

# mRb

FALL 2011 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

## Sometimes you *can* go home again

With *Winter*,  
Massey Lecturer Adam Gopnik  
reclaims his Canadian Self

### QWF Shortlist

See page 14 for a complete list of this year's QWF Literary Awards nominees

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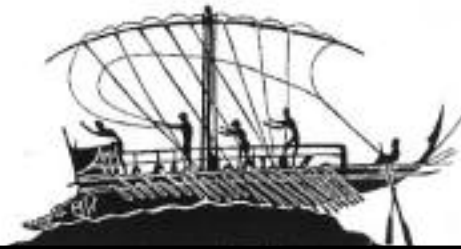
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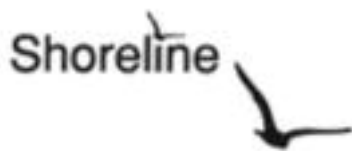
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A: dreamt

Q: This past May, during a speech he was giving at a campaign event, Newt Gingrich's cell phone went off revealing his ringtone to be which ABBA classic?  
A: Dancing Queen

Q: What Sci-fi writer is credited with coining the term "cyberspace"?  
A: William Gibson

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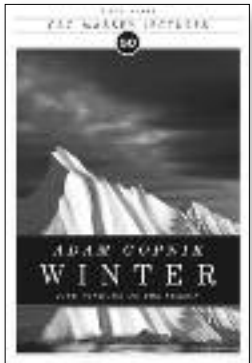
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Illustration by Geneviève Côté  
from *Ella May and the Wishing Stone*



ILLUSTRATION BY GEOFF ISHERWOOD



**WINTER**  
**Five Windows on  
 the Season**  
 Adam Gopnik  
 Anansi Press  
 \$22.95, paper, 256pp  
 978-0-88784-974-9  
 uncorrected proofs

By Ian McGillis

## Adam Gopnik Makes Winter Fresh Again

**A**dam Gopnik has been reliably surprising us for so long now that there might be a danger of taking him for granted. Step back a bit from his work, though – whether it’s his expository essays in *The New Yorker* (dogs and the alleged decline of America post-9/11 being two recent subjects), the personal accounts of living in Paris and New York collected in *Paris To the Moon* and *Through the Children’s Gate*, or his groundbreaking cross-disciplinary art criticism – and it becomes clear just how unusual the fifty-five year-old’s approach is. In ways different from,

yet kindred to, those of fellow Canadian Malcolm Gladwell, Gopnik takes an old form and makes it new, choosing counterintuitive routes into his subjects and proceeding, through the marshalling and interpretation of both high- and lowbrow sources, to make us wonder how we ever saw it any other way. *Winter: Five Windows on the Season*, the book version of Gopnik’s upcoming series of Massey Lectures (lectures he first practiced “mock-Massey”-style in front of select friends and family at home in New York) turns out to be an ideal venue for the display of his strengths. A

potentially awkward hybrid form – in Gopnik’s words “amended transcripts of lectures I once gave, designed to be the vocal templates of lectures I have yet to deliver” – is made pleurably readable through sheer enthusiasm and freshness of thought. Goethe, Dickens, Milton, Beethoven, and Napoleon are explored, but so are Joni Mitchell, the origins of central heating, the evolution of our perception of icebergs, the formation and popular mythology of snowflakes (turns out they’re *not* all different), and the birth of modern hockey – not on country ponds, Gopnik insists, but in Montreal neigh-

borhood rinks, in a process leading directly to his beloved Montreal Canadiens. That last example illustrates something that’s been evident in Gopnik no matter how far afield he has ranged: that his perspective as a Canadian, and more specifically as a Montrealer, informs and underpins what he does. The Massey selectors made an inspired choice for 2011.

IAN MCGILLIS: What was your initial reaction when asked to be a Massey lecturer? How familiar were you with the history and lineage of the series? Are there any of your predeces-

sors' lectures that stand out in your mind?

ADAM GOPNIK: Growing up in Montreal, I was a loyal – no that's the wrong word, *faithful*, it has more religious overtones – a faithful listener of the CBC and of *Ideas* particularly, and of course the Masseys were part of that experience. I seem to recall Jane Jacobs on cities and Leslie Fielder on literature most vividly. Since being graced with the opportunity to speak myself, I've dutifully read up many I missed, and was particularly struck by Ignatieff on rights and John Ralston Saul. It's an extraordinarily distinguished list, and I seem to be the ringer on it, a jester among giants. But perhaps – I certainly hope – everyone (who's invited) feels this way.

When the invitation arrived – on my iPhone, standing in the snow on a February day at a bus stop on Madison Avenue and 58th Street – I felt, in an odd way, repatriated. I had a chance to articulate a piece of my own experience, the Canadian part, that had been denied to me before. I wanted a subject both Canadian and universal, and Winter as a subject came immediately to mind, and my very Canadian mother-in-law – Gudrun Bjerring, the first Canadian woman film director – as its dedicatee. By the time the bus got to 86th Street, I was ready to go... I won't say *home*, for I'm all too well aware that there's something infuriating, for those for whom home is not a site of sentimental pilgrimage, but simply the place they live, about those of us who live away and still blithely claim it, but *back*. Montreal made me, or a big part of me, and Montreal in winter particularly. All of the key experiences that happen to people between the ages of ten and thirty – rejection, infatuation, falling in love, making love, watching hockey, finding a vocation, discovering art, leaving home, rediscovering home as a refuge, reading Milton, for God's sake, at the Mister Steer on St. Catherine Street – happened to me in Montreal.

IM: Are you comfortable with the idea of these five pieces being read as stand-alone essays? Would you, indeed, even categorize them as essays?

AG: I'd like them to be read as... lectures. I love the lecture as a literary form, something very different from the written essay or from the essay-read-out-loud. There are a few published lectures of that kind, where you feel the breathless pace of the speaker, even at the price of a slightly more awkward sentence-making. Isaiah

Berlin's lectures on romanticism come to mind, and so do Nabokov's on literature. Though written, both have a spoken sound: terse and illustrative in Nabokov, avid and eager to please in Berlin. A lecturer has to exhort and to explain, where an essayist works by implication, irony, and indirection. There are transcriptions of Auden lecturing in the forties that sound like a poet speaking, without the elaborate numbered units. My own friend and teacher Kirk Varnedoe, tragically, left his last series of Mellon lectures unfinished – that is, he died before he could revise them. We had only the transcripts to publish. I liked the result. It sounded more like Kirk talking and thinking than any other text of his.

IM: Can you say any more about the "mock-Masseys" you mention in your Author's Note? Were they interactive affairs incorporating feedback from the others in the room, or did you try for a simulation of the lecture hall experience?

**"All of the key experiences that happen to people between the ages of ten and thirty – rejection, infatuation, falling in love, making love, watching hockey, finding a vocation, discovering art, leaving home... happened to me in Montreal."**

AG: I wanted to be sure that the printed text had some of the sound, the rhythm, of the spoken word. And I suppose I wanted to simplify my life a little – I was at work on another book as I wrote this one – by seeing what I had to say before I tried to write down in sentences what I thought. More important, I wanted to simplify my sentences a little, or if not simplify them – they still look quite comma-bound on the page – put them back in touch with speech. So I assembled some patient friends and family – our upstairs neighbour, the wonderful writer Patty Marx, and her boyfriend, the polyglot Paul Roosin, were regulars, the writer Alec Wilkinson made a special visit for the hockey one, while the kids, to be honest, wandered in and out of the room as I spoke – and harangued them for an hour by candlelight from the top step of our living room. They listened patiently, made notes, and then shared them. Some went well, others badly. My assistant, Ariel Knutson, then transcribed them with fiendish concentration, and they became the basis for revision and re-revision. I'd love to do it again,

though I don't notice much clamour from the cheap seats for a repetition.

IM: To what degree, if any, was the "boning up" you did on these five themes an educational or revelatory experience for you?

AG: I would be lying if I said that the fundamental foundations of the series altered much from beginning to end: the two simple ideas that govern and unite the five lectures – that we have a richer idea of outside once we're safe inside, and the inside is visible in the way we sing or paint or talk about the outside; and that winter is an eternal challenge to our habit of naming, organizing the world – remained constant. What I did learn, in spades, or snowflakes, is *how*. The wind blowing, if you like, was mine, the snowflakes being blown, all unexpected.

IM: I once attended a lecture by John Ralston Saul in which he chided his fellow Canadians for being the only winter country that complains about the cold and snow, saying that as a nation we are in a kind of collective denial. He cited a trip he had taken to Sweden, where he noticed that nearly all public buildings incorporate a large cloak room very near the entrance. In Canada, he said, we never know where to put

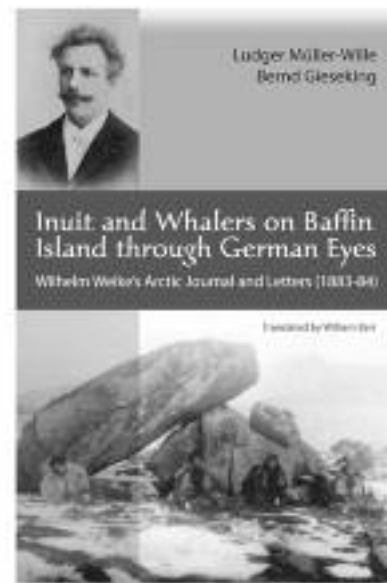
our coats. Do you concur with any of this? Do you notice, on returning here after long periods abroad, that we are any more or less a "winter nation" than when you were growing up in Montreal?

AG: I'm not sure. That's a nice observation of John's about the Scandinavian coat closet – though as one married to a woman of Scandinavian descent, I wonder if it doesn't reflect the Swedish gift for order as much as their comfort with winter: I expect that when Swedes strip for a summer skinny dip, there's also a large locker room nearby where they put their clothes. Swedes are neat folks. It's true that Canadians do whine about winter more than you might think, and only latterly, sort of secretly, admit to liking it.

IM: Was your choice of cultural references influenced at all by their greater or lesser degree of fame? In some of the more obscure cases – and I think it's fair, without implying any judgment,

continued on page 10

## FALL NONFICTION FROM BARAKA BOOKS



### INUIT AND WHALERS ON BAFFIN ISLAND THROUGH GERMAN EYES

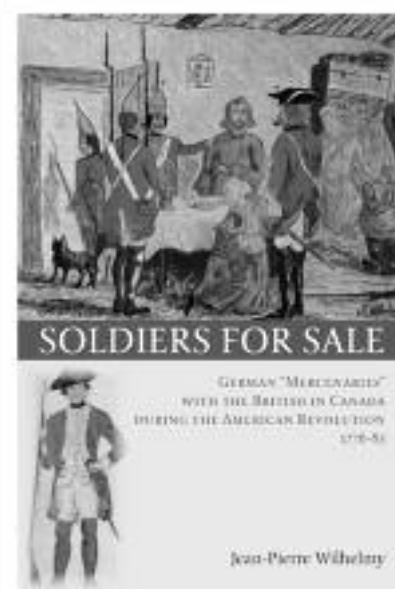
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A gutsy,  
coming-of-age  
story.



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**With a Closed Fist**  
GROWING UP IN CANADA'S  
TOUGHEST NEIGHBOURHOOD

Kathy Dobson

Starting in 1968, eight-year-old Kathy Dobson shares her early years growing up in Point St. Charles, one of Montreal's poorest districts. When student social workers and medical students from McGill University invade the Point, Kathy and her five sisters witness their mother transform from a defeated welfare recipient to an angry and articulate community organizer.

"This is as authentic a description, language and all, of life in the Point during the 60s and 70s as it is possible to get. Poverty, hunger, love, abuse, ingenuity, survival, intelligence, language wars – they are all there; fierce optimism and laugh out loud humour carry the story along. That is the way it was. I know, I was there."

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# non-fiction

## Canadian Idols

**GEORGES AND PAULINE VANIER**  
Portrait of a Couple  
Mary Frances Coady  
McGill-Queen's  
University Press  
\$34.95, cloth, 296pp  
978-0-7735-3883-2  
uncorrected proofs



There are very few iterations of the word “service” today that carry with them a positive connotation. The terms “service industry,” “public service,” “servitude,” “customer service,” denote pools of inertia, if not outright personal or professional failure. But it wasn’t always thus, as we are reminded in Mary Frances Coady’s *Georges and Pauline Vanier: Portrait of a Couple*.

The original power couple, Georges and Pauline Vanier partook in – or were close observers of – many of the great events of the early twentieth century. “I ask only to serve,” was their personal as well as public maxim.

Born to a Francophone father and Irish mother in Montreal, George (he was to Gallicize his name later, adding the “s”) Vanier was studious and seri-

ous. Not long out of law school, he joined the Canadian army at the outbreak of World War I and was instrumental in founding Canada’s first French Canadian battalion – the famed 22nd Regiment, better known as the Van Doos.

This war experience, including the loss of a leg, served Vanier well his entire life, helping to forge his not-exaggerated reputation as stalwart, intelligent, and courageous. Appointed to a series of increasingly distinguished positions – aide-de-camp to Governor General Lord Byng; member of the Canadian military delegation to the League of Nations; secretary to the High Commission in London; Envoy Extraordinaire to France – Vanier’s rise through the ranks of Canadian diplomacy was never without merit.

Nor was it ever without Pauline. A woman of little formal education, Pauline Vanier (née Archer) was unanimously regarded as critical to her husband’s success. A relationship founded in their shared spirituality and dedication, it was also, over time, a very real partnership: “We work as a team,” Vanier reiterated to External Affairs at the end of World War II. For his part,

Lester B. Pearson, then ambassador to Washington, communicated to Georges the high praises “which I hear about you and your mission, and, more particularly, about your wife.”

Through early hardships, frequent trans-Atlantic moves, tumultuous events, and five children, the Vaniers forged a complimentary relationship out of radically different temperaments. Drawing from their diaries and copious letters to each other, Coady has ready access to very personal struggles, fears, and ambitions. The author’s real strength, however, is in perceiving how these struggles intersect and reflect the world around them. From the distinct differences in their Catholic faiths, to the battlefields of World War I, to the fall of France to Nazi occupation, to the post-war years of shuttle diplomacy, to Vanier’s appointment as Canada’s first French Canadian Governor General, *Georges and Pauline Vanier* is also a compelling history of the first half of the twentieth century.

Along with the Vaniers, secondary characters come vividly to life. Julian Byng, the British diplomat who led the Canadian charge at Vimy but who is

best remembered for the “King-Byng Affair,” is jovial, opinionated, and loyal. Loathing “pomp and ceremony and pretension,” he remains the couple’s closest friend until his death.

Charles de Gaulle, on the other hand, in spite of the fact that Vanier was the only foreign diplomat during World War II to recognize (and lobby for) de Gaulle’s leadership and the role of the French resistance, consistently repaid the debt in diplomatic snubs. This culminated in 1967, when he sent a low-level minister to Vanier’s funeral. Three months later he managed to express a national rift for generations to come with his “*Vive le Québec libre!*” from the balcony of Montreal’s city hall.

In refreshingly clear prose built upon tremendous research, Coady has written the story of a couple who served Canada not only in their lifetime, but through future generations. To wit, the Vanier Institute of the Family as well as the humanitarian work of their children: Jean Vanier (l’Arche), daughter Thérèse (pioneering female physician), Georges (Trappist monk at Oka).

It’s tempting to assume that a very modern and preoccupied Canada has lost that mid-century sense of service and public good. But the words of Jack Layton, as relayed by Reverend Hawkes, cannot help but sound slightly familiar: “How I live my life every day is an act of worship.” Georges Vanier couldn’t have said it any better. **ms**

Leila Marshy is literary editor of *The Rover*.

# Books & Breakfast 2011



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SUNDAY NOVEMBER 20 10:00 A.M.

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ECW Press

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WITH A CLOSED FIST  
Vehicule Press

**DAVID A. WILSON**  
THOMAS D'ARCY MCGEE,  
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## The Human Stain

### FOOLS RULE

Inside the Failed Politics of Climate Change

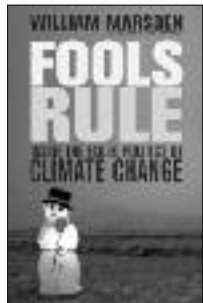
William Marsden

Knopf Canada

\$29.95, cloth, 336pp

978-0-307-39824-6

uncorrected proofs



There is something comical in journalist William Marsden's description of the 2009 Copenhagen summit. In the opening chapters of *Fools Rule: Inside the Failed Politics of Climate Change*, he unpacks the proceedings of the two-week conference and lays out an absurdist labyrinth of greed, mistrust, and simple bureaucratic idiocy. Marsden describes Copenhagen as "a clumsy tango of often half-hearted participants" in a "dance marathon" who "stagger about the floor inching forward, wavering and retreating." But, the author's charming and often humorous narrative approach aside, it is tremendously disheartening to realize that, as a breathless world looked on, infused with all the hope and urgency of change, the eminent leaders of the world met behind closed doors and bumbled like an awkward high-school student union.

Marsden's central argument that there exists a fundamental disconnect between politics and nature leaves little room for hope. He explicitly critiques the local, bottom-up approach advocated by some environmentalists (like Holly Dressel and David Suzuki in *More Good News*), and argues that top-down decisions in the political spectrum rapidly wipe out any small gains that are made. It's a bleak landscape he paints: the United States, half-heartedly present at international conferences and choked by its own Senate; China, insistent on securing compromise from the United States before moving forward; India, the fast-growing CO<sub>2</sub> producer on earth, bent on putting every citizen in a car; Canada, money-hungry and overpowered by a Conservative political agenda. Countries are personified in Marsden's account, and they rail at one another with the same insecurities and uncertainties as individuals, their actions ringing with the insolence and entitlement of children.

*Fools Rule* balances this political perspective with a scientific account of global warming deeply informed by Marsden's personal experience. He describes travelling into the Arctic and lays out the science of glaciology and ice age cycles. He struggles to extricate information

from scientists muzzled by the government – many of whom are discouraged, financially stifled, and pessimistic about the future – and presents a terrifying portrayal of melting ice caps and rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels. He explains the dangers of methyl mercury latent in the Arctic and how warmer temperatures could ultimately poison our oceans. It is refreshing to have the science presented from a journalist's perspective, accessible, yet not oversimplified; and more so to have presented why the possibility of a decisive proof of global warming is so problematic from a scientific standpoint.

Peppering this 300-page political and scientific study, Marsden's narrative intrusions are occasionally strange, (a page-long description of an aging woman on a flight to Cancun is particularly jarring), but they help break up denser passages and lighten the urgent tone of the book. The trouble is that Marsden struggles to end on a note of optimism after effectively tearing apart all hope. It seems to be a trope of many environmental studies to end this way, tying up hundreds of pages of bleak forecasts with sudden and brief parenthetical hope for the future.

"Stupidity breeds unbridled confidence," Marsden explains in the closing chapter. There is deep-seated psychology behind the political behaviours he describes, and there appears to be little way around them. The politicians with the least scientific knowledge are the most emphatic and sure of themselves. While Marsden advocates putting important international decisions in the hands of an assembly of experts – engineers, scientists, economists, technicians, and others – to create a global action plan, it seems painfully unlikely given the power struggles his books takes pains to showcase. As a journalist with decades of experience and a number of titles to his name, Marsden might have explored in greater detail the nuances of the solution he suggests.

Amidst the warming temperatures, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels, perhaps that is the most uncomfortable thought of all – that even as humanity has struggled to create a sustainable and livable future, our collective human psychology has deadened any hope of real progress. **msb**

Sarah Fletcher is Web coordinator at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. She holds a master's degree in English Literature and is a regular contributor to *The Rover*.

## Reading for Dummies

### READING THE 21ST CENTURY

Books of the Decade, 2000–2009

Stan Persky

McGill-Queen's University Press

\$34.95, cloth, 296pp

978-0-7735-3909-9

For Socrates, writing ideas down induced intellectual laziness. Not only does the skill of writing "introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it;" it also cheapens one's education because the student thinks that the text can replace the living, breathing teachers who modify their discourse according to each pupil's needs.

Whether or not you agree with Socrates about the dangers of the written word, his warning is remarkably relevant to the digital age. Constant Internet access has, for many, displaced an indispensable part of our thinking. As soon as a fact is in dispute, out comes the smartphone, and – ta-dah! Yet we remember nothing. Even worse, our interest in intellectual questions seems to have flagged.

This problem is at the centre of Stan Persky's *Reading the 21st Century*. Persky has analyzed the statistics showing a decline in reading, writing, and general knowledge in today's students. He has also tried to teach works of Spanish literature to a group of undergraduates, only to find that they hadn't heard of the Spanish Civil War. Or Albert Camus. Or Augusto Pinochet. "How do you discuss a novel about the nature of historical memory with people who have no historical memory?" he writes.

Persky calls this a contemporary "cultural and political crisis," and his new book of criticism attempts to look at how books published between 2000 and 2009 deal with it. He is interested in how the books of great writers, from novelists like Philip Roth and Javier Cercas to cultural commentators like Tony Judt and Richard Dawkins, address the loss of much of their younger audience to electronic "infotainment."

It's an important question, but *Reading the 21st Century* doesn't answer it. Persky simply reviews every book he mentions, quoting liberally,

often without connecting the authors' ideas to his central theme.

Persky is obviously a talented book reviewer, and he writes very engagingly about the books he loves, but part of the problem is that he doesn't get down and dirty with the prose he's writing about. For example, of the unconventional writing techniques in *Elizabeth Costello*, Persky writes: "I suppose postmodern critics would describe all this as 'destabilizing the text,' but whatever it is Coetzee is doing in this virtuoso performance, it's surprisingly compelling." Even if you dislike postmodern criticism, you're bound to find an explanation of "destabilizing the text" more fulfilling than no explanation whatsoever.

Yet when he is writing about books that directly relate to this cultural crisis, he is at the top of his game. Mark Bauerlein's book *The Dumbest Generation* provides evidence for the up-and-coming generation's lack in education, and Persky does a fine job not only of presenting this

information but also of convincing us that Bauerlein isn't an alarmist. And he is right to take issue with Bauerlein's attribution of the problem to the revolutionary ideals of the 1960s.

Even when he ventures off topic, Persky writes about some amazing ideas and wonderful plots. We learn about Edward Said's interest in the kind of artist whose end-of-life style reflects unresolved problems rather than comfort in one's own oeuvre. We lose ourselves in the snowflake-like structure of Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, a novel about a poet investigating a series of suicides related to the prohibition of wearing headscarves.

Despite its flaws, as an introduction to great works of literature of the past decade, *Reading the 21st Century* works. When Persky praises the essays of historian Tony Judt as "persuasive invitations to the life of the mind," he is describing his own book's achievement. This volume will likely inspire you to read and think about literature, and there can never be too many books that do that. **msb**

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



"... an eclectic and colorful collection of original art, poetry, and essays that unravel the world from bizarre and fantastic perspectives ... a refreshing variety of style and range of voice." – Utne Reader

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# Politically Enraged

## ROGUE IN POWER

Why Stephen Harper is Remaking Canada by Stealth  
Christian Nadeau  
Lorimer  
\$22.95, paper, 160pp  
9781552777312

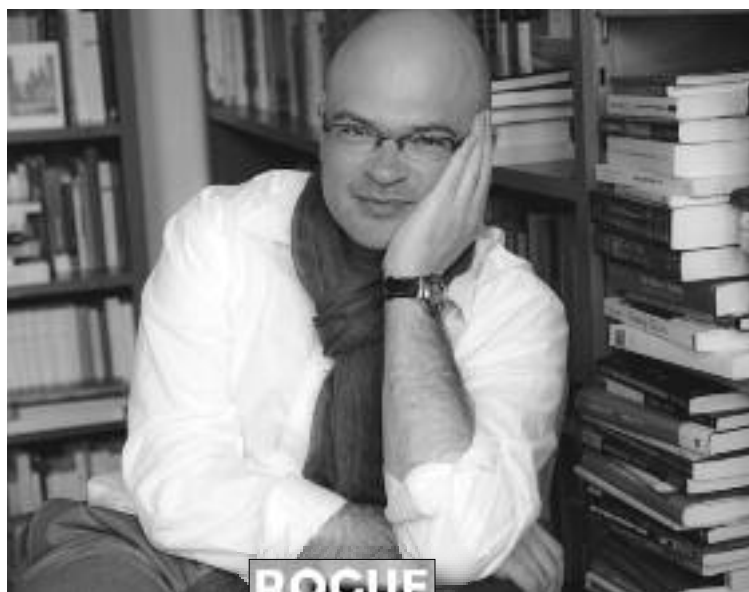
Christian Nadeau is hardly the first person to criticize Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party for their efforts to steer Canada in a more right-wing direction, nor is he the first to claim that the Harper government has scorned this country's democratic traditions. Over the past few years, such comments have become as ubiquitous as gripes about our weather.

What distinguishes Nadeau from most of Harper's detractors is that he writes from the perspective of a politically engaged philosopher who wants to link his activism with the insights of his academic field. With *Rogue in Power*, Nadeau attempts "to combine [his] professional commitments with [his] duty as a citizen." Nadeau aims to deploy the methods of philosophy to attack the strategies and values of the Harper government.

A political theory professor at l'Université de Montréal and the author of numerous

scholarly works, Nadeau hopes that this book will persuade a general readership that liberal principles are superior to the principles upheld by the Harper administration. By "liberal" principles, Nadeau does not mean those of the Liberal Party or of any other specific party, nor does he mean the libertarian principles that sometimes go under the name of neo-liberalism. Nadeau espouses the progressive strain of liberalism that insists that freedom goes hand in hand with civic equality and fairness in the distribution of resources.

In contrast, Harper sees freedom as threatened by the egalitarian aims of the welfare state, which he believes must be curtailed even at the cost of greater social and economic inequality. Nadeau argues that the Harper government combines this economically libertarian ideology with a non-libertarian belief that government should promote traditional moral values. Nadeau acknowledges Harper's willingness to be pragmatic, but he views this pragmatism as a mere tactical manoeuvre. Harper's long-term goal is the fundamental reshaping of Canada. If Harper succeeds, Nadeau fears that Canada will



have been transformed to the point of no return: regardless of which party is in power, Harper's principles will reign supreme.

Many readers may share Nadeau's belief that political philosophers should strive to influence public debate by making their ideas accessible to a wider audience, and agree with his frequently made claim that citizens need to be more politically engaged. Readers may also share a fair number of his misgivings about the goals and policies of the Harper government. Nonetheless, the book remains somewhat unsatisfying, largely because it covers far too many topics in too brief a space.

**If Harper succeeds, Nadeau fears that Canada will have been transformed to the point of no return.**

Only small portions of the book deal directly with political theory, but despite Nadeau's refreshingly jargon-free style, these sections are likely to leave non-specialists scratching their heads. Complicated theoretical distinctions, such as the distinction between the good and the just, are described in only a few sentences, and the ideas of high-calibre thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes are presented in a few short para-

graphs or less. Popularization can be a good thing, but Nadeau's attempt at popularization exceeds the limits of good sense.

The bulk of the book consists of Nadeau's attacks on the individual policies of Harper's government. Few policies are left unmentioned: the book covers dozens of topics from abortion to aboriginal policy. Unfortunately, almost no topic is analyzed in sufficient detail, and a bright and critically minded Harper supporter would probably not be swayed by these rather skimpy critiques.

Nadeau seldom acknowledges the reasons why some smart, well-intentioned, and highly informed people side with Harper on a variety of these issues. In this regard, the book shares a flaw with many undergraduate philosophy essays: it attacks a position without first making a serious effort to explain why an intelligent person might uphold that position. Readers already predisposed against Nadeau's target may find this book an enjoyable read, but they won't come away with many new insights. **mrb**

Jean Coléno holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Toronto and teaches in the Humanities Department at Dawson College.

# Escaping Winter

## JUST ONE SUITCASE?!

A. Margaret Caza  
Shoreline  
\$19.95, paper, 166pp  
978-1-896754-93-2



This is a memoir about travels, but not of the Marco Polo variety. The author and her husband, and sometimes the kids and the in-laws, mostly went to Florida for a few weeks in wintertime. If that sounds thin, perhaps it is. But the "adventures" here are so fondly recalled, and related with such naturalness, that things are nicely thickened up and it's hard not to cheer the little adventurers on.

At the very least, anyone who has ever holidayed by car will breathe an "I've been there" sigh at the recollections of missed exits, arguments over souvenir stand stops, and

grim, last-chance motel rooms found long after sensible people have stopped for the evening.

The author is A. Margaret Caza, born Margaret Crawford in Campbellton, N.B., in 1930, and married in 1952 to Renaud Caza – a Caza of the Cazaville Cazas, Cazaville being a farming community southwest of Montreal where Renaud operated a successful agricultural and construction equipment business. She wrote of their life together in an earlier book entitled *Walk Alone Together*.

Oddly, Margaret's biggest travel adventure was before she and Renaud were married, when she was trying to decide whether to marry him at all. A spell as a secretary at a U.S. Air Force base in Greenland

was just the thing to convince her to tie the knot.

The couple's early travels were relatively adventuresome, even if the author's recollections now don't always match the grandeur of the locations.

**This book is a reminder of the value of meeting life's little challenges with tact and openness.**

Her only comment on Chitren Itza was that it was "beyond hot and humid"; Spain in the off-season was unrelentingly rainy and cold.

She does make the point, however, that a local guide – in Spain, for the Cazas, it was a taxi driver named Pepe – can make a sojourn in a foreign locale endlessly easier and more interesting. And she takes the occasion to remember her pleasure, after getting out of the rain and into a good hotel, at "all the lovely

warmth that central heat and a good husband provide."

But after that, it pretty well settles down to wintertime trips to Florida, examples of Canadians' – and especially French Canadians' – preference for warm sun and sandy beaches over frozen pipes and three feet of snow. Of course, the trip is never straightforward. Renaud's reluctance to gas up and Margaret's tendency to doze when she's supposed to be navigating ensure a certain excitement. And the likelihood that the car is packed to excess with two or four or more family members, each with his or her own likes and needs, adds colour. Still, it's not the substance of the recollections as much as the warmth with which they're remembered that distinguishes the book. Accidentally going into the ladies' room, or disagreeing on the importance of bringing boxes of oranges home from Florida are hardly earth-shaking events, but

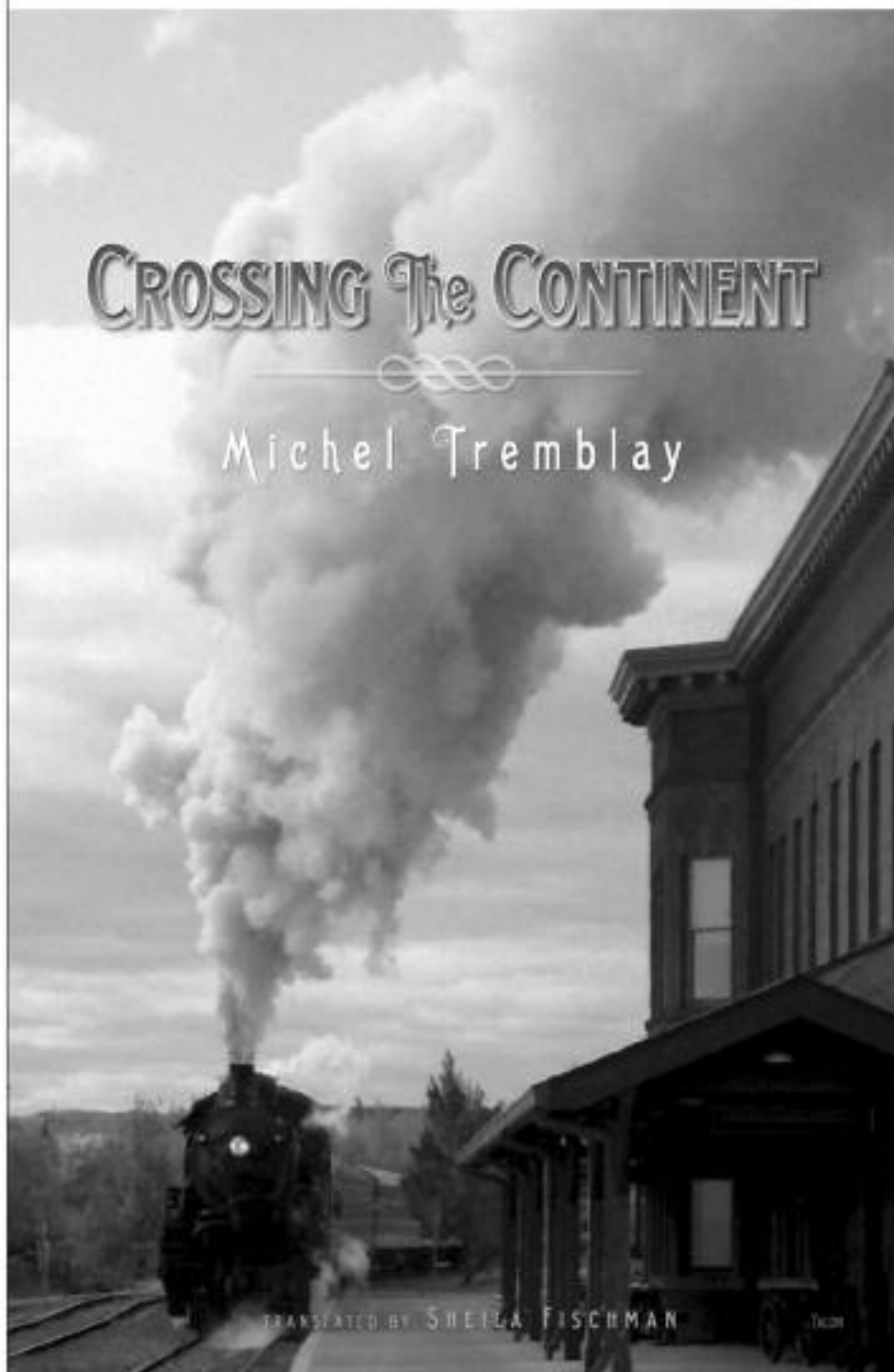
recalling them in an affectionate glow can be charming.

Eventually, the Cazas bought a mobile home in the Québécois' favourite home-away-from-home, Fort Lauderdale. And the annual stays there, however harried the comings and goings, were much-anticipated and important intervals. It is "this annual renewal," Margaret writes, that "sustains a harmonious relationship. A relationship that had merely, in fact, been relegated, like so much rutabaga, to the root cellar of making a living, for a general ripening, to be looked at anew by the grace of a winter vacation."

It ain't *On the Road*. But *Just One Suitcase?!* is a reminder of the value of meeting life's little challenges with tact and openness – and looking back on them with a smile. **mrb**

Dane Lanken's most recent book is *Kate and Anna McGarrigle: Songs and Stories*.

New this fall from Talonbooks ...



## Crossing the Continent

MICHEL TREMBLAY

Translated by SHEILA FISCHMAN

It is 1913, an era of industry and adventure, when *Crossing the Continent* is an enterprise undertaken by so many, young and old, of different cultures, unimpeded by the abstractly constructed borders and identities that have so fractured our contemporary world.

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\$18.95 / 288 pages / 978-0-88922-676-0

**At the end of Tremblay's career one will likely be able to sew together all his plays and novels and discover that we have been privileged to read the works of a veritable Québécois Marcel Proust.**

—*Canadian Book Review Annual*

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## Adam Gopnik

to say that the diarist Anna Brownell Jameson and the composer Harry Somers are obscure – is there a sense in which you're taking the opportunity to help make them better known?

AG: I never consciously chose to underline an obscure case in order to show off some obscure bit of learning. The trick, the big trick, with these lectures was to avoid at all costs the feeling of a seminar report. The subject is sufficiently large that you could simply cite stuff in place of thinking through stuff. So I made an informal rule that I wouldn't obsess on anything that I wasn't obsessed with, wouldn't pretend to be excited by things that didn't engage me entirely. There are some things that I talk of that I don't exactly like – Caspar Friedrich strikes me as a chilly and a bit spooky proto-Nazi in his work – but can't help being haunted by. So naturally when I found a new thing or author or composer that I did like, without reservations, it was thrilling. For the most part, the list of artists and writers analyzed – Dickens, Tchaikovsky, Monet, Trollope, Bishop, Jarrell, on and on – is a list of writers and artists I like and live with. But the new folks who came in – Jameson was one, Lawren Harris another – were especially welcome.

IM: Joni Mitchell's "River" is a perfectly apposite choice to represent one type of Canadian response in song to winter. Was your choice of that song the result of a whittling-down process from among some other candidates?

AG: In taking specifically Canadian things, which I certainly did, I wanted the rule to be, or at least felt, that it wouldn't be in because it was Canadian but because, being Canadian, it was as good as everything else I was talking about. Lawren Harris is not just good for a Canadian painter, but a remarkable painter; Joni Mitchell is a poet and artist of a rare quality – better than Dylan, with Lennon-McCartney and James Taylor the best songwriters of her generation – and rather than crowd in six Canadian songwriters to show I could, I cited one who was incised on all our souls. I wanted to bore down, if I could, on why certain pictures or songs move me as much as they do. I listen to "River" and though I'm neither a Saskatchewan girl on skates nor live in L.A., it always moves me to tears, makes me feel that something felt has become something known, registered, permanent. That interests me; how many different attitudes to winter you might compile in a Canadian record collection doesn't. I recall trying to say this to one of my art history professors at McGill years ago, that what I really wanted to understand was why certain pictures – I think Renoir's "Loge" was, weirdly, the one I chose to cite – seem to resonate beyond their simple subjects and treatment with all the perfume of a period and resonate in the mind as broadly as any novel. He looked at me as if I were crazy, and said what I was really interested in might not be art history but art appreciation. He said it as damningly as he could, but he wasn't wrong.

IM: Although a huge hockey fan, you say that "at moments (you) have been inclined to abandon" the game. How close are you, at this time of headshots and concussions and a general rising tide of violence, to acting on that inclination? Is there any convincing response that fans like you and I can give when non-believers say that the game has become irredeemable? I have felt, when faced with such views, that my very Canadian-ness is in crisis.

AG: I get furious about, and depressed by, the degradation of hockey, and like you I swear the game off only to come back again. The Chara-Pacioretti incident sickened me, even granting Chara every benefit of the doubt. Not least was the attitude – the chortling, he-got-him attitude – of the morally deranged Boston broadcasters and fans, and the more general attitude of the league under the morally deranged Bettman, too. In no other sport in the world – no other sport in the world – would that kind of thing be greeted with anything except an ejection and a long-term suspension. Zidane merely head-butted an Italian once, and he was in permanent disgrace, and rightly so. Sports are mock-combat, pretend-war. When we let them cross the line beyond, they become ugly rather than beautiful. What can you do? Hockey remains not only my favourite game but, as you say, a part of who we are, essential to who we are. To surrender the game to the fools is just too painful. We should form – under Ken Dryden's leadership? – a committee to Save Canadian Hockey For The World. I'd join in a Montreal minute. mrb

Ian McGillis is author of the novel *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry*, and a frequent contributor to the *mRb* and the *Montreal Gazette*.

# The Golden Girl

**W**riter Maria Meindl inherited thirty-eight boxes of papers from her grandmother Mona Gould. Mona was a big name at one time, but, by the 1960s, she was virtually forgotten. Born at the very time that Mona's career as a writer and broadcaster in Toronto was faltering, Meindl became her grandmother's most admiring and loyal audience. Now Meindl has written a fascinating history of her grandmother's brave attempts at living the life of a poet, and her own thoughts on life and freelancing.

**ANNE LAGACÉ DOWSON:** Some people are familiar with your grandmother's widely anthologized poem "This Was My Brother," but few are aware of Mona Gould. Why a book about her?

**MARIA MEINDL:** My childhood memories of Mona are vivid and disturbing, just the type of experience that ferments over the years and draws the attention back and back until you express it in some form. As soon as I sat down to write anything, Mona was just there. I couldn't *not* write the memoir sections of the book.

Just before she died, Mona left her papers to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. I'd taken on the job of sorting them and it made sense that I should go on to write the biography.

It was a real "should," though, and at times I resented it. I waffled for a long time before I admitted to myself I was writing the book. Judge Edra Ferguson (who had known Mona from St. Thomas, Ontario) called me up after Mona's obituary appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, and told me she would help me with the research, as if the book were already underway (even though at that point I was just coming to terms with the magnitude of sorting the papers). I found it impossible to say no to Judge Ferguson. That was a strong motivating factor!

I'm glad I did it, though. All of it.

**ALD:** You lived in Montreal and the Townships – how did that influence your work and life?

**MM:** I went to Bishop's University, and moved to Montreal for a couple of years afterwards. I thrived there. It was a revelation to me, that there was a big

world far away from the responsibilities I'd been carrying since birth. It was fresh, exciting, and *mine*. It was different enough (back then) that I felt like an expatriate, but also still part of Canada. I love Quebec and still go back regularly to visit friends and family, but it was really hard to find work in the early 1980s. Plus I felt a call – for better or worse – to come back home. I could not have put it into words at the time, but there was something I had to take care of or figure out here in Toronto. Mona was part of that.

**ALD:** What did you discover about the grandmother you thought you knew?

**MM:** Mona was a great spinner of yarns. Pretty much her whole life story had been – I won't say fabricated – but vigorously massaged. She never talked about the diligent way she had built her career. Nor did she ever talk about how much other women had helped her. All those details were in her papers. Interestingly, I had more admiration for the grandmother I discovered in the boxes than the one I thought I knew.

**ALD:** Mona was a character – tell us about Jungle Red and picture hats.

**MM:** Jungle Red is the colour of nail polish the characters talk about in *The Women* by Clare Boothe Luce. In the play, the colour symbolizes the willingness to scratch another woman's eyes out! Mona loved all that stuff, and she affected the Joan Crawford look with the big hat and the red lips painted to look squarish. All these trappings served as decoration, a protection, and as a kind of battle dress in the war she felt was constantly underway among women. As life went on, she started to

resemble Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard*. I don't think that was intentional, but I don't think she would have minded people saying so either!

**ALD:** She was inspired by Dorothy Parker and admired Katherine Mansfield – how did they influence her?

**MM:** Mona's witty verses were directly inspired by Dorothy Parker, and Mona was also brilliant at writing them. Katherine Mansfield was an idol, too, though Mona was unlike her except perhaps in looks. She patterned herself after these women, and the myths she wove about herself were drawn from their lives. Edna St. Vincent Millay was another one. In her day, Mona didn't have many role models in her own country, and she had a tendency to look outside rather than in, period. The introspection only came later in life when she was struggling emotionally and financially. Ironically, I think her poetry benefited from those difficulties.

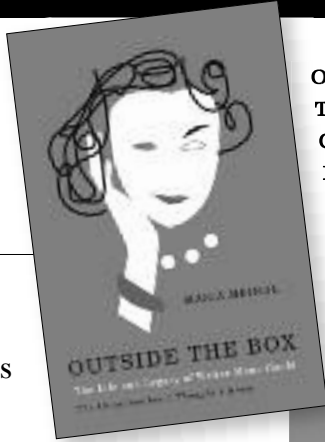
**ALD:** You say that Gould spent her life fighting failure, hiding the fact that she was always a step away from poverty and obscurity – why is that?

**MM:** She really believed that she could earn her living as a poet. Need I say more? Still, I love her for never giving up on that quixotic dream.

**ALD:** She knew P.K. Page and Dorothy Livesay – why did she not become as well known?

**MM:** Sorry Mona, wherever you are but ... Frankly, she wasn't as good. She didn't edit herself or let herself be edited rigorously. She didn't do the really tough, demanding part of the job, and it shows.

**OUTSIDE THE BOX**  
The Life and Legacy of Writer Mona Gould, The Grandmother I Thought I Knew  
Maria Meindl  
McGill-Queen's University Press  
\$34.95, cloth, 312pp  
978-0-7735-3911-2  
uncorrected proofs



But on the other hand, who cares? Mona defined herself as a popular poet. That's something that doesn't exist any more. A certain academic snobbery around poetry came slamming down after the war and Mona suffered from it.

She wanted to write a lot, and be read a lot. She wanted to touch people and speak to the important occasions of their lives in a way that gave them an outlet for their own feelings. At this, she was a brilliant success. She established venues – radio, magazines, newspapers – to share what she wrote. She got sheaves of fan letters. For her poetry!

Times are changing, though. I do believe her work will come back into favour because it's very moving, especially when read out loud.

**ALD:** The poem she is best known for contains an element of anti-war sentiment – what were Mona's political views?

**MM:** Later in life, she used to read the poem to school groups, along with the slogan *Make Words Not War*. She thought war was a terrible thing, to be avoided at all costs.

**ALD:** Dieppe is now considered to be a butchery – how did Mona cope with the loss of her brother?

**MM:** That's a complicated question. Even though she was a staunch pacifist,

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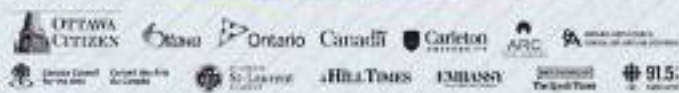
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## Maria Meindl

she never, never addressed the dissent that surrounded Dieppe. At least, I never heard her do so.

It came out clearly in her papers that Mona was under pressure from editors to put her emotions aside throughout the war. The poem seems all the more skilful in light of this because in the final couplet, she walks a fine line, and gets away with it. The poem was very widely distributed.

I think it cost her a lot to keep her feelings under wraps, though, and I don't think she ever recovered.

ALD: One of the reasons you wrote the book, and took the time to catalogue Mona's papers, is because there is little documentation of the life of Canada's literary freelancers. How does her life resemble and differ from yours as a freelancer?


MM: There's one big thing we have in common: fatigue. But don't we have that in common with all women? I loved coming across letters about Mona's busy life and that of her friends. I felt a kind of solidarity across the generations.

As for differences, at one point I *kvetched* in my blog: "Mona got the martinis, I get the footnotes." It always seemed like she had more fun, particularly when it came to the gruelling work of sorting her papers.

Also things are getting harder and harder for writers. The 1950s were really good times for freelancers. One could make a living. Even so, Mona was constantly stretched to the limit and spent her old age in poverty.

ALD: What are today's freelancers to think based on your and Mona's experience?

MM: When David Mason appraised the collection he wrote that there's little documentation of the lives of Canadian freelancers and I do think it's an important thing to think about because history can help us gain perspective on the present.

Even though Mona scorned material things she must have known deep inside that she was living through important times and that her "stuff" would be valuable some day. Otherwise she wouldn't have kept it. 

### This Was My Brother

This was my brother  
At Dieppe  
Quietly a hero  
Who gave his life  
Like a gift,  
Withholding nothing.

His youth...his love...  
His enjoyment of being alive...  
His future, like a book  
With half the pages still uncut –

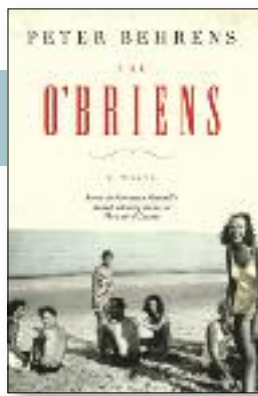
This was my brother  
At Dieppe –  
The one who built me a doll house  
When I was seven,  
Complete to the last small picture frame,  
Nothing forgotten.

He was awfully good at fixing things,  
At stepping into the breach when he was needed.  
That's what he did at Dieppe;  
He was needed.  
And even Death must have been a little shamed  
At his eagerness.

---

This poem first appeared in *Tasting the Earth*, Mona Gould, MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd, 1943.

Anne Lagacé Dowson is an award-winning radio journalist who was a long-time host of CBC Radio's "Radio Noon." Her column Bloke Nation appears in Hour Community.


**THE O'BRIENS**

Peter Behrens

Anansi

\$32.95, cloth, 514pp

978-0-88784-229-0

feature by Marianne Ackerman

# Talking 'Bout My Generations

One of the downsides of being a lifelong reader is that one rarely approaches a book innocently, free from the spoiler effects of hype and reputation. I was out of the country, away from the news this summer, when Peter Behrens' novel *The O'Briens* came to me in a near pristine state. His first novel, *The Law of Dreams*, won a Governor General's Literary Award, but literary prizes being only a hair's breadth away from a lottery, that meant little. It was the promise of a brick-sized tale spanning many decades in the life of a big Irish Montreal family that piqued my interest, and Behrens delivered beautifully.

It's 1887, Pontiac County, an English-speaking community on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, teenage Joe O'Brien and his four younger siblings are waltzing to the Victrola of an exiled New York Irish priest who has taken the orphans under his wing. The rest is about how Joe welds that advantage to a hard core of ambition fuelled by poverty and his father's abandonment of the family. How he seeks out and marries a woman who will provide their children with a civilized upbringing while he devotes his energy to earning money. And how the scars of struggle are worn in later life.

Behrens follows his many characters with the dogged passion of an aged aunt bent on hunting down and revealing all the juicy parts of life. The patriarch fades in and out of the focus. Sometimes we are taken into Joe's tortured psyche; elsewhere, he is observed from a distance, appearing to those who live with him – and the reader – cold, aloof, indecipherable.

*The O'Briens* is very much a study of character, and there are many great ones: Gratton, the occasionally irresponsible second son, free of Joe's sense of responsibility, thus lacking his focus; Tom, the obligatory priest, estranged from the worldly ambition that spurs the main branch; Iseult, the woman Joe loves and yet does not understand; their children, as complex and unwieldy as their elders.

This is the story of a family's progress from poverty to bourgeois ease, a mansion in Westmount, and enough money to make the idea of divorce in the 1930s not only possible, but comfortable. Then the brutal democracy of war, exposing the young men to battle and their women to

worry and waiting. Behrens is a diligent researcher. Leaving the personal for public history, he inspires confidence with deft descriptions of how Joe makes his first fortune in railroads, what Montreal is like for a successful postwar industrialist, and how a wealthy, Catholic family participates in the Francophone world without ever fully crossing over.

Although social history isn't its purpose, *The O'Briens* gives a fine picture of Anglo Montreal before the Quiet Revolution, a subtle yet important corrective to the stereotypical images thrown up by a more politicized time. The war-time chapters are reminiscent of Gwethalyn Graham's 1944 novel, *Earth and High Heaven*, except that Behrens injects a dose of existential angst into those romantic times, to create a contemporary sensibility.

Some reviewers have found that the novel loses steam in the last third, where the story approaches living memory. I thought Behrens did a fine job of finding a fresh idiom for times closer to our own. Conveying events through letters, snippets, brief scenes, quick changes, the various episodes appear like a series of photographs, from sepia to crisp black and white to Kodak colour. As the third-generation O'Brien children grow up, both the family and their story fragment into competing narrative lines, as they would in life. The final chapter is thrilling and poignant. A narrow escape for the patriarch, the ending could easily have turned tragic, making this a better book but probably not a more popular one.

Behrens' first novel, *The Law of Dreams*, was written during a lull in the fifteen-year labour of bring-

ing *The O'Briens* to fruition. It tells the story of Fergus O'Brien, grandfather of Joe, who left Ireland for America during the potato famine of the 1840s, passing briefly through Montreal. A tightly focused story proceeds with brief, punchy sentences, poetic language, snappy dialogue; an effective blend of intellect and emotion. A picaresque tale replete with the nail-biting swings of fortune and a high gore factor, it reads like a miniseries in waiting, at least compared to *The O'Briens*, an epic story best suited to the novel form.

Epic. Episodic. These words are generally bad news in the film industry, where Peter Behrens toiled for fifteen years, during an interlude between the publication of his short-story collection *Night Driving* (1987) and *The Law of Dreams* (2005). Learning this biographical detail after reading both books, I was tempted to speculate as to where that experience of storytelling had influenced his writing, and where it had not. His style is consummately visual, a series of scenes, as if the omnipotent author is holding a camera that can travel into people's heads. By and large, he resists Hollywood conventions in *The O'Briens*; at least the story is epic enough to

Behrens follows his many characters with the dogged passion of an aged aunt bent on hunting down and revealing all the juicy parts of life.

feel potentially true, and not just filmic.

Meeting Behrens this summer during his brief visit to Montreal for the Canadian Association of Irish Studies conference at Concordia University provided further insight into at least one reason why the novel feels true: he lifted huge chunks of detail from his own family history, using both the first and last names of family members, telling some secrets, spinning some lies.

Born and educated in Montreal, Behrens left as a teenager to work as a cowhand in Alberta, before settling in California. With his wife and their four-year old son, he now divides his time between a small town in Maine and small-town Texas. Keeping Montreal at a distance allows him to re-imagine the past with a certain amount of freedom, to fill in the gaps noticed by his youthful, observant self.

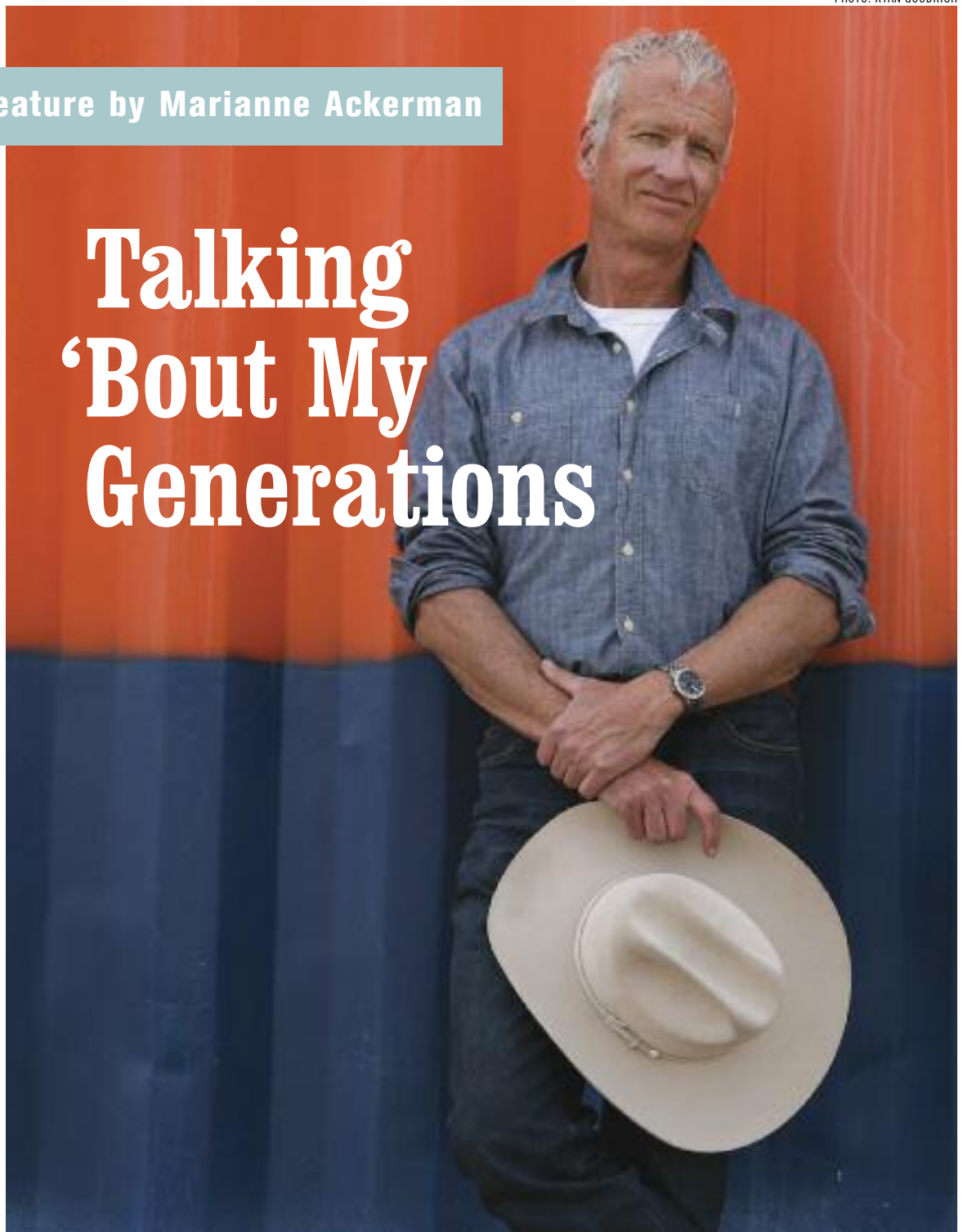
"In my grandfather's generation, the famine was always the

unspoken presence," he said. "Our family culture was shaped by the famine experience. I remember driving by the Black Rock with my grandfather. He seemed to have a visceral reaction to the memento of suffering. That and his own travails may explain the tendency of silence in our family. There are things you just don't talk about."

Though personal history provided material, he was not constricted by truth, cutting and amending the facts where necessary.

"Genealogy bores me," he says. "Family history is my thing. I guess it's my way of staking a claim." His next novel will draw on the paternal side of family history, the story of his father Herman Behrens who married an Irish woman. A tale no less riveting than Joe O'Brien's. mb

Marianne Ackerman's novel *Piers' Desire* is published by McArthur & Co.



2011

# QWF AWARDS

## Shortlist

### QWF Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature

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#### Côté, Geneviève

*Without You*  
Kids Can Press

#### Epstein, Alex

*The Circle Cast: The Lost Years of Morgan Le Fay*  
Tradewind Books

#### Silberberg, Alan

*Milo*  
Simon & Schuster

### Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction

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#### Hemel, David

*Midway*  
Cormorant Books

#### Nasrallah, Dimitri

*Niko*  
Véhicule Press; Esplanade Books

#### Thien, Madeleine

*Dogs at the Perimeter*  
McClelland & Stewart

### Cole Foundation Prize for Translation French-English

Sponsored by the Cole Foundation

#### Cowan, Judith

Paul Bélanger  
*Meridian Line*

*Origine des méridiens*

Véhicule Press; Signal Editions  
Éditions du Noroît

#### Lederhendler, Lazer

Nicolas Dickner  
*Apocalypse for Beginners*

*Tarmac*

Knopf Canada; Vintage Canada  
Éditions Alto

#### Winkler, Donald

Georges Leroux  
*Partita for Glenn Gould*

*Partita pour Glenn Gould*

McGill-Queen's University Press  
Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### Concordia University First Book Prize

Sponsored by Concordia University

#### Foreman, Gabe

*A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People*  
Coach House Books

#### Hannan, Jack

*Some Frames*  
Cormorant Books

#### Scowcroft, Ann

*The Truth of Houses*  
Brick Books

### Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-fiction

Sponsored by Champlain, Dawson, Heritage, John Abbott, and Vanier Colleges

#### Dallaire, Roméo

*They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*  
Random House Canada

#### Weisbord, Merrily

*The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das*  
McGill-Queen's University Press

#### Yanofsky, Joel

*Bad Animals: A Father's Accidental Education in Autism*  
Viking Canada

### A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry

Sponsored by Richard Pound in memory of his brother Robert

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*Skullduggery*  
Véhicule Press; Signal Editions

#### Foreman, Gabe

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#### Hannan, Jack

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poetry shortlist

Thursday November 24 2011 7pm

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GABE FOREMAN,  
KATE HALL &  
SINA QUEYRAS

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RUSSELL THORNTON

Thursday February 23 2012 7pm

DARREN BIFFORD &  
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# Doing More with Less

**A**s a rule, Daniel Griffin avoids using exclamation points. The economical, unadorned prose that is the distinguishing feature of his new short-story collection, *Stopping for Strangers*, doesn't provide much room for excessive gushing, punctuation marks included. Griffin's characters are damaged, often emotionally stunted types, as skilled at deceiving themselves as they are at deceiving others. They don't talk to each other so much as talk in the vicinity of each other. For instance, in "The Last Great Works of Alvin Cale," a finalist for the 2009 Journey Prize, the estranged relationship between a father and his dying son is summed up in a remark made by the son's wife who observes: "The things the two of you need to talk through could fill a book." Just not this book or the ten stories in it, which are all the more affecting for everything that's left unsaid. This is Griffin's first book and for a first-time author he is remarkably trusting – mainly he trusts his readers to read between his carefully crafted lines.

All of which may explain why spotting an exclamation point in Griffin's email correspondence – Griffin lives in Victoria, but he's writing me now from India where he's been since May, engaged in his "day job," setting up an office for the tech company he works for – is a little surprising. I've just emailed him to assure him that forty, which he's about to turn, is hardly old for a literary debut. In fact, it's about average. A short while later, he responds with the kind of enthusiasm that is out of character with, well, his characters: "Glad to hear I'm only about average in terms of age!"

Of course, you don't need to read between the lines to recognize the excitement mixed with relief in this comment. Griffin, who figures he's been revising the stories in

*Stopping for Strangers* for a decade, has had his share of what's-taking-so-long moments. Frustration and doubt have lurked, he admits, but then he adds: "writing's an act of faith in so many ways, and for the most part I've had faith."

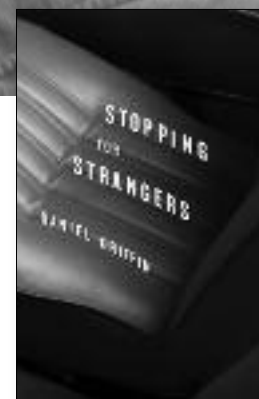
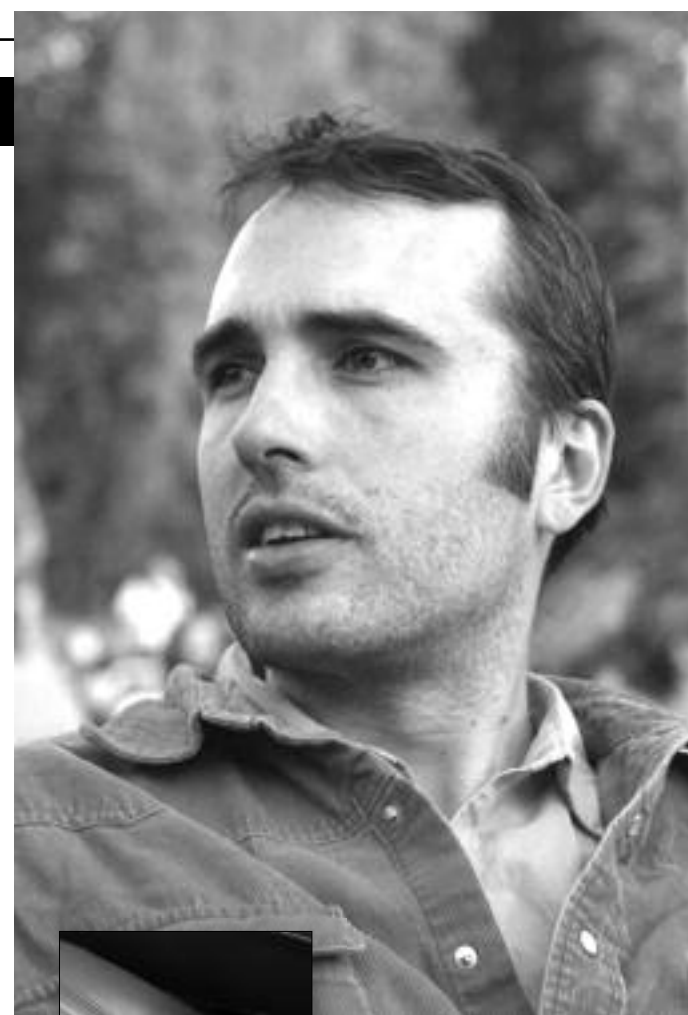
The word last spring that Esplanade, Véhicule Press's fiction imprint, was accepting his book finally confirmed that faith. He, his wife, and three daughters had recently arrived in Chennai, a crowded, noisy city in the south of India, and he was still jetlagged when he received the email with the good news. "It was about four in the morning," Griffin

recalls. "I stepped out into the street, walked around. I was thrilled of course. I'd been working on these stories for years, always with an eye to putting a collection together and now it was happening. There's life on the streets in India, even at that hour – people sleeping in rickshaws, or on the streets, a couple of people starting up their gas stoves to cook.... It was a surreal experience to have this great news to share and to be surrounded by people I couldn't talk to about it."

This is, incidentally, the kind of scene Griffin would go to considerable lengths to downplay if he were transforming it into fiction. The surreal elements would likely give way to something a little grittier and, in Griffin's hands, more complex as is the case in the title story. So while readers may expect "Stopping for Strangers" to turn into a predictably weird cautionary tale about picking up hitchhikers, it becomes even creepier the more deeply Griffin explores his characters' more subtle and human motives.

Andrew Steinmetz, Esplanade's fiction editor, met Griffin a couple of years ago at a literary event and his first impression was of "a shy, tall fellow from another era." But if Griffin's personal style seemed a little unusual, so did his prose. Steinmetz ended up reading "The Last Great Works of Alvin Cale" and was immediately hooked by "Daniel's style," which he describes as "very sparse and simple, but... (with) an edge." Likewise, in the blurb

"I'm a rewriter not a writer. For me, the true work is in the revision, the repeated effort to improve, uncover, polish, and re-envision.... The reality of being a writer is continual dissatisfaction."



**STOPPING FOR STRANGERS**  
Daniel Griffin  
Esplanade Books  
\$18.95, paper, 148pp  
978-155065-320-5  
uncorrected proofs

he contributed to *Stopping for Strangers*, David Bergen, the Giller Prize-winning novelist, also seems to have recognized in Griffin's stories a writer from another era: "(*Stopping for Strangers*) evokes echoes of the plain and piercing voice of Raymond Carver."

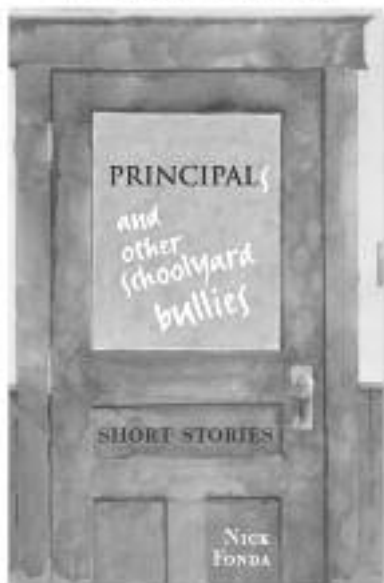
The comparison, here, to the 1980s poster boy for the much celebrated and later much maligned literary school of minimalism couldn't be more fitting, or flattering, as far as Griffin is concerned. He is, he acknowledges, "a big believer in influence" and Carver's stories, famous for their pared-down realism, were a revelation to Griffin when he first came across them in his early twenties.

"Reading (Carver's) stories made me want to write short fiction, it's as simple as that," Griffin explains. In addition to Carver and other American masters of the form like Ann Beattie, Griffin cites the influence of Canadian short-story writers like Guy Vanderhaeghe, Greg Hollingshead, Annabel Lyon and, of course, Alice Munro. Still, the Carver stories are the ones he keeps coming back to: "I visit them like old friends and like old friends they're a joy to spend time with, but they can also still surprise and amaze."

For his part, Griffin is also determined to find surprise and amazement in the seemingly ordinary moments in his characters' lives. Minimalism may have fallen out of favour

continued on page 16

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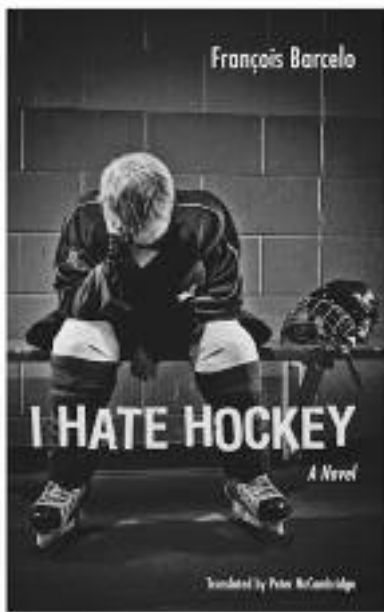
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**MINORITY REPORT**

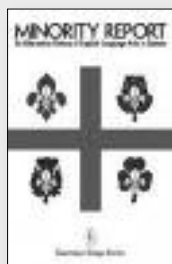
An Alternative History of English-Language

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On September 22-23, 2011, a segment of Quebec's English-language arts community – writers, publishers, dancers, musicians, actors, visual artists, etc. – gathered for the second State of the Arts Summit organized by ELAN (the English-Language Arts Network). Its purpose? To determine what the community can do over the next few years to survive, grow, and flourish.

After planning for a collective future, the Summit ended with the launch of the book *Minority Report*, a loving look at the history of English-language arts in Quebec. Edited by Dimitri Nasrallah, the book is the paper version of *raev.ca*'s history section. Created by ELAN in 2010, *raev.ca* (Recognizing Artists: Enfin Visibles!) is a website that provides a snapshot of the community: 154 ELAN members have profiles; there is an online map of English-language shows, venues, and artists in Quebec; and brief histories of the different disciplines represented by ELAN are available. It is these histories – published as is, without any additions, though without all the pictures – that became *Minority Report*.

The book is very enlightening: in the dance section, we learn that Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal was, in the 1950s, "one of only three Canadian companies to offer its dancers regular salaries;" and the music section reveals that Emile Berliner, developer of the gramophone, founded, in 1899, the first North-American record-pressing plant in Montreal. Interestingly, and perhaps the point of this exercise, it would appear that some of Quebec's artistic disciplines had a brush with death at one point in their respective history ("Le théâtre Anglophone à Montréal: pratiquement mort" declared *La Presse* on December 7, 1985) before resurrecting and thriving once again.

Unfortunately, these essays are somewhat superficial, giving a very quick – yet important – summary only. And though they are extremely interesting, readers who aren't familiar with a given discipline might be frustrated with the long lists of unknown names.

As the closing event for the Arts Summit, the launch of this book was a great way to hand over the torch to current artists. The histories chronicled in *Minority Report* end in 2010, but they create a platform from which current artists can keep developing English-language arts in Quebec. mb

Mélanie Grondin is editor of the *mRb*.

**Daniel Griffin**

a couple of decades ago, but this hasn't kept Griffin from absorbing its most enduring lesson: how to do more with less. Major things happen in *Stopping for Strangers* – infidelity, domestic violence, suicide, illness, death – but they tend to happen, quite deliberately, offstage. Instead, the reader is left to sift through the emotional residue of love and loss. In the collection's opening story, "Promise," it's the simple failure of two brothers, who were once close, to reconnect that leads to tragic consequences.

Family life and its secret fault lines are at the heart of most of Griffin's fiction. It seems the more the husbands and wives, the siblings, the parents and children in *Stopping for Strangers* care about each other, the more skilled they are at pushing each other's buttons. The opening lines of "Lucky Streak," for instance, reveal everything you need to know about a marriage close to collapsing under the pressure of financial hardship and mutual resentments:

After I lost my job, my wife hung up her shingle as a massage therapist. She emailed friends and family, told co-workers from her day job, put an ad on Craigslist and bought a second-hand massage table.

When it wasn't in use, we folded the table in half, turned it on its side and set the TV on top of it.

There is something about the throwaway effortlessness of a passage like this – its mix of dark humour and lighthearted trepidation – which points, of course, to a great deal of effort. "I'm a rewriter not a writer," Griffin explains. "For me, the true work is in the revision, the repeated effort to improve, uncover, polish, and re-envision.... The reality of being a writer is continual dissatisfaction."

So, too, is the reality of being human. The merits of *Stopping for Strangers* emerge ultimately from the care Griffin takes in establishing his characters in the grey zone where most of us live most of the time, that place between our best intentions and worst impulses. "These are... the situations that interest me," he writes, concluding a long email. "A flawed person struggling to do the right thing is so much more interesting than either a bad person doing a bad thing or a good person doing a good thing." mb

Joel Yanofsky is the author of *Bad Animals: A Father's Accidental Education in Autism*. Visit his website at [joelyanofsky.com](http://joelyanofsky.com).

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# poetry

## Play Pen

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Linda Besner's poems are seriously playful. The title of her book, with its pair of rhyming words, suggests that rhymes can echo at point-blank range. Children love playing with such sounds. Northrop Frye – a critic we don't think of as playful – said that lyric poetry was built on two principles from early childhood experiments with language: "babble" and "doodle," or sound play and structural play.

In *The Id Kid*, the wild energies of the imagination babble in a ludic fashion that doesn't eschew the shaggy

dog story and the bad pun. Derek Besner, who is perhaps the scientific father in the poems, has written on dyslexia, and Linda Besner uses one form of the disorder – seeing words in reverse – as a mirror into the soul. In "Matthew J. Trafford," a friend sitting on a "loots" by a hall mirror writes "YAG" on his forehead with the narrator's eyeliner, which unsettles gender assumptions. Is he gay? Has he appropriated the narrator's gender by using her makeup? Trafford is gay in the mirror but "yag" in the external world. Besner also plays with language by writing intertextually, incorporating lines from other people's poems into her own work.

Joshua Trotter's *All This Could Be Yours* has affinities with Besner's work. He too writes intertextually: eight of his poems contain quotations or reworkings of writings by other poets ranging from John Ashbery to Edward Thomas. Trotter is a punster and rhymester. The book has a number of sonnets, but they are refreshingly contemporary in tone and diction with no smell of formaldehyde. Trotter reworks the form freely, even writing some as two stanzas with seven lines each. One of them, "Rough Diamond," is a travesty of Shakespeare's familiar sonnet, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds." The poet babbles, as Frye would say, about the marriage of true minds and the mirage of two minds. Trotter's book aims at multiple voices speaking in a range of tones, rather than in a consistent style, but it has recurring elements that give an air of unity, like the three poems on faith and the three based on the life of Père Joseph Le Caron, the Franciscan missionary to the Hurons. With *All This Could Be Yours*, Trotter wants to see how

much play there is in the language; "play" in the sense that a mechanical device has play.

Gabe Foreman is even more playful than Besner and Trotter. In his *A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People*, he presents a series of portraits of human types in alphabetical order, from "Accidents" to "Zygotes." But no collection of "types of people" could ever be complete, as Gertrude Stein found in her interminable *The Making of Americans*.

Some of Foreman's poetic portraits are highly whimsical: "Collage Dropouts" (with a cartoon featuring a school of fish) is printed *en face* with "Colonels of Truth." The most amusing feature of the book is the use of cross references: "Buns in the

Oven" simply reads "See *Zygotes*" and "Zygotes" says "See *Little Bundles of Joy*." "Working Stiffs" says "See *Zombies*," and "Zombies" reads "See *Working Stiffs*." A liberal sprinkling of cartoons, sketches, fill-in-the-blanks exercises, and questionnaires with yes/no boxes provides another level of joking, a visual one. Is there a serious dimension to all this jesting? Foreman shows elements of strangeness in such hackneyed terms as "History Buffs," "Sticks in the Mud," and "Frequent Flyers." The metaphors in our terms for types of people can be defamiliarized by making them literal, as when a description of "Tough Cookies" begins with a recipe for cookies. The epigraph to "Old Flames" quotes Walter Lippmann: "A great deal of confusion arises when people decline to classify themselves as we have classified them." This immensely entertaining book declines classifications for us all.

Bruce Taylor has won the B.A.M. Klein prize twice. After a gap of thirteen years, he has published *No End in Strangeness*, a collection of new and selected poems. Taylor is a good poet, observant, and witty, with an interest in traditional forms. The opening section of his new work is dominated by three poems about adventures with microscopes. Taylor is sometimes garrulous, and the "Little Animals" poem runs to nine and a half pages without enough energy to sustain the performance. On the other hand, "Timon's Epitaph" is a twelve-line poem with force and brilliant rhymes. The selected poems section is cleverly called "Life Throes," and the examination of ordinary life is his strength. He probes the mundane for meaning. Bruce Taylor should be welcomed back to active duty as a poet.

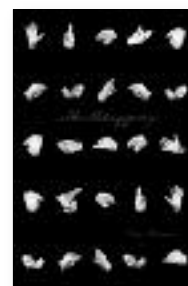
Jack Hannan published poems in chapbooks in the 1970s and 1980s, but *Some Frames* is his first full collection. His work is subtle and elusive. He has been compared to John Ashbery and there is a resemblance if not an influence: the poems mimic the processes of thought or narrative but rarely deliver an idea or a story. One of the poems which does have extractable content imagines Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman on the sidewalks of New York. When Hannan praises Rothko's "silent, enormous, and beautiful flat panels," we are being invited to think of Hannan's poems as a kind of Abstract Expressionism in word. Of Hannan, one can say he does it very well, whatever "it" might be.

Asa Boxer's first book, *The Mechanical Bird*, won the Canadian Authors Association Prize in 2008. His new collection shows the wit and confident tone that marked its predecessor, and a

title like *Skullduggery* lets us know that we have a playful, even tricky, poet. He can be too frivolous, devoting a poem (Cohen forgive him!) to "The Sisters of Murphy." The most amusing work is "Dante in Ikea," which escorts us through a consumerist hell. The poem is written in three lines stanzas, but Boxer doesn't go all the way by writing real *terza rima* like Dante, which requires an interlocking rhyme scheme. There are rhymes, but intermittent ones. In the second section of the book, Boxer imagines poets as firearms: the Browning Colt, the Burns Rimfire, the Dickinson Riddler – no one has ever done this before, not even Dickinson, who famously wrote "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun." The final third of the volume comprises a set of poems called "Friars Biard and Massé's Primer to the New World," a kind of hoax history of Canada modeled on the bizarre medieval travel writings attributed to Sir John Mandeville. The tone is a little too solemn and the folklore (or fakelore) is too whimsical: a bad combination. After reading this exercise in oddity, the reader should go back to "Fishing," a powerful poem that uses a worm on a fishhook to dramatize the cruelty by which we live. It is a better use of Boxer's considerable talent.

Leigh Kotsilidis arranges *Hypotheticals*, her excellent debut collection, in four categories: Evidence, Variables, Falsifications, and Conclusions, suggesting a scientific experiment. But by speaking of hypotheticals, instead of hypotheses, she implies that she will do more than explain the facts: she will imagine them, at least in part. Shortly after its founding, the Royal Society denounced the use of metaphor in scientific reports and called for naked language. Kotsilidis experiments with phenomena (anything

continued on page 20



# fiction

## Winter's Bones

### TELL IT TO THE TREES

Anita Rau Badami

Knopf Canada

\$32.00, hardcover, 336pp

978-0-676-97893-3

Canada is rich in Indo-Canadian fiction writers: Rohinton Mistry, Ameen Merchant, and Padma Viswanathan spring to mind, among many others. Most of their work has, like Anita Rau Badami's, either been set wholly in India (*Hero's Walk*) or divided between India and Canada (*Tamarind Mem, Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*). Now, however, we are seeing books whose characters are not only Canadian-born, but a generation or two removed from the supremely disruptive act of immigration. *Tell It to the Trees*, Badami's new book, is one of those. From birth to death, its characters are people of a snowbound landscape.

Varsha Dharma is the teenaged daughter of Canadian-born parents. Her family lives in the house that her mysterious immigrant grandfather Mr.

J.K. Dharma built in the wilderness outside a small town in northern British Columbia. When Varsha's mother dies, her father goes to India to get a new wife. Suman, the new bride, could not have imagined the cold and isolation awaiting her.

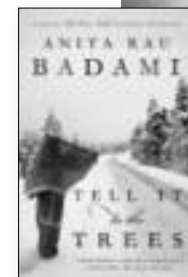
Varsha's father is a violent autocrat whose patriarchal power deforms all of their lives; he uses Indian culture as a reference point to reinforce his control over the family, even though he had never been there before going to find a wife. As a result, Varsha and her little brother Hemant become secretive, plotters who constantly struggle to suppress the details of the violence they live with.

The plot turns around the arrival of Anu, who rents the cottage behind their house. The novel opens with her death by hypothermia; it is the quest to find out why she died that pulls the reader through the story. Yet the momentum of that plot device runs out partway. Badami's style is didactic, explaining the obvious: the father is violent and the weather cold. She spends too long

setting up the action instead of moving the story along. New information appears much too late.

This story is undermined by the weakness of its imagining – which will surprise anyone who has read Badami's previous vivid tales. It feels as if it was meant to be a small family epic, starting with the tantalizing figure of Mr. J.K. Dharma, who moved so far from everything in search of silence. But we learn almost nothing more about him, and little else about the history of the family. We see that Akka, Varsha's ailing grandmother who lives with the family, is more complex than she first appears, but we are never allowed to explore her past. And it is often hard to credit the explanations offered for the behaviour of the other characters. Anu's shift from her intense Wall Street career to her tenancy in the back house is tough to swallow, and her death is equally hard to believe. The reader never comes to care for her, so her death, which ought to drive the plot, has little impact.

Varsha undergoes what would have been an interesting personality change if drawn with more finesse; instead, it comes across as one of those children-are-evil horror movies, but without the suspense. And the landscape, absolutely necessary to both the plot and the mood, is like a cardboard backdrop. We are told the snow is up to the



eaves, yet we rarely feel it blow into our faces, hear it crunch, or see the glare that makes one squint. The anticlimactic ending completes the reader's feeling that the book is built backwards in an effort to shore up a weak plot. If Anu's death were not announced at the beginning, perhaps Badami would have been forced to build more powerfully toward it. Instead, this potentially gripping Indo-Canadian Gothic is deflated and disappointing. **mrb**

Elise Moser's novel *Because I Have Loved and Hidden It* appeared in 2009; she is co-editor of *Minority Reports*, the anthology of Quebec Writing Competition winners.

## Burning Bush

### THE TATTOO

Pan Bouyoucas

Cormorant Books

\$21.00, paper, 240pp

9781897151990

“All the battlements are empty/And the moon is laying low/Yellow roses in the graveyard/Have no time to watch them grow,” croons singer-songwriter Beck in a tune so deliciously dark it makes grieving sound good. Consistent with the rest of his *Sea Change* album, “Guess I’m Doing Fine” signals the end of a relationship; “the yellow roses” evoke death – or dying love.

The significance of yellow roses is much more hybrid in Greek-Montreal writer Pan Bouyoucas's latest novel, *The Tattoo*. When twentysomething-year-old Zoe and her two girlfriends decide to get matching yellow roses tattooed just above their bikini bottoms, their interpretation of the symbol is modern and lighthearted. These young

Montrealers see it as a cheery sign of friendship and freedom: “We’ll be the sisterhood of the Yellow Rose—for life.”

Zoe secretly wishes for a less clichéd tattoo, but she goes along with her girlfriends' whims, not wanting to offend – a decision she later questions when her bohemian boyfriend teases her for choosing such a “pedestrian” or “conformist” design.

But, one must be careful of what one wishes for. Soon Zoe's desire for something exotic manifests, but not in a way she ever could have expected – or wanted. She is seriously alarmed when her tattoo magically begins to grow, sprouting magnificently luminous buds. Originally intended to seal a friendship pact, now, much like in Victorian floriography, her yellow rose inspires nothing



but jealousy. Suddenly her tattoo is a thorny source of alienation; her friends accuse her of trying to outdo them, and her boyfriend suspects infidelity: “The artist must’ve been quite smitten with you for him to put so much work and love into it,” says Daniel.

Desperate to dwarf her budding bush, Zoe frantically sets out to find help, yet a series of synchronistic events cause her to collide with a myriad of worshippers, all of

whom wish to exploit the miracle of her tattoo for their own cause. Each group is convinced that Zoe's tattoo is the answer to their prayers, a potential solution to major global crises, such as war and climate change. Women living in a feminist colony, for example, are excited about “giving the planet's unarmed forces the flag they needed to finally overthrow the masculine order that ruled the world.” Consequently, Zoe too begins to believe that her tattoo might be calling her to fulfill a higher destiny.

While skimming serious issues, *The Tattoo* remains a relatively light, and often humorous, read. Playfully cynical, Bouyoucas pokes fun at the self-serving side of social activism: Zoe is constantly disillusioned when supposedly well-intentioned humanitarians manipulate the media to meet their own selfish demands.

Also mocked is the whole notion of free will. Each time Zoe starts to take her mission seriously, an absurd shift in

circumstances sends her plans belly up. Her life resembles a Tarot reading in which the Wheel of Fortune pops up in every hand; thus, potentially profound topics – like memory and dreams – are never thoroughly explored.

Flirting with moral and supernatural themes, the novel has a vaguely mythological feel. Yet Bouyoucas offers none of the obvious moral-of-the-story conclusions of the traditional fable. His cliffhanger ending leaves readers wondering: Are Zoe's close encounters with death tragic or empowering? And should one, as in Beck's song, see the yellow rose as a symbol of grief, or, like the activists, as a promise of peace?

Given the general levity of the novel, readers turning the last page may also simply choose not to dig too deeply. For when all is said and done, “a rose is a rose is a rose.” **mrb**

Kimberly Bourgeois is a multi-disciplinary artist living in Montreal. Kimberly and the Dreamtime songs and poems are now available on iTunes.

## Slashing Through Montreal's Past

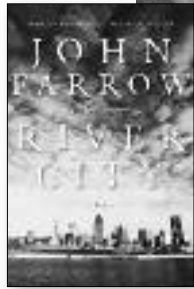
### RIVER CITY

John Farrow  
Harper Collins Publishers  
\$24.99, paper, 843pp  
9780002005807

Imagine a murder during the 1955 Maurice Richard Riot in Montreal. It happens right in front of the Sun Life Building, and the murder weapon is a legendary Quebec artefact. One picture shows a smile on the author's face as he feels the tension and potential of the set-up. Immediately thereafter, the smile becomes a grimace as the author tries to figure out how he can possibly contextualize the cauldron of social and political tensions that boiled over on that night. With so much history, where to start? To *really* tell the story, he'd have to go all the way back to the arrival of Jacques Cartier. That's where most authors would say: "Imagine the murder happened in Orillia..." but not Trevor Ferguson. Working under the pen name of John Farrow, Ferguson invents Jacques Cartier's Dagger, and makes it the unifying device for the mix of crime and history, the *histoire noire*, that is *River City*.

The murder investigation is as hard-boiled as crime fiction comes and serves as the prequel to Ferguson's Emile Cinq-Mars series. This dirty trip through *la grande noirceur* of the Duplessis era alternates chapters with the story of the Dagger, which is also the history of Montreal. It's no textbook history lesson; it's a visceral reliving of the battles, massacres, miracles, betrayals, and bargains to which Montreal, and Canada, owe their existence; it will make street names like Maisonneuve and Jeanne Mance bleed for you. Cartier's Dagger, procured from a Hochelaga Iroquois Chief in exchange for a hat, moves through the hands of *coureurs de bois*, kings, insurance agents, fascists, and a prime minister, while the murder investigation drives to its resolution during the October Crisis. It's amazing that anyone would even *attempt* to write this book.

Ferguson has some impressive tools, not the least of which is patience – the book weighs in at 850 pages. He's got an ability – which has also been ascribed to the painter Norman Rockwell – to drop the observer into a moment right on the edge of the action, and render it richly and lucidly. There are only two scenes which really clunked for this reader, one was a detective initi-



ation, and the other is a spoiler, but that's nothing given the sheer number of moments this book succeeds in constructing well.

Moving through a range of characters and periods without seeming like 400 years of Forrest Gump is an accomplishment which owes a great deal to Ferguson's ear for dialogue – it's clear that he's also a playwright. A 1534 meeting between Cartier and Cardinal de Medici in a Sicilian villa evokes an elevated and distant tone without resorting to anachronistic language or having it feel flowery and camp. We understand that most of the murder investigation is conducted in French, and again this is conveyed lightly with occasional sentence inversions and telltale turns of phrase. Ferguson is also a wonderful mimic. It is harder to evaluate his imitation of Samuel de Champlain, but he does a marvellous Trudeau, so mercurial and angular that this reader could almost see that distinctive Gallic nose twitching beneath the printed words.

The island city lodged in the throat of the continent's most significant waterway casts a spell on its inhabitants – Ferguson knows why, even if we don't. He peels back time's layers and explains the conflicted, almost bi-polar linguistic, religious, and political paroxysms to which Montreal is prone. He tells us a story, the seedy and corrupt kind that we love despite ourselves, helping us understand how even this inclination is part of our heritage. This book is a gift to the city of Montreal, and to all those who love a good murder. mrb

Rob Sherren is a Montreal musician and writer whose reviews have appeared in the *mRb* and the *Winnipeg Review*. His work can be seen at [robsherren.wordpress.com](http://robsherren.wordpress.com)

## (French) Immigrant Song

### DIRTY FEET

Edem Awumey  
House of Anansi  
\$22.95, paper, 175pp  
9780887842443

Thinking about Paris often leads to overworked and clichéd images of lights and romance, thanks to the city's countless appearances in literary and cinematic works. But, in his second novel, *Dirty Feet*, Togo-born Quebec author Edem Awumey overlooks the much-explored image of Paris as the luxurious and vibrant cultural centre in favour of the city's dark side.

The short but dense novel recounts the story of an unlikely and undefined relationship between two migrants in Paris, both haunted by memories of their respective homes. The protagonist Askia suffers the somewhat typical fate of many immigrants: though he is well educated, he drives a cab and lives in squalor. He is also on a mission to find his lost father, who is believed to be living in Paris. One day, he meets the mysterious Olia (who happens to be his fare) – a Bulgarian fashion photographer who claims that she has photographed Askia's father and offers to help locate the missing man.

"Dirty Feet" is the name given to Askia's family, who were condemned to a nomadic life, unable to settle long enough to rest and clean their feet. As a symbol of mobility, feet serve as an apt synecdoche for the transient existence of Askia and other nomads portrayed in the book. Feet are often either, in one extreme, hidden out of shame, or, in another, fetishized. These two extremes serve as apt metaphors for both Askia and Olia's experience of being foreign and transient. Olia represents the "exotic" immigrant qualities that society accepts, and even covets; her successful integration into Paris is signalled by her bright, spacious apartment and her lucrative profession as a fashion photographer. Askia, on the other hand, stands at the opposite side of foreignness, inciting fear and rejection. Hidden from others in his taxi, he provides mobility to the privileged Parisians who would rather not be associated with him outside of that context. His bare and shabby room in the outskirts of Paris also symbolizes the downward spiral of a neglected existence that is neither celebrated nor properly supported.

What seems to begin as a mystery and a potential love story takes a dark turn. Instead, the book explores the depths of Paris, unseen by most people. Askia's Paris includes undocumented



people running away from the authorities, regular harassment from skinheads invading his home and threatening his life, and probing customers who see his foreignness as either offensive or perversely desirable.

The tragedy of an abandoned son, reinforced by recurring allusions to Telemachus, son of Odysseus, runs parallel to the description of Paris's dark underbelly. Like the labyrinth of a taxi driver's daily route, the book travels back-and-forth between the past and the present. The nonlinear account is sometimes written as a straight-up expository, especially his encounter with customers; other times, the book borders on magic realism, as when Askia recalls an idealistic version of his father: "his turban, perpetually white, impervious to dirt... the rumour eventually spread that it was not the turban. It was his heart. His heart remained unsullied."

Awumey adorns his book with short, vivid phrases that, at times, read like poems ("The Rom, his bloody head. A red ball. As on that maliciously sunny day when he had managed to beat the dog Pontos on the head with a chunk of hard mortar ..."). Sometimes, the poetic tendencies yield clichéd phrases ("did you forget that it's called the City of Lights? You can't hide in the light...") – but these instances are rare.

In Woody Allen's latest film, *Midnight in Paris*, a white American man in a rut finds his inspiration and *joie de vivre* in the city. Unlike the easy romanticization of Paris in Allen's film, Awumey's text reveals the fictionality of such idealization by looking beyond the clean streets and brightly lit cafés. A finalist for France's Prix Goncourt in 2009 (previously won by Marcel Proust and Romain Gary), *Dirty Feet* reveals the unsettling truth of an ugly racist reality even in a place celebrated for its culture and beauty. mrb

Rosel Kim is a writer and blogger living in Montreal; her personal blog is *What Are Years?* ([jroselkim.wordpress.com](http://jroselkim.wordpress.com)).

## Round and Round We Go

### THE LAMPOST DIARY

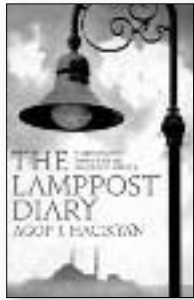
Agop J. Hacikyan

Interlink Books

US\$15.00, paper, 268pp

978-1-56656-855-5

In his fifth novel, Turkish-Canadian writer Agop J. Hacikyan constructs a loving portrait of life in Istanbul during the mid-twentieth century that sadly misses the mark as often as it hits it. Written in the third person, yet with a distinct journal-like quality, *The Lamppost Diary* is a rambling episodic tale. Hacikyan meanders into descriptions of people, places, and events that he introduces and then abandons with no concern for toeing a cohesive storyline.



What is meant to hold the descriptive vignettes and flashes of history together is the coming-of-age story of Tomas, an Armenian-Turk, whom we first meet as a young boy in the initial days of World War II. The uncertainty of the times and the shadow of the Armenian genocide that occurred decades before hover over young Tomas's world. When his younger sister dies after an accident, he learns first hand about loss and the lies parents tell to protect their offspring.

Nothing is certain for the young protagonist except for the green lamppost that he circles three times as a ritual before going to school. There may be some cultural significance to this, but the reader is not let in on it. Instead, we are tugged through young Tomas's life in the same haphazard way a toddler pulls a wooden toy, sometimes easily and other times with a jarring jerk.

There is also a sense that there are similes and odd word patterns that have been transposed from another language: "...skinnier than the shadow of a piece of macaroni" and "In spite of his fatigue, he read with a certain homely energy..."

Young Tomas has three boyhood friends, characters that are never fully developed but instead moved around like scenery to illustrate an incident or demonstrate camaraderie among minorities. Together, the boys

take themselves seriously enough to try and blow up a corrupt politician's car with a pipe bomb, but the incident is eclipsed in importance by their earnest efforts to lose their virginity in a brothel. The background on Navsika, the prostitute who sees it as her mission to service young boys, is thorough, and like many of Hacikyan's characters, she charms us before casually disappearing from the book.

It takes almost half the book to find anything resembling a plotline. During this first half, we are privy to Tomas's forced circumcision, his sexual awakening, his loss of virginity, and detailed descriptions of Turkish

discriminatory policies aimed at non-Muslim citizens. In the second half, however, the romance between Tomas and Anya, the beautiful White Russian girl he becomes infatuated with while they are still children, blossoms into a love story.

At the top of her class, Anya is as bright as she is beautiful. Upon graduating, she wins an American scholarship to study medicine at John Hopkins University, giving Tomas yet another compelling reason to leave Turkey. But Tomas, unlike Anya, has trouble succeeding on a number of levels. The harsh Wealth Tax imposed by the Turkish government on Armenians, Jews, and Greeks at the end of the war impoverishes his once well-to-do family. A long distance runner, Tomas comes in second in an important race and misses the opportunity to represent Turkey at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne.

Although the first half of *The Lamppost Diary* covers only about five years, once the love story becomes the novel's focus, the action leaps through time as if racing to a finish line. Like Tomas after his competitive run, the novel does not come home a winner. mrb

Gina Roitman is the author of *Tell Me a Story*, *Tell Me the Truth*. Her documentary film, "My Mother, The Nazi Midwife and Me" will premiere in January, 2012.

## Family Ties

### WHEREVER GRACE IS NEEDED

Elizabeth Bass

Kensington Books

\$17.95, paper, 393pp

9780758265944

"The business of fiction is to probe the tender spots of an imperfect world,"

writes Barbara Kingsolver in her essay "What Good Is a Story?" Not only does this sentence sing (read it aloud), but it also makes the important point that fiction is serious business. To recognize life's tender spots and extract the meaty stuff is the mark of a skilled writer. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Bass, who in *Wherever Grace is Needed* tackles the complexities of family, its bonds – real or imagined – and the ache to belong, fails to find these tender spots. Her efforts flounder with characters stuck at surface level and a story that fails to enlighten.

Grace Oliver's parents divorce when she is still a little girl growing up in Austin, Texas. Grace's mother moves her to Portland, Oregon, separating Grace from her father and two older brothers. Twenty odd years later, a thirtysomething Grace owns her own business, is in a committed relationship, and is working hard to stay grounded.

When one of her older brothers calls to say that their father has been hit by a car and has broken his leg, Grace volunteers to put her life on hold in order to nurse him back to health. The move back to Austin forces Grace to confront her feelings of detachment from the family she had left as a child. While she's there, her father is diagnosed with Alzheimer's and begins a steady decline.

The book is split between two stories – that of Grace Oliver and that of the West family, neighbours of Grace's father, consisting of a widower and his three children who recently lost their mother and sister in a car accident. Readers hop between Grace's search for belonging and the West family's journey through grief. The bridge is Grace herself, whose relationship with the West family is what finally helps her put her own life into perspective.

The subject matter is rich but Bass fails to infuse her characters with more than stereotypes and clichés. During moments of emotional tension, Bass holds the reader's hand, not trusting us to make connections. An example is a scene later in the book



with widower Ray West and Grace. Emboldened by recent talks with Grace over the backyard fence, Ray decides to throw a neighbourhood cook-out in the hope that it will

repair the damage he's done to his surviving children and let the neighbourhood know he's on the mend. The day before, he goes over to Grace's house looking for a phone number, but ends up confessing his love for her in her living room.

He tugged her hand and she seemed to slide right toward him ... Their lips met and she was amazed by the hunger she sensed in him in just a brief kiss. He held her tight, almost like a man hugging a life buoy, until she pushed away ... he was studying her face as if he'd never really noticed it before. "I half suspect I could fall in love with you, Grace."

Aside from the tacky dialogue and glaring similes, the real disappointment is the title of the next chapter: "Things Fall Apart," in which Ray's BBQ is rained out and his daughters get into a scratching match.

The author of more than thirty romance and "women's fiction" novels, Bass fails to penetrate into deeper emotional realms. This is not to say there is no potential for depth. The final scene deals with a photograph of the surviving West girls as small children, playing together in a happier time. The death of their mother and sister has completely destroyed their relationship, but the photo gives them a way to reconnect without words. Bass finally seems to discover one of life's tender spots, but doesn't manage to probe it. mrb

Taylor Tower is a freelance writer and public relations professional living in Montreal.

## Poetry

from ice fishing to tennis to weather, her favourite theme) through brilliant metaphors. In "Flukes," she demonstrates how they can be layered, which takes us really far from naked language. The data for her work is often sourced in

other poems: she's another intertextual writer. She even uses that fluctuating authority, Wikipedia. The cover of *Hypotheticals* bears a cut paper collage of Signal Hill in Newfoundland, where Marconi sent the first transatlantic radio message, and the poems often send ambiguous

signals, metaphor being inherently ambiguous. Part of every message is noise, communication theory tells us. In two ambitious dialogue poems, "Orphans I" and "Orphans II," Kotsilidis imagines Plato, Herodotus, Stephen Hawking, and Mulk Raj Anand carrying out

inquiries in a spaceship. They represent philosophy, history, science, and literature. The experiment fails to establish truth: the great men squabble and their ideas cancel each other out. Although the last word of "the second dialogue" is Plato's ("Love"), it is followed not by a period

but by a dash and a sombre stage direction: [*Light fades.*] Have we been illuminated? Sometimes the static is part of the signal. mrb

Bert Almon teaches a poetry master class with Derek Walcott at the University of Alberta.

# young readers

## Brave New Worlds

**B**elieve it or not, there are still some people out there who think that young adult (YA) literature is written by people who aren't smart enough to write for adults.

Those who demean the skills of teen fiction writers apparently haven't bothered to actually read any of the many fine YA books that have been published in the last couple of years.

Whether you need a rebuttal for someone who stubbornly insists on stigmatizing the YA genre, or you're looking for a great read for yourself or a teenager you know, Catherine Austen's novel *All Good Children* is an excellent choice.

Max Connors, the narrator of *All Good Children* is a completely believable fifteen-year-old character. He's funny, feisty, and incredibly annoying. He's addicted to his electronic device or RIG (Realtime Integrated Gateway), sarcastic, highly critical of his hard-working single mom, and often downright nasty to his six-year-old sister Ally.

It's easy to imagine Max and all the other teenagers who populate this novel torturing the substitute teacher at your local high school, or hepped up on a combination of super-size blue slushie and hormonal firestorm. But *All Good Children* doesn't take place in our time. Max's story is set in the near future, in a town called New Middletown. In New Middletown, the desire for security, the requirements of the pharmaceutical company that employs the town, and the enduring belief that financial rewards equal happiness have created a dystopian nightmare.

Max doesn't get it at first. He thinks he's just feeling a normal dose of adolescent aggravation against an adult world that, as far as he's concerned, is too stupid to know better. In some ways he agrees

with the way things are run in New Middletown. The constant surveillance means that, within the city limits, the world is relatively safe and sparkling clean. And as long as he continues to ace his schoolwork without even trying he's pretty much guaranteed a good job later on.

But when he returns from a week away with his mother and sister, Max notices that things have changed. The rest of the novel tracks Max's struggle to survive in a society where children are vaccinated to assure compliance. It seems the adults who have the authority to control him are in favour of the so-called New Education Support Treatment and it's up to Max to figure out how to save himself and the people he cares about from becoming emotionless automatons. A fast-paced plot with lots of edge-of-your-seat twists and turns is sure to keep both adults and teenagers turning the pages.

Austen provides many nuanced details of life in the near future, from facts on transportation and garbage disposal to the devastating effects of global warming. Strong characterization as well as a thrilling and horrifyingly plausible plot all combine to make *All Good Children* a wonderful read. Great literature is never limited by its genre.



**ALL GOOD CHILDREN**  
Catherine Austen  
Orca  
\$19.95, paper, 312pp  
978-1-55469-824-0

**T**he four picture books and four chapter books that make up *The Adventures of Cosmo the Dodo Bird* are the first in the series of environmentally themed adventures featuring Cosmo the dodo bird and his intergalactic sidekick 3R-V. Written for young readers and originally published in French by Origo Publications, these stories are intended to inspire children to consider how human behaviour negatively affects the ecosystem.

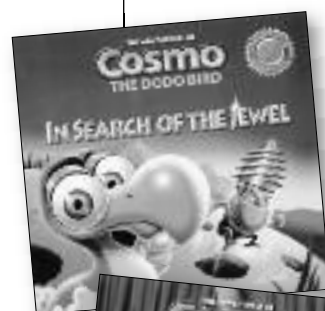
The main character, Cosmo, is a dodo bird whose species was eradicated hundreds of years ago. A twist of fate and a wrong turn find Cosmo teamed up with 3R-V, an invention from the future whose mission it is to go back in time and transport into the future families of animals who are destined to become extinct. 3R-V and Cosmo set off on a quest to find another living dodo bird somewhere in the galaxy. Of course, they never actually find another dodo, but the

ongoing search is the premise for the continuing series of stories.

There is some overlap in terms of plot between the picture books and the short-chapter books. In both series, the first book charts the birth of 3R-V, the fateful meeting of Cosmo and the beginning of their quest. The picture books introduce us to Digger, a creature whose desire for treasure almost leads him to destroy his own planet; Fabrico, who learns that it's bad to dump toxic sludge; and Zigor, who understands with Cosmo and 3R-V's help that recycling is better than thoughtless consumption. The short-chapter books look at the dangers of climate control, the importance of respecting and nurturing the balance of nature, and how competition can destroy the ecosystem.

Racine's motive for writing these books is entirely honourable. He obviously cares deeply for the planet and is committed to using his experience in brand imaging and visual communications to bring a message of sustainability and environmentalism to children. But ultimately his experience in the world of graphic design works against him in these books. The images of Cosmo and friends are likely the latest

continued on page 22



## NEW TALES from TUNDRA



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about friendship  
and imagination



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## Young Readers

in digital imagery but they are often stiff and don't invite the eye to linger on the illustrations. One has the impression that the stories are written versions of an animated cartoon or game rather than existing, as they do, first and foremost as books.

**N**ini is the story of a Chinese baby. The book follows her from before she is born, through her time in an orphanage, to her adoption by parents who live in a snow-covered house. As a big girl, she still remembers her birthmother's voice, but also loves her adoptive parents.

Thisdale's illustrations are beautiful, a highly textured combination of painting, drawing, and digital imagery. The pictures draw us in, creating atmosphere and tone, and ultimately establishing an unexpected connection between the Chinese and Canadian landscapes. Unfortunately, while it is obvious that Thisdale cares deeply about the subject of the book, the text doesn't work as well as the illustrations. Pictures as lush and evocative as these deserve words to match.



In *Ella May and the Wishing Stone*, Ella May returns from the beach with a wishing stone that she lords over all her friends. When Manuel, Amir, and Maya get fed up with Ella May's attitude and try to make their own wishing stones, the boastful protagonist does everything she can to make sure they know that her wishing stone is the only real one.

The charming drawings by Geneviève Côté depict a late summer's day on the sidewalk. It's easy to forgive Ella May when she finally comes to her senses and realizes that friends are much more important than possessions.

In *My Name Is Elizabeth*, the drawings are simply delightful and Elizabeth, the outspoken protagonist, demands your attention from the first moment you see her determined expression peer out from under her ermine and oak-leaf crown.

Elizabeth is tired of being called anything but her proper name. Accompanied by her duck sidekick, she sets everybody right, and by the end of the story she shows us that even girls as determined as she is are capable of bending the rules when necessary. A good example of how a simple story and engaging illustrations can work together to create a wonderful book. mb

B.A. Markus is a writer, teacher, performer, and mother living and working in Montreal. She also writes book reviews for *The Rover*.



**THE ADVENTURES OF COSMO  
THE DODO BIRD**  
(Picture books)  
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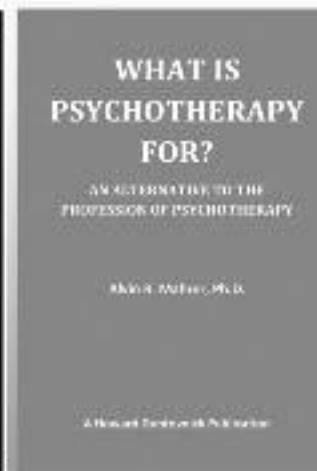
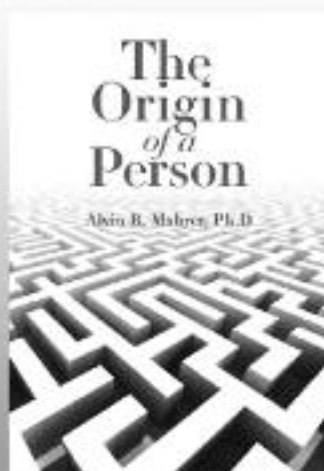
(Short-chapter books)  
**THE QUEST OF THE LAST  
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# Back to the Point

A current Montreal real estate website describes Point St. Charles as an up-and-coming neighbourhood, a good bet for potential property owners, and an opportunity for “more house for your money!” The irony is surely not lost on writer and journalist Kathy Dobson, whose memoir *With A Closed Fist* recalls a time when the Point was the last place anyone would willingly choose to settle. In the 1960s and 1970s, “Canada’s toughest neighbourhood” was neglected, disenfranchised, and prone to outbreaks of fire, roaches, and gangs of kids warring over territory. It was also Dobson’s childhood home. It was where her mother became politicized over her family’s abysmal living conditions, and where a young Kathy and her five sisters would regularly be recruited for lie-ins on the street and protests against an indifferent city hall.

*With A Closed Fist* is a kind of grassroots history of a time and place fast disappearing. Condo developments and gentrification are changing the face of Point St. Charles, from a one-time working-class slum and literal dump into the kind of place that gives developers a particular eye-gleam: it’s cheap, “authentic,” *au courant*, and, most importantly, marketable. But Dobson’s book records a much different transformation. As Kathy fights with an oblivious teacher over a school uniform she can’t afford, the women of the Point hold protests outside the school board office to get their kids better educations; as Kathy explores an abandoned building where the roaches form “a large wiggling carpet,” her mom joins an Informed Citizens group and meets with social work students from McGill to teach them how to listen to the poor. The memoir chronicles a true people’s movement, one that led to the autonomous Community Clinic being created to serve the neighbourhood, and Kathy and other Point kids being allowed to attend better schools in Westmount.

Dobson doesn’t write as an adult looking back on childhood with the insight of experience, but “straight up, in my own voice, as a kid growing up in the Point.” For the most part, younger Kathy’s voice is strikingly believable: candid,

scornful, funny, unadorned with the sentimentalism or preciousness some writers feel toward their younger selves. It reads like fiction. She speaks with the same frankness whether she deals with sexual abuse and near-starvation or talks about pranking the neighbours, hiding from the bailiff, and falling into a seething stew of cockroaches. Her harshest stories lack the gravity that more decorous, middle-class approaches to dire circumstance seem to require, and the effect is unsettling.

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Dobson illustrates class tensions shrewdly. She shows how poor kids who get rerouted to middle-class schools or neighbourhoods don’t become middle-class by association — there are still and always deep divisions that isolate Kathy and the other Point kids from their peers at Westmount High. She systematically avoids the heartwarming tropes of the coming-of-age story. The charming teacher, the kind-hearted social worker, the prospect of a new job all fail to transform Kathy from a troubled, shiftless kid to a self-actualizing, stable grown-up; unlike an after-school special, there are no simple solutions here. The one exception is the book’s ending, which feels like a breathless rush to deliverance. It’s like Dobson ran out of time and had to engineer a boyfriend *ex machina* so we’d be able to sleep at night. It’s a little disappointing for a book that otherwise avoids easy

answers, and whose struggle is of a neighbourhood as much as a single person.

*With A Closed Fist* shares the time and place of David Fennario’s groundbreaking 1979 play *Balconville*, and the two works have a close sensibility. In 2005, Fennario revisited his setting and characters in *Condoville*, where the changes to the neighbourhood play out in tensions between the older residents and the new, gentrifying class, represented by a mixed-race gay couple. It’s a complicated dynamic, between those whose hard-won victories are under threat and those with their own struggles to find a tolerant space. But personal differences fall away in the face of structural inequality. A system that bars the poor from controlling their own possibilities will never serve anyone well, not even those who, at first, seem to prosper from it.

In one passage, Kathy’s mother Eileen speaks to the student social workers from McGill gathered at her kitchen table:

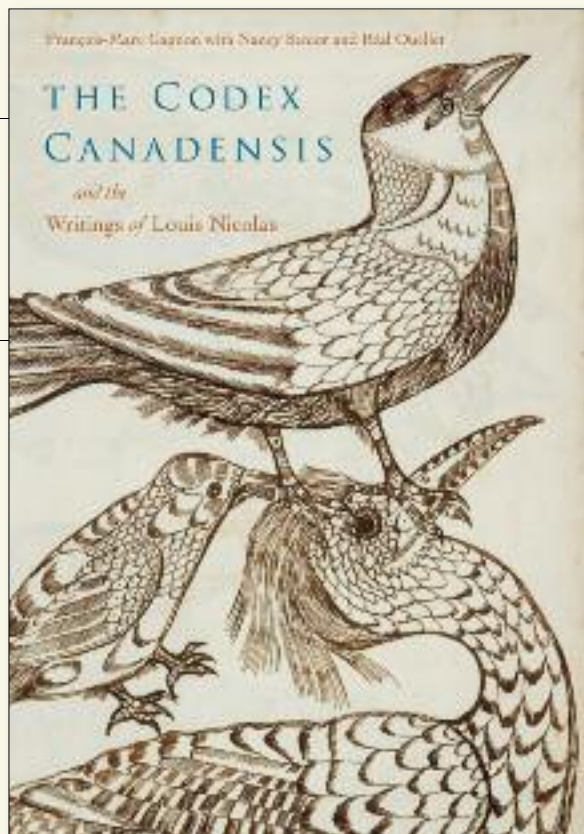
“You’re being taught to tell us, preach to us, how to fix our problems,” Mom says, “instead of asking us, the real experts.... Don’t tell me how to fix my problem — first we need to find a common ground.... We need to find a common language.”

After all Eileen’s agitation, passion, and community organizing, it’s sad to think that her dream of a common language is as elusive as ever. At the very least, this memoir is a powerful tribute to her and a reminder of how difficult and essential is the work of speaking, and listening. ■

Anna Leventhal is a writer living in Montreal.

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Kathy Dobson  
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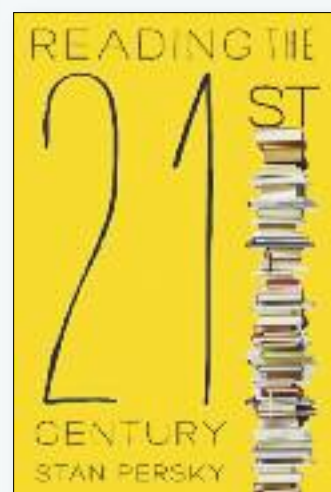
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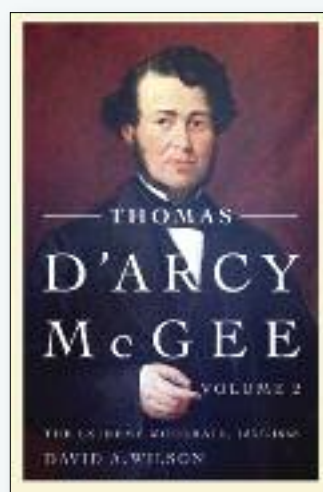
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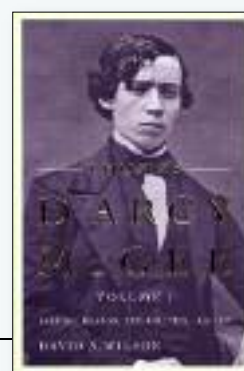
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