

mRb

SPRING 2012 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

growing pains

Sina Queyras explores the mechanics
of family dysfunction

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18 • 6:30 PM

McCord Museum, 690 Sherbrooke St. W.

Event #11

**True Crime Event:
Montreal's Most Notorious
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McGill University's Will Straw onstage with Kristian Gravenor, the man behind one of Montreal's most notorious blogs, Coolopolis, discussing shocking Quebec crime and how the media shaped the public's perception of the stories. \$10

SATURDAY, APRIL 21 • 2:00 PM

McCord Museum, 690 Sherbrooke St. W.

Event #57

**Love to All, The Letters of
Irving Layton**

A Blue Met exclusive! One hundred years after his birth, Montreal poet Irving Layton is as controversial as ever. Bon vivant, womanizer, contrarian and major poet, his legacy at home remains complicated by stories of his combative personality. With Arthur Holden. \$10

SATURDAY, APRIL 21 • 8:30 PM

OPUS Hotel, Salon St-Laurent

Event #76

**Montreal Noir: The City's
Forgotten Pulp Past**

Cheap, disposable and sensasionalistic, Montreal's pulp fiction took its place on Canadian and American newsstands sixty years ago. It has since been ignored, neglected and, in some cases, hidden by its authors. What was so shameful about these books and why are we reviving them now? With Trevor Ferguson, Jim Napier, Will Straw, and Marcel Jeannin. Hosts: Brian Busby, Mélanie Grondin \$7

SUNDAY, APRIL 22 • 1:00 PM

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Event #86

**Translating David
Foster Wallace**

Edoardo Nesi, the translator of Infinite Jest into Italian, discusses the work of David Foster Wallace with renowned US literary critic and writer Scott Esposito and well-known Quebec translator Sophie Voillot. With Montreal writer and critic Juliet Waters. \$10



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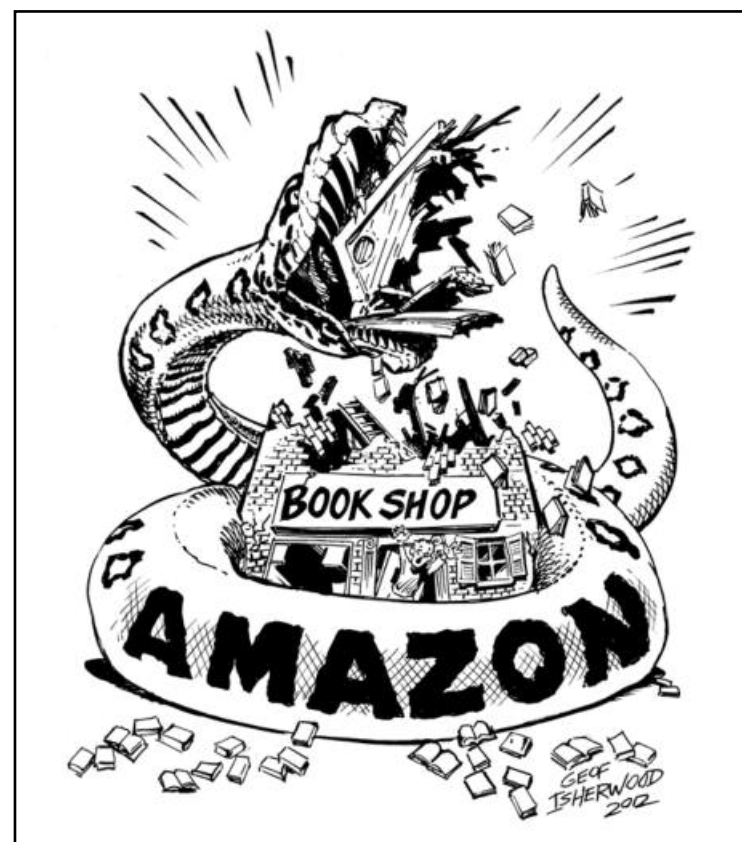


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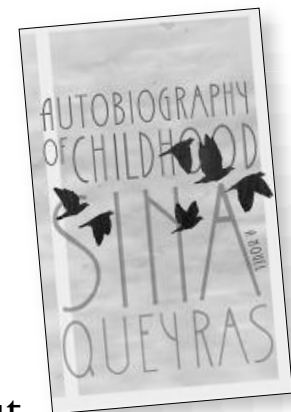




By Marianne Ackerman

The inner life of a working-class family

In any era, literary life tends to congregate around poles. In the early twentieth century, Paris was the magnet for North-American writers. Montreal drew Anglo-Canadians in the 1940s, a role this city once again plays for the young and mobile. But there currently is no recognized literary capital, no single place where ambitious talents know they must be in order to meet key people and imbibe the local beverage of choice for inspiration. Rural writing retreats and university campuses are the main centres of production, which makes Sina Queyras a quintessentially contemporary writer, although nothing else about her first novel is typical – or ordinary.



AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF CHILDHOOD
Sina Queyras
Coach House Books
19.95, paper, 200pp
9781552452523

An award-winning poet, anthologist, and creative writing teacher at Concordia University, Queyras took a decade to write *Autobiography of Childhood*. She began in true Canadian fashion with a series of short stories, but, exercising her editor's eye, she decided they added up to "a cliché mother-daughter coming-of-age-story." So she started over, producing the better part of a complete new draft during a month-long residency at the Vermont Studio Center where she held a fellowship in 2003.

The first six chapters bear resemblance to the original short stories in that the characters and situations are the same, but conventional storytelling has given way to a wheel-like structure with six spokes, one for each of the five grown siblings and their father, Jean. The characters look back on a shared past marked by poverty, loss, and frequent moves; a past much like Queyras's own. The hub of their thoughts is a hospital bed in Vancouver where Therese, one of the siblings, lies dying, after a long battle with cancer. Each character faces Therese's death with a different level of awareness, concern, or lack thereof. The dying woman is drowning in memory; the people around her are distant voices.

Guddy, an academic, makes her way back from New York during a snowstorm, hoping to arrive in time for one last conversation with her estranged sister. But Therese has left her caretakers with instructions that, when the end is near, she prefers drug-induced sleep to wrenching consciousness. Guddy aches to say goodbye, but her sister is oblivious. A painful irony, since consciousness is what this novel is all about: the searing inner landscape of six completely different personalities who have little in common but the past. Jerry is a salt-of-the-earth type who appreciates the Lower Mainland of BC as "the most golden place on earth." He is content with his small stake, yet tortured knowing his 21-year-old son has become a property speculator, the antithesis of his father's working-class ethic. As for the other siblings, Bjarne lives on the streets, visits his mother Adel in her mobile home to do his laundry, stock up on food, and watch Judge Judy on TV. Annie takes care of Adel and frets about her dying sister whom she never understood. Jean, their father, relives the family's tragic beginning, remembering how, as a young immigrant from France, he became a husband and father too soon. Struggling for decades to make ends meet, he coped with a flamboyant, unsatisfied wife, unwilling to let go of a bad marriage.

Queyras acknowledges an anecdotal similarity between her own past and events in the novel, but says that lived experience has been thoroughly transformed: "Real life is far too complex for fiction."

It's no accident, though, that she decided to become a writer. As the youngest child of a big, complicated family, she says she always felt guilty; frequently at a loss to understand what was happening, she was nonetheless driven to try. "The last one gets to watch, to learn from the older siblings' mistakes. The others felt I had it easier, which is true. As the youngest, I became the emotional barometer. They were rebelling, acting out. I was watching."

Her approach to fiction is fearless, unsparing. She tackles anger and frustration with courage, making no concession to the readers' subliminal yearning for redemption or reconciliation. The labyrinthine narratives are soaked in sadness derived from the early death of an older sibling, Joe. Childhood is not to be understood, it is to be embraced. "We plant our childhoods like flags. We

insist on them. We say: this geography, this materiality, these emotional landmines, this is who I am. We insist on them because without them we are nothing."

A soft-spoken woman in her late 40s, Queyras exudes loyalty to the world that has fed her art. While the fictional mother is treated to hard analysis in the book – "narcissistic, bombastic, histrionic, mean and, worse, incapable of learning," thinks the dying Therese – Queyras says she is sorry that her mother, who died in 2010 at the age of 78, never lived to read the book. "I think she would have liked it."

"I wanted to write about the legacy of trauma and poverty. I get very angry when people think working-class people have no interiority," she says. Or that the only consciousness worth exploring is the mind of intellectuals.

A high school dropout, she started university in her late 20s, focusing on creative writing. Her literary gods were the twentieth-century modernists: Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, especially Virginia Woolf. "I

was overwhelmed by her ability to capture consciousness. Her style blew my mind. Reading Woolf, I realised I knew nothing. My little desires were so minuscule beside hers. I saw that I had to commit to a life-long contest of reading and practicing in order to do anything in literature that would be moderately interesting." Modesty has characterized her approach to writing and informs her self-judgement.

"This is a very small book," she says, looking at my much-thumbed copy lying on the café table between us. "It's a subtle, quiet novel. I'm proud of it, but very realistic." Experimental, conceptual writers may find it too middle-of-the road, she says. Readers looking for action won't find it. She doesn't care. After spending years helping would-be writers find their way in a classroom situation (including the past four at Concordia), she looks at literary life as a privileged one, and takes a long-term approach. It's the body of work that counts, she says, not instant approval, prizes, or even a large readership.

These days, her home life is taking up a lot of space. Since her partner, Danielle Bobker, gave birth to twins five months ago, she's lucky to get twenty minutes of writing time per day. "If I can manage that, then writing remains an open page in my mind," she says. "I can think about it, work on it mentally, throughout the day."

In preparation for parenthood, she installed a desk in the basement laundry room of their east-end Montreal home. "I figured I could work while the clothes were in the dryer." It hasn't quite worked out that way. Bobker, who teaches seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature at Concordia, escapes to the laundry office too.

With the changes brought about by parenthood, Queyras has had to all but give up writing for the literary blog *Lemon Hound*, which she founded in 2005 as a platform for critical writing and now shares with several other writers. (A selection of her own essays written for the blog were anthologized last year in a volume called *Unleashed*.)

The next book, she says, will be larger, more ambitious; the style, more conceptual. "I will make it as beautiful as I can. But my past is raw, rugged. That's what I have to work with." ■

Marianne Ackerman's latest novel *Piers' Desire* is now available as an e-book. Details can be found at www.piersdesire.com. Her essays and reviews are published at www.roverarts.com.

Queyras acknowledges an anecdotal similarity between her own past and events in the novel, but says that lived experience has been thoroughly transformed: "Real life is far too complex for fiction."

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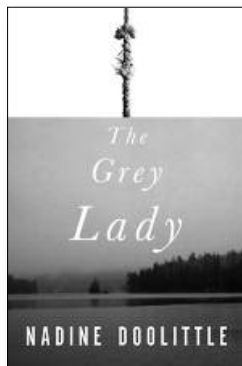
Dead Man's Folly

THE GREY LADY
Nadine Doolittle
McArthur & Co
24.95, paper, 272pp
9781770870611

Nadine Doolittle's deliciously atmospheric new crime novel, *The Grey Lady*, is the kind of book you want to read with a fire crackling in the hearth, a hot drink by your side, and a blanket within reach. As the clouds encroach, the wind screams, the rain attacks "like volleys of mean little spears," and the Gatineau Hills, in which the story is set, loom, dark and threatening, the reader shivers in delight.

Our narrator is Hester Warnock, aged 56. She is cynical, pragmatic, unyielding, and a bit of a ball-buster ("I'd learned at an early age that behind the curtain of male authority there was a quivering little fellow with his penis in his hand," she tells us).

While her way of seeing the world may not always be pleasant (for example, "spring in the Gatineau Hills comes on like a messy premature birth") it is always apt, and great fun to read. Hester's descriptions are so vivid and her narrative voice so strong, we feel we are right there in the deluge with her.



The victim is 58-year-old Malcolm Driver. Depending on who you listen to, Malcolm is an idealist, an opportunist, a philanderer, a plagiarist, or all of these things. In the early 1970s, he ran a commune until the mysterious death of his pregnant young girlfriend led the group to disband. Recently, Malcolm published a New Age self-help novel that became a surprise bestseller and prompted the making of a documentary of Malcolm's life.

We learn early on that Hester and Malcolm were lovers for a brief, explosive, life-altering time in 1974. We also learn that Hester did something terri-

ble back then about which she has felt unrelenting guilt ever since. In fact, she has chosen not to see Malcolm for 35 years. When he appears at her office and asks her to participate in the documentary, she acquiesces and joins Malcolm's film crew and other entourage at the farm ("an orchestra of eight – insiders and necessary evils assembled by Malcolm to deliver him what he wants"). A storm closes in, and before you can say "Agatha Christie!" Malcolm is found dead, and all those present are under suspicion of murder.

Doolittle gives us a good assortment of characters, from the refreshingly astute lead police investigator, Detective Sergeant Rompré, who conducts his investigation with Zen-like calm, to Malcolm's obese and downtrodden common-law wife Brenda, who lumbers around the converted barn in which they live, complaining about her unwanted house guests. As with any good mystery, virtually everyone has something to hide, and, in her straightforward, no-nonsense way, Hester quickly figures out their secrets. A few of the past events on which their motives are based seem a bit too coincidental, but we let it go, eager to see where Doolittle is taking us.

The only thing that doesn't add up is Hester's intense attachment to the event of 35 years ago. Seeing Malcolm in her office "was like encountering the



fellow survivor of a shipwreck. Someone who remembered what my life was like before the boat sank." In fact, so much is made of this mysterious incident that when we discover what it is, we cannot help but wonder: is that severe enough for Hester to remain overcome with guilt more than half a lifetime later?

Perhaps it is. We want it to be, at any rate, so that we can plunge back into the novel, which is so tightly written and perfectly paced, we feel we are being swept along by the story, like a fallen branch in a fast-flowing river of spring runoff. ms

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer of fiction, non-fiction, and travel features. Her latest personal essay, entitled "The Big Chill," appears in the March issue of *ELLE Canada* magazine.



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Trivial Pursuits

MAINTENANCE

Rob Benvie
Coach House Books
20.95, paper, 281pp
9781552452516

There's an illustration of a treadmill on the cover of Rob Benvie's latest novel, *Maintenance*. It works, and not just because the book features several exercise sequences: a post-conjugal violence workout, a teen's weightlifting sesh, tennis champs sweating it up on the courts, and even some allusion to a lapsed yoga habit. But if there's a treadmill on the cover of this book, it's because the narrative is so largely preoccupied with the regimented rituals of human life, the motion- after-motion of it, the exertion leading nowhere.

Generally set in 1990s suburban Toronto (we know it's the 1990s because of the constant *Friends* and *Seinfeld* references as well as the JoyCam-style brand-name product placements), Benvie's novel has us trailing behind a

rather cumbersome cast of characters – a nuclear family made up of a spacey mom with some kind of secret brain disease, a travelling dad, and their delinquent teenager. Others who populate the book include an African immigrant, his work cronies, a host of teens, Satan. However divergent their backgrounds, the cast's individual isolation is equal in timbre and their radically dissimilar routines dole identical measures of disengagement. Affairs, diets, disease, natural catastrophes, war – nothing can shake them awake. The slow motions of their day-to-day exist in an emotional mini-mart. Excessively private, they are remote even to themselves.

And yet throughout the meandering mundanity of their existence, many of the characters encounter religion – they'll meet a simple-minded Christian or wonder vaguely about karma. And the fact that each storyline swats at religion in this manner sug-

gests that the narrator, if not the writer, favours some alternative approach to the one the characters act out. What complicates that possibility is the introduction of Satan into the novel. Benvie can stick Satan into the story, sure. It's a bold, if somewhat classic move. But sometimes it seems as if the book were reaching for some kind of religious rev-



The slow motions of their day-to-day exist in an emotional mini-mart.

Excessively private, they are remote even to themselves.

elation, and throwing Satan into the novel certainly adds a kind of irrefutable Christian duality to the text. One could wonder, however, whether the role of Satan is to underline or undermine the disengagement of the characters. Is Benvie telling us his characters have fallen away from God?

But we do not witness either fall nor grace. The

banality of the characters' lives is so airtight that there is no space for any sliver of sublime. The novel's last line, "In the end, it's all kind of pointless, nothing," in its allusion to Shakespeare ("Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of

sound and fury / Signifying nothing"), hammers home the fact that Benvie's characters squirm aimlessly through their suburban day-to-day for naught.

It is in this book's brief flashes of sound and fury that the story pulses. Specifically: guns shot into the air, a cigarette burning through an eyelid, a teenage rape, the outbursts of a judgmental

nurse ("I think it's revolting. How you feel so entitled. With the dream life, that you deserve the fairy-tale ending. The women I work with downtown endure real pain every day. Horror stories you wouldn't believe. Crack pipes in their vaginas. In our safe little pockets, we just don't know. And life, to people like you... it's just a barbecue"). These are moments not only of passion, but plot. These ferocious eruptions of volatility contrast the novel's overarching humdrum mood, of course, but it's the consequences these actions force on the characters that make an off-scene shift readers aren't privy to, but can't help imagining.

The trouble with 400 pages of meaninglessness is that readers may be left unmoved, wishing that something, anything, would happen; just wanting someone to get off the treadmill and act with conviction. mrb

Melissa Bull is a writer, the editor of *Maisonmeuve's* Writing from Quebec column, and the current editor of *Playboy's* humour website, *The Smoking Jacket*.

The Bee's Knees

POLLEN
Tom Abray
DC Books
18.95, paper, 192pp
9781897190739



It's safe to say that questions about the status of the short story can raise heated discussion among serious readers; one need only recall the not-so-distant joint publication of *Salon des Refusés* issues by two prominent Canadian literary magazines for an example. Certainly, though the form has seen a bit of trouble in terms of commercial viability, one is hard pressed to think of a time when literary types didn't take stories seriously. The short story is a mainstay of journals and many small presses and is constantly being reinterpreted by all kinds of writers. Recent years have seen a vogue for collections of linked short stories: connected either by theme, setting, or the reappearance of characters or particular devices. Given such furor and ferment, one welcomes a collection of well-crafted stories able to drive the debate from one's mind with a smile. And the strong points in Tom Abray's *Pollen* deserve exactly that greeting.

More than merely "not linked," the stories in Abray's book demonstrate noteworthy range. They examine family, romantic relationships, childhood, loss,

and mourning among other things and do so using diverse voices, points of view, and formal treatments. Such variety is commendable. And the stories themselves? Though as various as their themes and techniques, they are united by the author's undeniable competence.

The story "White Stones," for example, examines life – and the experience of illness – from the perspective of a child in a way that is both idiosyncratic and compelling. "Coral" on the other hand, tackles domesticity from the point of view of the father and effectively conveys the easy comfort and submerged dissatisfaction that can often mark a household while building to a conclusion that comes off as oddly both pat and – somehow – surprising. A brief exchange near the end, ostensibly about the wife's art practice but revelatory of much more in the narrative, captures the story's tone as well as the author's way of handling its material:

She was a late bloomer. She knew the technique and she taught it to others, but she did not find her true form until we were in our thirties. Before that she'd known she had it in her, but it would not come out the ways she wanted. It was like a dream, she's said to me, when you are trying to run, but the force you exert takes you nowhere however much you try. I once suggested she might have been trying too hard, but I could tell from the way she looked at me that I did not understand.

Passages of this sort, which paradoxically offer insight through their very obliqueness, are one of the book's charms.

Also among the more interesting pieces are a couple of short vignettes that stray from conventional narrative approaches in favour of different, lyrical, or absurdist registers, like "Wendy, Field Guide" with its nonsense natural history and "Snow" with its paranoid voyeurism, and the longer tale, "Swarm" – certainly a contender for the book's high point – which closes the collection. Using the elaborately sustained trope of a swarm of bees invading an apartment, "Swarm" shows a good touch and moments of real psy-

chological sensitivity in its impressionistic look at the relationships shared by a trio of roommates.

If not every story achieves quite that level of complexity and sophistication, there are more than enough that do to keep one reading. *Pollen* demonstrates that, despite the difficulty undoubtedly facing the short story as a commodity, it remains as lively and vital a literary form as ever. And that's enough to keep readers in very good humour for a while yet. mrb

Peter Dubé is a Montreal-based writer. His most recent book, the novel *The City's Gates*, is published by Cormorant Books.



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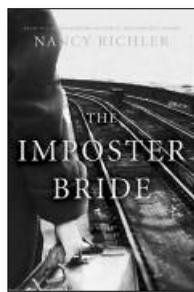
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A Lily by Any Other Name

THE IMPOSTER BRIDE

Nancy Richler
HarperCollins Canada
29.99, cloth, 352pp
978-1-44340-402-0



In an episode from the third season of *Mad Men*, the main character – a man calling himself Don Draper – experiences his greatest nightmare when his real name and backstory come to light. His wife (who makes the discovery) is appalled: “You’ve been lying to me every day,” she says. He tries to tell her he’s the same person she married, but his false identity proves too overwhelming a deceit for her to accept.

Why should names interest or even obsess us? Surely a person is more than a label. True, but a name provides a good starting point. As social animals, we like basic taxonomy: classifying who and what we deal with, especially in our most intimate transactions.

Montreal novelist Nancy Richler’s new novel, *The Imposter Bride*, creates a world that places front and centre questions of identity and the kaleidoscope of facts that comprise a human being.

A Holocaust survivor travels to Montreal, where she enters the most intimate of states – marriage and motherhood – under a false name. It turns out she lifted identity papers from a dead woman, one Lily Azerov, right after the war. Under that name, she becomes engaged to a Montreal man through the post. When “Lily” arrives at Windsor Station, the fiancé takes one look at her and backs out of their engagement. His brother marries her instead. They grow to love each other and have a child. When their baby, Ruth, is almost two months old, “Lily” takes her purse to go out for milk and never comes back.

Ruth grows up happily in two households, nestled in a loving and harmonious patchwork family comprised of a single father, a paternal grandmother, an uncle and his wife, three boys, and a mother-in-law. Scenes from this warm and busy life alternate with excerpts from the real Lily

Azerov’s journal and flashbacks from various characters (sometimes confusingly).

The characters often mention trusting their instincts and drawing up rapid assessments of people and situations. For example, when they first meet, Ruth’s future husband predicts they will marry. In fact, the Holocaust backdrop suggests that survival can be contingent on being able to think quickly: figuring out a stranger’s actions and intentions is more helpful than knowing real names or personal details. At least initially. Once we incorporate that person into our lives, the whole truth *does* matter – very much:

A name is not just a sound that our mouths make. It’s an evocation. It’s bound to the life and soul of its bearer in ways that we don’t fully understand—that’s why we’re forbidden to utter the name of God ... It’s not just out of respect—you understand?

With its folksy characters and Jewish-Montreal nostalgia, *The Imposter Bride* feels book club safe. Its depictions of charity and acceptance, though pleasing, ring false. No one curses the beautiful, mysterious woman who disrupts lives and commits the almost unthinkable act of child abandonment; indeed, there is barely a household squabble. Two husbands and one wife leave their spouses, but those left behind are unerringly faithful and kind, spouting wisdom not criticism. Ruth wonders about her mother for decades before searching for her, but in the interim she exhibits not a whit of neurosis or anxiety.

Overall, the award-winning Richler writes solid, evocative, well-paced prose. In Lily’s scant journal entries, Richler changes key and becomes more lyrical. It’s a shame the entire book was not written this way. She seems to have made a conscious decision to avoid narrowing the book’s appeal. Let us hope that in her next novel she trusts her readers to handle something more. **mrb**

Louise Fabiani is a Montreal-based freelance writer. Her poetry chapbook *Cryptic Dangers* was recently published by Alfred Gustav Press.

True Grit

RAIN FALLS LIKE MERCY

Jack Todd
Touchstone
28.99, cloth, 304pp
978-1-4165-9851-0



Near the beginning of *Rain Falls Like Mercy*, a Wyoming ranch owner tells a reporter what’s what: “You want to write about the West, you have to know the truth about this country. The truth is in the tall tales. Take away the yarns that stretch the truth, and all you have left is the East with better scenery.”

For many years, Jack Todd stuck to the facts. As a sports writer for the *Gazette*, he analysed hockey stats and commented on the performance of quarterbacks. But in 2002, he began a novel based on family documents he’d received from his mother decades before. *Sun Going Down*, which focused on a cowboy-turned-military-man relative of Todd’s, was the beginning of the Paint Trilogy that spans exactly a century of family history.

Rain Falls Like Mercy is the last volume of that trilogy. And while it is based on true stories, it reads like a series of tall tales. In this book, Todd has combined three genres of truth-stretching: it is at once a Western, a thriller, and a story of military heroism. You name it, Todd’s got it: cowboys, psychopaths, soldiers, prostitutes, prison-wardens, oil tycoons, desperadoes. The choice to pay tribute to these traditions accounts for both the novel’s triumphs and flaws.

The story opens with a grisly slaying of a runaway teenage girl. Her body is found in a cabin on a Wyoming ranch, and we follow Sheriff Tom Call as he investigates with the help of the ranch owner Eli Paint and his wife Juanita. This crime – one in a series of murder-rapes that are described in disturbing detail – is the start of a love affair between

Juanita and Tom, but the relationship is interrupted by Tom’s enlisting as a pilot in the Second World War. The case is also left hanging, and it haunts Tom no matter where the war takes him.

Throughout, the third-person narrative shifts from one perspective to another, allowing us to slip into the murderer’s shoes, those of one of his victims, and then those of a Navy gunner, all in rapid succession. Best of all, Todd allows us to hear the idiosyncrasies of his characters’ language, which can be wonderfully over-the-top. For example, the countryside is “drier than a preacher’s breakfast,” and a crossroads “looks like hell after the fire went out.”

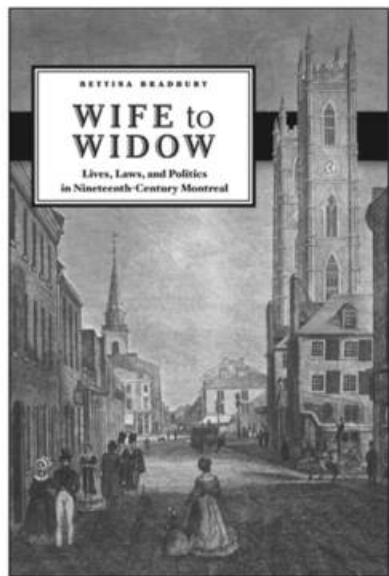
But some elements are a bit too much: “The longest life is no more than a sliver of light between two boundless ribbons of dark, like the light you see through the chinks of a log cabin at sunrise.” Or the scene in which an American Indian intones a traditional funeral cry after everyone else has left the site of a death.

In the end, though, these things don’t spoil the fun of *Rain Falls Like Mercy*. This novel is a romp, and part of its charm is its flamboyant, not-quite-realistic colour. It feels right that some of the cowboys sound a little too much like cowboys.

And sometimes the writing is great. When the murderer is picked up as a hitchhiker, Todd perfectly builds the tension of the scene. We know how it will end, but, as with a Greek tragedy, we are riveted. We don’t want to see how the action will unfold, but are unable to turn away.

Todd is a master at creating suspense on a larger scale as well. The end of each chapter makes you want to plunge into the next. In this way, Todd has undoubtedly succeeded in *Rain Falls Like Mercy*. He brings us back to the childhood pleasures of being taken in by a good yarn. **mrb**

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



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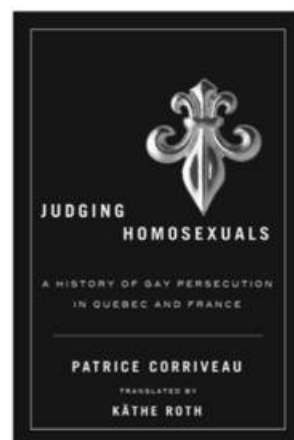
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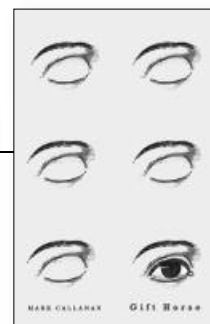
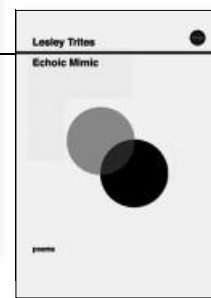
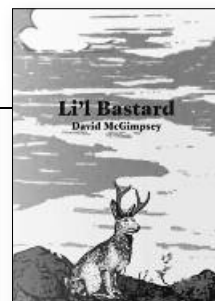
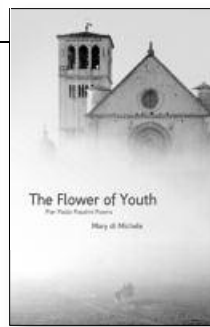
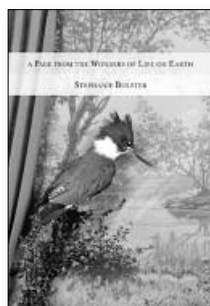
Patrice Corriveau,
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The Nature of Things



A PAGE FROM THE WONDERS OF LIFE ON EARTH

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GIFT HORSE

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Wildlife inhabits much of Stephanie Bolster's *A Page from the Wonders of Life on Earth*, which meanders through gardens, orchards, museums, and other landscapes to explore how nature is interpreted and transformed through the human gaze. From topiaries to

taxidermy, we frame our experiences with nature in order to exert control, impose distance, or make our awe feel somehow more manageable.

Bolster, who co-edited a 2010 anthology of zoo poems entitled *Penned*, seems to have taken inspiration from that volume. Many of the poems focus on zoos and contemplate how we keep animals in order to keep our own animal nature at arm's length. "Not me not me not me," says the zoo-goer in "Hello, You." And since many of the poems are also about the decline of such places – derelict zoos, neglected urban gardens, a collapsing Crystal Palace – we are often led to wonder what the distance is between a meadow and a lawn? A lion and a house cat? Life and still life?

Although there is an implicit suggestion here that we are nature's most destructive force, this is not a polemic on our treatment of animals or the environment. Rather, the poems capture and sometimes lament our fascination with the wild and our paradoxical, insatiable desire to tame it. Bolster's real moments of brilliance are when she seems to suggest that the poem itself is such a process, with the poet ordering the chaos of experience in order to make it seem more meaningful than it really is. Her spare dic-

tion and carefully wrought lines are the poetic equivalent of an English garden, with not a blossom out of place. At times the meaning of words is transformed, but methodically, not playfully, as an insect is pinned to a board with its wings unfurled.

In Mary di Michele's new collection, an artist comes of age during a time of war. Italian poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini spent World War II in a small village, teaching local boys at a school he ran with his mother. With *The Flower of Youth*, di Michele at first set out to explore the development of the artist at a tumultuous historical moment, but found that the war was only a distant backdrop for the internal turmoil of a young gay man coming to terms with his sexuality.

Di Michele calls the book "a kind of novel in verse," perhaps because the arc of the book is more emotional than narrative. Working from Pasolini's memoirs, she has preserved the limitations of autobiography, focusing on how he judged himself rather than how history has judged him. We discover Pasolini through the countryside he loved ("a grove of acacias to kiss / unseen, safely to kiss.") and the rural youths after which he lusted,

all distilled through di Michele's lyrical sensibility.

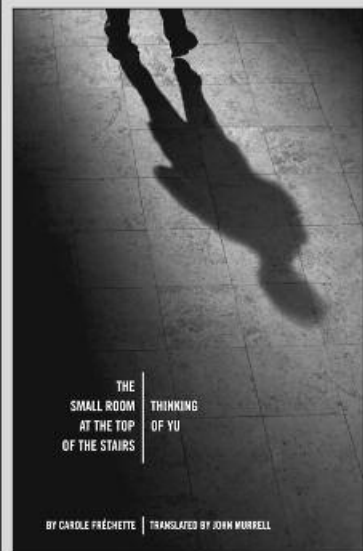
The collection opens with a prologue detailing di Michele's travel to northern Italy, where she visits Pasolini's home and grave. The poems that follow, in Pasolini's voice, explore his life during the war and focus on his passionate encounters with other young men. Those relationships ultimately led to a scandal that forced him to leave the mountain village where the poems are set, but di Michele focuses on the period prior to his discovery, imagining his romantic and sexual desires, and the spiritual anguish they must have inspired in that time and place. "There were / sins I dare not divulge / to this day," he confesses in "My False Faith," which explores the collapse of his Catholicism in the face of his budding homosexuality. The book concludes with three translations of a single Pasolini poem in which he imagines the day of his death. Only in the third version does di Michele elaborate on the original enough to hint at the violent nature of Pasolini's 1975 murder. Indeed, biographical facts are secondary to di Michele's larger project. Most of the background material comes at the tail end of the collection, in the epilogue. Pasolini is at the centre of the book more as

inspiration than subject, a stand-in for the adolescent every-person coming into his own under less than hospitable circumstances.

Consisting of 128 "chubby sonnets," David McGimpsey's latest collection, *Li'l Bastard*, is what *The Dream Songs* might have been if John Berryman had been drunk on McDo milkshakes instead of alcohol. Alternately sardonic, silly, and crotchety, these sixteen-line poems are disillusioned but unsentimental pop culture postcards from an avowed but likable bullshitter.

The book chronicles a road trip across North America by a trickster poet in the throes of a mid-life crisis. The speaker of these poems is a tourist/pilgrim in search of a solace that can't be found on the road, or quite possibly anywhere else. Raging against the indignities of aging, he writes from Nashville, "When I was thirty-five I had a small stroke / and for a brief time dollar signs / appeared to me as question marks — / so I thought you had won the lottery." The real rage – and punchline – is in the poem's title: "Song for the Power that Watches over Us and also Reminds Us, from Now On,

continued on page 10



The Small Room at the Top of the Stairs & Thinking of Yu

by Carole Fréchette, translated by John Murrell

In *The Small Room at the Top of the Stairs*, Grace finds herself irresistibly drawn to the mystery of the room her husband has forbidden her to enter. Will she let her curiosity get the best of her and encounter the secret life of the man she loves? A thought-provoking journey, *Thinking of Yu* is the story of a woman who discovers herself when she becomes increasingly curious about the creative rebellion of three Chinese students who altered a portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square.

The List

by Jennifer Tremblay, translated by Shelley Tepperman

"Shelley Tepperman's English translation of *The List* is exceptional. If there was anything lost in translation it was undetectable in this compelling reading of a script that is structured like poetry yet realized with complete and heartbreaking humanity."

—Chicago Stage Review

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To Celebrate Milestone Birthdays with a Series of Invasive and Humiliating Medical Exams.” The levity is partly a pose, a lament in funny glasses. Our hero loves, yet seeks deliverance from the vapid flash of pop culture. He walks the Place Versailles shopping centre in east-end Montreal with the same reverence one might feel visiting Versailles itself. “You can’t buy Wrangler jeans at Versailles,” he either complains or boasts.

McGimpsey is the master of effortless irreverence. Where other poets exert themselves looking for ways to innovate, he skewers lyrical earnestness on the one hand and high-brow reinvention of the wheel on the other, while still responding to poetic tradition and forging his own path away from the mainstream. He drives poetry forward by taking the air out of it: “Nobody, / not even the rain, has such a hairy back.”

Also something of a road trip collection, Lesley Trites’ debut, *Echoic Mimic*, is a “mixed-genre long poem” that follows Ada’s flight from a sleepy hometown and philandering boyfriend to Toronto, where she discovers the bittersweet joys of urban anonymity and the limits of geographic solutions to romantic problems.

Written partly in short lyric verses and partly as a play with dialogue and stage directions, the collection is imaginative and playful in form, and Ada’s ferocity sometimes feels worth applauding: “I will not stick my head in the oven. / I’ll see my poems published before I die.” But Trites’ narrative and language sometimes veer into the too familiar, as when the couple in “Our First Date” exchange an ice cube in an open-mouthed kiss, or

Ada lies awake in “Urban Lullaby,” her apartment littered with “unwashed wine glasses / with lipstick imprints / and the grounds / from last Saturday’s coffee.” These feel more like stock images than finely observed details. Such false notes are somewhat fitting for a coming-of-age tale; they can feel a bit like rereading one’s own teenage diaries, filled with over-wrought emotion, unoriginally expressed.

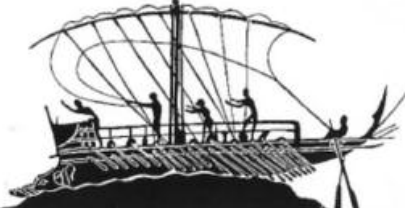
It’s a dirty little secret among survivors of plane crashes, shipwrecks, and deadly diseases that life’s fragility, when not a source of wonder, can be the source of some disappointment. After all, survival is really only temporary reprieve, and anyone who lives to tell the tale is starkly aware of the wolves just beyond the forest’s edge. Written largely in the wake of a serious illness, poet Mark Callanan’s second full-length collection, *Gift Horse*, captures the ambivalence of one delivered from death’s clutches. “There’s something to be said for vetting presents,” he suggests in the title poem, pointing out that the fall of Troy could have been prevented if someone had taken the time to look in the mouth of that well-known horse.

Despite the ambivalence, Callanan doesn’t sound bitter. His poems have the delicate hope and cautious hunger of a convalescent, grateful for the gifts of being, but eager to accept them on his own terms. “These days I would rather haul / myself apart than have it done / without my consent,” declares the speaker of “Butchering Crabs,” which opens the book. Yet for the most part the poems are only obliquely confessional. Callanan’s precision with language and skill with slant rhyme give his poems music, while images of the natural world ground the collection with a bracing chill. Often animals, real or mythical, stand in for the vulnerability, loneliness, or rage of the wounded human. In “Off the Boat,” stow-away rats “risk electrocution / just to raid / the blackened crumbs / from your toaster tray. / Now tell me / you wouldn’t do the same.” Mortality becomes a bond between the species. The survivor understands why people sometimes act like animals, and why animals act in their own self-interest: life’s brevity is palpable when you know you’re being hunted. mrb

Abby Paige is a poet and freelance writer. She lives in Ottawa.

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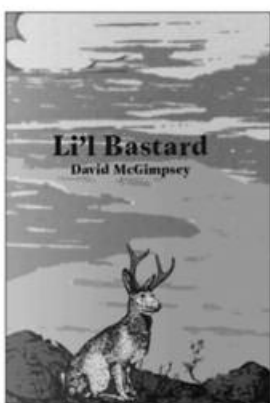


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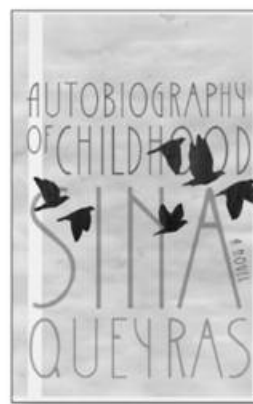
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AGAINST GOD

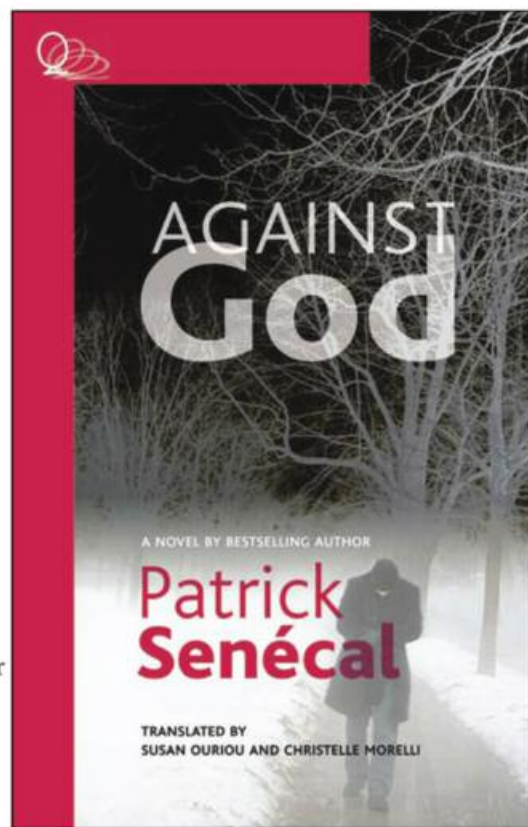
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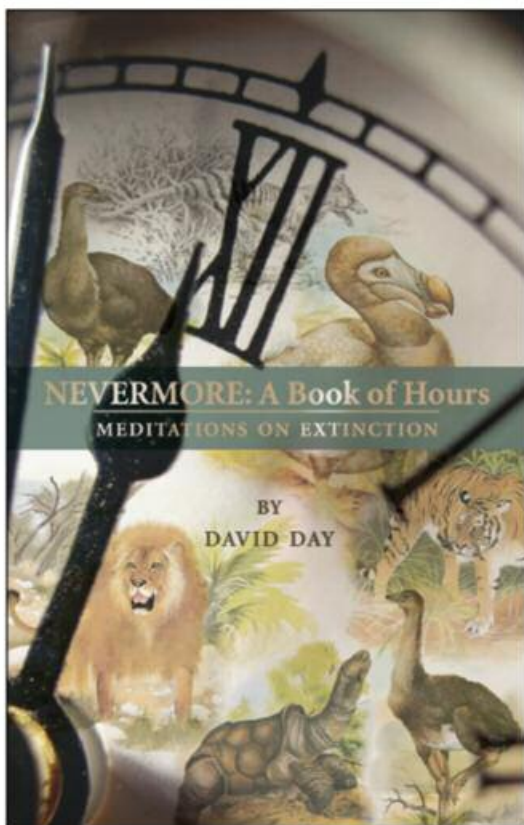
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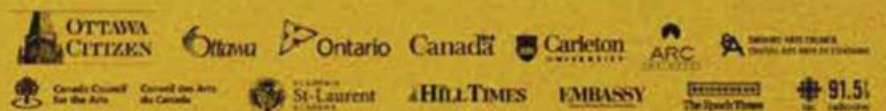
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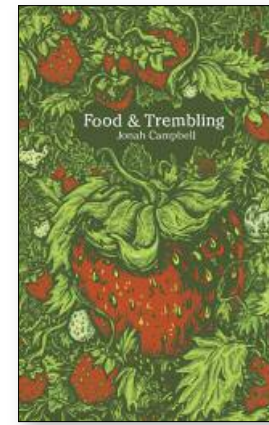
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FOOD & TREMBLING
Jonah Campbell
Invisible Publishing
17.00, paper, 232pp
978-1-926743-15-8

feature by Andrea Belcham

Green pepper aficionados, weekend brunchers, and self-identified foodies beware: Jonah Campbell has no love for you. The Montreal-based author of *Food & Trembling*, a collection of essays loosely united by gastronomy, does not tame his tastes for gentle readers. Indeed, his book perpetuates the tone of frank, black humour established in his blog, *Still Crapulent After All These Years*, which Campbell started in 2008. Despite Campbell describing it in a recent interview as being read only by “immediate friends ... and people who get there from Google searching ‘deep-fried cheeseburger,’” the blog attracted the attention of the editors at Invisible Publishing. *Food & Trembling* includes many ideas originally presented online, though revised and expanded in order to shed what Campbell called “that ‘bloggy’ tone.”

Yet perhaps it’s because of this blog foundation that the book is so intriguing. Campbell is a mess of contradictions, singing the praises of caperberries in one essay and Doritos Late Night All Nighter Cheeseburger Flavored Tortilla Chips in the next; idealizing the authenticity of a chickpea shami offered by a literal hole-in-the-wall Montreal food counter here, yet perfectly happy to construct a soy milk-based béchamel there. When the book starts, Campbell is a margarine-savouring vegan, and by the book’s end, he’s an “energetic omnivore” dabbling in offal. Of course, the author is fully aware that his taste for the pure clashes

with his penchant for the processed – he even spends an essay reflecting upon “Food As Destroyer” (i.e., why he persists in eating junk food when he’s sick). *Food & Trembling* is like sitting with a friend over a couple of pints and listening to him expound deliriously but endearingly. You can’t deny your friend his idiosyncratic cravings, can you?

Campbell is the first to admit that he lacks any “professional” authority as a gourmet. In the essay “God Help Me,” he recounts his early experiences in the kitchen – first as a teenager relegated to making the family dinner each night, then as a resto “dish pig” (described

briefly as “First Time I Got My Hand Covered With Maggots, First Time I Enjoyed Mushrooms, First Time I Felt Physically Angry At Mussels, First Time I Obscured My Tears In The Steam of a Dishwasher”), on to his associations with Food Not Bombs, and the beginning of his vegetarianism. Now Campbell is a master’s student in the Social Studies of Medicine at McGill, and a home chef with a real DIY spirit. He’s brewed chocolate-espresso stout in his own apartment, used torn-up beer boxes as a makeshift cutting board, and dumpster dived for donuts. Scroll through his blog and you’ll find a photo of a pig’s head boiling away on Campbell’s stove, a pair of sunglasses perched on its snout. An expert he is not, but he’s also not afraid to state his opinions and share his natural curiosities. He displays an admirable willingness to eat “off the beaten path.” As he says in “Not Much Pluck”: “It occurs to me that there has been a fundamental shift in my relationship to food over the past few years. Namely that *disgust* now plays a profoundly diminished role in determining what I eat.”

He insists (though his mother may believe otherwise) that it’s not bravado that leads him to sampling sautéed calf brains, but a desire to find “truth in the tastes of others.”

Campbell arrived in Montreal in 2005, intending to hitchhike from Ontario to his homeland of PEI, but decided that *la belle province* was just as good a place as any to settle. In *Food & Trembling* he relays several moments in which place and taste

become perfectly fused in his memory – that delectable chickpea shami, for instance, stumbled upon in the most unlikely of spots here in Montreal. When asked how he regards the food landscape of the city, Campbell said he prefers a “sort of negative culinary map of Montreal.”

“On the one hand, it has this rep as a great food city, but a lot of the restaurants and the culture upon which that reputation rests are not really accessible to a lot of the populace,” he explained. “The food that I came to know and love when I first moved here is all of the street-level stuff, the cheap South Indian, Sri Lankan, and West Indian food of Côte-des-Neiges, the tall and Pakistani food of Park X, and all the little Middle Eastern and Chinese places that pepper the downtown core.” This *mélange*, he insisted, “provides the real topography of a city’s foodscape.”

And Campbell traverses this foodscape in the company of friends – the ex-pat’s new family with whom he breaks bread. Sampling native potato chips on a European tour, MacGyvering a repair to his apartment’s temperamental fridge (described in the very funny “I’ll Never See Such Arms Again, In Wrestling or in Love”), devising ways to cook with the aforementioned (stolen) case of caperberries: such are the adventures binding friends. The Orphan Christmases for punk immigrants that Campbell describes in *Food & Trembling* have since been replaced, he told me, by other rituals

continued on page 20

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978-1-894994-56-9

If Sherwin Tjia were a cat, he'd likely prefer to answer nature's call outdoors rather than within the cramped confines of a litter box. The poet, painter, and illustrator who brought us *The World is a Heartbreaker*, an A. M. Klein Poetry Prize finalist collection of pseudo "potato chip" haiku, continues to take the road less traveled, marking new territory along the way.

To catnap or not to catnap, that is often the life-or-death question in Tjia's latest creation – a skilfully illustrated graphic novel that is, in more ways than one, truly novel. *You Are a Cat!* is the first title in his bogus Pick-a-Plot!™ series, parodying the game books popularized in the 1980s.

The bottom of each page offers a list of options so that readers get to create their own "catventures" through the eyes of Holden Catfield. "If you want to continue outside, step to page 3," or "if you decide that today is more of a 'nap in a sunbeam' sort of day, retreat to page 17." Either way, Tjia will lead you down some pretty twisted back alleys.

As playful in person as he is in print, here is what Tjia had to say when we met to discuss his latest work.

KIMBERLY BOURGEOIS: It's interesting that you chose to write from the perspective of a cat. What is your relationship to cats?

SHERWIN TJIA: I love them, and I think about them a lot. I like to hang out with cats, and, because I've spent so much time hanging out with them, I feel like I know them quite well. I know how they would think and act in different situations, and also the kinds of adventures that they might go on when they leave the house.

KB: Do you ever feel like a cat?

ST: Definitely, I like to be comfortable like a cat. I'm a little finicky, I'm particular, and I like to sleep a lot. And that's probably where the similarities end.

KB: If you had nine lives, how would you spend the ninth one?

ST: That is a complicated question; I'm not quite sure how to answer that, actually. I think about reincarnation a lot, because I believe in it. ... So the idea that you have nine lives and that you've worked your way through all of them is a terrifying notion because that's like: full stop, this is the life you've got. But

knowing that that's your last life and that there is an element of choice there, I don't know that I would come back as a cat. I'd probably want to come back as a celebrity. And I think the interesting thing about celebrities is that they, above all of us, can enact a life where they live just like a cat. Because a cat can be lazy, finicky – you know, spur of the moment – do wild things, take wild chances, and, at the same time, have a life of complete comfort.

KB: Is there any one celebrity you'd want to be?

ST: I'd want to be one of those celebrities who don't need to work, one of those heiresses – like Paris Hilton. ... But, the problem with being that rich is that you grow up in that environment, so, while you might be scandalously rich, I feel like there is an impoverishment of imagination. Your imagination is cultivated when you don't have anything, when you grow up poor. So, if it's my last life, I would love to be an heiress, but with the imagination that comes from growing up poor.

KB: What does your hero, Holden Catfield, have in common with Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*?

ST: (laughs) I just thought it was a charming name, but the more I thought about it – like after I wrote the book – the more it seemed like Holden Caulfield and Holden Catfield actually had a lot in common in a very strange way, in that they both go on this kind of walking journey. In the case of Holden Caulfield, it's through New York, where these tall buildings make him feel very small. And, he kind of follows his whims. He's like, I feel like going skating, or maybe I'll call up that girl, or whatever. In *You Are a Cat!*, you can kind of do the same thing; there's a girl you can go visit. ... And, the fences and the world make you feel very small, because you're a cat. So, from your point of view, the world is

huge. You make these random decisions, and you are occasionally surprised by the depravity of the world.

KB: Holden Catfield lives with a highly dysfunctional family. This is not the first time you've explored this kind of psychological territory. Your comic strip, *Pedigree Girls*, for example, also alludes to discordance in the home. In her memoir, *The Liars' Club*, Mary Karr writes: "A dysfunctional family is any

family with more than one person in it." Would you agree with this?
ST: (laughs) Yea, all families are dysfunctional in their own way. At the beginning, I wasn't sure how this family (in the book) would be dysfunctional; I wanted it to be interesting. And I wanted you, as the cat, to be privy to the entire picture of the family, though the family isn't privy to the entire

continued on page 23

Get ready to take a few hits.

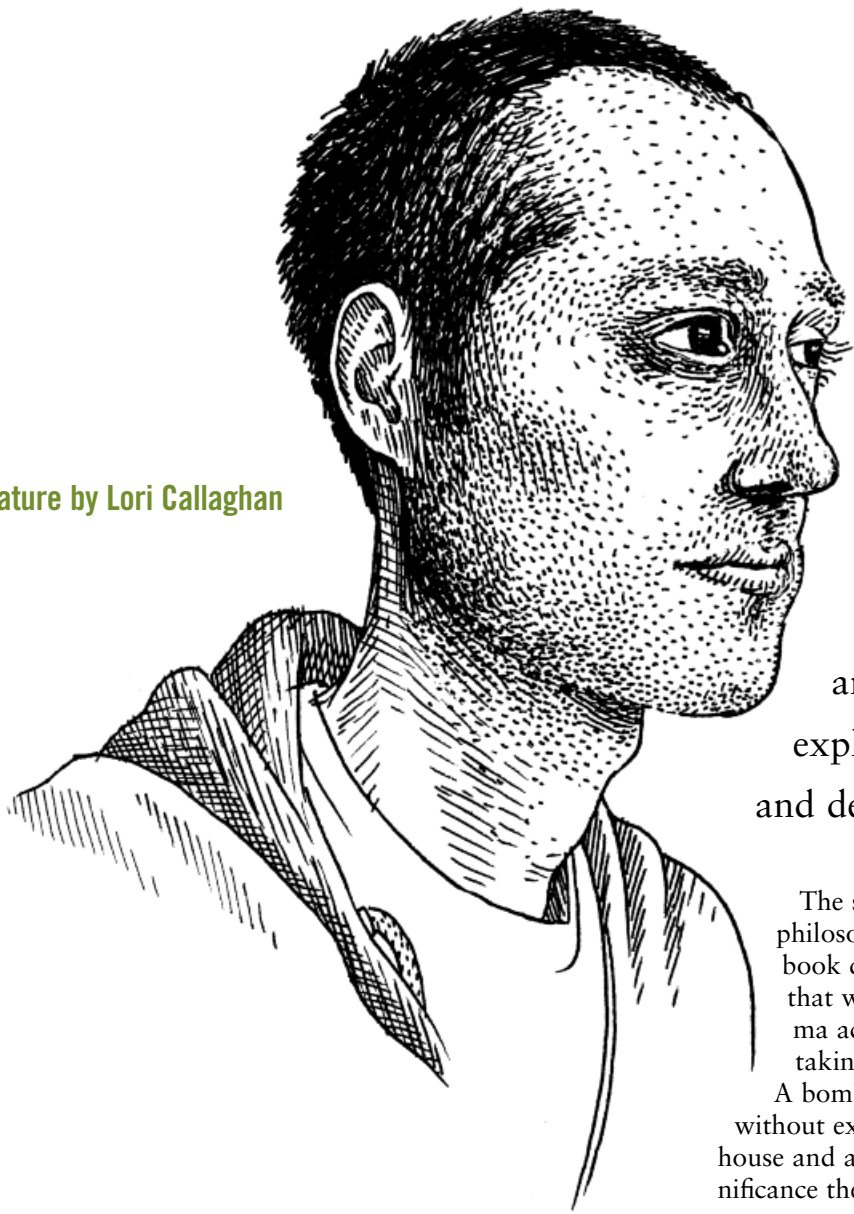
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feature by Lori Callaghan

Finch Philosophy

Big Questions is a big book. At nearly 600 pages, it is the culmination of 15 years worth of work by graphic novelist Anders Nilsen. Finches, a bomb, crows, an idiot, a snake, and a crash-landed pilot are the focus of this epic that explores theology and the search for meaning in the sparse and desolate plains the finches inhabit.

The short strips filled with jokes and philosophical pub talk that begin the book quickly give way to the narratives that will shape the finch-verse. Grandma aches and toils through her day, taking care of her grandson, the Idiot. A bomb drops out of the sky and lands without exploding. A plane crashes into a house and an angry pilot emerges. The significance the finches attribute to these events

polarizes them into smaller groups. Add to this a gang of vengeful squirrels and a murder of malicious crows that are driven by a scarcity of food, and the landscape takes on a post-apocalyptic quality that comes complete with its own Hades-like underworld.

Big Questions was born of an automatic drawing exercise Nilsen did at the University of New Mexico, where he received his BFA.

continued on page 18

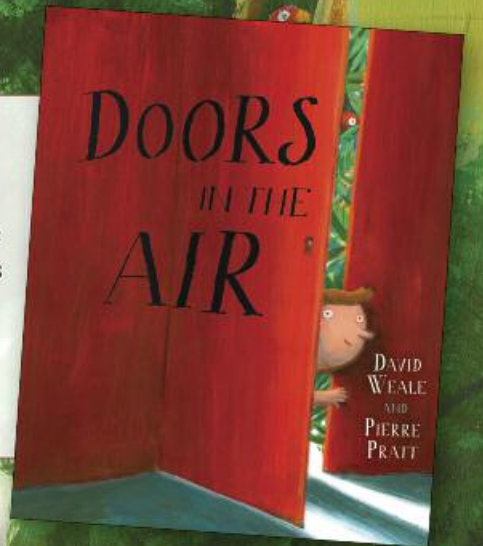
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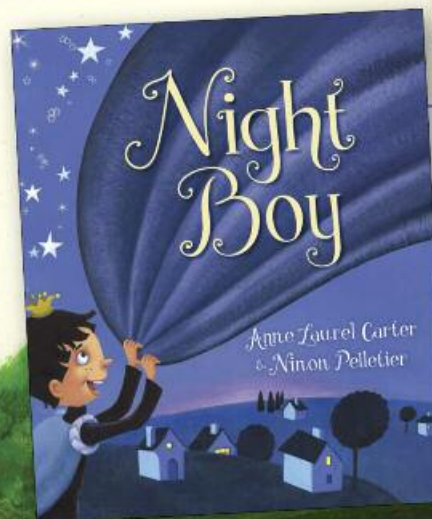
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Back to Schul

TRACES OF THE PAST

Montreal's Early Synagogues
Sara Ferdman Tauben
Véhicule Press
18.95, paper, 160pp
9781550653168

Montrealers like to say, with enduring pride, that you can't throw a stone without hitting a church. GPS not needed, simply find the spires in the distance and onward go. Over time, however, this Catholic skyline has all but sunk under the impetus of the Quiet Revolution and upscale condos.

And so we treasure the archaeological artefacts of Montreal's religious history: a crucifix here, an organ there, a stained glass window for your kitchen. But Sara Ferdman Tauben, author of *Traces of the Past: Montreal's Early Synagogues* is the archaeologist who stays at the dig after all the others have gone home.

What Ferdman Tauben dusts off is the story of Montreal's synagogues. The city's first

Jewish residents established the Shearith Israel congregation (also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) as long ago as 1768. The first synagogue in Canada, it was also the first non-Catholic house of worship in Quebec.

As the community moved up the Main and westward, they dotted neighbourhoods with shuls, small *shtibels*, and built synagogues. More than mere places of worship, the synagogues united disparate

waves of immigrants into cohesive communities, providing amenities such as meeting rooms, kitchens, gymnasiums, halls, and classrooms.

Like their Christian counterparts, the synagogues reflected the financial, organizational, and architectural ambitions of their congregants. From modest converted duplexes (the Bagg Street Schul) to "the city's first example of the Roman-Byzantine style" (Temple

Emanu-El), they were an unmistakable counterpoint to the otherwise "more commanding ideologies" that surrounded them.

As the Jewish community grew, splintered, evolved, retracted, reformed, and grew



Ferdman Tauben is the archaeologist who stays at the dig after all the others have gone home.

again, entire congregations moved first north, then west, picking up stakes and migrating half way across town. In their wake, the splintered groups swallowed their pride and merged together, forming compound groups in a last ditch effort to survive in situ. The Chevra Shaas Adath Yeshurun Hadrath Kodesh Shevet Achim Chaverim Kol Israel d'Bet Avraham, for example, was an amalgamation of

five former downtown congregations.

Likewise, she notes the relationships – or lack thereof – between the Conservatives and the Reformers, the traditionalists and the "moderns," and between everybody and the Hasidim. Fascinating portraits of individuals emerge in the process: the Parnass family, for example, most of whom played leadership roles in the community, including the women; or the chatty anecdotes from individual congregants. Sam Birenbaum, long-time secretary of the Anshei Ozeroff congregation in the 1920s, writes: "As fate would have it, we settled in Montreal where daily life in its 'Hoo-Ha' was ready to swallow us (up)."

Ferdman Tauben has clearly spent many hours in the archives, poring over letters, blueprints, meeting minutes, shopping lists, attendance records, and so on. What emerges, surprisingly, is a lively and personable account of a vibrant community on the move. Further, she teases out the knots between historical record and its messier companion, the truth. The story of the Beth Yehuda on Duluth, for example, bears this out. Its congregants beamed that their synagogue "with splendour and glory ... was the pride of all Montreal Jews." But Ferdman

Tauben immediately reaches for that next dusty box in the archives, and smiles at the crumpled note otherwise overlooked. "In the treasury there was not even one cent ... All this cost money, which wasn't there," reveals a 1940 letter.

While written for those interested in Montreal's Jewish history, *Traces of the Past* is a valuable work for anyone interested in the cityscape, urban planning, architecture, religion, or minority communities. Yet, while she mixes anecdotes and archival research with ease, there is no mistaking that her priority is getting the facts straight and paying homage to the buildings themselves. Written with refreshing sparseness, it is rich in detail and texture. It can also occasionally feel like an onslaught of information, and more than once I found myself flipping forwards and backwards and forwards again, having gotten lost in Beth this or Shaar that. But to accuse her of erring on the side of detail is like telling St-Viateur Bagel to go easy on the sesame seeds.

Now that many of Montreal's original synagogues have been converted into schools, condos, and, yes, even churches, *Traces of the Past* is an important contribution to the history of Quebec. **mrb**

Leila Marshy is editor of *The Rover*.

War? What War?

BLITZKRIEG AND JITTERBUGS

College Life in Wartime, 1939-1942

Elizabeth Hillman Waterston
McGill-Queen's University Press
34.95, cloth, 288pp
978-0-7735-3976-1

Elizabeth Hillman Waterston was preparing for her first semester at McGill University in 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany. *Blitzkrieg and Jitterbugs* is the account of her experience as a student in the shadow of that distant war. Waterston tells her story in lively, present-tense journal entries, drawing on school yearbooks, articles from the *McGill Daily*, photographs, and her own memories to create what she calls a "fictionalized memoir."

Waterston launched herself energetically into university life, attending dances and guest lectures as well as first-year classes. She also joined the

McGill Daily team, reporting on campus events ranging from debating competitions to debutante balls. In the midst of essay writing, she notes, exhilarated, "I'm not weary! I'm studying my head off, but I'm having a great time, war or no war!"

Signs of the war were everywhere, however. Men starting their first year of university were required to undergo a medical examination by the Canadian Officer Training Corps and "urged to consider adding COTC drill to their schedules." Male students dropped out to join the army in increasing numbers, and many professors also left as they were called on to contribute to the war effort. And *McGill Daily* headlines – examples of which are interspersed throughout the book – provided a sombre reminder of current events: "British reveal atrocities in Nazi concentra-

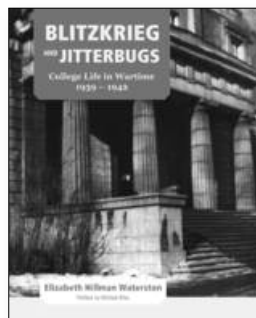
tion camps"; "Thirty sectors of London bombed"; "Canada declares war on Japan."

Waterston recalls the pressure that the *Daily* faced from the administration to not rock the boat. Reprimands and warnings were delivered to the newspaper's staff, reminding them, for example, that "it is not appropriate for the *McGill Daily* to run stories about cutting classes or other high jinks of the kind acceptable in peacetime. The general public will be watching university students very carefully in the next few months for assurance of campus support of the war effort."

Critical voices still managed to be heard on campus, however. Waterston was impressed by student activist Madeleine Parent who argued that management was using patriotism as an excuse to keep workers'

wages low and to prevent the formation of unions. She was also inspired by feminist Thérèse Casgrain's fight to obtain the vote for women in Quebec – finally achieved in 1940.

Barriers for women were beginning to break down in the early 1940s, but women in academia still faced prejudice, as Waterston discovered. There were few female professors, and female students were excluded from certain departments, such as mathematics. Women could study law, but weren't admitted to the Montreal Bar until 1942. She regularly encountered male professors' fixed perceptions of women's abilities. For instance, her philosophy professor informed her that "logical thought comes more naturally to male students." Less discussed in the book is the war's role in making new jobs available to women, though Waterston



experienced this in a small way in her summer job in 1941 when she worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway as a clerk, a position normally occupied by men. More analysis of trends and changes such as these – whether within the text or in an introduction – would have added an interesting dimension to this book and provided welcome context.

As a war history *Blitzkrieg and Jitterbugs* is somewhat abbreviated, ending in the spring of 1942 when Waterston transferred to the University of Toronto because so many professors in her faculty had been "gobbled by the war effort." However, as a memoir of one person's wartime experience it is an engaging read, providing a snapshot of life in English-speaking Montreal in the 1940s, and vividly evoking the disconnect between that world and the conflict unfolding in Europe. **mrb**

Kate Forrest is a Montreal translator, editor, and piano teacher.

Meet Me in St. Louis

THE SWEET SIXTEEN

The Journey That Inspired the Canadian Women's Press Club

Linda Kay

McGill-Queen's University Press

34.95, cloth, 224pp

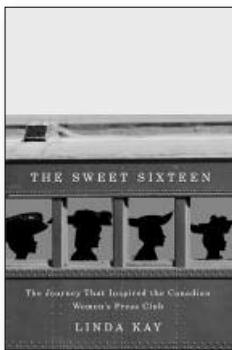
978-0-7735-3967-9

In 1904, sixteen Canadian women set out on the Canadian Pacific Railway to the St. Louis World's Fair. Dubbed "The Sweet Sixteen," they would cover the fair as reporters for various newspapers. Though not all were working journalists, all were iconoclasts in one way or another: women who worked outside the home, women with ties to Canada's cultural elite, opinionated women who nurtured their writing craft within the cramped space of the "Women's Pages." By the time they returned to Canada, they had solidified their resolve to make Canada a friendlier place for female journalists, and the Canadian Women's Press Club was born.

Meticulously researched and capably written, *The Sweet Sixteen* is Linda

Kay's attempt to bring these women and their journey to life. She introduces characters like Kathleen "Kit" Coleman, the first woman ever to act as an accredited war correspondent; Robertine Barry, journalist and founder of *Le Journal de Françoise*; Margaret Graham, who initiated the trip to St. Louis by demanding equal opportunity for female journalists; and Grace Denison, a seasoned columnist for *Saturday Night*. Together the sixteen formed a group that may not be diverse by today's standards, but that was remarkable for the time – Anglophone and Francophone, veteran and novice, small-town and big smoke women with a shared passion for writing and reporting.

One of the book's most interesting aspects is seeing the World's Fair through these women's eyes. Today it's hard to conceive of how important these fairs once were; before television, the internet, and the proliferation of



global industry, World's Fairs were the only opportunity for regular people to get a look at the latest technological and scientific breakthroughs (in 1904, baby incubators were the hot new thing), or to see the art and ways of life of other cultures (Irish linens and Japanese tapestries were among the items exclaimed upon in St. Louis). They were also home to the biggest, most outrageous spectacles going: the St. Louis World's Fair featured a re-enactment of a battle of the Boer War starring none other than General Piet Cronjé, the Boer commander who had been defeated by the British Empire only a few years before. (Naturally the women's opinions on this spectacle were mixed.) Coming from a Canada that was largely white and Protestant, the Sweet Sixteen were enchanted by what they saw at the fair, waxing poetic over the harmony, richness of culture, and "kinship of man" on display.

Kay also highlights some of the internal tensions these correspondents must have faced as high-profile female public figures. Although as working

women they were pioneers and progressives, many argued against women's suffrage, claiming, as Sweet Sixteener Kate Simpson Hayes did, that while it was acceptable for women to guide and support their husbands and sons, "a woman had no business openly participating in the political process." Her sentiments were shared by Kit Coleman and Grace Denison, among others. It's an interesting stage in the feminist evolution, where women could be public and independent, but only as individuals – they didn't tie their successes to a broader movement. The Press Club they founded was a first step toward strengthening solidarity and opening doors for female journalists. They taught feminism by example, not by screed, setting a precedent that we take for granted today.

Although in later chapters the book plods a bit as it details the Press Club's rise and fall, *The Sweet Sixteen* generally offers a spirited and interesting glimpse into the lives of some unusual women on an uncommon journey. **mb**

Anna Leventhal is a Montreal-based fiction writer.

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Writers, editors, friends of the press – all are welcome to celebrate DC Books' 25th birthday during the 14th Blue Metropolis Montreal International Festival, April 18th to the 23rd. Editors Steve Luxton and Jason Camlot will be there, opening the line-up with four new and very recent books, like *Failure to Thrive* – TV script writer and Food Network Producer Jeff Oliver's energetic and ultimately poignant literary debut that digs deep into the compromises of marriage, the intensity of parenthood, and the love that propels a father in the face of his own mortality to raise his son.



With wit and sensitivity, the tales in Tom Abrey's debut collection, *Pollen*, portray moments of suffering, confusion, and discovery and introduce the reader to worlds as widely various as Japanese kite-making, bees, daycare, alcohol,

and motorcycle maintenance.

In both its vivid acts of visionary recovery and in more satiric moments of faux antique pastiche, Daniel O'Leary's *The Lower Provinces* examines the claims of the present and calls for a deeper appreciation of the insight surfacing from the well of the Canadian past.



Steve Luxton's *In the Vision of Birds* vividly portrays the natural world's green particulars – what Zen Buddhists term 'The Ten Thousand Things.' Long before the current rise of eco-poetry, Luxton was writing powerful and exquisitely crafted poems about and set in nature. This important collection brings together for the first time Luxton's best nature poems written over the last 35 years and includes new and previously unpublished work.



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INUIT AND WHALERS ON BAFFIN ISLAND THROUGH GERMAN EYES

Wilhelm Weike's Arctic

Journal and Letters (1883–84)

Ludger Müller-Wille

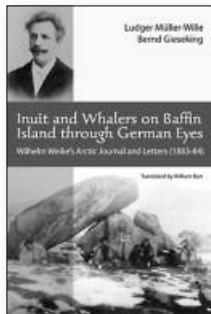
and Bernd Giesecking

Translated by William Barr

Baraka Books

29.95, paper, 286pp

9781926824116



In the late nineteenth century, European and Scandinavian countries had already been exploring the Arctic for centuries, and several had been present semi-permanently and commercially for decades. By the 1880s, Germany had a polar station at Qingua, at the deepest point of Cumberland Sound, and the Germans, along with many of their occidental compatriots, were fascinated by all things Arctic.

And so it was that, in 1883, Franz Boas set out for Baffin Island, taking with him as a manservant a young man who had worked for his parents, Wilhelm Weike. Boas, though trained as a physicist, was interested in natural history and anthropology. This year-long expedition was the beginning of a career that would eventually bring him to teach at Columbia and include significant contributions to Native folklore and linguistic anthropology. Boas's Arctic journals and letters, first published in English translation in 1994, reveal a thoughtful scientist who was already cognizant of the nuances of historical science – taking observations in their own context. Meanwhile, cheery and pragmatic, Weike's journals, now also translated into English and buttressed by editorial context, flesh out the quotidian aspects of Boas's nascent ethnographic concerns.

Wilhelm Weike was hired to cook, haul, sew, clean, hunt, re-sole shoes and so on, and had the skills as well as the physical and psychological constitution required to support Boas during his year on Baffin Island. These journals of an uneducated helpmate are something of a cultural oddity, and ultimately remain a footnote to the expedition.

The journals are superficially domestic; Weike's diligent daily entries are a catalogue, without afterthought or analysis, of meals prepared and endless coffee brewed, of the commonplace deaths of Inuit children, of the cold (“in the afternoon the temperature rose to -44°C ”). Boas had been the one to instruct

Weike to keep a journal, intending to use his servant's writings as a resource, and Weike, in his log, remains deferential to “Herr Dr Franz Boas.” The editors' inclusion of a handful of letters Weike wrote home, however, offer a glimpse into the poetic soul and dry wit of this

man whose socio-economic class and lack of higher education determined his role on the Boas expedition. For example, on the journey west, Weike writes home of the “Greenland icebergs that towered up like church steeples.” Later, after settling into the Scottish whaling station, with its music and drinking and merrymaking, Weike wryly sighs, “I had to play the triangle again.”

The existence of and access to such documents is typically fraught with difficulties, both graphically and contextually. Weike wrote primarily using the German Gothic *Spitzschrift*, while the copyist hired by Boas rendered a version in Roman script, negotiating Weike's abysmal handwriting, transliterations from English and Inuktitut, and still-fluctuating cartography.

The editors of Weike's journals are particularly painstaking in documenting the variants of Inuit names and in tracking the numerous European interpretations of the land and its inhabitants. Some explanations veer into redundancy: do we really not know how marine mammals breathe through holes in the ice? William Barr's translation of Weike's no-frills journal is functional, though he occasionally takes temporal and idiomatic liberties (thus, for instance, he has Weike “feed[ing] our faces” in August 1884, while the American slang coinage would not exist for another two decades).

The editorial tone of *Inuit and Whalers on Baffin Island through German Eyes* is not quite academic nor quite colloquial. The editors' preface and afterword, notably on the long-term relationship between Weike and Boas, do provide additional insight into the German class structure of the time, and into the character of the man who would become the father of modern anthropology. Yet, much like the indefinite position of Weike's journals – part utter banality, part detailed archive – Müller-Wille and Giesecking's book fills in a bit of Arctic exploratory history, but it's hardly required reading. mrb

Katia Grubisic is a writer, editor, and translator.

Despicable He

THE CANADIAN FÜHRER

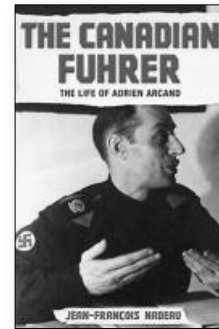
The Life of Adrien Arcand

Jean-François Nadeau

Lorimer

35.00, cloth, 360pp

9781552779040



The Canadian Führer explores the life and impact of a virulent anti-Semite, Adrien Arcand (1899–1967). Now largely forgotten, Arcand achieved notoriety during the 1930s as the charismatic head of a series of far-right organizations and newspapers.

Jean-François Nadeau gives a highly readable portrait of a malevolent and shadowy figure, while also providing a well-informed outline of the right-wing Catholic movements that once flourished in Quebec. Although Arcand's own movement was small, Nadeau reveals that he received support from key establishment figures over several decades. Nadeau also shows that Arcand's life intertwined with those of a number of famous figures, including the artist Jean-Paul Riopelle (who admired him in his youth), the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline (who attended one of his fascist meetings in 1938), and future Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau (who, as a law student, criticized his incarceration under the War Measures Act, a statute later deployed by Trudeau himself).

Depression-era Quebec was rife with groups that flirted with fascism and anti-Semitism. Arcand's movement went beyond the point of flirtation by ostentatiously embracing the symbols, rhetoric, and style of Nazi Germany. He crammed his newspapers and pamphlets with anti-Semitic articles and cartoons of the most poisonous sort (one cartoon, reprinted in this book, depicts a hook-nosed, bearded, and leering octopus encircling the globe with its monstrous tentacles). Furthermore, his disciples staged mini-versions of Hitler's mass rallies and paraded in uniforms adorned with swastika armbands.

Arcand always viewed himself as a faithful, indeed fervent, Roman Catholic. He was both hurt and surprised when Church leaders reacted to his movement with hostility. He did get some support from a few clergymen on the ultra-right fringes of the Church, but mainstream Catholic authorities were wary of a man who so closely modelled his movement on a regime linked with neo-paganism and the persecution of Catholics.

Although a Francophone with his main base of support in Quebec, Arcand staunchly supported a united Canada, the British Empire, and the British monarch. At party meetings, members would raise their arms in fascist salutes and yell:

“Long live the King!” Arcand's preference for hereditary monarchy may have stemmed in part from his nostalgia for the Middle Ages. He felt revulsion for most modern ideas and currents of thought. The Enlightenment, liberalism, socialism, communism, and the theory of evolution were frequent targets of his polemics. His prime target, however, would always be the Jews, whom he loathed with rabid intensity. He took it as an unquestioned axiom that Jewish conspiracies were responsible for the world's ills.

For a hate-filled monomaniac, Arcand could be surprisingly pragmatic, a theme explored at length in this book. For tactical reasons, Arcand often urged his supporters to vote for mainstream conservative parties such as the Union nationale, which returned the favour by giving him small sums of financial aid through much of his life.

In 1938, as war with Germany loomed, Arcand realized it might be prudent to keep some distance between his movement and Hitler's regime. He began to curb his overt references to Nazism, but the subterfuge fooled no one. Arcand was incarcerated under the War Measures Act from 1940 to 1945. A pathological liar, he had so exaggerated the strength of his movement that authorities became genuinely alarmed. It didn't help matters that he had conducted a vast correspondence with Nazi supporters and sympathisers overseas.

Arcand emerged unrepentant from his wartime imprisonment. He kept up and even increased his correspondence with anti-Semites across the globe. He helped launch the holocaust-denial industry and came to be treated as a mentor by Ernst Zündel and his ilk. Arcand remained a paranoid bigot to the end, all the while regarding himself as an upstanding Christian.

The arts editor at *Le Devoir*, Nadeau is also an accomplished historian. He is an expert on the right-wing thinkers and figures who were active in Quebec during the period covered by this book. Nadeau is thus able to contrast Arcand's movement with the other, usually far less fanatical, right-wing groups that thrived in this province during Arcand's lifetime. The breadth of Nadeau's research is impressive: his extensive endnotes show evidence of long days spent in archives. Nadeau's main text, however, is written in an engaging style. This book is of great worth to professional historians, but it will also appeal to a broad readership. mrb

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

Nilsen continued from page 14

Sketching a new picture every 60 seconds for an hour, the central elements of the birds, plane crash, and lost pilot emerged. A series of self-published gag strips in 1999 marked the official launch of this work, which Nilsen now refers to as his newest and also oldest book. The pen-and-ink, black and white drawings are often sparse, with detailed pointillism and borderless expanses. It evokes the void of uncertainty the finches are trying to fill.

The philosophical musings the birds engage in stem from Nilsen's interest in theology and in how people create meaning when they interpret their experiences. The finch Charlotte Evangelista takes the arrival of the bomb, which she believes to be an egg, as something that was delivered into their care, a "miraculous visitation." Others believe the pilot to be a hatchling who needs tending. The finch Zwingly even argues that the end is near and that if they treat the hatchling well everything will be different. Bayle, a finch named after French theologian Pierre Bayle, dies at the hands of the Idiot and then comes back to life. Believing the Idiot resurrected him, he becomes the Idiot's follower and champion. Divided into religious factions, the finches begin to clash with each other, eventually resorting to violence.

Bleak landscapes, desperation, and the drive to survive are recurring themes in Nilsen's work. His *Dogs and Water*, which won the 2005 Ignatz Award for Outstanding Story, follows a young man

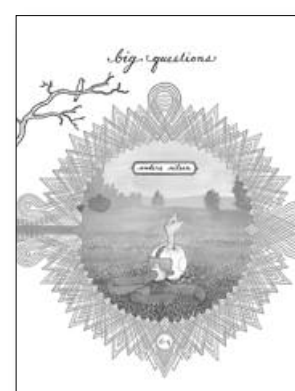


and his stuffed bear across a desolate land as they endure encounters with armed men and wild animals on their way to some unknown destination. The bird-on-bird violence and cannibalism in *Big Questions* gives it a grim atmosphere that is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Far from the levity of the gag strips that open the book, the story becomes increasingly stark and more interesting as a narrative. Death and calamity are the sorts of things that drive the finches to find an explanation, to find meaning, in a world that beats them down.

The gag strip, however, returns at the end. Filled with platitudes and burp humour, it tries to lighten

The bird-on-bird violence and cannibalism in *Big Questions* gives it a grim atmosphere that is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

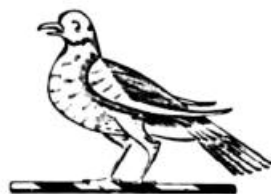
the mood. Given the trajectory the book has taken, this gives it a sad trombone send-off. Without the gag strips *Big Questions* would harmonize better as a whole. If you can look past them, though, you'll find an epic tale that delves into the survivalist mentality of a group of finches trying to understand their place in a brutal world. mrb



Lori Callaghan is a freelance visual arts critic who has written for the *Montreal Gazette* and *The Rover*.

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Anders Nilsen
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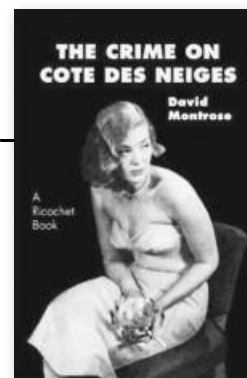
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Signature
EDITIONS

Richard Sommer, 1934-2012



It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of Richard Sommer, on February 13, 2012 after a courageous battle with cancer.

Richard was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2004 and his recently published verse journal *Cancer Songs* was an important part of his response to this challenge. As Richard said, these were songs of refusal to go under, to surrender to the undertow of the disease, songs of newly discovered yearning, courage and awe. Despite the pain and suffering, or perhaps because of it, he recognized that there was also a heightening, a vividness and intensity of perception, a kind of awakening that resulted from experience of dealing with cancer.

Richard's love of music ran deep and he was an accomplished flautist who in his later years volunteered in hospitals and personal care homes, playing for the sick and elderly. He also had an enthusiasm for dance; when some might retreat to their rocking chairs, he performed with his wife of more than forty years, dance improvisationalist, teacher, and artist Victoria Tansey.

The author of ten books of poetry — *Cancer Songs*, *The Shadow Sonnets*, *Fawn Bones*, *Selected and New Poems*, *The Other Side of Games*, *Milarepa*, *left hand mind*, *Blue Sky Notebook*, and *Homage to Mr. Macmullin* — Richard also taught poetry for many years at Concordia University and will be remembered by many as an engaged and generous teacher.

Others will remember him as an ardent environmentalist. He served for three decades as a volunteer game warden in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, and led, with others, a citizens' environmental group in a seven-year battle, ultimately successful, to save the Townships' Pinnacle Mountain from developers.

May you rest in peace, Richard.

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EDITIONS

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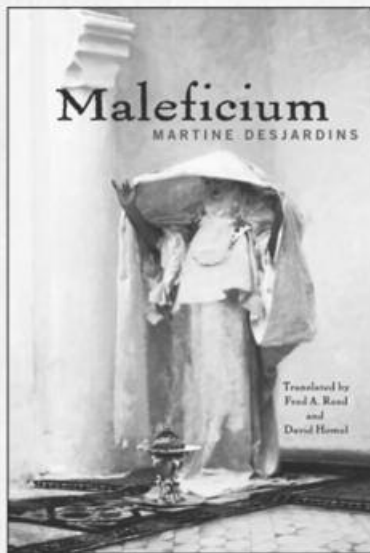
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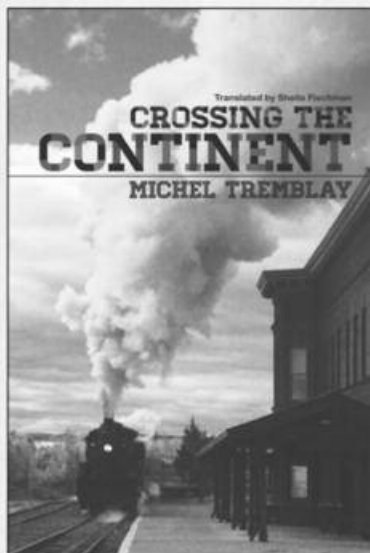
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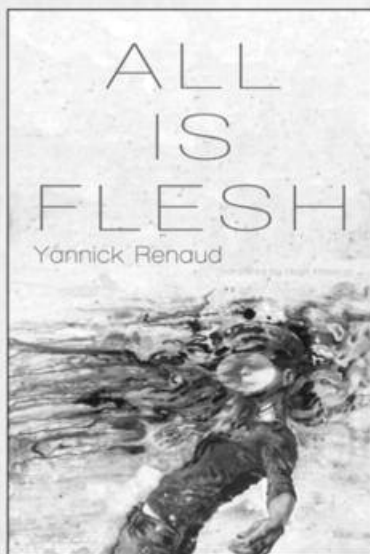
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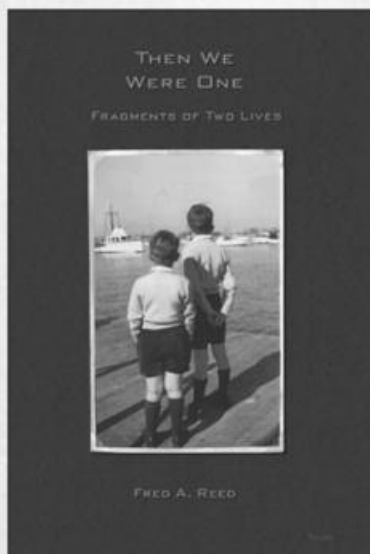
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A finely wrought autobiography about the Vietnam War's impact on one man and his journey of personal discovery.

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Campbell continued from page 12

He insists that it's not bravado that leads him to sampling sautéed calf brains, but a desire to find "truth in the tastes of others."



that build community, like last summer's First Annual Octo-Q and Seafood Fest, "where we steamed a bunch of mussels and had smelts, and I tried to cook a whole octopus on the barbecue."

All this is not to say that the book lacks gravity. There are finer details in Campbell's self-portrait. The man loves words, to put it mildly. Many an essay begins with – or focuses entirely upon – an etymological profile of such rarer food-bent words as gulchin and petecure. In the book, he points to his father, with his "correct-if-uncommon kinds of wordplay," for instilling an "interest in the directionality of word mechanics." In our interview, he elaborated:

Analysis and critique are the source of some of the keenest and most ineffable pleasures of my life, and make up a big part of who I am. Most of the time the words we use are "black boxed," as in, we use them and they do things for us, but we don't give much thought to how they do what they do, and how they got there. I find opening those black boxes, or attempting to, through etymologies, a really satisfying and exciting process.

In *Food & Trembling*, Campbell extends the actions of analysis and critique to a dissection of food itself, and beyond that, his cerebral interactions with it – taste. Meals are itemized in language that surpasses the mere restaurant reviewer's, even while maintaining a slight note of perversion (read with what reverence he describes his favourite "aromatic breakfast" of margarine, buckwheat honey, and harissa on toast, right down to the peculiarly successful interaction of spices in the Tunisian variety of harissa). Furthermore, it is not enough for the author to say he dislikes green peppers: he uses his dislike to ask whether it "reaffirms the unity of the self and the continuity of identity," at the same time as deliberating the very truthfulness of the essential-self concept.

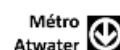
Although Campbell has been blogging for a while, food writing as a genre is a more recent discovery. He calls M.F.K. Fisher a favourite (in the book, top person "For Whom I Should Probably Invent A Time Machine For The Purposes of Seducing/Being Seduced By") for managing to write about food with a sensuality "that never becomes trite." Sharing the shelves with his well-thumbed *Oxford English Dictionary* are Grieve's *A Modern Herbal* and Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking*. The literary figures that pop up referentially in Campbell's book are many; in conversation, he stressed the particular influences of Maugham, Capote, and David Foster Wallace ("for not being afraid of indulging" – like Campbell – "in prolific footnotes in what are non-academic texts"). As for his own writing, Campbell recently completed a series for the *National Post*, and while another food book is not yet on the menu, he has been toying with the idea of assembling a second, much more extensive index to *Food & Trembling*, loving the "idea of an index that is simultaneously a tool and a puzzle." And who would read this conceptual supplement? "Nerds, I guess," he mused. "It's something that I want to do, but then I can't imagine anyone actually wanting it." mrB

Andrea Belcham is the author of *Food and Fellowship: Projects and Recipes to Feed a Community* and the co-founder of the community-supported kitchen Stone Soup Cooperative.



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young readers

Rules of Poetic Engagement

Below: Illustration by Pierre Pratt from *Doors in the Air*



YELLOW MINI Lori Weber Fitzhenry & Whiteside 9.95, paper, 243pp 9781554551996 Ages 14+



It's only the bravest of warriors who take up the gauntlet and teach poetry to high school students. Engaging teenagers and getting them excited about poetic forms takes a combination of an indomitable spirit, an ingenious mind, and inexhaustible life force.

Traditionally, teachers have used song lyrics as a means of introducing their young charges to the power and relevance that poetry already plays in their lives. Metre, rhythm, and rhyme are all hidden there in the words of their favourite Foo Fighters or Rihanna song. And once you've got them hooked, it's not hard to make the connections between the poetry they already know and the verse they've yet to discover.

Lori Weber has another strategy for introducing young adults to poetry. She has written a novel in verse aimed at the high school crowd. Published by Fitzhenry & Whiteside, *Yellow Mini* contains a series of poems written in free verse that describe the lives of 13 characters over a period of a few months. Each character writes their own poems from their own point of view. Five of the characters are 16-year-old teenagers and the remaining eight are adults – seven parents and one teacher.

The book itself is laid out attractively: poems appear in various shapes and sizes and the black and white illustrations are simple yet effective. It's obvious that the publisher took time and effort to produce a visually appealing book and that they believe in the value of offering teenagers access to poetry.

But despite the best efforts of the publisher and the writer, *Yellow Mini* falls short. Most disappointing is the overall quality of the poems themselves. At its best, free verse is a meaningful combination of carefully chosen words resonating with lyrical qualities, patterns of sound and repetition. Free verse is not limited by rhyme, cadence, or metre, but it is nevertheless meticulously crafted. Indeed, without the rules inherent in other poetic forms, the writer of free verse is called upon to create an effective form as well as expressive content. Unfortunately Weber largely fails to provide either rigorous form or vivid content.

Take for example Annabelle's reflections on her former friend Stacey:

I see the way Stacey stares at me and Christopher like she a) *can't believe* I have a boyfriend and b) *can't believe* it's Christopher

Often the reader is left wondering what makes the writing poetry. What difference would it make if this were written in a more traditional prose format? A reader unfamiliar with free verse at its best – think Walt Whitman, Allan Ginsberg, and Dorothy Livesay – could very well come away from *Yellow Mini* assuming that anything written with irregularly broken lines qualifies as free verse.

It's true that many of the poems written in this book are from the perspective of a teenager. And perhaps one could argue that it is appropriate then that the poems are rough and unsophisticated. This argument might excuse the lack of rigorous form in the work, but it does not excuse the absence of emotional depth. Teenagers know all about emotion and if given the chance will provide incredibly rich and powerful imagery to express what they're feeling. Weber's narrators rarely do that. Most of the time they just provide the facts necessary to move the plot along. The poems written from an adult's perspective don't fare any better. Here too we are left with neither effective form nor expressive content.

Despite the criticism of this work, we should thank Lori Weber for her willingness to experiment with form within the Young Adult genre.

THE FRENCH FRY KING

Rogé

Tundra Books

19.99, hardcover, 32pp

9781770493506

Ages 4-7

It's hard to resist a sausage dog with big ideas, and that's what Rogé gives us in the new English translation of *The French Fry King*. Along with a charming story about this irresistible protagonist, Rogé's painted folk-art-inspired illustrations take us into Roger the sausage dog's world. And what a world it is. It seems that a little dog with big ideas is capable of achieving anything he puts his mind (and paws) to. And so when a random potato rolls his way, Roger gets a brilliant idea. One refurbished trailer and many pounds of peeled potatoes later, Roger starts a french-fry business.



Before you can say "woof," the entrepreneurial canine is crowned king of fries and is traveling the world, creating all manner of gourmet fries, and celebrated everywhere he goes. But it seems even sausage dogs get the

blues and so Roger must face the limitations of his dreams for fame and fortune. Roger does eventually discover what gives true meaning to his life; something that goes far beyond his original material desires. A pleasure to look at and a pleasure to read for parents, the six and under set, and aficionados of sausage dogs everywhere.

NIGHT BOY

Anne Laurel Carter

Illustrations by Ninon Pelletier

Orca Books

19.95, hardcover, 32pp

9781554694020

Ages K-3

Bedtime is a popular and enduring theme in picture books, and for good reason. Most parents consider reading a book to their child a necessary element in the bedtime routine, as compulsory as the endless stalling manoeuvres that must be satisfied before sleep is finally achieved. What better story to tell at bedtime than one that ends with a young child tucked cozily between the covers, fast asleep?

Night Boy, by Anne Laurel Carter, follows the antics of a young prince named Night and his mischievous older sister Princess Day. Day challenges Night to a game of hide-and-seek and so begins an intergalactic race across the solar system. Night packs a sack full of snacks, grabs his favourite teddy bear, jumps aboard his sleek spaceship, and, guided by the north star, sets off in search of his fast-moving sister. But before long Night gets distracted by the possibility of a snack. A bump sends his milk out of the spaceship and into the sky, making a sparkling series of constellations. The story ends with Night back at the palace, and Day making sure her little brother is safe and sound. Ninon Pelletier uses rich shades of deep blue



continued on page 23

Skating on Thin Ice

Whether or not you agree with its blunt sentiment, you've got to admit that as an attention-getting device it takes some beating. For a Canadian writer to name a novel *I Hate Hockey* – or more specifically, and even better, for a Quebec writer to name a novel *J'hais le hockey*, as François Barcelo has done – is an act of national nose-thumbing akin to, say, an Argentinian novelist penning something called “Tango Sucks.” When, on the very first page, Barcelo's narrator/antihero Antoine Vachon goes one better than the book's title and calls our national game “the most resounding expression of our national stupidity,” the gloves have well and truly been dropped.

There is, and has been, no shortage of pro-hockey literature: Ken Dryden, Roy MacGregor, Stephen Brunt, Paul Quarrington, and Adam Gopnik have hymned the game's essence in their own ways, all without downplaying the brutality that has always been part of the sport's unique mix. Still, maybe the time is ripe for some wholly dissenting voices. Only an immature culture is afraid of self-criticism, after all, and to be a hockey fan is a complicated calling at a time when the mere voicing of the words “Sidney Crosby” is enough to induce a crisis of conscience. The current epidemic of concussions and other injuries can make you feel, on a bad day, as if you're complicit in the systematic crippling of a generation of Canadian youth. Thankfully there does appear to be the stirring of a literature willing to take on the new mood. Last year Lynn Coody explored the inner life of a hockey goon in her novel *The Antagonist*, and now comes Barcelo.

While it's apparent from the start that Vachon's hockey antipathy may have at least as much to do with his own issues as with the game itself – here is a man who has comprehensively screwed up his life and is casting about for the nearest scapegoat – he does make some good points. As someone just old enough to have

experienced a time when fans were trusted to know when to cheer and when not to, I find that his account of attending a game at the Bell Centre with his then six-year-old son rings all too true: “music with no apparent connection to the game blared from the loudspeakers ... we were pelted from all angles by deafening ads projected at the dazed crowd from every screen and amplifier in the building.” Montrealers used to

... if every hockey son who disappointed his father turned out like Vachon, we'd be a sorry nation indeed.

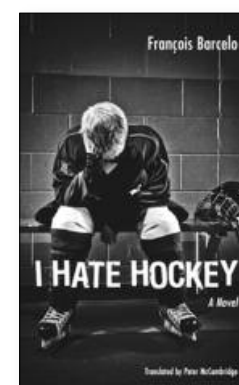
pride themselves on their disdain for such things, but now we go along with it all as meekly as fans in Columbus or Tampa. Barcelo/Vachon also touches upon most of the more troubling social issues surrounding the game at the youth level, from the class implications of simple participation – the unemployed Vachon is forced to stand by as his estranged wife “pays a fortune” to equip their teenage son's minor hockey participation – to the recurring problem of adult authority figures preying sexually on their vulnerable young charges.

All fine and good as far as it goes, but the trouble is, Barcelo never goes far enough. No sooner is a specter like sexual molestation introduced than it gets lost in the narrator's web of avoidance and denial. It would help if Vachon were either slightly sympathetic or carried to the extreme of a parodic grotesquerie, but unfortu-

nately he satisfies on neither of those levels. Self-pitying and casually racist – he describes a half-Asian teen as “not super slanty eyed” and mocks small-town Quebecers for being unable to tell a Chinese from a Vietnamese even when it's evident he can't make the distinction himself – Vachon is anti-PC to an extent that makes at times for downright queasy reading. This is a man honest, or foolish, enough to admit briefly entertaining the notion of receiving sexual favours from a minor. We might be more inclined to go with Vachon's voice if the roots of his misanthropy were better explored, but the best we get is a glancing remembrance of his boyhood failure at hockey and how it affected his relationship with his father: “Things were never the same between us after that. He never forgave me for forcing him to give up on his dream of having a famous hockey player for a son.” An archetypal Canadian scenario, to be sure, but if every hockey son who disappointed his father turned out like Vachon, we'd be a sorry nation indeed.

In the end, then, a great title gets squandered. *I Hate Hockey* may reveal something about a certain kind of male anger, but it tells us disappointingly little about ... well, about hockey. The anticipated iconoclastic manifesto never materializes and we're left with an uneasy mix of mid-life crisis novel and social issues novel, a book that's too raw for the young adult market and not quite meaty (nor long) enough to succeed as regular fiction. I had hoped for a literary equivalent of Guy Lafleur. I got Scott Gomez. mRb

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



I HATE HOCKEY
François Barcelo
Translated by
Peter McCambridge
Baraka Books
14.95, paper, 104pp
978-1-926824-13-0

young readers continued from page 21

to depict the night sky filled with glimmering stars and there are some interesting opportunities here for parents to introduce their children to facts about the celestial skies.

DOORS IN THE AIR

David Weale

Illustrations by Pierre Pratt

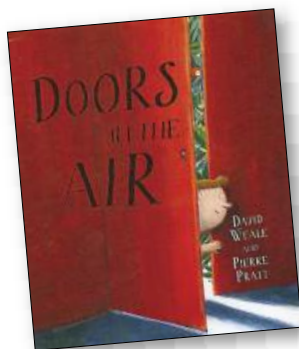
Orca Books

19.95, hardcover, 32pp

9781554692507

Ages K-3

A little round-headed boy peers out the upstairs window of his house and contemplates the limitations of the physical world. So begins *Doors in the Air*, a reflection on the richness that our imagination can bring to our lives. Illustrations in bright colors by international award-winning Pierre Pratt draw in the reader, and each page is filled with a fascinating variety of funky objects sure to incite lively discussion between reader and listener.



Despite the many pleasures of his home, our round-headed protagonist makes a strong case for the importance of doors: entranceways into the limitless world of the imagination. Accompanied by a strange long-necked bird, the little boy goes through doors that take him into a jungle populated by tiny elephants and flying fish, along a corridor filled with winding vines of giant multi-coloured flowers, and on a magic carpet ride past castles and exploding volcanoes. Most of the book is written in regular rhyme sure to please the ears of young readers, but near the end the rhyme scheme changes without warning and for no apparent

reason. This sudden change in form undermines the impact of an otherwise appealing book. mrb

B.A. Markus is a writer, teacher, and mother who still remembers when her grade nine teacher used "Sympathy for the Devil" to reveal the power and relevance of poetry.

Tjia continued from page 13

picture of itself. As a cat, you're the perfect voyeur, because you can't say anything. So, yea, I agree that every family is dysfunctional in its own way. But also families are very functional. Family members find ways to be loving, despite being related to each other.

KB: Your book reminds us that cats are pretty good at keeping secrets given that they can't speak plain English. Do you have any secrets you would only share with a cat?

ST: Yes.

KB: Do you want to leave that as a one-word answer?

ST: (laughs) Absolutely. I'm not going to elaborate.

KB: Through Holden's eyes, the reader is presented with choices along the way. Ultimately, however, each path leads to trouble-tinged creepiness. Does this reflect your own vision of life? Is the idea of choice – or free will – simply an illusion? Would you describe yourself as a fatalist?

ST: (laughs) It's a book. It has a limited number of pages. I couldn't write forever. In many ways, I had to corral readers while affording them meaningful and non-meaningful choices. Because that's the whole shtick of the book – you get to make choices. And, you get to go on a *wild* journey or a *mild* journey. But, at the same time, yes: you go to some dark places. Because, as the writer, I like dark places. I like interesting places. And I like places where reality creeps through the artifice of everyday life.



I like it when you can kind of see people's hidden selves in everyday life. Because people carefully manage their decorum – for good reasons. But I like it when, say, I'm on the bus and I'm looking at the car idling beside the bus and the driver is picking his nose or singing along with the radio. ... Because I am interested in all the things people do when no one is watching. I like the authentic self. And, as the cat, you are in a unique position to see people's authentic selves – because they trust you with that. And that's quite lovely. mrb

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal *minou* whose *Kimberly and the Dreamtime CD* is now available on iTunes.

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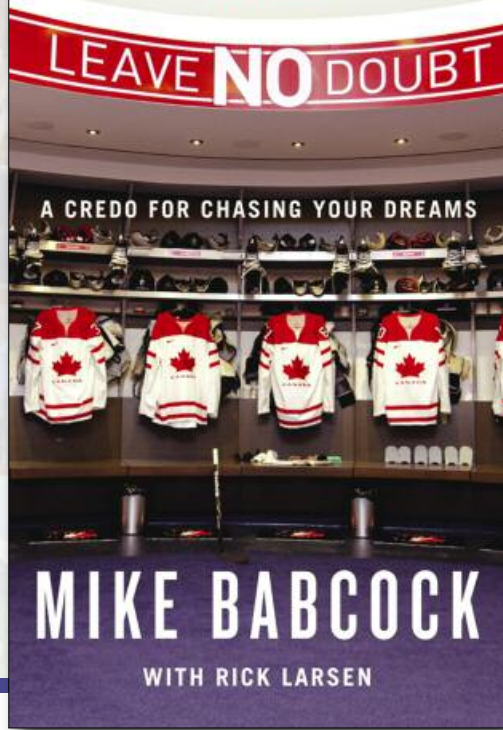


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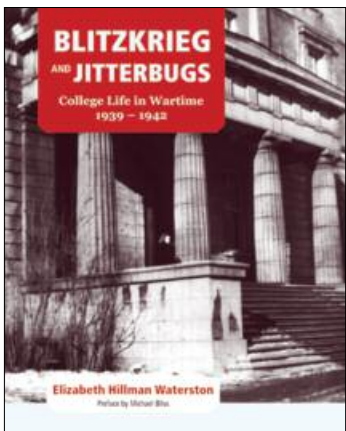
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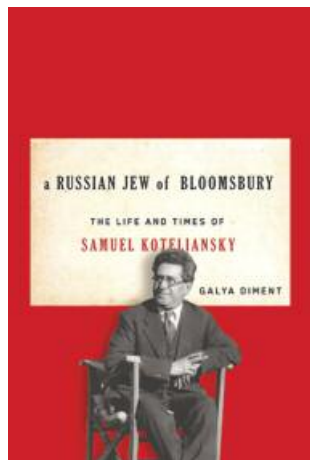
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Mike Babcock
with Rick Larsen

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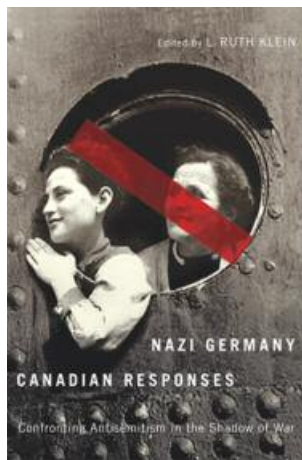
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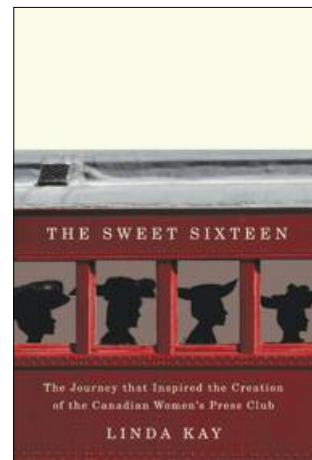
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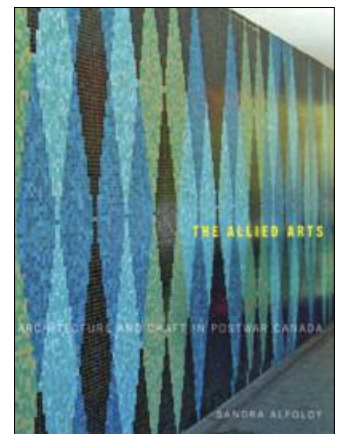
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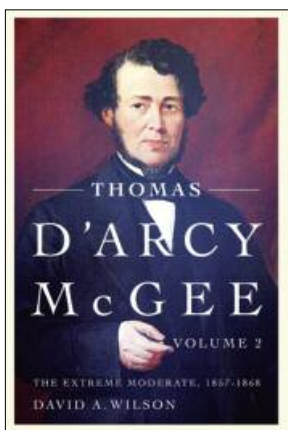
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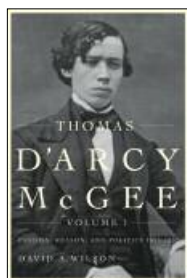
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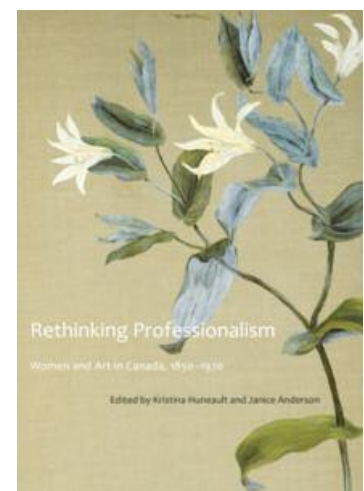
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