



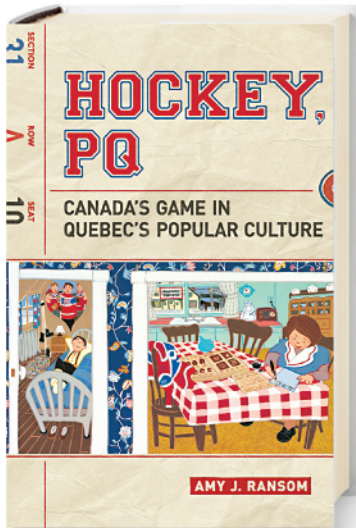
# mRb

SUMMER 2014 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

## O'Neill's Little Criminals

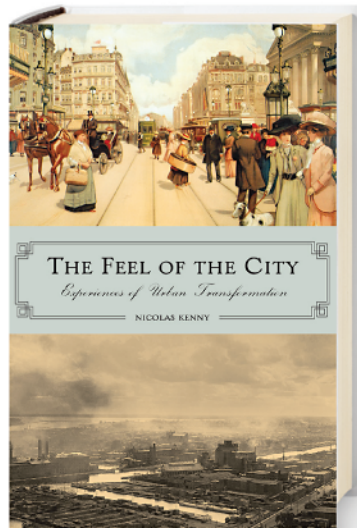
**The Girl Who Was  
Saturday Night**  
explores boundaries and separation

New from  
University of Toronto Press



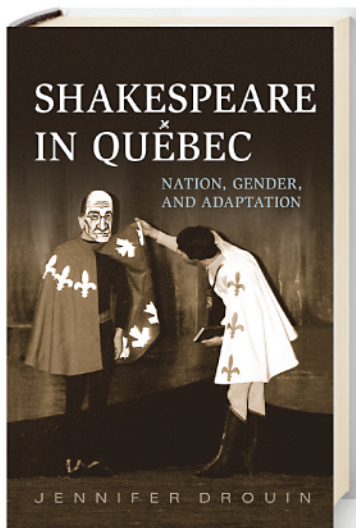
**Hockey, PQ**  
Canada's Game in Quebec's Popular Culture  
by Amy J. Ransom

In *Hockey, PQ*, Amy J. Ransom examines everything from the blockbuster movie franchise *Les Boys* to the music of former pro player Bob Bisonnette, and from the soap opera *Lance et compte* to the fiction of François Barcelo to establish how Canada's national sport has been used to signify a specific Québécois identity.



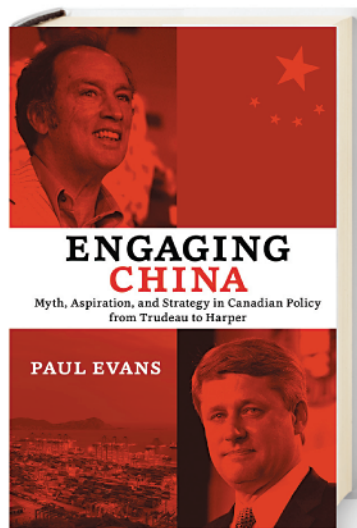
**The Feel of the City**  
Experiences of Urban Transformation  
by Nicolas Kenny

*The Feel of the City* exposes the sensory experiences of city-dwellers in Montreal and Brussels at the turn of the century and the ways in which these shaped the social and cultural significance of urban space.



**Shakespeare in Québec**  
Nation, Gender, and Adaptation  
by Jennifer Drouin

In *Shakespeare in Québec*, Jennifer Drouin reveals how Shakespeare has been adapted in Québec and how Québécois adaptations have evolved in response to changes in the political climate. As a critical analysis in English of rich but largely ignored French plays, this book bridges Canada's "two solitudes."

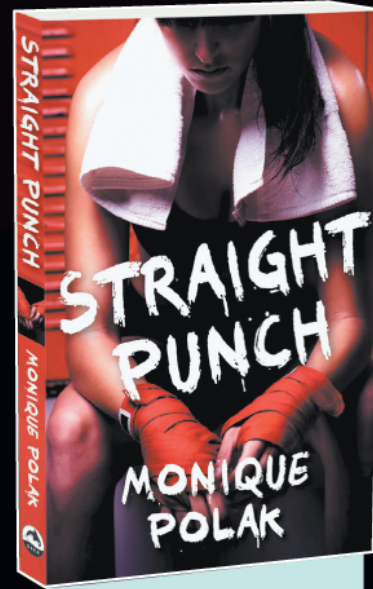


**Engaging China**  
Myth, Aspiration, and Strategy in Canadian Policy from Trudeau to Harper  
by Paul Evans

For more than four decades, engagement has been the bedrock of Canada's policy toward China. Author Paul Evans provides a concise account of the evolution and state of the Canadian approach to China, its achievements, disappointments, and current dilemmas.

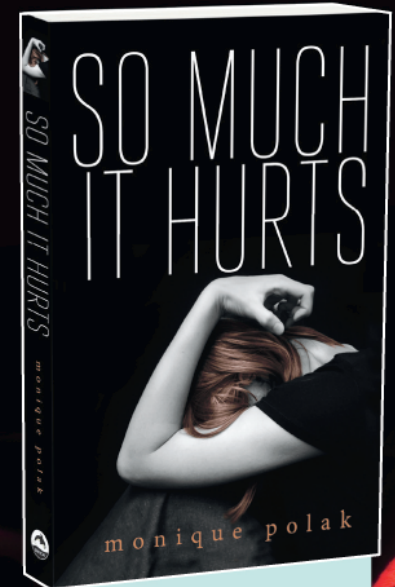
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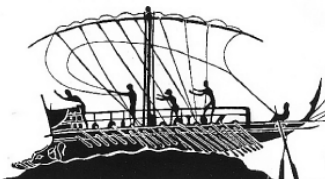
- More Like a House: Exploring the Short Story
- "Regulated Hatred": Darkness in the Novels of Jane Austen
- Théâtre Montreal Theatre
- From Athens to Rome
- American Bestsellers: The Struggle with Race in the U.S.
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Farewell, Farley Mowat.

ILLUSTRATION BY LIAM MATTHEW BYRNE

## INNOVATIVE CANADIAN POETRY FROM **ARP**

**Burning Daylight**  
Christine Fellows



**Sin Eater**  
Angela Hibbs



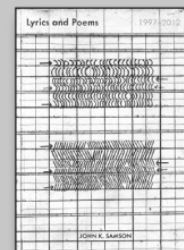
**Quivering Land**  
Roewan Crowe



**Begin with the End in Mind**  
Emma Healey



**Lyrics and Poems, 1997-2012**  
John K. Samson



**Maple Leaf Rag**  
Kaie Kellough



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The protagonist of Heather O'Neill's long-awaited second novel, *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*, is nineteen-year-old Nouschka Tremblay: intelligent but directionless, poor despite her celebrity, and stuck in the well-worn rut of her relationship with her deadbeat twin brother, Nicolas. She dropped out of high school in response to Nicolas's cajoling, and the two roommates, best friends, and partners in crime have been drifting hedonistically ever since. But something is shifting in Nouschka. The easy-way-out choices of their adolescence (rhetoric over critical thought, petty theft over a minimum-wage job), which continue to suit Nicolas, don't satisfy her anymore. When we meet her in 1994, on the threshold of her twentieth birthday, Nouschka is struggling between the pull of attempting to make something of herself and the inertia of her squalid and promiscuous existence on boulevard Saint-Laurent. "I was trying my best to straighten out my life," she tells us, "but I always ended up in the middle of some festive waste of time."

The intimacy of the siblings' relationship is understandable: they have had only one another to rely on all their lives. Their mother abandoned them in infancy and their absentee father, the has-been French-Canadian folk singer Étienne Tremblay, shows up only when he wants to use them as props in his pursuit of publicity. The elderly grandfather who raised them, Loulou, though sweet and kind, cannot relate to the twins.

What alternative does she have to her current life with Nicolas? Nouschka isn't sure. Against the backdrop of the 1995 referendum, Nouschka must weigh her own "Oui" vs. "Non" options.

Writing from the perspective of a "pure laine" Québécois character is politically charged, particularly when the character is as cutting a social critic as Nouschka. In the first few pages of the book, Nouschka describes the legacy of *les filles du roi* who reluctantly helped colonize New France: "They were pregnant before they even had a chance to unpack their bags. They didn't want this. They didn't want to populate this horrible land ... They spoke to their children through gritted teeth. That's where the Quebec accent came from. The nation crawled out from between their legs." Later, Nouschka explains her father's popularity thus: "Quebec needed stars badly. The more they had, the better argument they had for having their own culture and separating from Canada."

O'Neill was unfazed by the politics of an Anglophone writer adopting the voice of a Francophone. "I didn't really consciously think about it," she says. "It just happened and I really enjoyed it and by the time I thought about possible ramifications, it was all too late: the Tremblays were already alive and well and living in Montreal and they wouldn't let me go until I'd told their tale."



## Saturday Night Fever

BY SARAH LOLLEY

PHOTO BY TERENCE BYRNES

# Talon Translations

Talonbooks has been translating Quebec literature for over forty years. We've published more than 150 titles featuring Quebec's best writers and translators, winning numerous prizes along the way.

It is impossible to talk about *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* without drawing parallels to O'Neill's spectacularly successful first novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, which won Canada Reads 2007 and was a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the Orange Prize. Both books have a powerful narrative voice that grabs the reader on the first page and does not let go. Both books present the seedy side of urban living without judgment. And both involve imperfect parenting relationships. A third-generation single parent herself, O'Neill says that in her new book, she "wanted to explore that dynamic where you have a faulty, funny, scrawny family tree, where one side of the family has too much influence." Étienne Tremblay is a terrible father to the twins, their mother is not merely absent but unknown to them, and Nicolas, who accidentally fathered a child with an old girlfriend, is proving to be a slouch in the parenting department as well. "I wanted to see how Nouschka and Nicolas would deal with that inheritance, trying to make families of their own," O'Neill says. "They are flawed. They have inherited their family's strengths and weaknesses."

Much as it was in *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, Montreal itself is a central character in *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*, though O'Neill warns that the city's newer residents might not recognize her descriptions of it. The section of boulevard Saint-Laurent on which O'Neill lived in the mid-1990s and which served as

inspiration for the book (at the intersection of rue Sainte-Catherine) no longer really exists, she says, both because of development in the area and because the neighbourhood culture has changed. "I used to know everybody walking down the street. Everybody seemed to know everybody. It was before the Internet, so a street corner culture still existed. I didn't have a phone, I never locked my apartment door, and I slept in my boots."

Cats wend their way anthropomorphically through *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*. A cat that has just been impregnated lays on Nouschka's bed "reliving the evening nervously in her mind." A cat tiptoes down the hall "like a naked girl heading to the bathroom after she's had sex in an unfamiliar apartment." Of a black cat that has the permanent look of having been struck by lightning, Nouschka says: "his thoughts were broken things."

"There was this catnip tree on a block where I grew up. Every morning it would literally be filled with cats and they would lie around stoned and crazy. That kind of mirrored the human life that I grew up around," O'Neill says. "The cats have the same sort of feral, aristocratic, out-all-night quality of the Tremblays."

The most extraordinary aspect of *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* is the language, which is simple, poetic, and insightful. The book is heavy with simile evocative enough to delight a high school English teacher ("beer bottles trembled in the [fridge] door, like kids lined up for the diving board") but racy enough – this is Heather O'Neill, after all – to keep it out of the classroom ("the belt slid from the loops of his pants like a snake through grass"). As in her previous work, O'Neill shows her rare talent for using simple language to illuminate truths of human behaviour. "It must be nice sometimes to have an all-consuming philosophy that includes not really caring about anyone other than yourself," Nouschka observes when her father lets her down yet again. "I don't think that I could write a character that didn't have a unique and odd language, because it mirrors the way that I like to write," O'Neill says of Nouschka. "I choose characters who will allow me to do dangerous acrobatics with words and think unusual thoughts and have odd insights."

Where does the character end and the author begin, the reader wonders, when Nouschka says that she wants to study literature because "it exposes everything," because writers search for

**I choose characters who will allow me to do dangerous acrobatics with words and think unusual thoughts...**

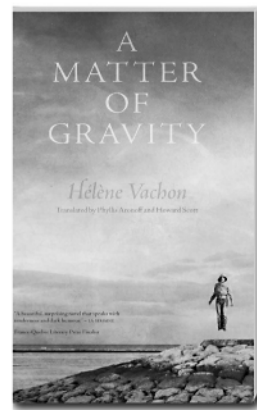
"secrets that [have] never been mined"? "Every writer has to invent their own magical language, in order to describe the indescribable," explains the Franco-phone character, written by an Anglophone author, set in a fragmented province. "They might seem to be

writing in French, English or Spanish, but really they were writing in the language of butterflies, crows and hanged men." mrb

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer specializing in medical writing, travel writing, and personal essays.



**THE GIRL WHO WAS SATURDAY NIGHT**  
Heather O'Neill  
HarperCollins Publishers  
\$29.99, cloth, 416pp  
9780002006309



## A Matter of Gravity

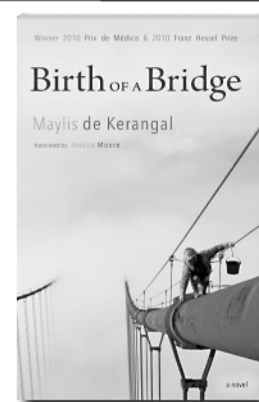
Hélène Vachon  
Translated by Phyllis Aronoff & Howard Scott  
*A Matter of Gravity* is about the forces that draw two men together. Hermann, an embalmer and doctor's son, devotes himself to the dead to mask his disappointment that, unlike his father, he cannot cure the living. Hu is an ailing concert pianist who dwells in memories of past glory.  
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## Birth of a Bridge

Maylis de Kerangal  
Translated by Jessica Moore

The consortium of workers who gather during construction of a mythical bridge – engineers, designers, divers – with their various nationalities and social classes present a microcosm of not just California, but humanity as a whole.

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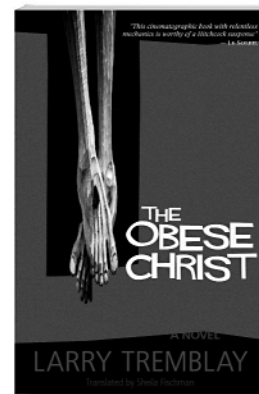
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## The Obese Christ

Larry Tremblay  
Translated by Sheila Fischman

Edgar, a timid, asocial thirty-something, witnesses the brutal rape of a young woman and subsequently bears the unconscious victim home. Haunted by the death of his overbearing mother, he pledges to act as the mysterious woman's saviour.

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## Tom at the Farm

Michel Marc Bouchard  
Translated by Linda Gaboriau

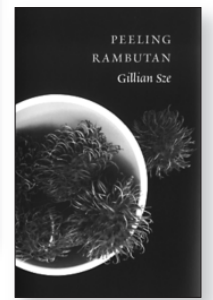
As an unexpected guest at his recently deceased lover's funeral, Tom is blindsided by the man's legacy of untruth. With the mother expecting a chain-smoking girlfriend, and the older brother hell-bent on preserving the façade, Tom must confront the torment that drove his lover to live in the shadows of deceit.

Winner of the 2014 Lambda Literary Award  
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# poetry



**MxT**  
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Greg Santos  
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**BOURBON & EVENTIDE**  
Mike Spry  
Invisible Publishing  
\$14.95, paper, 72pp  
9781926743493

**PEELING RAMBUTAN**  
Gillian Sze  
Gaspereau Press  
\$19.95, paper, 80pp  
9781554471331

The elegy has been a fixture of poetry since the time of Theocritus (3rd century BC), though the traditional apparatus of shepherds and symbolic flowers no longer fits the modern sensibility. Grief, like love and death, is a perennial theme, and poets find fresh ways to deal with it. Sina Queyras, who has lost a number of family members in recent years, including her sister, the photographer and filmmaker France Queyras, has written a profound exploration of grief in *MxT*. She has created a convention of her own by structuring her book around the terminology of electrical circuits, her father's field of expertise. Each section has a diagram of an emotional circuit: Alternating Mourning, Direct Mourning, Emotional Overload Sensor Circuit, and so on. This scheme offers interpretations of experience that are unique to the book and are a good alternative to the hackneyed five stages of grief or Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia." In a passage sure to be much quoted,

Queyras declares, "I am not interested in what Bourdieu, or Kristeva, has to say about grief. I don't want a grid, I want arms." The author does, in fact, make subtle use of Kristeva's ideas about mourning, abjection, and leaky bodily fluids; and art always requires ways of representation, which are also grids. But it is two great photographers – Diane Arbus and Lee Miller – who are the real presiding figures in these poems.

The great strength of the book is not in the apparatus – circuit diagrams, tutelary figures – but in the texture. Queyras employs many forms: prose poems, poems in stanzas, representations of postcards, aphorisms ("All mature poets understand the need for dry wood chips"), found poems, concrete poetry. The tour de force is "Elegy Written in a City Cemetery": each of its 53 lines paraphrases another poet's elegy and has a footnote. The sources are extraordinarily wide-ranging, from Tibullus to Coleridge to some of the author's contemporaries, and she clearly knows the elegiac tradition. Queyras alludes to Anne Carson, whose *Nox* is also an elegy for a sibling, and one of the most ambitious works of our time.

"Anne Carson is a footnote in the biography of death. Few of us get a mention," she writes. Queyras does deserve her own footnote in the tradition of elegy for this ambitious and moving book.

Mia Anderson won the \$20,000 Montreal Poetry Prize in 2013 for "The antenna," a poem about the faculty of religious awareness that appears in her latest book, *Light Takes*. Anderson is an Anglican priest, and her poems emphasize religious experience in the tradition of George Herbert and R.S. Thomas. Her strength is in extended metaphors, what Herbert would call "conceits": God as a heart surgeon, the Trinity as The Holy Doozers of the children's show *Fraggle Rock*,

human interaction with the infinite as a wicking action. In "The kingdom is," she uses the *manette*, the keypad used in retail transactions, as a clever way to represent grace: if you punch in your identity, your debts are forgiven (as they are in the Lord's Prayer), and you are taken into the kingdom. Anderson lives near Quebec City, and French phrases often turn up in the poems. The weakness of the book is in the blandness of the style: much of it is written in brief lines with no music and very little imagery. The lines may be brief, but the poems ramble on in a sermonizing way. Yet, the reader is in touch with an interesting mind and, certainly, one that has fresh things to say about spiritual life. The opening poem, "Physics is how," shows her spiritual originality. In it, she suggests that physics underwrites human freedom by permitting us to deny the existence of God. The famous claim in Psalms that "the heavens declare the glory of God" is reversed. The glory of the heavens permits us to declare the non-existence of God, and physics is therefore a divine gift. Anderson's religious tradition is old but her perceptions are hardly threadbare.

The work of Greg Santos is permeated with high spirits. But too much of *Rabbit Punch!* is whimsical: frivolous poems about Paris Hilton, John McCain ("On his thirteenth birthday, McCain was knocked unconscious by a rogue piñata"), Bugs Bunny, and Hooters (the restaurant). His muse is David McGimpsey but John Ashbery's more daft moments must take some credit or blame. Santos loves to invoke Twitter and Facebook and has even created a poem with the help of a website that enables users to erase parts of well-known source texts (wavepoetry.com). However, the best poems in his book – wistful and straightforward lyrics – are in the first section. The topical and trendy poems

don't show enough ambition. Tellingly, he uses Paul Violi, a weak imitator of the New York School of Poetry, for an epigraph: "For we were made to reach for things. / For imagination extends life. / For our reach must exceed our grasp." Violi was imitating Robert Browning rather lamely ("Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?"). Santos has said: "I'd like to think that my poetry provides a little bit of lightness in the dark; I'm the night light of poetry." This is his second book. It is time for him to increase his wattage.

In *Bourbon & Eventide*, Mike Spry has created a postmodern narrative, a kind of redacted novel in tercets, two per page, in which a story is told and sometimes retold with inconsistencies. The story is common enough: two people meet in a liquor store and begin an affair. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, girl gets abortion, boy loses girl again, and so on. Mostly boy and girl drink too much. The style is banal, perhaps deliberately so, and the author knows that his story is based on tropes from romantic comedies – but not much is funny. He plays with the clichés: the man's mother goes out, not for the traditional cigarette but for eggnog, and never comes back. We last see the couple by a lake, emptying a bottle and dancing in tall grass. The norms of storytelling are not broken in an innovative way, and it is hard to take an interest in his rather anonymous characters. There is not enough distance from the romantic clichés.

*Peeling Rambutan* chronicles poet Gillian Sze's travels in China and Taiwan, where her ancestors originated. The volume is dedicated to her great-grandmother, whose ghost is seen in Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park as well as on Wu Li Road in Fujian. For a poet of the Chinese diaspora, the

themes she covers are not unfamiliar territory: family lore, proverbs and legends, folk remedies, techniques of preparing food, letters to an absent lover. But the treatment of these subjects is brilliant, with powerful images drawn from all of the senses, and tremendous skill in pacing a poem whether in verse or prose. We discover Sze's background alongside her, as sensuous and emotional experiences, not as a travelogue. Poems set in Canada offer useful contrasts, and undercurrents of family conflict create tension. One of the finest poems, "The Tale of Dark-Face Sze" is a bit of mythology that evokes the stories in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*. In the legend, a member of the Sze clan in Fujian goes out to gather leaves and suddenly suffers an apotheosis, finding herself transformed into an onyx statue. Family members quarrel over who owns the valuable statue, a dispute that is miraculously solved when the image of the new goddess splits in two, a variation on the ancient *deus ex machina* motif. One excellent strand in the poem deals with the multiple uses of Chinese verbs: the same verb appears in expressions for becoming a Buddha, beginning to sweat, and publishing a book. The poems could have a little more context, though an audience can't demand a chronology of travels or a genealogy. Sze frequently addresses people referred to as "you" – relatives, an absent lover, and others whose roles are not entirely clear. More identification of addressees would enhance the experience. The mild obscurities of the collection call to mind her description of peeling rambutan: at first the spikes seem to say don't touch, but they turn "lissome like new grass." These poems are a feast. **mm**

Bert Almon's most recent poetry collection is *Waiting for the Gulf Stream*.

# fiction

## Gabrielle Roy's Heirs

### MY OCTOBER

Claire Holden Rothman

Penguin Group

\$22.00, paper, 352pp

978-0-14-318867-4

“**T**he voice of a generation” is about to move his office. Luc Lévesque, one of three protagonists in Claire Holden Rothman’s new page-turner, is a celebrated Quebec novelist and sovereignist whose plots portray the working class of his beloved Montreal neighbourhood, Saint-Henri. He is verging on 50 – and perhaps a few other things – when a sexy, not yet twenty-five-year-old office assistant finds him the “perfect” new workspace, conveniently located away from disturbances, such as his wife and son...

Many writers would be seduced by this new location, and Luc already knows the literary landmark well. Hugging the tail end of rue Saint-Augustin, less than a heartbeat from the railway tracks and rue Saint-Ambroise, a ship-shaped house sits immortalized by the words of Gabrielle Roy, “twisted, as if to brace itself

against life’s shocks.” Luc is surprised to remember this last phrase by heart. In Roy’s excellent 1945 novel *Bonheur d’occasion* (*The Tin Flute*), Jean Lévesque inhabits the house with no windows on the front; it seems fitting that 56 years later, another Lévesque, especially one who is lauded across the province as Gabrielle Roy’s heir, should occupy the place.

On a practical level, the last building before the railway crossing proves uninspiring; Luc’s romantic notions are gradually derailed by menacing mould spores and noisy, sleepless nights. A backdrop for disillusionment, the locale heralds danger (“The way the street and rail converged here was vaguely nightmarish”), yet Luc neglects indicators that he’s off track and signs the lease.

While Luc’s reputation is firmly fixed among his fans, his popularity is plummeting at home. Hannah, his Anglo wife and prize-winning translator (perhaps a nod to *Bonheur’s* translator, Hannah Josephson), is painfully admitting to herself that she dislikes Luc’s latest novel. And although she has long maintained a quiet distance from her parents to keep the peace in her marriage – her father, Alfred Stern,

served as a prosecutor during the October Crisis kidnappings, and naturally disapproves of her pairing with a superstar separatist – this gap suddenly narrows when she is called to her ailing father’s Toronto bedside.

Luc and Hannah once dreamed “of a marriage that did away with the old divisions of language and culture,” but their idealism is challenged when their teenage son, caught between cultures, changes his name from Hugo Lévesque to Hugh Stern, identifying with his estranged grandfather. When Hugo gets into serious trouble at school, the threat of violence shatters old silences, unleashing a less comfortable, yet more honest, kind of communication.

*My October* brings home the forceful sway of words in shaping truths. “Reality boiled down to this in the end: the story you told,” reflects Hannah. “Everyone had one. No one could claim the right to the last word.” Here the author, whose best-selling novel *The Heart Specialist* was long-listed for the 2009 Scotiabank Giller Prize, delivers a complex, political, and at times heart-wrenching family crisis with all the emotional pull of Gratien Gélinas’s 1968 play, *Hier, les enfants dansaient* (*Yesterday the Children were Dancing*).

What could have been a tired topic feels fresh thanks to Rothman’s empathic ear. Deftly rendering the inner voice of each of her protagonists –



Hugo, Hannah, and Luc – she presents a nuanced network of perspectives, challenging the

divisive dichotomy that generally characterizes Quebec politics.

This graceful dance between viewpoints was surely inspired by the narrative style of *Bonheur d’occasion*, the novel Rothman weaves intertextually with her own. In *My October*, Hannah is struck by “the voices” in Roy’s classic, finding them all “so closely observed that it was easy to forget they were fictional.” The same could be said of Rothman’s well-orchestrated choir of characters, thanks to which *My October* rings true. **mrb**

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based artist who paints poems that often turn out like songs: [kimberlyandthedreamtime.com](http://kimberlyandthedreamtime.com).

## Three World Wonders

### WONDER

Dominique Fortier

Translated by Sheila Fischman

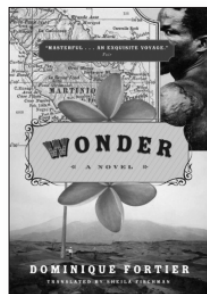
McClelland & Stewart

\$24.95, paper, 295pp

978-0-7710-4769-5

**A**ugustus Edward Hough Love was the British mathematician who, in 1911, developed a model of surface waves in geodynamics that are called, in his honour, “Love waves.” What irresistible fodder for a storyteller! Dominique Fortier puts him in her novel *Wonder*, translated by Sheila Fischman, where he appears as a shy geek who finds true romance with Garance, an equally geeky young woman who lies upon the earth to listen to its music. On holiday in Bath, Garance helps Augustus develop a good opinion of Jane Austen, although he had “never since childhood felt like opening a novel,” preferring to read books about “the world as it really [is] without also having to worry about those that held pure ravings.”

Fortier’s writing is very far from “pure ravings.” It is lucid, rich in detail, and showcases her deep and broad interest in the history of science, which sets her novels apart from much of fiction. Her characters live in a world that she sees in its historical context,



with scientific ideas among the currents that shape its landscapes, including the topography of human relations.

*Wonder* begins on the cusp of a disaster. It is 1902, and in Saint-Pierre, on the island of Martinique, it is snowing ash from Mount Pelée, the volcano that overlooks the city. Baptiste is chafing with boredom and humiliation, seated at a table with his fellow servants. Their employers are indulging in a Carnival-time reversal of roles, dressing in the help’s clothes and, maladroit and bad-tempered, serving them a meal. Later, in a portside tavern, he knifes his master’s arrogant son, who is taking liberties with a young mulatto woman; for this crime he is thrown in a dungeon. When the volcano overlooking the city blows, it kills every single person in Saint-Pierre – except, entombed in his hole in the ground, the burned and thirst-scorched Baptiste. His subsequent fame as the only survivor of the spectacular eruption of Mount Pelée gets him a job with the circus as “The Man who Lived Through Doomsday.” This leads him to romance, and disaster of another kind.

And then there is Rose, who walks Mount Royal with a pack of dogs: her own great and gentle Damocles as well as a bunch of rough-and-tumble



MARTINE DOYON

others. Rose is a keen and quiet observer, drawing for the reader a lyrical portrait of Montreal’s mountain as it changes through the seasons. She comes to love through her wanderings and her sensitivity to the beauty of the life around her.

If it is hard to see the connection between the three characters – Edward and Baptiste, historical figures brought to warm life by Fortier, and the contemporary and (presumably) wholly fictional Rose – that is because the connection is tenuous, tied by a few slender threads. Presented in three quite separate sections, each concerned with different characters and different times and places, *Wonder* will challenge those who expect a single coherent story

rolling along a path from A to B. The reader is given only the slightest of justifications for making narrative links between the three stories and their inhabitants. Fortier gives the reader the task of making new connections in the neuronal map of the world we live in: its hidden movements under the earth, peregrinations of people in time and space, and the constant, difficult, and often beautiful complications of the human heart. **mrb**

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

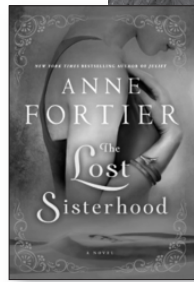
# The Female Furies

**THE LOST SISTERHOOD**

Anne Fortier  
 HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.  
 \$22.99, paper, 701pp  
 9781443412469



While I was growing up in the 1950s, the only female superhero around was Wonder Woman, an Amazon with bracelets that could deflect bullets. Today, with Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* holding readers young and old in thrall, it's high time the Amazons took their rightful place in the pantheon of empowered women. Anne Fortier, author of the *New York Times* best seller *Juliet*, rises to the challenge.



The Danish-Canadian writer's hefty new novel, *The Lost Sisterhood*, skilfully weaves a mesmerizing tale of two women – one modern and one mythological (or maybe not) – replete with intrigue, twists, and turn-arounds. If you were pitching this story to a producer, you'd say, Dan Brown meets Danielle Steel via Margaret Atwood.

The Amazons, women warriors of Greek mythology, fascinate Oxford philologist Diana Morgan, a curiosity that was seeded by her grandmother who believed herself to be one. Diana's parents, however, believed Granny was mentally unstable. Before they could have her institutionalized, Granny disappeared. Some time later, Diana receives a package in the mail: an exercise book with the alphabet of an ancient language and a jackal-headed bronze bracelet.

Approached by a mysterious foundation offering proof of the Amazons' existence, Diana sees an opportunity to convince her skeptical colleagues. Despite her apprehensions, she leaves the backbiting world of academia and undertakes an odyssey into the realm of archeological digs, high intrigue, and raw brutality. In North Africa, she reluctantly teams up with Nick Barràn, an irritating and illusive character who is alternately friend and foe. He delivers her to a buried temple in Algeria where she discovers the same symbols she found in her grandmother's notebook and the story of the first Amazon queen.

In parallel to Diana's story is the tale of a determined young huntress, Myrina, who flees her devastated village with her blind sister, Lilli. They survive a desert crossing and reach the mythic Lake Tritonis where they join the priestesses who serve the

Goddess of the Moon. The temple is attacked and looted by Greek marauders, led by Orestes, son of the

powerful king Agamemnon. A number of the priestesses, including Lilli, are abducted. Determined to rescue all of her sisters, Myrina and her remaining band sail to Crete, where she meets Paris, heir to the throne of Troy; he helps her raid Agamemnon's palace where she liberates her sisters. What follows is Fortier's brilliant revision of an ancient myth.

Like a high-speed chase, Fortier criss-crosses the two women's stories at a breakneck tempo as Diana and Nick follow the trail of Myrina and the Amazons from Greece to Turkey to Germany and, finally, Finland.

The evidence supporting the existence of the Amazons builds with clever feints and clues, keeping readers on their toes but sometimes inducing a bit of head-scratching. Why does Diana have to explain the legend of the Minotaur to Nick, who has been working as a guide on archaeological digs? And why the brief prologue that describes a college student receiving a baby in a basket (an event that is totally forgotten by the book's end, 700 pages later)?

Of the two odysseys, I much prefer Myrina's story: despite its mythic roots, it rings truer and is richer than Diana's travails in tracking Granny's jackal bracelet and the Amazons. Of the two love stories, Myrina and Paris strikes a heartfelt chord, whereas the teeter-totter relationship between Diana and Nick feels too contrived.

Ultimately, *The Lost Sisterhood* is a swift and wonderful read; a book that is ripe for big-screen adaptation. **mRb**

Gina Roitman is a writer, editor, and author of the acclaimed short story collection *Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth*, and the co-producer, co-writer, and the "me" in the award-winning, documentary, *My Mother, the Nazi Midwife and Me*.



"Godbout has a keen eye for how discombobulating any place can be to be the outsider, and the world he smartly evokes isn't necessarily one of malice so much as cruel indifference, which seems as accurate today as it was a century ago."  
 — National Post



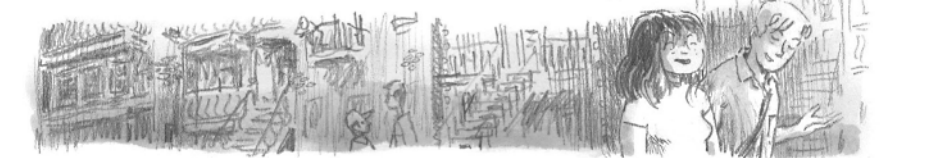
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**MY NEIGHBOUR'S BIKINI**  
 JIMMY BEAULIEU

Translation by KerryAnn Cochrane  
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 64 pages / tp / \$15





By Katia Grubisic

## An Autobiography of Translation

**T**he iconoclastic Galician poet Chus Pato is no stranger to multiplicity. Almost all her books are complicated by language and national politics. They are in part a post-modern reflection – part funhouse, part *cri du monde* – not just of her political beliefs, but of Galician literary history, of poetry’s power and right to independence, of her experience of ancestry and motherhood, of a resolute gaze to the future.

Those who have read the work of Erín Moure, Pato’s English translator, know that her work has never been straightforward either. At times combatively deconstructive and at times evanescently lyric, Moure’s poetry is a sailboat, precariously on the verge of either wrecking or lifting into the wind.

If the author is spectral, as Moure suggests in *Secession/Insecession*, then this book is doubly haunted, with the renowned Canadian poet translating and responding to an award-winning series of poetic texts by Pato published in Galicia as *Secesión*. Moure spoke to me from somewhere between Edmonton, Montreal, and Brooklyn.

**Katia Grubisic:** This is the fourth book of Chus Pato’s you’ve translated. How has the relationship of translation evolved into dialogue, and now into the poetic reciprocity of *Secession/Insecession*?

**Erín Moure:** I would call *Insecession* a reciprocation on my part rather than reciprocity, as Chus does not read or speak English. She knows my poetry only from *Teatriños* (*Little Theatres*) in the Galician translation by María Reimóndez (which exists thanks to Chus’s encouragement of the editor) or from looking intently at poems and books to discern their structures and using Google Translate. She deploys all the reading mechanisms at her disposal and stands as a model for the poetic investigation of a language you don’t understand!

Our first relationship *was* dialogue. I’d found her astonishing *m-Talá* in 2000, which I could scarcely read, as I was just learning Galician. I met Chus the next summer when I took a summer course in Santiago de Compostela to learn to speak Galician, and she continually brought me heaps of Galician poetry books, which I would read every week and painstakingly write down comments to be shared with her the following week. Her excitement at speaking and sharing with this new Galician speaker motivated me a lot. I wanted to translate Pato, though, and I had just started on it. Over the years, translating her work has infinitely improved my Galician and my poetry knowledge.

**KG:** You’ve said you don’t think “any poet has their own specific style at all times.” There is always slippage in your own voice, from book to book and over time – it’s productive, and organic. Yet there *is* something Pato-ish about her work here, and something Moureian about yours. Ghosts, perhaps; anticipations. Pato writes, “a poem is not composed of fragments but of ruins that are remainders of an earlier collapse or of one still to come, or that never happened, that are ghosts and despite this memorable.”



**SECESSION/INSECESSION**  
Chus Pato and Erín Moure  
BookThug  
\$23.00, paper, 175pp  
9781771660341



Elsewhere, you ask “must someone haunt or bear this haunting?” What has brought Pato to her hauntings? What has your *parcours* been?

**EM:** Pato wrote *Secession* in response to a request from the Galician editor, poet, essayist Carlos Lema to write an autobiography, perhaps because her earlier books teem with female characters and imagined lives. Perhaps Carlos was trying to pin Pato down. But she can’t be pinned down. So she wrote poems (she calls them poems, Carlos calls them prose) that are a unique combination of poetics and biography or memoir. Theory and affect shimmer amidst each other and are productive and the result mesmerized me.

I translated *Secession* before it came out in Galician in 2009, in a fit of reading, wherein translation and reading were coterminous. We self-published 60 copies of my translation for sale at the Poetry International Festival Rotterdam, and I thought, how could I publish Chus’s work in Canada? What if I wrote a companion book, an echolation, and it were a bit longer than my translation of Chus’s *Secession*? We are the same age; perhaps I could write such an autobiography of myself, of poetry, and of translation. If our books appeared in one volume, it would qualify as a Canadian book.

**KG:** I love your term “echolation,” encompassing both “echo” and “elation.” The notion of the impossible has also recurred in your work, and it resurfaces in this book. “Impossibility is the only thing that can occur,” you write. Do you think poetry is especially suited to, or perhaps defined by, undermining, opposition, nullification, overturning?

**EM:** Poetry, to me, is a limit case of language; it’s language brought to its limits (which are usually in our own heads) where its workings are strained and its sinews are visible, and where its relationship with bodies and time and space cracks open. Poetry is without market value and thus is free to explore other values in the language act, in the simple fact of speaking. “Impossible” is what people said when I wanted to translate Chus Pato. Translation is often called impossible. In fact, I am most often attracted to translating “impossible” texts, texts that are not served well by the worn paradigms of translation based on a contrast between fidelity to the word (much more than this goes into translation, and in different ways than the paradigm supposes) and transparency or fluidity of the text in the target language.

**KG:** There are also political implications of translating from Galician. In *Secession/Insecession*, thematically and stylistically – ruins, memory, nationhood – it’s everywhere. If “the

continued on page 17

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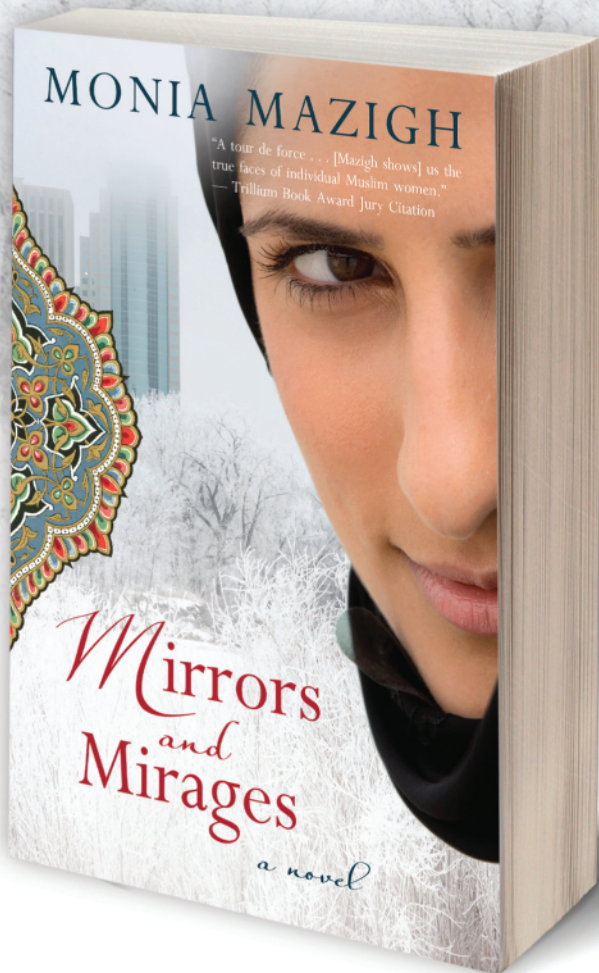
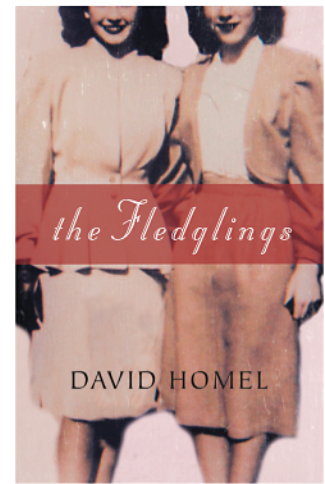
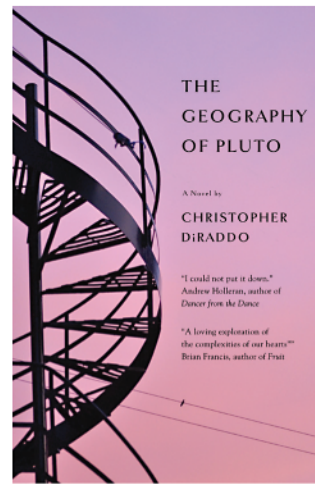
Set in Montreal's gay community, Christopher DiRaddo's celebrated debut novel, *The Geography of Pluto*, charts a young school teacher's breakup of his first love and the emotional dislocation created by his mother's terminal illness. According to the *Montreal Review of Books*, "the book's crystalline prose makes for an incredibly smooth read."

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By Crystal Chan

“I don’t care about hockey,” says Anna Leventhal, as the greasy spoon diner we’re in erupts into cheers over a Habs playoff goal. “But it’s still kind of exciting.” What interests her is the camaraderie. It’s these “networks of intimacy that happen outside of families” that she explores in her first book, *Sweet Affliction*. “I write about communities, for lack of a better term.”

A cancer patient, a young ballerina, a date rapist, a female prisoner: Leventhal’s characters stumble into, drift away from, or pass by one another unknowingly. The collection’s 15 stories unfold cinematically through rapidly intercut glimpses of everything from the beginning of life to its end, making for a diverse spectrum of tone, point of view, and topic. Leventhal, who has been spinning tales since age four – dictating “epic stories about this family of cats with really long tails called the Meower family” – wrote *Sweet Affliction* over six years.

Most of the stories are tied together in an interlocking structure and share Montreal as their setting. The uniquely Montreal ritual of mass lease transfers on the first of July is seen through a kaleidoscope of residents across the city in “Moving Day.” But like a 3-D image appearing magically from a pattern, a bigger picture emerges as Leventhal shifts smoothly between wildly different perspectives. The residents share a quiet bitterness and a collective resilience over the desperation that hides behind Montreal’s laidback and glamorous facade.

*Sweet Affliction* is full of déjà vu. Sally is a squatter in “Moving Day,” as well as another character’s aunt, afflicted with multiple sclerosis, in another story. Then she pops up as a young friend who “scorn[s] the idea of sexual difference.” “Fucking is fucking,” says young Sally, “cock or no cock.” Leventhal revisited certain characters because she “wasn’t ready to be done with them,” and the connections between stories provide the reader with the pleasure of recognition and add emotional nuance. It’s bittersweet to see Sally as she “hoists herself up one side of the dumpster, and ... swings one leg then the other onto the refuse heap,” and, years later, sitting in a wheelchair.

Leventhal “didn’t want it to be a story cycle,” however. Each piece can stand alone; in fact, the tenuous way in which life stories overlap is itself a recurring theme. People bump into each other years later, as in “Maitland,” a horror story that unwinds like an unexpected punch concealed within the banal sweetness of a family Passover dinner. Leventhal loves “that layeredness of the short story where it lifts the lid and you see all these things going on underneath that you weren’t aware of.”

The narrator of “The Shirt” is surprised to run into someone: a stranger wearing his own shirt. He had last seen it worn during a one-night stand by a woman who was for him a half-forgotten footnote; for the other man, the narrator learns, the woman is a poignant memory. Leventhal examines how and why the imprint that we make on one another’s lives fluctuates so dramatically.

*Sweet Affliction*’s oldest story, the Journey Prize-nominated “The Polar Bear at the Museum,” depicts a budding “too-close-for-comfort friendship between women where it’s part competition and part love and part confusion.” Leventhal tells me it’s “emblematic of a lot of the relationships that I’m interested in.”

She is also keenly attuned to “our relationship with our bodies, especially for female-bodied people.” Pieces “revolve around sickness and disease, ability, and disability” as well as “fertility, infertility, and choices around fertility.” In “Gravity,” a teenager muses as she buys a pregnancy test



that “they should make two different kinds ... one for women who really want to have a baby and one for everyone else. Each test would have the same two graphics: a bunch of exploding fireworks with the words *Way To Go* under it and, like, a frowny face. The same symbols for both tests, but for opposite results.”

Leventhal excels at dark humour. Many stories have the fantastic believability of retold anecdotes. “I basically just listen to stories people tell me and then appropriate them,” Leventhal half-jokes. A Winnipeg native, Leventhal has lived in Montreal for 17 years. The city’s neighbourhoods, dépanneurs, franglais, and Hasidic bakeries fill *Sweet Affliction*. “Sometimes I’ll be in the midst of a story and I’ll be sort of struggling; then I’ll just reach for something familiar,” Leventhal explains. “Oh yeah! That thing my friend told me about, there’s something there that I can draw on ... There are parts of me in all of the characters.”

Leventhal writes as often as possible. “Sometimes I actually have to set a timer to be able to write ... at the end of 20 minutes I’m allowed to stop.” She has also completed a master’s degree in Communication Studies on Winnipeg’s public access television, and worked with independent media projects such as Bookmobile, the Bibliograph/e zine library, CKUT radio (she’s working on a novel set at a community radio station), and as a bartender at Casa del Popolo. All of this keeps her sharp eyes and keen ears surrounded by storytellers. Fascinated by raconteurs, she has a talent for capturing dialogue and idiosyncrasies.

Christopher Isherwood had Berlin, she points out, whereas she draws inspiration from the mix of earnestness and helplessness that’s the zeitgeist of a certain Montreal lifestyle. Her fellow artist-activists are “always hustling and don’t necessarily have a career, don’t know how they’re going to make money, don’t know really what their place in society is – not exactly the margins of society, but people who don’t see a reflection of themselves in the broader culture.”

The influence of other writers, especially Grace Paley and Amy Hempel, emboldened Leventhal to depict her own circle: they “make you feel like it’s okay to write about what you’re writing about.” Local readers are likely to feel at once creeped out and proud to recognize themselves and their friends in her work. Montrealers have certainly responded to

her writing – Leventhal was voted second place in the category of “Best Living Author” in *Cult MTL*’s 2014 Best of Montreal poll, trailing none other than Leonard Cohen.

Though it’s the only city she’s known as an adult, Leventhal doesn’t picture herself growing old in Montreal. Then again, “I don’t really picture myself growing old anywhere,” she says. “I’m really a one-day-at-a-time person.” And like Leventhal, her characters tackle life one day at a time.

The book opens with an epigraph by Derek Walcott: “There is no rest, really, there is no rest. There is just a joyous torment, all your life, of doing the wrong thing.” When the narrator of the book’s title story is hospitalized for uterine cancer, she uses her “collection of positive adjectives” as armour against her pain, “[creating] a whole new meaning.” As life for Walcott is a “joyous torment,” cancer for her is “awesome agony. Bootylicious suffering. Sweet affliction.”

“In retrospect,” thinks Leventhal, “the character in that story is ... experiencing things that she doesn’t know how to articulate so she’s just sort of grabbing for words and putting them together trying to express what’s going on in her body.”

“That’s what all writers are doing, right? We’re all just kind of throwing random words together, trying to explain what’s going on with us. Mostly failing, but nevertheless creating something.”

Crystal Chan edits *QWF Writes*. She was the Managing Editor of *La Scena Musicale* magazine and the Program Coordinator of ELAN (English-Language Arts Network).



**SWEET AFFLICTION**  
Anna Leventhal  
Invisible Publishing  
\$19.95, paper, 200pp  
9781926743431

By Eric Boodman

The backyard is empty now, except for a few pieces of trash. There are piles of old white buckets, their insides crusted grey with leftover cement. A big muddy suitcase, crawling with pill bugs, sits by the shed. The bikes are carcasses, stripped of wheels and chains. Even the wooden fence is missing slats.

But on summery Friday nights in 2010 and 2011, when Guillaume Morisette lived at 4562 Saint-Dominique, as many as 200 people would flock to this muddy square of grass for free outdoor film screenings. The screen was made of two-by-fours and a bit of recycled cloth. Most of the chairs had been gleaned from a restaurant that had gone out of business. Morisette and his roommates bought so much Pabst Blue Ribbon at the local *dépanneur* that the owner gave them a discount. They resold it illegally, at a markup, out of a plain brown suitcase. If the cops showed up, the suitcase would be zipped shut and tossed out of sight.

Those years of film screenings and parties and hookups are the subject of Morisette's novel, *New Tab*. Almost every element of Morisette's life at that time – his boredom with working as a video game designer, his friends and acquaintances, the creative writing workshops he was attending at Concordia, even his address – was used to create the world of his narrator, Thomas. And while most authors are coy about repackaging autobiography as fiction, Morisette is unabashed. "What books are is someone saying, 'I'm feeling lonely and I want to communicate,'" he told me over drinks at a Mile End café.

He didn't always feel this way about literature. No one inspired him to read books as he was growing up in Jonquière. The literature that was taught in school seemed distant from his experience; books were written in a French that hardly resembled the *joual* he spoke at home and on the street. "Video games were a medium I felt close to as a teenager," he said. As a young adult, he moved to Quebec City, to work in game design.



**NEW TAB**  
Guillaume Morisette  
Esplanade Books  
\$19.95, paper, 164pp  
9781550653724

But in 2008, he fell into a deep depression. The next year, still suffering, he moved to Montreal, into a primarily Anglophone community, and began to pick up English books by authors like Miranda July, Jean Rhys, Mary Robison, and Jack Kerouac. "It made me laugh and consoled me," he said. "I found myself recognizing my own problems in these writers' plight."

*New Tab* opens with Thomas cut loose from all sense of community. He is moving into a new apartment with strangers from Craigslist, whose lives he discovers by "stalking" them on Facebook. At work, he creates documents that allow programmers and producers to work on the same project without communicating face-to-face. His parents have given up on being parents, preferring the company of their possessions to that of people. "I think they're going feral," Thomas muses to one of his friends. "Soon they'll eat the dog."

Yet Thomas's own social life is devoid of real connection. He spends hours chatting on Facebook, and gets drunk at parties so he doesn't have to engage

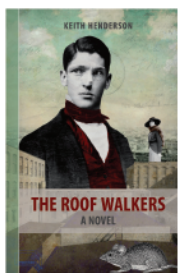
with the "stir-fry mix of personality traits." He jokes with Romy, the woman he may or may not be dating, that they should register a patent for "lonely partying."

Although the book eschews any sort of traditional narrative arc – some sections feel like the collected tweets of Guillaume Morisette – Thomas's interest in Romy gives the book its story. At first, she is an Internet ghost, a person who exists to him only through email and Facebook. But then she appears at one of the backyard film screenings, and they strike up a friendship based on their shared alienation. He writes poems with titles like "All My Relationships Are Ambiguous Relationships" and "I Am Sorry You Are a Poem, Poem"; she writes stories about "characters who have no ambition and think dating in Montreal is the absolute worst." Every so often, there are flickers of true companionship, but overall, the relationship can be summed up in a single sad sentence: "We slept in my bed, but not together."

Morisette may have captured the utter loneliness of the dot-com generation, but he does not see the Internet as a source of isolation. Nor does he see *New Tab* as critical of our dependence on the virtual world. "It embraces the

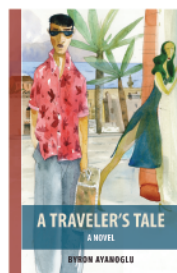
continued on page 14

## Good Summer Reading from Montreal's DC Books



"*The Roof Walkers* by Keith Henderson, an epistolary novel about the birth of Canada, is historical fiction at its best. It not only illuminates a point in time, but wraps its subject in a compelling story of intrigue and passion. Henderson examines that time near the end of the American Civil War when Thomas D'Arcy McGee's vision of 'one great nationality' in a peaceful and united Canada—then a loose confederation of provinces—was anything but a foregone conclusion." —the US Foreword Review, which selected *The Roof Walkers* as a finalist in its 2014 Book of the Year Awards.

In Byron Ayanoglu's *A Traveler's Tale*, Jefferson Cooper finds himself in a small village in Turkey. He has no idea why he is there, nor who he is. Victim of selective



amnesia, with a suitcase full of money and a demonstrably shady past, he sets out on a voyage of self-discovery—Istanbul, Mumbai, and Kerala, meeting all manner of people who seem to know him so much better than he knows himself. Along the way, he falls in love with a slender, ethereal person who leads him to a realization of who he is and to his long-sought redemption.

In Kenneth Radu's *Butterfly in Amber*, Delia, an independent-minded Montreal woman of sixty, leaves her married lover to go on a cruise along the Volga and enters into a forbidden but lustful and satisfying liaison with Kostya, a young member of the ship's crew. *Butterfly in Amber* is a novel about choices, sex, living life on unfamiliar terrain, and the courage to act according to one's desires, the consequences be damned, although discretion is always advisable, if not always followed.



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# non-fiction

## For Lenin's Sake

### BETHUNE IN SPAIN

Jesús Majada and Roderick Stewart  
 McGill-Queen's University Press  
 \$29.95, cloth, 186pp  
 978-0-7735-4383-6

**"I**t began in 1931 in Manchuria. The Fascists won that time. Then it got going again in Abyssinia, and the Fascists won again."

In the spring of 1937, as Canada's Mackenzie King government joined in keeping Republican Spain under effective embargo during the civil war against General Franco and his coup, the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune made the point as clearly as he could: "the world war has started. In fact, it's in its third stage – Manchuria, Ethiopia and now Spain."

Bethune had just returned to Canada from the frontline in Spain, and he brought with him vivid firsthand accounts. Like thousands of others from around the world, he had travelled to Spain to join anti-fascist forces in the war triggered by Franco's July 1936 military insurrection against the Spanish Republic. By the time he returned, Bethune had helped transform blood transfusion infrastructure on the Republican side, had gained the honorary military rank of *comandante* (major), and had borne witness to some of the worst aerial massacres the world had seen.



Roderick Stewart and Jesús Majada's *Bethune in Spain* rounds out the personal history of this unlikely Canadian icon and provides readers with an accessible record of Bethune's accounts of this period.

The authors trace the journey that led Bethune from his birthplace of Gravenhurst, Ontario, through Montreal and on to the Spanish front. A clear narrative is there for readers to follow. And throughout the book, the authors also step back to let Bethune speak and write for himself. Radio broadcasts he prepared, periodic letters he sent to the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (CASD), and various newspaper articles about his experiences are interspersed in full form.

This record of Bethune's perspective is to be welcomed, but his accounts of revolutionary Spain do not always measure up to the classics. The events of 1936 jolted a generation, and some of the world's sharpest writers were drawn to the front: George Orwell used rhetoric about the Republican "popular front" to reveal the fatal tension between independent workers' militias and central authorities that were militarily beholden to the Soviet Union. And Langston Hughes incisively described the contradictions that found Franco's North African troops fighting "under a banner that holds only terror and

**The events of 1936 jolted a generation, and some of the world's sharpest writers were drawn to the front.**

segregation for all the darker peoples of the earth." Some lapses in Bethune's writing are perhaps to be expected. As he himself wrote: "For Lenin's sake be reasonable. Working eighteen hour days. Can't be war correspondent and doctor too."

Still there is much of value in his writings. Consider the horrors of German and Italian attacks on anti-fascist population centres in Spain, etched into international consciousness by Picasso's *Guernica*. In the same vein, Stewart and Majada work with Bethune's firsthand accounts to vividly reconstruct the lesser-known days of slaughter after the fall of Málaga (Picasso's birthplace), as a civilian population in full retreat was bombed from the air and shelled from the sea.

The book focuses on a mixed character. Bethune reveals himself as having both medical expertise and an undue sense of entitlement to positions of organizational leadership; both anti-fascist politics that broke with the Canadian mainstream and an adherence to Communist Party lines.

One may wish to have Orwell as a supplement when Bethune writes with satisfaction: "no more C.N.T., U.G.T., F.A.I., C.P. – now just the great red five-pointed star of the people's united army." Or Hughes, when Stewart and Majada set the stage for the fall of Málaga by recalling yells of "the Moors are coming."

But in the final count, this is a story of independent solidarity – pursued by Bethune despite his home country's official parochialism – amid a defining historical fight. It deserves our thoughtful attention. **msb**

Dan Freeman-Maloy is a Montreal-based writer and a PhD student at the University of Exeter's Centre for Palestine Studies.

## Up and Away

### TAKING AVIATION TO NEW HEIGHTS

A Biography of Pierre Jeanniot  
 Jacqueline Cardinal and Laurent Lapierre  
 Translated by Donald Winkler  
 University of Ottawa Press  
 \$29.95, paper, 408pp  
 978-0-7766-3046-5

**I**n the life of Pierre Jeanniot there are plenty of lessons in how to make something of oneself: how to think clearly, work hard, succeed. Jeanniot came from circumstances that were not desperate per se, but not all that promising, either. Yet as a young technician in Montreal, he invented the "black box" flight recorder and, as president of Air Canada, he instituted computer reservation systems and no-smoking flights. The latter initiative was so successful it's hard to imagine now that people ever smoked on planes.

As chair of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) from 1991 to 2002, he steered the restructured and rejuvenated organization through new challenges: terrorism and airline security, long lines at airports, and excessive airplane pollution. Along

the way, he co-founded the Université du Québec and was its long-time chancellor – these among many other business, cultural, and charitable roles.

Born in France, in 1933, Pierre Jeanniot was the son of a family of railway station masters on his father's side, and a well-to-do, artistic family on his mother's. He lived first in Addis Ababa, where his father worked for the Franco-Ethiopian Railway, then back in France, where his father abandoned the family and where young Jeanniot's lycée decided he didn't have the "mental capacity" for higher learning.

His older sister married a Canadian soldier and moved to Montreal; in 1947, Pierre Jeanniot and his mother followed suit – by air, no less. Fourteen-year-old Pierre was anxious and airsick the whole way. His mother became a schoolteacher and Pierre boarded with a schoolmate's family on Marcell Avenue in NDG. He showed admirable zeal, working weekends at the Dominion store on Monkland and, earlier evaluations aside, he successfully graduated from the École supérieure Saint-Henri.



At 22, he became a technician at Trans-Canada Air Lines (later Air Canada), and – displaying more admirable zeal – took night courses for 10 years, earning degrees in physics and math from Sir George Williams and business administration from McGill. In the 1960s, he devised the black box, the flight information recorder in an indestructible case. It was installed first on Air Canada planes and soon on every plane on earth.

His term as president and CEO of Air Canada, 1984 to 1990, had its share of challenges: the computer reservation system, instituted first at Air Canada and then sold to other airlines; the rise (and fall) of cut-rate airlines; turning Air Canada into a global carrier; and the privatization of the company, which Jeanniot saw as a means of raising cash to buy new planes. There was also crisis with the Association des Gens de l'Air who, in the mid-1970s, demanded more French in Air Canada cockpits. Jeanniot was seen by some as a villain at the time; a decade later, he was given an award by the same group for having promoted French in aviation.

It's all here in this big, thoroughly researched, well-written, and very

readable biography. Jacqueline Cardinal and Laurent Lapierre conducted 29 interviews with Pierre Jeanniot between 2007 and 2009, a good indication of their thoroughness. The authors, both affiliated with HEC Montréal, have distinguished academic backgrounds and are experienced researchers and writers – it shows.

Mention must also be made of the translation, by the Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based translator and filmmaker, Donald Winkler. Suffice it to say that one would never guess that this is a translation: the writing is that smooth and clear.

It is interesting to read how so many of these situations arose and how Pierre Jeanniot responded to them. And if indeed leaders are drawn to biography for the examples and lessons they provide – as the authors of *Taking Aviation to New Heights* say in their introduction – present and future leaders might do well to observe the examples and lessons provided in this fine biography. **msb**

Dane Lanken, author of *Montreal Movie Palaces: Great Theatres of the Golden Era 1884-1938* (Penumbra Press), was a co-founder in 1973 of the heritage group Save Montreal.

# graphic novel

## The Love of a Good Woman

ON LOVING WOMEN

Diane Obomsawin

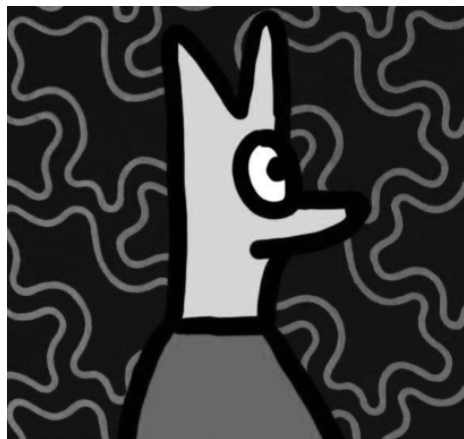
Translated by Helge Dascher

Drawn & Quarterly

\$16.95, paper, 88pp

987-1-77046-140-6

Look at the back cover of *On Loving Women* and, down in the bottom left corner, you'll see a bar code. Its presence, of course, is nothing remarkable in and of itself. Every book needs one, and designers, as a rule, tend to incorporate them as inconspicuously as possible. In this case, though, it's uncommonly prominent, not just larger than usual but contained within the shape of a cartoon heart. I know what you're thinking, and yes, in almost any other conceivable context this is the kind of thing that would be revoltingly twee. But don't be put off, please, because by the time you've finished Diane Obomsawin's sweet, generous, poignant book, you'll find yourself thinking that a heart-shaped bar code, with its dual implica-



tion of romance and more prosaic human interchange, is the perfect teaser for what's inside.

*On Loving Women* is a graphic novel, but only in the loosest sense of that often-ambiguous designation. Montreal-born Obomsawin, who made her English-language debut in 2009 with a comics version of the life of nineteenth-century German founding Kaspar Hauser, has gathered 10 sexual awakening/coming-out accounts – her own and those of nine other women – and told them in discrete chapters: “Mathilde’s Story,” “Maxime’s Story,” etc.

The sequencing of the stories follows no particular logic, creating an impressionistic, cumulative effect. Text is mini-

mal, deployed in plainspoken first-person sentences (“I had this next-door neighbour, Lorraine. I liked her a lot.”) set above the images, with occasional, judicious use of speech-bubble dialogue. Explicit political content is absent, with the message of personal liberation and gradual but measurable societal progress all the more effective for being implied rather than stated. Visually, Obomsawin uses flattened perspective, the compositions stylized but simple and uncluttered, the colour range limited to a muted grey-scale, and each chapter’s period and setting indicated by a few well-placed details; compositionally she sticks mostly to a classic six-panel-per-page grid.

For all the variety in the stories Obomsawin is presenting here, her subject has become fairly common. What really sets Obomsawin apart is a counterintuitive but ingenious choice she makes in depicting her characters. A fair clue to that can be found in “Mathilde’s Story”: “Recently, I’ve come to realize that all the women I’ve ever loved ... have horse faces.” Notice it doesn’t say “horsey” or “horse-like” or “equine.” That’s because the women in

question literally do have the faces of horses.

For all its realism, then, *On Loving Women* is also surreal. The characters’ bodies are comically elongated, more or less human, but the heads and facial features anthropomorphically incorporate elements from various mammals: horses, yes, but also dogs, pigs, rabbits, and unidentifiable hybrids thereof. What might appear at a glance to be a distancing device actually has the paradoxical effect of throwing these human stories into relief and bringing the reader closer to the characters; the slight skewing lets us consider, with a new clarity, narratives that we might otherwise be tempted to take for granted. Similar strategies, to different ends, can be found in works as far-ranging as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Matt Groening’s *Life In Hell*, so if you’ve appreciated either of

those, there’s no reason you can’t take the leap with Obomsawin. **ms**

**Ian McGillis** is books columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*. His next book, *Higher Ground: One White Person’s Lifelong Relationship With Soul, Reggae and Rap*, will be published by Biblioasis.



## Morissette continued

Internet as a profoundly transformative experience,” he said. “I don’t feel alone. When you’re at parties, you’re at the mercy of other people. On the Internet, there’s some form of protection.”

The illusion of safety that the Internet provides is everywhere in his writing. Intimate details are revealed in quirky sections, often no more than one or two sentences long, in the same way that millions of people reveal their most private longings and rejections through Facebook status updates. Some of these sentences are deep (“entire lives archived on the internet like garbage piled up in a landfill”), some ridiculous (“rice”), and others are simply strange: Thomas imagines his penis as a “take-a-penny, leave-a-penny” tray, and compares his pain to that of a sea turtle.

“My poems weren’t very poetic, they were more like emails gone wrong,” Morissette explained. And if the prose in *New Tab* sometimes feels improvised or offhand, it was intentional on his part: he spent four or five months just trying to establish the tone of his novel, reworking the same material until it felt right to him.

His interest in experimentation was what led him to writing in English in the first place. “English is easier to play with than French,” he said. “It’s like this Lego language. You can make a word out of anything.” His

writing is at its most inventive when he writes about depression:

I wanted reality to go away for a while, make me miss it a little. Reality was a kind of insomnia, always there, just there, annoyingly there, in my bed, at the park, inside every raccoon, behind movie stars in movie trailers, there, being, occurring, fluctuating, not telling me what it wanted from me, giving me the silent treatment, a kind of torture.

Even though *New Tab* is a novel haunted by depression and loneliness, it is a record of Morissette’s self-reinvention: he changed jobs and languages during the year and a half spent living at 4562 Saint-Dominique. He discovered a creative community among the people who attended the backyard film screenings. He found an escape from his depression.

The chameleon-like ease with which Morissette has been able to reshape his identity does come with some disadvantages. “Since I chose to write in English, I’m doomed to be ignored by the French Canadian community,” he said. That said, he is happy with the book and the changes it documents: it was “liberating to write honestly, openly, almost violently about personal experience.” **ms**

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

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# Power (Outage) of Love

## MY NEIGHBOUR'S BIKINI

Jimmy Beaulieu

Translated by KerryAnn Cochrane

Conundrum Press

\$15, paper, 64pp

978-1-894994-83-5

Jimmy Beaulieu is a creative powerhouse in the French-speaking graphic novel milieu. The cartoonist has published 16 books in the past 14 years in addition to working as the publisher at Mécanique générale and starting his own small-print press, Colosse. In 2010, English Canada was finally able to see some of Beaulieu's work with the release of *Suddenly Something Happened*.



It's the story of Beaulieu's life: his childhood growing up among a huge extended family on Île d'Orléans, his parents' separation, his years of single-dorm in Quebec City and Montreal, and finally life with his girlfriend in Montreal's Rosemont neighbourhood. *Suddenly Something Happened* showcased Beaulieu's significant skill as a graphic artist and his wonderful sense of humour.

Originally published in French in

2006, *My Neighbour's Bikini* is the story of two shy neighbours living on the Plateau who meet on a sweltering summer day when everything grinds to a halt because of a power blackout. Simon introduces himself to his neighbour, Bernadette, on a downtown street, and, after they walk home together, Bernadette invites Simon to go

for a swim at the neighbourhood pool. The chance meeting has an authentic cringe-worthy feel to it, mainly because of some highly realistic dialogue, and this short tale offers a very accurate depiction of Montreal. However, the story has some sizeable shortcomings.

In a graphic novel it is imperative that the reader readily understands the relationship between two consecutive panels, through visual or textual clues. In *My Neighbour's Bikini*, the relationship between panels is not always clear. Two vignettes that have zero or little impact on the outcome of the narrative were inserted into the storyline. In the first instance, Bernadette and Simon's conversation is interrupted by a sequence with a young man cycling on Mount Royal. In the second, the story jumps abruptly from Bernadette and Simon



walking home to two women in an apartment sharing an intimate moment. One of these women, who the reader later meets at the pool, is Bernadette's neighbour. While these two vignettes were initially confusing, they do add some atmospheric detail to the story, lending it an overall dreamlike quality. Introducing vignettes into the traditional storyline is a recurring pattern in Beaulieu's work. This is especially true in *À la faveur de la nuit* (2010).

Another recurring feature in Jimmy Beaulieu's work (unfortunately non-existent in *Suddenly Something Happens*) is nudity, which is tastefully presented and never gratuitous in *My Neighbour's Bikini*. Beaulieu has considerable talent at drawing nudes, and the author should be given credit for presenting natural-looking, full-hipped women rather than the standard waif variety. In the past, he has presented work with frontal nudes of men, which was the subject of complaints at the

Quai des Bulles Festival in Saint-Malo, France. Naked women were fine, but a naked man in an intimate moment was apparently offensive...

I was initially puzzled by the publisher's choice to translate a book that was first released in French eight years ago – it does not reflect how far the author has come since then. But *My Neighbour's Bikini*, although not Beaulieu's best, is tamer than some of his other work, and it may be a way to test the waters to see how English speakers will react to his more audacious content. Overall, once readers accept his non-traditional storyline, they will enjoy the oneiric quality of his work, and of course, the fact that his characters, both male and female, look like everyday people – a refreshing and welcome change. mrb

When **Heather Leighton** isn't reading, she's blogging at *Unexpected Twists and Turns*.

# Love, Theft, and Bibliophilia in the Mile End

## PETTY THEFT

Pascal Girard

Translated by Helge Dascher

Drawn & Quarterly

\$19.95, paper, 100pp

978-1-77046-152-9

Pascal Girard's *Petty Theft* is a fictionalized autobiographical account of the author's surrogate character, also named Pascal, and his increasingly hare-brained schemes to stalk, date, and ultimately confront a cute girl he sees shoplifting a copy of his book. This innocent enough set-up is followed by an escalating series of comedic embarrassments in which Pascal repeatedly says the wrong thing at the wrong time and where everything he does to get out of trouble has precisely the opposite effect. Girard previously mined his self-titled character's social and romantic awkwardness to great comedic effect in *Reunion*, a book about a disastrous high school reunion. This time, Pascal's knowledge that the girl he is romantically pursuing is a shoplifter allows him a measure of detached confi-



dence as he assures himself that he is really only doing "detective work."

What that means, exactly, is unclear to both Pascal and his friends in the story, who have trouble understanding his strange fascination for solving the "case." Of course, one explanation is that the girl, Sarah, is cute and that Pascal is flattered by the implicit compliment she paid him when she shoplifted his book. As he stalks her through landmarks familiar to anyone who has spent time in Montreal's Mile End, the initially creepy vibe turns rather sweet, especially as Sarah proves to be entirely unrepentant about her shoplifting. In the end, *Petty Theft* is closer to being a comedy of errors about competing approaches to bibliophilic book-collecting than a full-fledged detective story, and it is Girard's vibrant and accomplished cartooning that makes the featherlight narrative come alive.

A master slapstick artist with a keen sense of comic timing and a knack for pinpointing the exact moment when human interaction takes a turn for the absurd, Girard is especially skilful at extracting humour from precisely rendered body language.

While some gags ultimately fall flat – there are only so many times dropping a hammer or blindly bumping

into things can be milked for laughs in a book this size, after all – the hit-to-miss ratio is high, especially when the jokes originate from Pascal's unsuccessful attempts to act cool in front of Sarah. His frequent moments of imagining the two of them together – running naked on a treadmill while holding hands, romantically shoplifting together, and making love on a pile of books – are funniest of all. Supported by his pared-down graphic style, which emanates nervous energy from every squiggly line and cartoony bead of sweat, Girard's storytelling is both fluid and comically self-aware throughout *Petty Theft's* tightly-paced pages. The habitual reliance on a six-panel page layout and medium-shot drawings of two people talking, however, gets slightly repetitive and sometimes makes the story seem like a book-length newspaper comic strip.

This tendency towards monotony in panel and page composition is counterbalanced somewhat by Girard's large cast of colourful characters and the lively feel of lived-in local colour he adds by depicting easily recognizable Mile End locations like Wilensky's, Nouveau Palais, and the bookstore operated by his publisher, Drawn & Quarterly. As much a love letter to his neighbourhood as a charming tale about the perils of conflating sexual attraction with bibliophilia and detective work, *Petty Theft* continues Girard's impressive run as one of the funniest comics chroniclers of masculine romantic anxiety. mrb

**Frederik Byrn Köhlert** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Montreal who studies and writes about comics.



# Réal Amerika

## AMERIKA

Based on the novel by Franz Kafka

Réal Godbout

Translated by Helge Dascher

Conundrum Press

\$20, paper, 184pp

978-1-894994-81-1

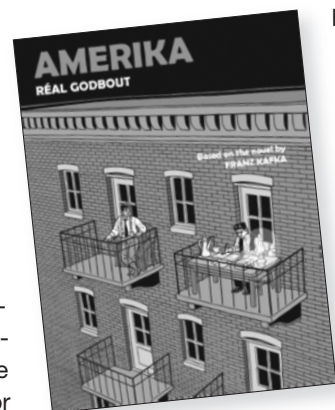
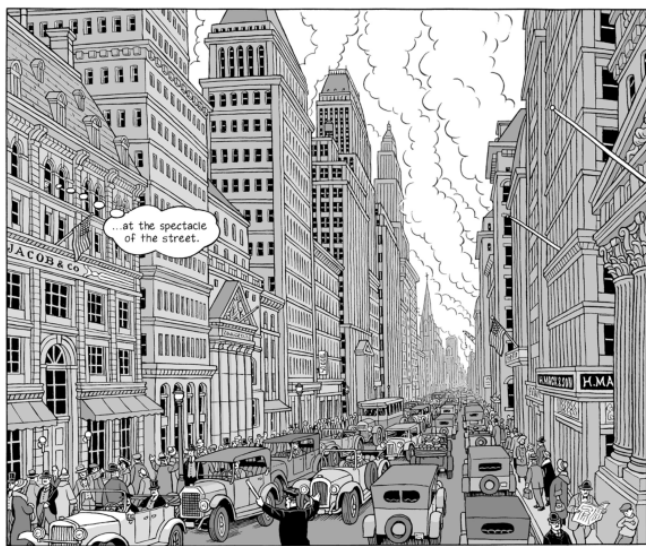
**F**ranz Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika* begins with a striking, factually inaccurate description of the Statue of Liberty: "The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds of heaven." Réal Godbout's graphic novel adaptation opens with a perfectly menacing, blade-wielding Lady Liberty, capturing from the very first frame how Kafka got America wrong, but in so doing, got *Amerika* right.

*Amerika* is in capable hands (and a good thing, too, since Kafka wrote it without ever having seen this side of the Atlantic). Godbout, a seasoned graphic novelist, has produced a faithful adaptation of the posthumous novel that follows teenaged Karl Rossmann as he tries to make something of himself in the United States after being sent away from Prague for having impregnated his parents' 35-year-old housekeeper. The book features crisp and meticulously detailed black-and-white illustrations, and the whimsical, comedic, and occasionally surreal moments of the original story are particularly well served by the graphic novel form, making some scenes feel foreordained for a visual medium.

Karl's adventure begins on an implausibly fortuitous note – a wealthy, American, and heretofore unknown uncle adopts him before he can even disembark the ocean liner – but his fortunes (literal and figurative) dwindle with each chapter. *Amerika* is a series of loosely related events that happen to Karl, yet he throws himself into each new scenario with the vehemence of someone who has carefully charted his own course. As it happens, nearly all the characters find themselves suddenly and swiftly overcome by feeling: a hatred of their interlocutor, for instance, or the necessity of hatching an escape plan. If readers are left feeling jilted and jostled by this abruptness, it would be a mistake to blame the graphic novel format. Indeed, this is the pace of the original, and the rapidity with which stark changes occur is, in a sense, what makes *Amerika* well suited to the graphic novel.

Replicating the rhythm of Kafka's *Amerika* is, nonetheless, the greatest challenge Godbout faces. His *Amerika* is condensed, skimming over some of Kafka's perplexingly long descriptions or conversations, which helps readability but sacrifices some of their peculiarity in the process.

Godbout's adaptation was first written and drawn in French (translated from the original German), meaning that this English translation is not one, but two, steps removed from the original text. Fortunately, aside from the appearance of a handful of anachronistic curse words in one scene, there was only one segment where the story suffered as a result. In the final chapter, Karl seeks out employment at the Grand Nature Theater of Oklahoma and is reunited with an acquaintance who makes her living as part of a chorus of trumpet-blowing angels. She encourages



him to present his candidacy to the theatre, and upon being hired he tries to find her again only to be told that the travelling musicians had gone on to the next town. Karl responds, "Too bad. One of the angels is a friend of mine..." In the 1946 English translation, however, Karl responds, "I had a friend among the angels." Fortune and mis-

fortune strike our protagonist with simultaneous blows, but there is a subtle serendipity that follows him, too. The Grand Nature Theater of Oklahoma seems too good to be true: will Karl finally find his place in America? Or is he bound to meet some truly unsavoury ending, traipsing foolishly into the theatre, a Pinocchio lured into Stromboli's nefarious playland? *Amerika* is a light affair by Kafka's standards, and his long-time friend and literary executor Max Brod maintained that Kafka intended it to end on a "note of reconciliation."

We don't know what the future holds for Karl Rossman, but – and I suspect Réal Godbout agrees – we can rest assured that he, at the least, has a friend among the angels. **mrb**

**Sarah Woolf** is the associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*.

# Worth a Thousand Words

## PHOTOBOOTH

A Biography

Meags Fitzgerald

Conundrum Press

\$20.00, paper, 280pp

978-1-894994-82-8

**P**eople have squeezed into them, kissed in them, brought props and costumes and pets into them. Andy Warhol had commercial success with them. Amélie Poulain chased a man around Paris because of them. Even the Mafia used them. Nearly 100 years old, chemical photobooths are rarely given their due importance in photographic history, and now they're quietly vanishing from our public spaces. As early as next summer, digital booths may be our only option for impromptu four-frame photo shoots.

This history is just some of what *Photobooth: A Biography* has to offer. In her graphic novel debut, writer, illustrator, and self-described "photobooth geek" Meags Fitzgerald draws back the curtain on an industry in flux and shares her own relationship with the machines.

What began as an online crowd-sourcing campaign aimed at funding a trip to a photobooth convention quickly snowballed into a season spent abroad, countless art exhibits, and a job in Chicago. Along the way, Fitzgerald interviewed everyone from vintage booth owners to long-time technicians to a man whose sample photo strips have adorned the sides of booths for over 25 years. Now her travel and research has culminated in *Photobooth*.

The novel opens with history lessons: the rise and demise of early photobooth prototypes, the story of the man who invented the photobooth as we know it today, as well as the early days of Fitzgerald's photobooth courtship. While detail heavy, it certainly isn't dull; Fitzgerald puts a lot of effort into keeping the facts fascinating and the jargon accessible.

It also reads with a sense of urgency. The production of colour photobooth paper ceased in 2007 and the supply is projected to run out by next summer. Fitzgerald completed this project as quickly as she could with the hope of encouraging people to experience the booths firsthand before they disappear entirely and, perhaps, to reverse their fate.

And yet, *Photobooth* isn't simply a



heartfelt historical memoir or a compelling preservation campaign. It also explores the darker and philosophical sides of these machines. One moment Fitzgerald will be conflicted about the use of a known carcinogen in the developing process and the next she'll be waxing poetic on the motivations and desires of collectors.

Fitzgerald shares her experiences of the booths as confessionals, time machines, and sanctuaries; her relationship with them is so intimate it's as if – as she concluded herself – she's written this memoir about one of her dearest friends.

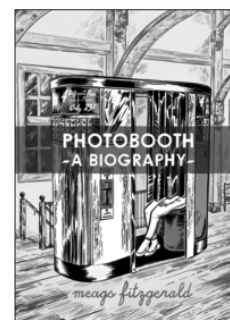
Largely composed in black and grey ink, *Photobooth* is brimming with detailed illustrations of photo strips from her own collection and with full-page portraits of historical and contemporary booths. It often feels more like a travel scrapbook than your typical graphic novel. For the most part, this stylistic decision complements the subject matter; tossing the six-panel-per-page standard out the window gave Fitzgerald the freedom to cut and paste and arrange to her liking. The words gently fill the space left by the illustrations and the pages still have plenty of room to breathe.

What this book occasionally lacks in tightness, it more than makes up in timeliness and heart. Fitzgerald pulls off what our favourite teachers seem to do effortlessly: ease us into loving a subject we couldn't have imagined falling for.

"Do you really think a book could change the course of [the photobooth's] fate?" Fitzgerald wonders near the end.

Time and again, history has proven that technology waits for no one. Yet *Photobooth* will have you rooting for the vintage machines. Perhaps this little gem will help transform their imminent fate to become artifacts in beautiful and unpredictable ways. **mrb**

**Alex Bachmayer** is a Computation Arts student, artist, and lover of graphic novels.





**Moure** continued

real is monstrous,” as Pato worries, how do we find the balance between reality and... would its antidote be metaphor?

EM: There are decidedly political implications. Galician is a language that is and has been under threat. I write in a hegemonic language, English. No one reading in English can know the political and affective pressure of having a native language under threat. Yet Pato’s work transcends the concerns of her language and nation, and resonates with us, as we all belong to the nation of trying to speak in the face of the commercial obliteration of speaking.

KG: You frequently translate from parent languages, notably Portuguese, Galician, and Spanish. Is there one or another that seems to fit you better, like a coat you feel more comfortable in?

EM: Galician is the root language of modern Portuguese, though with centuries of repressions it also became invaded by Spanish. When you learn Galician, you end up learning a lot of Spanish (plus no one believes you speak Galician and always speaks Spanish to you), and it is easy to read Portuguese and in a couple of days to hear it and speak it, too. I consider myself to be a Galician speaker, though, and the other two languages come to me by osmosis. I think and dream in Galician.

KG: What drew you to Galician initially?

EM: Its sound drew me when I first went with my father in 1994 to the village on the Miño River from where his grandfather had emigrated in 1848 to Lisbon, then to Paris and London. Galician has a rich poetic history, and a rich, rich presence of women in contemporary poetry as well. And to add one speaker to a language under threat is to help it survive.

KG: You’re working on a translation of the novel *Mar Paraguayo*, by Wilson Bueno, whose work hasn’t been translated into English; you’re also working on your next book of poems. Is there any cross-pollination when you work on writing and translation projects simultaneously?

EM: Oh yes. It gets confusing, which is rather lovely, a lovely confusion, a helpful one. I end up writing in many languages at once, then have to decide if I will translate or leave or...

KG: One of the attractive aspects of your writing in general is the freedom with which you inhabit language: every word has a slot into which it wriggles, regardless of the language for which it was originally intended. Author, language, syntax, image – where is your primary allegiance?

EM: Just to being alive in words. *A min non me importa en que idioma*. I love languages. ■

Katia Grubisic is a writer, editor, and translator.

**No one reading in English can know the political and affective pressure of having a native language under threat.**

Fire-breathing clerics,  
Montreal’s Red Light District,  
Claude Gauvreau, Kittie  
Bruneau, Alfred Pellan,  
Jean-Paul Riopelle, the city’s  
fevered bohemian community  
in the dying days of the  
Duplessis regime.



Of Jesuits and Bohemians

*Tales of My Early Youth*

JEAN-CLAUDE GERMAIN

Translated by Donald Winkler

OF JESUITS AND BOHEMIANS

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# YOUNG READERS

**T**here is something magical about picture books that manage to successfully tackle big life questions while also engaging and entertaining the early reader.

In *A Fish Named Glub*, the small and rather ordinary piscatorial protagonist swims around his bowl pondering the profound and the existential. Glub can't stop asking himself questions: "Who am I?" "Where do I come from?" "Where do I belong?" And he can't stop worrying. The world around his bowl, in the rundown diner where he comes to consciousness on page one, is filled with bossy men and the threatening women who, thinking the diner is no place for a scrawny yellow fish, try to dispose of him. But in the end Glub triumphs when his terrified darting about in the water produces shimmering underwater bubbles – bubbles that make real the dreams of whoever plunges their hand into his bowl.

Josée Bisailon's evocatively textured multimedia illustrations make each page a sensory delight. But while the idea of a small fish explaining the big picture might sound good on paper, *A Fish Named Glub's* sometimes obtuse plot and occasionally awkward writing mean that in the end this book neither answers our questions nor engages our interest.

It's the dawn of the twentieth century and the Tweedles are about to take the plunge and buy a car. Papa and Mama and little brother Francis are enthusiastic, but sister Frances is skeptical. The Tweedles eschew the unpredictable steam and noxious fossil fuel options and buy an electric model, a choice that elicits mockery from their neighbours. But the drive home is so traumatizing for Papa that, the next morning, he decides to ride his bike to work. That is how Frances ends up saving the day by driving the electric car – and her injured, previously scornful neighbour – to the hospital. At the end of *The Tweedles Go Electric*, we see little brother Francis and big sister Frances in the future: Francis becomes a racing car driver, while Frances drives the electric car from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The illustrations by Marie Lafrance are extraordinary. The world she has created takes us back in time: whimsical penny-farthing bicycles, tidy stone houses with neat painted shutters, wooden barrels, and a motif of spinning old-fashioned car wheels with spokes.

Children will appreciate and understand the Tweedles' attempts to find a car that will not only transport them quickly and safely, but one that will also limit pollution. However, not all parents will feel comfortable with the gender stereotypes used to describe the siblings: "Like

most girls, she is more interested in higher education. Speed gives Frances nosebleeds, and adventure seems to go along with getting lost, which makes her nervous." As for her brother, "Francis, like most boys, loves adventure."

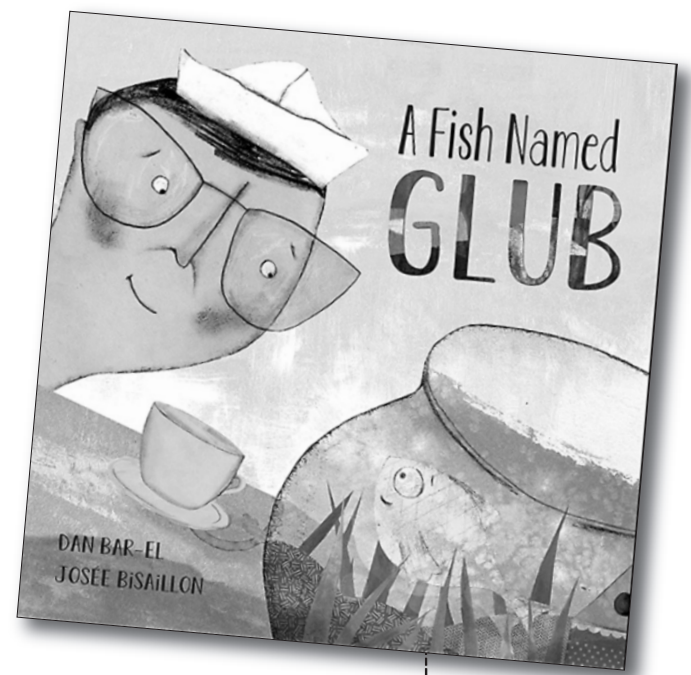
Kulling has written a lovely book that successfully reveals some of the connections between life 100 years ago and now. Unfortunately, her generalizations about the sexes, while limited to a handful of sentences, make it less likely that this release will become a family favourite.

*Starring Me and You* is the third book in Geneviève Côté's Piggy and Bunny series, a celebration of friendship and individuality, targeting readers two years old and up. Like her earlier offerings, *Without You* and *Me and You*, this newest release features bright, colourful drawings, simple text, and a big book format well suited to the preschool audience.

Piggy and Bunny are unlikely friends: Bunny is shy and nervous, while Piggy is outgoing and rambunctious. Côté's earlier books, especially *You and Me*, were both poignant and funny, but *Starring Me and You* comes off as preachy and stiff. Aside from one illustration of Bunny in the throes of a massive case of stage fright, Côté's usual lighthearted humour is largely absent.

Côté's success with the previous books in this series might mean that the writer/illustrator has been encouraged to produce an endless stream of Piggy and Bunny books. Hopefully, in the future, Côté will be given the opportunity to put Piggy and Bunny aside and produce work for young readers that reflects her prodigious creativity.

Frances Itani is an award-winning and internationally published novelist, poet, and children's book author. *Best Friend Trouble* tells the story of a spat between Hanna the raccoon and her friend Lizzy the skunk. It's fun to watch Hanna get out her frustrations: she goes down to the basement and bangs nails with her older brother, clangs a pair of finger cymbals with her dad, and draws an



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**28 TIPS FOR A FEARLESS GRADE 6**  
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Lormier  
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explosive picture while sharing her mother's desk. And who can resist Hanna's super cute pet hamster Octavia?

Geneviève Després's rich watercolour and pencil crayon illustrations are strong and cinematic. Her colours are warm – fiery oranges, crimson reds, and creamy yellows.

The combination of good writing and illustration make *Best Friend Trouble* a good choice for summer reading, ideal for those long hot afternoons when nobody seems able to get along.

If you haven't heard of Catherine Austen, you've been missing out on one of Canada's finest young adult, preteen, and children's book authors. She charms and informs young readers with a feline named Isis who has a lot in common with her immortal ancient Egyptian namesake, scares the pants off teenagers with a terrifying dystopian thriller, and writes hilarious short chapter books for preteens who are just starting to dip their toes into the sea of adolescent angst.

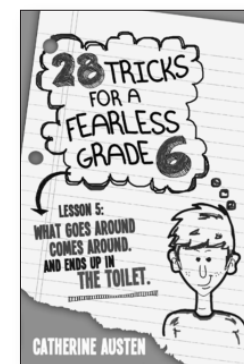
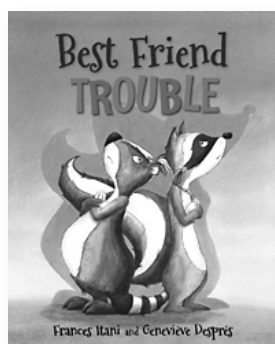
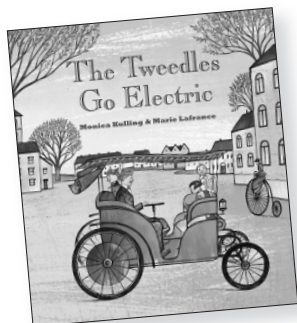
While it's true that Austen has written books for specific audiences, what sets her work apart is its ability to resonate with any reader who appreciates strong characters, smart dialogue, and fast-paced, surprising plot lines.

The title of *28 Tips for a Fearless Grade 6* – a companion to *23 Tips for Surviving Grade Six*, which was aimed at the female preteen market – identifies Austen's targeted audience, but this slender tome packs enough laughs and overall good feelings to satisfy readers aged 11 to 111.

Dave and his friends in *28 Tips* have no choice: they have to survive Grade 6. Protagonist and amateur psychologist Dave Davidson and his left-footed, dog-hating, future-fearing, paranoid-of-public-speaking classmates fret and wisecrack their way through the novel, allowing older readers to revisit the days when we were full of ideas and potential, and at the mercy of our exploding hormones.

If you buy only one book this summer, do yourself a favour and make it a book by Catherine Austen. Regardless of whether you're a young reader, a preteen, a young adult, or a full-fledged grown-up, this gem of a Quebec writer will be sure to take you on a magnificent literary ride. ■

**B.A. Markus** recently won the Carte Blanche/CNFC Competition for her essay, "On Good Days."



By Kai Cheng Thom

THE  
MILE END  
CAFÉ

# Retiring from Gender

“So here it is. My friends call me he, or they. The government and most of my family call me she. The media calls me she, because I don’t trust them enough to request that they do anything else. My lovers call me sweetheart. Or baby. Somewhere in all of that, I find myself. These are, after all, only words.”

Ivan E. Coyote, *Gender Failure*

Though I have never had the pleasure of formally meeting *Gender Failure* authors Rae Spoon and Ivan E. Coyote, their voices and stories feel as warm and achingly familiar to me as those of my own family members. We share a certain kinship, in the sense that transgender and genderqueer individuals in North America are bound together by experiences of marginality, of gendered violence, of living and dying at odds with the categories “male” or “female” imposed on us at birth. For the luckiest among us – that is to say, those who survive – these shared experiences also grant us a community in exile, a kind of chosen family: bittersweet, fractious, and often dysfunctional to be sure, but family nonetheless. At our worst, we are at each other’s throats, fighting for scraps of freedom tossed from the table of the “LGBT rights” movement. At our best, we live, love, and mourn as one.

Based on a live storytelling and musical performance show that Spoon and Coyote toured across North America and Europe, *Gender Failure* is a tender evocation of the trans and queer communities at their best, worst, and everything between. Made up of letters, personal essays, song lyrics, and photographs, the book is a promise between its co-authors. Coyote writes: “Rae and I vowed to write [a work] that would shine a light on our true trans selves ... to create a space together to be brave inside of, and we made a promise to place our deeply personal and individual truths on the dashboard as our compass.”

Spoon and Coyote live up to this promise. They explore with gentle humour and poignancy such intimate topics as burgeoning sexuality and gender dysphoria in childhood, experiences in mental health care, coming out (and coming out again), gender normative washrooms, and top surgery. Spoon, a noted singer-songwriter and composer, complements veteran author and storyteller Coyote’s trademark tongue-in-cheek wisdom with a literary voice as soulfully earnest as their acclaimed folk songs. Both authors’ backgrounds as entertainers shine through in *Gender Failure*; their prose is unpretentious and easy to read. These are stories from the kitchen table, from truck stops and basement dive bars, from long road trips and battered rocking chairs.



To most readers outside the queer and trans communities, the novelty of *Gender Failure* is no doubt its nuanced yet accessible glimpse into the complexities – occasionally hilarious and often harrowing – of life in the margin of gender norms. To those of us inside these communities, Spoon and Coyote stand tall as part of, as elders of, a growing legacy of queer and trans artists and writers; the stories they offer are anything but novel. Spoon’s account of struggling with body dysphoria, choosing between hormone replacement therapy and preserving their singing voice, and ultimately “retiring” from the gender binary, is at once a unique personal narrative and the ongoing, exhausting journey that all trans individuals undertake in coming to terms with the complex relationship between identity, body, and socialization. Coyote’s description of undergoing

a psychiatric evaluation in order to qualify for top surgery is a heartbreakingly funny satirical commentary on the medical establishment’s violently inept approach to trans people’s health care. *Gender Failure* thus offers the reader a rare and necessary vision: a reflection of the marginalized through our own, rather than the mainstream’s, eyes.

It would be a mistake, however, to construe Spoon and Coyote’s reflection of transgender lives as wholly representative of the trans community. Indeed, the authors themselves make this clear, reminding readers that their lived experiences are just that: the limited, real experiences of white, trans-masculine individuals. Still, for this Asian, transwoman reviewer, the fact that out of some thirty-odd stories about queer and trans people, only two prominently feature a transwoman – and none feature trans people of colour – is worthy of mention. The authors acknowledge this lacuna and the fact that transwomen of colour, within the broader trans and queer community, inhabit what amounts to a state of emergency in terms of violence and barriers to social services and public health; yet this eases only a little the bittersweet reality it evokes. But then, this is the nature of family and community, much like *Gender Failure* itself: flawed, bittersweet, and beautiful throughout. mb

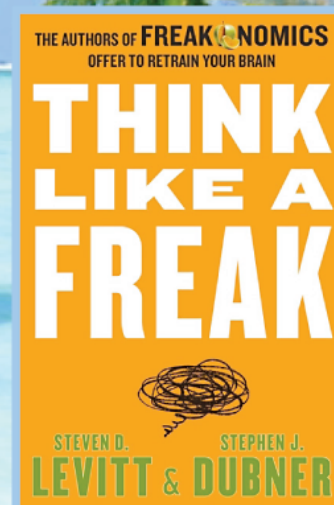
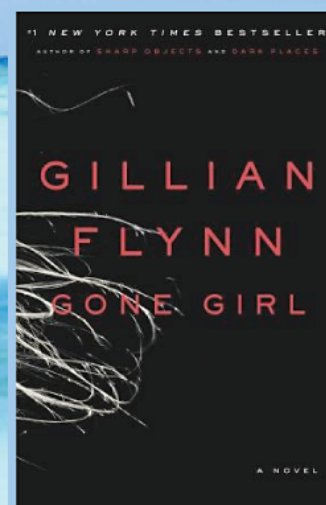
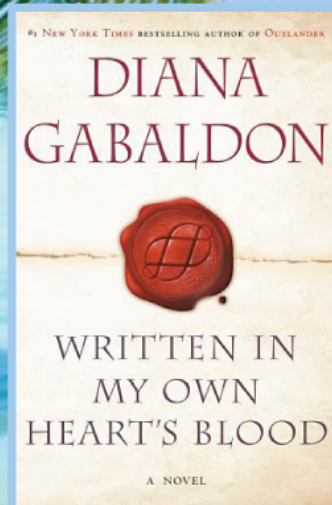
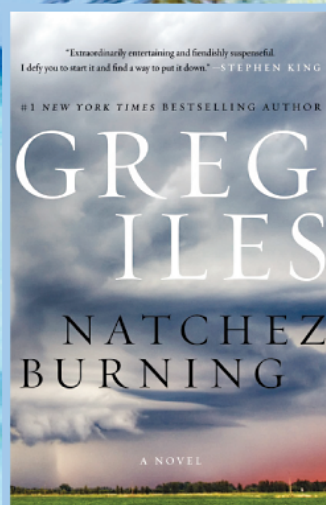
**Kai Cheng Thom** is a queer writer and spoken word artist in Montreal. Their writing has appeared in several publications, including *ditch*, and, most recently, *Matrix Magazine*.



**GENDER FAILURE**  
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