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SUMMER 2013 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

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WHISK

JENNIFER QUIST'S
LOVE LETTERS OF
THE ANGELS
OF DEATH

THE EXILE BOOK
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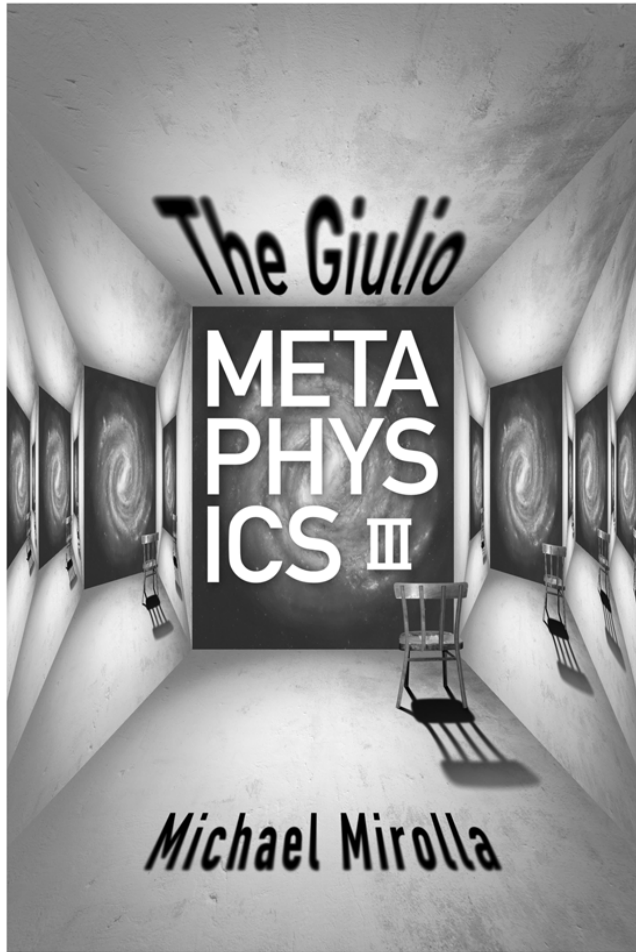
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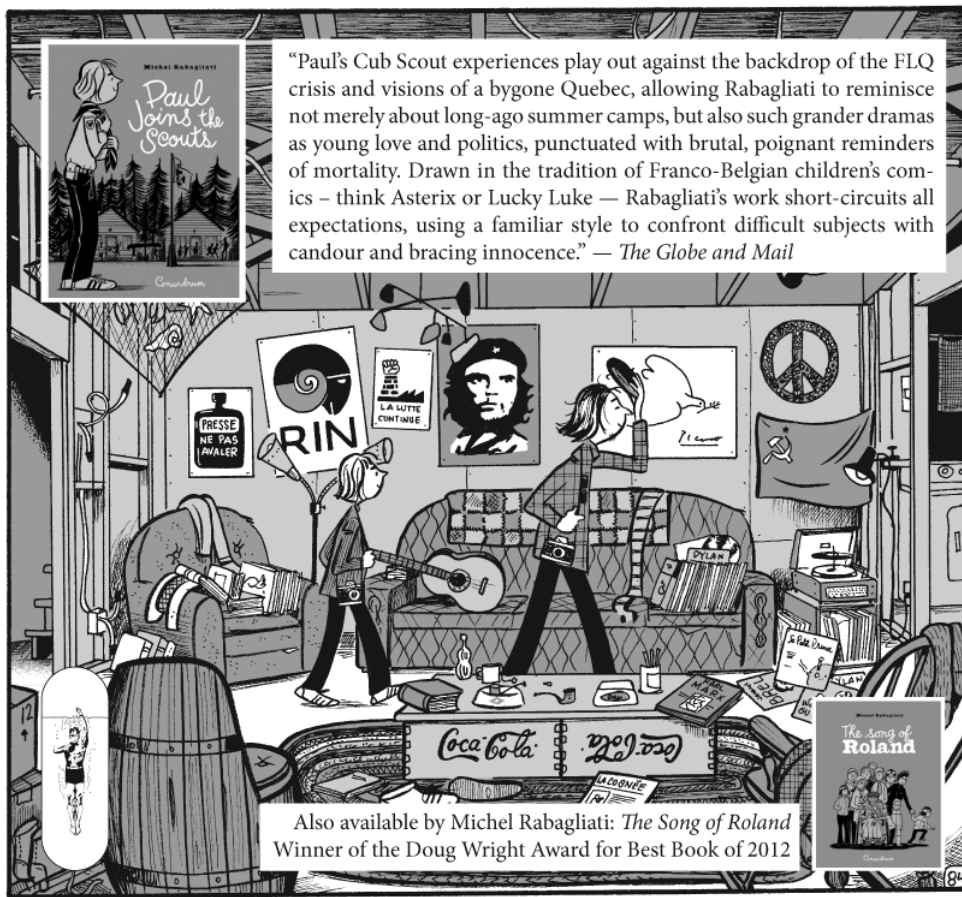
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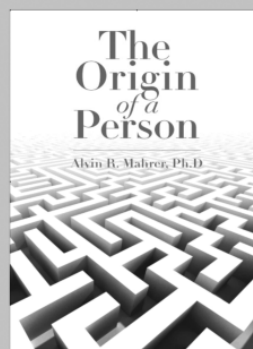
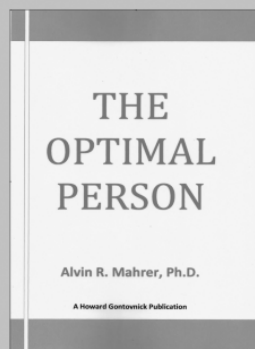
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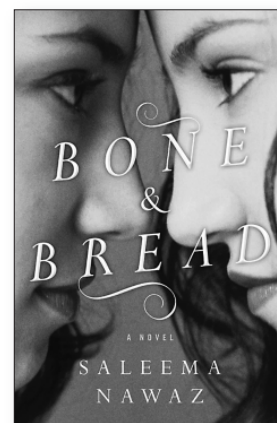
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by Ami Sands Brodoff

Woman Does Not Live by Bread Alone



BONE AND BREAD
Saleema Nawaz
House of Anansi Press
\$22.95, paper, 445pp
978-1-77089-009-1

Sister: she is your soulmate and companion, your sidekick and protector. She is your mirror, the person with whom you share “sweet, crazy conversations full of half sentences, daydreams and misunderstandings, more thrilling than understanding could ever be,” to quote Toni Morrison.

In her enveloping, heartfelt debut novel, *Bone and Bread*, Saleema Nawaz penetrates deeply into the sibling bond. Beena and Sadhana are so close they barely know where one leaves off and the other begins. When the story opens, we learn that Sadhana, the younger of the pair, is dead at age thirty-two, and “that she had spent half of her life starving herself, or trying not to.”

When you lose a loved one, her absence can haunt as painfully as a phantom limb. The survivor returns to the past, seeking understanding, a chance to heal through the solace – even the pain – of memory.

I met up with Nawaz at Café Art Java near McGill during her lunch break as administrative coordinator for the Department of Philosophy. The thirty-four-year-old author is striking, tall, and lithe in a coral trench coat belted at the waist, long planes of glossy black hair, and short bangs framing large, dark eyes. With the appearance of *Bone and Bread*, she

secures her place as one of our most promising writers. Her story “My Three Girls” won the 2008 Journey Prize, the same year that her collection of stories *Mother Superior* appeared, a finalist for the McAuslan First Book Prize from the Quebec Writers’ Federation. *Bone and Bread* is receiving acclaim and a storm of publicity.

“How does it feel to be a literary cover girl?” I ask. She laughs, “It’s fun!” No false modesty here, thankfully.

Wise and accomplished, *Bone and Bread* centres on loss, grief, and healing. Beena and Sadhana lose their father as girls, then their mother as teens. Later, Sadhana dies, seemingly from complications related to anorexia. “Ghosts ought to have been my speciality,” Beena tells us. “There were enough dearly departed in my family to haunt a dozen Gothic novels.”

“Family relationships intrigue me,” Nawaz says, sipping on a tall glass of milk and nibbling on a croissant, while mute cooking shows air on large-

screen TVs. “You don’t get to choose your family. Blood knots are more complicated than other relationships.”

Papa appears for just a few pages, but Nawaz brings him to life. Born in the Punjab, he chooses a passage from Guru Granth Sahib to give his daughters insight into each day, and has a smile for his girls that “travelled up to his eyebrows and all the way into his orange turban.” When he dies of a heart attack in the bagel shop below their apartment, readers feel the loss along with his bereft daughters and widow.

Readers spend more time with Mama, a flame-haired “universalist kind of spirit” who has her own lucky star and believes in animal spirit guides. Born in Galway, Ireland, she follows her heart, “choosing to be free, choosing to always be choosing.”

When the sisters plan a roast chicken dinner, the surprise ends in tragedy. Though their mother taught them to chant mantras and spin wool, neither

girl possesses practical skills. Mama’s death is particularly traumatic because her daughters feel responsible.

Nawaz sets up a rhythm between past and present, layering the avalanche of losses in the sisters’ childhood and teenage years. Images from their richly detailed past, as the girls grow up above the bagel shop, breathing in the fumes from the wood-burning ovens, are among the best in the novel. The sisters share a birthday and a bedroom; their menstrual cycles are in sync. As teens, they camp out on the balcony and spy on the bagel boys having their smoke breaks. Beena loses her virginity with one and becomes pregnant at sixteen, but the father doesn’t stick around, and Beena raises her son, Quinn, on her own.

Nawaz is also an only child, raised by a single mom, who was originally from Nova Scotia. She is named for her Indian father, Saleem, who left the family when she was two. “I don’t remember him,” she says, and has no desire to contact him. “What could he give me? What could I want from him?”

In *Bone and Bread*, Quinn actively seeks out the father who abandoned him. Nawaz says her fictional character is “open to imaginative possibility. Quinn is an evidence-gatherer.”

So are Beena and Sadhana, though the sisters are complementary in most other ways. Beena is round and ungainly, bookish, caught between

Family relationships intrigue me ... Blood knots are more complicated than other relationships.

trying to save her sister and carve out a life of her own. Sadhana is thin and fierce, fragile and sharp-tongued. Her starvation and compulsions – desperate attempts to control a world that has stricken her and her sister with too many losses – make perfect, albeit self-destructive sense.

The yin and yang of the sisters, the dialectic of the novel's title (which echoes born and bred) might have been schematic in lesser hands. But Nawaz makes it work. It's a powerful moment when both sisters stop menstruating at the same time: Beena because she is pregnant with new life, Sadhana because she is starving herself to death. Even more potent are their simultaneous hospitalizations: Beena to give birth, Sadhana to prevent death.

Beena tells the story. Her voice is strong and delicate, poetically resonant. She possesses a literary sensibility, insight, and depth beyond her years. The language is dense, layered, blooming with images and raw visceral power; the miracle is that it rarely feels strained. Most contemporary writers are squeamish about sentimentality, but Nawaz does not shy away from raw emotion.

Caring for a mentally ill sister is unrelenting; as a result, Beena's voice can be recursive. This is a deeply interi-

or novel and some readers may feel the need to come up for air. At times I craved the refreshment of the quotidian: Beena doing her job as an editor and part-time paralegal, the clip of a workmanlike sentence. I longed to see the hustle and flow of life, to hear the texture of other voices, one in particular: Sadhana's.

I ask Nawaz why she chose a single, first-person point-of-view. "I just started writing in Beena's voice," she says, "and it stuck." She drafted a section from Quinn's perspective, "but it didn't work for the novel as a whole."

Sadhana ultimately remains mysterious, inscrutable. Though we learn about her: her rage at injustice, her fierce bond with Quinn whom she calls "our child," her gifts as dancer and actress, we are outside, looking in. Beena wonders if constantly watching her sister "was not making it harder for me to see her... You needed fresh eyes to see clearly." Seeing Sadhana's world through her own eyes might have made this book even more powerful.

Yet, Nawaz makes readers feel the loneliness of trying to help a mentally ill loved one: stopped fast – again and again – by the hard, intractable mystery of the Other. Here, she succeeds. Have your tissue box handy.

As a child growing up in Ottawa, Nawaz was a voracious reader and writer. She learned to read at three and always knew she wanted to write. She describes her process as slow and meticulous, building sentence by sentence. "I would like to write faster," she confesses, "to find the story sooner."

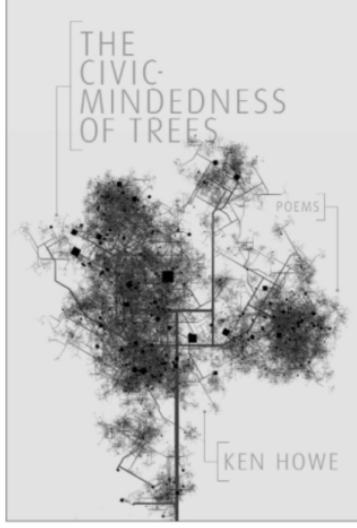
Bone and Bread took her five years to complete. Her biggest challenge? "The ending." To avoid a spoiler, I'll only say that the narrative contains a mystery and a few unexpected twists and turns.

It's been a month since a fire destroyed the apartment Nawaz shared with her husband, Derek Webster, founder of *Maisonneuve*, and his eleven-year-old daughter. Fortunately, no one was hurt and the family looks forward to moving into a home they are

renovating in Mile End, the neighbourhood of *Bone and Bread*. Nawaz very much enjoys being an "other mother" to her stepdaughter who is currently angling for a sibling. More new roots are a distinct possibility.

"What are you working on next?" I ask, an hour of writerly talk passing all too quickly. "I have about 100 pages of a novel," she says, "and a big chunk of interconnected stories. How do you decide what to attack?" Given the strength of her first two books, it's clear that the talented author will figure it out. Her readers will gladly wait. **mb**


Ami Sands Brodoff is at work on her fourth book, the novel *In Many Waters*. She has been awarded a writing fellowship at The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.



THE CIVIC-MINDEDNESS OF TREES
BY KEN HOWE

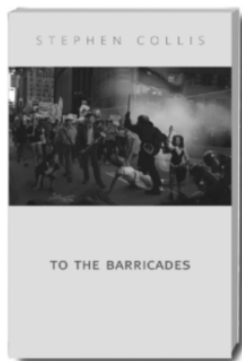
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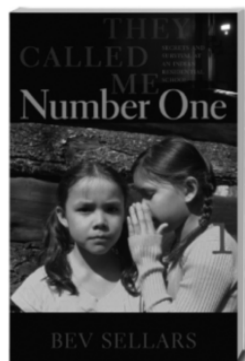


To the Barricade

Steven Collis

In *To the Barricades* we move back and forth between historical and contemporary scenes of revolt, from nineteenth-century Parisian street barricades to twenty-first-century occupations and street marches, shifting along the active seam between poetry and revolution. At once elegy (poems dedicated "to" past revolutionary figures and scenes) and a call for renewed struggle in the here and now, this collection of "social lyrics" and serial explosions seeks to drive apathy from the field and to recover forgotten "radical ideas" amidst our current "amnesiac condition."

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They Called Me Number One

Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School
Bev Sellars

Xat'sull Chief Bev Sellars spent her childhood in a church-run residential school whose aim it was to "civilize" Native children through Christian teachings, forced separation from family and culture, and strict discipline. In the first full-length memoir to be published out of St. Joseph's Mission at Williams Lake, BC, Sellars tells of three generations of women who attended the school, interweaving the personal histories of her grandmother and her mother with her own. She tells of hunger, forced labour, and physical beatings, often with a leather strap, and also of the demand for conformity in a culturally alien institution where children were confined and denigrated for failure to be White and Roman Catholic.

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Kafka's Hat

Patrice Martin
Translated by Chantal Bilodeau

In Patrice Martin's ticklish tip of the hat to the writing of Franz Kafka, we follow the misadventures of a bureaucrat – aptly named "P." – as he embarks on the illustrious task of collecting the titular headgear. "P." expects that accomplishing this seemingly simple task will grant him a promotion. But our eager protagonist has overlooked the systematic difficulty in modern bureaucracies – as well as in some of twentieth-century's best fiction – of getting things done. And so *Kafka's Hat* is increasingly unreachable: express elevators get stuck between floors, suitcases must be searched, unsympathetic bureaucrats must be confronted. "P." knows that every hero has his coming-of-age trial to go through; trouble is, he's no modern Ulysses.

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Tom at the Farm

Michel Marc Bouchard
Translated by Linda Gaboriau

Following the accidental death of his lover, and in the throes of his grief, urban ad executive Tom travels to the country to attend the funeral and to meet his mother-in-law, Agatha, and her son, Francis – neither of whom know Tom even exists. Arriving at the remote rural farm, and immediately drawn into the dysfunction of the family's relationships, Tom is blindsided by his lost partner's legacy of untruth. With the mother expecting a chain-smoking girlfriend, and the older brother intent on preserving a facade of normalcy, Tom is coerced into joining the duplicity until, at last, he confronts the torment that drove his lover to live in the shadows of deceit.

\$16.95 / 96 pp / Drama / 978-0-88922-759-0

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by Anna Leventhal

Home on the Shtetl

Popular culture has a kind of romantic notion of Yiddish as an outlandish, playful, mouth-feely language where every word is an onomatopoeia; it's the language that gave us chutzpah, shlemiel, dreck, words whose meaning you can taste as you say them. It's where we turn for grotesque insult, gut-level contempt, grievous offence. We might forget, then, that for generations of Eastern European Jews, Yiddish was the language of daily life – it expressed tragedy, boredom, affection, and tenderness, alongside all that great trash talk.

Yiddish is also haunted by loss – as those communities of Eastern European Jews were wiped out in the Holocaust, so was the language diminished. But pockets of diasporic Yiddish-speakers still thrive, and small, dedicated groups are committed to preserving and disseminating the best work of some of its lesser-known writers through translation.

For editor Frieda Johles Forman, *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* was a union of two of her great passions. "I'm a Yiddishist," she says, "which means I love Yiddish, and I want it to stay alive, in one way or another." And as a feminist, the project of selecting and translating the work of women writing in Yiddish was a way of giving a voice to women whose lives had previously been muted.

The stories themselves span decades and nations, from the Eastern European shtetl to a socialist commune in the Crimea, from the recently liberated Lodz Ghetto to a cottage in the Laurentians. They shed light on Jewish women's daily and lifelong struggles in the last century. Several focus on a longing for education and experience denied because of gender, while many more deal with the efforts of Holocaust survivors to continue their lives. They capture a rich cross-section of experiences, and they do so in the rhythms and the cadences of a marginal language, a language that carries with it the traditions and experiences of a world that's not exactly lost, but sometimes hard to see.



When Singer wrote Yentl, he was writing what Yiddish women had been writing for decades.

Anna Leventhal: Why do you think women's voices have largely been left out of Yiddish writing in translation?

Frieda Johles Forman: Translation is a political act – in order to get translated you have to have some power. And women writing in Yiddish were not in that category. We're living in a world where women don't always get a fair deal – that part I don't need to elaborate. Now, when it came to Yiddish women writers, it's particularly hard to understand, because in the Yiddish-speaking world, women actually had a good position. There weren't as many as men, but they were not unknown. But in the last half of the twentieth century, if you asked anyone in the English-speaking world to name a Yiddish woman writer, they would scratch their heads. So something happened in the process between the original language and the translation. The visa or the ticket you needed to move from one language to another didn't exist until the women's movement came and issued it.

AL: As an editor, what guided your selection process? What were you looking for in the stories you chose?

FJF: We wanted material that really high-

lighted women's lives, that showed women in a light different from the one in which male writers had shown them before. The other thing that's unique to this volume is that we wanted a lot of Canadians. That was really one of our goals – because if we weren't looking for Canadians, no one would be.

One interesting thing is that the stories we translated didn't have sentimentalized views of the shtetl. They reveal it for what it was – it had a lot of warmth, and a lot of passion for learning, but it also had limitations. And that's one of the themes we hope the book will convey – the yearning for a wider world, beyond the restriction of narrow shtetl life. As an editor I'm very drawn to that expression. To me it's one of the aspects of the human condition that I find the most engaging, the most compelling. And here we find it in great quantity. In some cases it's so simple, like the Ida Maza story, where there's a little girl who says she wants to learn, and her brother says, "You can't, you're a girl." You know, when Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote *Yentl*, he was writing what Yiddish women had been writing for decades.

AL: In one of the later pieces, an essay by translator Goldie Morgentaler, she mentions this conversation she has with her mother Chava Rosenfarb, a well-known Yiddish writer, where Morgentaler says, "You can't say this, it's too mushy, too sentimental, too many adjectives," and Rosenfarb responds "English is such a cold language!" How would you characterize Yiddish as compared with English? And what were some of the challenges in translating it?

FJF: Are you familiar with the term "Yinglish?" There are a number of writers that were very popular earlier in the century, and were reclaimed by the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s, Anzia Zezierska, for example. These were immigrant women who wrote in English, but with great Yiddish flow to it. For example, in Zezierska's work she'll use expressions like "It became dark in front of my eyes." Now that's not real English – but it's Yiddish. When you read her Yinglish, you can translate it back to Yiddish, because you know that's what she's thinking.

Now, we didn't want to continue in that frame, although it played a very significant role in its day. We wanted something that could be read in English with some pleasure. On the

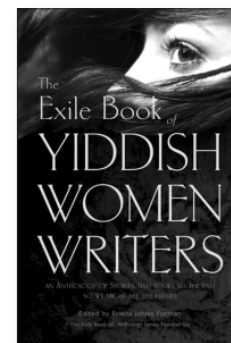
other hand, we didn't want it to sound like Alice Munro or Margaret Atwood. We wanted it to have something of the choppi-ness that some Yiddish writing has. Yiddish writing isn't always that fluid, it doesn't just melt. It goes along and it stops and then it starts, so it has a kind of energy that's different from English. I've read Yiddish translations that sound like they were written by an American writer, and that's lovely reading, but it doesn't give you the flavour of Yiddish.

AL: There are some great writers in English where you can really feel the influence of Yiddish. I'm thinking of Grace Paley and Saul Bellow, for instance.

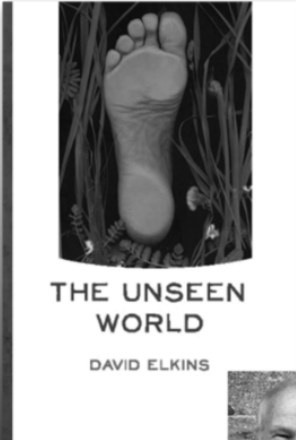
FJF: Especially Grace Paley. Her storytelling has a very Yiddish quality to it. I love her work, and I love Saul Bellow. It's interesting that you mention that these writers that we all revere still have something left of another culture. When you're translating Yiddish you're really translating another culture as well. Yiddish is unique in the sense that it's steeped in Jewish culture, so it might be difficult for non-Jews to understand the references. You can't assume that if someone says *shemona esray* or one of the prayers, that people will know what it is. And why should they? So we end up with glossaries. It's not ideal, but what is it?

AL: At the same time, there's something to be said for creating a world and letting people enter it at their own pace, not worrying if they understand every word. **FJF:** Exactly. Literature wants to give us another world that we can enter – that's what good literature is. And I think this book, taken as a whole, opens up a number of worlds. It opens up, for instance, for those of us of Ashkenazi background, the world of our grandmothers, which we didn't know before. Nobody really knew their daily lives. And now we do. ■■

Anna Leventhal lives in Montreal. Her book of short stories *Sweet Affliction* will be out with Invisible Publishing in spring 2014.




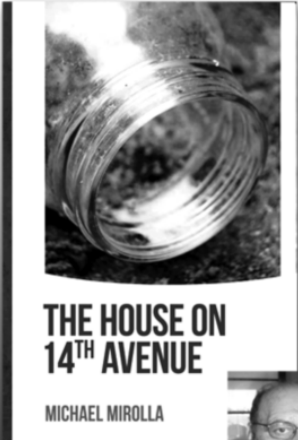
THE EXILE BOOK OF YIDDISH WOMEN WRITERS
Edited by Frieda Johles Forman
Exile Editions
\$19.95, paper, 306pp
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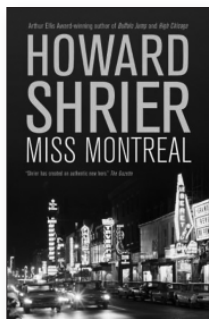
Murder in Montreal

MISS MONTREAL
Howard Shrier
Vintage
\$19.96, paper, 304pp
978-0-307-359-58-2

Readers who enjoy hard-boiled detective novels with expert pacing and rich physical details will delight in *Miss Montreal*, the fourth book from Toronto-based novelist Howard Shrier. Those who also hold the city of Montreal dear – potholes and all – will be in heaven.

The story begins in late June. Toronto-based private investigator Jonas Geller has been hired to probe a murder case on which the Montreal police can't – or won't – make progress. "Slammin'" Sammy Adler, a widely read columnist at *Montreal Moment* magazine, has been found beaten to death, a Star of David

carved into his chest. Is it a random act of anti-Semitism? Was it a targeted crime? Sammy's grandfather, widowed and dying, wants answers and hires Jonas to get them.



Jonas takes his work seriously, but this case has an added personal dimension: he knew Sammy, albeit decades ago. When the two boys attended summer camp together, Jonas took the gawky Sammy under his wing and coached him on what became a "slammin'" baseball swing.

Equipped with high-tech surveillance gear, plenty of ammunition, and a dry sense of humour, Jonas and his sidekick, a gun-loving bruiser called Dante Ryan (Jonas' regular partner Jenn is recovering from something that happened in a previous book), zoom up the 401 to Montreal and are immediately immersed in the city's charms: gorgeous women, smug cops, crowded *terrasses*, French-language stalwarts, and rutted roads. As they dig into the stories Sammy was researching at the time of his death, they uncover a web of crime, violence,

xenophobia, political ambition, and long-buried family secrets.

Howard Shrier is a two-time Arthur Ellis Award winner and it's easy to see why. *Miss Montreal* offers exciting action sequences, realistic dialogue, wry wit, an airtight plot that unfolds with perfect pacing, and bedroom scenes that are sexy without being smutty. His characters are so real that this reviewer felt genuine anxiety over using the term "sidekick" in the previous paragraph lest the goon read it and take offense.

But Montrealers may find that the most impressive part of the book is Shrier's portrayal of their city. The description of Montreal from the perspective of an outsider – our overabundance of Saint-named streets, our aggressive driving – is super. The explanations of how heavily accented French is pronounced ("*boîtes* – boxes – pronounced *bwytes*. *Place* sounded like *plowce*") are bang on. The references to recent events, including chunks of concrete falling from overpasses and the ongoing Charbonneau investigation, are apt. And the irritation that Jonas and Dante feel when faced with characters

who are staunchly anti-English is palpable. The scene in which a meathead French-Canadian cop refuses to speak with Jonas and Dante in English (Dante retaliates by speaking Italian, including calling the cop a few choice names that cannot be reprinted here) is deliciously satisfying to any Montrealer who is frustrated by the recent resurgence of linguistic prejudice in the province.

The only place the story drags is in the first few chapters when Shrier refers to events that occurred in his previous novels. But this is a necessary part of writing a detective series. New readers must be given some context and old readers must be rewarded for coming back to the trough, and the combination of the two makes for uneven storytelling.

In the acknowledgement, Shrier states, "writing crime fiction is a dream come true." Keep writing books like this, Howard, and the pleasure will be all ours. **ms**

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer of fiction and personal essays, and is finishing the manuscript of her first crime novel.

Lost in Red Tape

KAFKA'S HAT
Patrice Martin
Translated by Chantal Bilodeau
Talon Books
\$12.95, paper, 144pp
9780889227439

It's hard to place what Patrice Martin's agenda is with *Kafka's Hat*. The back cover describes his first novel as a "ticklish tip of the hat" to the writing of Franz Kafka and a "labyrinth of intertextual references." Whether or not so-called hat-tipping is justification enough for a novel, if Martin aims to evoke the work of his idol, he's somewhat missed the mark. Consider: would Kafka ever introduce his docile protagonist to a spirited young lady who would steal his heart, teach him to privilege his own judgment, and get him – egads! – laughing?



Probably not, though according to his bio Martin has been "bumping into the spirit of Kafka for most of his adult life" and spent years working in government, likely from whence comes his insistence that mindless bureaucracy is a horrible thing. But Kafka was arguably less concerned with the literal experience of bureaucracy as

with the terrifying spectre of immutable authority and the painful existential conundrum we find ourselves waking to every morning. Martin's take on his idol has made him rather smaller than that, and his inspirations don't stop short at Kafka; *Kafka's Hat* is a dense and cerebral work that repeatedly alludes to Borges, Auster, and Calvino as well.

Stylistically, *Kafka's Hat*

lacks those magical details that bring a novel alive; it has the bones of a story, albeit with a touch of osteoporosis. The reader meets the hapless bureaucrat P., a man who "wants to preserve the world in which he lives" and "has always defended the established order." P. is given the task of picking up Kafka's hat for his boss Mr. Hatfield, who purchased it at an auction. P. so wants to impress Mr. Hatfield, but a series of zany events ensues that compromises his ability to recuperate said hat. The reader follows P. as he discovers that bureaucracy is full of shit and too often negates our better human qualities.

In section two, Martin introduces a writer named Max who has written a manuscript about a man going to pick up Kafka's hat for his boss. Max drives to New York in a desperate bid to track down Paul Auster and maybe even convince him to translate his manuscript into English. (Paul Auster most defi-

nately did not translate this book. A woman by the name of Chantal Bilodeau did.)

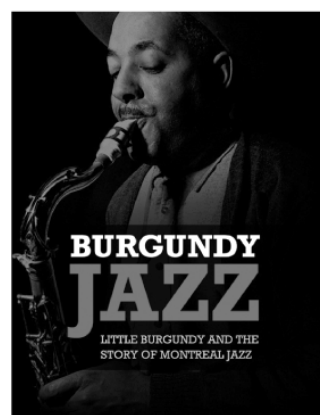
Then comes the third section, in which three writers suspiciously akin to Borges, Calvino, and Kafka attend a writers' conference. From there follows the climactic ending that ties the three sections together like a clumsily wrapped Christmas gift. It's a self-reflexive work, but that's nothing groundbreaking. There needs to be a creative justification for this kind of style.

The difference between a new writer like Martin and a classic writer like Kafka is that Kafka's style produces a notable effect on the reader. There is a disturbing quality to his writing, a sense of the writer's soul laid bare between the words. It's got that punch-in-the-gut feeling that is conspicuously missing in *Kafka's Hat*. The main problem with Martin's first go at a novel is that it is mostly intellectual play and self-conscious recycling, leaving the reader cold

and not particularly affected. What happens to the lost soul cast into the shuffle of inefficiency and bureaucratic bloat? What can the absurdity of bureaucracy tell us about humanity? What does a self-referential novel accomplish, aside from tired postmodern cleverness?

To be fair, reading enough first novels has lowered my expectations sufficiently that I will say this was a pleasant read, and I occasionally looked forward to picking it up again. With some work, Martin could use his inspirations to produce much stronger writing. The crucial question is how does his own approach fit into all this wanton hat-tipping? One can only hope his second shot at a novel reflects a little more of his own identity as a writer and a little less of his very laudable influences. **ms**

Sarah Fletcher works in communications at the Canadian Centre for Architecture.



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ALMOST LOST: CANADA'S YIDDISH WOMEN WRITERS

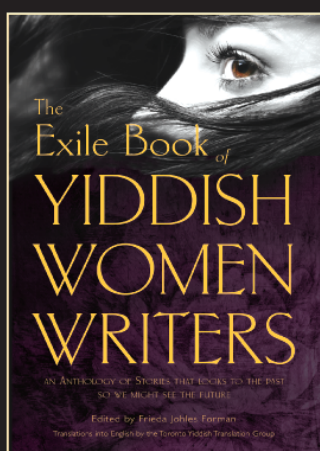
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To date, the major anthologies of Yiddish prose in translation have concentrated on popular male writers and excluded not only fiction by women but their memoirs and other prose writing as well. By their exclusion from these anthologies, Yiddish women writers were denied their place in history, and important voices were never heard. Yiddish women writers provide the vital link to understanding Jewish experience in Europe, North America, Israel and other parts of the world. This anthology represents a transformation of Yiddish literature and, with it, a fresh understanding of Ashkenazi and Sefardi life.



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Fiction, Poetry, Translation, Drama and Nonfiction

by Abby Paige

The Thing Itself

“The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor,” Aristotle argued in his *Poetics*. “It is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance.”

Much of Western thought and literature has been built on that reverent foundation, the belief that metaphor is the least direct but somehow shortest path to truth, endowed with an almost sacred power to reveal the unity of all things.

So what happens when you scrub poetry of figurative language, besides sending Aristotle into a grave-spin?

With their new collection, *Whisk*, the poetry collective Yoko's Dogs offers one answer to that question. Since 2006, poets Susan Gillis, Mary di Michele, Jan Conn, and Jane Munro have been studying and composing *renku*, a Japanese form of collaborative linked verse. Working mostly via email from points across North America, and in person at an annual writing retreat, the four developed a system of composition appropriate to the form and to the geographic distance between them. A poem would begin with one poet sending an opening, three-line verse, called a *hokku*, to the group. Then, one by one, each poet, in a pre-determined order, would add her own verse, to create a four-stanza poem. While composition followed a set order, the poem was shared amongst all the poets at each step, so the entire group could follow its development.

“The *renku* tradition seemed very balanced,” says Conn. “Four stanzas, four voices. It seemed very democratic. There are lots of rules, and once we mastered those we delighted in breaking many of them.” In the process of preparing *Whisk* for publication, for example, seven-, ten-, and twelve-stanza pieces were created by combining several four-stanza poems, allowing for greater elaboration and variety.

Stanzas are linked, says di Michele, “through montage rather than a continuous narrative or theme. Links are not logical, but imagistic or tonal.” Indeed, the loose association between verses, rather than the building of a story or a poetic argument, is one of the defining features of the *renku* tradition and of the Dogs' practice. The group eschews the referential language of metaphor and the editorial mode of the lyric, exploring instead the resonance created by juxtaposing one image or feeling with another.

Susan Gillis offers an example: “If one verse has a red ball being thrown, the linking verse might have the colour red or a ball or an action of throwing, all very direct kinds of links, or it might pick up a mood of abandon or festivity or another situational thing and link to that,

or again it might transform that red ball into the setting sun on the horizon.”

Often the links are hardly perceptible, and while it's possible to discern how a poem moves from the flight of a red-tailed hawk to the chirp of a treed squirrel to Twitter to Tahrir Square, the shock of jumping from one image to another is often more exciting than solving the riddle of its connections.

“A strength of *renku*,” says Conn, “is that it concentrates on the five senses.” The poems paint pictures that are not purely visual, but fully sensory, including scents, sounds, and sensations that can conjure a moment – or several juxtaposed moments – for the reader.

The task seems deceptively simple, but required a unique kind of writerly attention from the poets. Munro describes her verses as cats that would only come to her when she ignored them. “While that simplicity of image and straightforwardness of voice sounds easy, free, light-hearted – just a quick little dance – it sometimes took us a long time and considerable back-and-forth to compose. Plus, working with the constraints and protocols was challenging.”

The avoidance of metaphor was among those constraints, and the Dogs acknowledge that reading poems so stripped of figurative language can represent a challenge for the reader, whose mind might naturally search for narrative or another, more familiar poetic approach.

“I remember not getting *haiku*,” says di Michele. “Some would fall flat for me at times. I did not know how to unpack the images, images that are pure ‘show’ and no ‘tell.’ But [now], the excitement for me is suddenly seeing without being told!”

The poems are deeply, sometimes dizzyingly, simple, and yet can seem frustratingly disjointed if one is unprepared for their illogical leaps. The simplicity of their language makes it easy to begin reading quickly, but the sudden shift in a new stanza to an entirely different moment, image, or place is both jarring and stimulating. It causes one to pause, hesitate, contemplate. Where some constraint-based poetry

(see next page)

Jan Conn, Susan Gillis, Jane Munro, and Mary di Michele are Yoko's Dogs.



seems more fun to have written than to have read, these poems demand a discipline from the reader similar to that practiced by the poets: What does an image do when it does not refer to anything else? How can I tune my mind to this kind of seeing? When a poem is not making metaphors, what is it doing instead?

If the Dogs use the words “discipline” and “rigour” repeatedly in describing their collaboration, it is with a sense of joy; the invigoration of an interesting challenge, shared among friends. The honesty, diplomacy, and “doggedness” required came easily to these long-time friends.

When asked about sharing ownership of a poem with others, Gillis says:

We're very much like a family. A little microcosm that has its own 'language,' developed almost unconsciously over the years. I think early on we heeded advice from Roo Borson and Kim Maltman of the collective Pain Not Bread, to not settle for majority rule in disagreements but work all the way through them till something fully acceptable to all of us emerges... Sometimes it's tempting to give up on a difficult verse, even when there are things in it that seem worth working out. Recognizing when to toss it, change direction, and when to stay with it till the kernel of it emerges – that's something we deal with.

Facing the pleasures and frustrations

In the renku tradition there are lots of rules, and once we mastered those we delighted in breaking many of them.

of writing with a family of poets was as much a comfort as a challenge; it provided a safe but rigorous vehicle for growth. Munro compares the group's work to her long-standing yoga practice. “I feel working with Yoko's Dogs is a form of yoga,” she says. “I've struggled to bring intelligence to every aspect of the verses I've submitted, learned a lot about myself in the process, and then, let it go: I did my best with my small bit without

anticipating what would come next. Like yoga, it's been transformative – and the work makes me happy.”

It also produces an enormous amount of email. With Gillis and di Michele based in Montreal, Munro in Vancouver, and Conn in upstate New York, the group has faced as many logistical challenges as creative ones. They have experimented with collaboration by Skype, telephone, and blog, but the majority of their work happens through email, which allows them to fit their composition in between teaching, writing, and other responsibilities. An annual retreat allows more time for discussion, spontaneity, and fun, as verses are composed in person, closer perhaps to the origins of *renku*, which was traditionally

composed in groups during outdoor gatherings.

With *Whisk* released out into the world, the Dogs are now turning their attention to new work, experimenting with new forms, and exploring ways to “score” their *renku* poems for collaborative readings on the rare occasions when they are gathered in the same place at the same time. They have recently been exploring how to divide a single poem between their voices and discovering a whole new layer of their work in the process.

“It's a remarkable shift for us, to read with multiple voices,” says Conn. “It allows me to re-examine each poem at yet another level. Like one of those Russian doll sets: there always seems to be more inside.”

Abby Paige is a poet and freelance writer, based in Ottawa.



WHISK
Yoko's Dogs
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The Biography of a Marriage

“I think Babies “R” Us is one of the saddest places there is – everyone looking to buy something that will make a very traumatic and life changing experience into something more manageable.” Like her main characters, Jennifer Quist does not hesitate to express firmly held, intelligent opinions. That’s her talking about birth. You should hear what she has to say about death.

Love Letters of the Angels of Death is very aptly titled. Don’t be fooled by the reference to angels; this is no New Age fluffball. The book opens with decomposing human remains, and includes a corpse lowered into a grave filled with water and another buried in concrete. (It’s probably not what you think, but Quist lets you think it just long enough to let the idea take form in your mind.) Not to mention the quirks of the living, like the elderly woman who sleeps on a table saw. But the characters’ experiences with death make them “better able to empathize with each other and live together.” In spite of the abundance of funerals (there are a few weddings too), this book is that rarest of literary portraits: the story of a genuinely happy marriage.

Quist had good models. “I’ve never lived in a household where there was anything but a happy marriage at work. My parents got along so well my dad actually took me aside when I was still single and warned me I should lower my expectations for marriage because most married people didn’t get to live as happily as he and my mother. It might have been good advice, but I ignored it and wound up in a happy marriage of my own.”

Literature offers few images of really good, healthy marriages. Tolstoy’s famous remark about all happy families being the same implies that they’re boring, but Quist’s lovers, Carrie and her husband Briggs, are engaging from beginning to end. They navigate the perilous waters of everyday life with humour, tenacity, and integrity. Clearly, Quist understands how happy marriages work. Not that the book is strictly autobiographical. “I let the book family off easily,” she says. “HA!”

The book is set mostly in Alberta – there is a vivid Fort McMurray – with occasional references to Edmonton landmarks and the “bald prairie”

around Calgary. But the book also travels to several Maritime settings. For Quist, *Love Letters* is not particularly an Alberta story, but is naturally pan-Canadian, since it follows the route taken by many Canadians to travel between regions.

Quist keeps us interested as her loving couple copes with various deaths and smaller disasters thanks to her sensitive observations and deft turns of phrase. A pile of kids’ winter clothes “looks like the boys came home from school and then just exploded inside the front door.” A charred wooden wall “looked like it was cobbled together out of tiny coal tiles.”

The second-person narration, with Briggs telling their story to his wife, is a risky choice, but it almost always works. There are artificial-feeling moments when Briggs recounts events and emotions he could not have been privy to, but that’s part of the point: in this marriage they see and feel the world through each other. Although, at the very end, this is carried to an extreme that is more technically consistent than emotionally effective, it works well enough. It’s one of the details that Quist drew from life. After her husband lost a parent, she managed her and her husband’s grief “by tuning into his feelings and his perspective. It was a survival measure,” she says. In *Love Letters*, it is at the core of Carrie and Briggs’s practice of loving marriage. This radical empathy is one of the book’s joys.

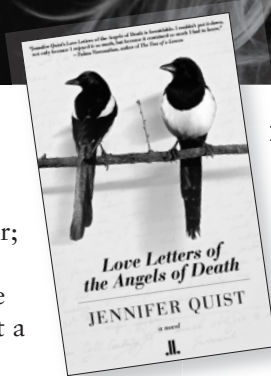
“During those few days,” Quist explains, “nothing mattered to me but his experience.” Putting her mind to her husband’s experience seems to have fitted Quist beautifully to write from a man’s perspective. She has also benefitted from life with five sons. “I’m outnumbered six to one by men. I’m soaked in the male psyche.”

Briggs and Carrie have four small sons, but there is a strange absence of

toddler life. Carrie never seems to have mashed banana on her T-shirt or crusty egg yolk in her hair; there is no sense of the constant parental struggle to get enough sleep or eat a blissfully uninterrupted meal. The kids are constantly being left behind with someone’s aunt while Briggs and Carrie run off to deal with another family crisis. This is not so much a story of parenthood as it is the biography of a marriage, complete with its prehistory in childhoods and family histories. Death reveals family dynamics that other writers might have shown through scenes of domestic life. Quist is interested in death because of how it affects us:

Western death rites have become a product – a pre-paid package deal. My personal theory is that it’s because the social responsibility for dispatching the dead became a mostly male responsibility and many of them would rather just write a cheque and sit it out. The death industry is over-processed and just about everything about it seems targeted at making all contact with the dead body extremely controlled, absolutely voluntary, and overseen by specialists from outside the family unit ... I don’t think this is good for people.

The opening scene of *Love Letters* is a graphic (but not disgusting) description of Carrie and Briggs coping with the deliquescing corpse of his mother. It reads a bit like a murder mystery starring a forensic expert – but Quist’s point is that death is not to be left to experts. “I think it makes them better able to empathize with each other and live together,” she



LOVE LETTERS OF THE ANGELS OF DEATH
Jennifer Quist
Linda Leith Publishing
\$16.95, paper, 222pp
978-1-927535-15-8

explains. Like birth, death has been too professionalized, too abstracted, leaving us at a loss when faced with these very intimate aspects of life. Searching the shelves of Babies “R” Us, “we’re trying to find a way to write a cheque and then show up as honoured guests at the big event, the way we do with death. But ... birth – or at least the postpartum aspects of it – is still something women have to pass through themselves inside their own bodies.”

The love letters that Carrie and Briggs, the angels of death, accumulate for the reader in the gradually revealed story of their marriage are not sentimental in the least. Nor is their happiness due to a trouble-free life. On the contrary, it comes from the closeness they create by seeing each other through the whole shebang. The good times, of which there are plenty. The moments when they struggle to work out how to live right. And the painful times, all the mess and weirdness and occasional shocks of being part of a scattered family with its full complement of foibles and failings. Briggs and Carrie never stop “writing” the love letters that make up both life and death.

“It’s hard but it’s good for us,” says Quist, “and for the people who need to step up and care for us.”

Elise Moser’s YA novel, *Lily & Taylor*, is out in Fall 2013 from Groundwood Books.

A Tale of Two Worlds

PLUTO'S GATE

L.E. Sterling

DC Books

\$18.95, paper, 266pp

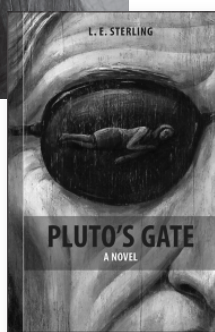
978-1-897190-90-6

As far as retellings of ancient myths go, L.E. Sterling's urban fantasy novel *Pluto's Gate* is an especially imaginative one. Told in lucid yet dream-like detail, it reinvents the story of Persephone, who according to Greek mythology was abducted by the God of the Underworld.

In Sterling's version, modern-day Persephone (known as Percy) is a young woman whose story doesn't sound so unusual at first. After living in a "dinky little non-town" with no plans for college, she moves to Montreal and gets a job at a local café as well as a "sort-of" boyfriend. Percy didn't have a completely run-of-the-mill upbringing, however: her father is a rock star, her mother "an honest-to-Goddess practicing witch." Her best friend Simon has been at war with a spirit trapped in a painting since he was seven.

Things begin to change as she develops "an absolutely inhuman crush" on a silver-eyed man she first spies on the Main. Though it starts out as what could be another novel about urban hipsters, the narrative quickly veers into the fantastical when Percy walks through a door in a club and accidentally crosses into the Underworld.

Sterling convincingly captures the voice of a twenty-year-old woman. So much so that the conversational and informal tone is initially startling, as the reader is immediately thrown into an intimate relationship with the narrator. "My parents' short marriage reads like one of those tales that end with the heroine being



broiled to death on an iron floor or the prince freezing to death before he gets to his princess," she says on the first page.

Yet I quickly found myself warming up to the unconventional narrative voice. "I guess at heart I was still that geeky kid who really wanted to believe in fairy tales and magic portals," Percy says near the beginning. Indeed, the book reads as if the fantasies of a young girl who stayed up all night reading *The Mists of Avalon* have come true.

If I had any misgivings, they quickly fell away as I found myself increasingly wrapped up in the narrative. While in the original myth Persephone is abducted by the god Pluto, in this version she stumbles into his lair and falls for the brooding god of her own accord. The novel really hits its stride as it describes the budding relationship between Percy and Pluto. Their love story is strangely compelling, with comic relief brought by the occasional clash of culture between a present-day woman and a centuries-old god. For example:

I grabbed his fingers and held them against my skin. "You're such a cheese ball, you know that?"

"What," he tilted his head back, narrowing his silver eyes into slits, "is a 'cheese ball'?"

Percy's arrival coincides with the slow bloom of daylight in the land of the dead, for the first time in its history. After Simon attempts to rescue her, they undertake a journey through the Underworld together, and the boundaries between life and death and light and dark are troubled throughout.

Limiting the point of view to the perspective of a somewhat narcissistic first-person narrator is a bold move, and one that comes at the expense of the other characters. Simon has the potential to be the most fascinating character in the book, yet seeing him through Percy's eyes leaves the reader unable to get a firm grasp on him; he seems to slip through the narrative like a chameleon. Pluto too at times felt more like a caricature than a fully realized character.

Yet Sterling has woven a tale of admirable complexity. If one or two threads were dropped in the process, the grace of the weave makes that easy to overlook. **mb**

Lesley Trites is a Montreal-based writer of fiction and non-fiction. She is the author of *echoic mimic*.

Into the Woods

THE DOUGLAS NOTEBOOKS

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Christine Eddie

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\$19.95, paper, 184pp

978-0-86492-619-7



"We exhaust ourselves traveling the earth, hunting for some treasure that will console."

So begins *The Douglas Notebooks: A Fable*, the English translation by the masterful Sheila Fischman of Christine Eddie's award-winning debut novel *Les*

carnets de Douglas. And for all those weary literary wanderers out there, tirelessly hunting through bookshelves both real and digital, this lushly evocative work is indeed a long-searched-for consoling treasure.

A skilfully woven combination of magic realism, social commentary, and love story, *The Douglas Notebooks* transports the reader into the tale of Romain and Elena. Romain, born into a wealthy family who makes its billions from the profits of war, is the sensitive, unloved son who escapes into the forest to find peace. Elena, born into extreme poverty, escapes her murderous father and wanders from town to town, learning the mysteries of healing and finally finding love in the reclusive Romain whom she renames Douglas after the soaring coniferous trees in their forest home.

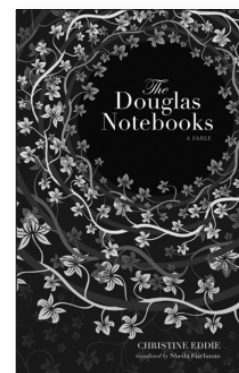
Eddie creates a world populated with wandering souls, benevolent strangers, evil parents, magical clarinet solos, untimely deaths, and bittersweet endings. It is a fairy tale world for adults evoking the themes of war, love, death, destruction, and reconciliation. So effectively does Eddie draw us into her creation that we never feel the need to locate ourselves in time or place.

It is a pleasant surprise to realize that the author's tale is set in post-war Quebec. The pastoral land-

scapes and untamed forests are populated by our own twittering birds and majestic trees. The gossiping villagers, the local wise woman, the mysterious foreign schoolteacher, and the lovelorn doctor are all characters from the fictional town of Rivière-aux-Oies, but they could be from any small town tucked away off Highway 15 or Highway 10.

The fate of small-town Quebec is as important to this tale as is the love story of Douglas and Elena. With a light touch and lyrical language, Eddie describes the death knell of rural Quebec: its transition from agricultural village to vacation destination to industrial wasteland, and finally to big box store address. The small town and its surrounding landscape was a refuge for the main characters, but, as the natural environment disappears, the characters realize that to survive they must leave home and start wandering again.

Eddie describes the death knell of rural Quebec: its transition from agricultural village to vacation destination to industrial wasteland, and finally to big box store address.



Eddie knows something about the search for a place to call home. Born in France to a Lebanese father and a French mother, she first moved with her family to Quebec and then to New Brunswick two years later. When she was twenty, Eddie moved again, returning to study literature in Quebec City at Laval University.

Eddie, who works as an editor for the Quebec government, has been writing for years, but she never thought that this breakout novel would be published. In fact, the story was given to a friend as a gift, and it was only at the friend's insistence that Eddie submitted it to a publishing company. As Eddie herself suggests, the gift she offered a friend became a gift for her too.

Eddie has written a modern fairy tale, full of magical moments and literary elegance, a veritable treasure for any reader who is hunting for a book that will console and inspire. **mb**

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

The Test of Time

OFF THE BOOKS

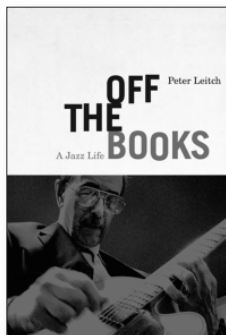
A Jazz Life
Peter Leitch
Véhicule Press
\$20, paper, 188pp
978-155065-348-9

“One chord is fine. Two chords are pushing it. Three chords and you’re into jazz,” American rock guitarist, singer/songwriter, and photographer Lou Reed once said. Seasoned jazz guitarist Peter Leitch, also a composer and photographer, would likely consider that an improvement. “I had no interest in the popular music of the day,” he relates in his memoir. “When you have been listening to Bird or Trane, Miles or Monk, or Clifford Brown, music on this level, how can you take the Beatles seriously?” Interestingly, Lou Reed never cared for the Beatles either. In fact, these two offbeat artists have shared a few key points, including heroin, a mistrust of the mainstream, and a long-term love affair with New York.

Leitch’s memoir chronicles an

impressive career, recalling a lifetime of stages and studios shared with jazz greats, mapping the scene from the 1960s onward. The book is divided into three parts, based on the places where Leitch has lived – Montreal, Toronto, and NYC. The third chapter is the longest, honouring the gritty city that greased the guitarist’s groove: “I had never seen a place where most of the rules were ‘on hold’. As long as you didn’t commit a violent crime, no one cared what you did.”

From early on, Leitch preferred to write his own rules. He wasn’t big on school, and, though he took



When you have been listening to Bird or Trane, Miles or Monk, or Clifford Brown, music on this level, how can you take the Beatles seriously?

music lessons, he mainly improved through practical experience. Collecting tips from mentors, he played and practiced passionately, developing character and street credibility: “I didn’t sound like other jazz guitarists,” he notes. “You have to tell your own story, even if you sometimes have to borrow someone else’s words.”

If Leitch’s own story were a 45, the B-side to freethinking would be estrangement. His memoir recalls recurring bouts of depression and significant entanglement with drugs and alcohol. His innate sense of alienation was reinforced by external circumstances, such as growing up Anglo in predominantly French-speaking East-end Montreal, though he came to consider this an advantage: “I now realize that not having any strong national or cultural identity was useful to me, in being able to easily move in and out of different cultural and ethnic situations as an individual.”

And move he did, his infatuation with jazz heightened by each new lead. Luckily, his thirst for musical mastery eventually trumped his cravings for heroin, perhaps saving him from a premature coda: “I was too serious about music and my wife and I decided to kick,” he recalls, underlining the importance of having a “strong motivation in some other direction” when beating addiction.

Leitch’s writing style is casual and conversational. While this can be refreshing, one wishes occasionally that he would slow down a little, taking care to craft more memorable images. Quick summaries like “we had a brief relationship that didn’t

work out for various reasons,” leave the reader wanting for details and depth.

That said, his confessions on the highs and lows of his “jazz life” are courageous. As many artists will attest, self-doubt has a way of creeping in through the back doors of ill-attended gigs, littering red carpets with unpaid bills. Leitch bravely admits he was not immune. Despite his great achievements, his sense of dignity dangled like a broken guitar string when resources and recognition were low.

In this sense, the book will resonate not only with jazz enthusiasts, but also with any artist who has been tested by fickle crowds or critics, and yet carries on. In 1973, *Rolling Stone Magazine* called Lou Reed’s *Berlin* album his “last shot at a once promising career.” In 2003, they included it on their list of 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. It only took thirty years for the world to catch on; meanwhile, Reed just kept pushing forward.

At sixty-eight, with multiple music and photography projects in the works, Peter Leitch is fortunately doing the same. “Artistically speaking, I’m not going to go quietly,” he declares. mbs

Montreal-based artist Kimberly Bourgeois paints poems that sometimes turn out like songs: kimberlyandthedreamtime.com.

Democracy in China

THE LEGACY OF TIANANMEN SQUARE

Michel Cormier
Translated by
Jonathan Kaplansky
Goose Lane
\$29.95, cloth, 237pp
978-0-86492-902-0

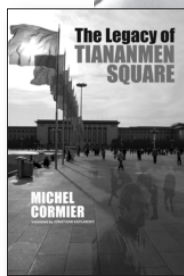
Several years ago, a Chinese newspaper found itself in hot water after a young employee authorized the publication of a text written by the Tiananmen Mothers, a group dedicated to preserving the memory of the Tiananmen Square victims. So complete was the silence surrounding the events of June 1989 that the employee had no idea that mentioning Tiananmen was taboo.

If, for Westerners, Tiananmen is synonymous with the violent suppression of democracy, this is not so for people living in China today. Citing this example of effective state censorship, journalist Michel Cormier suggests that prospects for democracy remain dim nearly twenty-five years later.

In *The Legacy of Tiananmen Square*, fluidly translated into

English by Jonathan Kaplansky, Cormier asks why democratization efforts in China have repeatedly failed. Looking back at a century of Chinese history, he argues that each contemporary leader “has felt the need to sing the praises of democracy even though his actions were steeped in authoritarianism.” Mao lambasted parliamentary democracy for enabling the continued oppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie, even as he cracked down on political opponents. Deng Xiaoping, the leader who called the army in to Tiananmen Square in 1989, argued that his “socialist democracy” represented the collective interest of the Chinese, if not their individual rights.

Authoritarianism has been challenged continually, and Cormier tracked down five prominent figures in the democracy movement to record their experiences. The resulting interviews add a welcome human element to what is otherwise an informative but rather dry overview of recent



Chinese political history. It is fascinating to read Wei Jingsheng’s reflections on the radicalizing effect of living through the Cultural Revolution and observing the chasm between Communist discourse and widespread rural poverty. In an inflammatory text entitled “The Fifth Modernization,” Wei argued that Deng Xiaoping’s economic modernization program was meaningless without a fifth component: democracy. This stance resulted in lengthy imprisonment, followed by exile.

The majority of the book, however, focuses on the figures at the top of the Chinese power structure rather than on those agitating for change. As the CBC and Radio-Canada Beijing correspondent between 2006 and 2010, Cormier surely accrued significant inside knowledge of China, and one might have expected him to draw more from this experience. His account would have been strengthened by interviews taken from

a wider cross-section of Chinese society, or by a more comprehensive examination of post-Tiananmen attempts to demand democracy. One group that might have merited a closer look is the Tiananmen Mothers, who have persistently challenged the official narrative surrounding the June 1989 crackdown. The publication of Charter 08, a pro-democracy manifesto, could also have been discussed in greater depth. In fact, one of Cormier’s interview subjects, Bao Tong, was involved in its creation; it would have been interesting to hear his

reflections on participating in this courageous initiative while living under police surveillance.

Cormier’s central argument – that Tiananmen’s legacy was the entrenchment of authoritarianism – is nonetheless persuasive. When the government decided to clamp down on the student movement, it simultaneously cracked down on dissenters within the Communist Party. Cormier concludes that in this repressive political climate, activists have shifted their focus toward what he calls “citizens’ rights” – the right to clean water, education, fair working conditions. Han Dongfang, a workers’ rights advocate and veteran of the Tiananmen protests, believes that these struggles are essential steps in creating accountability, if not liberal democracy: “What will lead the government to be more responsible ... is not the government. ... People have to be more confident and push; that is what is happening in China. With time, the Chinese government will have no choice but to change, to become a more responsible government.” mbs

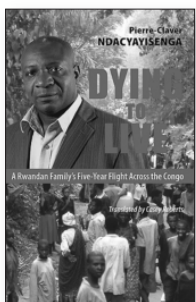
Kate Forrest is a Montreal translator, editor, and piano teacher.

Memento Mori

DYING TO LIVE

A Rwandan Family's Five-Year Flight Across the Congo
Pierre-Claver Ndacyayisenga
 Translated by Casey Roberts
 Baraka Books
 \$19.95, paper, 168pp
 978-1-92682-478-9

Everyone is dying to live: cancer patients, amateur yoginis, guests on Oprah. Inspirational posters on Facebook remind us to “focus on what’s important” and that when life gets you down to “hold your head up and keep going.” We must be the bravest, most noble, most self-directed group of people ever. We’re all “survivors” and if given half the chance we will chew your ear off with a heart-warming tale of grit and passion. Or we could get over ourselves and read *Dying to Live: A Rwandan Family's Five-Year Flight Across the Congo*.



The Rwandan genocide began in April 1994, the day after President Habyarimana’s plane crashed under suspicious circumstances. Estimates now put the death toll at anywhere from five hundred thousand to one million people as the country’s two ethnic groups, the Hutus and the

Tutsis, took out generations of resentment upon each other. Shortly after the first eruptions of violence, Pierre-Claver Ndacyayisenga, a schoolteacher in Kigali, his wife, and their three small children embarked on what would become a five-year walk for their lives.

The journey was never less than perilous. With rebel soldiers always a day or two behind them, the refugees moved in columns of tens of thousands, lurching from village to village, living, sleeping, barely eating on the dusty roads. They eventually crossed the border to the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Safe havens for a short period of time, the border towns and villages were soon overwhelmed. With barely any energy, the refugees had to pick up and move on. Forced to live by his wits, Ndacyayisenga proved to be a gifted entrepreneur, initiating a series of ad hoc business ventures: brew-

ing and selling banana wine, working as a butcher, buying and selling dry goods.

One day passes into the next, one village into the other, and there are more bullets to dodge, machetes to outrun, jungles to push through, fevers to endure, and meals to miss. Although a map is provided, it doesn’t do justice to the sense of time, space, and the unknown. The milestones of the journey are less places as they are stamps of survival: Lubutu, Ubundu, Boende, Opala, Wendji, Pokola, Yaoundé. The stakes were always impossibly high. Ndacyayisenga crafted a raft out of bamboo so his family could cross the impossibly wide Congo River; they gave up their last dollars to follow dubious guides through dense jungle; and when a fork in the road appeared they miraculously chose the way that didn’t lead to marauding soldiers.

On a cold December night in 1999, Ndacyayisenga landed in Montreal. Ten months later, after working several factory jobs and as an office cleaner, he was able to bring his family over. Though the journey was over, the struggle was

not. “After escaping all the violence of our native land together, this was ultimately the battle our marriage would prove unable to survive.” And so closes the last chapter of *Dying to Live*.

Unfortunately, a sense of detachment undermines the book’s harrowing subject matter. Early on they lose their 11-year-old son during an exodus. This is the first real indication that they are walking in the shadow of death. When they finally find him, they only take “a few minutes to listen to the story of his adventure before (they) started out (again).” Later, they lose track of their daughter as they cross the fast moving Lubutu River. “Her disappearance introduced an element of conflict into my already exhausted group.” That’s all? She is found the next day, but the emotional relief is thin.

While the bones of the story hold up, they are often lost in the dry dust of information and the breathless recounting. A slower, gentler, and more focused approach would have worked just as well.

Finally, a note to translators the world over. Just because the French have a permissive relationship with exclamation points, it doesn’t mean you have to. mb

Leila Marshy is the editor of roverarts.com.

He Built This City

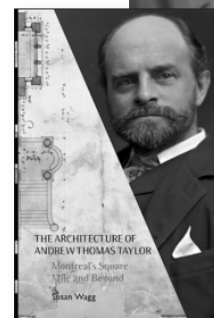
THE ARCHITECTURE OF ANDREW THOMAS TAYLOR
Montreal's Square Mile and Beyond
 Susan Wagg
 McGill-Queen's University Press
 \$39.95, cloth, 227pp
 978-0-7735-4118-4

Stories of English-Montreal bourgeoisie, benefactors, and impressive commissions abound in this exhaustive look at one of our most prolific architects: Andrew Thomas Taylor. As the book’s author, Susan Wagg, points out, very little to date has been written about Taylor, and *The Architecture of Andrew Thomas Taylor: Montreal's Square Mile and Beyond* aims “to fill this gap and to add to the woefully few monographs devoted to Canadian architects.”

We quickly learn of the architect’s vast imprints on many key projects in the city: in 1891 he was commissioned to design McGill’s Redpath Library, and “by the time he left Canada in 1904, the majority of McGill’s purpose-built buildings were his.” Furthermore, one of his major projects was to renovate the Bank of Montreal’s Head Office, still standing in Place d’Armes. Taylor helped found the Province of Quebec Association of Architects (PQAA) in 1890 and McGill’s Department of Architecture in 1896. He served on various committees, organized exhibits, and even taught. He was knighted in 1926 and received the Medal of the City of Paris in 1919. In short, his name should also be stamped on most of the notorious *pierres grises* of the majestic Golden Square Mile.

It helped that Taylor had remarkable connections: he was related to the wealthy Redpath family and counted the tobacco magnate and governor William Christopher Macdonald among his clients. Macdonald became the benefactor for Taylor’s architectural undertakings and often saw no limit to price. The only thing Macdonald requested was that “the buildings he commissioned be among the best in the world.”

The book is chronological, beginning with his birth in Edinburgh in 1850, and ending with his death in England in 1937. Architecture buffs will revel in building details and descriptions. Others might find themselves reaching for Wikipedia when reading sentences such as this one: “To the left [of a three-story façade] was a ‘Tuscan Gothic’ motif: a pair of barely pointed windows separated by a mullion with a single circular light in the spandrel beneath an arch to match the entrance. Pointed windows filled in the next level between the buttresses. On the upper level a triplet of similarly arched lights were set



under a relieving arch in the gable. The peak contained three tiny lancets.”

Architectural styles are often thrown around – “the Shingle Style,” “the Kentish vernacular,” or “the High

Victorian” – meaning some background in architecture is handy; however, the book, for the most part, reads effortlessly even for those less fluent in the vernacular of arches.

Anecdotes, such as the one about Taylor’s discovery of elevators in New York, make this book an enjoyable read: “‘No one,’ he said, ‘thinks of laboriously climbing up numerous flights of stairs. There is an attendant all day long in charge of the elevators. You step in, and almost immediately step out at the floor you wish.’” We see a side of Taylor we would not have if we were simply looking at his sketches.

Anybody not yet acquainted with Andrew Thomas Taylor should pick up this book. Wagg has certainly drawn a rich portrait of Taylor, helping to ensure that “a sufficient number [of buildings] survive as visual reminders of this nation’s past.” mb

Branka Petrovic received her B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy from McGill and her M.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing from Concordia. She works at the Canadian Center for Architecture and writes poetry.

VOICES OF THE HEART

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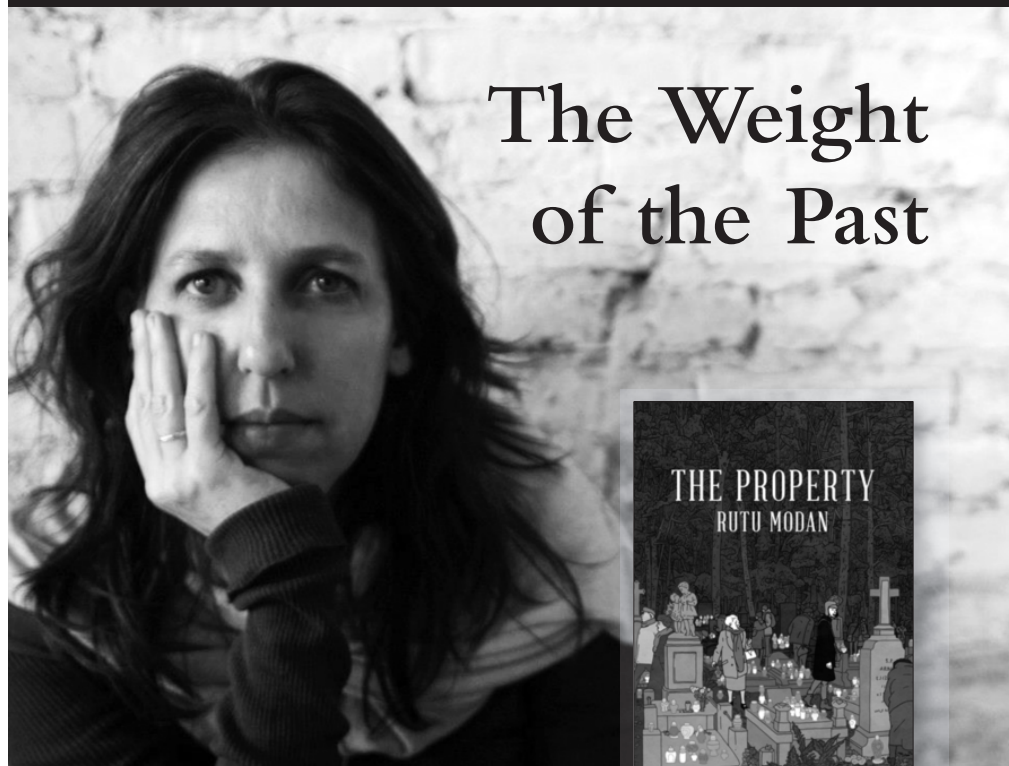
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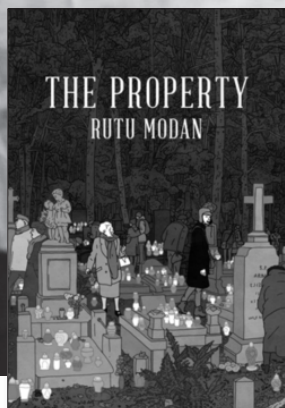
Nominated Distinguished
 Teaching Awards McGill University

Novel *The Jaguar's Song*
 praised by Wesleyan College

Writers' Conference Scholarship Committee.
carolhendren@yahoo.ca 514-834-7447



The Weight of the Past



THE PROPERTY
Rutu Modan
Translated by Jessica Cohen
Drawn & Quarterly
\$24.95, cloth, 232pp
9781770461154

Shame, greed, and love intertwine on the streets of Warsaw in this graphic novel by Israeli artist Rutu Modan. The novel's epigraph is a quote from Modan's mother Michaela: "With family, you don't have to tell the whole truth and it's not considered lying." It certainly sets the tone for this tale of a Polish-born grandmother, Regina, who returns to Warsaw decades after escaping to Israel during World War II. She is accompanied by her granddaughter Mica who is there to support and help her reclaim a property her family lost in the war.

The dramatic elements are many: a romance between strangers, a long-lost love, a jealous daughter, a would-be con artist, and a secretive grandmother. The characters Regina and Mica propel the story forward with their individual adventures, but Modan depicts some interesting moments where the weight of the past collides with a modern yearning to connect. In one instance, Mica gets caught up in a reenactment on the street where men dressed as German soldiers with rifles round up people with badges and load them into the back of cloth-covered trucks. After liberating Mica from the group and apologizing for the mistake, the woman who organizes the tour explains, "The reenactments are part of our newest activities. The regular old exhibitions don't interest the internet generation. They want to experience the real thing."

After graduating from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem in 1992, Modan became a co-editor of the Hebrew edition of *MAD* magazine and was one of the founders of Actus Tragicus, a group of five Israeli comics artists that published nine books and one special comics album, *Dead Herring Comics*, between 1995 and 2010. Her debut graphic novel, *Exit Wounds*, about a son searching for his estranged father after a suicide bomber enters a train station in Tel Aviv (where Modan grew up) won her the 2008 Eisner award for Best New Graphic Novel.

The idea for *The Property* developed out of a series of illustrated stories Modan wrote for the *New York Times* website in the visual column, *Mixed Emotions*, in 2007. The series is a collection of six memoirs about Modan and her family, including her grandmother. It demonstrates the difficult relationship that both she and her mother had with Grandma, largely due to a clash of values, and is echoed in Mica's relationship with Regina.

Like Regina, Modan's grandmother grew up in Warsaw and fled to Israel after the German occupation of Poland.

Characters are drawn in a simple manner – solid colours, strong lines, minimal texture – that is often compared to Georges Remi's (a.k.a. Hergé) *ligne claire* style, which he pioneered in *The Adventures of Tintin*. Backgrounds add depth and there are detailed images of street life and cemetery celebrations on All Souls' Day. The narrative follows a pretty straightforward script that has a lot going on, and yet at times feels like there isn't enough happening because the story never really peaks. There is no dramatic climax, only the occasional outburst of frustration.

The underlying sense of loss that pervades the story is subtle despite the gravity of these individuals' experiences. "How many times can you start life all over again?" asks Regina. This resignation to the present is as close as we get to an epiphany. The sentiments of loss resonate the most with the reader, but are muted, which is perhaps why *The Property* isn't that gripping. The moments of levity, the mystery, the romance, the secrets, it all rolls along at a pretty quick pace and the characters simply persevere. In that sense it is an everyday story, a story of people just trying to make it through. **msb**

Lori Callaghan is an arts critic in Montreal whose work has been published in the *Montreal Gazette* and *The Rover*.

Forgetting Berlin

LETTING IT GO
Miriam Katin
Drawn & Quarterly
\$24.95, cloth, 160pp
9781770461031

Changing a career path becomes more difficult with age. Now imagine a career change in your sixties, right when most people are thinking about the end of their professional aspirations. Artist Miriam Katin did just that. In her seventh decade, she became a graphic novelist, not a change you'd expect with the genre's high concentration of authors under the age of 40. In 2006, she penned her first critically acclaimed graphic memoir, *We Are On Our Own*. In this story, a very young Miriam and her mother are forced from their home in Budapest during World War II after the Nazi invasion. They change their names and go into hiding, managing to stay just steps ahead of German soldiers. This experience marked Katin for life, giving her an understandable reason to despise all things German. However, in the years following the publication of *We Are On Our Own*, some unexpected news forced Katin to come to terms with her haunting past. *Letting It Go* is the account of this painful but ultimately inspiring experience.

In this, her second graphic memoir, we meet Katin and her husband living peacefully in Brooklyn. Their son Ilan arrives with his girlfriend, a Swedish comic artist. Over a cup of coffee, the son tells his mother not only that he and his girlfriend are moving to Berlin, but also that he wants his mother to help him with the paperwork so that he can become a Hungarian citizen and obtain an EU passport. Katin's immediate reaction is horror, and she refuses to help her son. But when she realizes that her actions could undermine their relationship, she seeks the advice of friends and loved ones, and eventually relents. On the surface, she puts on a brave face, but underneath she suffers in silence, and her inner turmoil has some very surprising physical manifestations. In the end, she and her husband travel to Berlin, not once but twice, and the trips are filled with some wonderful unforeseen surprises.



But we also see that letting go of long-harboured grudges is a very difficult process.

Although this might sound like a serious book, there are many light moments that make it an easy read. Katin's borderless panels have a beautiful flow to them,

and many of her finely detailed establishing shots are stunning. My personal favourite was the crayon effect of the choppy river below the Brooklyn Bridge.

However, while this book is enjoyable and sends a powerful message, it has one significant shortcoming. Although we can see and hear Katin's pain in *Letting It Go*, we don't feel her trauma. This will be particularly

Katin's borderless panels have a beautiful flow to them, and many of her finely detailed establishing shots are stunning.

true for anyone who has not read *We Are On Our Own*. Without having a clear idea of Katin's past, this memoir loses considerable power. In spite of the book's many references to the horrors suffered by Jews at the hands of the

Germans in World War II, the references are too well known and impersonal to produce the desired effect. A flashback might have helped readers better identify with Katin's experience.

Nevertheless, it is inspiring to read a memoir by a woman in her seventies who is not only willing to share her past, but who also shows us that it is never too late to face our demons. Katin has the courage to tell her story, warts and all, and do it unconventionally with a graphic novel. **msb**

Heather Leighton has written for the *Globe and Mail* and the *Montreal Gazette*. She is the books editor of *The Rover*. You can find more of her writing at *The Unexpected Twists and Turns*.

by Marianne Ackerman

Government Killed the Radio Star

Growing up in rural Ontario with no newspapers, no radio, and three TV channels, I used to shudder at the roar of canned laughter beating through a thin wall between the living room and my desk. Prime-time TV was a constant, except when the weather was good or there was nothing on but “a CBC special.” In our house, the genre had a name of its own.

At university I soon developed the newspaper habit, along with a taste for Peter Gzowski’s psyche-defining morning radio show and Barbara Frum’s trenchant interviews at dinnertime. In those days, you couldn’t give CBC radio a miss and still consider yourself well-informed.

How times have changed. These days I read three morning newspapers, watch HBO almost exclusively, and am married to a foreigner who leaves the room whenever he hears the sonorous voice of Peter Mansbridge. If the perky Wendy Mesley is hosting *The National*, he’ll stick around long enough to mention she’s Mansbridge’s ex-wife, at which point I once again point out how civilised we Canadians are. It’s one of those married conversation rituals.

On my own, I channel hop past the truly egregious items that crowd out useful information and stop at the ad-shortened *The National*: weather damage, accidents, consumer fraud, medical disasters – punch-in-the-gut stories designed to produce a mixture of awe and guilty relief at bedtime.

There you have it, all shades of the good grey CBC, from annoyance to necessity to contentious curiosity, which brings me to Wade Rowland’s manifesto *Saving the CBC: Balancing Profit and Public Service*. Reading this cri de cœur for Canada’s public broadcaster aroused a paradoxical reaction: first alarm, then a fierce desire to see the whole bureaucratic mess shaken up or shaken down.

Formerly a senior manager at both the Mother Corp. and CTV, Rowland is now a media professor at York University. His prognosis is gloomy and passionately argued. He believes the CBC is facing fiscal problems it cannot survive without radical reform. Since 1985, federal funding has been cut by two-



Rowland believes the CBC is facing fiscal problems it cannot survive without radical reform.

thirds while total government expenditures rose by fifty per cent. Some time soon, a private broadcaster will snag broadcast rights to NHL hockey, divesting CBC of \$100 million a year in advertising revenues and precipitating “an unprecedented financial crisis.” So, like health care and pensions, CBC is on the proverbial collision course.

Rowland’s ten-point reform program includes abolition of all advertising, elimination of professional sports broadcasting, increased in-house production and local programming, expansion of CBC radio with no ads, and greater government subsidy. All ideas that would take the CBC back to a simpler, gentler time when it was part of the vital national glue I experienced in my intellectually formative years.

A short, meaty book, *Saving the CBC* explains how and why the organization was founded as well as how internal bureaucratic struggles have plagued it for eons. Rowland’s own experience as a TV news consultant in the mid-1990s is candidly presented as “A Cautionary Tale.” When the head of English-language television, Ivan Fecan, sent out a memo suggesting CBC news should step out of the commercial ratings game and instead concentrate on in-

depth reporting and analysis, Rowland wrote a reply for his boss, news VP Ted Kotcheff, vividly defending entrepreneurial TV, arguing that CBC had to compete with commercial broadcasters. Kotcheff was later ousted in “a palace coup” and Rowland was dispatched to the basement, where his phone never rang.

“In retrospect,” Rowland writes, “I can see that we were both far too enamoured to competitive rivalry in the industry, and not creative enough to see how something better could be built outside the commercial framework.” Building that something better is the central argument of *Saving the CBC*, which sets out an altruistic path to a pure public service institution. It’s a useful summary of all that’s wrong with CBC, a dense, fact-filled work that has already succeeded in stirring debate about the future of public broadcasting in this country.

What’s missing is the future. There is the very real possibility that TV as we know it will soon go the way of the book – leaving content providers to scramble for new forms of delivery of their work. In that context, whether CBC should produce drama and variety in-house or buy it from independent producers may be a moot point. Maybe producing content *is* CBC’s future, as networks morph into new beasts altogether. For certain, the future of CBC has a lot more to do with the future of TV in general than with how well the organization conforms to the role its founders envisioned half a century ago.

Most discouraging, he quotes the musings of Robert Rabinovitch (CBC president from 1999 to 2007) from a 2010 interview: “So you have to ask yourself, what is the CBC for? I don’t know the answer, but I do know the way it is right now is embarrassing. It’s going to get worse.” A comment, Rowland says, that illustrates both the dire nature of the predicament “and Rabinovitch’s fundamental unsuitability for the position.” Indeed.

Shrinking budgets are an obvious crisis, hardly unique to CBC; Rowland’s trenchant analysis suggests that a dearth of new ideas and absence of strong leadership are far greater problems. Hard questions, no easy answers. **mb**

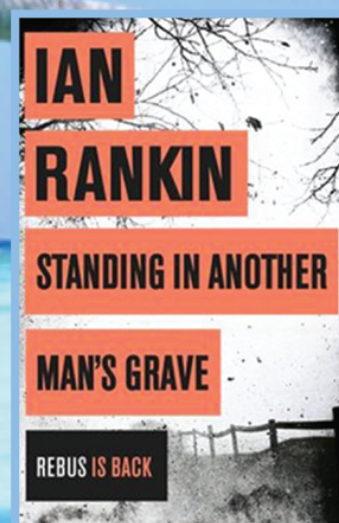
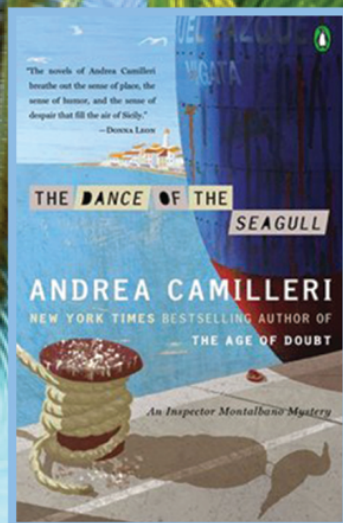
A novelist and playwright, Marianne Ackerman is publisher of the online arts magazine *The Rover*, found at roverarts.com.



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