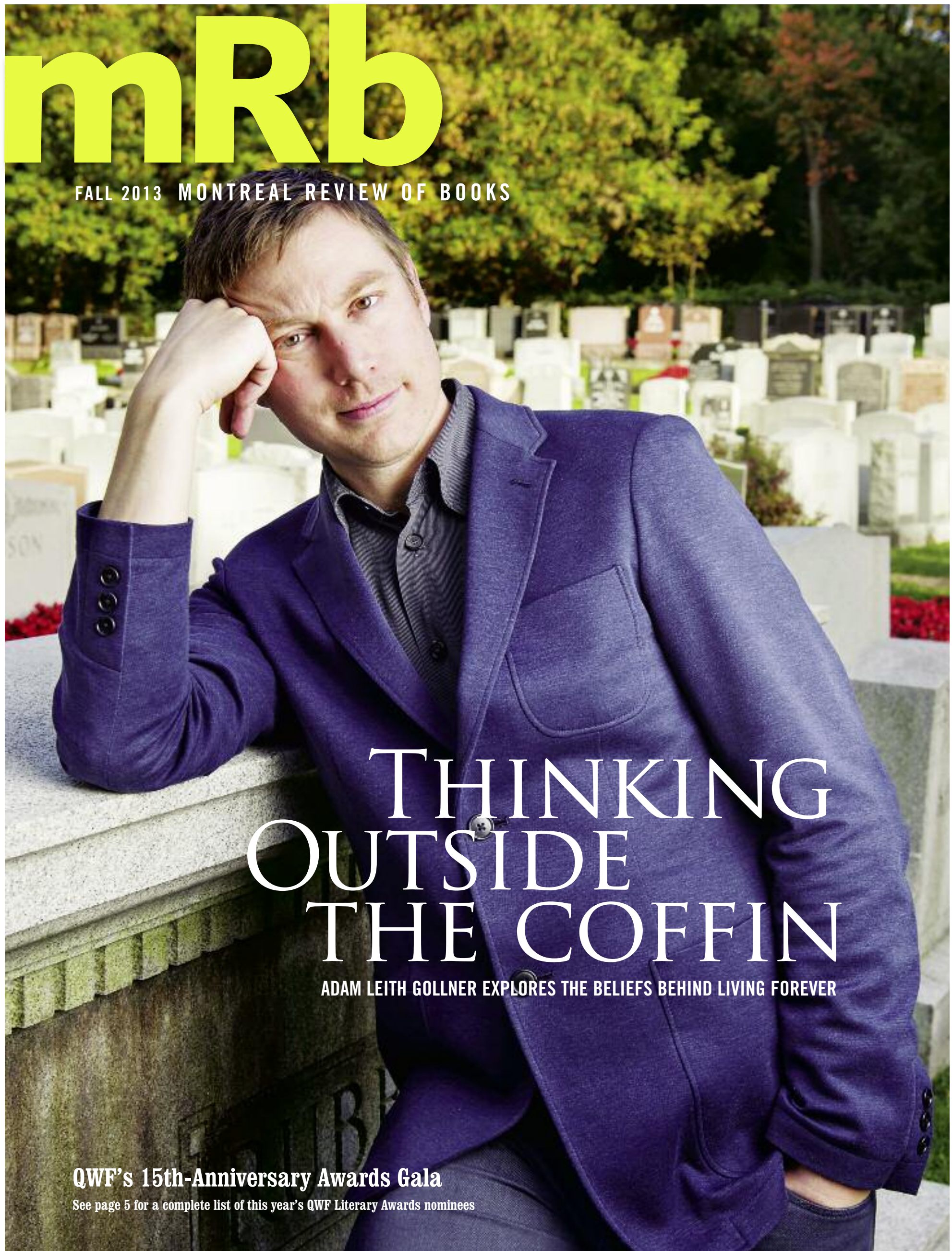


mRb

FALL 2013 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

A man with short brown hair, wearing a purple blazer over a grey shirt, is leaning on a stone wall in a cemetery. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows numerous white headstones and green trees.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE COFFIN

ADAM LEITH GOLLNER EXPLORES THE BELIEFS BEHIND LIVING FOREVER

QWF's 15th-Anniversary Awards Gala

See page 5 for a complete list of this year's QWF Literary Awards nominees

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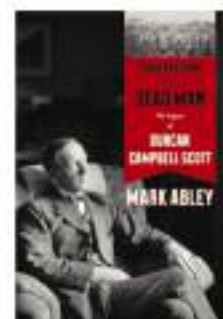
DON NEWMAN
WELCOME TO THE BROADCAST
HarperCollins

KEN MCGOOGAN
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For editorial inquiries contact:

AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3

Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4

Telephone: 514-932-5633

Email: editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

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DEATH BECOMES HIM

BY ANNA LEVENTHAL

“How do you want to die?” This question was posed to Adam Leith Gollner at a recent talk by a gruff Bostonian in a Hawaiian shirt with grey hair slicked back “gangster-style” and an oversized watch.

“And it wasn’t said like ‘If and when you *do* die, how would you choose for it to happen?’” Gollner says. “It was more like this murderer standing over you, saying ‘Pick your way.’ It was such an antagonistic statement.”

It seems that when you’re the author of an in-depth treatise on the subject of eternal life, things can get a little personal.

Gollner’s latest publication, *The Book of Immortality*, is a sweeping, eclectic examination of a few of humanity’s deepest obsessions. From the fountain of youth to the eternal soul to the concept of “singularity,” in which we will merge our consciousness with computer intelli-

gence to become infinitely powerful divine beings, Gollner examines our ability and need to imagine life after life.

It’s hard to overstate the breadth of this book. (Gollner tells me the book, as it is, comprises less than half of what he originally wrote. “Two-fifths,” he specifies.) He read and travelled widely, looking for places and people who promised endless life and undying youth, in the form of mineral springs, religious rites, freezing your body after (or before) you die, nanotechnology, and goat testicle transplants. He encountered an outlandish and sometimes unsavoury cast of characters, including gerontologists,

“spiritual eclectics,” futurists, fraudsters, psychics, Buddhist nuns, enterprising rabbis, and David Copperfield. Especially delightful are the Montreal mainstays we encounter first-hand, such as Jesuit priest and film scholar Father Gervais, imam Omar Koné of the local Sufi order, and rugelach purveyor Cheskie Lebowitz, of Cheskie’s Heimische Bakery.

Gollner also comes in contact with a wildly diverse set of beliefs and practices, including those of immortalists, several of whom were present at the same talk as the steely Bostonian. Immortalists, as we discover, are people who believe that death is not the natural and unavoidable

outcome of life, but rather a bad habit – one that can be kicked.

“They find the idea that death is inevitable to be offensive,” Gollner tells me. “They speak of death as this *ism* like sexism or racism, this backwards way of thinking that needs to be eradicated.” Expressing his own belief – that death comes for us all – was enough to raise the hackles of more than one immortalist.

“Their belief system that death is not real is one of the most warping things to me,” Gollner says. “What an alien mindset. It hurls you into this place where nothing you know is real; your way of making sense of the world is being challenged. And when you’re in that place of uncertainty, well, the mind doesn’t like that. We’ve entered into the cesspool of belief.” But Gollner gamely straps on his hip waders and sloshes around in that cesspool, spending many pages

grappling with situations where logic has clearly left the building.

Early in the book he visits St. Augustine, a Florida town that claims to be the home of the “genuine” Fountain of Youth, found by Ponce de Léon in the sixteenth century. What ensues, as Gollner tries to verify the fountain’s authenticity, is a regular maelstrom of contradictions, logical fallacies, spurious reasoning, and straight-up magical thinking. In one passage, he asks the fountain’s media spokesperson, Michelle Reyna, if Ponce de Léon really discovered the fountain in St. Augustine. Reyna replies:

Absolutely. Although some people claim he may not have made it this far north. We agree to disagree with those people. In either case, because this is known as *the* Fountain of Youth, and it has been here for over one hundred years, we’re going to say that he was here, because no one else is taking the lead on it. If no one else can produce any evidence that he landed elsewhere, then why not?

Later, Reyna points out some Spanish moss, which she then informs Gollner “is not Spanish, and it is not moss.”

The mental gymnastics needed to follow Reyna’s reasoning are, in fact, only a warm-up for the rest of the book. By definition, Gollner’s subject evades easy understanding. He tells us early on that immortality is unknowable and inconceivable, and then goes on to spend four hundred pages trying to know it and conceive of it. *The Book of Immortality* is, in a way, a creative non-fiction account of one man’s attempt to drive himself crazy by confronting the unfrontable.

“‘Huge mindfuck’ is an apt description of what [writing the book] was like,” Gollner tells me. “I barely remember, to be honest. I remember being grateful when I came across the description of immortality as a preoccupation resistant to articulation, and feeling like, *oh yeah*. There are breakthroughs in terms of understanding what you cannot understand.”

Belief is really the linchpin of his research, the itch Gollner returns to over and over and can’t quite scratch. The longer you spend in the book, the more you become attuned to your own inclinations toward convenient suspensions of reason. I might chuckle or cringe at men having goat balls implanted in their scrota to ramp up their sex appeal, but hey, I’m writing this by the light of a Himalayan salt lamp. I

don’t have a leg to stand on. What unites Gollner’s various narrative threads is this universally human ability to put faith in something outside of our understanding, whether it be a supreme being or an eight-thousand-dollar jar of skin cream. Some of these leaps of faith are numinous, sublime, while others have a strong whiff of snake oil, but the principle is the same: we want to believe. And there’s something compelling, and charming, and scary, about absolute credulity, even – or especially – when it comes from those on the fringes of what’s acceptable to believe in.

Curiously, although nearly everyone in this book is obsessed with living forever, or at least radically extending their lifespan, only a few talk about why, or what they would actually do with their bonus years. Gollner muses that life eternal, at least life as we know it, might not be quite the garden of delights the immortalists imagine. “Borges said something like prolonging man’s life means prolonging his misery,” he says. “I don’t think about it that starkly, but it does mean prolonging reality. And reality is good and bad. Like, if we live forever, will we have to work menial jobs forever to support ourselves? Would I want to write books forever? Like, actually *forever*?”

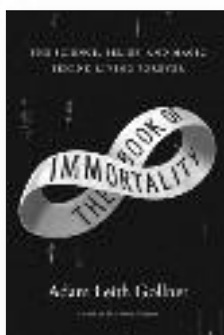
Gollner recounts his response to the floral-clad Angel of Death he encountered in Boston. “Just to be clear, I don’t *want* to die,” he told the guy, and the audience, and me. “I accept

Belief is really the linchpin of his research, the itch Gollner returns to over and over and can’t quite scratch.

the fact that it’ll happen, but I don’t want to invite it. Don’t kill me, if that’s what you’re saying. And if you have to kill me, please do it in my sleep. There’s a difference between accepting that death is real and wanting to die.”

“I’m not on a death trip,” Gollner tells me, serious and unironic. “I like to think of myself as being on a life trip. A journey of life.”

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



THE BOOK OF IMMORTALITY
The Science, Belief, and Magic Behind Living Forever
Adam Leith Gollner
Doubleday Canada
\$29.95, cloth, 416pp
9780385667302



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fiction

History Revisited

OCTOBER 1970

Louis Hamelin

Translated by Wayne Grady

Arachnide

\$24.95, paper, 600pp

978-1-77089-103-6

October 1970. Montreal. The kidnapping of James Cross, the murder of Pierre Laporte, the nation watching as Trudeau orders troops into the streets to search for FLQ terrorist cells. We know the story.

Or do we?

Louis Hamelin, in this peerless translation by Wayne Grady, tells another version through the eyes and words of Samuel Nihilo. Sam learned the uniquely Quebecois intellectual métier of investigative poetry at the knee of Chevalier Branlequeue, a grizzled separatist publisher. The latter holds court at the Lavigneur Taverne on Ontario Street where his group meets to discuss key FLQ members and decode the texts of newspaper articles published during the crisis. (Can't

you taste the Molson and feel the Export "A" smoke absorbing into your skin?) His mentor's death leaves Sam in possession of Chevalier's FLQ crisis files and plunges him into a world of conspiracy.

The richness of the subject matter aside, the novel is a virtuosic technical accomplishment. It shifts time, perspective, and setting like a kaleidoscope; the reader doesn't always know where they are or why, but they know it's part of a larger pattern. The book was researched for four years, and somehow Hamelin cohesively interweaves more than thirty characters, based on the crisis' real life participants, all the while affecting the tone of weary outrage that is so much a part of Quebec public discourse. Choosing poets to be the investigators leads to some spectacular descriptive passages and allows the authorial voice to operate



credibly in a range of romance and hyperbole well-suited to conspiracy themes and creation myths.

Sam flees the past, to a cabin in Abitibi, raising chickens and screwing his barmaid girlfriend, who is also lead actress in a theatre company that stages Camus plays for the mill town rubes. The conspiracy haunts Sam, as does an apparition of Laporte and a lynx just like the one he saw a trapper strangle with his bare hands when he was a boy. The book's original title was *La constellation du lynx*. In the animist pantheon, the lynx represent secrets, and constellations speak to the human tendency to project shapes and meaning onto abstract points. Do we see a secret or do we see what we want to see?

Novels whose plots consist of

a big reveal have the same structural challenge in that making an entire work point to something hidden, and then finally showing it, can be anticlimactic. Hamelin's expository devices are primarily didactic, but the burlesque pacing of the uncovering keeps the reader interested throughout the book's six hundred

pages, although there is some begging of the point at the end. What's the conspiracy? (Spoiler alert!) The FLQ had been infiltrated by agents provocateurs – the SQ, RCMP, Canadian Military, and even the CIA knew what was going on the whole time and could have stopped it earlier, but they let the events escalate so that they could justify sending troops into Quebec to intimidate the nascent separatist movement. The story is told as fiction, however Hamelin adds one single footnote to say that a particular story from the police round-up is likely apocryphal; does the single authorial incursion imply that the rest of the anecdotes are factual?

If this novel is to be taken as *histoire masquée* then it has revisionist or apologist intentions. FLQ members are mainly portrayed as sympathetic characters whose crimes are explained with

a boys-will-be-boys wink. Whether led astray by provocateurs or not, these weren't kids who chucked a brick through the school window on a dare – the cell members held hostages for months, set bombs, robbed banks. The book's villains are police, army, and the agent provocateurs, especially Yves Langlois, who is renamed Francois Langlais for the novel (tongue-in-cheek, one hopes).

October 1970 is a marvellous work. Perhaps it's the current political climate, but in brushing aside FLQ brutalities to re-plant heirloom seeds of indignation over the Saint-Jean-Baptiste day riots and the War Measures Act, it feels almost like a separatist book of Exodus – persecution waxing poetic to establish moral authority for the chosen ones. For those of us who experienced the FLQ crisis from elsewhere in Canada, the story educates, entertains, and provides important insight about the formative years of the generation that drives separatist politics. No matter what you call it, *October 1970* is one of the most important reads of recent memory and could perhaps even be considered the Quebecois answer to *Two Solitudes*. **MB**

@robsherren reviews for the *mRb*, builds wind farms, and is seeking a publisher for his novel *Fastback Baracuda*.

Give the Gift of Wigrum

Wigrum

Daniel Canty

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

It's October 1944. During a brief respite from the aerial bombardment of London, Sebastian Wigrum leaves his small flat and disappears into the fog for a walk in the Unreal City. This is our first, and last, encounter with the enigmatic man we come to discover decades later through the more than one hundred everyday objects he has left behind.

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\$14.95 / 200 pp / Fiction / 978-0-88922-778-1



We Have a Winner, Maleficium!

This month Talon celebrates Martine Desjardins, winner of the 2013 Sunburst Award! We also congratulate Fred A. Reed and David Homel, the excellent translators of Desjardins's four novels. The Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic is a juried award celebrating the best in speculative fiction published in Canada the previous calendar year. The award celebrates the best of genre fiction that includes science fiction, fantasy, horror, magic realism, and surrealism.

Maleficium also won the 2010 Prix Jacques Brossard and was a finalist for the 2010 Governor General's Literary Award (French Fiction).

\$14.95 / 160 pp / Fiction / 978-0-88922-680-7

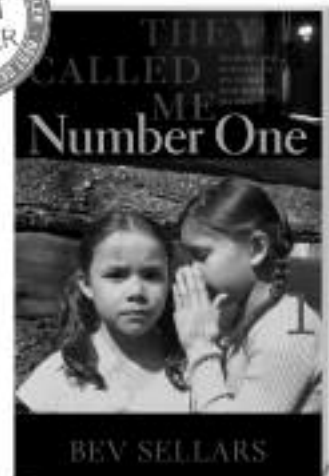


They Called Me Number One

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 recalls hunger, forced labour, and physical beatings, often with a leather strap, and also the demand for conformity in a culturally alien institution where children were confined and denigrated for failure to be White and Roman Catholic.

\$19.95 / 256 pp / Non-fiction: Autobiography / 978-0-88922-741-5



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Finding Father

EUCALYPTUS

Mauricio Segura

Translated by Donald Winkler

Biblioasis

\$16.95, paper, 150pp

978-1-92742-837-5

Mauricio Segura's third novel, *Eucalyptus*, is a briskly paced narrative portrait of a Chilean-Canadian plantation owner seen from the perspective of his son. It draws on the rough outline of the Segura family's experience for material. Like his book's protagonist, Mauricio Segura immigrated with his family to Montreal at a very young age, shortly after Pinochet came to power in Chile.

The story's protagonist, Alberto Ventura, has returned to Temuco in Araucania for the funeral of his father, Roberto. Over several packed days, he tries to understand his father's life story and mysterious death, gradually piecing together a composite narrative from contradictory accounts offered up by those who knew him. Assembling the pieces isn't easy, as Alberto's father's life is structured around a handful of discontinuities. We see him in elliptical vignettes, alternately as a leftist activist in the early seventies, as a political prisoner under Pinochet, later as a Canadian immigrant and family man, soon as a philandering, abusive husband, and, ultimately, as the owner of a Chilean plantation when he returns to his homeland at the end of the dictatorship in 1990.

Similarly, Alberto is challenged to know which characterisation of his father, among the sundry conflicting accounts, is closest to the truth. Was Roberto a "horrible man," "an old-fashioned idealist," "a man of his time," a charitable altruist, "a hopeless egoist," or perhaps all of these at the same time? The revelations in the book might feel divergent, but it's to Segura's credit that the effect mirrors Alberto's own search for his father's identity, wherein "the more he found out, the more he realized that he hardly knew him at all."

The mystery ostensibly driving the story is Roberto's cause of death, suggested by a cryptic and gruesome scar on his torso. Was Roberto murdered by members of the local Mapuche tribe in an act of reprisal? Until the book's end this seems most likely. In recent years, he had begun living with the



chief's daughter, a young veterinarian in training, and this fact combined with tensions in the local community suggests a murder of retribution. But the final truth is more nuanced and much brighter.

More fundamentally, what *Eucalyptus* depicts is a middle-aged son's attempt to come to terms with a heritage of exile and diaspora, a process that his father went through before him. Despite their mutual estrangement, Alberto and Roberto are both immigrants and emigrants, fully at home neither "here" nor "there." Canada is virtually absent from the text, except in several passing references to snow, a Montreal apartment, and Alberto's teaching career.

The Canadianness of father and son in *Eucalyptus* is an added layer of complexity in an already serpentine ancestral identity. To escape persecution, Roberto's ancestors, who were Sephardic Jews, fled from Iberia to Macedonia, and from Macedonia to Chile, over the course of several centuries. Even as Roberto believes that "being an immigrant" means being "a second-class citizen," he is consoled by the prophet Jeremiah's ruling that happiness is possible anywhere, as long as one attends to one's relationship with Yahweh.

In its concluding pages, the book reaches out towards this possibility. The short novel reflects on the vital relation of exile (from one's country, as well as one's past) to such redemptive modes as love, atonement, and belonging. The fulfillment of Alberto's quest to understand his father squares with Segura's strong affirmation of charity and compassion, virtues capable of healing troubled pasts. mrb

Jacob Siefring is a freelance literary critic and copywriter living in Ottawa. His website is bibliomaniac.com.

A Mother's Hope

KUESSIPAN

Naomi Fontaine

Translated by David Homel

Arsenal Pulp Press

\$14.95, paper, 99pp

978-1-55152-517-4

Kuessipan, we are told on the dedication page, means "your move" or "your turn" in the Innu language. Not having read the book yet, we don't know whose turn it is. But we know already that this will be an Innu story, and those who read on are rewarded with an intimate view of a unique community, situated in a geographical and historical place unknown to most of us non-Innu, although both the geography and the history are deeply connected to our own.

This is not a traditional plot-driven novel; its "arc" is rather a tiny segment that trails filaments back into the past and, as it grows along the pages, into the future. Rather than follow a single protagonist along a plotline that leads from A to B, this story accumulates in thin sheets, sometimes only a couple of paragraphs long, that gradually build a picture that surrounds the main figure, a young woman who rarely shows herself as "me" or "I" but who allows us to see her life in its details.

The somewhat abstract structure is probably more familiar to readers of novels in French; it is one of the only ways this book reveals its French origins. The translation by David Homel is graceful and transparent, allowing the narrator's voice to come through with strength and clarity; there is nothing abstract about the language. The narrator describes the physical and the emotional environments with precision and eloquence, her observations and her compassion both mature far beyond her chronological age (Fontaine was 23 when she wrote *Kuessipan*). She describes an old man whose "laughter is broken by smoke." Who hasn't heard that? "The wooden porch is overgrown with dogs and softened by rain." Who hasn't seen one of those?

Fontaine's descriptions of the poverty and dislocation of life in Innu country will not surprise anyone who reads the news, but in contrast to most of those news stories, her layered images of Innu life are full of human depth, including also struggle, pride, joy, and love. It is not a romanticized view, but contextualized, with an intelligence that keeps the story engaging.

In the end, it is a story of strength and of hope, which are intimately entwined. The hope is

for the future, in the sleeping body of our heroine's baby son, and the strength is from the past: "the life she had chosen now, that she had borrowed from her ancestors." She draws power from her sense of herself, amplified by her people's long history, fortified by the life she is making now, in which she is, in her own home, the woman of the house.

So whose turn is it? It is the turn of *Nikuss*, "my son," who will draw his own strength from the



PHOTO: KIZZY ESTEVEZ



land and the past of his people. He has his work cut out for him. He will know "that even the earth can be deformed by human grasping,

the water sullied by contempt for everything that does not bring riches." But a baby is nothing if not hope embodied, and he will "bring comfort," he will "see the beauty of the world," his "laughter will be the echo" of his mother's hopes. He will stand with her "by the shore and the tides."

Like all good stories, Naomi Fontaine's *Kuessipan* ends with a beginning. mrb

Elise Moser's YA novel, *Lily and Taylor*, appeared from Greenwood Books in September.

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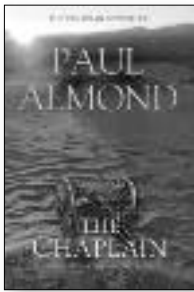
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THE CHAPLAIN
Book Five of
The Alford Saga
Paul Almond
Sulby Hall Publishers
\$19.95, paper, 284pp
978-1483943572



Paul Almond is a lifelong storyteller. He began his career in the 1950s directing and producing television for the CBC, BBC, ABC, and Grenada TV in the UK. He is co-creator of the award-winning documentary *Seven Up!*, has received countless awards, and was appointed to the Order of Canada.

Now, Almond is well on his way to fulfilling a grand vision in *The Alford Saga*. *The Chaplain* is the fifth novel in the series, with three additional novels planned. The saga covers Quebec, Canadian, and world history from 1800 to 2000. It is, quite plausibly, Almond's creative and personal magnum opus. The series explores the arrival of Almond's own family of British settlers in North America and illustrates the author's connection to the land in his native Shigawake, in the Gaspé region of

Quebec. *The Chaplain* is based upon the experiences of Almond's uncle and hero, Reverend John M. Almond.

The novel is set during the South African War, or Boer War. Almond explains that Great Britain had "decided to wage one of its little wars against the Transvaal and Orange Free State: two white, Protestant, Dutch-speaking Republics in southern Africa, who had declared their independence from all European empires." The war is known as the first to employ the use of concentration camps, amongst other horrific procedures. Almond points out that the Royal Canadian Regiment joined this war before these means were used.

As *The Chaplain* book trailer promises, our protagonist dives into an adventure with no rest to spare. We are introduced to Chaplain John "Jack" Alford in Quebec City, where Canadian soldiers from across the country have landed and are readying to depart for South Africa. When the Chaplain discovers that Church of England clergy are not represented on the ship, he volunteers immediately, with permission from the Prime Minister, no less.

This story, set during the time of Canada's first international war initiative, is built upon the deep structure of British imperialism. However, this historical-action-adventure novel is written with sensitivity. With well-constructed, straightforward prose, the story slowly peels away the layers of social relations having to do with nationalism, classism, poverty, and the harsh reality of war. The empathetic and straight-shooting Chaplain is attuned to the needs of his parish and the differences amongst its members. In between bouts of soldier seasickness, enteric fever, bullet wounds, and death, the Chaplain is earnest in honouring his faith and people.

The novel begins with Canadians referring to the Boers as savages whom they are primed to destroy. But as the story continues, dissenting viewpoints about the war emerge: we see soldiers who enlist to avoid certain poverty and witness slight English discrimination against the French. Despite the difficulties our protagonist encounters, Almond tirelessly illustrates a gentlemanly and characteristically Canadian visage for the Chaplain. By the end of novel, the Chaplain, having witnessed, suffered, and questioned the horror and destruction of war, is tending not only to broken and battered Canadian soldiers, but to Boer soldiers as well. There is romance, heartbreak, and love.

The next novels planned in the series will cover World War I, Montreal during the Great Depression, and the development of Canada's cultural industries (including the National Ballet of Canada, the Golden Age of Canadian Television Drama, and the beginnings of the motion picture industry). It is evident that Almond has undertaken this project with gusto, and the upcoming topics in the series reveal the breadth of this vision. mrb

Deanna Radford is a writer living in Montreal.

Beneath the Surface

DESIRE LINES
Stories of Love & Geography
Mary Soderstrom
Oberon Press
\$39.95, cloth, 144pp
978-0-7780-1409-6



There is an inherent risk involved in putting together a collection of short stories. Include stories that are too alike, and readers may feel they're reading the same story over and over. Include stories that are too different, and the collection can seem incoherent when viewed as a whole. A thoughtfully structured collection, Mary Soderstrom's *Desire Lines: Stories of Love & Geography* manages to strike an elegant balance between these two pitfalls.

Desire Lines revolves around a set of themes, notably the desire and geography of the title, yet each story approaches an idea in a different way. Desire lines are defined as the "paths that people take when they want to go somewhere," which "frequently have no relation to the formal layout of roads and sidewalks." The characters taking these paths are fascinating, complex, and refreshingly diverse. Soderstrom employs a wonderful economy of language, so that much is conveyed about the characters in a relatively short space.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first, "Substrata," deals with things lying beneath the surface, both literally and figuratively: a young girl falls into a river, a female engineer goes underground to work in mines and is forced to deal with the sexism underlying her chosen profession, and a young couple must decide their future while leaving a lot unsaid. The second part, "The View from Here," explores the unique viewpoints of several characters coming from different walks of life. The final part, "The Forces of the Earth," deals in extremes: one woman becomes obsessed with chasing volcanoes, as "the desire to get closer to the volcano mounted in her like molten rock in the mountain itself." The characters in each of the final stories are faced with the inevitability of death.

Careful reading reveals subtle links between stories that at first seem unconnected: one story focuses on the granddaughter of a character from an earlier story, and the unnamed archivist of one story turns up as the narrator in the final story. But as a whole, the collection does not feel overly self-conscious, unlike some collections of linked short stories. There are just enough common narrative threads to keep it all tied together, albeit loosely.

A mastery of perspective is also evident. In "Ancient Faults," we see the events through the eyes of the young narrator, Rebecca, who is watching her mother, Dorothy, and does not entirely grasp what we can:

Dorothy does not turn her head for the usual two quick kisses that grown-ups here give each other. Instead she meets his mouth with hers, Rebecca sees, and he puts his arm around her.... They stay like that for longer than Rebecca expects.

The gap between what Rebecca sees and what we interpret adds another layer to the story.

Soderstrom offers sensitive, attentive, and compelling portraits of relationships, including a character who has grown too large to have sex with his wife without crushing her and an ex-priest who takes great pleasure in his much younger new wife. But perhaps the most developed and convincingly portrayed relationship is the friendship between two women, Libby and Gail, explored in the longest story of the collection, "Madame Pele Is Not Amused."

When Libby sends Gail flowers to apologize for getting drunk and vomiting all over Gail's bed and hallway, Libby adds that in the "press of emotion," she forgot about the bag of gifts she'd brought. It is precisely this "press of emotion" that is so beautifully expressed in these stories. The emotional tension makes the release of narrative conflict brought about by skilfully written endings all the more satisfying. mrb

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



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Sticks & Stones

Why does a woman stay with a man who hits her? And what does it take for her to finally choose to leave? This fall, two ambitious novels by Montreal writers tackle those complex questions: *So Much It Hurts*, by Monique Polak, and *Lily and Taylor*, by Elise Moser.

So Much It Hurts, the fourteenth young adult novel by Polak, explores the origins of an abusive relationship. The protagonist is seventeen-year-old high school senior Iris, a middle-class kid from the right side of the tracks.

From the beginning, we learn that Iris is the kind of young woman whom adults feel they don't have to worry about. She is a straight-A student, dates a nice boy, shows up on time for her waitressing shifts, and causes her overworked single mom no headaches.

Enter Mick, a handsome thirty-one-year-old director from Australia who is consulting on the high school's production of *Hamlet*. It's easy to see why he makes Iris' heart skip a beat: where the boys in her class are insecure and fumbling, Mick is confident and smooth. But perhaps the greatest aphrodisiac of all is that Mick, a well-known director, believes that Iris, an aspiring actress currently playing the role of Ophelia, has talent. When Mick turns his intense gaze on Iris, she blossoms with excitement and desire.

So Much It Hurts is told from a first-person perspective and Polak capitalizes on this to show us how Iris – increasingly isolating herself from the people who know her best – normalizes Mick's controlling behaviour and violent outbursts. By the time Mick actually hits her, Iris has laid the groundwork to absolve him of his actions.

Lily and Taylor, Moser's second novel, is a dark and violent thriller that explores a world in which domestic abuse is entrenched and expected by the women affected by it. The book opens in the aftermath of a murder. Taylor's older sister (and her caregiver since their mother's death) has finally been dealt a fatal blow by her long-abusive boyfriend. As a result, seventeen-year-old Taylor and her nephew must now move to another city to live with Taylor's overworked grandmother and her controlling husband. Taylor's boyfriend calls regularly, alternately threatening her with violence and begging for reassurance of her love. Why doesn't she tell him off and hang up the phone? His sweet words (the ones that come between the insults) are the only tenderness



AUTHOR MONIQUE POLAK PHOTO: MONIQUE DYKSTRA

she gets. Besides, Taylor does not know a single man who is not at least somewhat abusive to his partner.

After school lets out for Christmas, Taylor and her new friend and classmate Lily, whose home life is similarly bleak, suddenly find themselves in a situation that grows more desperate by the hour. Ultimately, there is a tipping point in the plot; one that might (we hope desperately) also turn out to be a tipping point for the abused character.

Polak is frank about the inspiration for her novel: a similar relationship she had as a teenager. "It took me a long time to extricate myself from [the relationship]," she says. "I know first hand the feelings of powerlessness, denial, isolation, and shame that I tried to describe in this book. Even now, at fifty-three, and in a happy, stable relationship for nearly twenty years, I still feel a little bit ashamed about having been and having

stayed in an abusive relationship." The most challenging part of writing the book, she says, "was returning to those dark days in order to retrieve details I hoped would bring my story to life."

Moser, too, found the experience of writing her book profoundly affecting. "I did have to take a break during the writing and go lie in bed in the dark for a while to come to terms with the violence the story demanded." This is despite having mostly drawn inspiration for *Lily and Taylor* from stories about other people rather than personal experience. "You just have to read the papers to see it all around you."

Moser says that she didn't set out to handle the topic of domestic violence specifically, "but it is such a pervasive part of our society, and such a common experience for girls and young women, that it seemed natural to make it part of this story." As a culture, she adds, we do not take domestic violence seriously enough. "The devaluing of women and women's feelings that has played a part in several recent spectacular cases of bullying of teenage girls is of a piece with the attitudes that allow boys and men to abuse their partners. Domestic violence is, after all, a kind of bullying, but because it is in the context of a relationship, we somehow think it's okay." To ask why a woman doesn't just leave an



AUTHOR ELISE MOSER

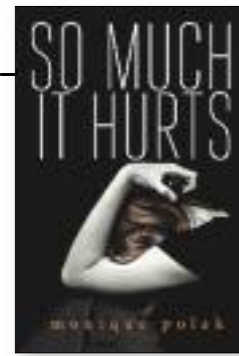
abusive partner is to oversimplify to the point of insult, she adds. "Why don't people leave all the things they don't like: their boring jobs, their crappy apartments, their horrible family holiday gatherings? Think of all the times you've seen a parent hit or verbally abuse a child in public – it's so normal for them they are not even embarrassed."

When asked about the greatest misconception about domestic violence, Polak describes the stereotypical view "that only uneducated, poor women with low self-esteem and emotional dependencies get involved in abusive relationships. I had that stereotype myself," she admits, "which is partly why I didn't see that I was one of those women." Moser said that it is the mistaken belief "that it is not a serious problem, that it only happens to someone different from you, and that it is separate from all the other ways our society disrespects women."

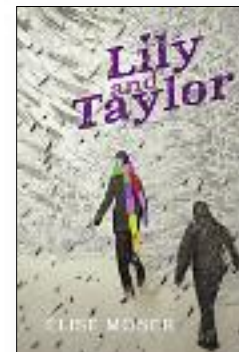
Both Polak and Moser hope that their books will resonate with women in similar situations to their protagonists. "I think it's important to raise awareness about the issue; not just for the young (and older) women in such relationships, but also for others who judge these women," Polak says. "Educated, successful, apparently confident women can also be in abusive relationships. Notice that I avoided using the word 'victim' here," she adds. "The word victim is associated with powerlessness," she explains. "Feeling like a victim can prevent women from developing the strength they will need to get out of these kinds of relationships."

Moser has included a message at the end of her book for readers who may be in abusive relationships, including specific organizations to call. "I didn't write [this novel] to be a handbook" for women in abusive relationships, she says. "But after I finished it, I thought, if a reader is someone living with abuse (as some readers will be, given how widespread it is), and if they come away from the book imagining a change for themselves, I owe it to them to give them at least a possible next step." mrb

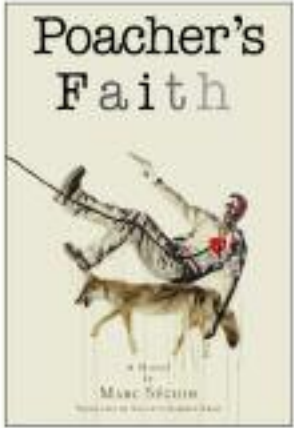
Sarah Lolley's personal essays, travel narratives, and short fiction have been published in Canada and abroad. She is currently completing her first mystery novel.



SO MUCH IT HURTS
Monique Polak
Orca Book Publishers
\$12.95, paper, 288pp
978-1-459801363

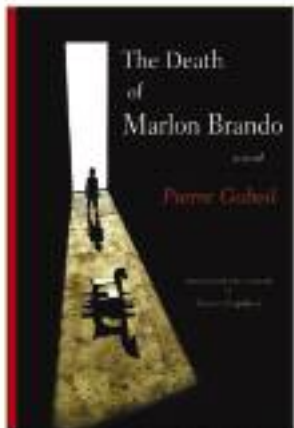


LILY AND TAYLOR
Elise Moser
Groundwood Books
\$9.95, paper, 224pp
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POACHER'S FAITH Marc Séguin
translated by Kathryn Gabinet-Kroo
\$16.95 paper 160 pages

Marc Morris is many things, but he is principally a hunter. Half Mohawk, half Caucasian, he is filled with a deep bitterness fuelled by disillusionment. As he himself freely admits, he kills animals so he won't kill men... This is a fascinating and deeply revealing story, told as Marc traces back through ten years, during which he criss-crossed Canada and the United States "If you're the slightest bit squeamish, or a lifelong vegan, you might find yourself skimming over a few sections of this novel. Then again, you might just end up being morbidly fascinated by how close it takes you to nature. *Poacher's Faith* is a tale to be savoured, and once you've turned the last page you'll want to go right back to the beginning again." *Ambos-Quebec Literature in Translation*



THE DEATH OF MARLON BRANDO
Pierre Gobeil Translated by Steven Urquhart
\$16.95 paper 152 pages

With its undulating language and landscapes, and parallels with the multi-faceted *The Wasteland* and *Apocalypse Now*, *The Death of Marlon Brando* is a touching and disturbing novel that tells the tale of a young boy and his coming of age against a backdrop of abandonment, betrayal and the loss of innocence. It was listed as one of a hundred must-read Quebecois novels, and well-known journalist and literary critic Gilles Marcotte writes that it "reminds you of Steinbeck, Yves Thériault" revealing its complexity of themes like a layered cake. "The genius of this book is to pack so much into [its] pages... Read this book because it should be a classic, read this book because it is a masterpiece." *—Montreal Review of Books*



ZIPPO Mathieu Blais & Joël Cassés
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By Elaine Kalman Naves

Family Ties and Family Spies

The subtitle of Shelagh Plunkett's memoir – *Intrigue and Lies from an Uncommon Childhood* – cuts to the heart of the matter. If every family has its myths and secrets, those of the Plunkett family are particularly absorbing.

In 1974, at the age of thirteen, Plunkett travelled with her parents, older brother, and younger sister to Guyana. Then eight years into its independence from Britain, Guyana was a poor and violent society, divided along racial lines, and careening towards communism. Patrick Plunkett, Shelagh's father, was a civil engineer ostensibly there to study the country's hydroelectric potential. Shelagh, whose world until then encompassed suburban Vancouver where "the most exciting concern was what we were having for dinner," was plunged into a sensuous, tropical world fraught with both delight and danger. Determined at first to hate the place, she tumbled headlong in love with her exotic and precarious new home. When her

family abruptly and secretly left Georgetown – her mother sewing uncut diamonds into the hem of her dress – she was bereft.

Her father's next posting took the family to another troubled region: "a small, unthought-of place" on Timor Island, in Indonesia. A few hundred miles away from Kupang, the hardscrabble town where they lived, Indonesian soldiers were slaughtering East Timorese rebels by the thousands. None of this was understood by the flaxen-haired, blue-eyed daughter of the civil engineer, who was "an exhibition" wherever she went. By this time, alienated and troubled by the dislocations of the past three years, she was living a double life. So was her adored father, who in all proba-

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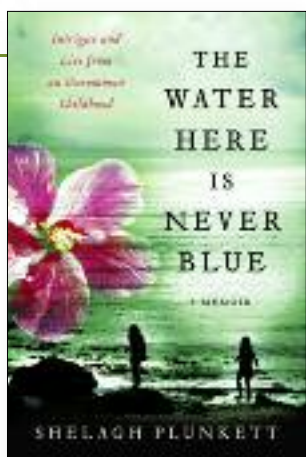
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THE WATER HERE IS NEVER BLUE
 Intrigue and Lies from an Uncommon Childhood
 Shelagh Plunkett
 Viking Canada
 \$30.00, cloth, 295pp
 978-0-670-06699-5

PHOTO: NIAMH MALCOLM



bility was a spy. He died in 1993 at age fifty-eight, leaving much unfinished emotional business and a host of unanswered questions.

The Water Here Is Never Blue is a beautifully written hybrid: by turns coming-of-age story, travelogue, and mystery. Plunkett sheds light on the customs and cultures of two post-colonial societies in crisis, at the same time tapping into the stormy waters of adolescent angst.

A freelance writer and journalist who won the prestigious Canadian Literary Award for Personal Essay in 2007, she moved to Montreal seven years ago "because I always wanted to live here." We spoke a couple of weeks after the publication of *The Water Here Is Never Blue* at Nick's restaurant on Greene Avenue.

Elaine Kalman Naves: Was there a eureka moment when you knew you had to write this book?

Shelagh Plunkett: It started with an essay called "In a Garden," that won the CBC Literary Award. There was a bit of a eureka moment then. I was working as an editor and freelance writer, and I got to the point where I wanted to write in a different kind of voice. And I decided I'd write about an experience I'd had as an adolescent in Guyana. I started it in what I'd call a straight-up voice, the style you'd read in a magazine like *The Walrus*. Then all of a sudden, these interjections of a Guyanese-sounding voice jumped into my head. I submitted it for the award and it won!

continued on page 13

This Little Hamster
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La vita mia

“I remember reading that, for some, having had a happy childhood is almost as painful as having suffered an unhappy one,” muses the narrator of *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore*. “It feels like a persistent ache of yearning, like the grief for a lost love.” The novel draws extensively on writer Connie Guzzo-McParland’s own youth. Using her childhood experiences as a springboard, Guzzo-McParland tells of the changes in a fictional village in the south of Italy in the years after the Second World War and of a family preparing to immigrate to Canada in the 1950s.



Guzzo-McParland returned to Concordia University for a creative writing degree while in her fifties (“I was obviously the older student in the class,” she says with a laugh). For fourteen years she worked on a project that culminated in a six-hundred-page thesis, which was eventually transformed into the book that forms the subject of this review. The considerably trimmed-down novel weighs in at a much more digestible 161 pages, or approximately two paperback pounds.

“Painful but ultimately liberating,” she describes the editorial process.

In *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore* a woman retells the stories of her childhood in Italy before settling in Canada. Caterina describes a sleepy, slow-moving world in which locals eagerly await the arrival of the mailman twice a day, women clean their laundry on concrete washboards by the river, and church functions are at the centre of the social sphere. Men habitually leave their families behind to find work and the children play in simple-minded bliss.

The title and cover design suggest a simple romance novel, with a young woman reclining on a cement partition and a distant landscape that softens to a soothing pastel blur, but the book is more than that: it is a vivid portrait of life in a restless community; a window into an isolated world replete with eccentric characters. These include old Anna, crazed with grief after losing her son in the war; Professor Nucci, a thirty-year-old bachelor living with his spinster sisters, who spends his days walking up and down the streets with a baton; and Don Mario, a man half paralyzed in battle who rarely emerges from his home.

The adults struggle with claustrophobia and the after-effects of the war, but for the children the town of

Mulirena is a far more benevolent place. “It’s like a paradise lost,” Guzzo-McParland describes it. “Sometimes it can be painful to think you can never regain that place. The children in the village were really cherished.” In writing *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore*, Guzzo-McParland aims to capture that loss and to commemorate her youth in Italy.

Her prose often captures the sense of something just out of reach: “The men gorged themselves on the first ripe figs of the season, savouring the juicy red pulp while looking up at the girls with yearning eyes.” Some of the writing is funny: “The two villages were like Siamese twins joined together at the neck but wanting badly to keep their distance from one another. If one village sneezed, the other, jolted by the vibrations, would sneeze back harder.”

At times, however, *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore* feels more like an elaborate mosaic of images and stories than a novel. The tales are laid out in the book one after another, and though the quiet village setting lends itself well to Guzzo-McParland’s anecdotal approach, these are occasionally disconnected. Major and minor events are given similar weight, and many of the vignettes have no overarching narrative function. To wit: a monumental event like a suicide attempt is described in one paragraph, as if an afterthought, while a gypsy girl stealing a book goes on for several pages, in spite of its irrelevance to the plot.

This approach is interesting, and it is certainly intentional, but it comes at a cost. Writer George Saunders once commented that the hardest thing for fiction to do is to create steadily rising action – something missing through much of *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore*.

With little suspense and a kind of absent-mindedness about the flow of stories, this work might have been stronger as a collection of short stories.

Though many are quite mundane, the stories are appreciably different from those of modern life. Many could stand alone, including three that recount the casting process of a church play, the arrival of a new teacher, and a visit to the beach. Caterina is especially taken with the illicit romances that happened in a setting where “women were criticized for so much as speaking to a man who was not a close friend or relative.” She describes how the girls look out from their balconies as suitors linger below and occasionally the men are doused with dirty dishwater thrown over the ledge by a disapproving family member.

Caterina especially loves to follow Lucia and Aurora, “two of the prettiest girls in the village,” and Tina, who is “always cheerful and liked telling jokes.” All three are courted by dashing young men, though Lucia’s tumultuous romance with Totu, which picks up towards the end of the novel, is the only one to hint at anything like a sustained plot. One of the failings of *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore* is that Lucia and Totu are among the few characters to recognizably change over the course of the novel.

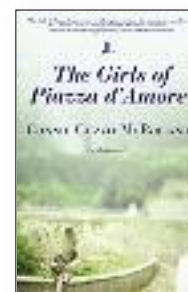
Caterina herself never grows up to experience Calabrian romance firsthand, since, at the time, families in the village were steadily leaving to find work and money elsewhere. “There was just no opportunity,” Guzzo-McParland says. “That was one of the main problems – unless you were a farmer and worked the land, the men had to leave the towns.” Many

Italians were sponsored by family members in Canada, where it was much easier to build a life than in the tremendously expensive cities in the north of Italy. As time goes on Mulirena dwindles from its original population of 1500. “‘Four houses and four cats,’ – that is how we spoke about [Mulirena] after we left,” Caterina explains.

Though earlier iterations of Guzzo-McParland’s novel included stories of life in North America, in *The Girls of Piazza d'Amore* Canada looms over the novel as a vague, unreal place, a foil to the familiarity of life in the village. As her schoolteacher describes the immensity of the country, Caterina explains “the word ‘immensity’ took on the shape and colour of the silent forests of Canada. There was no mention of cities or people, as though Canada were only land and water.”

It’s a respectable debut novel, one that invites the reader into the landscape of Guzzo-McParland’s memories before immigrating to Canada and the experiences of a youth that can never be recovered. In spite of some of its disconnects, hers is a poignant portrait of a simple world fated to change and the idyllic times of childhood that, however remote, none of us can quite manage to leave behind. ■

Sarah Fletcher works as web coordinator at the Canadian Centre for Architecture.



GIRLS OF PIAZZA D'AMORE
Connie Guzzo-McParland
Linda Leith Publishing
\$13.95, paper, 161pp
978-1927535196

Big in Japan



KITARO

Shigeru Mizuki
Drawn & Quarterly
\$26.95, cloth, 396pp
9781770461109

We live in such a hyperconnected world that the notion of a pop culture phenomenon remaining confined to one place is all but obsolete. But there are still a few out there.

Shigeru Mizuki is a living icon in Japan, to the point where an entire street in his birthplace, Sakaiminato, is given over to bronze figures representing characters from his work, and the nearest airport has been renamed in his honour. If you're not Japanese, though, or a serious manga cultist who has learned the language, you'll be forgiven for not having heard of him. The ninety-one-year-old cartoonist's first publication in English came just two years ago, when Drawn & Quarterly brought out a translation of his remarkable World War II memoir, *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths*.

Compelling as *Onward* is, it represents a side-trip from the author's career-long obsession: *yokais*. This panoply of mythical "spirit monsters" is so deeply entrenched in Japan's collective psyche that the word has no direct translation; Matt Alt, in his illuminating introduction, gives it a good try when he calls them "the things that go bump in Japan's night." A serious *yokai* scholar from an early age, Mizuki tapped into the popular mood when he came up with the character of Kitaro, a benevolent 350-year-old *yokai* who takes the earthly form of a young boy with jet-powered sandals, hair that doubles as antennae for the channelling of the spirit world, a magical protective vest woven from the hairs of his ancestors, and – last but not least – an empty eye socket often occupied by his father in the form of an anthropomorphic eye. In stories ranging from a few pages long to more than a hundred, the graveyard-frequenting boy goes about tending to everyone from illness-stricken individuals to entire cities – saving them from the more malevolent of his *yokai* brethren, and frequently from their own human folly.

For manga newbies, indeed for anyone not accustomed to a lot of fantasy in their reading, this may all sound like at least one contrivance too many, but Mizuki renders his parallel world with such complete assurance that all such reservations quickly fall away. It helps that his settings are very much those of a recognizable Japan, drawn with a stylized realism that counterbalances the fantastic *yokai* goings-on perfectly. Among many other things, this book constitutes a tour of Japanese cultural touchstones. One of those is baseball, and Mizuki gives the sport its due in "Monster Night Game," in which a player discovers a magic bat and soon has to choose between home-run omnipotence and his soul.

Elsewhere, "Ghost Train" follows a pair of Tokyo hipsters as they get definitively disabused of their smug disbelief in monsters; "The Great Yokai War" functions as a (possibly ironic) protest against the encroachment of western pop monsters into postwar Japan. We're reminded that these stories, for all their otherworldly timelessness, date from 1967 through 1969, and that the spirit of protest sweeping the western world at that time had very much reached Japan and had a voice in Mizuki and Kitaro; the stories' scepticism about violence as a problem-solver is all the more powerful coming from an artist who lost an arm as a soldier.

A final note: this book honours traditional Japanese practice in being designed to be read from right to left, both on the page and within individual panels. I mention this only because I still occasionally meet people reluctant to take on the reading of manga because they think the whole "backwards" thing will trip them up. Trust me, within three pages or so it feels perfectly natural. Besides, what better way of encountering a new world than by reading in a new way? mrb

Ian McGillis is the chief book reviewer of *The Gazette* and author of the novel *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry*.



Plunkett (from page 11)

EKN: It's an unusual voice, not just the slipping into the dialect, which is amazing, but also the voice of the "Shelagh" character – you.

SP: I wanted to write the main part of the book in the voice of a girl with the limited knowledge and understanding I had at the time. But the Prologue and Epilogue are in a different, grown-up voice that includes knowledge of the political situation that I didn't have back then. One of the biggest challenges was to try to keep that adult combination of censorship and too much information from the main part of the book. At the same time, I hope that the voice evolves a bit. I hope that's noticeable.

EKN: I did notice. In Timor, I think the character acts...

SP: [laughing] More troublesome!

EKN: [laughing] More out in the world. The book is a really interesting blend of the personal and the political. You show what it's like to live in a state of adventure and excitement, but yet to not understand what's going on. It makes the reader feel on edge, waiting for something ominous. Was that deliberate?

SP: I didn't set out to consciously create that sort of atmosphere, but it's what we were living with. The more I went into the past the more I remembered how it felt, and the points of discomfort I felt. I guess that infused the writing. Moments like when I was sitting with my

[Indo-Guyanese] friend on the school steps, and she was telling me about her reality, how uncertain her future was going to be in Guyana, and how frightened she was. I was a fourteen-year-old muddling-along kid from the suburbs of Vancouver and I suddenly realized her life was very different from mine.

EKN: Talk about the research process for this book.

SP: At the beginning I read everything I could get my hands on about what Guyana was like and what Indonesia was like when we were there. I read lots about St. Rose's, the [all-girls private] school I went where I learned so much. And the Internet is absolutely brilliant! I found a website where people from all over the world have posted recordings of birds. I could listen to what birds in Guyana or in Timor sound like. That really helped to immerse me. Also my father had shot thousands of slides and I watched and archived those. I was sitting in my office with the curtains drawn and watching carousel after carousel. And then my mother came to visit and she went over them with me and it trig-

gered a lot of memories for her. I spoke a lot with her and my sister and brother. I ate Guyanese and Indonesian food. I listened to Guyanese music.

EKN: And the other part – the accessing of emotions?

SP: I don't know how to explain accessing the emotions. Some days it worked, some days it didn't. It was hard to predict, almost like achieving a self-hypnotic state, except that makes it sound too passive. It's as if you have to challenge yourself. It's a funny process.

EKN: What's the impact of the reality of family secrets, family lies, on a growing, perceptive, and introspective child/young woman? Are those secrets and lies what led to your subsequent rebellion or was it the lack of stability in your life?

SP: [slowly] In a way. Also, my father was away a lot. I misbehaved most when Dad was away, because he and I were very close. When he was away, I put my mother through a lot.

EKN: You don't say for sure in the book that he was spy. But I believe you pretty much think he was. Can you speculate about his motivation? You

make the point in the book that, when you came back from Indonesia, you were living in a much nicer home than when you had left. And you also say that he

held very conservative political views.

SP: Very conservative. In the mid-1970s, Canada was putting a lot of money – or considering doing so – into these countries. And he was an engineer doing his job. I just think they might've said to him, "Just keep an eye on things, take pictures, send a report."

EKN: Who do you think "they" were?

SP: The Canadian government! These were mostly Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) projects.

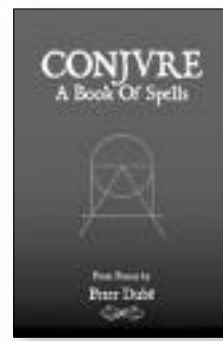
EKN: Would he have seen it as protecting Canadian interests?

SP: Yes. With his politics he would've felt that you don't just hand out money to struggling countries because of philanthropy. He would have felt it was right to poke around. mrb

Elaine Kalman Naves's new book, *Portrait of a Scandal*, recounts the true story of a notorious abortion trial in Montreal during the era of Confederation. It is forthcoming from Véhicule Press later this fall. Visit her website at elainekalmannaves.com.

poetry

The Conceptual Muse



HOOKING

Mary Dalton
Signal Editions
\$18.00, 95pp
978-1-55065-351-9

CONJURE

A Book of Spells
Peter Dubé
Rebel Satori Press
\$13.99, 88pp
978-1-60864-076-8

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Jon Paul Fiorentino
Couch House Books
\$17.95, 88pp
978-1552452806

THE GREY TOTE

Deena Kara Shaffer
Signal Editions
\$16.00, 63pp
978-1-55065-352-6

The muse in our time has taken a conceptual turn. Etymologically, a poet is a “maker,” and many writers are constructing poems from other texts or finding formulas to generate them. Mary Dalton’s extraordinary book uses the traditional rug-making craft of her native Newfoundland as a basic metaphor. Hooked rugs were assembled from strips of cloth, an activity of finding and then constructing a rich mosaic, a cottage industry bricolage.

She works in the ancient tradition of the cento (the Latin term referred to a patchwork cloak), a composition made up of passages from other authors. Dalton’s scrap bags are notebooks containing thousands of lines from other poets, an extraordinary range of them. (William Burroughs kept vast files of texts from which he created his celebrated cut-outs.) Her procedure is to make a poem from, say, the third line of many poems, or the fifth. Twenty pages of her ninety-five-page book are devoted to a list of the sources.

Dalton began her project by thinking about mash-ups in contemporary music. Like any good mash-up, her poems are seamless creations. The works

cohere in subtle ways, with their titles usually pointing toward the theme or atmosphere being created. Most of the poems are in stanzas, which leads the mind to expect lyrical tidiness, an expectation usually defeated by the free progression of the poem. We get a series of ghazal-like surprises and our understanding of coherence is expanded. Dalton has cited Christian Bök’s *Eunoia*, a work of compulsive compilation, as an inspiration. But nothing in *Eunoia* sounds like this, the conclusion of “Press”: “The jukebox music takes you back; / braver than lipstick, / its threads the colour of cantaloupe and cherry.” The sources are the seventh lines of Gerald Mangan’s “Glasgow 1956,” Alison Fell’s “Pushing Forty,” and Michael Longley’s “An Amish Rug.” The three lines convey nostalgia through complex synesthetic imagery: the music is compared to threads, a visual image, and the threads are compared to lipstick, which is visual and tactile and given colours that are also flavours. Perhaps odour is implied too. We are in the world of juvenile or tawdry romance evoked by the obsolescent jukebox image, one quite removed from the Amish rug in Longley’s original. The use of a poem about rugs in the final line is a clever reminder that we are in the midst of a book founded on a rug metaphor.

Dalton has said in an interview that a cento is a kind of anthology. A reader could spend years going through her poems and their sources. The poems she uses are almost entirely modern, but a poet using her methods could choose poems from an earlier period and the result would be a different range of diction. P.K. Page added the *glosa* to our repertory of forms. The delights of *Hooking* may be a new precedent.

The cover of Jon Paul Fiorentino’s *Needs Improvement* is a hilarious visual poem. It simulates a traditional report card “To The Parents Of: Jon

Paul Fiorentino,” which contains some damning marks: 70 in English, 54 in Imagery, 49 in Responsibility, to select a few. A whole section of this diverse collection is called “Needs Improvement: Pedagogical Interventions.” It contains “The Report Cards of Leslie Mackie,” a student whose progressive destruction by his teachers, parents, and peers is traced in the cards, with their progressively more savage tone. The purpose of the section, the author says in his notes, is to “critique the culture of homophobia, transphobia and bullying in early childhood education.”

The section includes comic presentations of postmodern theory through labeled diagrams of machines, which is about as conceptual as poetry can get. The ideological state apparatus theory of Louis Althusser takes the form of a dishwasher, for example, and the Freudian process of condensation and displacement is represented by a nozzle with controls. There is no diagram for Derrida’s “free play of the signifier,” but the whole book represents that principle. The satire on blurbs is especially amusing: the genre is often glib or dishonest, although Nicole Brossard’s praise on the back cover of *Needs Improvement* is accurate.

The conceptual muse is at work in this book: Fiorentino turns a text by the fearsome critic Judith Butler into a set of poems about “The Winnipeg Cold Storage Company” by manipulating words from her *Excitable Speech*; other poems rework texts by Oscar Wilde, Roland Barthes, Robert Kroetsch, and William Hazlitt. Confessional poetry is sent up by “Skulk Hour,” a parody of “Skunk Hour,” the poem by Robert Lowell that initiated the movement.

In the final part of the book, Fiorentino presents eight villanelles, as traditional a form as it gets. Three of them use the mottoes of Canadian cities as their refrains, a bit of sampling by our DJ. The mottoes are

mocked in two of the poems, but in the final villanelle, “Salter Street Strike,” they are taken seriously. Both are associated with his home city, Winnipeg: “People before profit” and “One with the strength of many.” He associates these modestly utopian slogans with one of his mentors, bpNichol, whose open-heartedness is celebrated in the poem. The book ends, as many books do, with modest hope.

Deena Kara Shaffer’s book is concise and focused on one theme: grief, mainly for her parents, who died of cancer in quick succession. The grey tote of the title is a bag used to pack necessities for a stay in the hospital. Such a bag (maybe the same one), she tells us, was used by the speaker’s father, mother, and grandfather. And the theme of mortality is extended one more generation by “The Grey Tote: / Me,” in which she describes the grey tote sitting in a closet, concealed by “anything that can be put in front,” ready for use for trips and projects, or, by implication, for a trip to the hospital. It’s as much a memento mori as the traditional skull on a desk.

In the opening section, she approaches her losses gradually: the first few poems deal with perils in the woods and at the edge of a waterfall. Then the subject of cancer arises, with poems about cancer patients contemplating or committing suicide. “Into That Morphine” (rather than “Into That Good Night”) describes an assisted death. She ends the section with poems about her parents, Mum, Dad, Grandad.

The second section contains the graphic poems about the illnesses of her parents. She avoids sentimentality rather scrupulously, even satirizing her mother’s optimism: “her cancer wasn’t catchable, / but boy, her belief in wellness was.” The administration of dying is outlined in “Ward Calls”: the process begins with apologies for the diagnosis, presumably by a doctor, progresses to the

visit by the oncologist “armed / with a social worker,” and ends with Haldol – and as a last minute touch, “a priest to sing you there.”

In the concluding section, she deals with the aftermath of death: the process of grieving, the anxiety about one’s own mortality. Shaffer’s poems are concise, which helps maintain the tone of tough, clear-eyed attention to the realities of dying, but the music is harsh, relying on parallelism and alliteration more than imagery and rhythm. Often the lines are brief to the point of claustrophobia. More generosity of style would intensify the feeling without necessarily leading to sopiness. However, looking steadily at life and death is a form of generosity. The effect of this book is cathartic.

Peter Dubé’s poems are a curiosity. Poets are drawn to the occult – there was Yeats and his lunar cycles and Ted Hughes with his Ouija board – and Dubé reads grimoires: books of spells, instructions for creating magical effects. In *Conjure*, the incantatory form lends itself to prose poetry. The rhetorical pattern is instruction, a command given either in the opening line or shortly after: “Close the doors,” “Set the table just for two.” Forty-four poems in the imperative mood become monotonous. The instructions are mostly for rather bland effects: to cause a desired person to seek you out or to know a distant happening. Even the spell to make your voice heard in other worlds has no dramatic event. This is very well-mannered magic. Dubé practices “surrealist automatism,” and we would expect a genuine road to the unconscious in the manner of André Breton or Philippe Soupault. But these poems are meticulous and neatly worked out. This is not black or white magic but grey. mb

Bert Almon was inducted into the City of Edmonton Cultural Hall of Fame in 2013.

non-fiction

So Many Possible Elsewheres

THE EDGE OF THE PRECIPICE

Why Read in the Digital Age?

Edited by Paul Socken

McGill-Queen's University Press

\$34.95, cloth, 232pp

9780773541788

In his opening paragraph, Mark Kingwell acknowledges the problem inherent in his contribution to *The Edge of the Precipice: Why Read in the Digital Age?*, a new essay collection edited by Paul Socken. Kingwell is – in concert with Socken, a professor emeritus at Waterloo University – preaching to the choir.

As for the rest of the congregation, they're clearly a lost cause. If you're not a dedicated reader of serious literature, as bestselling author Kingwell points out in "Language Speaks Us: Sophie's Tree and the Paradox of Self," "then you are probably not reading this and words are at a loss. There may be ways to reach you, the non-reader, but this is not one of them."

Which is for the best since any so-called non-readers, who happen to pick up *The Edge of the Precipice*, will probably feel a little insulted. I'm a reader and often I felt insulted on their behalf.

The snobby mood is set in essays like Leonard Rosmarin's unapologetically imperious "How Molière and Co. Helped Me Get My Students Hooked on Literature." Rosmarin, a professor emeritus of French literature, recounts how he came out of retirement recently to berate his undergraduate students for wasting their time on rockers, rappers, and the Internet. His sole purpose seems to be to make his students feel stupid. "I will not tolerate overgrown bed-wetters in my classroom," he says, by way of introduction.

Fortunately, it's the shifting moods, even the split personalities, of *The Edge of the Precipice* – from despair to arrogance to hopefulness back to despair – that make reading this collection an interesting, if, occasionally, infuriating experience. In "A World without Books?," librarian Vincent

Giroud wears his ambivalence on his sleeve. He's well aware that old-fashioned books are becoming a thing of the past; at the same time, he defiantly renounces the digital future:

Holding a book in my hand or on my lap and turning its pages is a pleasure I am not prepared to give up, much in the same way as I would not be tempted to ingest my food in the form of tablets.... When the time comes to be fed through a tube, I will be ready to leave this world, and I am tempted to say the same about the world of books.

It's fortunate, too, that not everyone in *The Edge of the Precipice* is ready to jump off the cliff – just yet. In "Solitary Reading in an Age of Compulsory Sharing," Drew Nelles, former editor-in-chief of *Maisonneuve* magazine, eloquently defends the unique brand of alone time that reading allows. Along the way, he takes some well-deserved shots at book clubs and ubiquitous review websites like Goodreads.

Tones also shift in *The Edge of the Precipice* and while Socken, a long-

time academic, seems predisposed to include the perspectives of his fellow PhDs, he thankfully makes sure his colleagues steer clear of jargon and convoluted literary theorizing.

Even so, the best essays in the collection tend, not surprisingly, to be less scholarly and more personal. In "The End of Reading," veteran literary critic Alberto Manguel recalls how, during a two-week stay in hospital, he found comfort in the companionship of one great book:

I am deeply grateful to my *Don Quixote*... the twin volumes kept vigil with me.... They continued a conversation begun ages ago, when I was someone else, as if they were indifferent to time, as if taking for granted that this moment too would pass.

In "A Very Good Chance of Getting Somewhere Else," Montreal poet Katia Grubisic champions "the chaos of discovery" that's uniquely available in print on paper. It's the kind of revelation that makes the old-fashioned act of reading still seem like a perfected and indispensable technology. Of the three-dimensional presence of books in libraries and bookstores, in her home and her life, Grubisic writes: "The physical presence of so many possibilities is irreplaceable.... There are so many possible elsewheres." **mrb**

Joel Yanofsky is the author of *Bad Animals: A Father's Accidental Education in Autism*.



Poets of Governments Past

CONVERSATIONS WITH A DEAD MAN

The Legacy of Duncan

Campbell Scott

Mark Abley

Douglas & McIntyre

\$32.95, cloth, 256pp

978-1-55365-609-8

Insight is 20/20. Or is it, really? Do we ever truly get a clear picture, or are all views inherently variable, endlessly evolving in accordance with the viewer's vantage point? If history is a trustworthy example, much of what we hold true today will be found, at very best, naïve by future generations. At worst, our visions will be deemed offensive, oppressive, or even downright detestable.

Canadian poet and prose writer Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), the primary focal point of Mark Abley's new biographical book, exemplifies the

latter. While highly revered during his lifetime – he was a former president of the Royal Society of Canada, a founder of the Dominion Drama Festival, and an Honorary Doctorate recipient from Queen's University and the University of

Toronto – Scott has since slipped down the slope from fame into infamy. With certain historians now linking him to the cultural genocide of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, his posthumous name has suffered severely.

What caused Scott's vertiginous fall from grace? Certainly not his art. "As a poet, Scott could rise to empathy," Abley recalls, at a time when intolerance prevailed. The answer is surprisingly mundane: the writer's downfall was his day job.

Scott worked tirelessly for fifty-two years as a civil servant for the federal government, giving his days to the department of Indian Affairs at a time when, sadly, the government's



PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY

views on "Indians" were clouded with colonialism. Starting out as a copy clerk, he worked his way up to deputy minister. Although he gained respect throughout his career, he descended into a demonic doghouse as subsequent generations clued into the consequences of his department's aim: to assimilate First Nations peoples into mainstream Canadian culture.

Today, Canada's former hero is compared to the likes of Hitler – a charge that would cause even the deadest of dead men to stir in their graves – which is exactly what happens in Abley's compelling work of creative non-fiction. Unable to rest in peace, the ghost of Dun-

can Campbell Scott visits the Montreal author in his home, requesting help to clear his name. Abley engages him in a heated imaginary debate, seeking explanations for the seemingly irreconcilable sides of his legacy. "How could a poet set out to destroy another culture?" challenges Abley, himself a poet.

Abley has found a creative way to deliver a haunting history lesson, deftly digging up facts and conjuring collective memories that aren't easy to digest, yet perhaps necessary to face at this particular juncture in time. His probing look into the residential school system that Scott oversaw, for instance, is profoundly unsettling, recalling how, in the name of "civilization," Aboriginal children were segregated from their families and communities and sent to schools where a grotesque array of abuse was reported, and the death toll from disease was heartbreakingly high.

Yet one can't help but keep turning the pages, wanting desperately, like Abley, to gain clarity on Scott's actions. Commandably, Abley has addressed a highly charged question in a

balanced, compassionate manner. By considering Scott's plausible role as a scapegoat and comparing him to his contemporaries, he contextualizes the civil servant's vision, yet never condones it, maintaining a critical eye throughout. All this he does with utmost regard for Canada's First Nations, providing well-researched background material that expands perspective on current uprisings, such as Idle No More.

The book may also inspire broader questions on the overall future of multiculturalism. "The Indian shall become one with his neighbour in his speech, life and habits, thus conforming to that world-wide tendency towards universal standardization," wrote Scott in 1919 while in charge of Indian Affairs. In our increasingly westernized world, some will find these predictive words chilling, and surely wonder how today's views are shaping up from the ledges of tomorrow's lookouts. **mrb**

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

Bound to Our Past

CANADA'S FORGOTTEN SLAVES

Two Hundred Years of Bondage

Marcel Trudel

Translated by George Tombs

Véhicule Press

\$27.95, paper, 323pp

978-1550653274



During much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the phenomenon of slavery in New France was virtually absent from history books. François-Xavier Garneau, the most influential French-Canadian historian of the nineteenth century, *did* briefly address its existence, but he falsely implied that the British bore the brunt of the responsibility for slavery in Canada and that the Catholic Church and French government had consistently opposed the institution.

Garneau's views on slavery were challenged by the historian Marcel Trudel in his classic 1960 work,

L'Esclavage au Canada français. The book is being released for the first time in English under the title *Canada's Forgotten Slaves* (the excellent translation by George Tombs is based on an updated French edition of the original work.)

The result of meticulous archival research, *Canada's Forgotten Slaves* demonstrates that Europeans held slaves in the area now covered by Quebec from at least as early as 1629. Slavery became increasingly common starting in the late 1600s and endured for about a half century after the 1760 Conquest. The exact date of its end remains obscure, but the institution gradually sputtered out in the early 1800s as a result of the anti-slavery movement.

Before the 1790s, slavery raised few moral concerns on the part of either French or English Canadians. Slave owners included senior government and Church officials, merchants, voyageurs, butchers, bakers, tavern keepers, local priests, and nuns. The majority of slave owners were of French rather than of British origin.

Even after the Conquest, slaves were somewhat more likely to be owned by French speakers.

Slavery in this part of the world was less widespread than in much of the Americas (Trudel was able to identify the existence of about 4,200 slaves in New France and British-colonized Quebec). Unlike in the American South, slavery here was largely an urban phenomenon. It never played a central role in the economy and seems to have been practiced mainly as a form of conspicuous consumption on the part of slave owners. Only a handful of individuals are recorded as possessing more than twenty slaves, and no one owned over fifty. About two-thirds of the slaves in Canada were Amerindian, the rest being black.

Even by the standards of the time, slaves in Canada had brief life expectancies: on average, they died shortly before their twentieth birthdays. This shocking statistic is explained in part by the large percentage of Amerindian slaves who often fell prey to European diseases within a few years of their captivity. In other respects, the institution of slavery in Canada seems to have been somewhat less harsh than elsewhere on the conti-

ment. For example, slaves in New France had many of the rights of free persons when brought before the courts, and slaves convicted of crimes do not appear to have been punished more severely than non-slaves.

Marcel Trudel died in 2011 at the age of ninety-three after publishing over forty books. One of Quebec's foremost historians, he annoyed some of his peers by refusing to write in the service of nationalist or romantic agendas. Trudel regarded slavery as a great evil, but in exploring its history in this part of the world, he presented Quebec in neither a flattering nor an excessively dim light.

Canada's Forgotten Slaves is a scholarly and even-handed work, yet it is surprisingly readable and contains many memorable anecdotes. To this day, few people know anything about the history of slavery in Canada beyond the existence of the Underground Railroad. Trudel's book is an important corrective to this widespread ignorance and its English translation is long overdue. mrb

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

"Merci, Sheila!"

IN TRANSLATION

Honouring Sheila Fischman

Edited by Sherry Simon

McGill-Queen's University Press

\$29.95, paper, 222pp

978-0-7735-4196-2

In her introduction to this new book of essays on Canadian literary translator Sheila Fischman, editor Sherry Simon equates translation to cultural tourism. Writing about Alastair Reid's translations of Borges and Neruda, Simon claims that, as the two poets "had been his guides to Latin America, he was their companion in the English-speaking world." This equation gives rise immediately to a host of fallacies – whether there is such an entity as the English-speaking world, for instance, whether Latin America is knowable through poetry, whether Borges' guides in the English-speaking world mightn't have been his Anglophile (and Anglo-descended) parents, or Twain, or Old English epics, or Oscar Wilde...

In the case of Sheila Fischman, however, the national alignment is somewhat more apt. In his contribution to *In Translation: Honouring Sheila Fischman*, former House of Anansi Press editor-in-chief James Polk confirms Fischman as a guide to the other literary solitude: "Sheila has produced by now a unique Quebec literary saga



for us anglophones. ... She recreates the French version, yes, but also transforms it into our version." For English-

Canadian readers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Fischman has been the introduction to French-language Quebec literature.

I'm not sure the project of national identity is quite so binary anymore. *Nous* and *vous* are especially fraught at the moment, as much as in the seventies, but such divisions seem increasingly disingenuous, revealing political machinations more than they reflect actual experience.

Fischman herself is aware of the shift and speaks to Simon of the growing bilingualism and cultural awareness in publishing (the interviews with Fischman included in *In Translation*, one of them previously unpublished, provide an insightful counterpoint). While the "children of Trudeau" to whom Fischman refers were shaped by

an array of forces, the evolution of translation in Canada hinged largely on a single figure. Fischman is a master of her craft, with about 150 publications and a slew of prizes to her name, but it should not be forgotten that, as well as establishing cultural signposts in an era when they were few, she was also a force on the political end of the profession.

Roch Carrier, in his essay "Merci, Sheila!" (translated by Donald Winkler), waxes nostalgic, recalling artsy gatherings in the Townships in the late sixties: "The conversations took place in English, in French, in a combination of languages. ... It was a time of unmistakable conviction." Fischman has been among the more convincing proponents of literary translation, launching careers, fighting for recognition while maintaining a generous artistic transparency, paving the way. Fischman, Carrier asserts, "was, and remains, an extremely powerful literary agent." All along, she has worked relentlessly. There are no corner offices in literary translation.

A well-deserved Festschrift, the book is also a trove of Canadian publishing history – *In Translation* invites giving in to nerding out, from CanLit (CanTrans?) gossip to expansive discussions of tiny semantic variances. *In Translation* offers contextual overviews, abstract musings on the art in general, and ardent testimonials to Fischman's work in particular, by writers, transla-

tors, and lit-and-language types including Graham Fraser, Patricia Godbout, D.G. Jones, and Gaétan Soucy. Some structural or editorial decisions are a bit puzzling, but even the less explicitly pertinent pieces are good reads, and the less-good reads are pertinent.

Sheila Fischman has made it her work to transpose, to use Soucy's word, as from one musical key to another. *In Translation* movingly catalogues the overwhelming gratitude and admiration of colleagues and friends, and stands as a testament to the personal and professional magnanimity that has characterized a good, long career. mrb

Katia Grubisic is a writer, editor, and translator.

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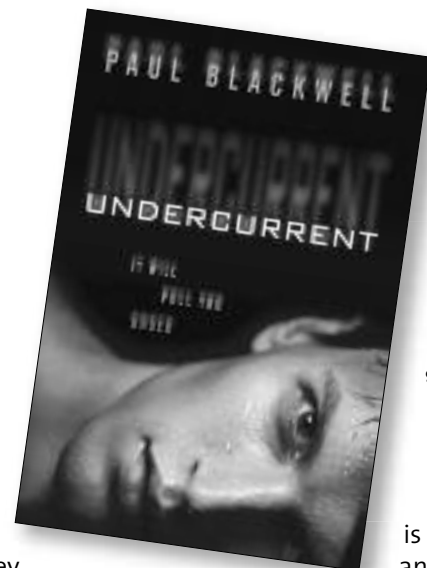
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young readers

Time May Change Me

P.J. Bracegirdle, a.k.a. Paul Blackwell, is a high priest of the creeps. His talents for scaring the pants off children are well displayed in the picture book market with *The Dead Family Diaz*, for 8–12 year-old readers, with *The Joy of Spooking Trilogy*, and now with his latest Young Adult release, *Undercurrent*.



UNDERCURRENT
Paul Blackwell
Doubleday Books
\$14.95, paper, 320pp
978-0062123503

Blackwell wastes no time and cuts straight to the weirdness. In the prologue we are given the central image of the novel, a young man, lying on his back as though in a coffin, going over a massive roaring waterfall. On page one, first-person narrator Callum awakens in darkness, unable to speak, move, or see. On page six he feels the sharp jab of a needle in his arm and hears a woman whisper in his ear, “I hope you never wake up.” On page ten his best friend tries to suffocate him with a hospital pillow.

The world Callum eventually wakes up in is familiar in some ways, but horrifyingly different in others. His brother Cole, a cocky jock in Callum’s memory, is now paralyzed and dependent on a machine to keep him alive. The town of Crystal Falls has gone from being a natural attraction to looking like a run-down one-industry town with a toxic river running through it. Perhaps scariest of all, Callum himself has transformed, from a cute, earnest, and occasionally feisty sixteen-year-old to Crystal Falls’ resident bad-boy jerk.

Undercurrent follows Callum’s quest to untangle the world he left behind from the world he finds himself in.

Along the way, he gets betrayed, abandoned, threatened, and beaten up. And there are plenty of bad guys – Ross the

sexual predator, Ivy the duplicitous golden girl, the mysterious Mr. Schroeder. And just when you think our narrator is about to succumb, there’s a nice girl named Willow who tries to help him out.

Callum’s struggle to understand his new reality and find a way back to his own world is central to this novel, so it is disappointing when Blackwell lets this storyline falter at the end. While a range of reasons for Callum’s inadvertent trip are offered – quantum mechanics, a metal cylinder with a blinking red light, a portal near the falls – there is never any convincing elucidation of how Callum ended up in hell. Perhaps this was done to leave room for a sequel, but a novel with this many delightfully unsettling twists and turns and thrills and chills deserves an equally satisfactory ending.

PICTURE ME

Lori Weber
Lorimer
\$19.95, cloth, 168pp
978-1459405097



incessant images that tell them exactly how they should look and how they should be.

The three narrators of Lori Weber’s new novel *Picture Me*, are as smart, sassy, and insightful as thirteen-year-olds can be. Weber’s narrators – Krista, Tessa, and Chelsea – are capable of great kindness and horrifying cruelty. They are also children, too young to have any power over what is being done to them. But thirteen-year-old girls can do great things and Weber sincerely wants to shine a bright light on the potential and passion of girls at this seminal moment in their development.

From the very first chapter, the three young narrators draw us in, but as the book progresses they become more static and predictable. Krista, Tessa, and Chelsea enact the well-worn “female” roles of martyr, mother, and whore. Krista is killing herself with diet pills. Tessa is saving Krista, protecting her little sister, helping her mother, and befriending the school misfits. Chelsea

is torturing the weak and being used by the more powerful.

In the section where Krista describes, in third person, what it feels like to be the fat girl at school, the book sings. But moments like this are undermined by the use of language that doesn’t fit the character. Would thirteen-year-old Tessa really say, “I felt bile rising in my throat”? Would Krista say, “I dreaded being chosen”?

Weber has written a novel set in the present with references to bombs in Afghanistan and Lindsay Lohan’s latest antics. But when Chelsea takes an unflattering photo of Krista and then as her act of cruelty puts it up at school, we feel like we are back in an episode of *Degrassi* circa 1980. In the age of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, bullying has achieved a much more despicable level of sophistication.

Lori Weber’s intentions are admirable. Her challenge now is to convincingly build characters that reflect and inspire the complex realities of girls living in our world today. mrb

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

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Preface by Sarah Saule,
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By Andrea Belcham

How the Cookie Crumbles: The Economics of Food

THE
MILE END
CAFÉ



Chilly mornings with high blue skies, golden afternoons with leaves tumbling into the wind – autumn has come to Southern Quebec, and, with it, an awakening need to prepare for the ice and snow to come. Against this annual backdrop of farmers' markets teeming with the bounties of the harvest, local U-pick orchards opening their gates for apple lovers, and community Oktoberfest celebrations promising artisanal beer and sausages, we readily turn our thoughts towards local foods. It's now that the possibilities and abundance are most tantalizing. Like many people, I take stock of future tastes and prepare provisions for the months ahead: I pickle vegetables, prepare apple and pear butters and sauces, and dry the remaining herbs in my garden for cooking and tea brewing. Yet also like others, I know that my family won't have to rely on only these foods to see them through the winter. Which is why more purist local food experiments intrigue me. I subscribe to a year-round organic produce basket program; I buy locally raised meat, eggs, and dairy; I prepare from scratch and avoid convenience foods as much as I can; I seek out ways to purchase directly from growers and producers wherever possible. But I know I could do more to improve my food security (i.e., the availability of food and my access to it) and contribute toward environmental sustainability. I feel guilty that I could be doing more, but I can't find the time to do it. According to Michael Mikulak, I'm not the only one.

As he relays in the third part of his book *The Politics of the Pantry*, Mikulak himself once delved into a year-long commitment to eating only foods local to his home in Hamilton, Ontario. He made goose sausage, nurtured a sourdough mother, grew vegetables in cold frames well past when many of us have put our gardens to bed for the year, laboured on a Community Supported Agriculture

Small acts collectively yield change; it is the lack of will that impedes more than anything.

farm in exchange for a share in the produce, foraged for edible fungi, and preserved and pickled in such amounts that his very skin was probably infused with flavour. Now a career academic with two children and less time, he no longer eats so exclusively. He buys ethically to supplement that which he continues to grow in his garden, even while recognizing that “for those of us writing, reading, and eating from privileged positions, it can be difficult to reconcile the luxury consumption of artisanal, organic products with a politics of equal distribution and climate change.”

The purpose of Mikulak's book is not so much to retell his struggles and triumphs with his food experiments – indeed, this personal narrative is but a small part of a text more concerned with critique – as to consider strategies for pushing against the dominance of economics to frame and explain food security and, by extension, the environmental crisis. It's all too easy, he tells us, to feel defeated by a capitalistic system that seems so pervasive, both exploiting the earth through practices like the cash cropping of monocultures, and “offering” relief through measures and products that actually sustain the system (like certifiably organic, industrially produced foods that use green-

washing images and texts in their advertising to appeal to those seeking alternatives). Capitalism is the unwanted guest at the dinner party, begrudgingly invited and then resented for dominating the conversation. For Mikulak, the solution rests with local food: “I want to celebrate local food in order to save it from the ‘success’ of organics,” he says. His argument resonates with me: yes, this may be local food still purchased with dollars, but it's without the middleman, and there is value (beyond the financial) accrued by reducing the distance food travels from ground to plate, by using barter opportunities to obtain food, by uniting with others in the community to process crops for use (as with a batch cooking get-together), and by learning indigenous and exotic skills to grow, handle, and prepare local foods. Small acts collectively yield change; it is the lack of will that impedes more than anything.

Because I devote so much time to acquiring and preparing food, it's natural that I crave food-centered media. *The Politics of the Pantry* offers an analysis of many popular food texts, encouraging close readings in order to reveal their limitations and capacities to inspire real change. We see how Michael Pollan's bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, for instance, provides a convincing description of how corn has become the keystone of industrial agriculture; at the same time, the book “divides the world into obese victims and super-subjects such as Pollan, who can resist the power of the advertising regime.” Many familiar voices in the sustainable foods movement, like Carlo Petrini, Barbara Kingsolver, Jamie Oliver, and Gary Paul Nabhan are given similar treatment, revealing their varying usages of “utopian pastoralism” and “apocalyptic” fact reporting to make their cases. For Mikulak the most valuable narratives support the transmission of skills: DIY urban agriculture that is accessible to more segments of the population. From locavores will arise “a new beginning, a new set of value practices that contain the seeds of a better world.”

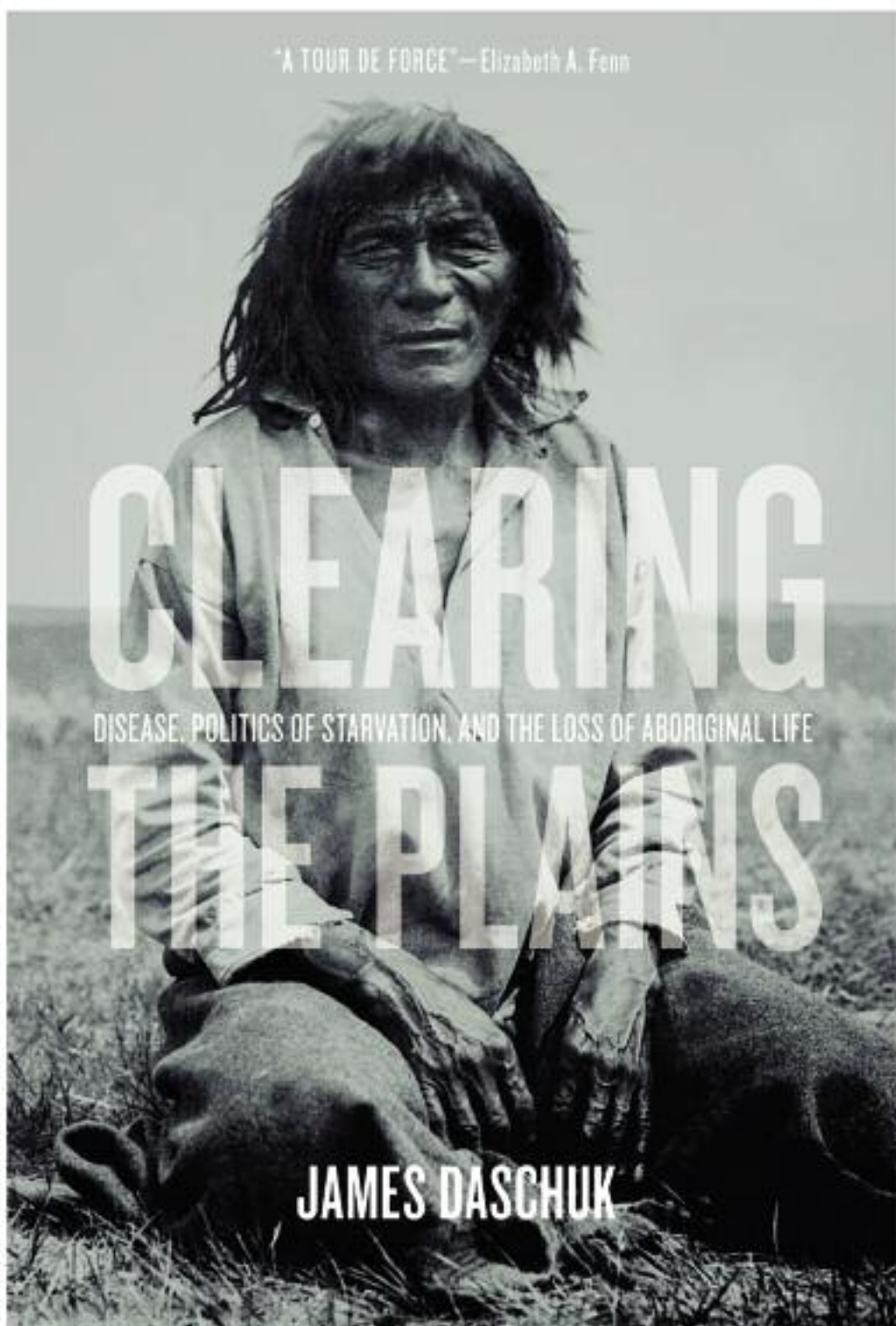
And that's encouraging to hear reaffirmed – that we each have agency, that even with a jar of homemade pickles I'm feeding the effort. mrb

Andrea Belcham is the author of *Food and Fellowship: Projects and Recipes to Feed a Community*.

THE POLITICS OF THE PANTRY
Stories, Food, and Social Change
Michael Mikulak
McGill-Queen's University Press
\$29.95, cloth, 268pp
978-0-7735-4276-1



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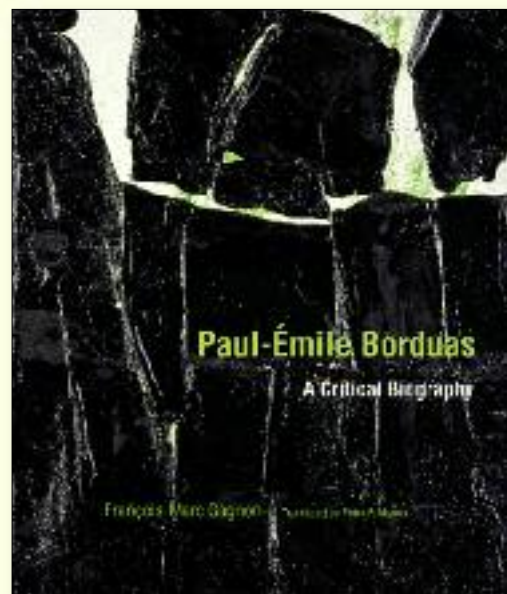
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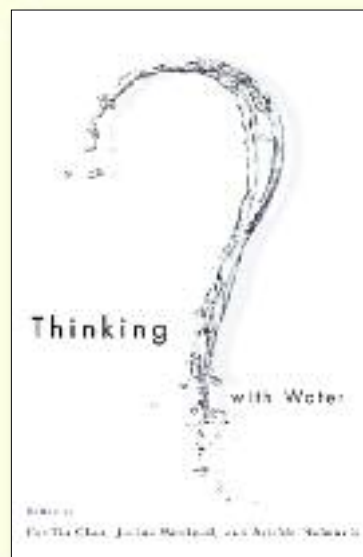
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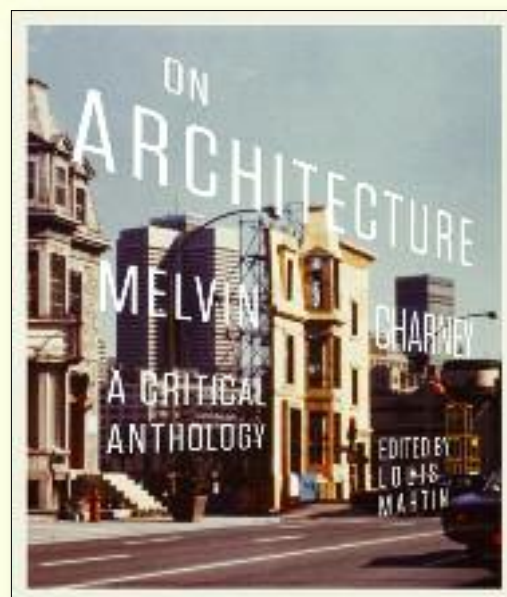
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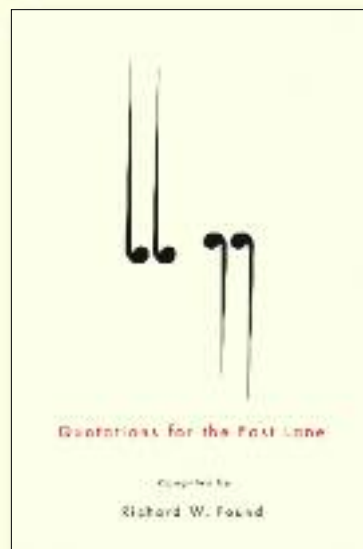
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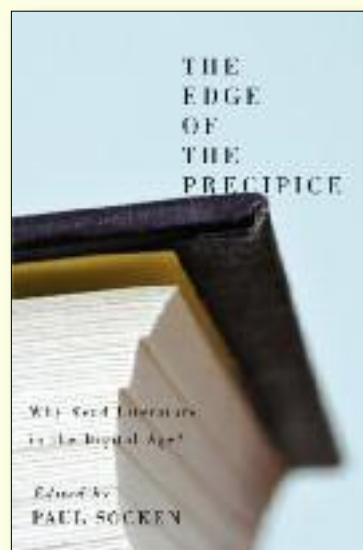
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