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SPRING 2015 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

The Hangover

Post-referendum Confessions in Chantal Hébert's *The Morning After*

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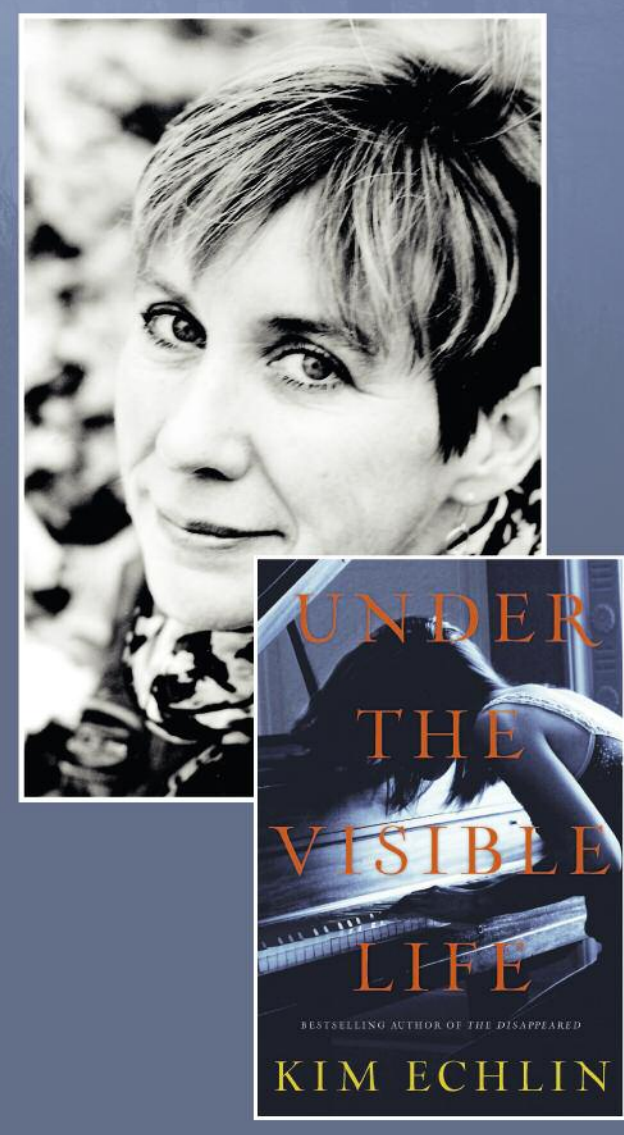

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Neil Smith's pet Onomatopoeia are always a great source of inspiration. *Ba-dum tish!*

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The Only Adult in the Room

PHOTO BY TERENCE BYRNES

BY CLAIRE HOLDEN ROTHMAN

During the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty, Chantal Hébert, one of Canada's most popular political pundits, moved her family from Ontario to Quebec. Ironically, the decision had nothing to do with politics.

"I spent the referendum taking my younger son to entrance exams for high school in Montreal," she explains on a cold, bright January morning in Montreal, the city she continues to call home. "I didn't want my sons to be Ottawa people. I wanted them to be in a place where there were four universities."

For a woman who has devoted the last forty years to discussing national politics on air and in print, Hébert seems surprisingly dispassionate. *The Morning After*, her fascinating new book about the 1995 Quebec referendum, contains not a whisper of her own political views.

She is sixty years old, although the smiling woman sitting across the table from me seems younger. Perhaps it's the jeans she's wearing, or the absence of make-up. Or perhaps it's the curiosity and the glint of humour in her eye. She belongs to the baby boomer generation, which has been the heart and soul of the Quebec sovereignty movement since the 1960s. In her approach to that issue, however, she defies generational stereotypes.

"I've covered a lot of constitutional stuff," she says, "and I have to say, the bigger the story, the less I'm invested in it. That's the way we are trained as journalists. You cover a good story, but it's not a story in which I'm the main character."

Far from being the main character, in *The Morning After*, Hébert is completely effaced. The book is a series of interviews with seventeen key players in the 1995 Quebec referendum (including Jean Chrétien and Daniel Johnson Jr., from the No camp, and the triumvirate of Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, and Mario Dumont from the Yes). In every case, Hébert steps aside to let others tell their stories.

But here's the kicker. Instead of requesting a rehash of actual events, Hébert (with help from former Liberal and Bloc MP Jean Lapierre) asks her subjects what they would have done had the Yes side won.

Why, I ask, did she decide to write about the referendum twenty years after the fact?

"These people have never told their story," she replies. "There weren't many referendum books by the main players. I thought, before they disappear and their voice becomes what other people make of them, I'm going to … ask them to tell me how they imagined the nine-o'clock news that night, if [Société Radio-Canada news anchor] Bernard Derome announced the Yes had won."

Parizeau is eighty-four years old today; Chrétien is eighty-one, and Bouchard is in his mid-seventies. The book is a time capsule. The revelations it contains, however, puncture time-worn myths.

The No camp offered Hébert few surprises. She had expected divergent views concerning what to do in the event of a Yes victory. She had also guessed correctly that the people in Quebec would be at loggerheads with Jean Chrétien in Ottawa, and that the rest of Canada would skirmish over conflicting local interests.

What Hébert found astonishing was the level of chaos in the Yes camp. It was common knowledge that Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard was more cautious about secession than Premier Parizeau. Even so, Hébert was surprised at how fundamentally they disagreed about what a Yes victory would have actually meant. Even more disconcerting was that the two Yes leaders showed so "little inclination to talk to each other about the way forward." On the day of the referendum, Parizeau refused to take any of Bouchard's calls and left his so-called "Negotiator-in-Chief" on his own to watch the results come in. Bouchard admits that when the final result was announced, he was completely in the dark as to Parizeau's plans.

Yet, according to Hébert, Parizeau was "possibly the only adult in the room." He was, she says, the only

one in the Yes camp "who seemed to have been thinking about the reality of creating a country."

Unlike Bouchard, whom Hébert refers to in the book as a "paper tiger," and youthful Mario Dumont, Parizeau had tried to imagine the reactions of the rest of Canada after a Yes victory. He foresaw (rightly, in Hébert's view) that the other provinces would be disinclined to negotiate with Quebec beyond the barest minimum. Bouchard, with his visions of deals and partnerships between the provinces, was dreaming in colour.

One of the most compelling sections of the book features interviews with political figures from outside Quebec and Ottawa – Roy Romanow and Preston Manning from the West; Frank McKenna from the East. The ballots may have been cast in Quebec, but Hébert reminds us that lives outside its borders would have been affected.

By including these stories, Hébert takes a swing at a misconception she's fought against all her life as a journalist: "that the Rest of Canada is a monolith."

Hébert's openness to the full spectrum of opinion in this country permeates *The Morning After*. Perhaps her training as a journalist explains this openness. Or perhaps it's the result of the many years she lived, studied, and worked outside Quebec. When I ask her to describe her own identity, her answer is an eye-opener: "I'm a Montrealer. I'm an Ontarian."

She seems at ease with the contradiction, belonging to the minority of her generation who straddle Canada's official languages. She may live in Montreal, but her principal employer is the *Toronto Star*, for which she writes a weekly column in English. She's a national affairs panellist on CBC television with Peter Mansbridge. She also writes guest columns for *L'actualité* and is heard five days a week on French-language radio in Montreal.

Canada did, in the end, survive the referendum of October 30, 1995. But it was not a happy ending for anyone involved. The Yes side, which lost by only 0.58% of the total vote, was devastated. Premier Parizeau, whose lifelong dream had been to create a sovereign Quebec, resigned the morning after. But the No side did not celebrate either. "There was no embrace of Canada in that result," Hébert remembers. "It wasn't a commitment."

Much has changed since 1995, and even since 2012 when Hébert conducted the interviews for the book. In last spring's election, the Parti Québécois under Pauline Marois suffered such a spectacular rout that people wondered if the sovereignty issue was dead.

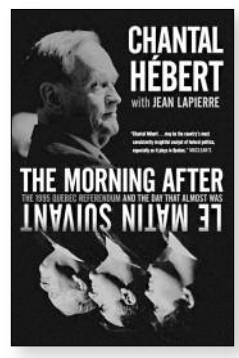
Hébert pauses when I put the question to her. "Sovereignty is a powerful idea," she says at last. "I am not someone who believes the end of history is the end of my own era. I would find it very presumptuous to say that in twenty years, in some landscape that I can't imagine, this idea won't come back. But I believe that as we have known it, and for my generation, we are not going to be revisiting the issue of Quebec's future within Canada unless there is a dramatic change."

"I am not someone who believes the end of history is the end of my own era. I would find it very presumptuous to say that in twenty years, in some landscape that I can't imagine, this idea won't come back."

It's a careful answer. I press further, inquiring what Hébert herself would have done the morning after a Yes win in Quebec. I'm angling here, still trying to get at her politics, at the sensibility under the journalist's skin.

She refuses the bait. "I would have covered the biggest story of my life," she says, smiling. "It's probably why I wrote the book. It's the big fish that got away." mRb

Claire Holden Rothman's latest novel is *My October*.



THE MORNING AFTER
The 1995 Quebec Referendum and the Day that Almost Was
Chantal Hébert, with Jean Lapierre
Knopf Canada
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978-0-345-80762-5

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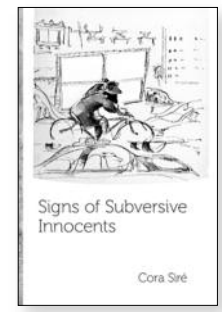

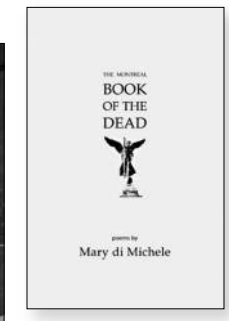

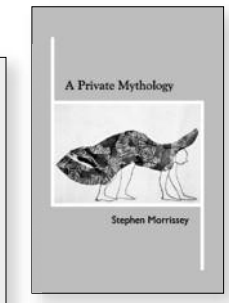

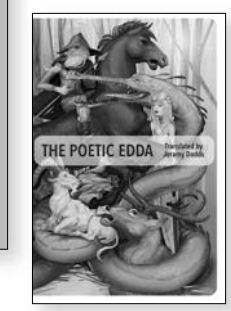

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THE POETIC EDDA
Translated by Jeramy Dodds
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Cora Siré's outstanding debut has material for several books. Her subjects include travel, exile, geology, works of art, and Latin American history. The travel poems are not quick tourist snapshots: she has an impressive knowledge of Vietnam, and her poems about Argentina's sad history have tragic depth. The personal themes – diasporic dislocation, the struggles of love – are as piercing as the *quena*, the Andean flute that she writes about in a poem of brilliant metaphoric phrases, the equivalents of musical notes.

Her poem "Zeitgeist," which is illustrated on the cover, describes an artist cycling through a dreary December cityscape carrying a large canvas that bears a work of art created in a "generous space." In spite of the masculine pronoun given to "this guy," he seems a reflection of the poet herself. The generous space of this book is filled with formal ingenuity, ranging from rhymed stanzas to glosas based on the writing of the Uruguayan poet, Delmira Agustini. Her tour de force is a double ethere, a tribute to Leonardo da Vinci best read, she says, from the bottom up and from right to left. Da Vinci used mirror writing as a code, which makes the tribute appropriate. Occasionally her rhymes are excessive – sounds placed too close together or too strained to work – but these are excesses of exuberance. Her range includes the plaintive Andean flute, but she commands an orchestra.

Larissa Andrusyshyn's first collection, *Mammoth*, explored grief by making fine use of imagery drawn from DNA and paleontology. In *Proof*, she extends her range of metaphors to include mathematics and entomology. Mathematics lets her create unsentimental poems about a potentially sentimental subject, known in creative writing workshops as "the break-up poem," a dangerous subcategory of "the relationship poem." She is served well by her knowledge of commutative qualities and the work of Euler and Fermat. Think of Andrew Marvell's use of plane and solid geometry in "The Definition of Love," published in 1681, with its planispheres and parallel lines. Is Andrusyshyn our modern metaphysical poet?

Her audacity in using the "Ew!" factor in a set of poems about insects is impressive. Literature has never included poems about "Sex Lives of Leopard Slugs" or "The Diving Bell Spider." John Donne, who brought scientific imagery into his poetry, would be impressed. One of her best poems, "The Genus Nabokovia," uses facts about the butterfly discovered by and named for Vladimir Nabokov as a means of describing his work and his relationship with his muse/wife, Vera. It's a shame he isn't alive to read it, especially the daring line about the butterfly having "photoreceptors in its appendage— / it sees with its genitalia." The fondness for declarative sentences in this book, combined with the short lines, gives it a brisk, tonic quality. The title poem lists various meanings of "proof," though she does not include the term as used in the field of numismatics to denote coins of exceptional quality struck for collectors. Her work is a proof copy in this sense: polished to a shine.

Mary di Michele's *The Montreal Book of the Dead* shows how well a chapbook works when it has a theme. Most of the ten poems in this pamphlet are about people who are either literally dead or suffering from failing memory. Nearly all of the poems are written in stanzas, usually quatrains or tercets, but she also writes a glosa and an unrhymed sonnet. Her syntax is precise and well suited to these meditations on death, aging, and memory. Some of the poems are elegies for her parents, but another theme is dementia, a shadow of death. She doesn't hesitate to generalize, offering a gentle wisdom: in "Forgetfulness" she observes that remembering is hard for the old, but forgetting is difficult for the young. In "Scotopia" (the term for seeing in dim light), she takes us to the top of Mount Royal at night, and then delivers an epiphany, a vision of the world from the stellar perspective, seeing it as a whole: "we all bow to the darkness, / we all turn in the light." In faint light, illumination is born. As Wittgenstein said, "the feeling for the world as a limited whole—that is the mystical."

Di Michele concludes with an unrhymed sonnet, "Somewhere I Have Never Traveled," saluting the well-known poem by e. e. cummings. But while cummings's poem is an ecstatic vision, di Michele's work is a troubling hallucination. The narrator finds herself at the Canada-United States border, but the outpost is unmanned, with no one to inspect the passport that proves her existence. In an eerie moment, she finds that the passport photo doesn't "look like me." She is neither here nor there, and like the dead in folklore she casts no shadow. After a series of elegies for others, the author finds herself in a hallucinatory state between worlds, the kind of ambiguous state described in the Tibetan and Egyptian books of the dead. A border crossing, indeed.

The best poetry in Stephen Morrissey's *A Private Mythology* is found in the sequences. His 2012 chapbook, *The Coat Poems*, is included in the first section of the new work. He makes some amusing and often moving variations on the garment: "The Homeless Man's Coat," "The Poet's Coat," and "The Shaman's Coat," to name a few. The garments become metaphors for themes like love, poverty, the self, and the writing of poetry. Hints of childhood in a dysfunctional family in "Mother's Mink Coat" are elaborated in several later poems.

The most interesting sequence is "The Great Year," which reflects Morrissey's long interest in astrological signs and his understanding of anthropology. The Great Year is a cycle of around 26,000 years, each portion of which is marked by a dominant constellation. W. B. Yeats worked out the scheme in vast detail and used it to explain all of history. Morrissey covers the period from the Age of Virgo (13,000–10,800 BC) to our present Age of Aquarius. He naturally exploits the symbolism of the astrological signs ruling each period, especially the animals. The poet has researched the epochs of human history from the Neolithic onward, and he describes developments in material culture and shifting mythologies. In the last poem of that cycle, he has his own vision of the world, seen from space as one living being, a fitting epiphany that puts our history in cosmic perspective.

The autobiographical works in the book's last section mix love poetry, discussions of the poet's calling, and family stories. Most of the love poems have only their sincerity to recommend them, and the remaining poems often fail to make his private mythology (his family history) interesting enough to others. The most memorable lines of the book are in "Waking at 4 a.m." Morrissey tells us that "this is when the poem / of morning is created; / we are workers in the darkness, / early risers, busy with / the enterprise of light."

The Poetic Edda, also known as The Elder Edda, is an Icelandic compilation of Norse myths and narratives dated around AD 1000. The texts convey a pre-Christian world that is often startling in its violence and its rather incoherent mythology. The Icelandic sagas written centuries later are better known and easier to find. The Edda is a distillation of a culture: its religion, its legends, and its wisdom. The best-known presentation of the Edda for common readers is a fairly short selection prepared by a poet, W. H. Auden, and a scholar, Paul B. Taylor, published in 1970. Jeramy Dodds is a poet and a scholar both. He describes his work as a re-enactment of the written texts, taking whatever liberties seemed necessary to produce a readable English version. He works at keeping the terse lines and the all-important alliterative patterns of the originals. Auden and Taylor are sometimes a little stuffy, almost archaic, but Dodds is always direct and not likely to sound dated a generation from now.

These poems do not have the power of their close literary relations, Anglo-Saxon poems such as *Beowulf*, "The Wanderer," and "The Seafarer," but they capture a seemingly alien world view that can refresh us precisely because of its strangeness. The annotated list of names consists of twelve pages of fine print, and nearly all of the entries will be unfamiliar outside a small academic circle. Coach House has done an elegant job of presenting these texts. The layout and typography are distinguished. In the spirit of the Vikings who settled Iceland, Jeramy Dodds has raided an archaic culture and brought home loot for us to share. A good translator has a streak of piracy in the soul. mfb

Bert Almon writes from Edmonton. His most recent poetry collection is *Waiting for the Gulf Stream*.

non-fiction

Lord of the Wings

CHILDREN INTO SWANS
Fairy Tales and the Pagan Imagination
Jan Beveridge
McGill-Queen's University Press
$34.95, cloth, 300pp
978-0-7735-4394-2

Regardless of age, many people are still fascinated, even enthralled, by fairy tales and their characters. How else can we explain the resurgence of fairy tale adaptations – many of which are not necessarily aimed at children – in both movies (*Maleficent*, *Into the Woods*, etc.) and television (*Once Upon a Time*)? While most of us are probably more familiar with the fables of seventeenth-century French writer Charles Perrault and nineteenth-century German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, we may not realize that fairy tales and otherworldly phenomena are much older than that.

In *Children into Swans: Fairy Tales and the Pagan Imagination*, Jan Beveridge explores the stories, characters, settings, and themes that have preceded and often inspired the tales we know today. Mostly focusing on Irish folk tales and Norse mythology – they are "among the oldest narratives of Europe after the Classical Age … so old that their origins have long disappeared into prehistory" – Beveridge seems to particularly revel in a manuscript written around the year 1100, the *Book of the Dun Cow*, whose history she covers in great length and whose ancient stories she often uses to illustrate her themes.

Each chapter of *Children into Swans* covers a specific theme – fairies, elves, giants, shape-shifting, spells, etc. – abundantly depicted with examples and summaries of fairy, folk, and mythological tales. These summaries are a real treat as they introduce readers to legends they may not otherwise encounter, but often the shortened and flat version of the tale can leave readers wanting for more, particularly when one, "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," is called "the most stunning tale ever written in Irish." For instance, summaries such as "Suddenly, a loud scream came from the unborn child of Fedlimid's pregnant wife" doesn't quite render the translation by world-renowned Celticist Vernam Hull: "What [is] the violent noise that resounds, ('o woman,' he said)/ That rages throughout your bellowing womb?"

A companion book to *Children into Swans*, containing most, if not all, of the fairy tales mentioned (especially the obscure ones that can't be found in Perrault, Grimm, or the *Poetic Edda*) would be an interesting idea, especially since this reviewer often googled the stories mentioned to read them in their entirety with all their lovely details, spells, and language. Furthermore, a small glossary at the end of the book for certain recurring words and peoples such as Tuatha Dé Danann (the first gods of Ireland), Fomorians (a race of demonic sea-raiders in Ireland defeated by the Tuatha Dé Danann), and Æsir (the wisest and oldest gods of Norse mythology, such as Odin and Thor) would be helpful.

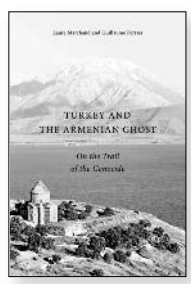
The book certainly reinforces the notion that, as Audre Lorde wrote: "There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt." J. R. R. Tolkien dipped heavily into the old stories when creating Middle-earth (which comes from Midgard, the earth inhabited by humans in Norse mythology). Indeed, giants in Britain were sometimes called "ents," the first dwarves in the *Poetic Edda* had names like Thorin and Gandalf, and there is a forest called Myrkwood in Norse mythology. What's more, it's hard not to think of *Game of Thrones*' weirwood trees when Beveridge describes trees as having "a connection to the magical or spirit world."

Clearly aimed at the general public as well as academics, *Children into Swans* is a wonderful introduction to the inner workings of Northern-European fairy tales and mythology. mRb

Mélanie Grondin is the editor of the *Montreal Review of Books*.

One Hundred Years of Solitude

TURKEY AND THE ARMENIAN GHOST
On the Trail of the Genocide
Laure Marchand
and Guillaume Perrier
Translated by Debbie Blythe
McGill-Queen's University Press
$32.95, cloth, 232pp
978-0-7735-4549-6



The Armenian genocide garnered ample press attention at the beginning of 2015. The fervour was not, however, on account of the impending centennial anniversary of the deportation and massacre of approximately 1.5 million Armenians during the Ottoman Empire's final years; rather, it was due to the involvement in a European Court of Human Rights case of one Amal Clooney, human rights lawyer and wife of George.

Notwithstanding the spotlight Ms. Clooney brings to the case, the timing of Doğu Perinçek's trial – coinciding with the hundred-year anniversary of the devastating events of 1915 – is poignant to be sure. But beyond easy symbolism, the case against the Turkish politician accused of denying the Armenian genocide is noteworthy for highlighting one of the broader consequences, and enduring dilemmas, of the genocide: What is to be done when a state that perpetrated crimes against humanity refuses to acknowledge the events, let alone take responsibility for them? As the April 24 commemoration approaches, a witches' brew of domestic and international political machinations, racism, nationalism, and historical revisionism is boiling to the surface. But how is one to make sense of it all?

PHOTO: LAURENT MELIKIAN

Enter *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost: On the Trail of the Genocide*, Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier's masterful investigation into the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing. Originally published in French in 2013, this fascinating, carefully constructed volume has been translated with precision and grace by Debbie Blythe in time for April's centennial.

The book pointedly begins not in Turkey but in France, among the sizable Armenian diaspora unofficially headquartered in Marseille. From the outset, the authors' express interest is in the political and cultural legacies of the genocide, as opposed to the chronology of events (which, they note, is extensively documented elsewhere). "We were there not as archeologists to dig up the past," they write, "but to learn more about the heirs to the legacy of the genocide and the contemporary manifestations of memory."

Having originated in a series of previously published articles, *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost* moves at a clip and switches gears quickly and often, yet it also manages to build a cohesive narrative. Marchand and Perrier showcase an artful and commendable restraint with detail; they clearly draw on a wealth of knowledge, but they don't make the mistake of attempting to pack everything into these succinct, meticulously curated 200-odd pages.

Organized thematically, the history, interviews, and anecdotes are neatly parcelled out into eighteen short chapters, tackling a wide array of concerns: the diaspora, Turkey's state-sanctioned "official version of history," hate speech laws, etc. The most gratifying takeaway for readers – particularly for those who are new to the topic – is the nuanced, multifaceted, and deeply intricate web that the authors have spun, linking the forgotten (or intentionally disappeared) past to the ever-evolving present. Marchand and Perrier's scrupulous work enables readers, academic and general-interest alike, to contextualize the current contentious debates in Europe.

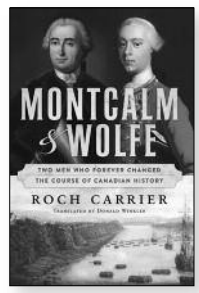
Regardless of one's position on whether or not genocide denial should be a punishable crime, Turkey offers perhaps the most compelling argument for such a law; the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet called it "the very exemplar of a historiography of denial." As Marchand and Perrier's text demonstrates, state-propagated historical revisionism, in conjunction with laws that prohibit or severely constrain challenges to that historiography (e.g., Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, criminalizing "denigration of Turkishness"), produces an especially toxic environment for an oppressed minority group whose continued marginalization is directly rooted in that very mythology.

In the words of one survivor, born in 1923, the same year as the Turkish Republic: "Nothing's finished. The genocide is not over. The state continues to persecute Armenians. And Armenians continue to curse the Turkish government." mRb

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

Spinning an Old Yarn

MONTCALM AND WOLFE
Two Men Who Forever Changed the Course of Canadian History
Roch Carrier
Translated by
Donald Winkler
HarperCollins
$34.99, cloth, 336pp
978-1-4434-3688-5



There is no shortage of writing on the events surrounding the conquest of Canada by the British Empire during the Seven Years' War. Roch Carrier's *Montcalm and Wolfe: Two Men Who Forever Changed the Course of Canadian History*, originally published in French, is a recent contribution to the genre, focusing on the lives of the two military leaders whose armies clashed during the siege of Quebec City in 1759. The distinguished author's name should ring a bell since Carrier was made famous by his short story "The Hockey Sweater," which was quoted on an older version of our $5 bills. The word "Canadiana" fits Roch Carrier's work like a glove.

Although his style of writing (and lack of citations) is suitable for a popular audience, Carrier ends up focusing heavily on the details of the campaigns led by Wolfe and Montcalm before and during the British conquest of New France. He gets right down to troop movements, exact numbers of dead and wounded, discarded attack plans, and so on. Such considerations would have loomed very large in Montcalm and Wolfe's thoughts, and since the book is first and foremost a tightly spun, fast-paced biography of these two men, these minutiae figure prominently. Military history buffs will feel right at home among such details.

Nevertheless, other readers may still find it thought-provoking to compare more recent (and brutal) forms of warfare with the gentlemanly niceties that peppered the battles of a bygone era. For instance, French and British officers sometimes broke bread together during truces. During the siege of Louisbourg, the British commander Amherst even sent a basket of pineapples to the enemy governor's wife to "express his sincere regrets for imposing on her this discomfort." Of course, war was not so gallant an affair for the vast majority of people caught up in it, and Carrier provides stark glimpses throughout his book into the wide gap between a starved, overtaxed *Canadien* peasantry, drafted into military service alongside metropolitan soldiers and Native allies, and a small group of fabulously wealthy merchants.

A word on the representation of Indigenous peoples: Carrier severely misses the mark on this front. One might expect to read statements such as "bands of natives would … smell the enemy's presence on the wind" or "the natives … were unable to suppress their warrior instincts" in pulp fiction, not in a history book written in recent years. Indigenous peoples only feature in Carrier's account insofar as they participate in one specific battle or another, and always in a peripheral manner – nothing is said about how they imagined their shifting alliances with the French or the English crowns. Indeed, the book's closing statement that all of the belligerents described in the book had been "swept away by the raging currents of a war between narcissistic tribal chiefs," in reference to the rulers of France and Britain, simply reminded this reader of the near absence of *actual* "tribal chiefs" in Carrier's narrative.

The author's explanation of his decision to write about Montcalm and Wolfe is deliciously ambiguous: he explains that he once travelled hundreds of kilometres on a scooter, all the way to Montcalm's former residence in France, in order to pay his respects to the man who tried but failed to defeat the British army. "And I promised myself then," he writes, "that one day I would try to understand why." At first blush, Carrier is simply raising the central question of the conquest – how did France lose its North American territories to Britain? – to which he provides a thorough military analysis. On the other hand, perhaps the author is, unintentionally, raising another question for readers: Why do the lives of these military men – their battles and their personal struggles – matter so much to some of us all these years later? mRb

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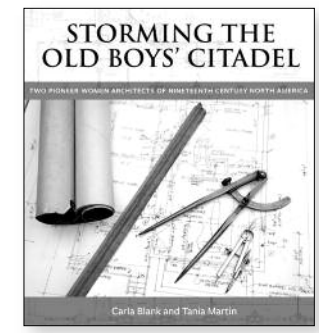
De architectura

STORMING THE OLD BOYS' CITADEL
Two Pioneer Women Architects of Nineteenth Century North America
Carla Blank and Tania Martin
Baraka Books
$29.95, paper, 234pp
978-1-77186-013-0



In 2004, the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which has been in existence since 1979, was awarded to its first woman recipient, Zaha Hadid. In 2012, the jury awarded Wang Shu, leaving out his wife, Lu Wenyu, with whom he co-founded his practice. And in 2013, a petition started circulating requesting that Denise Scott Brown be acknowledged alongside her husband and partner of forty years, who was awarded the prize in 1991. We don't have to go far back in history to notice that women architects were – are – often silenced.

Yet women, as *Storming the Old Boys' Citadel: Two Pioneer Women Architects of Nineteenth Century North America* describes, have been practising architecture for decades. If women still struggle in "a profession that traditionally functioned more like a gentlemen's club," one can only imagine what it was like in the late 1800s – the period in which this story unfolds.

We're introduced to the lives and work of two female architects working in the United States at that time: Louise Bethune, whose project includes the infamous Hotel Lafayette in Buffalo, New York (not to mention 120 new buildings and renovations), and Mother Joseph (born Esther Pariseau in Saint-Elzéar, Quebec), whose House of Providence (currently Providence Academy), was built in 1873 in Vancouver, Washington. Both were great feats for their time.

Yet despite these achievements, the two women remain "practically non-existent in the nation's historical record."

As authors Carla Blank and Tania Martin point out, part of the issue is that architecture was not always defined and legislated as it is today. Architecture programs were not found in Canadian universities until the late nineteenth century (1890 at the University of Toronto and 1896 at McGill). Prior to that, as with any old carpentry business, architecture was simply handed down through apprenticeship. In fact, architects had to knock down a few prejudices to detach themselves from their ancestral connotation (from the Greek word *architekton*, meaning a "master carpenter").

For women, another obstacle was the "male-dominated for-profit business enterprise" that did not admit them into its university programs. It took World War II, and a reduced male population, for Harvard and Columbia to finally start admitting female students into their architecture programs in the 1940s. Montreal's own McGill University started in 1939.

The book reads painlessly and does not restrict its scope to gender-related issues. Quite the contrary: amusing anecdotes abound. We learn that Louise Bethune once collaborated with famed inventor Nikola Tesla on the Cataract Power & Conduit Company's terminal. And that in its worst years, the Hotel Lafayette – once the majestic stopover destination of President Franklin D. Roosevelt – turned into a quasi crack house under businessman Tran Dinh Truong's care (or lack thereof) in the 1970s and 1980s.

In *Storming the Old Boys' Citadel* we aren't flooded with technical plans and ceaseless dates, as one might expect from a book on architectural history. Or if we are, we don't notice them. Rather, we are invited to peek into the lives of the women who worked in this era, learning not only about the nooks and crannies of their buildings – as they transform from architectural marvels to decaying walls – but also about the history of their cities. We exit, at the very end, in the present, contemplating the restorations of recent years.

Books like this one are vital in highlighting what our history notes have left out. They remind us to redefine our views and question our records.

If we need to redefine the history of architecture today, let it include women. mRb

Branka Petrovic works at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and writes poetry.

Animal Farm

WHAT ANIMALS TEACH US ABOUT POLITICS
Brian Massumi
Duke University Press
$21.95, paper, 152pp
978-0-8223-5800-8

For its complexity, rigour, and insight, Brian Massumi's work tends to engender sheepish admiration from grad students and scholars alike. His name is ubiquitous in several branches of the academy – among them philosophy, communication studies, and affect theory. Although his influence within the humanities runs deep, he's not read with anything near the same enthusiasm outside. His work is dense, self-referential, and erudite; his most recent book, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, is no exception.

Here, Massumi's main intervention is to reveal how the field of politics has been limited by a conception of humanity as distinct from and better than other forms of life; how a belief that humans are a discrete category, uniquely capable of reason and insight, forecloses ways of thinking that exist or originate outside of human consciousness. To put it another way, humans exercise a detrimental vanity in assuming that only we are capable of "language, thought and creativity." The problem is not only that we humans think of ourselves as smarter than any other living thing, but also that we consider ourselves to be of a different order of existence. For Massumi, this vanity has blinded us to the philosophical and political possibilities that exist outside of our impoverished understanding of what is and isn't human. In order to escape this myopia, Massumi turns to animals to illustrate some of the resources that are available when we become aware of the limitations imposed by a rigid conception of what humans are and how we do what we do.

Imagining two wolf cubs in a play fight, he dissects what happens in the action of the one lightly nipping the other. The nip is complex because it is a playful gesture that is inseparable from what it seems to be imitating: a bite. Massumi's bet is that presumably limited human understanding, especially as it plays out in politics, cannot do justice to this paradox: that the playfulness of the nip is always imbued with the aggression of combat that would otherwise motivate a more ferocious bite.

Massumi analyzes the slip between the playful gesture and its aggressive correlate, between the nip and the bite, for everything it's worth. Bite and nip are not simply in opposition, nor are they the same thing. The nip can become a bite if one cub gets carried away… just as the whole interaction can dissolve if playfulness is rid of its contingent aggression. Massumi calls this relationship "mutual inclusion" which in turn becomes the basis for his theorizing about what animal politics might look like.

The essence of Massumi's argument is contained within an extended essay, which is then followed by three supplements that elaborate some key concerns. The format produces a concise text without sacrificing any profundity.

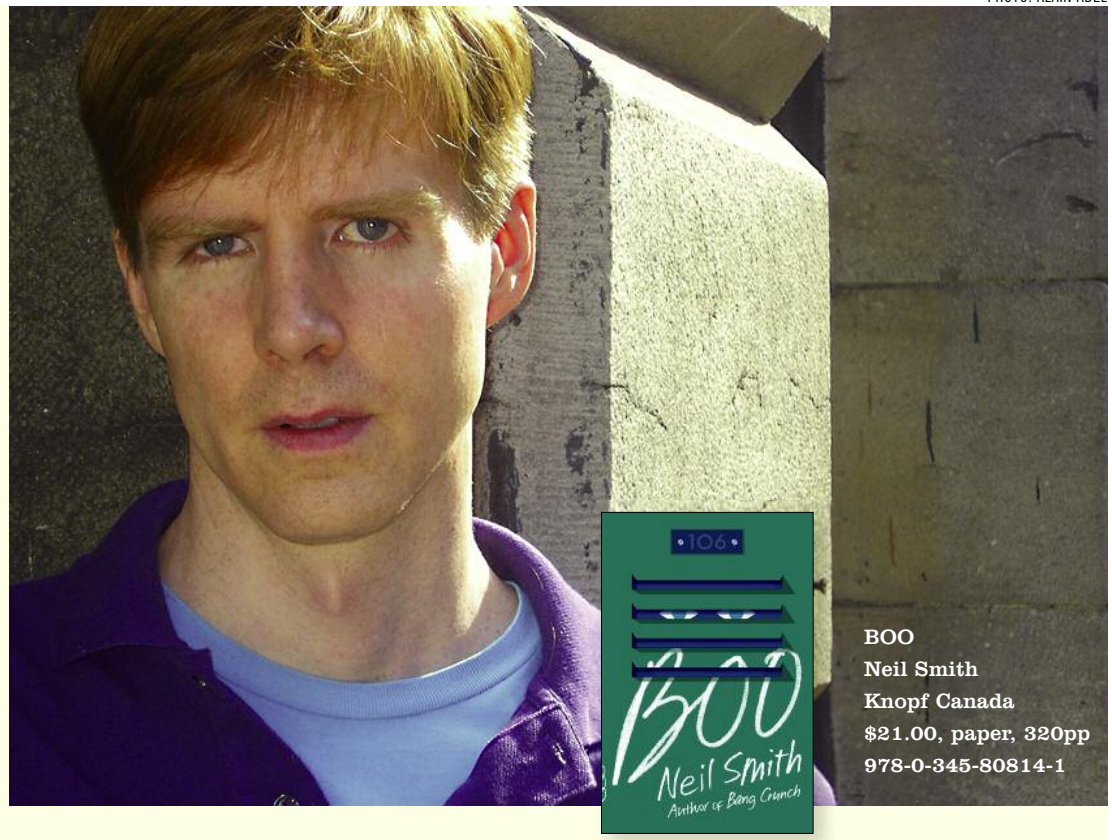
The book is a substantial contribution to an already advanced conversation. As such, those interested in Massumi's thought might be better initiated with his 1995 essay "The Autonomy of Affect," a founding text for the humanities' resurgent interest in affect and emotion, or even his book *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, which this newest work builds upon. For those ready and willing to navigate the complexity of *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, Massumi is a brilliant thinker who has produced another incisive critique that is likely to elicit interesting scholarship and responses, both from his immediate interlocutors and anyone else looking for a way out of humanity. mRb

Liam Mayes is a Montrealer in absentia, working on a PhD in Rhetoric and Public Culture at Northwestern University in Chicago.

the people you meet in heaven

By Eric Boodman

PHOTO: ALAIN ABEL



BOO
Neil Smith
Knopf Canada
$21.00, paper, 320pp
978-0-345-80814-1

Neil Smith first discovered heaven in 1974, when his family moved to Salt Lake City. Utah was completely foreign to him: he had been a committed atheist since age six, and now, as a ten-year-old, he was surrounded by Mormons. It wasn't the first time he'd met believers – his father's job required the family to bounce around, and when they lived in Boston almost everyone in his class was Catholic. But faith in New England was tight-lipped: hardly something to talk about in public. Not so in Salt Lake City. At school, his classmates' first question for him was whether he was Mormon. When he went over to their houses, he was shocked to find basements stacked with canned goods – enough to keep the family alive for at least three months in the event of apocalyptic shortages.

Yet what intrigued him most of all was their concept of heaven. Before 1978, the participation of Black people in the Church of Latter-Day Saints was restricted, and the racist policy had filtered down into the beliefs of Smith's classmates. "Mormons believed that heaven was segregated," he says. "They didn't want to be with atheist Canadians or Black Africans or Japanese. Their heaven was their neighbourhood with their friends and their family."

For Smith, that description wasn't detailed enough. He wanted to know what kind of toothpaste they used in heaven, and what the toilets looked like. He wanted to know the way heavenly houses were built, and whether or not you could eat meat in the afterlife. "When I would ask the Mormons these

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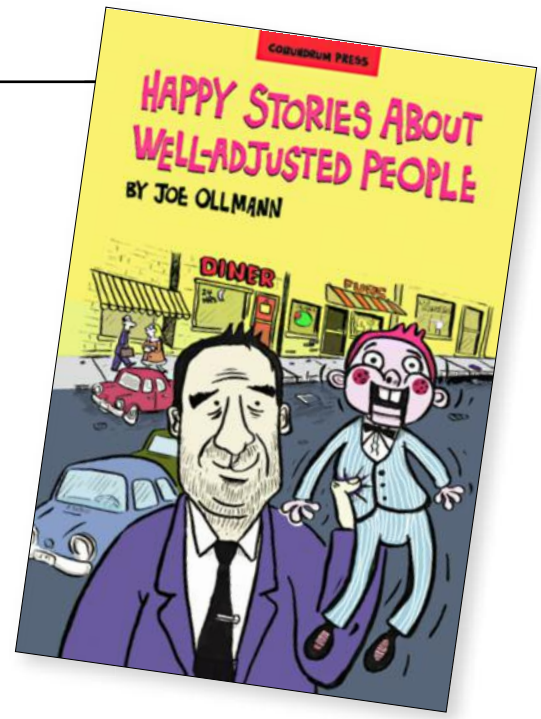
By Ian McGillis

Ain't No Rembrandt



HAPPY STORIES ABOUT WELL-ADJUSTED PEOPLE
Joe Ollmann
Conundrum Press
$20, cloth, 244pp
978-1-894994-86-6

Joe Ollmann isn't comfortable with praise. On the back cover of his new book, the graphic novelist professes to blush as he hand-letters glowing testimonials from fellow cartoonist Seth and culture journalist Jeet Heer. But if the collection *Happy Stories About Well-Adjusted People* is anything to go by, he'd better get used to such things.

Ollmann cites *Peanuts*, *Spiderman*, *Captain America*, and *Mad* magazine as early formative influences, but perhaps a better indication of his sensibility would be the American realist tradition epitomized by Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*) and Robert Crumb in his more restrained mode. He's got kindred spirits in literature and music, too – like Charles Bukowski and Tom Waits, he expresses compassion for society's downtrodden and marginalized through vivid narratives that get right in the muck and murk of life. And like all of the above, he can shift from wrenching to gut-bustingly funny in a blink.

Ian McGillis: Your work strikes me as especially strong in the writing department. That's not to imply that the visuals aren't striking too, only that the storytelling reads as uncommonly well crafted. Do the stories come first, or is your process more organic?
Joe Ollmann: I'm definitely more of a writer who also draws. I mean, I work hard on the visuals, but I am always acutely aware of my limitations. And it helps that every review of my books always mentions my "grotesque, claustrophobic, ugly" artwork. I'm like, "I know, I know." I guess I've grown accustomed to my art and am resigned to it, trying to improve the elements that I can, cognizant always that I ain't never gonna be no Rembrandt.

The stories definitely come first. I generally write a straight short story and adapt that into a comic script where some interior monologues and descriptions will become narration, then I storyboard that and break it down into pages. I know some cartoonists who work unscripted, or from a rough outline, but I go in from the beginning like a general planning a massive attack.

IM: To what degree do you feel your characters need to be conventionally sympathetic? Do you enjoy walking that likeable/unlikeable line? It could be that I'm thinking of the protagonist of "Hanging Over" here.
JO: Probably subconsciously my ex-Catholic need to be good stops me from writing completely unsympathetic characters. You spend a lot of time with the characters you write, so you tend to make them likable to yourself to some degree, like the people you choose to surround yourself with in real life. I also think that completely unsympathetic characters, while they may be interesting as biological specimens, are pretty hard to relate to or root for, and I always want people to care about the people I write about like I care about them.

IM: The heroines of "Big Boned" and "Otherwise, Arachis Hypogaea" are two of my favourite characters in the book, and show a real ability on your part to empathize with female characters. Insofar as it's possible, could you tell me about the genesis and development of one of them?
JO: Charlene in "Big Boned" came from a small incident on a bus a long time ago. This drunk old guy was annoying this young woman, hopelessly flirting with her and annoying the hell out of her, but she was politely and shyly kind of tolerating it. I could see that the old man felt he could get away with it only because

continued on page 17

By Anna Leventhal

The Shy Exhibitionist

Montreal's Véhicule Press has a reputation for publishing strong, modern, stylistically original fiction by new writers, and Anita Anand's debut collection, *Swing in the House and Other Stories*, published under the revamped Esplanade Books imprint, is very much in keeping with that tradition. Anand has a fine sensibility and an ear not just for dialogue, but also for situation – for parsing the almost invisible shifts in dynamic and power that happen between ordinary people.

At times, *Swing in the House* reads more like a series of vignettes than a collection of isolated stories. Many pieces are only a few pages long and have an unfinished feeling, but lyrically so; their abrupt endings leave you suspended, vertiginous, like when the music cuts out in the middle of a dance party and you find yourself moving through a silent room, the sound of your own blood in your ears. While the style is purely her own, Anand credits writers such as Miranda July and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya with giving her the confidence to maintain it: "Both authors write stories that sometimes come to a jarring stop, which is somehow also very satisfying," she says. "I don't know how much those books have influenced me, especially since I discovered both of those writers very recently. But reading works like these encourages me to trust my instincts and keep writing that way."

It's not simply style for style's sake. Something feels very true about stories where things don't get resolved in a neat, plot-driven arc. "I try to explore ideas of family relations, racism, and so on, without resolution because they are inherently unresolvable subjects," Anand says, "and all we can learn from them comes from portrayal." And what does she portray? Lost girls, uneasy friendships, displaced families, couples who betray each other in clumsy ways; a hundred small and portentous moments that happen in between life's defining events. Her stories engage race, gender, class, mental health, and family ties with subtlety and a wry, delicate touch, often drawing on Anand's own experiences. "One day," she recalls, "I listened to somebody at work talk about how she disapproved of the inclusion of visible minorities on *Coronation Street*. I didn't say anything at the time. I am an introvert and apparently that means I don't have quick retorts. Instead, I went home and thought about what really struck me – about how this colleague had no idea of what it meant to feel unrepresented, how it makes you feel both invisible and too visible at the same time. And I sat down and wrote 'Doppelgänger.' I made sure it was from a white person's point of view, that of the bewildered, lovable goof of a white boyfriend who tries to understand his girlfriend, who is half-Chinese and half-white, and [who] struggles with her identity at least partly because she doesn't see herself represented anywhere."

Anand, who was born in Montreal, has lived in and around the city with stints in British Columbia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Having been, she says, the only person of Indian origin in many situations for much of her life, she has the gift of estrangement that impels so many writers. "As anyone like me can tell you, being a visible minority is uncomfortable," she says. "Constantly being asked where you are *really* from, for example, is *really* unsettling. It can make you feel unsettled for life. If there is one thing that drives me to write, it is the sense that there is still a lot of ignorance about what it means to belong to a visible minority. Rather than rant about white privilege, I have chosen to try to bridge the gap in understanding in a gentler way. My hope is that fiction can do that; it can create empathy."

Some stories address race outright, like in "Marilyn Bombolé," where a Cameroonian-Canadian woman deals with the difference in treatment afforded to her given (African) and married (white-bread) names. In others, like "Doppelgänger" or the title story, race and racism are undercurrents that shift the narrative flow. In "Between Black and White," which Anand describes as *her* story, a middle-class Indian family moves to New York, where they encounter both white and black people who are poorer than they are, but less socially isolated. "We were constantly moving when I was a child," Anand says, "and I had to adapt to being not just the new kid everywhere we went, but also the only Indian kid. And I didn't feel Indian. I just felt out of place, wherever I was." The child who narrates this story describes her Indian-ness in these terms: "This meant that our home smelt like incense. That we sometimes ate food that other people, like my piano teacher or my dad's boss, refused to even try. That when my parents went out to a party, my mother would dress in clothes that made her look beautiful, colourful and weird at the same time, like an exotic bird."

Characters like this populate *Swing in the House*; they are in some way outsiders, or lost, or groping in a tentative but persistent way. In "What I Really Did," which was nominated for a Quebec Writing Competition award, an adolescent tourist puts herself in an excruciatingly vulnerable position. In "The Dare," a woman who calls herself a shy exhibitionist upsets the balance of her suburban neighbourhood by standing outside naked. A hungover man relives childhood patterns while looking for both his car and his brother in "The Search." This kind of narrator is familiar to Anand: "The people closest to me, the people I know, and, okay, that includes me, are a bit uncomfortable in this world. We are people who have never had the luxury of being part of a majority, whether it is because we don't look the same or we don't think the same. We don't wield any power. And our views of the world are interesting, if only because they are views that aren't represented very much."

Anchoring the collection is the title story, which began as a novel that Anand kept in the proverbial drawer where all writers have at least one manuscript stashed away. "When I opened the drawer," she says, "I immediately began hacking away at it, because it was awful. So now it's a novella." By far the longest story in the collection, "Swing in the House" follows one woman, Julie, through an unhappy marriage, an affair, and a troubled but enduring friendship. And, in keeping with the book's sensibility, it deals with what Anand refers to as "a minority predicament" – a character is diagnosed with HIV, which quickly progresses to AIDS. Anand explains: "Someone I knew in the nineties died of AIDS, basically because she was diagnosed too late. Why was she diagnosed so late? Because she wasn't African, an intravenous drug user, nor a gay man. When she suddenly became ill and died, all of her friends, including me, were just reeling. There was no information out there, no stories about people like her. It was our first experience of death, and it seemed so unfair. We hadn't been warned; *she* hadn't been warned. We were busy being young and immature, oblivious to such a thing."

SWING IN THE HOUSE AND OTHER STORIES
Anita Anand
Esplanade Books
$18.00, paper, 180pp
978-1-55065-398-4

For Anand, experiences like this are the impetus to write. It's a way of making sense of the absurd, but also a way of colouring in what's often invisible. The desire to be seen, to be recognized, is powerful – even if it comes at the cost of comfort, which holds as true for Anand as it does for her characters. "Maybe, ultimately, I'm like the woman in 'The Dare,'" she says. "A shy exhibitionist." mRb

Anna Leventhal is a Montreal-based writer. Her book of short stories, *Sweet Affliction*, is out with Invisible Publishing.

Smith (from page 11)

questions, they would become angry or peeved," he says. "They thought I was a complete freak, but thankfully I was Canadian. That was my excuse. It was like I was from Mars."

The Mormons may have been surprised at Smith's interest in minutiae, but his readers shouldn't be. The short story collection *Bang Crunch*, his first book, is packed with wacky details that prompt the reader to do a series of double takes. No character or situation is too far out: in "Extremities," he writes both in the voice of a severed foot and from the perspective of a pair of calfskin gloves. And in "Green Fluorescent Protein," a widow converses with her late husband's ashes, which she keeps inside a curling stone.

The book was an international hit. It was auctioned off to the highest-bidding publishing houses around the world, "instead of being hawked around small presses in his native Canada," as Michel Faber put it in the *Guardian*.

Yet, Alice Munro aside, reputations are seldom made with short stories, and nearly every review of *Bang Crunch* speculated about the novel that was to follow. In May – eight years and one discarded novel later – *Boo* will come out in both Canada and the United States. While details in the new book are as bizarre as in *Bang Crunch*, the setting is markedly different. Smith's zaniest short stories take place on Earth: even the innermost thoughts and feelings of a pair of gloves are revealed against the backdrop of downtown Chicago. Now, in *Boo*, Smith brings his off-the-wall imagination to a whole other realm: the afterlife. And unlike his Mormon classmates, he leaves nothing out.

He tells us what kind of toothpaste they use in heaven (baking soda), and what kind of houses they live in (red-brick dormitories that look like housing projects). He tells us that there are no insects in heaven and that people get high by smoking chamomile leaves instead of dope. He shows us how heavenly buildings "fix themselves," the shattered windowpanes inching back into being, the cracks in cement closing of their own accord. He even tells us about the kind of pineapple you get in heaven: "certainly more canned than fresh."

In case that seems too similar to the afterlife you'd been looking forward to, don't worry. There's more.

Everyone in heaven is thirteen years old. And they will stay thirteen for the next fifty years – at which point they "redie," and pass to some other realm.

Our guide to this strange world is Oliver Dalrymple, nicknamed Boo because of his pale skin. He idolizes Jane Goodall and Richard Dawkins. When he is stressed out, he recites the periodic table. And he prides himself on his rationality. As he tells the "do-gooder" who welcomes him into heaven, "I've never had a spiritual day in my entire life."

Smith calls himself a "science-head," and the way that his novel echoes his own life is as minutely planned as a chemistry experiment. Boo's last days on earth take place in the same Chicago suburb where Smith lived when he was thirteen. In fact, Boo attends Smith's old middle school, Helen Keller Junior High. The author was not bullied the way his character is, but he wasn't popular either: because his family never lived anywhere longer than a year or two, he hardly ever had the time to cement his childhood friendships. Boo, on the other hand, is socially inept. "He really wants friends, but he doesn't know how to have them," explains Smith.

At fifty, Smith is still boyish, with a shy smile and a sheet of sandy hair he brushes out of his eyes. While working on *Boo*, he was also translating a Québécois novel written in the voice of a fifteen-year-old. Most people would rather forget that awkward transitional stage between thirteen and fifteen, but Smith has fond memories of it. Those are, he says, "the years when your imagination is the wildest. If you don't have religion, you might have books. Those fictional worlds I read about were as alive to me as the Bible might be if I were religious. Every book is a Bible in its own way."

This Bible might seem lighthearted, almost silly in its tone, which Smith admits can verge on the twee – "I have a really, really high tolerance for twee," he says – but there is an undercurrent of deep loss. When Smith wasn't much older than Boo, his brother died of an overdose, and it changed the way he understood the afterlife. "I'm intrigued by exoplanets, not by Jesus," he says. "But when someone close to me dies, I can't help imagining a parallel universe where that person lives. I know that world is fictional, but fiction brings me comfort."

This novel is that fictional world, a kind of imperfect, secular heaven where the God-figure – Boo calls him Zig – seems to be a bumbling hippie. Smith's late brother even makes a cameo appearance, dressed as a goth, white makeup "caked in his nostril folds."

But the book is also an adventure story, and a fable about friendship. When Johnny Henzel, a classmate of Boo's from Helen Keller, arrives in heaven, he fills Boo in on the gruesome details of their deaths. Boo didn't die of a heart defect, as he originally thought. Both he and Johnny were shot by a kid at their school. And because their killer also committed suicide, Gunboy, as he is known, is among them in heaven.

Boo and Johnny's search for Gunboy reveals the underbelly of the afterlife – the support-group-turned-militia of kids who want to avenge their violent deaths, the infirmary for thirteen-year-olds so sad and confused they want to "redie."

Smith knows that his vision is quirky, and might not appeal to everyone. "I'm not one of those authors who want their books to live on for centuries," he says. "I'll be happy if it lives on for a year." But he does hope that thirteen-year-olds will read it, that he can provide the kind of inspiration he got from writers like Paul Zindel and Shirley Jackson when he was a young adolescent.

And who knows? Maybe it will even reach the bestseller list of the *Salt Lake Tribune*. mRb

Eric Boodman is in his last year at Yale, where he has focused on fiction and long-form science journalism. He has written for the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

fiction

Through the Looking Glass

BEGINNING WITH THE MIRROR
Ten stories about Love, Desire and Moving Between Worlds
Peter Dubé
Lethe Press
$15.00, paper, 178pp
978-1-59021-027-7

"My past is tangled with men. Tangled like sheets. Just the way I like it," divulges the protagonist of "Funnel Cloud," the third piece in Peter Dubé's spellbinding new collection. Yet, alone in a dark basement, waiting out a tornado, he links the twister to his lifestyle – confronted with unexpected danger, he reevaluates past gambles: "How many lusty happy hours have I indulged myself with? How many randy nights with no regard for risk?" Doubling as a self-conscious narrator, he speaks directly to the reader as though sharing confidences: "Look again," he urges, drawing you in.

Gripped by this story, as with the nine others, you do look – again and again – despite all stormy warnings. It can't be helped. Like a magic wand, Dubé's poetic pen mesmerizes with sumptuous metaphors while beauty mingles seductively with recklessness and wreckage.

Dubé's sixth book, an addition to his already noteworthy contributions to gay literature, serves up stories that are often surreal, sometimes supernatural, and never static. As suggested by the title, the mirror is a key symbol, especially in "Echo," where this magical portal reflects ever-revised versions of the past. Occasionally, the Montreal writer's political side surfaces, as in "Egress," which mirrors his 2012 novel *The City's Gates*, whose timely publication echoed the mood of the "Maple Spring" uprisings.

Mostly, however, the author dances with desire, taking us on a homoerotic romp through the elements – water, air, earth, fire – designing dreamscapes that undulate and defy simple interpretation. In the emotionally charged, liquid landscape of "Tides," for instance, boundaries between inner and outer worlds are permeable, making it tricky to distinguish the imaginary from the real. Sometimes it's best not to cling to logic. Reading *Beginning with the Mirror* is visceral, like a water slide into the unconscious.

In Dubé's moving opener, "Blazon," even fire feels fluid, snaking its way to eruption. Confronted with his own desire, the protagonist has trouble dissociating an inflamed conscience with actual fires. "Then his head came down, and he kissed me again—hard, full, his tongue in my mouth reaching for the hallucinatory serpent as it entered my head on waves of flame, coiled up in the roots of my brain and flooded everything with venom."

Depictions of sex can be explicit, and occasionally, as in "Needle," passion bleeds disquietingly into fury, magnifying "the warm wet violence of summer rain." Yet, the undercurrent of these cravings is often curiosity, a yearning to learn. "I can't count the times I trusted to fate to learn," confides the protagonist of "Funnel Cloud," recalling the occasion he followed two young men into a parking garage. Casual encounters are not necessarily impersonal: "And every time it is different. Only a truly superficial person would say that men are all alike in our pleasures."

PHOTO: PAUL LITHERLAND

Dubé's luscious language and a touch of abracadabra elevate scenes that might otherwise seem too crude. Distinctly Dionysian, reality revolves around the ecstatic, rather than the mundane. In the heartwarming closing piece, "Vision," Cam visits his dying friend, Dean, in the hospital, affectionately feeding him only the juiciest updates from his life: "I launch into an account of my week, careful to leave out the tedious details of the daily grind, the slow spiritual erosion that is the job."

Mirroring Dean's long, drawn-out death, this last story is the longest, delving into the supernatural. After weeks spent "hovering between worlds: the ordinary physical one and that of the spirits," Dean appeals to Cam for one last outlandish favour. Cam fondly remembers Dean as the friend with whom he would test his own limits, try the craziest stunts, and complies out of compassion, ignoring his own better judgement. "Nothing done for love is foolish," he resolves, encapsulating the tenderness that weaves through several of these stories, sealing the spell on a book that invites readers to study intimacy under lights beyond those of mainstream culture. mRb

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based artist who paints poems that often turn out like songs: kimberlyandthedreamtime.com

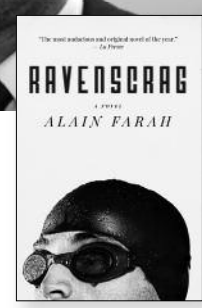
Showing Cracks

RAVENSCRAG
Alain Farah
Translated by Lazer Lederhendler
House of Anansi
$22.95, paper, 224pp
978-1-77089-895-0

Ravenscrag bills itself as a story about the mansion above McGill University where the CIA ran LSD and electroshock experiments in the 1950s and 1960s, which certainly sounds appealing, but it is in fact the story of an academic having a 60,000-word mental breakdown before infiltrating an asylum to shoot people with a toy gun. Published in French as *Pourquoi Bologne*, Alain Farah's book, impeccably translated by Lazer Lederhendler, reconstructs a mental breakdown (that may have been exacerbated in the mansion) in short disconnected chapters that shift topic and time period, occasionally descending into hallucinatory paranoiac episodes.

Writing madness is tricky – for instance, Carl Jung's transcriptions of his nervous breakdown, published as *The Red Book*, are incredibly difficult to penetrate – but each of Farah's scattered micro-scenes flow well within themselves. Farah tells the story from the insane first-person perspective of a character named Alain Farah. The approach can be compared to method acting – pretending to be insane, as opposed to a classical actor who would instead create the impression of insanity. The technical challenge is to establish a thread amid the erratic misdirection of an unreliable narrator who is also mentally disturbed. This "method writing," could also be compared to "method directing": one actor can pretend to be insane and the piece can hold together, but if the director (i.e., the eyes through which the work is seen) behaves insanely then the entire piece is threatened to descend into high-toned blathering.

PHOTO: SIMON DUHAMEL



Farah tells us he takes his motivation from director Ridley Scott's work on *Blade Runner*, saying at one point in the story that, "The following statement has been ascribed to the director: 'I never think in a linear way. I put everything that matters to me in a bag, I shake it and I watch what happens.'" In a novel, however, words alone must carry the work, and skill is required to provide orientation. Putting setting, events, and characters in a bag, shaking them, and spilling them out on the page risks spoiling the ingredients of the story and borders on being disrespectful of the craft.

Farah is also averse to narrative, which he explains by, again, quoting Scott: "But can't the emotion felt be just as important as understanding the plot?" Focusing on emotions is a viable approach. Emotion comes from proximity to tension, attachment to characters, or atmosphere. But the rambling madman reduces characters and details to names that are dropped into scenes, without context, thus yielding neither narrative nor emotional value. Farah justifies his approach by saying, "In other versions of this book, the events unfolded without a break. It was seamless: I opened and closed a lot of doors, I moved characters from one scene to the next, in a word: boring.... so I erased the whole thing.... I prefer to tinkle out a few tunes I find enjoyable, even if there are fewer of you on the dance floor." Elsewhere the authorial character tells us that after his last novel came out, "a bookseller told me 'Your book is a party, but we're not on the guest list.'"

Writers like Chuck Palahniuk and Larry Tremblay have proven that linearity and sanity are overrated literary commodities. Readers just need well-constructed characters, stories, and emotions. If writing them is boring, that may be an indication that something is wrong at the source, and it probably won't get better if the work is put in a blender. A novel needs some element of cohesion – even if it's only emotional – which Farah never succeeds in establishing. *Ravenscrag* has wonderful potential: setting, situation, social relevance, all of which are completely squandered in favour of the author's personal indulgences and justifications thereof. It's a party with a self-absorbed host and music you can't dance to: if that sounds like your kind of fun, by all means, buy a ticket. mRb

@robsherren reviews books for the *mRb*.

Fortune's Fool

HOLY FOOLS + 2 STORIES
Marianne Ackerman
Guernica Editions
$20.00, paper, 184pp
978-1-77183-002-7

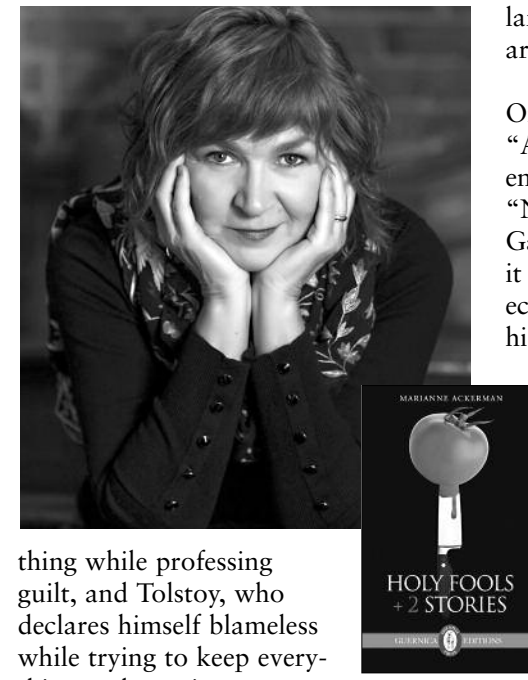
Marianne Ackerman, Montreal novelist (*Jump, Matters of Hart*, and *Piers' Desire*), journalist, and playwright, now moves into satire with the novella "Holy Fools," the first part of *Holy Fools + 2 Stories*.

The term "holy fool" comes from Saint Paul ("We are fools for Christ's sake," 1 Corinthians 4:10) and usually refers to a person who gives up all his worldly possessions to live the holy life. Ackerman turns this notion on its head and provides two fools for our consideration.

As befits a man who recognizes that he offers nothing to the world, Peter Wright's life only moves forward by being buffeted and bounced around by external events. He has come to the conclusion that the only way to render it interesting would be by making "a well-planned exit" – suicide. It has taken him a year to prepare. And wouldn't you know it, like everything else he has done, it fails. Instead, he is accused of murder. But, in a flash of insight, he realizes the solution he craves is right in front of him: prison. There he would have the security he seeks – three meals a day, a roof over his head, and no worries – just a comfortable routine and virtual anonymity. He pleads guilty.

His lawyer is furious. Stung by the defeat, she recommends her client read *Crime and Punishment* to pass the time (a nice writerly jab: Dostoyevsky's protagonist is a murderer who remains free while another serves his time). Waiting for Peter in prison, though, is fool number two. Tolstoy is a robust fellow who has written doorstop-sized biographies (hence the moniker). He favours avocado-coloured shirts and grandiose financial schemes, one of which has landed him behind bars. He may remind some readers of a similarly larger-than-life figure from Quebec who spent several years as an unwilling guest of Uncle Sam's penal system. Tolstoy's days are spent marshalling attorneys to prove his innocence and planning his next big deal. Fatefully, he takes a liking to Peter.

Here we have two sides of the holy fool coin: Peter, who gives up everything while professing guilt, and Tolstoy, who declares himself blameless while trying to keep everything and acquire more.



The satire in "Holy Fools" is pointed, not broad. It starts out a bit too darkly, though this is necessary for the plot, and is a little choppy in the first pages. But Ackerman hits her stride in the prison scenes, and the rest of the story is smoother. The pace is fast, and there are a few sections that might have been milked a little longer for their ironies. Still, Ackerman has her fun, and the reader is rewarded regularly with moments of delicious archness.

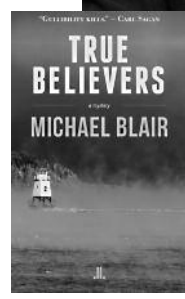
The accompanying two stories, "No One Writes to the Professor" and "Albert Fine" couldn't be more different. The first draws its inspiration from "No One Writes to the Colonel," a Gabriel García Márquez story, and in it a Spanish teacher and would-be economist ponders his failure to write his PhD thesis – and all that could have been if he had – as he makes his way to live with his sister in Poland. It is a sad, introspective tale of a man who is struggling with his feelings of responsibility for the bad choices he has made. "Albert Fine" is the more straightforward story of a mentally "slow" hired hand and the family he works for. Set in the early 1960s, it depicts a hard-scrabble rural life and the dire consequences of suspicion fuelled by misunderstanding. But it is "Holy Fools" that really stands out as the most daring of the three. mRb

A long-time magazine and book editor, **Timothy Niedermann** recently turned to writing full-time. His first literary effort, "Wall of Dust," will be published by Deux Voiliers Publishing in April 2015.

Hack & the Rigilians

TRUE BELIEVERS
Michael Blair
Linda Leith Publishing
$16.95, paper, 340pp
978-1-927535-64-6

PHOTO: TERENCE BYRNES



Near Burlington, Vermont, not far from the Canadian border, a retired school teacher walking her dog along the shore of Lake Champlain has made an unwelcome discovery. It is the body of a woman, partly frozen in the ice. The police set about their work, made easier by a business card found in her clothing: it belongs to Hack Loomis, a local PI.

Like many in his profession, Loomis is scratching out a precarious living from too few clients. He lives in an Airstream trailer on the building site of what was to be a home with his ex-wife. His business partner – and recent lover – Connie Noble, adds both a page to his professional book and a much-needed dimension to his personal life.

When the police contact him about the body, Loomis suspects he knows who it is: Belle Ryerson. An employee at a local law firm where he'd previously done some work, she had recently set up an appointment with him, but had failed to show. Something – or someone – had intervened before she could keep her appointment. When Loomis arrives at the office of the chief medical examiner, however, he's puzzled to find that the body isn't Belle's. In fact, he's never seen this woman before.

While the police focus on the victim, Loomis is concerned about Belle. He tries to contact her through her employer, but she hasn't appeared for work. Once Belle's sister becomes involved, and worried, Connie offers up their PI services pro bono – much to Loomis's dismay.

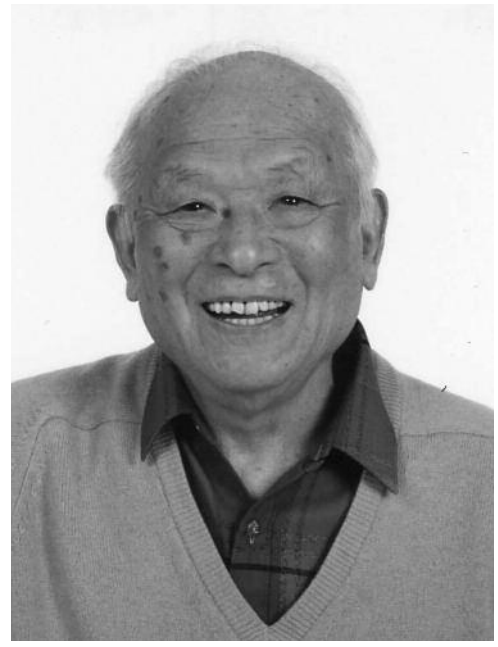
It doesn't take long for them to discover that Belle was interested in something called the Kentauran Foundation. Founded by psychiatrist Dr. Thaddeus Kellerman, it counts among its members a woman who claims to have been abducted by aliens as well as a former astronaut who claims to have witnessed a UFO and to have been abducted while on a NASA mission in 1984. Kellerman himself claims to be in contact with "Rigilians," aliens who believe the Earth is on the verge of collapse and want to take earthlings to another planet. With a membership of nearly three hundred people, the Foundation is preparing to construct a powerful radio transmitter in Costa Rica to contact the aliens and arrange for the voyage. Had Belle somehow infiltrated the group, discovered a nasty secret, and perhaps paid with her life? And what of the body in the lake?

Author Michael Blair weaves a tale of duplicity that would do a professional con artist proud. The reader warms to Hack Loomis immediately. He is both everyman and the underdog, surrounded by adversaries, but never conceding defeat. If I have a reservation about Loomis, it is his personal hygiene: bathing only twice a week doesn't endear him to readers. On the other hand, Loomis's relationship with sidekick Connie Noble is nicely nuanced, as she is clearly taken by him but realistic about their chances of making their business relationship succeed. The other characters are well drawn, and the dialogue is spot on, tailored to each individual, whether it be the arrogant head of the law firm where Belle Ryerson worked or her trusting but naïve sister Hazel.

Deftly tapping into the commonly held belief that intelligent life must exist on other planets, Blair fashions a convincing tale of gullibility and greed, leavening his story with his trademark sly humour. The result is *True Believers*, an entertaining excursion into the realm of those who desperately latch on to what they want to believe. mRb

Jim Napier's reviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on his own award-winning website, *Deadly Diversions*.

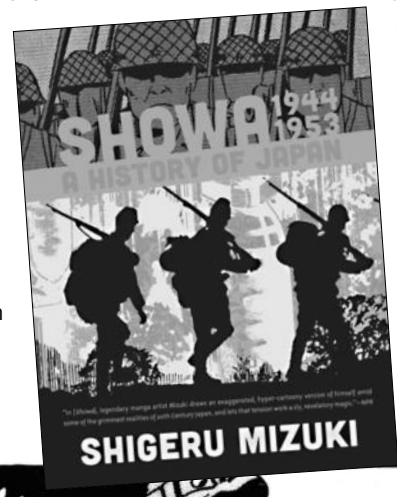
Mizuki's Manga Memoir



SHOWA 1944–1953
A History of Japan
Shigeru Mizuki
Drawn & Quarterly
$24.95, paper, 536pp
978-1-77046-162-8

The third English-language instalment of Shigeru Mizuki's gargantuan manga history of Japan's Showa era (the period from 1926 to 1989, defined by the reign of Emperor Hirohito) is the best yet. This sprawling series gradually deepens its gripping narrative as new layers and perspectives are added to a story that is relatively unknown to most Westerners. Part autobiography and part history lesson narrated by Mizuki's famous *yokai* character Nezumi Otoko (literally and visually "Rat Man"), each *Showa* volume demonstrates how the political becomes personal by juxtaposing historical facts and events with the narrative of Mizuki and his family. But where volume one (covering 1926–1939, including the Depression years and the lead-up to war) was too often bogged down by a lengthy and rather uninvolving recounting of historical facts, and volume two (1939–1944, with a focus, naturally, on the Pacific War) suffered from a seemingly endless series of masterfully drawn but ultimately indistinguishable battle scenes populated by anonymous soldiers, the third instalment of the planned four-volume series takes the reader through a riveting account of the final decisive battles of World War II and – most importantly for the storytelling – gives more prominence to Mizuki himself.

When we left Shigeru at the end of volume two, he was stranded, in a literal cliffhanger, on a mountainside in Papua New Guinea where he had been stationed as a soldier in Japan's Imperial Army. The new book follows Shigeru's attempts to stay alive as Japan's military suffers decisive defeats and his company is stranded without supplies in the jungle. Although he endures a range of hardships including malaria, starvation, and the loss of his left arm in an air strike, the happy-go-lucky Shigeru is portrayed as something of a slacker who is oblivious to the severity of his circumstances as long as he has a bowl of rice in front of him. Given the seriousness of the situation, this narrative strategy seems odd at first, but as the army around him descends into the madness of mass suicide and desperate kamikaze attacks in the final months of the war, Shigeru's innocent disposition functions as a humanizing counterpoint to a military culture devoted to last stands and absolute obedience to the Emperor. Surviving against all odds through the end of the war – the book, perhaps surprisingly, devotes only a few pages to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – Shigeru returns home to a war-torn Japan that is grappling to find a new direction in the aftermath of humiliating defeat. As the country adjusts to the American occupation and slowly emerges from post-war malaise, Shigeru drifts around the country and in and out of jobs until he finds his calling as an artist. Fittingly, the book ends with Shigeru going to Tokyo to try his hand at the new craze of comic books, thereby setting the stage for the fourth (and final) volume of this expansive Bildungsroman to depict Mizuki's development into one of Japan's most celebrated manga artists.



Drawn in a style that mixes hyper-realistic backgrounds, often traced from photographs, with cartoony character design, *Showa* treads a careful visual and narrative line between sombre moments of national as well as personal tragedy and a firm belief that few things are too serious for broad slapstick humour – or, for that matter, to be explained to the reader by a giant rat. As entertainingly offbeat as it is informative and thought-provoking, each new and increasingly impressive instalment reveals *Showa* to be a singular achievement with a historical and humanistic scope that is perhaps unparalleled in comics. mRb

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

Ollmann (from page 12)

she was overweight and therefore "flawed" and would possibly lack the confidence to tell him to f—k off. And watching her, I was like, "Why is she being polite to this piece of shit?" I was feeling all noble and kind of physically insinuated myself in between them and did my smile that says "Aren't I a good person?" that I usually reserve for gay couples holding hands or disfigured children, to let them know I'm a good person who likes them. So I guess I was probably filled with such self-loathing at that moment that I projected it onto her and thought of how annoyed and angry and full of rage she must be, not just against the drunk but against me, the smug self-righteous guy making assumptions about her.

I grew up in a house with four sisters and I got married young the first time – 17! – and I had two daughters at a very young age, so I've had a lot of female influence all my life. I would hope that that would allow me to write female characters well.

IM: Should readers be looking for autobiographical clues in your work? How present are you in your stories?
JO: People have written to me, concerned about me, after reading "Hanging Over." They thought it must have been based on something real, like I was an alcoholic and had a mentally handicapped brother I didn't want to take responsibility for. But no, though there was a time [when] I could relate to the problematic drinking and I *could* write that stuff from hard-earned experience. Those days are over; I've been off booze for over a year now. I'm like an ascetic monk, though less humble about it. I flatter myself that it's my fantastic, empathetic authorship that causes this autobiographical confusion, though an easier answer might be that I tend to draw my main characters to sort of resemble me.

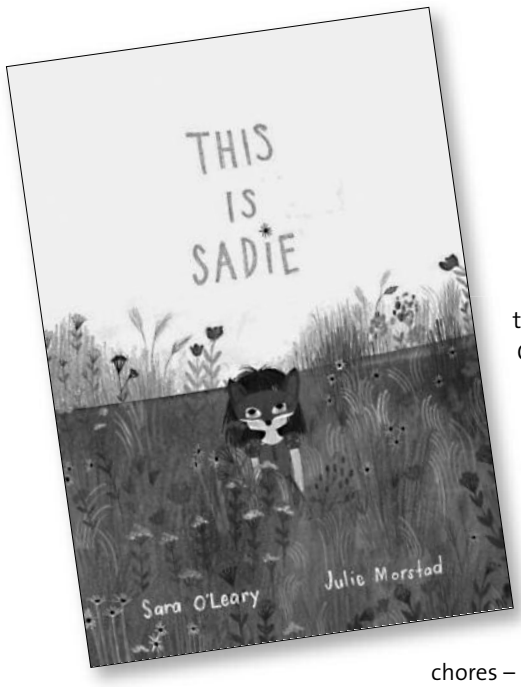
IM: "Pathetic majesty … maudlin, shaggy clown …"; your self-portrait in the afterword almost seems designed to pre-empt anticipated criticism. How much attention do you pay to reviews and to response from readers and peers in general?
JO: Oh shit, I pay *too much* attention to reviews and random blogs and what my peers think and what strangers say on Goodreads. All this constant feedback that's available is such a stupid distraction. I really am striving to not give a shit about it anymore.

Not bragging, but I almost always get good responses from reviewers. CBC just said I am to graphic novels what Alice Munro is to fiction! Ridiculous hyperbole, but I'll take it. Of course, the things that resonate and stay with a self-loathing author are not the kind words from erudite, respected institutions, but "You suck!" spelled incorrectly on someone's blog. That's the stuff I fall asleep thinking about.

IM: A lot of people still have a somewhat limited view of what "comics" are and can be. Do you find, as a practitioner of the form, that it entails a certain implicit pressure to be funny, or do you find that the form allows for all the emotional and tonal scope you need?
JO: Art Spiegelman did all serious cartoonists a favour forever with *Maus.* It's always trooped out – "Jesus, this guy made a comic about the friggin' Holocaust and it works!" It really made it easier for everyone else that that was a bestseller and won the Pulitzer.

I don't feel a pressure to be funny; I just can't help it. I think it's also a sign of maturity. Being all dark, serious, and earnest is a young person's game. As you grow older and you get closer to the grave and you suffer life's constant stream of humbling, hilarious situations, I don't know how you could write anything without injecting humour. mRb

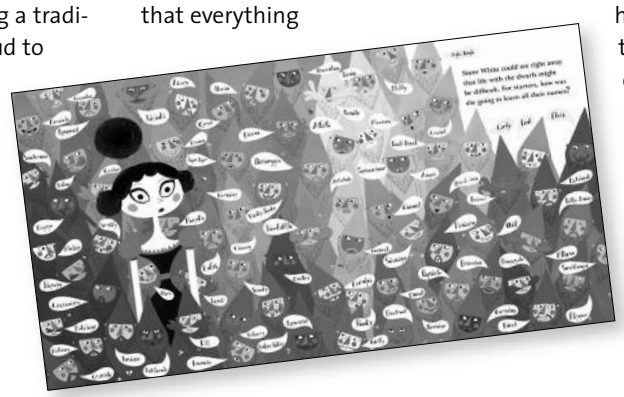
Ian McGillis's book *Higher Ground: A White Person's Encounters With Soul, Reggae and Hip-Hop* will be published by Biblioasis in Fall 2015.



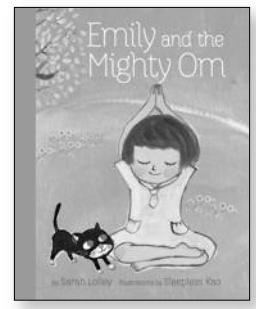
young readers

With the picture book *This Is Sadie*, Sara O'Leary and Julie Morstad team up to introduce us to a girl of great imagination. Rather than plotting a linear storyline for her heroine, O'Leary offers us a character sketch of a girl uninhibited by adult limitations. From the moment Sadie wakes up in the morning, her hammer and nails are out on her bedroom floor and she begins to make "boats of boxes and castles out of cushions." Her play is all-consuming at the same time as being carefree: she floats from swimming under the sea with a mermaid, to howling alongside a wild dog, to clinking tea cups with the March Hare – all within a morning, one suspects. Morstad's airy gouache and ink illustrations nicely complement Sadie's fleeting interests. There's nothing threatening in the artist's renderings of imaginary realms, where even wolves and leopards look approachable, and the night is a calm green-blue illuminated by glowing fairy wings and moonlight. Sadie herself, with her untameable black hair and twirling skirt, is endearingly painted. Yet O'Leary encourages more than detached admiration of Sadie's child-led antics, inviting young readers to reassess the normal in their own lives: "Sadie has wings, of course," the narrator reveals. "She can feel on her back where they are starting to grow. Maybe you have them too. Have you checked?" And what is Sadie's favourite tool for building alternate worlds? A tool accessible to any child? "Stories, because you can make them from nothing at all."

Many a parent reading a traditional fairy tale aloud to their child will not take long to notice the stories' frustrating portrayals of gender. Young audiences, too, remark on injustices, such as a princess too powerless to construct her own destiny. Which is why Davide Cali's latest title, *Snow White and the 77 Dwarfs*, comes as a humorous tonic. The picture book begins at the moment when Snow White, fleeing an evil witch, is offered shelter by the dwarfs on the condition that she help with chores – a task made quite challenging in this retelling given the sheer number of little men. Raphaëlle Barbanègre fills the pages with bold colours and chaotic backdrops to emphasize the new calamity in which our heroine finds herself as she navigates such daily tasks as clothes-washing (seventy-seven dwarf hats criss-cross the page on an infinite laundry line), breakfast-making (another seventy-seven hands reach out with an amusing variety of mugs for their morning coffee), and "beard maintenance." Young readers will especially delight in the two-page spread in which Snow White tries to absorb their various nonsensical names (Pillow, Hokey-Pokey, Topinambour, Kerfuffle...). Finally, receiving no help from the bearded cherubs who are more like children than men, the protagonist opts "to take her chances with the witch" and willingly eats the poisoned apple. Her empowerment is questionable if a coma or domestic enslavement are her only choices, but Cali is aiming for laughs, and in this he succeeds.



With *Emily and the Mighty Om*, Sarah Lolley taps into the recent trend of kids' yoga with the tale of a girl who helps a yogi resolve a difficult problem. Emily is entranced by her new neighbour, a beard-tugging elderly gentleman by the name of Albert who appears on his front lawn each afternoon to do his yoga routine. More curious than the bizarre positions he achieves is his concluding "om," which he explains is "a magic word that everything understands – people and animals, trees, even rocks." One day, Emily returns home to find Albert stuck in a complicated asana on his front lawn, unable to speak. One by one, passersby stop to offer their frantic suggestions for what he needs, but it is Emily who remembers the words of her elder and leads them in a collective chant that cuts through the tension and re-establishes the calm that Albert needs to pop out of his pose. Sleepless Kao's paintings use calming, spring-like colours in a natural setting and simple figures to reflect the serenity of the om. Not only is Lolley's tale a useful narrative means to inspire scattered children to redirect their energies into observation and inward gazing, but the story's broader message tells us that even the youngest and the smallest among us have the capacity to teach.



Prolific YA novelist Monique Polak has penned a compelling read with *Hate Mail*, which uses a suburban Montreal-area high school as the platform for examining prejudices surrounding autism. Protagonist Jordie thinks his plate is sufficiently full trying to be cool enough to attract the attention of his classmate Samantha. When his autistic cousin, Todd, begins attending the same school, suddenly life gets a lot more complicated. Seeing how his peers react to Todd's unconventional behaviour, Jordie hides the fact that they're related: "What would it be like," he wonders, "to have a normal cousin? ... Sometimes, it sucks to be me." Jordie is aware of the unfairness of Todd's treatment, but he is silent about it, which Polak stresses is just as cruel as the taunts. Polak developed *Hate Mail* as a writer-in-residence at a school much like Jordie's, integrating students' ideas and feedback into the chapters as she progressed. This shows her ability to recreate a setting true to life. She's also deft at informing readers about autism – explaining behavioural patterns, for instance – without lapsing into lecture mode, using Jordie's voice instead. We see the development in Jordie as he shifts his focus from concern about his friends' opinions to concern for his cousin's well-being, especially after Todd's parents receive a hateful letter about their son. *Hate Mail* concludes with Jordie respecting Todd's differences, and with the school touting their former outcast as a hero after Todd's obsession with planes leads to Samantha's rescue. Polak's well-paced novel encourages teen readers to consider the prejudices at play in their own lives, and to find the courage to stand up for what they believe is just.

Those who have graduated from Marie-Louise Gay's endearing *Stella* picture book series will be excited to learn of a new series by the same author, penned for early readers and now available in English. *Princess Pistachio* features a feisty girl – portrayed with red braided hair reminiscent of Pippi Longstocking in lively pen-and-ink drawings – named Pistachio who is convinced that she is a displaced monarch from Papua being raised by mere commoners masquerading as her parents. On her birthday, she is delighted to find an unsigned card addressed to "my little princess" and a package containing a golden crown, which she regards as proof of her entitlement. Her parents, however, are more interested in getting her to eat her creamed spinach, while her younger sister Penny wants to join in the play-acting. Pistachio finds no support at school, either, despite showing up to class dressed in full regal garb. When the mystery of the card is revealed, a disappointed Pistachio lashes out at her sibling and has to redeem herself when Penny goes missing. The second book in the series, *Princess Pistachio and the Pest*, places more emphasis on the contentious relationship between the sisters. Pistachio's mother charges her to take Penny to the park, but Pistachio wants nothing more than to spend her first day of summer vacation exploring with her friends, and so it's with much grumpiness that she drags her sister and laden wagon down the street. The morning has its own share of adventure, however, with the girls facing a slew of obstacles on their way to the park. Certainly there are commendable features in the two books, including Gay's creative use of colour to portray emotion, but overall the stories seem unpolished, the text stilted. The characters are often unpleasant to each other without being corrected (not just sister to sister, but "friend" to friend, even parent to child) and there's a whole lot of shouting going on. Gay's fans may find themselves yearning for a return to the throne by the kinder, more inspiring Stella. mRb

Andrea Belcham, author of the book *Food and Fellowship*, lives in Saint-Lazare.

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By Kai Cheng Thom

THE MILE END CAFÉ

Of Mothers and Madness

"I know I'm being illogical, cantankerous, and quarrelsome. I know I'm unreasonable and infantile. I know, yet I continue to sob.... And now it is my turn to smile through tears as I repeat, 'Maybe there are no modern mothers...'" – Shulamis Yelin, "No Modern Mothers"

Maybe there are no modern mothers, indeed. After all, the archetype of the brilliant yet violently unbalanced mother is at least as old as Medea. The "crazy" mother is a powerfully resonant (if highly problematic) figure; there is something about her that we love to hate in literature and in life. As a writer and therapist, I find her again and again: in the texts I read and write, in the stories of my clients, and in my own family history (I defy you to find me a single family tree without a troubled mother ensconced somewhere in its branches, hanging upside-down like a bat). My own grandmother was known to slam her daughters' hands in drawers, run shrieking through the streets of small-town British Columbia in her nightgown, and make death threats to children – how's that for mommy issues?

Reading *Demonic to Divine: The Double Life of Shulamis Yelin*, an (auto)biography of the titular Shulamis – author Gilah Yelin Hirsch's mother and an almost-famous Montreal writer – compels reflection upon motherhood, mental illness, and the links we tend to draw between them. The book compiles diary entries and autobiographical writing by Shulamis, a brilliant and charismatic woman who was once the toast of Jewish Montreal. She was also, to go by Hirsch's commentary, a tempestuous and at least occasionally abusive mother. *Demonic to Divine* contemplates an old question: How do we forgive our crazy mothers? Adding a follow-up from a feminist perspective: is it mental illness that ruins mothers, or does motherhood – and, indeed, womanhood – in a patriarchal society make women crazy?

"I don't want to live a life through my children – I want to live my self, fully." Shulamis Yelin recorded this thought in her diary in 1938, echoing Ibsen's neurotic Nora, the mother who emancipates herself from house, husband, and children in *A Doll's House*. It's ironic then, that it is Shulamis's daughter's efforts that have brought her posthumously back into the public eye. In her long life, Shulamis was a force to be reckoned with, striving for recognition as a literary artist at a time when only men were considered great writers (some would say not much has changed). Her endeavours were occasionally rewarded: Nobel laureate Saul Bellow favourably reviewed *Shulamis: Stories from a Montreal Childhood*, describing her writing as "a kind of nostalgic ecstasy."

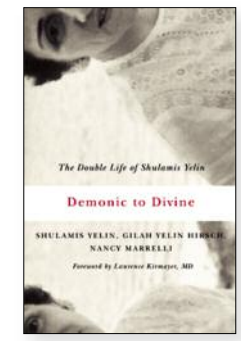
One wonders if Shulamis's identity as an independent, liberated Jewish woman in twentieth-century Montreal contributed to her lifelong sense of displacement, depression, and disconnection from society, which is well documented in her diaries:

> There is something in the night that just wearies out my heart with its heaviness and beauty and its silence. If the scream that lies choking in my soul could but escape and free me from this spell, I would wish to pass away from all there is in life. This stifling beauty throbs with wordless stories.

There is something hauntingly universal about Shulamis's private writings, published for the first time in *Demonic to Divine* – as if she is giving voice not only to her own longing for fulfilment but also to the rage of other strong-minded women of her time, still restricted by the boxes of oppressive gender roles, a fate enough to drive anyone mad. Even today, women are overwhelmingly represented in mental illness statistics for all but a few diagnoses; even today, women are haunted by the stigma that accompanies mental illness, in no small part because of archetypes such as the "crazy mother" (and its attendant tropes, the "crazy girlfriend" and "crazy wife"), which all too often serve to caricature strong-minded women as bad mothers and hysterical harridans. The curse of the crazy mother thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – if a woman is wilful, she is treated as mad, and is thereby driven to acts of violence and madness.

Near the end of her life, both Shulamis and her daughter seem to have made steps toward reconciling their conflicting realities of mental illness and motherhood. Instead of rejecting or redeeming her mother's character, Hirsch gives us this double portrait of her mother as at once demonic and divine. Shulamis seems to have embraced her demons, refusing the idea of being "cured" by the therapies available to her at the time of her most acute crises. On electroshock therapy, she wrote:

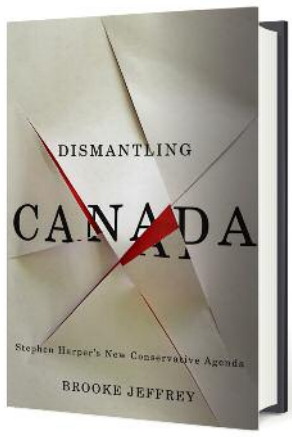
> A terrible indignity to impose on a person ... the ultimate punishment, the rape of the ego! How guilty can one be?! Somehow, one almost feels one has a right to one's own devils. Why exorcise them?!"



DEMONIC TO DIVINE
The Double Life of Shulamis Yelin
Shulamis Yelin, Gilah Yelin Hirsch, and Nancy Marrelli
Véhicule Press
$20.00, paper, 224pp
978-1-55065-383-0

To read *Demonic to Divine* is to bear witness to a process of remembrance and healing that refuses to either condemn or exonerate this particular "crazy" mother. The book prompts contemplation on the political implications of mental illness in a world where sexism and other social oppressions prevent individuals from flourishing to their full potential; it's also a reminder of the many forgotten "crazy" women writers who fairly litter the Canadian literary landscape (the once-celebrated poet and CBC broadcaster Mona Gould comes to mind). In the end, perhaps, it is not up to us to forgive our crazy mothers, but to accept them for who they are – in all their flawed, yet complete, humanity. mrb

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*.



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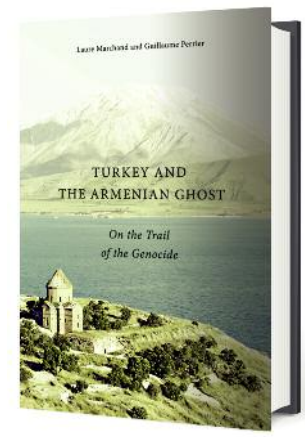

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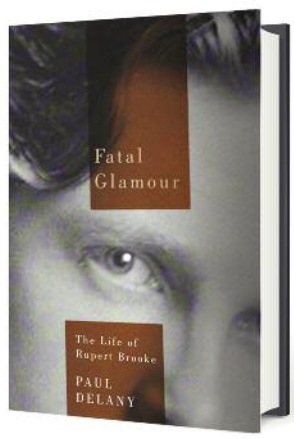

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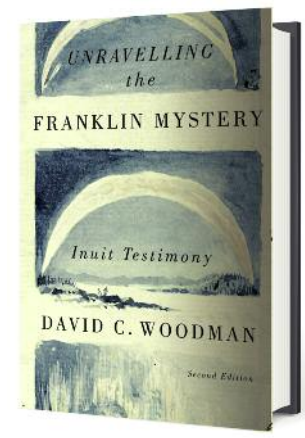

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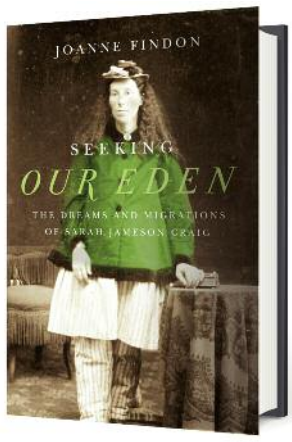

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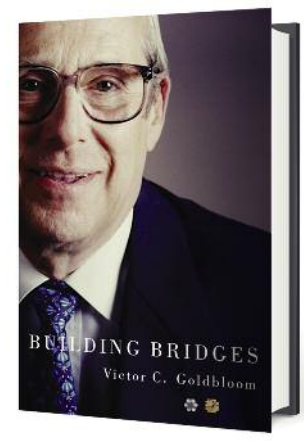

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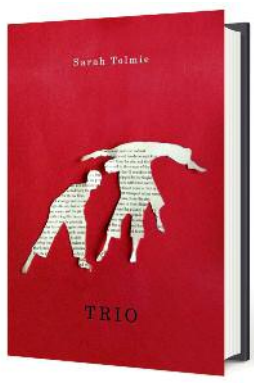

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Sarah Tolmie
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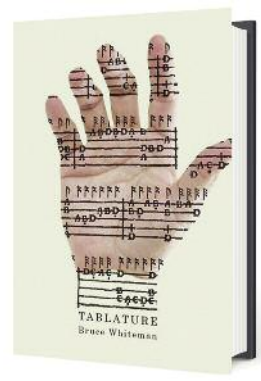
It's a complicated dance.



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