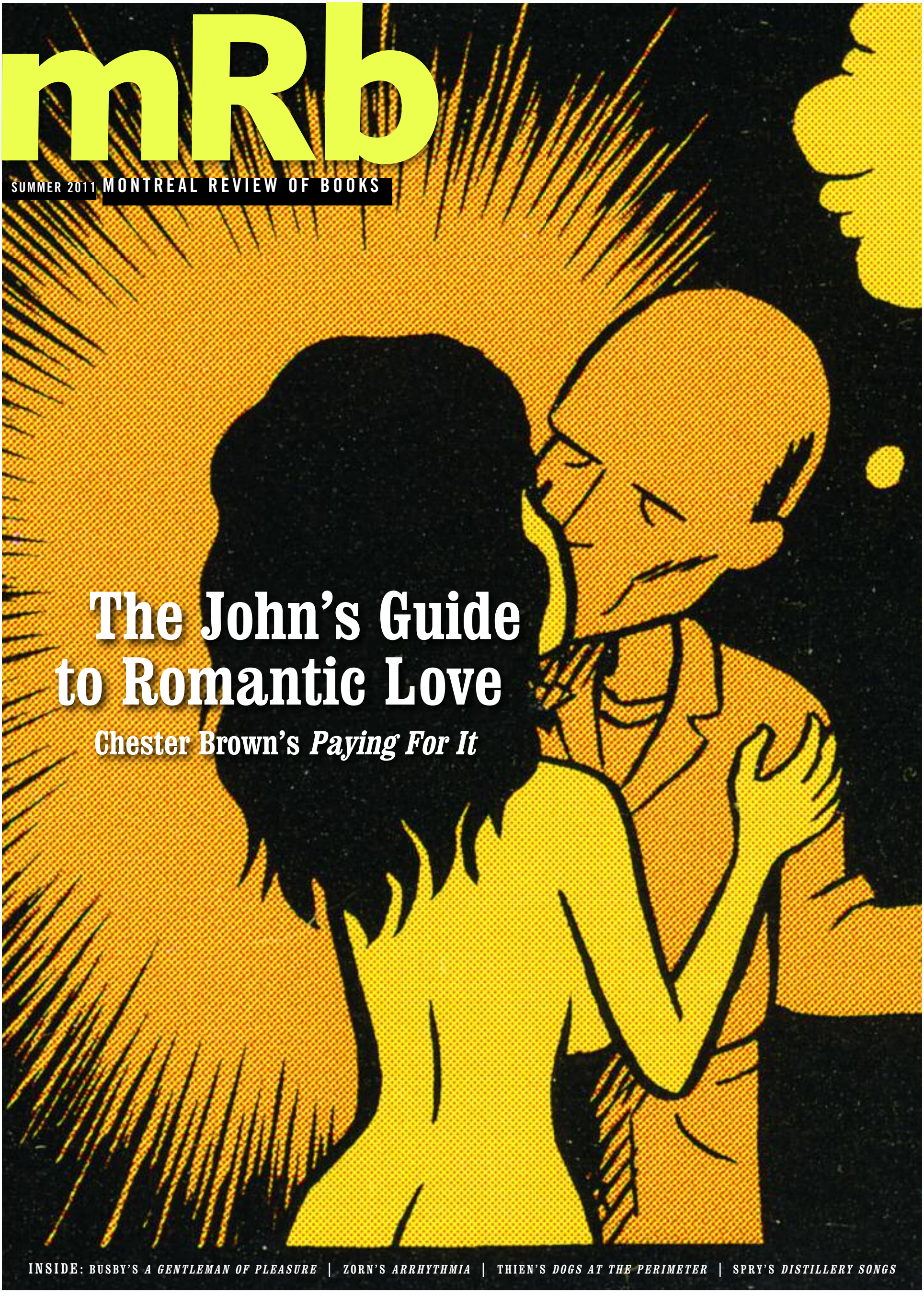
FREE/ISSUE 35

mRb

SUMMER 2011 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS



The John's Guide to Romantic Love

Chester Brown's *Paying For It*

POETRY

These poems were written by students enrolled in the **Writers in the Community** program sponsored by the Quebec Writers' Federation.

Help...

Society imposes the fact we are equals
What is equal if not a lie?
Is it wrong to compose a song with truth?
It seems everyone has gone bulletproof.
In the depth of our society many plead for help.
Help for what? A brighter day. It seems we are all lost
with no hope for rescue.
We see life as an endless nightmare and dreams a waste.
We've gone so bitter, with no sense of taste.
The last trace of strength is found in those with faith.
Faith in what? A brighter day.
Even if it may be after their last breath into death.

–Kareem

Cruel World

Small, so light, so old
little boy so small
the light so bright
the women so old
but this cruel world
is so new.

–Savannah

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A Happy Client Makes His Case

Chester Brown is an award-winning cartoonist and a two-time Libertarian Party of Canada candidate, but these days it's his life as a john that's getting the most attention. In his recent autobiographical graphic novel, *Paying For It*, he tells us about the twenty-three prostitutes he has been with since deciding to pursue paid sex in 1999.

By Lori Callaghan

GORDON BROWN

Brown believes that romantic relationships are nearly always a bad idea. "It's the exclusive nature of the relationship: that one person is supposed to fulfill all of your needs and they're supposed to be this centre of your emotional and sexual life. It just puts too much pressure on that one relationship. If it wasn't a matter of you relying on that one person for everything, it would change the dynamic," says Brown. This "possessive monogamy," as he boils it down to later in the book, is what he believes to be the problem. "It should be more casual, the way that friendships are."

The book opens with Brown's breakup with his last girlfriend, Sook-Yin Lee (who was then a MuchMusic VJ). This first scene stands apart since it is almost entirely blacked out. "I tried to draw it several times and I couldn't get the emotional tone right," says Brown. "Particularly the facial expressions." As he progressed with his drawings for the other scenes, he decided that it wasn't necessary to draw the first one. "I was a little bit concerned because I thought maybe it would indicate a black mood inside of me, that I was tremendously emotionally hurt by this and that that's what the blackness was supposed to convey, which it wasn't."

Almost three years of celibacy pass before Brown decides to try paying for sex. His first few experiences are full of trepidation and when his search for a streetwalker fails, he turns to the escort ads in a local Toronto publication. Nervous, insecure, and not knowing what to expect, he is pretty surprised when his first encounter actually goes well. He leaves the brothel feeling "exhilarated and transformed" and never looks back.

Brown had reservations about the title of the book. "I wanted something more direct. My original title was '23 Prostitutes' and they didn't want the word prostitute in the title. That, for them, was too direct," says Brown. In the end, he said that he was able to accept the title because of the way it might mislead the reader. "If they thought the title, *Paying For It*, was going to imply that I somehow feel contrite about all this or have regrets or feel like I'm paying for it in some non-monetary way, then that doesn't happen at the end and your reader's expectations would be dashed, I kinda like that. I guess that's why I was able to accept the title in the end."

His previous work, such as the acclaimed *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, carried the artistic influence of American cartoonist Harold Gray (the creator of *Little Orphan Annie)*. But now Brown is using a more rigid look, one inspired by American cartoonist Fletcher Hanks (from the golden age of comic books). The barrelling, stocky bodies with small heads have been replaced with more stylized figures that have a limited range of facial expression, if any at all. (Of particular note is the absence of any faces for the prostitutes. They are either obscured by speech bubbles, out of frame, or the ladies are drawn with their backs to the viewer. The Foreword says Brown "altered aspects of their bodies if they could potentially reveal an identity." But given that he already omits ethnicity and hair colour in some cases, it's not clear that this was a necessary obfuscation, and it seems to disassociate the viewer from the women on a noticeable level.)

Another difference that Brown noticed between this book and *Riel* was the promo tour. "Well, I thought I was used to being interviewed and was fine in them. I actually handled the first few print interviews OK, but then I did my first broadcast radio about the book. I don't know if you heard me on Jian Ghomeshi's show. Yeah, it was horrible. I was stuttering and stammering and really nervous. I did lots of radio interviews and TV interviews for the *Riel* book and I was fine. It must have been the subject. I still, on some level, am feeling ashamed about the subject, about being a john and being open about it. That took me by surprise because I have always been open about it to friends and family, or at least close family, so I wasn't aware. I thought I was over the sense of shame, but apparently I'm not."

Brown depicts many of the conversations he had with his friends and family, particularly with Kris Nakamura and fellow cartoonists Seth and Joe Matt, about his new life as a john. He develops his views on prostitution in these scenes, but it's in the twenty-three appendices and the notes section at the end of the book that he tackles a lot of the more specific issues surrounding prostitution. From self-esteem and human trafficking to taxation and licensing, he covers a lot of ground.

He also takes some very controversial stances on things like addiction (he backs Dr. Jeffrey A. Schaler's position that addiction is a choice, not a disease) and the institution of marriage (which he thinks is evil). Despite this, Brown

Nervous, insecure, and not knowing what to expect, he is pretty surprised when his first encounter actually goes well.

reports that the part of the book that's getting most of the attention is his current sexual relationship, which comes up at the end. "Everyone is very interested and, of course, I write very little about her. I guess that fuels people's curiosity."

SPOILER ALERT (A bad thing to do in a book review, but, damn, it's just such an interesting part of this tale.)

At the end of the book, which wraps up at the beginning of 2004, Brown enters into a monogamous relationship of sorts with a prostitute he calls Denise in the graphic novel, and he is still involved with her today. "It was a surprise for me too. When I began writing the book, I wrote a full script in 2006 and I knew it was going to take a little bit of time for me to draw it, so I wasn't sure how things were going to go. Although I was already in the relationship with [Denise], I didn't know how things would go. For all I knew we would be broken up by the time I finished drawing the book. Broken up – that we wouldn't be having sex anymore. See, I'm using relationship or girlfriend/boyfriend type language around her, but anyways. So, I left the ending open and things just happened the way things happened and I'm still involved with her."

Paying For It is an uncommon look into the world of prostitution from a john's perspective. It would be naïve to generalize from one man's experience to the whole profession, but it does offer a counter to those who believe that sex work is full of nothing but violence and despair. His arguments for the decriminalization of prostitution form the most impassioned aspect of the book, and are fairly opportune given that the Ontario courts are getting ready to hear the government's appeal of Justice Susan Himel's ruling last year that struck down the province's prostitution laws.

By contrast, there is very little passion found in the drawings. Coupled with the candid, and sometimes uncomfortable, moments that occur, Brown's new Robert Bresson approach to art can leave you cold. It's as though he removed from the visuals what he wants others to remove from their relationships: emotion. No matter what side of the sex work debate you find yourself on, you're likely to find this book challenging on some level, which is probably the point. mrb

Lori Callaghan is a visual arts critic for the *Montreal Gazette*.

PAYING FOR IT
Chester Brown
Drawn and Quarterly
$24.95, hardcover, 272pp
9781770460485

Like a Deep Blue Moan

DOGS AT THE PERIMETER
Madeleine Thien
McClelland & Stewart
$29.99, hardcover, 256pp
9780771084089

What constitutes a person other than a collection of memories, both those acquired in one's own lifetime and those passed down through generations? If you strip someone of his memories, do you strip him of his soul? And if memories are the very building blocks of humanity, who decides what to construct?

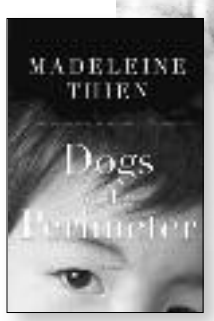
These are the kinds of questions one might ponder while reading Madeleine Thien's second novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, a work that bravely remembers the 1970s Cambodian genocide.

Janie, the book's principal narrator, is a Montreal neurological researcher who escaped Cambodia as a child. Yet, in 2005, the ghosts of her past still rap relentlessly on memory's door. She recalls a discussion with her friend and colleague Hiroji about a memory theatre constructed by Camillo, a once famous sixteenth-century Italian philosopher. Apparently, when standing in this room, "one could be simultaneously in the present and within the timelines of the past." When Hiroji suddenly disappears, Janie leaves her husband and son, and moves into her friend's apartment, restoring a sort of "memory theatre" of her own.

Hiroji is a Canadian-Japanese neurologist whose older brother James, a Red Cross doctor, went missing in 1975 in Phnom Pehn, Cambodia. Excavating James's and Hiroji's stories, Janie is haunted by the gruesome losses of her childhood. Thirty years earlier, the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, expelling residents of her native Phnom Penh; she and her family were forced to join the countless other citizens in travelling exile. She remembers being herded from place to place, under appalling conditions that caused nearly 2 million people to die. Relocated to communal farms, some people were executed, and many were left to work and starve.

The Angkar ("the organization") split apart families, forcing people to relinquish any attachment to the past, which was redefined as "memory sickness." Those expelled from the cities were brutally brainwashed to abandon loved ones: "To pray, to grieve the missing, to long for the old life, all these were forms of betrayal."

To survive, victims had no choice but to forge new identities and disown their pasts. But forced amnesia invariably gave birth to a sense of shame – a recurring theme throughout the novel. Some refugees, such as Hiroji's friend Nuong, were consequently unable to adapt to their new lives: "America's bright smiles and proud efficiency, its endlessly flowing water, cinemas, fairgrounds, and easy optimism shamed him. He felt out of place, unknowable."



While Thien's portraits of human suffering are stark, and at times painfully graphic, a vague hue of beauty nonetheless clings to their edges, like a memory wishing to be expressed: "I remembered beauty. Long ago, it had not seemed necessary to note its presence, to memorize it, to set the dogs out at the perimeter," recalls Janie.

The author's narrative is poetic and tinged with longing, like a deep blue moan, threading its way through her characters' lives. She tugs on this thread, bit by bit, as though unravelling the stitches of a collective wound. In quasi-dream-like fashion, she often blurs the lines that divide time, place, and character, so the reader must pay close attention, and sometimes even backpedal, to keep track of whose story is being told. Lives intersect and tangle, mimicking the interdependence of personal and collective memory.

In the end, one is reminded of memory's holistic nature. Try to sever some of it, and chances are the disowned part will cry out louder than ever – like a phantom limb begging for reconnection. Similarly, Janie's ghosts refuse to be silenced. Instinctively – and heartwrenchingly – she attempts to reappropriate what her oppressors stole: "How many lives can we live?" she wonders. "How many can we steal back and piece together?" mrb

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal writer who recently launched an album of songs and spoken word: www.myspace.com/kimberlyandthedreamtime

We'll Always Have Montreal

ARRHYTHMIA
Alice Zorn
NeWest Press
$21.95, paper, 315pp
9781897126806

Alice Zorn's debut novel *Arrhythmia* is an ambitious, deftly handled exploration of human beings in love. Far from stuttering along as its title might seem to suggest, it seldom misses a beat.

The main character, Joelle, is a former film student who now works as a secretary in the gastro wing of an unnamed Montreal hospital, where her husband Marc is a nurse. When Marc becomes infatuated with Ketia, a Haitian-Canadian girl half his age, Joelle's life unravels. She confides in her best friend, Diane, who, while she loves Joelle, believes her own relationship with her lover Nazim is truer and deeper than Joelle's marriage will ever be. But loving proves a challenge for everyone in this novel. Diane soon has to drop her smugness when she learns that the man with whom she has shared a bed for two years has not breathed a word of her existence to his family back in Casablanca.

Zorn navigates Montreal's cultural communities with ease. Although her central characters' names suggest they are French-speaking, Zorn never settles this matter for the reader. Linguistic affiliation is not all that important in Zorn's grand scheme. Neither is ethnicity. That being said, her description of Moroccan Nazim slipping away from his Québécoise lover's apartment to a café on Jean-Talon "where men congregate with small glasses of coffee or tea before them, the air rancid with black tobacco, faces animated by talk, jabbing the air with their fingers" is poignantly drawn. Nazim tries his best to adapt to Montreal, where people hide away from the cold and also from each other, and where fruit imported from his homeland – dates, tangerines – loses its sweetness before it reaches his plate. But it is not easy. Montrealers almost never make overtures to him. More painfully, Moroccan immigrants to the city refuse to invite him and Diane to their homes as a couple because they are unmarried.

Ketia is also beautifully rendered. Her infatuation with an older, married man and the turmoil that results have universal resonance, which Zorn grounds in detail about Montreal's Haitian community. Although it is never made clear where the "cheap brick apartment block with aluminum-frame windows" in which Ketia and her family live is located, the characters residing there are all believable. Scenes are flavoured with Haitian dishes (*gombos, piman bouk* and *cabri)*, and dialogue is garnished with bits of Creole. Married men occasionally have a "*fam sou koté*" (Ketia, for example), and over Christmas, Ketia's street reverberates with cries of "*Jwaye Nwel*!"

Zorn presents and juggles the thoughts and perceptions of each of her five primary characters so effectively that readers are soon intimate with all of them. Ketia's heady mix of sexual desire and moral confusion is so realistic that the reader sympathizes even as Ketia destroys a twelve-year-old marriage. Arguably the book's least likable character, Marc is also poignant as he struggles with familiar human desires and delusions.

Delusion is everywhere in this novel, which opens in the winter of 1999, the eve of the new millennium. People are obsessed with fears – delusional, it turns out – of cosmic destruction, or at the very least, of their computers crashing. At the personal level, characters keep assuming that they understand their lives and the lives of others, only to be brought up short by the discovery of how clueless they are. Zorn is a master of irony, delighting in exposing all the ways in which people try to fool themselves and others in the unending search for love.

Arrhythmia is a worthy follow-up to Zorn's 2009 story collection, *Ruins and Relics*. Her topic might be love's perversity, but she manages to let her own love for each and every one of these characters shine through. mrb

Claire Holden Rothman is a Montreal writer and translator.

Mistakes, I Made a Few

DISTILLERY SONGS
Mike Spry
Insomniac Press
$19.95, paper, 155pp
9781554830220

On the relationship between a work and its title, short-story writer and essayist Charles D'Ambrosio has written, "Entitling a poem or story or essay is harder than naming a child. The privilege of place is almost like a law of primogeniture, with the title inheriting the entire work, and along with that legacy comes the burden, the implied promise, of carrying the weight of the piece to the end." If the title of Mike Spry's first short-story collection, *Distillery Songs*, makes a promise, it's the promise to give a rich and varied ode to the kind of stories that emerge from nights (and, in this collection, lifetimes) spent drinking.

A night spent drinking is a fragile thing. A congenial gathering of friends is only ever one drink, one ill-perceived comment, one altercation away from becoming morose or even destructive. Spry's collection, and its preoccupation with excessive drinking and the damage it causes, also balances the funny and the sad. Most of the stories are depraved and depressing, with a cast of characters who aren't just getting drunk – they're pickled, distilled – transformed into aggravated versions of themselves. But the collection is also imaginative, ridiculous, and funny: sometimes it's the entire premise of the story (Jesus is reincarnated at a Neil Young concert and hitchhikes to Thunder Bay), and sometimes it's a line ("Plus He's the Lord Almighty, right, who tells the Lord they're not gonna help him kill a Spaniard dishwasher at three in the mornin' high on gas up the Bay?")

The stories are tight, economical, and each sentence has been nursed and carefully crafted. Spry has an ear for slang and tone; whether it's a demented orderly or a young woman at rehab, he gets it right. His writing lets the reader get close to the characters – you may even find yourself hoping everything works out for the guy who explains, "Okay, there's a goddamn dead hooker named Crystal or Shelley or Raven or something duct taped to my couch and it's one twenty-four in the afternoon and my notoriously punctual parents will be here for dinner at five-thirty … " Spry keeps his title's promise, and delivers ten snappy venerations for the sordid side of life.

GRACE
Vanessa Smith
Quattro Books
$16.95, paper, 128pp
9781926802268

The title character in Vanessa Smith's first novella, *Grace*, has plenty of problems, but excessive drinking isn't one of them. "*Something is wanting*. Something I can't find within myself," laments Grace, a restless art history graduate. The novella follows Grace in the few weeks that succeed her convocation and surround a life-altering experience. Written in the first person, *Grace* reads like a long diary entry. This gives the book an authentic feel, and provides the reader with the inside scoop (on insecurities, on sex – the usual topics that make a diary a juicy read).

Grace is at odds with her family, uncomfortable in her own skin, and undecided about her future. She is also lonely. Smitten by a stranger, she must soon confront an unforeseen, irreversible, and dire consequence of their liaison. Smith puts Grace in a very difficult (difficult to read, difficult to write) situation, but has the skill to make it work. The build-up, Grace's denial, and the situation itself are believable and moving. Smith builds suspense and the reader is just as surprised by the outcome as Grace is: "I move to stand, but find my legs don't work. An icy river of blood migrates from my face to my toes, and I taste the taste that grey makes on your tongue. The cold linoleum kiss of [the] tiled floor." If anything, Smith is too eager for Grace to learn something from her experience. Even when Grace is just beginning to acknowledge the situation she says, "At first, I ignored it. Silenced the voice of intuition that accompanied it. A new voice – a voice even older than my own." Does wisdom really follow so closely on the heels of experience? It does according to Smith, and the rest of the book expounds Grace's transformation.

In part, the novella is compelling because of the point in Grace's life at which Smith chooses to portray her. On paper, Grace doesn't have much: no career, few friends, no lover, and no plan. What she does have is more elusive: potential, youth, and her character. Smith portrays Grace as a complex person, at times utterly bratty, at other times sympathetic, dealing not only with the harsh transition period from student existence to adulthood, but also with an additional life-altering encounter. And as Grace's mother tells her, " … you can get through it … that's what makes it so frightening – so painful." mrb

Vanessa Bonneau lives in Montreal.

Bookwormhole

THE DOOR TO LOST PAGES
Claude Lalumière
ChiZine Publications,
$13.95, paper, 200pp
9781926851129

Comic books, back in the day, targeted the young, particularly boys and young adult (or perpetually young) males. Although there were many truly *comical* comics no spookier than *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, from the very beginning the medium seemed destined to favour the creepy, the disturbing, and the faintly subversive: things that catered more to those with a Y chromosome. The image of a boy curled up with a copy of *Tales from the Crypt* or some spin-off will forever be associated with classic comic books. (Even some superhero lineages – *The Dark Knight*, quickly comes to mind – hail from the murkier, *noir,* side of town.)

While the comic books of yore still exist (albeit with more adult collectors than ten-year-olds buying them), their latest incarnation is in a more substantial, "legitimate" form: the graphic novel. These mixed-media publications can also come in a variety of themes and forms, but basic black prevails. It reflects a seemingly bottomless hunger for exploring the scary and forbidden: loss of community or personal identity, loneliness, disease, sex, and death. (Witness the recent vampire craze.)

Somewhere, somehow, there is probably a study of the correlation between the proliferation of graphic novels and this upsurge of fantasy-horror-science fiction lit in its multiple permutations. If so, it may explain why Montreal writer and multiple anthologizer Claude Lalumière's latest offering, *The Door to Lost Pages*, sounds quite so much like a graphic novel, *sans* illustrations.

This follow-up to his well-received short-story collection, *Objects of Worship*, continues in the dark fantasy-horror vein. *Door* features supernatural beings and wild situations, characters with overactive imaginations verging on madness, edgy sexual imagery, and an empty-urban setting. The word "lost" is key: lost knowledge, lost children, lost adults, and lost directions. The bleak city backdrop offers no solace for anyone or anything. Appropriately, the story's progress resembles a delirium, a sense of being wondrously disoriented. The nesting of dream within dream brings to mind Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare*.

Door weaves the journeys of several human characters – Aydee, Lucas, and Sandra – against a fantastical background of altered states of consciousness (and even states of identity), which seem to involve visits to a world of large, menacing creatures – part myth, part machine, part human. The characters are all young, free of family ties to some extent, and desperately trying to find somewhere to belong. First Lucas and then Aydee go to the Lost Pages bookstore and find refuge amongst the arcane, the esoteric, the abandoned aspects of human knowledge. They eventually find each other and Sandra, too, all imbedded in a strange world that might very well have leapt from one of the books.

The odd and the mysterious are not only familiar tropes of fantasy, they parallel the lost/edgy/undefined feelings of the young characters. Lost knowledge equals lost opportunity. Knowledge that defies convention is like the average youth without a set path or a purpose, who resists fitting in just to be wanted:

> Lost Pages wasn't the only bookshop I frequented, but the books I found on its shelves were … unique. I never saw any of these books anywhere else. Bizarre bestiaries. Dictionaries of dead, obscure languages. Maps to lands that may never have been. Essays on religions with unfamiliar names. Obscure mythologies. Accounts of wars no history teacher had ever mentioned. Such were the wares of the bookshop that fed my teenage dreams.

A *Montreal Gazette* books columnist and former bookstore owner, Lalumière is clearly comfortable with the trickier elements of horror and erotica, and knows when to step back at the right moment. Although the Lost Pages world is pure fantasy, it is no fantasy world. He may have found the most compassionate way to depict people on the edge of society, and that is to paint them as being lost to themselves – and to everyone else. mrb

Louise Fabiani is a Montreal science writer, critic, and poet. Her chapbook *Cryptic Dangers* (Alfred Gustav Press) is due out in November. She is now at work on a work of speculative fiction that deals with lost knowledge of a more mundane kind.

Michel TREMBLAY

"Despite the sometimes inescapable seriousness of his material, Tremblay will induce chortles, chuckles and belly laughs in hapless readers, not to mention expanding upon the delight readers will no doubt take in his mastery of caricature. With a stroke here, a telling detail there, he creates characters who linger in the mind to participate in a marvellously mysterious mental dance."

—Globe & Mail

The *Notebook* Trilogy

Translated by Sheila Fischman

From the theatre of Euripides to the theatre of Montreal's Main, Michel Tremblay casts some of his most famous and exotic personae, The Duchess, Fine Dumas, Jean-le-Décollé and Babalu, in a whole new light in his *Notebook* series. Unlike his *Plateau Mont-Royal* novels, wherein these flamboyant transvestites and their community of social misfits are seen from the perspective of a child destined to discover the defining characteristic of his own otherness as gay, the *Notebooks* are narrated in the voice of a young woman, and one whose difference is not primarily determined by her sexuality, but by her highly visible stature—Céline Poulin is a midget.

The Black Notebook
$19.95 / 224 pages
978-0-88922-543-5

The Red Notebook
$24.95 / 288 pages
978-0-88922-588-6

The Blue Notebook
$24.95 / 272 pages
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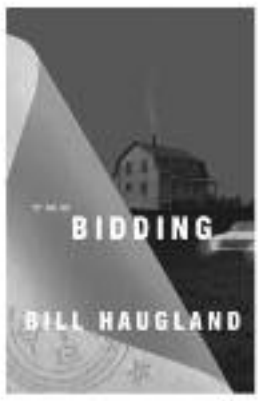

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$18.95

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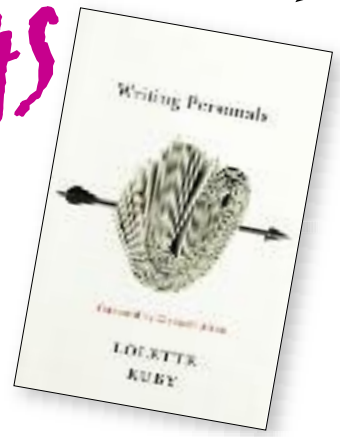
Véhicule Press
www.vehiculepress.com

Love Clippings

feature by Sarah Lolley

PERSONALS

Sylvia Weisler, age thirty-three, published writer of a book of poetry, is tackling a new subject in earnest. Her next book will be about newspaper-based personal ads, she has decided, and in order to write a fully informed, hard-hitting account of what "these ads reveal beneath the cloak of words," she will place a few of her own as bait, some masquerading as the real thing and one revealing her to be a writer in search of interviewees. Will she be able to do it? She herself is unsure and confesses as much in such a lovely, warm voice that readers feel they know her straight away. She is like a brainier, artier version of Bridget Jones: charming, self-deprecating, slightly dense when it comes to her own relationships, and entirely likeable.



WRITING PERSONALS
Lolette Kuby
Véhicule Press
$18.95, paper, 184pp
9781550652932

And so we dive into the world of *Writing Personals*, an original, highly readable debut novel, by Toronto-based author Lolette Kuby, that is perfect to curl up on the couch with. The book is composed of short (one to four pages), snappy chapters with descriptive titles, which are themselves, in a way, like personal ads: concise and highly informative. Deliciously, Kuby opens the book by flirting with the line between fact and fiction. The front cover announces a foreword by Gladwell Alcox, who is quoted on the back cover as well. Within a few pages, however, we realize that he is, in fact, one of the characters, and smirk along with the clever Ms. Kuby.

Kuby, who taught English literature at Cleveland State University before moving to Toronto ten years ago, has previously published three books of poetry and two collections of short stories. She confesses that when it comes to personal ads, she is not writing from experience, despite being single herself. "At some point I placed a couple of personal ads and they turned out to be pretty inconsequential, but I know that's not the case for other people." She sees the appeal, though. After people graduate from college or university, she says, meeting people becomes more difficult. "So many jobs are largely one sex, like stockbrokerage or elementary-school teaching. So people would go to bars. And then advertising took over." She chose newspaper-based personal ads over Internet dating to "limit my universe," Kuby explains. "With [Internet dating], it's just too vast … so I chose a much more limited print medium." In addition to keeping the action in Toronto, she wanted to focus on a particular demographic: "older people, middle-aged and over." Also, "there is a kind of seriousness to it. [You have] to put something on paper and go to the trouble of putting a stamp on it and mailing it."

Writing Personals is at its most whimsical in the first forty pages as Sylvia and her friend and former university professor Gladwell argue (making their cases directly to the reader, one chapter at a time) about the logistics of the research – what ads to place, how to answer them, and how to verify the respondents' veracity. Perhaps the most fun of all is Chapter 4, in which the narrator explains why she chose the words she did in the personal ads she has placed. For example, from the personal ad for "Older Woman": "It took me fifty years (She admits her age because she wants older men to respond) and three husbands (Men like women who are attractive to other men) to learn how to please a man. (I thought 'please a man' was brilliant. It informs the next man that he will find her sweet or feisty or pliable or tough, sexy or tepid – anything he wishes)."

"To me, if you're writing a personal ad, whether you're conscious of it or not, every word is important," Kuby explains. "Maybe it's my poetry background," she muses. "There's rarely a plot to a poem, so it's the language that carries everything." That said, she believes there's a limit to how much people should rely on personal ads and on written correspondence when forming an opinion about someone. "At least at a bar or a nightclub you know how the person dresses, what their voice sounds like, how they move their hands. Even though I'm a writer and am in love with words, it's still a really good idea that people can smell each other."

After a promising beginning, we encounter a few peculiarities with *Writing Personals*. We realize that Sylvia has no girlfriends, which is odd for a single woman in her 30s; in fact, she seems to have no friends at all save Gladwell, her publisher, Harry, and her research assistant, George.

Over time, the incredibly strange characters Sylvia meets challenge the reader's suspension of disbelief. Virtually all the women respondents are kooky; nearly all the men are adulterous. Is it possible that Sylvia manages to find all of the following: a porn-writing Jewish lesbian; a graphologist; a woman who believes she has been reincarnating and reuniting with the same man since Paleolithic times; a group of men who meet regularly to applaud the use of personal ads for adulterous means (that they do it is plausible, but to meet and talk about it?). Sylvia's publisher himself comments, "I didn't expect this book to contain such bizarre stories." Sylvia admits that she is answering only the "most interesting letters," yet when she attempts to answer one of the run-of-the-mill ads, she comes face-to-face with her ex-partner, estranged from her these last five years. What are the odds?

Perhaps the greatest disappointment is that the author moves away from the book's original premise and starts to describe Sylvia's newfound friendships with two of the

continued on page 13

Hush, Loamy-lipped Lover

feature by Katia Grubisic

So, girl dates cad. Girl leaves cad. Girl trips serendipitously over business card. Girl buys into expensive arranged-marriage service. Marriage is arranged. Newly-met husband turns out to be knave. Girl leaves knave. Arranged husband professes love, knaveship is overturned. Ta-dah!

We all have our fair share of both pleasant and embarrassing reads and re-reads. Buy us a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, seduce us properly, or catch us late enough at night, and all our superficial longings are exposed. As merely entertaining, or pop-culty as a book might be, there must still be a craft.

Some tools and thoughts for those who would write chick lit:

1. Your readers shouldn't want to punch your protagonist in the eye. Part satire, part guilty pleasure, genre fiction is escapist precisely because it reflects our shells to our selves, and relieves us of burdensome shame and fear. A thirty-something, almost-successful writer with a voice-of-reason, high-powered, *awe*-some best friend, conveniently disposable income, and an oh-em-gee-annoyingly high metabolism, will neither satire nor guilt provide.

2. Don't try to be cute. Our heroine looks "just like Anne of Green Gables (red hair, green eyes, pale skin, a smattering of freckles across my nose)."

3. Fluff novels still require writing, which is a craft, and which includes concerns such as diction. No man, and especially no remotely dateable man, would ever use the word "hush." *Pas de* hush. No "loamy" mouths; ew. Oh, and no one's name is Tadd, and if it is, it shouldn't be immortalized.

4. Perhaps not every other female character in said immortalization should be a cold, shrewd shrew or an unprepossessing busybody. From the pinched marriage-service lady to the pathetically affable co-arrangee, the other girls in *Arranged* seem destined only to be confirmations of how solemn and disarming the gossamer nombrilism of the Lady Anne is.

Interlude: In an otherwise gratuitous diamond-ring discussion, Anne briefly slips into a real, human, interesting voice. Her friend has already told her the story of her engagement, and Anne thinks, "I know, but I wasn't listening because I was wondering why no one wanted to marry me." It's a transparent narrative pretext for the reader to get the bended-knee anecdote, but, ah, a few words that ring true.

5. Must the entire secondary cast be either super-supportive, but almost-gay, besties, or assholes reading *Maxim* waiting for their cad-ship to be spurted all over the page? Or a Nacho-Libre type mooing Latinously? Or an East-Asian beauty who learned to love her arranged husband Even Though She Was Smart? Or an overly solicitous Teutonic therapist serving as chorus?

6. *Pas de* clichés, either. In *Arranged*, veritable festival of cliché, people have "kelly green eyes," beer is "amber liquid," and the ocean is cerulean. They say things like "dammit, Jack" and "there could never be anybody else for me but you." Cliché is a broadly social, insidious thing: we are, after all, used to being fed wheels spinning in heads, glints in eyes, hearts skipping beats; pop fiction must be both simultaneously so well spun that we don't notice the necessary familiarities, and inventive enough that it confirms the common experience by giving us a different way in.

7. Sex is, well, sex. When successfully sold, it seems easy and worthwhile – lip a-pout just so, member throbbing thusly. If you can't do better than "too good to be wrong" and "then he's inside me," get your hand out of my pants.

8. No stream-of-boring-your reader-to-unconsciousness: "No, that's silly. Didn't I just decide I needed to be alone? That's right, I did. So, I'll be alone. And then I'll find a new man, the right man, on my own." True thing.

9. Plausibility is hard to define, and harder still to require or recommend. Good writing will justify the most outlandish conceit, the most unlikeable narrator. As a fairy tale, *Arranged* fails imaginatively, psychologically, and even formulaically. It doesn't have the wit or the balls of the kind of schadenfreudic gong show that pop-satire genres can reach, which makes the whole kit – best friend, heartbreak, serendipity, arranged marriage, lovable jerk, happy ending – not only unbelievable, but unbearable.

Perhaps the shaping and marketing of chick lit, more so than its lad lit and fratire cousins, suffer from the notion that content is superfluous. Perhaps the marketing overtakes the content. But, in content and concept, *Arranged* is embarrassing to chicks, to cads, to arranged marriages, and especially to lit. Purple when she should be straight, tedious when she could be inventive, McKenzie scoops out either little boogers of information or swabs hackneyed generalizations. She didn't do the work. As for the reading, I did it so you don't have to. mrb

ROBERT J. GALBRAITH

Writer, editor, and translator **Katia Grubisic** will reveal superficial longings in exchange for Veuve.

ARRANGED
Catherine McKenzie
Harper Collins
$19.99, paper, 390pp
9781554687602

They Fuck You Up, Your Mum and Dad

THE JOYFUL CHILD
Norman Ravvin
Gaspereau Press
$24.95, paper, 137pp
9781554470877

Norman Ravvin writes exquisite prose. His third novel, *The Joyful Child*, is a sustained, delicate performance, rhythmically varied and attentive to emotional nuance. It's the story of Paul, and his relationship with his son, Nick, as told by an unnamed friend of Paul's. A brief novel, almost a set of linked short stories, the book moves easily back and forth in time, building patterns of imagery while investigating themes of travel and wandering, of fathers and sons.

Ravvin's precise tonal control keeps the book fascinating; the unexpected stringing-together of odd incidents develops a curious sense of meaning. Nevertheless, the quiet elegance of the structure occasionally seems forced and tends to make the book's more obvious moments seem even more obvious. For example, when one chapter ends with Nick's great-grandmother dispensing words of wisdom, the effect is platitudinous. Overall, however, Ravvin's eye for the unconventional – the way he can build a chapter around a surreal and fruitless search for a missing relative, and then resolve it with seemingly unrelated images of a well-tended garden and a firm handshake – serves to bring out the themes he's working with.

Unfortunately, though Ravvin has a profound grasp of Paul's history, personality, and perspective, the same doesn't hold for the book's other characters. While it is true that the story is narrated by Paul's nameless friend – who is reconstructing the events from what Paul has told him, making this a Paul-centric version of events – the narrator is equally fascinated by Nick, who is idealized, joyful, and yet colourless. Paul's wife Mary is a flat caricature of a careerist. It is ultimately difficult to find enough material in the book to construct an understanding of anyone other than Paul.

While the book does allow us to see Paul in different ways – narcissist, artist manqué, fundamentally passive – it doesn't build a case for him as an inherently interesting character. Paul's background as the son of his father, and as the father of his son, is resonant. We see how much being with Nick means to Paul, who was abandoned by his own father as a boy. Yet the man himself is uninvolving. We note the passivity, the lack of drive that leads to the melancholy conclusion of the book, and the feeling communicated to the reader is one of entropy rather than inevitability: a life running down. The grace of Ravvin's prose aside, Paul functions more as a symbol than as a character.

If Ravvin's characters seem flat, there is still a real sense of them being grounded in specific times with specific expectations – for families, for fathers, and for sons. Paradoxically, there's also an oddly timeless feeling to the book. Nobody seems to use a computer, and when the story mentions cellphones near the end, it feels almost anachronistic. The book is about slow growth and change as much as it is about recurring generational patterns.

The Joyful Child is a complex book that rewards careful examination and re-reading. But in the end, there's nothing surprising in the novel. Its focus is the journey, not the destination. mRb

Matthew Surridge is a Montreal writer whose criticism has appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* and who is currently writing an online fiction serial at www.fellgard.com.

And Don't Have Any Kids Yourself

THE MEANING OF CHILDREN
Beverly Akerman
Exile Editions
$19.95, paper, 232pp
9781550961485

The cover of Beverly Akerman's first collection of short stories, *The Meaning of Children*, features an engaging collage of photographs under the rainbow-hued title. Charming cherubic faces smile out at the passing potential reader, suggesting that the stories behind the cover will most certainly be heart-warming vignettes celebrating the innumerable gifts that children bring to our lives.

In fact, what the fourteen stories in Akerman's collection do is describe the myriad ways that mothering and marriage can damage and destroy a woman's soul and spirit. The first three stories, all set in the 1960s and told in the first person, introduce the reader to the mother as a resentful victim of her maternal state. The narrators are all young girls who observe and absorb everything, precocious and articulate beings who are confused and distressed by their mothers' turmoil and who crave a level of emotional intimacy that their mothers are incapable of giving them. The mothers are women who blame their daughters for turning their once luxurious hair to straw, who start each morning with a nagging session, who, over the family dinner table and in front of the children, tell their husband, "Maybe I should've had you fixed."

The middle section of the collection moves the narrators and protagonists out of childhood and into childrearing age. In "Like Jeremy Irons" we meet a woman with two kids under four years of age at home who decides she has to have an abortion if she wants to survive. This time around, Akerman has provided her protagonist with the wherewithal to take control of her life, albeit within the confines of a system that demands she justify her choice as a medical necessity. In the final paragraph of the story she imagines the sheet that was bloodied during the procedure washed clean and flapping in the breeze, an emblem of a hopeful future, but what lingers in the reader's mind is the image of a woman whose fertility has forced her to endure the grim machinations of an unsmiling doctor with hard glittering eyes.

In "Lighter Than Air," Sandra is the mother of an immature twenty-two-year-old son whom she still drives to the therapist, and the wife of a successful businessman who is often out of town. She has compromised all her dreams for her family and in her mid-forties is left empty and bitter. The story tracks the disintegration of her life. Her son finds a girlfriend and gives up on the therapy. Her husband, fed up with Sandra's nagging and unavailability in bed, hooks up with a lover in China, and Sandra's work loses its meaning. Sandra, now unwanted and unloved by the men in her life, spirals down into despair and attempts suicide.

The final section of the collection features stories about the senior set. In "Academic Freedom" and "Carbon Dated, Gold-Plated," Akerman describes a deadly soul-sucking variety of marriage. The wives in these stories are victims, trapped by unions that they waited too long to leave. Their long-buried secrets and unrealized dreams taunt and torment them and in the end injury and illness seal their fates. They will never be free.

Exploring the dark side of the maternal and matrimonial experience is both relevant and valuable, and Akerman is to be commended for her choice of subject matter. But by populating her tales with bitter, resentful, powerless, and almost uniformly unhappy female characters, the author catalogues the weaknesses of women while largely failing to celebrate their courage and strength. Redemption is unattainable for almost all of the wives and mothers in *The Meaning of Children*. Without a chance for recovery or rescue, we are left with the strong suspicion that the meaning of a woman's life is limited to servitude and despair. mRb

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

FEMINSIM: UR DOIN IT RONG

Two takes on the movement's failures and how to get it right

TALKING THE WALK
The Grassroots Language of Feminism
Marilyn Casselman
Freeborn Publishing
$21.95, paper, 288pp
9780615194097

FEMINISM FOR REAL
Deconstructing the academic industrial complex of feminism
Jessica Yee
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
$15, paper, 176pp
9781926888491

In her book *Talking the Walk: The Grassroots Language of Feminism*, Marilyn Casselman asks a couple of important questions: Why have female experience and knowledge over the millennia not been passed down and ingrained in our culture? And why, with women participating in politics and business to a never-before-seen degree, does patriarchy still have such a stranglehold on the world? She suggests these failures are due to a lack of mainstream support for feminism: feminism has failed to speak to "the average woman," and thus can never get enough traction to end global female oppression. The book offers itself as a remedy, a tool for attaining self-understanding and empowerment without resorting to jargon, theory, or Marxist analysis – a manifesto for a grassroots revolution.

This is the kind of book I would love to be excited about. Casselman's prose is full of righteous anger, directed at the numberless tentacles of patriarchy that have limited women's social, economic, sexual, and personal freedom. Her sources are all over the map, indicating a lifelong passion and a talent for honing in on sexism wherever it arises. But her invective seems unfocused, even scattershot, and too often rains down on the heads of potential allies. So much of the book is given over to random tirades, the shaming of women who don't share the author's views, dead-wrong analysis, and an essentialist, reductive view of womanhood – what Casselman calls "the feminine principle," as if there's just one, and we all share it! – that it entirely misses the opportunity to engage its audience, let alone mobilize it.

Maybe, with the aid of an editor with a very sharp knife, *Talking the Walk* could be an invigorating guide to self-actualization. As it stands, it's more of a rant.

So where to look for accessible, instructive writing on feminism?

Feminism for REAL: Deconstructing the academic industrial complex of feminism, edited by activist Jessica Yee, presents feminism as deeply rooted in everyday life. Grounded and ambitious, it suggests that feminism has become an idea learned in school, rather than something practised with friends, at work, or in relationships, and it works to fight this misconception. The collection of essays offers the views of writers of different origins, classes, sexual orientation, and gender identity, all of whom address feminism and its institutionalization with humour, passion, and rage.

> *Feminism for REAL* offers what *Talking the Walk* does not: a sense of how feminism affects the lives of women on a day-to-day basis

Robyn Maynard's piece "Fuck the glass ceiling!" offers an analysis of the global economic underpinnings of sexism (see, a little Marxist analysis ain't so bad), while showing how local community institutions can inadvertently exploit and silence women. Maynard draws her analysis from her own experience as a community organizer and feminist activist, so it reads as a bottom-up grassroots investigation, in spite of the complexity of its ideas.

Megan Lee's essay "Maybe I'm Not Class-Mobile; Maybe I'm Class-Queer" describes the author's experience as a poor student at McGill University, her feelings of invisibility and powerlessness, how this experience affected her relationship with her working-class family, and how her struggle is tied to her gender and race.

Several of the pieces explore Indigenous feminism and the counterpoints and critiques it provides to mainstream and/or white feminism – Theresa (TJ) Lightfoot's "So What if We Didn't Call it 'Feminism'?!" outlines the difficulties of reconciling capital-F Feminism with the values of Native communities struggling for self-determination. "Resisting Indigenous Feminism" is a vivid and instructive conversation between two young Native women as they discuss their relationship to feminism as both a concept and a practice. Other writers tackle Muslim feminism, sex work, male feminists, the media, and body image.

Feminism for REAL offers what *Talking the Walk* does not: a sense of how feminism affects the lives of women on a day-to-day basis, how it can be used as a tool to fight oppression, and how it must be continually critiqued in order to stay relevant and charged with a sense of purpose. Although it can be a difficult read in its challenge to dearly-held principles, it's also an inspiring and necessary one. Here's hoping for more like it. mrb

Anna Leventhal is a writer living in Montreal.

The Ego and the Scalpel

PHOENIX
The Life of Norman Bethune
Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart
McGill-Queen's University Press
$39.95, paper, 464pp
9780773538191

Norman Bethune remains one of the most famous Canadians in history, a man whose life and achievements inspire both veneration (especially in China), and resentment (from those who view his adherence to communism as un-Canadian). Following his death in China in 1939, Mao himself wrote a commemorative essay, and a special tomb was built for Bethune by his grieving supporters. He was proclaimed a hero of the Chinese revolution, and his fame spread from that point onward. A unique and engaging personality, Bethune was subsequently the subject of numerous books and films, including a recent biography by Adrienne Clarkson. The obvious question then is: does anyone really need a new 400-plus-page biography?

The answer to that question has much to do with the authors of *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune*. Roderick Stewart, a leading authority on Bethune, is the author of two previous biographies and the editor of a collection of the famous surgeon's writings. In 1999, he and his wife Sharon Stewart, also a published author, embarked on years of extensive travel and investigation into Bethune's activities. They uncovered new information on every phase of Bethune's life, including undocumented writings by Bethune and new interviews with friends, colleagues, and confidantes. With almost a hundred pages of detailed annotations and source notes, *Phoenix* is obviously intended to be the authoritative volume on Bethune and the primary source for future scholars.

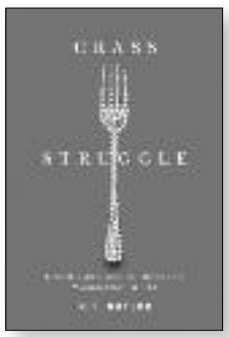
The book's title comes from the prevailing pattern in Bethune's life. An impulsive, temperamental, and difficult man, he habitually pursued his objective to make a difference in the world with little regard for those around him or for what was actually in his own best interest. Egotistical and driven, he unfortunately had little regard for the egos of others and would end up alienating the people who could help him the most. His ambitious initiatives in the medical field met with limited success. It is not surprising that, having little patience or respect for the bureaucracy of institutionalized medicine, he preferred the extreme environment of the battlefield, where he was free to run things as he wished, though even there he managed to unsettle his superiors and create trouble. His inability to get along with various colleagues and officials during his work as a surgeon with the Canadian Medical Unit in the Spanish Civil War led to his early exit from the country. He had helped to save thousands of lives, but had also done damage to his own reputation.

Bethune, as always, found a way to reinvent and rededicate himself. First he became something of a celebrity, embarking on a speaking tour and calling for the establishment of socialized medicine in Canada. He also publicly asserted himself as a communist, speaking out on what he viewed as the progressive achievements happening in the Soviet Union. But it was of course in China that he truly made his mark. In 1938, he travelled to Shaanxi province and joined those led by Mao Zedong. He worked to support their efforts to repel the Japanese, performing emergency surgeries on war casualties and civilians alike, and establishing much-needed training for medical staff. His commitment was such that he insisted on eating the same meagre rations as the Chinese foot soldiers. This likely led to a weakened physical state, making him vulnerable to the infection that cost him his life. In October 1939, he sliced his finger with a scalpel while conducting surgery. He died of septicaemia within a matter of days.

Readable and highly detailed, *Phoenix* is a comprehensive portrait of a singular Canadian whose life, even away from the battlefield, was of a dramatic and tempestuous nature. The biography avoids idealizing the man and instead highlights his faults and weaknesses as much as his strengths, arguing that the former were as instrumental as anything else to the shaping of his life. mrb

Michael Carbert is a Montreal writer and the editor of *Encore Literary Magazine*.

Lifestyles of the Rich and Heinous



CRASS STRUGGLE
Greed, Glitz, and Gluttony in a Wanna-Have World
R.T. Naylor
McGill-Queen's University Press
$29.95, paper, 471pp
9780773537712

While McGill economist R.T. Naylor certainly abhors the tastelessness of flaunted wealth, his new book, *Crass Struggle: Greed, Glitz, and Gluttony in a Wanna-Have World*, has a far more serious aim. Through almost overwhelming research, he reveals that the trappings of extreme wealth, far from being merely benign display, are often the products of a supply line that is rife with squalor, corruption, and criminality, and destructive to law, society, and the environment.

Crass Society is a brick of a book: 381 pages of text and 90 pages of notes, covering virtually every category of possession a rich person might covet: from gold and precious metals to jewels to fine art to antiquities to wine, ivory, exotic pets, even cigars. No indulgence of the privileged classes is safe from his scrutiny.

The depth of the research is staggering. We learn about not only the noxious technology for the industrial extraction of gold from ore, but also the numerous manipulations for turning a mediocre stone into a glittering gem. We learn how to doctor relics, stamp ancient coins in modern basements, adulterate wine, and mass produce old masters, all while taking advantage of tax incentives. If this weren't an exposé, it could be a primer on how to be a successful con artist.

This is a compendium of time-honoured practices of fleecing the rich, and Naylor enumerates the scams with relish. We share the embarrassment of museums and private individuals as the centrepieces of their collections – Rembrandts, Gauguins, and Monets – are revealed as clever fakes. The targets of these con games come off not so much as avaricious, but naïve. Even the caviar the poor rich dupes devour as comfort food after such debacles turns out to be nothing but lumpfish eggs.

Too bad then that much of the book is unreadable. The preface is a rant and there is virtually no narrative coherence to connect the research. The author bounces from incident to incident haphazardly, zigzagging from continent to continent and casually ignoring centuries to get to the next juicy morsel.

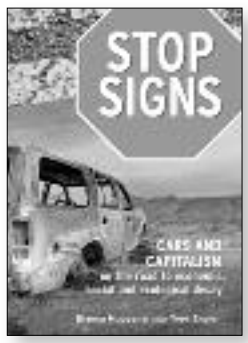
And where is the perspective? We never learn how industries, from gold mining to art auctioning to winemaking, are supposed to work legitimately. As Naylor presents things, every aspect of luxury-goods production is irredeemably corrupt and has never been otherwise. The author comes off like an army mess-cook. He gives you lots of stuff to chew, but you're not sure what it is supposed to be. Worse, Naylor tries to compensate with sarcasm. Some is quite funny – e.g., "conniving cabal of crab fishermen," "McSushification of [Japan's] billionaire class" – but most is pointlessly caustic and directed toward "parasitocrats," American neocons, and similarly easy targets. Other examples are silly, even bizarre: the ruler of Zaire is "president-for-life-who-is-now-dead Mobuto Sese Seko"; Jesus Christ is a "charismatic fellow with hair as long as a hip California vintner." (And Naylor gets it wrong. Jesus didn't dilute wine; he turned water into it.) Talking about fake collectibles, Naylor says this: "$2.87 … is probably the 'fair market value' of a signed first edition of a classic text by a University of Chicago economics professor who carried off his discipline's 'Nobel prize,' something as genuine as a lot of other items traded on the collectibles market today." The dig is at the late Milton Friedman. But why? Neither the man nor his work is mentioned anywhere else in the book.

This incoherence and pettiness seriously mar what could have been, in more disciplined hands, a deliciously entertaining romp. mRb

T.P. Niedermann is a freelance writer and editor in Montreal.

The Road to Hell is Paved

STOP SIGNS
Cars and Capitalism on the Road to Economic, Social and Ecological Decay
Bianca Mugyenyi and Yves Engler
Red Publishing
$21, paper, 259pp
9781552663844



Ever since its inception, the car has been admired as the pinnacle of modern progress, as well as independence and adulthood. In the United States alone, there are 246 million registered cars with 210 million licensed drivers behind their wheels.

In *Stop Signs*, by Bianca Mugyenyi and Yves Engler, individuals who cannot exist without their four-wheeled machinery, are labelled *homo automotivis* and come under scrutiny. Divided into two parts, *Stop Signs* juxtaposes personal travel anecdotes from the authors' car-less journey around America (and the challenges arising from this vehicle-less state) with a thorough and intersectional analysis of the automobile's damaging influence on various spheres of life.

In the authors' view, the car is responsible not only for crimes of environmental damage, but also for causing racial disputes, capitalist greed, and even the oversimplified nature of modern art. ("Lone circles and black squares as art? Blame the car.") Some of the negative outcomes of the car are familiar, such as the destruction of the natural environment through oil industry activity, road construction, and carbon emissions. Other startling and more insidious consequences of cars and the urban development surrounding them are highlighted, such as the destruction of ethnic communities by highway construction that cuts through them (Atlanta, Georgia) or by suburban sprawl that drives out local businesses.

The book's major strength is the authors' ability to demonstrate the domino effect of the auto industry's negative influences, which reach far beyond individual health concerns to the lack of political action that breeds exploitative capitalist entities like Wal-Mart. Mugyenyi and Engler argue that Wal-Mart's success came from the well-paved highway system: with "moving goods literally stored on the roads, wholesale costs are socialized. Instead of individual corporations, society pays."

The authors' resolution to achieve a car-less state is truly radical and without compromise. Rather than encouraging the many passive forms of car resistance that focus on individual abstention rather than systemic change, Mugyenyi and Engler urge readers to consider how government and labour systems must change in order to achieve a true pedestrian utopia.

The reading experience is not always a smooth one. For most of the book, the authors discuss their findings, relegating their travel experiences to the first few paragraphs of each chapter. The switch between the "subjective" travel account and the "objective" facts is often abrupt.

Though Mugyenyi and Engler effectively use sources already published to make their point, the absence of first-hand conversation with at least some of the activists they quote seems like a missed opportunity for original and updated information. Furthermore, the lack of copy-editing produces glaring spelling errors that are distracting at times ("MacDonald's" and "McDonald's" on the same page, as well as "Wall Mart" and "Wal-Mart").

Minor errors aside, Engler and Mugyenyi's activist backgrounds give the book its unique and impassioned tone, whether they are juggling the personal account of getting around the United States on Greyhound buses or synthesizing all existing facts about the automobile industry. The result is a smart and expansive critique of car-dependent North America that is convincing and frightening. This book is an eye-opener for everyone – from the stubborn car-lover to the anti-car activist who wants to brush up on the facts. mRb

Rosel Kim is a writer and blogger living in Montreal. Her personal blog is *What Are Years?* (www.jroselkim.wordpress.com).

Love Clippings (from page 9)

people she meets through the ads. The book takes a bizarre political turn when Sylvia develops qualms about one of the friendships (with the trophy wife of a Fortune 100 CEO). In one ridiculous passage, the CEO readily explains that he is part of a conspiracy in which top corporations have partnered with evangelical preachers to brainwash the public and "influence the election of the friends of the corporate system … even one of us as president of the United States." Sylvia's response is a cliché: "Images flashed in my mind of black children with swollen bellies lying on the ground in Sudan …"

Writing Personals strikes the most resonant notes when Kuby's characters share sage insights into friendships and romantic relationships. The most touching example is one character's argument that the most compelling reason to marry is to have someone who is your equal be a witness to your life. "You are truly alone … if the only memory that contains your past is your own," the character notes.

We also hear from characters who argue that personal ads turn us into commodities ("One says, 'Here's what I want to buy.' And the other says 'That's just what I'm selling'.") and from others who propose that personal ads are merely "the way destiny operated in current time."

"I've never really put a value judgment on it," Kuby says of the use of personal ads and the relationships that grow out of them. But perhaps, she says, their deliberate nature might actually make the resulting relationships more successful. "A lot of times when people get married or get involved with someone, they haven't made up their minds: I will love this person. They're kind of like 'Yeah, I love him but something might happen that will change that.' Maybe loving someone is just the intention of loving." mRb

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based fiction and non-fiction writer.

Native Sun

WILFRID LAURIER
André Pratte
Penguin Canada
Extraordinary Canadians
$26.00, hardcover, 221pp
9780670069187

André Pratte is the editor-in-chief of *La Presse*. He is the author of five books on politics and the media, including a biography of Quebec Premier Jean Charest titled *Charest: His Life and Politics*, and an exchange of correspondence with sovereignist Joseph Facal titled *Qui a raison?* His newest book, *Wilfrid Laurier*, is part of the Extraordinary Canadians series, published by Penguin Canada and edited by John Ralston Saul, that aims to provide historical insight into our own times.

Anne Lagacé Dowson: How did you first encounter Wilfrid Laurier in your own life, before becoming a journalist and biographer?

André Pratte: I knew that Laurier had been the first Francophone to be Prime Minister, that he had said that the twentieth century would be Canada's century, and I knew streets, schools, and a University were named for him, but that's about it.

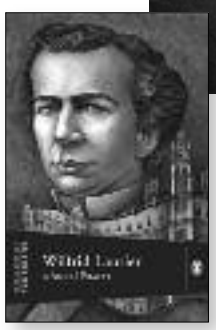
Near Saint-Roch, which was the workers' area of Quebec City at the time, you find on a very dirty street, a statue with just the name "Laurier" – no explanation. That started me thinking how strange it is that this man is almost forgotten. A man who was so important, you know: Leader of the Opposition for more than thirty years, Prime Minister for fifteen years, at a very important juncture of our history. For French Canadians at the time he really was a hero. In most houses at the time, French Canadians had a picture of Laurier. He was nearly a god.

ALD: I'm trying to think of an analogy – kind of like Rocket Richard?

AP: To understand why Laurier was so important you have to realize that Canada at the time existed on paper, but there was no nationalist Canadian feeling. Canada had been a bill written by business people and lawyers. Most people thought that Canada would be forever a British colony, and that English would be the dominant language. What French Canadians liked about the federation was that at least they would have their own government, the provincial government of Quebec, which would be French. So the fact that thirty years after Confederation a French Canadian would become Prime Minister of this huge English country was something totally unexpected on both sides. Only that makes Laurier extremely important. The fact [that] he achieved this changed the country forever.

ALD: He was of the view that a Canadian identity needed to be created – Catholic, Protestant, English, French, and inclusive – a radical idea at the time. And he was a great orator. Have you seen any footage of him speaking?

AP: There is a bit of film at the National Film Board when you can see him for about five seconds. Some people have told me that there is a recording of him, but no one has found it. To me that was very frustrating. I am a journalist, I am not a historian, and it is very important to me when I write about someone to see him and hear him. There are all kinds of things written about Laurier, especially by his adversaries, things like when he spoke French, he spoke with an English accent, and when he spoke English, he spoke with a Scottish accent, because he learned English with a Scottish family when he was a child. His father, even [though] he was a nationalist and a "Rouge," thought it was extremely important for his son to learn English. So Wilfrid was sent twenty miles from the village of Saint-Lin, where he was born, to an English village school for two years, and this is where Laurier became nearly perfectly bilingual. He learned that English-speaking people were not the devil incarnate, as many people thought in French Canada, like the Catholic Church was repeating all the time.



ALD: So is that the genesis of the idea that you could be both English and French and have a foot in both worlds and both cultures?

AP: Yes. And what makes Laurier so important, and, strangely, what has been forgotten, is he knew that those tensions between French and English, Catholics and Protestants, would always remain. [But] he thought people should realize that they shared common principles: the rule of law (Laurier was a lawyer by training), the British Parliamentary system. When he became Prime Minister he went to London, to resist attempts of the British government of the time, to have colonies participate in military conquest. He impressed the English press – the British papers were full of stories about Laurier and what a great speaker he was. When Laurier came back from this long European trip, he was greeted as a hero by both French and English Canadians. Thousands in Quebec City and Montreal turned out to greet him. That was a great achievement.

ALD: He was called the great conciliator and a silver-tongued orator – he also hewed to something called the "sunny way"?

AP: The sunny way comes from a fable where the sun and the wind compete to try and get a man to take off his coat. The wind blows and blows, and the man just keeps his coat on. And then the sun says, "wait a minute I'll do it."

The sun shines and shines, and it becomes so hot that the man takes off his coat. Laurier said that his way was not blowing and blowing, being angry and threatening, "my way is the sunny way" – that is, dialogue, compromise, understanding, tolerance. It is a difficult way because you are stuck between extremists. Laurier was seen by many French Canadians as a traitor, too ready to compromise, while many English Canadians thought he was taking Canada away from the Empire. Laurier was inspired by Abraham Lincoln – you know this famous letter by Lincoln to a New York journalist in which Lincoln says "My priority is to save the union. If I can save the union by freeing all the slaves I'll do so, but if I can save the union by freeing none of the slaves, or part of the slaves I'll do that." And the priority for Laurier was to have Canada remain a united country. If Canada didn't endure it would be a problem for both English and French Canadians, who would probably become part of the United States, and [in the case of the French] lose their language and their religion.

ALD: What would Laurier think of today's political situation?

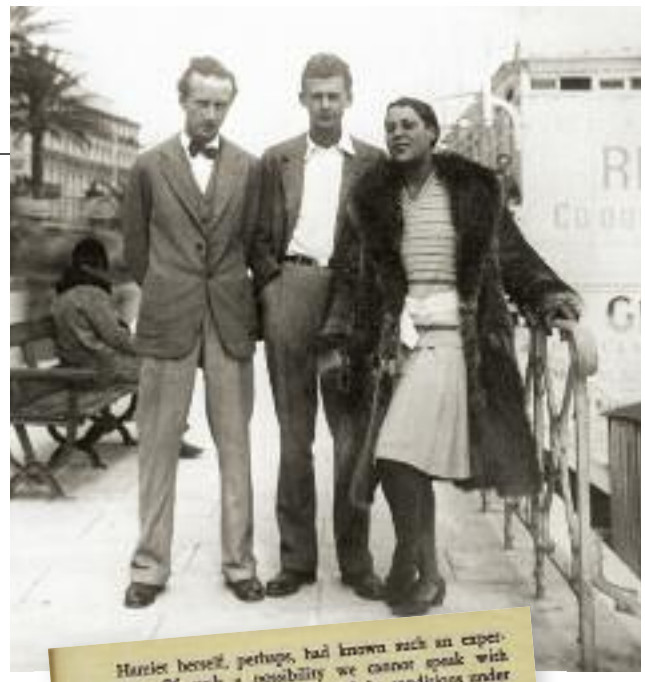
AP: He was hopeful that the sunny way would eventually diminish tensions between English and French Canadians. And they *have* diminished. If you read the newspapers of that period there was a lot of prejudice, and while there still is today, it was much worse at that time. He would be disappointed to find that there is a separatist movement that is still quite powerful. I think he hoped that the country would become more and more united. He said in one of his speeches that we will hear less and less about Ontario and Quebec, and more and more about Canada. He would be disappointed. But this doesn't mean that his way doesn't work. If we had had more Lauriers over the years we could have made a few more strides towards a more united country. mrb

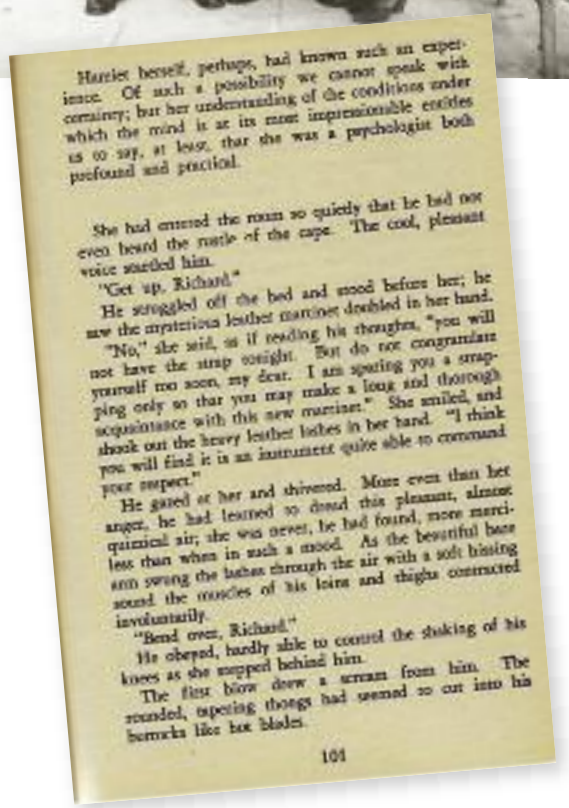
Anne Lagacé Dowson is an award-winning radio journalist who was a longtime host of CBC Radio's "Radio Noon." She is currently host of a Saturday afternoon show on CJAD in Montreal.

THE MILE END CAFÉ

feature by Peter Dubé

Too Sexy for the Canon





Harriet herself, perhaps, had known such an experience. Of such a possibility we cannot speak with certainty; but her understanding of the conditions under which the mind is at its most impressionable entitles us to say, at least, that she was a psychologist both profound and practical.

She had entered the room so quietly that he had not even heard the rustle of the cape. The cool, pleasant voice startled him.

"Get up, Richard."

He struggled off the bed and stood before her; he saw the mysterious leather mariner doubled in her hand.

"No," she said, as if reading his thoughts, "you will not have the strap tonight. But do not congratulate yourself too soon, my dear. I am sparing you a strapping only so that you may make a long and thorough acquaintance with this new mariner." She smiled, and shook out the heavy leather lashes in her hand. "I think you will find it is an instrument quite able to command your respect."

He gazed at her and shivered. More even than her anger, he had learned to dread this pleasant, almost quizzical air; she was never, he had found, more merciless than when in such a mood. As the beautiful lash arm swung the lashes through the air with a soft hissing sound the muscles of his loins and thighs contracted involuntarily.

"Bend over, Richard."

He obeyed, hardly able to control the shaking of his knees as she stepped behind him.

The first blow drew a scream from him. The rounded, tapering thongs had seemed to cut into his buttocks like hot blades.

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Top: Graeme Taylor, Glassco, and Sibley Dreis on the boardwalk at Nice, 1929.

Above: Excerpt from Glassco's *The English Governess*, reprinted with the permission of **Mr. William Toye**, literary executor of the estate of John Glassco.

Below: Brian Busby

There are ways in which biographies, interesting ones at any rate, act as reference points; for better or worse, they turn a life (whether typical or atypical) into a marker for a particular historical moment, or use it to summarize events too complex for readers to grasp in other ways. Though this is not their only effect, it is a compelling one.

Certainly, the notion of reference points came to mind while reading Brian Busby's engaging life of John Glassco, *A Gentleman of Pleasure: One Life of John Glassco Poet, Memoirist, Translator, and Pornographer.* Glassco is best remembered for his *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, a chronicle of his years as part of the expat literary milieu in 1920s Paris. His most successful title, it became a bestseller and earned high praise; the *Financial Post* called it a "masterpiece" and Malcolm Cowley characterized it as "fresher and truer to the moment" than even Hemingway's version(s). It was not long, however, before *Memoirs'* veracity came under attack by many, including such prominent critics as Louis Dudek. Similar doubts about truthfulness attached themselves to other books by Glassco. Happily, Busby's biography is meticulously researched and catches many questionable details and variant accounts of events while never losing sight of the overarching structure of his subject's project as an author. That's no small strength when the project includes much playful self-mythologizing, because, however charming Glassco's delight in fabulation and light touch with mere fact may be, it complicates things for biographers.

The diversity of Glassco's oeuvre also troubles one's ability to pin it down. It includes, besides his renowned "memoir," translations, volumes of poetry (one of which won the Governor General's Award), and – not to strain politeness – some fairly *recherché* porn. The aptly titled *A Gentleman of Pleasure* is successful in tracking down these more subterranean publications and situating them within both Glassco's body of work and the tangled history of the publishing scene of the times. These chapters are revealing and amusing as Glassco's whimsical sensibility led him to weave a yarn around even the naughtiest of works. He lavished a fascinating textual labyrinth of *faux* authors and histories on such titles as *Temple of Pederasty* that adorned them with depth, nuance, and back-story. Busby's uncovering of such elaborate pranks offers us some of the pleasures of a literary detective novel.

That said, the idea of "reference points" has a flip side; it evokes the question of the canon, which haunts this book like a ghost. Given the range and strength of some of Glassco's work, the degree of official recognition it received during his lifetime, his privileged background, and the period in which he was active (one in which the very idea of CanLit was cobbled together), why is it not more solidly ensconced on Parnassus with the work of such friends as Atwood or F. R. Scott? Although playing games with the truth (however amusing) is a factor in his being overlooked, there must be more to it than that; Glassco's choice to write pornography is surely central to his imperfect canonization. Most of the man's prose fiction dealt with such specialized interests as rubber fetishism and flagellation and was given titles like *Fetish Girl* or *The Fatal Woman* which, even in our own day, would disincline many to being seen reading it in the metro. The effect decades ago must have been significantly greater. Moreover, fabulation as a strategy, however problematic, can be safely inscribed in a rich literary tradition (writers have flirted with the fiction/non-fiction divide as far back as Defoe) and provides career-advancing fodder for academic researchers. The polite attention that erotica has begun to receive among cultural theorists notwithstanding, taboo still clings to sexually explicit writing. Indeed, with the exception of Sade, Bataille, and a handful of Modernists, there are relatively few porn writers accorded serious and sustained critical attention. And if the situation is somewhat better for queer writers and queer theorists, how could it be otherwise given how sexuality is at the heart of such identities and the cultures arising from them tend to reflect this?

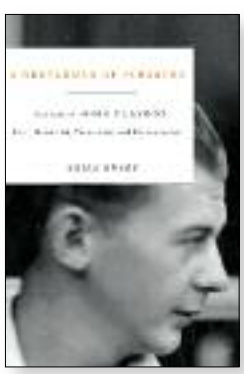
> Caveats aside, the space in the canon where one should find books intended to arouse both mind and genitals is still overwhelmingly blank.

Caveats aside, the space in the canon where one should find books intended to arouse both mind and genitals is still overwhelmingly blank. One must ask: if literature is meant, as some might argue, to reflect human life in all its complexity, why is it that of all our activities, sex alone is so rigorously excluded? If books are meant to move, provoke, and stimulate us, why is the stirring of sexual feeling marginalized? Of course, there are no simple answers to such questions, nor am I prepared to hazard any guesses of my own (particularly in a brief review essay), but at a moment in which much of literary culture is radically transforming, perhaps a glance at other basic assumptions is in order. Surely these questions matter? And equally surely, Busby's fine treatment of Glassco's complex, artful, and provocative body of work gives us an excellent opportunity to ask them. mRb

Peter Dubé's most recent book *Subtle Bodies*, a fictional biography of French surrealist René Crevel, is nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award.

From the book

This country has not treated Glassco well. His important translations of Hector de Saint-Denys-Garneau's *Journal* and collected poems were issued in small editions, received little notice, and slowly drifted into that sad status we refer to as "out of print." Glassco's own verse has fared ever so slightly better … The Canadian reaction to Glassco's pornography has been typically one of ignorance, indignation, and silence. In this area it is foreign publishers who, recognizing significant commercial potential, have shown the greatest dedication … The disregard demonstrated within this country has even extended to Glassco's best-known work, *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. When resurrected in 2007 under the *New York Review of Books* imprint, it had been out of print for nearly a decade. There is no Canadian edition.



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