between two young travellers, Miller writes: "The problem with falling in love with a traveller is easy to figure out. They keep moving, even after they've sworn you their heart. You become another town with a funny name they can say they've been to or a city they're anxious to leave …."

At other times, things come together in a way that shows promise for Miller's future work. In "Who's the Ghost," Miller uses the metaphor of invisibility to describe the struggle of those idealists who "made a choice when we were younger that we sometimes regret now, with our empty bank accounts and our rotting teeth …." Noting that "the more you care about something the less tangible it becomes …. Doubt and depression are common among ghosts," Miller concludes with a strangely uplifting and apt image: "to all the regular people going about their day we just appear to be a layer of fog creeping across the city streets. A completely silent cloud rubbing itself against the sides of mirrored financial towers." **AS**

Hear, O Israel!
David Solway
Mantua Books
$25, paper, 181pp
978-0-9734065-3-5

Hear, O Israel is David Solway's letter to the world and his laundry list of ways in which the world's perceptions and descriptions of Israel are wrong. Solway, renowned Montreal poet, winner of the A. M. Klein Prize for Poetry in 2007, starts by warning the Western world that it, like Israel, is under constant threat from Muslim terrorists and that "the West is beginning to learn what it feels like to be a Jew." Yet, he continues, "instead of recognizing a newfound solidarity with its ancestral victim whom it is coming to resemble, the West has chosen to make him responsible for its own, largely self-inflicted distress."

Perhaps Israel is indeed the scapegoat *du jour*. But trying to prove this, as Solway does, by insulting the opposition ("Of course, self-loathing Jewish anti-Zionists … are among the worst offenders, proliferating like ticks and lice on the body of their people"); using sarcasm ("… the familiar anti-checkpoint argument that pretends there is no such creature as a Palestinian suicide bomber on his way to butcher as many Israeli civilians as a thoughtful Islamist can possibly take with him"); and qualifying any opposing argument as "claptrap," does little to help Solway's cause. Because *Hear, O Israel* is so filled with negativity and because Solway refutes comments or ideas he doesn't agree with by simply stating that they're false ("Israel is an apartheid state … (false)"), the book is unconvincing and off-putting.

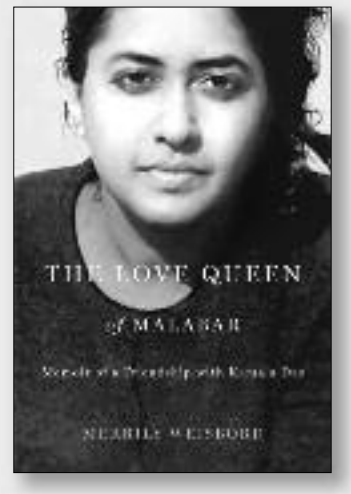
Furthermore, though Solway protests (too much) that he's not promoting book-burning, his assertion that he wouldn't mind burning anti-Israeli books, if he were that kind of guy ("If I did not believe in the preservation of books regardless of their content, I would say that this is one library that merits burning …."), strikes a chilling chord. Though he protects himself by claiming he wouldn't actually burn books, the anger and hatred that form the leitmotiv of his book prevent readers from giving him the benefit of the doubt. Sympathy, it must be said, does not easily flow in his direction.

In short: Solway has written a highly emotional tirade vilifying everybody and anybody who might have said or written something about Israel he doesn't agree with. **MG**

On the run: two horse thieves recently caught hiding out in the stacks of the Atwater Library, home of the mRb and the Association of English-language Publishers of Quebec. Aparna Sanyal (left) and Mélanie Grondin.

PHOTO: JULIA KATER

The Love Queen of Malabar
Memoir of a Friendship
with Kamala Das
Merrily Weisbord
McGill-Queen's University Press
$32.95, paper, 286pp
978-0-7735-3791-0



The Love Queen of Malabar is a biography of the later years of celebrated poet and writer Kamala Das and a chronicle of a 14-year cross-cultural friendship between the Canadian author Merrily Weisbord, and Das.

Throughout her life, Das incited controversy with her sensual poetry, her honest writings about her life and husband, and her bold opinions on almost every subject. Unexpectedly, in 2000, Das converted from Hinduism to Islam. This decision rocked her universe. Both Hindu and Muslim fanatics fought over Das, wishing to have her as their religious representative. Death threats were very much a part of this episode.

It is distressing to read Weisbord's account of this vibrant woman struggling to deal with the repercussions of her conversion. At the same time, Das is propelled into stardom in the Muslim world, a role she relishes and is well-suited to.

Weisbord's deftly recounts this part of Das's life, but in other parts of the book, in an attempt to create a rapport with her readers, she reveals too much about Das's personal life, particularly her sexuality. Still, it is clear Weisbord respected and cared for Das, and genuinely struggled with how to communicate who she was. And, for the most part, she has succeeded in writing a compelling and varied portrayal of a complex, contradictory, and brilliant woman.

The Love Queen of Malabar was recently nominated for The Writers' Trust Non-Fiction Prize. **VB**

Brault (from page 13)

enter into conversation with any other human being. Anyone you meet has a personal connection to arts and culture. Most of the time it's profoundly hidden, but once you connect with that, it's powerful. Anyone can say "oh, culture is not important," but if you really have the discussion, you'll realize that it is in fact important for anyone. The minute you can come into that conversation, you've achieved so much.

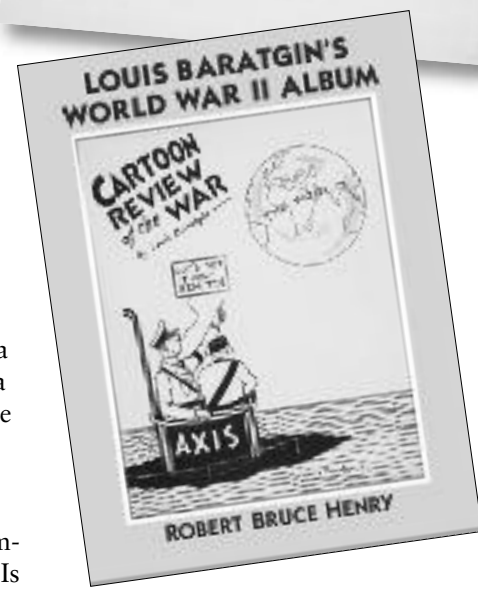
EM: You state that "the time is … ripe to bring back to the forefront principles of cultural policy that have been abandoned." What are those principles, and why is this the moment to reclaim them?

SB: At the end of the fifties, the Canada Council, the National Theatre School, the National Film Board, all these great cultural institutions – they had visions that were very much influenced by what happened after World War II. It was about building a cultural infrastructure, giving access. They were trying to answer profound needs – the need for beauty, for reflecting about the world. Now when you hear speeches from the people who are running these institutions, it's all about the contribution to the economy. We replaced discourses that were grounded in humanism by speeches that could be written by economists. We need to go back to those notions, because as a civilization we are facing challenges that are more or less the challenges this world was facing after the last world war. It's urgent. mRb

Elise Moser has cause to think about cultural policy as president of the Quebec Writers' Federation. Her novel *Because I Have Loved and Hidden It* appeared in 2009.

It Vos de Vorst of Times

Cartoon Review of the War
Louis Baratgin's World War II Album
1938–1943
Robert Bruce Henry
Véhicule Press
$21.95, paper, 142pp
978-1-55065-288-8



It's never a great idea to judge the cultural products of a past era by the standards of one's own. The practice has a way of diminishing both sides, and the goalposts have a way of shifting on you at the best of times. Things are further complicated when the work being discussed is the product of wartime and was clearly meant to give succour to one side in the conflict. But there are times when the gulf between then and now is so fundamental that it challenges attempts at an objective assessment. This gathering of lost cartoons by England-born Quebecer Louis Baratgin is one such case.

The best political cartoons distil a complex array of information into a single hard-hitting image, one whose message can be understood at a glance without being simplistic or sloganeering. By such a measure, Baratgin is a long way from the company of a master like Bill Mauldin. Is it fair to judge an obscure cartoonist who went largely unpublished in his lifetime against the best of his contemporaries? Insofar as Baratgin was working within the accepted style of his time and presumably wanted his work to be seen by a wide audience, the answer is yes.

Technically, Baratgin was a good enough draftsman, and like all cartoonists during World War II, he was helped along by the visual distinctiveness of his principal subjects. Hitler, Churchill, and Stalin were gifts to caricaturists and Baratgin gets plenty of mileage from portraying all three, though it has to be said he never quite got to grips with Mussolini. Where he begins to trip up is by making his panels too busy with both visuals and text, and over-explaining things on top of that. The cartoon on the cover, from 1941, can serve as an example. From a submarine labeled "Axis," Hitler points toward a distant planet Earth (we'll leave aside the question of where exactly the submarine might be) and says to Mussolini "Dot's vot I vont Benito!" Across Earth is written the helpful label "The World."

That bit of Hitlerian speech is a pointer to where the real problems start. Baratgin's representation of foreign accents (Mussolini: "I now maka de war against da Engleesh to helpa my gooda frienda Adolfie") causes uneasiness that even Robert Bruce Henry's introductory disclaimer can't quite assuage, but is just about excusable in historical context. In places, though, satire crosses the line into inflammatory stereotyping and results in something so appalling that readers may want to throw the book across the room. A South Pacific Islander – an ally in Baratgin's eyes – is drawn coal-black with a grass skirt and made to talk in a bizarre southern American accent. A pro-Canadian conscription cartoon from 1942 presents the Japanese as "Sly, Slinking Slant-Eyed Japs." It's one thing for cartooning to help mobilize a war effort; it's quite another to employ the same hate-mongering that was used to justify the wartime internment of Japanese Canadians. At such times, this collection becomes less the proclaimed "remarkable portrait of a world at war" than a time-capsule reminder of changing social attitudes. It is indeed a fascinating historical document, just not the kind intended.

A footnote of accidental hilarity: in one 1942 panel, a guitar-strumming Mussolini is drawn crooning to the goddess of peace and her caged dove, who clearly aren't enjoying what they hear. "Your music is punk!" says the dove. Move over, Ramones and Sex Pistols. Il Duce beat you to it by 35 years. mrb

Ian McGillis is a novelist and regular contributor to *The Gazette*.

Montrose (from page 4)

owner, former rum-runner, and alleged bigamist John Sark. What Mrs. Scaley really wants, though, is for Teed to track down Sark's possibly not-so-ex first wife, thus extricating Inez from what Martha is certain is a bad marriage.

It doesn't take Teed long to find Sark. Problem is, he's dead, shot to death in his Côte-des-Neiges apartment. Things take a twist when Teed follows a map he found in Sark's wallet to a Laurentian cabin, where he discovers another body, which also appears to be "The Sark." Soon Teed is tangling with temptresses, torpedoes, molls, and hopheads, not to mention Dt. Sgt. Raoul Framboise, the only French character in the book, who has zeroed in on Inez as the prime suspect in the murder of at least one of the Sarks.

Good stuff, with enough beautiful women and dead bodies to keep the pages turning. But I wasn't being paid to enjoy myself: I was being paid to dig up something on David Montrose himself, a.k.a. Charles Ross Graham.

So, who was Charles Ross Graham? According to Busby's Foreword, he "belongs to a select group that includes Brian Moore, newspaperman Al Palmer and transplanted Englishman Martin Brett, writers who six decades ago brought pulp-noir to Montreal." Born in 1920 in New Brunswick, Graham got a BA in science from Dalhousie and came to Montreal in 1941. He did postgraduate work at McGill, served with the Canadian Army Operational Research group during WWII, then earned a master's degree in economics at Harvard, before returning to Montreal.

He may have kept body if not soul together as a university lecturer and wage slave, but unsurprisingly his three pulp-noir novels were ignored by the Montreal papers. He cranked out *The Crime on Cote des Neiges* (1951), *Murder over Dorval* (1952), and *The Body on Mount Royal* (1953), which Busby considers the best, then – nothing. By 1967, after burying one wife and divorcing a second, Graham had moved to Toronto where he tried to make it as a freelance writer, finally writing a fourth David Montrose book after a hiatus of fifteen years. *Gambling with Fire* was also set in Montreal, but the hero was a displaced Austrian aristocrat named Franz Loebek. Graham died in 1968, shortly before *Gambling with Fire* was released in 1969, although according to the dust jacket Montrose was "living in Toronto."

But the lady wanted more – and I hate to disappoint a lady …

I contacted Busby and asked him if there was anything he could add. "I'm afraid not," he said. "Putting together the intro all but exhausted my skills as a detective."

My detective skills were not exhausted. I got Simon Dardick of Véhicule Press on the horn, hoping he could tell me something about Montrose/Graham. "We've wanted to reprint his books for a long time," he told me. "But we know almost nothing about Graham himself. We're hoping that a relative, friend, or colleague will see the books and come forward and tell us something about him."

I wasn't sure the lady was willing to wait that long.

Crime Writers of Canada is a professional association of, well, crime writers in Canada. Cheryl Freedman, former Executive Director, put me in touch with David Skene-Melvin, founding member of the CWC, antiquarian book dealer, and author of *Canadian Crime Fiction 1817–1996*. Could he tell me anything about David Montrose? I asked.

"Nothing you didn't get from Busby," he replied.

He did, however, refer me to a 1992 article entitled *Montreal Confidential* by Professor Will Straw, Chair of McGill's department of Art History and Communications Studies. Along with Al Palmer's *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street* (1950) and Martin Brett's *Hot Freeze* (1954), Montrose's first two books are briefly mentioned. "I'm glad these novels are being reissued," Professor Straw told me. "I know nothing whatsoever about Graham, though. Sorry."

I then did what any good investigator does when all else fails: I turned to Google. I scored half a dozen links to Montrose's books, mostly the upcoming Véhicule Press editions, as well as a second-hand original of *Gambling with Fire* that you can pick up for $400, but nothing about the man behind the writer.

A couple of other leads likewise led nowhere. The trail had gone cold; Montrose had faded into almost complete obscurity. It looked like I was going to disappoint the lady after all.

"Not much to show for my money," the lady said, when I filed my report. "Perhaps you should consider a new line of work."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe I'll become a mystery writer." mrb

The Crime on Cote des Neiges
David Montrose
Véhicule Press
$12, paper, 160pp
978-1-55065-284-0
Reviewed from proofs

Michael Blair is a Montreal mystery writer (who sets his books somewhere else). His first novel (*If Looks Could Kill*, M&S, 2001) was shortlisted for the 1999 Chapters/Robertson Davies Prize and the 2001 Quebec Writers' Federation First Book Prize. His next novel, *No Good Deed*, will feature Burlington, VT, private investigator Hack Loomis.

THE MILE END CAFÉ

Power
What Is It Good For?

Someone reading *People* magazine might conclude that Tom Cruise and Sandra Bullock run Hollywood. While they are certainly influential, so are the directors and producers behind the scenes as well as the financiers and studios that decide what films get made. To truly understand the movie industry, one should investigate the cultural context from which it operates and the economic principles that drive it, divorced from any individual.

Power: Where Is It? by Donald J. Savoie, a prolific author and the Canada Research Chair in Public Administration at Université de Moncton, is a *People*-style investigation of political and economic affairs. While Savoie makes a number of interesting observations about the influence of the media, polling firms, the courts, and international bodies such as the G8, his primary thesis is that powerful individuals matter more than institutional structures. "The dynamic element in the global economy is the individual," writes Savoie, "not countries, companies or institutions." But does this claim have any basis in reality?

Many things we take for granted today were won through tireless struggle by common folk, not bestowed by powerful individuals.

Mega corporations – often with various subsidiaries spread across the globe - increasingly dominate all areas of economic life. It wasn't a celebrity CEO that recently saved the automakers and banks; rather, it was hundreds of billions of dollars from Ottawa and Washington.

Savoie claims that celebrities drive the media as well. "The focus is on individual journalists not on news media organizations, because that is where the media's influence now lies." According to this thesis, Jeffrey Simpson, among Canada's leading newspaper columnists, is more influential than the *Globe and Mail* editors who decide what stories make the front page. But who chose Simpson to be a columnist? For that matter, who picked the editor who then chose Simpson? Presumably, Simpson attained his position because his writing pleased these editors and their bosses. If Simpson displeased the paper's owners you can be sure that a replacement would be sought.

As part of his aversion to structural analysis, Savoie dissects the media's power without mentioning who owns it or that it relies heavily on large corporate advertisers. Certainly, owning media confers power on an individual or corporation. Former media baron Conrad Black openly established the *National Post* to promote his extreme pro-capitalist ideology and Pierre Karl Péladeau, owner of Quebecor, Quebec's largest media conglomerate, is attempting to set up an all-news cable channel to support right-wing politicians (critics have dubbed it "Fox News North"). Likewise, a media landscape dependent on advertising increases the influence of big business.

Because Savoie focuses on individuals, the reader is left with the impression that we live in a meritocracy. Unfortunately, we don't, and implying otherwise serves to strengthen the dominance of the wealthy, white, and male.

Power is informed by Savoie's pro-corporate outlook. "The private sector is not in the business of throwing money around without seeing results," notes Savoie. But, isn't that precisely what a number of major financial institutions did when they paid huge sums to management even after these managers oversaw record losses. AIG, for instance, paid senior managers $165 million in bonuses after the company suffered a $61.7 billion loss in the final quarter of 2008.

"At the risk of sounding repetitive," Savoie proclaims, "countries that go further in reducing corporate taxes, cutting red tape and privatizing state corporations tend to see their economies prosper more than those that do not." So why isn't Haiti among the richest countries? Businesses there don't have to worry about taxes and the state plays almost no role in economic life.

A non-ideological review of history confirms the opposite of Savoie's claim about government intervention. In *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism*, prize-winning economist Ha-Joon Chang uses his native South Korea as a case study to demonstrate how almost every rich country developed through some form of economic protectionism. Once rich, they try to forbid other countries from following suit.

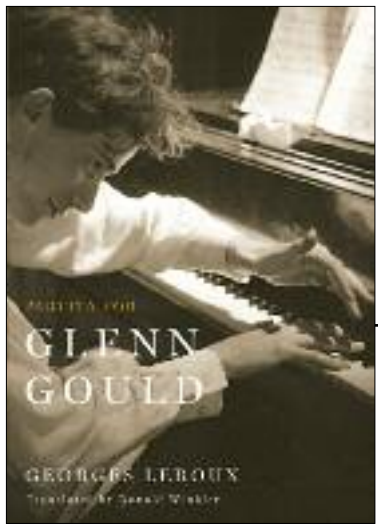
Since power generally prefers to conceal itself (if you don't know where it rests, it's difficult to challenge) exploring its locus should disturb the status quo. But, I would venture to guess that few among the political or economic elite will be disturbed by *Power*. Savoie's analysis is superficial. He fails to convey any substantive disapproval with a state of affairs that sees CEOs take home millions of dollars while others labour away for $9 an hour and some First Nations reserves don't even have access to clean water.

At the same time, Savoie completely ignores the popular social forces that shape political and economic affairs. Many things we take for granted today were won through tireless struggle by common folk, not bestowed by powerful individuals. Without these activists, there would be no clean air or water legislation while abortions and homosexuality would still be illegal. The 40-hour work week, old-age pension, and universal health coverage were all won by social movements that included millions of individuals who never would have been named in a celebrity-worshipping book like *Power*.

To a large degree, popular movements have shaped the legislative environment in which politicians and businesses operate. But, rarely do the dominant media or the sycophants of the powerful credit these social forces. mRb

Yves Engler's most recent book is *Canada and Israel: Building Apartheid*. For more information visit www.yvesengler.com.

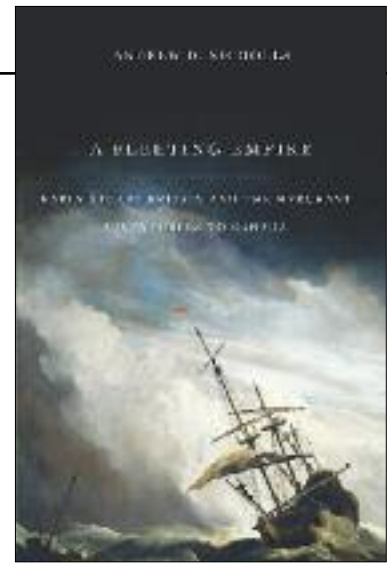
Power
Where Is It?
Donald J. Savoie
McGill-Queen's University Press
$29.95, cloth, 302pp
978-0-7735-3726-2



Partita for Glenn Gould
An Inquiry into the Nature of Genius
Georges Leroux
Translated by Donald Winkler

Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal (2007) *Winner*
Governor General's Literary Award for Nonfiction (2008)
Finalist
French Language Category

"Leroux gives welcome emphasis to the contradictions and paradoxes that made Gould such a fascinating figure, and his meditations on authenticity, genius, solitude, asceticism, and other pertinent topics are nourished by his wide reading in philosophy, literature and the arts."
– Kevin Bazzana, author of *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work*



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Andrew D. Nicholls

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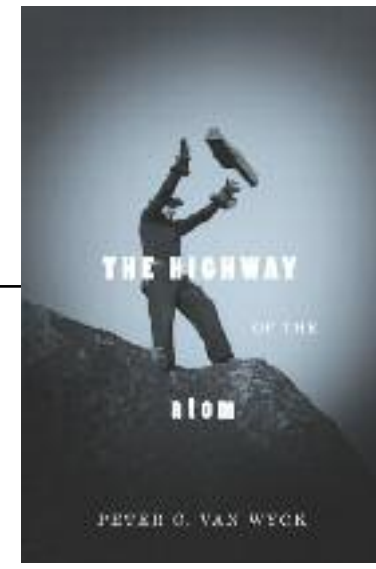

The Highway of the Atom
Peter C. van Wyck

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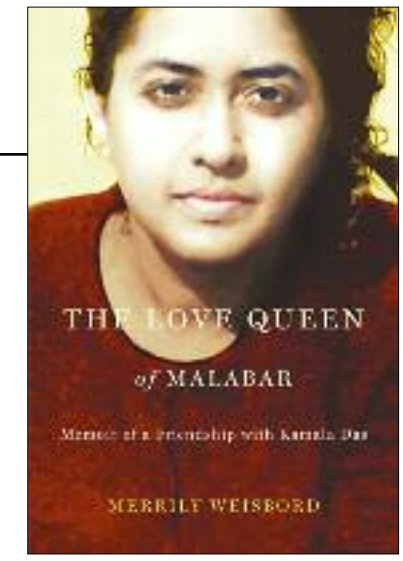
– John O'Brian, art history, University of British Columbia



The Love Queen of Malabar
Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das
Merrily Weisbord

"Highly engaging and honest, it is a model of writing across cultures and continents."
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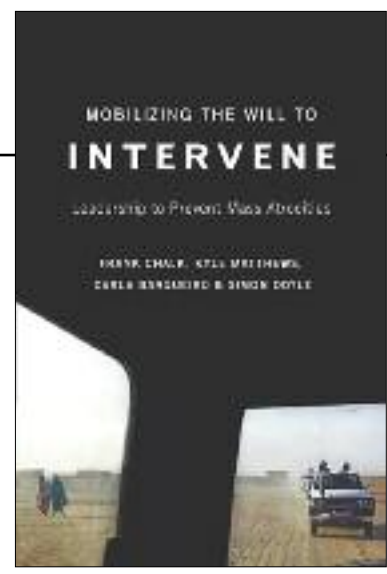

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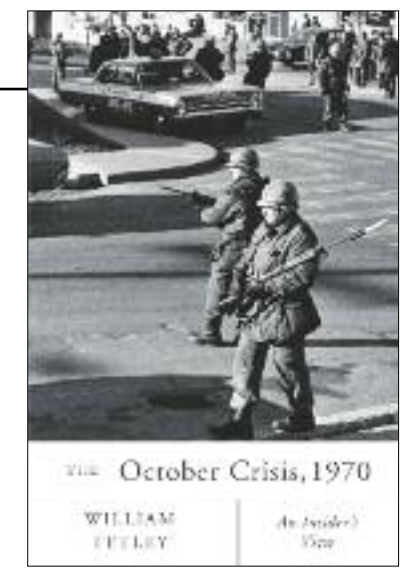

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