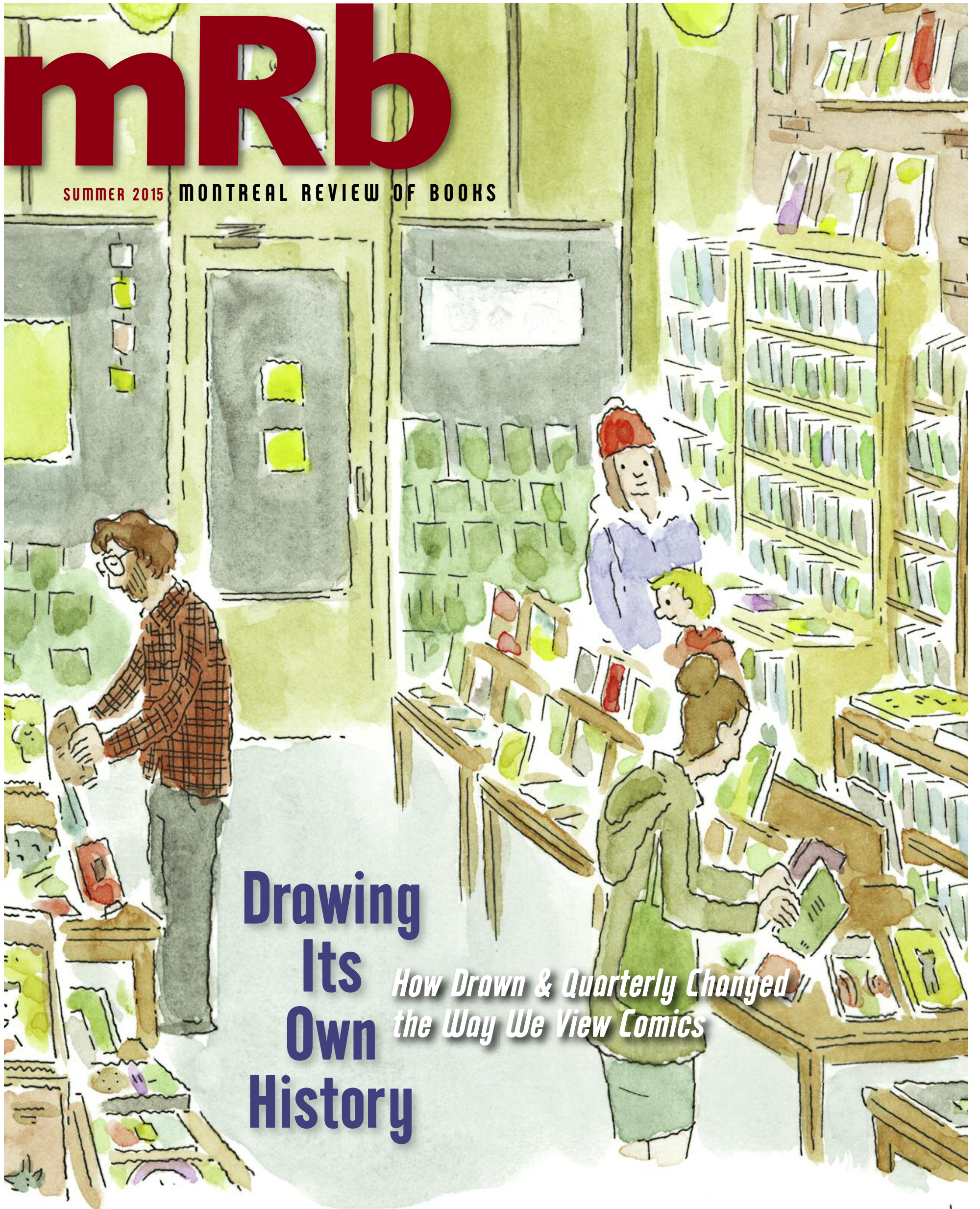


# mRb

SUMMER 2015 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS



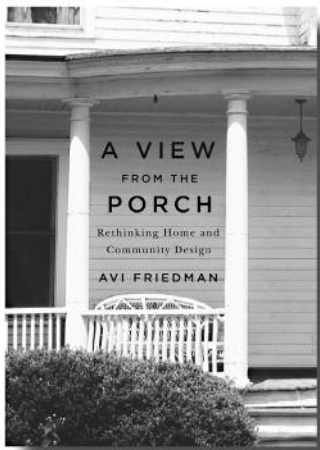
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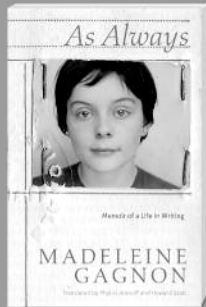
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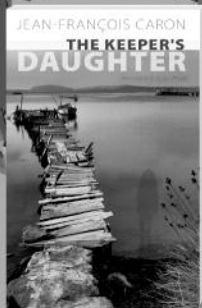
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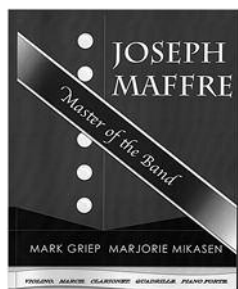
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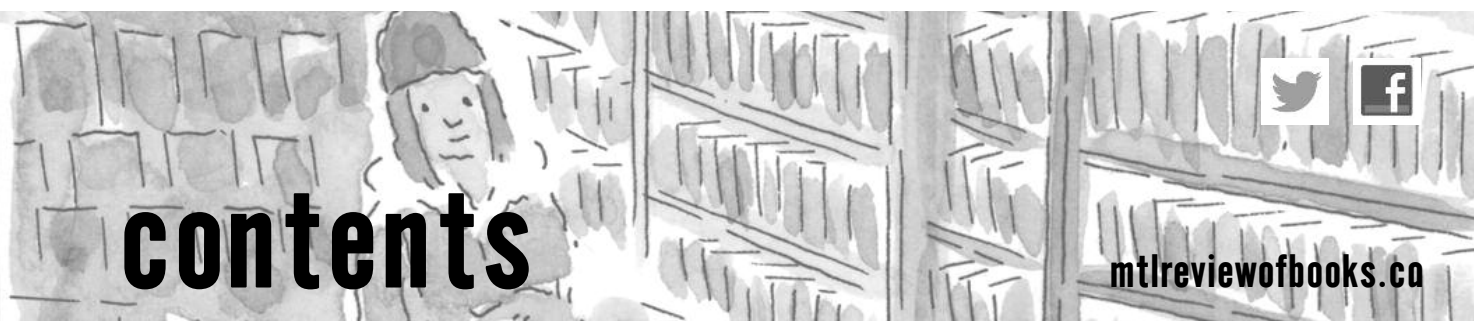
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Music must float in the air over Montreal...

ILLUSTRATION BY LIAM MATTHEW BYRNE

# A Montreal Powerhouse Celebrates Its Silver Anniversary



One of the most memorable afternoons I've ever had was spent in the company of a ninety-three-year-old retired architect and budding cartoonist. Harry Mayerovitch was a man who had done well for himself; he was enjoying his golden years living in a spacious apartment in Côte-des-Neiges, with another apartment across the hall to store his collection of art and memorabilia. I was visiting him to talk about his book *Way to Go*, a collection of mordantly hilarious cartoons and visual puns around the theme of death and mortality.

"They're a first-class operation," Mayerovitch said of the Montreal-based publisher that had just brought out the book he had first pitched when he was a mere ninety. "Anyone who says young people today lack a work ethic should take a look at Chris and Drawn & Quarterly."

Harry knew of what he spoke. The Chris in question was Chris Oliveros; the company, the influential graphic-lit powerhouse Oliveros founded in 1990. In 2004, I knew what Harry was talking about. Not long before, to my shame, I wouldn't have had a clue.

When I first moved to Montreal in the late 1990s and settled in Mile End, it pleased me greatly to know that I was walking the streets immortalized by Mordecai Richler and his creations. But soon enough I was getting just as much of a charge out of knowing that something special was unfolding in the neighbourhood in the here and now; its nerve centre, two small rooms above a travel agent on Avenue du Parc between Saint-Viateur and Bernard. It's how I would guess it felt to be living in Detroit in the 1960s heyday of Motown, knowing that every time you went down West Grand Boulevard and passed that big old house with the Hitsville USA sign, something amazing was being cooked up behind those unassuming walls.

Comics hadn't been a big part of my life since the fading of a childhood obsession with *Mad* magazine's Don Martin. Beyond an abiding interest in Robert Crumb and a few outliers like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, I assumed that the form had passed me by. But then, via routes I couldn't have foreseen, it began to sneak up on me again. One of my favourite albums of the

early twenty-first century was Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*, a work whose mood of curdled romance was enhanced by – indeed inextricable from – its evocative cover art and lyric booklet. The CD package, it turned out, was designed, drawn, and lettered by Seth. Concurrently, one of my favourite books was by that selfsame Seth. Titled, rather brilliantly, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, the book was my introduction to both the manifold delights of the D&Q catalogue and to the idea that the comics medium can be a vessel for as broad a range of artistic statements as any other. Dots were connecting here. More and more of the coolest artefacts on the cultural landscape had one thing in common – the imprimatur of a company whose headquarters were literally right around the corner from my apartment.

The D&Q brand is the kind that earns your trust, and before you know it you can find yourself venturing into *outré* realms – Marc Bell's intricate free-standing psychedelic tableaux, Anders Nilsen's dream-logic minimalist epics – that you would previously have never considered. You can also find yourself going back into history and getting happily mired there. Tove Jansson's *Moomins* have become so much a part of my life that I can scarcely recall how I got by without them, and it was the curatorial zeal of D&Q, and of Tom Devlin in particular, that brought those nearly forgotten Scandinavian trolls back into general circulation. The D&Q experience goes well beyond stars like Seth, Kate Beaton, Lynda Barry, Julie Doucet, and flagship titles like Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang* and Chester Brown's *Louis Riel*, the latter an especially groundbreaking work that continues to insinu-

ate its way indelibly into Canada's national cultural identity more than ten years after its publication. As the company's new mind-blowing silver anniversary anthology demonstrates, it's also about depth in numbers. Gathering this kind of plenitude between two covers is something precious few publishers could even conceive of doing; it's overwhelming, but in a good way. If anyone still clings to the notion that comics are a poor relation in the family tree of literature, this is the book to crush such thoughts once and for all.

Over the years, I've had cause to write about D&Q and its books many times, and one of the first of those assignments involved a visit to that second-floor office on Parc. Stepping through the doorway from the street I saw that the indoor staircase was lined on both sides with boxes full of books; I made my way up by shuffling sideways. Upstairs, in among still more piles of boxes, was Chris Oliveros. He's the most unassuming visionary you could imagine meeting – my strong sense was that here, stresses and vicissitudes of the publishing business notwithstanding, was a person doing exactly what he wanted with his life. My other abiding impression was of the seeming disjunct between the quantity and quality of what this office was producing and the size of what Mayerovitch called "the operation" – at this stage it was basically Oliveros and the newly hired spouse team of publicist Peggy Burns and designer/editor Tom Devlin. A common fallacy of pop culture history is the hindsight assumption that because something happened, it was inevitable. But that's a view that gravely short-changes the contributions of people like Oliveros, Burns, and Devlin. They did more than just tap into the zeitgeist; in a very real sense, they helped create that zeitgeist.

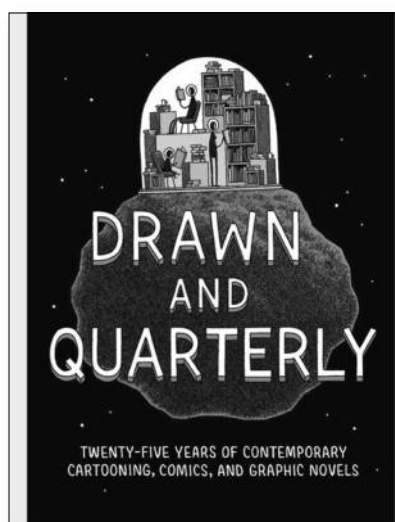
Books, lest we forget, are *objects*. Central to the success of D&Q and kindred spirits like Fantagraphics and McSweeney's is that, in an age when we're forced to do more and more of our reading from screens, they're providing something you just can't get electronically. I lived out a nice demonstration of what this can mean roughly ten years ago, when, for reasons I can't quite recall, I had to transport my copy of Chris Ware's *The Acme Novelty Library* across the city on public transit. The outsized volume was literally too big to fit into any bag I could find, so I rode the metro that day with the book in full view. In the twenty minutes or so between Vendôme and Beaubien stations, I struck up two separate conversations with two complete strangers, our only common ground being our shared admiration for the immaculate design of the book in my arms. Years later, when Ware did an appearance at the Ukrainian Federation along with Charles Burns and Adrian Tomine,

I saw those two people again, and we nodded in recognition. I like to think I had some small part in their being there. I don't want to overplay this – it's not like the three of us group-hugged and decided to move in together – but still.

Oh, and I almost forgot the store. Librairie Drawn & Quarterly, paid eloquent tribute by Heather O'Neill in the new anthology, has become the soul of Mile End in a remarkably short time – it's our City Lights, our Shakespeare and Company. When I spoke to Junot Diaz on the eve of his visiting the city recently, I asked the Pulitzer-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* what was on his must-see list. He didn't even pause. "Drawn & Quarterly," he said.

Inevitably – and rightly – things do change over a quarter century, and Drawn & Quarterly, for all its admirable continuity, is no exception. The office has moved and grown, to an airy eighth-floor loft space in the industrial zone north of Mile End, and will shift this summer to an even bigger space nearby. The staff has grown, from one to three to eighteen. Unthinkably, Chris Oliveros will soon be stepping down to devote more time to his own cartooning, his place as publisher assumed by Peggy Burns. A part of me fears that if the company were to get much bigger, something – some essential ineffable underdog spirit – might be lost. But it's only a very small part of me. These are smart people. I think this operation will stay first-class. mrb

Ian McGillis is the author of the bestselling novel *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry*. His next book, *Higher Ground*, will be published in the near future by Biblioasis.

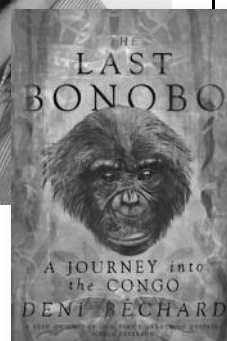
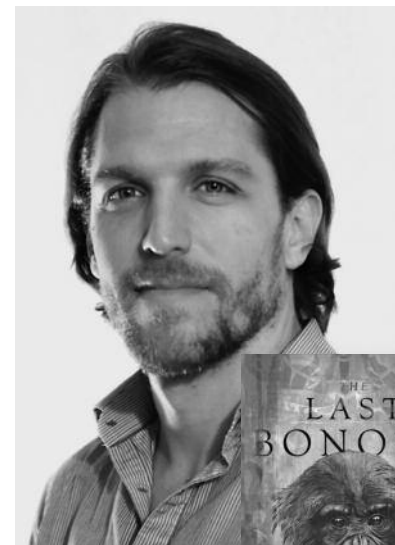


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# non-fiction

## Compassionate Conservation

**THE LAST BONOBO**  
A Journey into the Congo  
Deni Béchard  
Biblioasis  
\$24.95, paper, 400pp  
978-1-77196-032-8



**T**he *Last Bonobo* is a brilliant book, exactly the kind of intellectually powerful, clear, and compassionate account that could – literally – help save the world.

Deni Béchard knows how to write. Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for his novel *Vandal Love* and author of the memoir *Cures for Hunger*, he deftly presents big ideas with lucidity and a total lack of condescension. In *The Last Bonobo*, he does a beautiful job of explaining the evolution of *homo sapiens* and our near genetic cousins, the other apes, in the context of the geologic and environmental history of central Africa. He also navigates the complex colonial and postcolonial histories of the region with sensitivity and skill, including catastrophic wars in neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda, skating lightly over the horrors of the Congo's history without letting anyone off the hook. A reader with no knowledge of the region's history and politics may approach with confidence; Béchard makes it easy to understand the course of events.

*The Last Bonobo* is a case study in effective conservation, tracing the development of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI) led by Americans Sally Jewell Coxe and Michael Hurley. But the bigger and more important ideas that Béchard communicates so well are the values that make the BCI successful, and it is those values that, applied more broadly, could be world-changing. Unlike big, well-funded conservation groups like the World Wildlife Fund, which have heavy administrative structures to support, BCI is small and nimble, spending scarce funds doing conservation on the ground. Béchard emphasizes the time Jewell Coxe and Hurley spend cultivating relationships with those who live in the Congolese rainforest, deepening their understanding of the people's living conditions and traumatic history, the culture that guides their relationship with the forest and its non-human denizens, their profound local knowledge. The book is full of lively examples, such as a spot on the Tschuapa River where bonobos had become so used to the human presence that they began to eat food from people's fields. In response, the women planted "buffer crops" for the apes to eat instead.

Consistent with the respectfully collegial approach of BCI, which privileges the wisdom and work of local people as well as their needs, Béchard also offers eye-opening spotlights on BCI's Congolese partners, among them Albert Lotana Lokasola and André Tusumba, extraordinary men who founded their own grassroots conservation organizations, often at great personal cost. One comes away with the urgent sense that we cannot afford to let the trees of the rainforest, with their vital oxygen-producing and carbon-sequestering capacities, be cut down – but as well the understanding that the forest is not just the trees; it is also the plants and animals, including bonobos and humans, whose existence is inextricably tied to that of the trees. Whether we know it or not (the Congolese know it) we live *with* the bonobos.

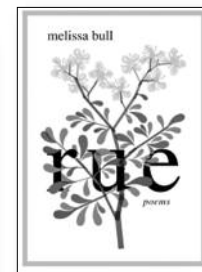
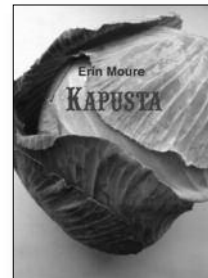
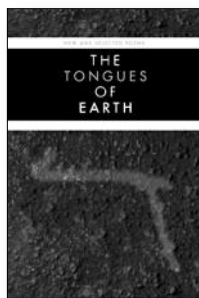
With a fine eye for detail, Béchard takes us through the rainforest with him. To dinner (caterpillars fried in garlic – delicious!), on the back of a motorcycle speeding across half-rotted plank bridges, to sit with a group of trackers beneath a tree full of bonobo nests (they bend and weave branches together to make "bowls" to sleep in). There, under the tree, he shows us how "Mama Sally" uses culture to bring creatures together: she breaks out a stash of power bars and trail mix and hands it out to her human companions. Bonobos, she explains, share food, and they like to see humans share food too. Sure enough, some curious bonobos appear to watch.

It is a privilege to join Béchard on his journeys, intellectual and physical. mrb

Elise Moser's YA novel, *Lily and Taylor*, appeared from Groundwood Books in 2013. Her kids' book about the woman who invented plastics recycling will appear in 2016.

# poetry

## Realms of Gold



### THE TONGUES OF EARTH: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

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### LEAVING THE ISLAND

Talya Rubin  
Signal Editions  
\$18.00, paper, 70pp  
978-1550654035

Mark Abley's *The Tongues of Earth* is a rich sampling of his three earlier books with some new poems. Abley is best known for his excellent non-fiction, but he also understands the craft of poetry, particularly the use of traditional forms. Most of his poems are written in stanzas, usually rhymed ones. He writes on many subjects, but his imagination is most engaged with extinctions, both biological (like the Imperial Woodpecker, the Labrador Duck, and the Garefowl) and linguistic. The concern with loss means that his tone is often elegiac, although he has written with wincing humour about the experience of a vasectomy: "The wisecrack surgeon sends me home in stitches. / Codeine is dynamite with Scotch and nachos."

Abley is the author of the non-fiction *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*, and, not surprisingly, some of the best poems in *The Tongues of Earth* evoke the human richness that vanishes with a language. K'tunaxa, an endangered language formerly known as Kootenai, has a term

for "starving / though having a fish trap," which encapsulates a knowledge of life in a single word. The remarkable "Deep Gold," based on Abley's edition of the writings of Samuel Palmer, a visionary artist, commemorates another kind of loss, the sad career of a brilliant creator whose work did not succeed in his own lifetime. He glimpsed the radiance of Heaven but the deprivations of earthly life destroyed his vision. Abley's work has substance, and the substance has form. This is a book to read, and read again.

Oana Avasilichioaei's *Liminal* is two books in one, with a portfolio of colour photographs in the middle. The Romanian-born Montreal poet has an instinctive interest in boundaries. A limb is articulated with other parts of the body, making it a liminal site, and an exile or migrant is a dislocated limb. The first half of *Liminal* is in five sections and explores boundaries and limits, dramatizing crossing, violations, and seepages. It is heavily theorized and works brilliantly with formatting and fonts, but remains curiously detached, even in the love poems. The photographs that both join and divide the book illustrate the concepts more powerfully than the poems of the first part.

The poems that follow would have made a strong book on their own. They are haunted by Paul Celan, a German-speaking Romanian and Holocaust survivor who lived in exile in France and eventually committed suicide. He naturally interests Avasilichioaei, a migrant who also lives in a place where French is spoken. She opens the second part with valuable translations of the sixteen poems and prose poems that Celan wrote in Romanian. She goes on to place herself in dialogue with Celan and his fellow Holocaust survivor, the Nobel laureate Nelly Sachs. It takes courage to juxtapose one's own writing with such giants. She carries it off honourably.

Erin Moure deploys her impressive literary powers to muffle the impact of the two stories she has to tell in her bilingual *Kapusta*, a new form she calls a "verse play / cabaret." She uses her now-familiar avatar E. as a narrator in both French and English, but she also introduces a sock puppet called Malenka Dotchka as a kind of stand-in for the stand-in.

One story is ancestral: the work is narrated by E. from behind the woodstove of her maternal grandmother, who was born near Lviv (then part of Austria, and now part of Ukraine) but ended up in the outskirts of a town in northern Alberta. The word *kapusta* means cabbage, and what could be more authentically Eastern European than cabbage? The stage directions say that the set should have a field of red cabbages on a tarpaulin. ("Only the cabbages are real," we are told.) The grandmother and her family left for Canada before the two genocides in Ukraine, the Soviet-imposed famine, and the massacres by the Nazis, but they were aware of them.

The other story is the troubled relationship of E. and her acculturated mother, referred to as MIM, whose denial of origins is reflected by her adoration of two American singers, Dean Martin and Perry Como, both Italian Americans with stage names. The mother does say that "we're all leaves of a single cabbage," but she has denied her roots. The materials of the poem are important human issues – genocide clearly counting more heavily than mother-daughter relations – but they are mediated by so much apparatus. When real suffering breaks into the work through descriptions of Nazi massacres, the machinery seems pointless.

Near the end, E. "writes over" Adam Zagajewski's poem "To Go to Lvov" (an alternative name for Lviv) by substituting lines of Holocaust testimony from the Internet while keeping every tenth line of the original. Zagajewski's poem is one of the great works of our age. Erin Moure's poem does not measure up, but whose would?

Melissa Bull is well known as a translator, particularly of Nelly Arcan, and as a columnist for *Maisonneuve*. Her strong debut as a poet plays off multiple meanings of *rue*, the most famous of which in English literature is the mad Ophelia's "You must wear your rue with difference," and Ophelia's "rosemary for remembrance" is quoted in one poem. While Bull writes about the Montreal streets, cafés, and apartments in the middle section, "Skirting Petite-Patrie," she remembers her past with considerable regret in the opening and concluding sections. In fact, much of the book explores memory, which, Socrates said, is the mother of the Muses.

The poems that open the book describe a dysfunctional childhood with an eccentric and artistic mother. Tolstoy's famous saying ran, "All happy families are alike. All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way." But in confessional poetry, it seems that all dysfunctional families are at least very similar: Bull does not wear her rue with enough difference. The sprawling prose poems that dominate the childhood section (called "Brood" – like Moure's narrator, E., Bull has grievances) might have been turned into a powerful essay. The last section is more moving because Bull limits herself to the grief and ambivalence she experiences during the terminal illness of her father.

Where she triumphs is in the poems sandwiched between the mother and father sections. Montreal place names proliferate, and she makes the sites real through sharp images. One of the best poems, "Scaffolding," catches the distinctive flavour of the Québécois accent on the East Plateau by quoting bits of conversation. She uses imagery of the body to suggest a real subject moving through the streets and "the patchouli hub of the café" of her city. The synaesthesia in the opening of "Ratii" is dazzling: "I could lick the hair of his arms to / smell the sunlight." Like Moure, Bull interjects parts of a celebrated poem as an intertext in a work of her own. Her poem

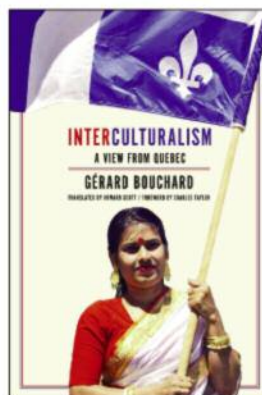
"BATTERMEDOWN!" cannot bear the weight of John Donne's great sonnet, "Batter My Heart, Three-person'd God."

Talya Rubin writes about two places called St. Kilda: the austere island in the Hebrides, abandoned by its people in 1930, and the raffish seaside suburb in Melbourne, which was named for Sir Thomas Acland's schooner, *Lady of St. Kilda*, after it moored there for a year.

The island is one of the most extreme human environments: the seas were impossible to fish and the inhabitants lived entirely on the birds that nest on forbidding cliffs. The islanders even improvised women's shoes from the split necks of geese. Rubin has done her research diligently and captures the exotic qualities of this desperate environment and the almost Neolithic lives of those who lived there. The poems about Melbourne are less interesting, a mixture of personal narrative and travelogue. The St. Kilda district is famous for the gorgeous cakes on Acland Street – which everyone agrees look better than they taste. Local colour, however, doesn't always satisfy. The poems in her "Montreal, Canada" section are predictable as well, mostly stories of growing up in the seventies. The best in this book comes last: Rubin won the Bronwen Wallace Award in 1998 for "Santorini, Greece," a collection of prose poems, the art of which transcends travelogue. Myth lurks everywhere in islands like Santorini, thanks to the long continuity of life there. In "Return," she evokes the story of Odysseus without naming him. "The Story of Bones" is another fine poem: it tells the story of an archaeologist working on Santorini with his young daughter and takes us deep into history in a single page. Like Keats in his great sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," she has travelled much in realms of gold. mb

Bert Almon lives in Edmonton, Alberta. Retired from teaching, he follows the careers of his former students.

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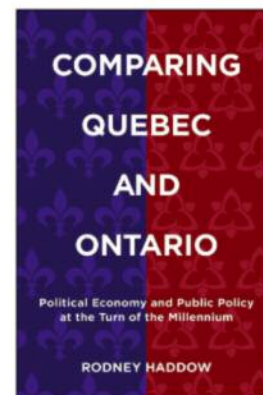


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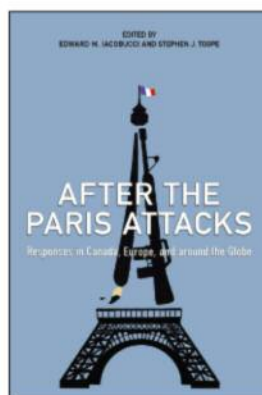


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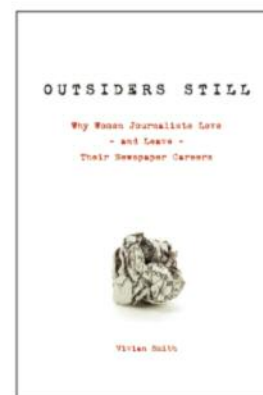


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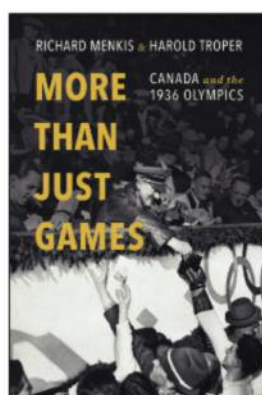


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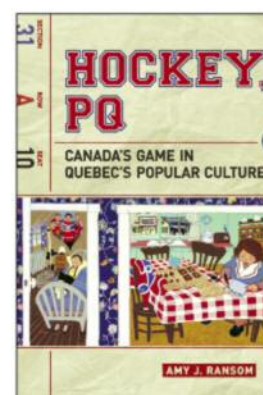


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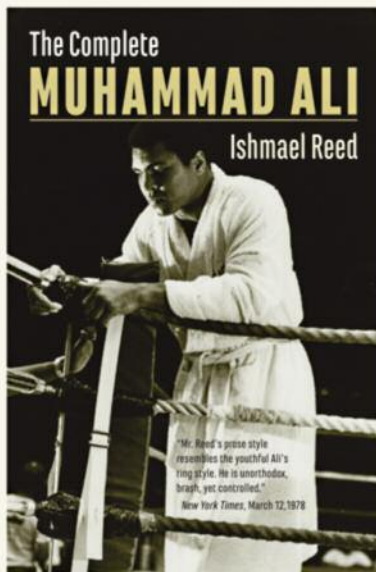


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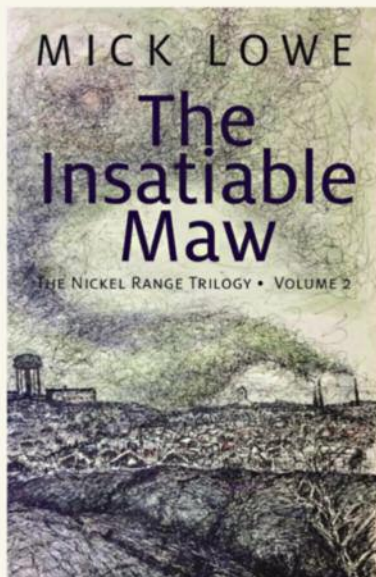
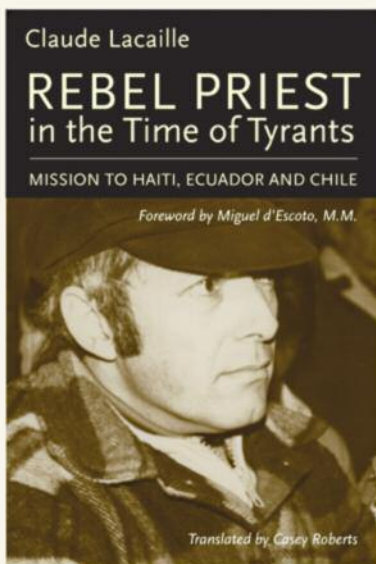
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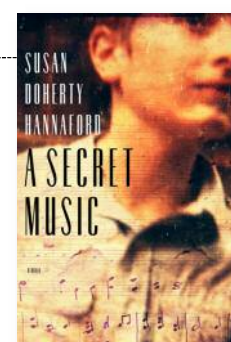
Advancing Knowledge

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By Ami Sands Brodoff

## Music and Madness

**W**hen I taught creative writing to people with schizophrenia in New York City, they often came to workshop wearing earphones. Many listened to music while they wrote. Hearing voices – often accusatory and threatening – is a hallmark of this devastating mental illness, and listening to music, my students told me, helped to drown out the dissonance in their heads. In her absorbing and warm-hearted debut novel, *A Secret Music*, Susan Doherty Hannaford braids these fascinating subjects – music and madness – into a poignant family story.



**A SECRET MUSIC**  
Susan Doherty Hannaford  
Cormorant Books  
\$21.95, paper, 296pp  
978-1-77086-367-5

interviewed him for a high school biography project, he finally shared the rich details of his life – just in time. Shortly afterward, he passed away. “I was meant to carry his story forward,” Doherty Hannaford tells me. In fact, he entered her dreams so often that she realized he was directing her project and keeping her positive through countless rewrites. “In his last appearance, he was fourth row centre in an auditorium, as if to say, ‘Let the show begin.’”

In early spring, I met up with Doherty Hannaford in her sunlit Westmount home, about a dozen blocks west from the setting of *A Secret Music* on Fort and Dorchester (now René-Lévesque). She served cappuccinos as we chatted for several hours, warming our bones after yet another ferocious winter.

The novel is inspired by the author’s father who never spoke much about his painful but fascinating life, growing up with a mentally ill mother. When Doherty Hannaford’s daughter

*A Secret Music* takes place in Montreal in 1937 with the Great Depression still devastating Canada. CBC radio is in its infancy, Benny Goodman is the reigning king of swing, and teenage prodigy Lawrence Nolan is pursuing his dream of becoming a concert pianist. He decides on his calling at age six, memorizing an entire book of piano pieces to make his pregnant mother smile. As a reward, she takes him to Archambault to buy new sheet music, and on one of the store’s pianos, Lawrence plays an impromptu allegro by Mozart. In the taxi home, his mother takes his hand and murmurs,

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# A Musical Renaissance

**STUDIO GRACE**

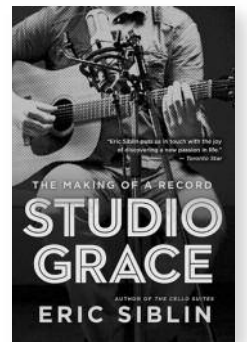
**The Making of a Record**

**Eric Sibilin**

**House of Anansi Press**

**\$24.95, paper, 328pp**

**9781770899353**



How many people once played in a band, tried their hand at writing songs, and eventually let the whole music thing fall by the wayside – but have a nagging feeling that someday they’d like to take it up again? No doubt the number is too high to count, but Montreal writer Eric Sibilin decided to take up a personal music revival in earnest, and to write about the experience. *Studio Grace* is an intimate, at times exhaustive account of Sibilin’s journey in writing and recording an album.

Writing in a straightforward, conversational style, Sibilin (author of the award-winning *The Cello Suites*) finds himself adrift after a breakup and decides to dust off his decades-long dream of recording his own songs. He has a muse of sorts in Jo, a friend and unrequited crush who gives him sometimes brutally honest feedback on his songwriting, as well as an ally in Morey, an old friend and music business veteran with a tricked-out home studio. Later, Sibilin also tries his hand at live studio recording with engineer Howard Bilerman at the storied Mile End studio Hotel2Tango, where famous records by Arcade Fire and others were laid to tape.

Sibilin goes into great detail about his songwriting process, an authorial decision that’s both rewarding and risky. Anyone intrigued by the mechanics of songwriting will find his revelations interesting, but readers with a more casual relationship to music may not be so captivated by the details of how the sausage is made.

Like anyone entering the recording milieu this century, Sibilin has to contend with radically different philosophies on the appropriate way to record. His old friend Morey is a convert to the doctrine of digital perfectionism, meticulously creating a piece with endless plug-ins and minute tweaks, while the Hotel2Tango’s Bilerman is a purist for analogue equipment and capturing the authentic moment of a live performance. As Sibilin discovers, the grey area between these creative polarities is huge, and part of making music in the twenty-first century is that each artist has to figure out where they stand.

Though his musical reboot is framed as being motivated by a painful breakup, Sibilin doesn’t open up much emotionally in the book. His self-portrait is of a perpetually curious, somewhat naïve fish out of water in the music community. As such, he’s a useful *tabula rasa* for the recording lessons he learns, though I would have found more to identify with if he’d delved a little deeper into the emotions behind the process.

One of the book’s curiosities from a Montreal perspective is the cultural split that it reveals within the city. No, not the language divide – Francophones, musical or otherwise, are barely present in the book. I’m referring to the gap between the entrenched Anglophone culture of Westmount, NDG, and the West Island, and the “hipster” artist milieu in Mile End and its environs. As a member of the latter, I found Sibilin’s perspective on my community, very much an outsider’s take, to be both puzzling and strangely touching. Are we bohemian types really so strange that a fellow artist, based in the same city, who speaks the same language, still regards us as an exotic specimen? Perhaps we are.

Anyone who is already involved in recording will be intimately familiar with Sibilin’s process – some might find it a refreshing reminder of the struggles we’ve all gone through, while for others it might be simply retreading old ground. A more likely ideal reader for *Studio Grace* is the person who’s always dreamed of recording their own songs, but never got up the nerve or the drive. For that reader, Sibilin’s journey is bound to be inspirational. mrb

Malcolm Fraser is a writer, filmmaker, and musical entertainer. His book *Wooden Stars: Innocent Gears* was published by Invisible Publishing in 2013.

“Lawrence, today I heard a genius.” He feels an electrical current between them and later whispers to her, “When I play, I play for you.”

Lawrence’s mother, Christine Nolan, is a gifted violinist, who won the Prix d’Europe in 1914, but has been unable to compete or play professionally since. “Why? Was it the war?” Lawrence asks her. “A war of sorts,” she says. Her war is a secret struggle with mental illness – specifically a mood disorder and periods of psychosis – that has prevented her from pursuing her ambition, an ambition that now takes seed within Lawrence.

The emotional core of *A Secret Music* is this passionate, enmeshed bond between mother and son, both of whom hope that his music will help keep her demons at bay. For Lawrence, his mother’s belief in, and single-minded focus on, his music is a burden-laden blessing. The layers and complexity of their relationship bring to mind another intricately merged mother and son duo, Paul and Gertrude Morel, in one of my favourite classic novels, D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. No accident, perhaps, that Doherty Hannaford named her hero Lawrence, not only after her father, but also this literary master.

While providing a refuge from the chaos of his mother’s madness, music offers the truest, deepest way of loving her and of being loved in return. In a wonderful scene when Christine is well, the two play a duet by Camille Saint-Saëns. It’s a magical moment, both for Lawrence and the reader. “Playing together meant he and his mother could share a sacred space”; she radiated a bliss and generosity that “filled him up.”

Doherty Hannaford’s portrayal of Christine’s struggle with mental illness is deft and subtle as Christine cycles between windows of reasonable normalcy and spells of psychosis, between illuminations and darkneses. We perceive her through Lawrence’s eyes, rather than through dehumanizing diagnostic labels. When she is ill, she puts her young baby into a dresser drawer, vows love to Franz Schubert, claims her hands “aren’t my hands,” strips off her clothes to “Auld Lang Syne,” hibernates in bed, or is taken “away.” During welcomed remissions, she is fragrant with Evening in Paris and a whiff of cherry cookies, impeccably dressed, and articulate.

Twenty percent of Canadians will experience a mental illness at some time during their lives, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association. Doherty Hannaford tells me that severe mental illness has touched the lives of several of her loved ones. She also volunteers at the Douglas Institute, working with people with schizophrenia, taking them out for coffee, a walk on the mountain, or a shopping trip to Winners, introducing “a dose of normalcy.” The novel dra-

matizes the rondo of shame, blame, and pain that people with mental illness and their families face every day. While there is no shame in having cancer, mental illness carries great stigma. Christine’s illness is kept hush-hush, the family certain that they will become social outcasts if their struggle comes to light, secrecy only adding to anguish.

One of the joys of reading this novel is an immersion in music. No surprise that Doherty Hannaford studied piano and is passionate about classical music. For the sonorous details, such as the rigors involved in becoming a top tier performer, she interviewed concert pianists and instructors, as well as students and faculty at the Glenn Gould School in Toronto.

Doherty Hannaford wrote much of the novel at the Westmount Library, poring over streetcar maps and Lovell’s Directory of 1937 to get specific addresses key to the story just right. “I loved that part of the process,” she says. “Suddenly, it’s dark outside and I’m still reading about milkshake flavours and what this treat cost back then.”

“My biggest challenge was structure,” Doherty Hannaford confides. “My story got too big.” She put major scenes on recipe cards, so that she could reimagine them and their sequence. Later, her editor, Marc Côté, helped her to cut over a hundred pages, a tough process that no doubt strengthened the book.

Though most of the writing in *A Secret Music* is supple and fine, Miss Tarasova, Lawrence’s dedicated piano teacher and a Russian émigré, is intermittently diminished into caricature through speech conveyed in an exaggerated, but inconsistent dialect: “They vil make us a recording for our submission.... Don’t ask me any kvestions.” Yet elsewhere Miss Tarasova speaks eloquently about romantic music:

“You must *dream* the piece when you play it.... If you don’t dream, the music is nothing but a rubble of notes.” Eschewing dialect and highlighting Miss Tarasova’s unique voice through phrasing and word choice would have worked better. That said, this is a small quibble for a book that works beautifully on so many levels.

A pleasure of *A Secret Music* is how fond we grow of nearly all of the characters, even the largely absent father who has made his way from humble, hardscrabble beginnings in Griffintown, processing inedible carcasses, to being the sole proprietor of an abattoir. Full disclosure: I cried at least once while reading this book and did not want to part with the Nolan family when I turned the last page. *A Secret Music* sings. mrb

Ami Sands Brodoff is completing her fourth book, the novel *In Many Waters*. Her first novel, *Can You See Me?*, focuses on a family grappling with schizophrenia.

**The novel dramatizes the rondo of shame, blame, and pain that people with mental illness and their families face every day.**

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After her success with *Mammoth*, in *Proof* poet Larissa Andrusyshyn explores the worlds of entomology,



memory and mathematics. From break-ups to Dung Beetles, the poems move from microscope to recollection, from abstract math proof to the visceral sting of a wasp’s quill.

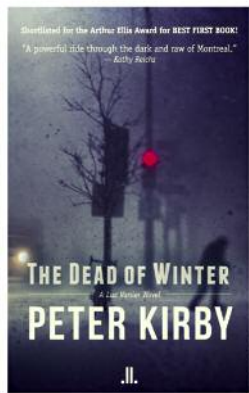
Stuart Ross’s eighth collection of poems delivers a gallery of emotionally charged experiments along with a series of philosophical meditations on the aesthetically contrived and sometimes downright quirky poetic processes that were followed to generate the poems in this book. *A Hamburger in a Gallery* is deeply engaged in demonstrating how art happens, especially through a poet’s immediate aesthetic engagement with other works of art.



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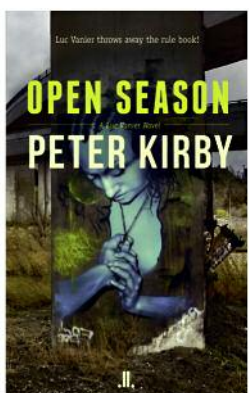


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By Jaime Forsythe

## The Metaphor in the Moment

Robyn Sarah's poetry has always reckoned with the past, but her newest collection, *My Shoes Are Killing Me*, reflects from a particular juncture in life, one she defines succinctly as “the beginning of dwindle.” Sarah explores the time in middle life when what has happened takes on a larger presence than what remains to happen. In this collection, things are shrinking and diminishing, summers aren't as endless, and even our smallest unit of currency has disappeared from circulation. The poems themselves slow down time when they pause in the ephemeral immediate moment, as when the speaker in “Keep Off the Grass” finds an antidote to the ache of the collection's title: “Dew, cool my heels.”

“The present moment ... has always interested me – the wish to occupy it fully, to write from inside of it,” Sarah writes in an interview over email. “When I do, an awareness of layers of time infuses it. This hasn't changed. Perhaps in this collection, there are more remembered moments than immediate ones, but I occupy them in the same way: I re-experience them as immediate, yet as part of a continuum.”

Sarah, a Montrealer since childhood, the author of seven previous collections of poetry, and current poetry editor at Cormorant Books, has always worked with exact, everyday detail. This specificity makes her poems easy to enter. Scenes and memories are captured in ways that feel universal, an effect Sarah achieves with precise images: “Trees dipped overnight in mist / and sugared with a thin fur of frost”; “our jaundiced hopes / like flat champagne / in last night's unwashed glasses”; “the afterglow, rose giving way / to mauve in the mild sky / a few stars like bubbles.”

“I've always had a very good memory – it has astonished my family ever since I was a child,” Sarah says. While she does keep journals, she says that her writing process “centres much more on a second set of dated notebooks that are really just scratch pads for discontinuous fragmentary scribbles: random thoughts and observations, descriptions of the view out the window, stray phrases or word combinations I like the sound of. That's where the poems usually germinate.”

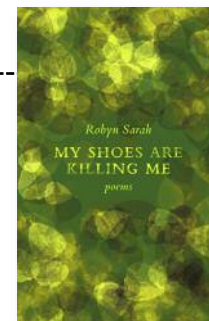
Sarah's description of her notebooks resonates with the sense of collage that many of the poems in this collection take on. References to garage sales, flea markets, boxes of letters and clippings in an attic, a patchwork quilt, compost piles and trash heaps reflect her interest in the fragment, in carefully considered flotsam. The details have the quality of ones that have accrued over time and ripened, the connections between them surfacing gradually, their arrangement allowing surprising leaps and juxtapositions. Take the title poem, which unfolds in nine sections, or “movements.” The poem stitches together a child's echoing questions (“Where is my trampoline?”), markers of the disappearing and obsolete (Kodachrome, Pepsodent, manual typewriters, sleighbells), and some wonderfully strange imaginings: a museum of dead sounds, subtitles to accompany a movie of rustling trees. The result is a wandering, moving meditation on memory and time. While this book's mood is bitter-sweet, sometimes weary, it is never dour;

humour and lightheartedness are here, too. “Where is my brain, was the real question. / It seemed to have wandered off,” the speaker in the title poem ends a stanza, wryly.

Why do certain images that might not appear initially significant stay with us, obsess us even? A hand held, the humid moment before rain falls, sun lighting the curve of a stair-rail. “I believe the details that catch our attention, or the moments that come back to us unbidden and insistently, do so because they are *not* insignificant. They have a metaphoric weight for us,” Sarah explains. “They *signify*, in a language that the unconscious knows, though the conscious mind may not. What haunts us is not the moment but the metaphor in the moment.”

In *My Shoes Are Killing Me*, these metaphors tend to come out of moments of transition, or of standing on the brink of change. Such moments might be overt, as when melancholy is displaced by a new season sweeping in “with glitter, with bustle, / like an auntie with a gold tooth” in “Fall Arrives.” More often, Sarah zeroes in on transitions that are more slippery and difficult to articulate, the subtlest and most private of epiphanies. In “Breach,” a teenager walks through “a sort of ruin,” a break in a construction fence leading to an empty lot, and finds joy: “aloneness that felt like treasure. A sense / of having embarked on open waters / in the frailest of crafts.” Sarah excels at revealing metaphoric weight without explaining away mystery, at holding up those moments where nothing has changed, but everything has.

There are certain lines in this collection that read almost too plainly; some readers may resist the explicit emotion of an opener like “Poignancy of the discarded” in “Castoffs.” At the same time, there is a striking directness to these poems, an honesty and unwillingness to hide behind irony or veils. In addition, Sarah is highly attuned to sound and rhythm, but never in a conspicuous way. She studied at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec, and has returned to playing piano seriously in recent years. Repetition, variation, and other musical features show up in her verse, along with a sensitivity to pauses and silences. “There's no question that my background in music has had a large impact on how I compose poetry, at both



MY SHOES ARE  
KILLING ME  
Robyn Sarah  
Biblioasis  
\$17.95, paper, 72pp  
978-1-77196-013-7



DR COWLES

conscious and unconscious levels,” Sarah says. “I write with my ear, and the patterns and nuances of musical phrasing are part of my aural vocabulary.” One has only to read aloud lines like “rhythmic click of sidewalk cracks, / and giddy clicklessness / on blacktop, velvet bands of new-rolled tar” to feel and hear the payoff of this rigorous listening.

The reflections on the passing of time in *My Shoes Are Killing Me* are not only interior; the book also turns its eye outwards. Collective memory is a theme of “When We Were Slaves In Egypt,” which depicts Montreal's Jewish diaspora and finding a sense of home. Sarah also addresses the future, mortality, and our aging planet, the disorientation of “more bad news on a beautiful day,” and “the forecast: hiatus, quietus. / Fear for the world. / Where's north now?” There is a persistent questioning about what makes a good life, what we keep, what we pass on. There is anxiety for what slips away: “Why do I not know the names of more flowers? / Everything gone before I can write it down.” There is resignation to the notion of “too late”: “while things we didn't do, and never will, / queue up on the wires like birds / and wing off, one by one.”

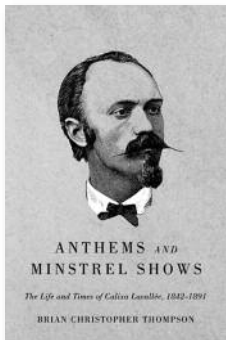
Ultimately, though, *My Shoes Are Killing Me* probes the world for moments of reprieve, solace, pleasure, beauty. Robyn Sarah does the work of searching out, amidst doubt and regret, “wisps of well being,” providing an answer to requests like these in a stanza from “An Infrequent Flyer Looks Down”: “Give me a talisman, a charm to keep. / Give me a pebble for my pocket, / something to palm in secret.”

Jaime Forsythe is a Halifax-based writer. Her first collection of poetry, *Sympathy Loophole*, was published by Mansfield Press.

## O Canada!

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We're not likely to get a more thorough biography of Calixa Lavallée than *Anthems and Minstrel Shows*, Brian Christopher Thompson's huge and meticulous account of the life and times of



the composer of "O Canada." It's exhaustively researched, even if sometimes the bigger picture is lost in the denseness of facts. Composing "O Canada" was, as this book makes abundantly clear, but a moment in Lavallée's busy musical career. He was a working musician, composing, concertizing, teaching, striving, particularly towards the end of his short and not especially easy life, to elevate the status and quality of music in North America.

Yes, North America. Lavallée spent most of his working career in the United States. He was born in 1842, in Verchères, just downriver from Montreal, and grew up in Saint-Hyacinthe (where his father led the town band). By his early teens he could play any instrument, but specialized in piano, violin, and cornet. He moved to Montreal at thirteen, and at sixteen made his debut in what was then the leading theatre in the city, the Theatre Royal on Côté Street, drawing, the press reported, "thunderous applause."

And then he was off to the United States. The most popular musical entertainment of the mid-nineteenth century was the minstrel show, wherein white performers in blackface offered songs, jokes, skits, and parodies of popular operas. Lavallée joined a troupe called the New Orleans Minstrels, based in Providence, that had strong representation from the French-Canadian communities then flourishing in New England. He toured widely with the show, mostly as musical director, for the next thirteen years.

It's hard to imagine today that blackface was ever so popular, but it was, and, as a highly competitive field, it drew not only huge audiences, but also the most talented performers. Still, according to Thompson, Lavallée had nobler ambitions. He spent two years in

the mid-1870s studying in Paris and returned to Quebec determined to do more composing, give more concerts, and establish a state-supported conservatory of music.

Lavallée taught, he composed cantatas, Irish songs, piano études (including *Le Papillon*, his best-known piece during his lifetime; it's on YouTube today), and operas (one, *The Widow*, was a small-scale success). Then in 1880, he was commissioned to compose a piece – eventually "O Canada" – for the Congrès Catholique Canadien-Français in Quebec City. Thompson reveals that Lavallée's politics were generally radical, anticlerical, and republican (in 1885, he organized a concert to benefit Louis Riel's family), but he teamed here with a thoroughly conservative judge, A.-B. Routhier, whose text, Thompson notes, "emphasizes the primary characteristics of the French-Canadian conservative ideology of the era and of the conference: historical memory, a pastoral way of life, religious faith, patriotism, and status quo politics."

"O Canada" had a successful premiere at the Congrès, specifically in Quebec City's Skating Rink – in a hockey rink! – and it never looked back. It was taken to heart by French Canadians, and with Robert Stanley Weir's west-stand-on-guard-for-thee English lyrics in 1908, by English Canadians, too.

One thing Lavallée could never get off the ground in Quebec was a state-supported conservatory of music, and Thompson suggests that this disappointment, perhaps more than anything, led him to abandon Canada in 1881 and spend his last decade in Boston where he threw himself into the promotion of homegrown American music. He was widely admired for this, but the cost was high: he died in 1891, of tuberculosis, at just forty-eight years old.

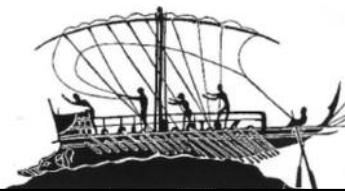
Thompson is a music scholar, formerly at McGill, now at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and we are much in his debt for so thoroughly unearthing Calixa Lavallée's life. mRb

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

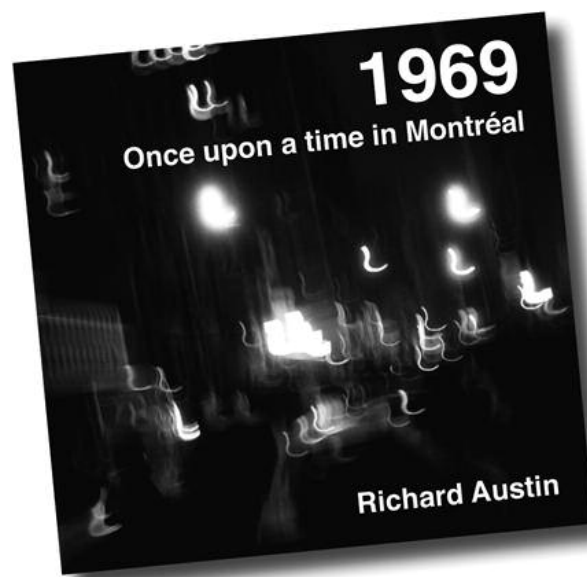
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By Sarah Fletcher

## Montreal's Holy Commandment

A small-town charm dominates much of the local fiction about our fair city, and Montrealer Elaine Kalman Naves's first novel, *The Book of Faith*, keeps religiously to this invisible holy commandment. *The Book of Faith* represents a tight-knit Jewish community in which a quirky rabbi pushes to come up with the money for a questionably needed synagogue renovation, a "successful" writer recovers from a failed marriage and finds herself profiling the life story of a wealthy member of her community, and middle-aged friends playfully mock each other and gossip with reckless abandon.

Though the pacing is occasionally unexpected, *The Book of Faith* is on par for a first novel and Kalman Naves shows promise for a second down the line. Having just returned from a war crimes trial in Germany to testify on behalf of her family, the author meets me for coffee and we discuss her relationship with the Jewish faith, her thoughts on writing and friendship, and the influence of the late, great Mordecai Richler.



**Sarah Fletcher:** This is your first foray into fiction. Where did the idea for *The Book of Faith* come from?

**Elaine Kalman Naves:** I started writing *The Book of Faith* and it was really affected by the other books I was writing. Basically my non-fiction work falls into two categories: pure non-fiction and creative non-fiction. Certainly in my three titles, *Journey To Vaja*, *Shoshanna's Story*, and *Portrait of a Scandal*, I used fiction techniques like dramatization and laying out scenes. And that was very much something that was part of *The Book of Faith*.

*The Book of Faith* grew out of [wanting to write something] very light about friendship between women. I had in mind three friends, roughly the women who are the central three in this book, and I wanted to write something with the synagogue background, maybe things that happen to you in middle age, relationships.

Then I myself lost one friend, and then I lost another one, when I was in my fifties. So that was a really big thing in how this novel came to evolve.

**SF:** Was one of the characters based on the friend you lost?

**EKN:** All of the characters are composites, but that's not really the important part. I think it was the realization of how significant friends are in our lives and what a huge role they play. I started to think about it: how important are your parents to a person? Yes they are crucial to you, but it is in the natural order of things to lose your parents and for you to outlive them. And in your life you have spouses and lovers and boyfriends, and they can come and go ... that is the reality. And your children, well, they're going to leave you! You invest all this energy in them and all of this love, but it is in the normal course of things for them to go.

For me, when I lost one of my very good friends, my whole worldview shifted because the idea was that my friends were going to be my companions all the way through to the end. That is one of the things that helped me write this book. The other thing is how interesting and varied life is after fifty. When I was fifty years old I thought my life was sort of over, it was all going to be the same for the rest of my life and nothing would change. And then a whole bunch of stuff happened. My friends died, I had health problems, my relationship came apart. This was also the point when I started getting attention for my writing, funny enough, and my career started to take off a bit.

**SF:** Do you yourself identify with Erica, the writer, as the protagonist?

**EKN:** Ha, well, she's not the only protagonist certainly – or I have failed if she comes across that way – because I wanted it to be much more spread through the perspectives. But yes, there are some similarities! She is certainly more successful as a writer than I am, I did give her that. One other thing that I envy that I don't have is her beautiful curly red hair.

**SF:** You have written often about the Holocaust, like Erica does. What is your relationship to the Holocaust as a writer?

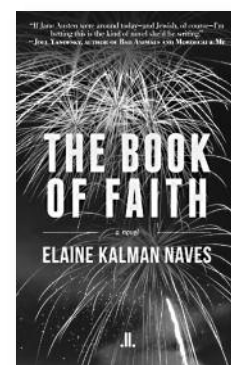
**EKN:** I remember when I finished two other books and I said: I am now finished with the Holocaust. Then I started to do something else and without me willing it to the slightest extent, I walked the Holocaust in the form of one particular survivor ... and then I walked another whole bunch of survivors. So I said, I may have finished with the Holocaust but the Holocaust hasn't finished with me!

**SF:** Are there any writers that you look up to or that you're influenced by?

**EKN:** Everyone who writes in Montreal is always aware of the status of Mordecai Richler. But I was also very influenced by a British novelist called Barbara Pym, who was held to be a twentieth-century Jane Austen, if you can be such a thing. I like that she came from a kind of churchy background. Because I set my cast of characters within the bosom of a liberal Jewish congregation, I felt that this kind of thing had not been done by a Jewish writer. It's all written out of a certain sensibility that doesn't make it ridiculous to belong to a community of faith.

So yes, I guess I wanted to be somewhere between Mordecai Richler and Barbara Pym. He didn't go to synagogue, but he could be very sarcastic with people who did. And so I'm writing from inside the tradition, I hope with respect for it as well as affection and quite a bit of playfulness and with a sarcastic and satiric eye. **mrb**

Sarah Fletcher is a writer in Montreal.



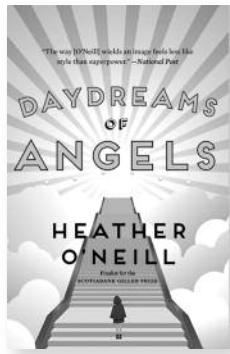
**THE BOOK OF FAITH**  
Elaine Kalman Naves  
Linda Leith Publishing  
\$19.95, paper, 360pp  
978-1-927535-73-8

# fiction

## The Power of Stories

### DAYDREAMS OF ANGELS

Heather O'Neill  
HarperCollins  
\$22.99, paper, 368pp  
978-1-55468451-9



Heather O'Neill's first collection of short stories is an embarrassment of riches. Written alongside her acclaimed novels, *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and last year's Giller-nominated *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*, several of these stories originally aired on NPR's *This American Life* and CBC Radio's *WireTap*. While short story collections tend to feature a relatively even style and emotional palette, *Daydreams of Angels* offers readers a wide spectrum of both. In these twenty stories sparkling with wit and fantasy, O'Neill gives us a variety of genres, including heartfelt coming-of-age stories, miniature historical fictions, allegories, tall tales, and even literary cover versions. And while these stories largely stray from the gritty realism of her novels, they nonetheless retain the powerful emotional resonance of those works.

*Daydreams of Angels* is a collection of stories deeply invested in story itself and the power it has to shape lives. Several repurpose older narratives, turning them into compelling contemporary tales. In an adapted Bible story, "The Gospel According to Mary M.," Jesus is cast as a Montreal schoolboy who turns apple juice into wine. Elsewhere, *The Island of*

*Doctor Moreau* and *The Story of O* (in O'Neill's version starring the Marquis de Sade as a young girl) receive their own retellings, giving these older texts a new relevance.

Another cluster of stories narrated by grandparents read like modern-day fables. In "Where Babies Come From," a grandmother debunks the stork myth and reveals instead that women used to find their babies washed up on the beach. In another, a grandfather describes how, after nearly freezing to death one night, he took a train part of the way to heaven alongside a Polish-speaking cheetah who gave him tips about angels. The same grandfather – or another – weaves a yarn about a fantastical old-timey Christmas and sailors with dancing tattoos. These exaggerated tales speak to the centrality of oral storytelling in family histories and draw attention to the broader cultural importance of this narrative form.

*Daydreams of Angels* also features a few stories that can be read explicitly as allegories for the creative process. In "Swan Lake for Beginners," a group of Soviet scientists set up shop in the northern Quebec town of Pas-Grand-Chose to create a perfect clone of ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. While the clones are easily created, getting them to devote their lives to the art of dance proves more difficult, often hilariously so. In my favourite of these allegories, twins lost on a desert island send out messages in bottles every day in the hopes of being saved, with unlikely results. Here O'Neill meditates on how desperation fuels creativity and the unanticipated consequences of fame.



Fanciful elements are central to the collection, but in some of the most powerful stories we revisit the Montreal streets and realist style of O'Neill's novels. "The Man Without a Heart" follows a poor young boy named Michal who strikes up a life-changing friendship with Lionel, a heroin addict, who encourages him to borrow the maximum number of books from the library every weekend. In another writer's hands this story might veer towards sentimentality, but for O'Neill it is an opportunity to explore a unique friendship between two flawed characters.

Some of the stories in the collection are of course stronger than others, and some readers might not embrace the diversity of the material, but overall these dispatches from O'Neill's imagination allow us to fleetingly see a world that is a little wilder and brighter than our own. The best stories in *Daydreams of Angels* brim with life, invention, and a rich understanding of how stories define us collectively and as individuals. **mrb**

Jeff Miller is the author of the short story collection *Ghost Pine: All Stories True*. His writing also appears in several periodicals and anthologies, and weekly at *Said the Gramophone*.

## Breathe In, Breathe Out

### BREATHING LESSONS

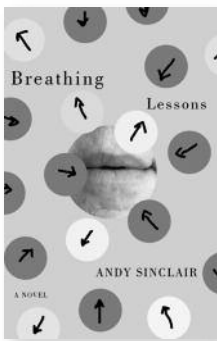
Andy Sinclair  
Esplanade Books  
\$18.00, paper, 180pp  
9781550653977

*Breathing Lessons* is a timely novel. It feels contemporary, and – as an account of the intimate life of Henry Moss, identified as a "homosexual everyman" on the back cover – it deals with questions that could only be broached now, when gay people are making their way into the social mainstream and facing the issues that this inevitably involves.

To the book's credit, it doesn't shrink from the contradictions of an assimilationist politic. One of the strengths of Sinclair's writing is the way in which Moss is made to embody the challenges facing young(er) gay men, many of whom grew up in a world in

which it was *somewhat* easier to come out than it was in even the recent past, and in which a well-established gay rights infrastructure pursues a rights-based politics of inclusion. Despite this, Moss often seems more "sad sack" than "everyman." Though he enjoys a supportive family and good friendships, his sex life is distressingly marked by a penchant for investing emotional energy in men he knows are inaccessible and inappropriate. Moreover, he is a sophisticated narrator of this conflict. Thus, it is his – largely unsuccessful – attempts to reconcile the poles of his life, to lend some of the stability of one area to the other, that shapes the fiction. For example, his mental response to a heterosexist comment from his mother (in a part of the book ironically titled "We're Just Like Everybody Else!") is to assert that he is "not an assimilationist," and later he contemplates a vulgar – though true – response to a man's question about how Moss knows his boyfriend.

Such fondness for "gay edginess" aside, however, Moss longs for a more conventional romantic relationship, and



time and again *Breathing Lessons* works through this in sharply rendered depictions of loneliness, compulsion, and unrequited desire.

Paradoxically, it is the protagonist's semi-clarity that highlights what is problematic here: though Henry's emotional landscape is well drawn, he doesn't grow or develop much.

He seems to remain trapped in his unfulfilling patterns. This, from the final pages of the book, is particularly telling:

"Young people are more concerned with what's going on around them. It's only as we get older that we start to look within."

I wonder why anyone would ever want to do that.

I'll admit I was having difficulties.

For all his acuity, Moss seems unable to resolve his contradictions; he commits to neither the anarchy of desire nor the comforts of the domestic. Of course, novels do not always require resolution, some simply draw a portrait, and the portrait here is sharp; still, a curious stasis reigns in these pages, one as much a matter of language as plot. One

looks for real movement, but Moss seems to not even learn much from his experiences. One longs for him to choose something – even indecision – rather than to simply fall into things, and his troubling passivity is further heightened by a flatness in the characterization. Despite Moss's mental sharpness, he rarely calls himself to task and, curiously for a book whose sexual frankness has been noted, this flatness marks even the erotic passages. And there are more ambiguities. For example, the book is tagged "novel" though it's structurally closer to a collection of linked stories that skips back and forth in setting and chronology, which might confound some readers' expectations. The title may perplex some, too, given it is far better known in connection with Anne Tyler's Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction. Still, despite these problems, *Breathing Lessons* is an interesting dramatization of a particularly contemporary situation and, as such, will find welcoming readers. **mrb**

Peter Dubé is the author, co-author, or editor of eleven books. His most recent work, the short fiction collection *Beginning with the Mirror*, appeared on the *Out in Print* "Best of 2014" list.

# No Yellow Brick Road

## OPEN SEASON

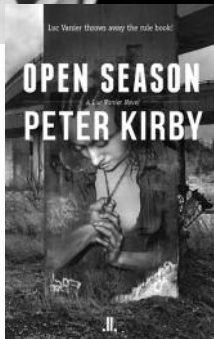
Peter Kirby

Linda Leith Publishing

\$16.95, paper, 300pp

978-1-927535-78-3

JOCELYN MICHEL



In the brief space of three years Montreal lawyer Peter Kirby has found time to turn out yet another in his fine series of novels featuring Montreal Detective Inspector Luc Vanier, and each new addition is more assured, and more compelling, than the last.

What sets Kirby's work apart from many other crime novels is that mere plot is never enough; character is key. This allows the author to explore troubling social themes such as the treatment of the homeless, the clash of cultures in Montreal's diverse communities, international human trafficking, and of course the inevitable conflicts that occur within policing circles when agencies compete for jurisdiction on a case, or worse, want to sweep it under the table. In *Open Season*, Kirby draws on current events to reveal a great deal about contemporary Canadian life, and as we have come to expect, his graphic account pulls no punches.

Katya Babyak finds herself locked in a run-down apartment in Rotterdam, with only an occasional sandwich and a bottle of water for company. It is the first leg of her journey from Kiev to Canada, running from a past without promise and only memories of pain. When she finally arrives in Montreal, it's not long before she discovers what others have in mind for her, and it's not her dreamed-of new life as a nanny for an upscale Canadian family. She's to work in the sex trade, effectively indentured to thugs who keep her in bondage.

While Katya struggles to salvage her life, another crisis is unfolding in Montreal. A Guatemalan journalist named Sophia Luna has been fighting her own extradition as she works on a story to document the illegal trafficking in sex workers to Canada. She is fighting her deportation with the help of Roger Bélair, a Montreal lawyer. But before he can do anything she's snatched off the street and Bélair is injured, in plain sight of eyewitnesses. Soon afterwards the lawyer dies and his office is ransacked. Her captors are working quickly and ruthlessly to ensure the story stops there. Converging plotlines elevate the novel from what might have been a routine police procedural to a fast-paced suspense tale.

Enter Detective Inspector Luc Vanier. Vanier and his partner Sergeant Sylvie Saint Jacques of the Montreal-based Serious Crime Squad have been assigned the kidnapping case. The details of Vanier's personal life – including his romantic relationship with pathologist Anjili Segal and his concern for his son Alex, a war-traumatized Afghanistan veteran – provide a further layer to Kirby's solid and engaging tale.

*Open Season* is a gritty narrative of the plight of vulnerable people trying to carve out a better life for themselves, but who wind up being imprisoned and exploited by hardened criminals who tempt them with the promise of a new beginning. It's definitely not a yellow brick road they embark on, and few of its travellers will ever find their way back to Kansas. Along their journey Kirby offers an informed critique of Canada's flawed refugee policy and shines a revealing spotlight on the federal authorities whose job it is to enforce it.

Is it too early in the series to call *Open Season* a breakout novel? Kirby's two previous Vanier stories were also deftly crafted, well-told tales, but his latest work steps up the intrigue several notches, resulting in a perfectly plotted, nicely paced, edge-of-your seat thriller that also has gravitas; and it has all the earmarks of a winner. *Open Season* may quite possibly be one of the best Canadian crime novels of 2015. mrb

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

# A Love of Note

## RIVER MUSIC

Mary Soderstrom

Cormorant Books

\$24.00, paper, 276pp

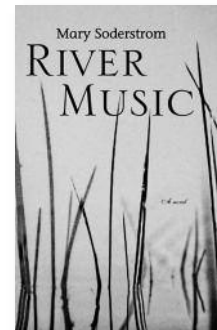
978-1-770864153

Music must float in the air over Montreal, a city that has nurtured many a lauded performer from the late classical pianist Ellen Ballon to Arcade Fire and Nikki Yanofsky. So it is only natural that music has been the central focus of a number of books by local authors, including most recently Mary Soderstrom's *River Music*. In her latest novel, the prolific Soderstrom – author of four books of non-fiction, three story collections, six novels, and a children's book – explores the life of a woman whose every action is driven by her passion to perform.

It is the thirties in Montreal when, at a tender age, Gloria Foster falls in love with the piano. The thrill of playing, of being carried down the river of music (a phrase repeated too often), quickly becomes the singular focus of everything she does.

Her first piano is a gift from her absent father, a man who is either away working or fighting in a war, and then, after the war, a hospitalized invalid she rarely sees. Her relationship with men vis-à-vis the piano, however, is set for life. Hereafter, the piano will always come first.

While the life of a prominent pianist can often be romanticized, Soderstrom reveals that a dedicated musician must choose a ruthless existence if determined to become a virtuoso. Having been raised by an oft-absent single mother, Gloria learns early on to hold her own council and to persist in order to get what she wants. Her road is difficult – there is grueling poverty as she perfects her skills in Paris, endless hours of practice, and, when famous, the punishing concert circuit. But she is certain any sacrifice is necessary. Tenacious and utterly self-absorbed, Gloria has no compunction about using and discarding people, including her own children and the various men who move through her life.



RON DIAMOND

As a young woman, Gloria had been told by her neighbour that her lifeline suggested she would have one abiding and great love, and we are led to believe it might be Pierre, who keeps appearing for one night stands. But by the end of *River Music*, the reader understands that the only thing Gloria has loved all

her life is the piano and the music she makes on it. Her eldest child, Frances, sums it up succinctly: "Don't forget that to make a musical career you've got to be so tough that you'd sell your first born to get ahead."

*River Music* is a thought-provoking guide to how musical tastes have changed over the decades. From Bach through Debussy to Claude Vivier, who is woven into the story, Gloria takes us on a journey in pursuit of those elusive elements that make music such an integral part of life. As a result, I found myself going to YouTube to hear some of the work described.

To her credit, Soderstrom deftly interweaves Gloria's determination to succeed with her failure to see the people in her life as anything more than scores to be interpreted and used to further her career. Ultimately, however, the book leaves the reader wanting something more from Gloria, whose greatest asset – her musical talent – is unavailable to us. Perhaps if we could hear her play, we might forgive Gloria her cold heart. mrb

Gina Roitman is a biographer, editor, and author of the short story collection *Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth*.

*Le combat est avenir — the fight is the future, and the battle has just begun.*

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# YOUNG READERS

**H**ilary Grist is a quadruple threat. This singer/songwriter is also a children's author and illustrator. She showcases all of these talents in *Tomorrow is a Chance to Start Over*, a picture book that comes with a CD of original dream songs. In the picture book, Isabelle and Ira are two children who just can't fall asleep. Grist's two clay creation protagonists go on a journey through the noisy city and onto a tiny sailboat. They drift along and land on the shores of a magical island. They learn to fly. This incredible journey culminates with a cozy return to home and bed and the promise of a new day and fresh beginnings.

Unfortunately, Ira and Isabelle have the same worried expression on their static clay faces from the beginning to the end of the book. The digital photography effects are rather rough in places and we are distracted, rather than delighted by the images. But the treasure here is the accompanying CD of dream songs. Grist's songwriting and singing take her listeners on flights of fancy and onto lovely slumbers. These songs make the visual representations in the book unnecessary because the music stands on its own. Grist is already a successful indie musician who tours the world and who has placed her songs on shows like *Grimm* and *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Let's hope that the CD, *Tomorrow is a Chance to Start Over*, is an indication that this talented woman is now focusing on building a fan base in the under-ten demographic.

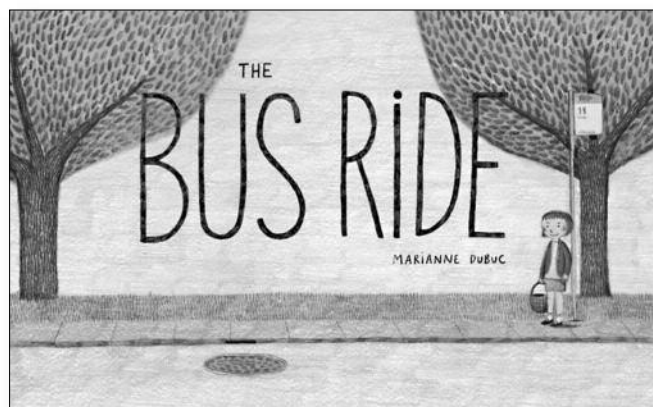
**A**s more baby-boomers joyfully achieve grandparenthood, we're seeing lots of releases that feature a strong grandparent figure. This time it's Nonna, Leo's grandmother, who has us eagerly turning the pages in Caroline Adderson's latest, *Eat, Leo! Eat!* Leo is every Nonna's nightmare, a grandchild who won't eat her *delizioso* Sunday family lunch. But because grandmothers are both resourceful and wise, Leo's Nonna devises a way to get Leo to the table. Not only does she manage to entice him to *mangiare*, she also makes sure he'll be back the next Sunday for more. The pictures by Josée Bisailon, especially the ones that illustrate the stories Nonna tells about the pasta she serves, are lush and rich, almost good enough to eat. The book features an end page with an informative paragraph and drawings of more than ten kinds of pasta labelled in Italian with English transliteration. This release would be an excellent choice for a child who has a real Nonna in their life. The depiction of a warm, noisy, and extended Italian family is respectful and celebratory. Nonna is a fictional grandmother who proves herself quite capable of taking charge and getting the job done.



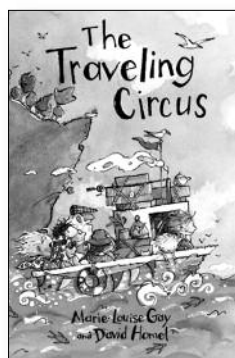
**W**riter and illustrator Marianne Dubuc is probably best known for her very successful *In Front of My House*. That book has been published in thirteen countries around the world. Dubuc's latest release, *The Bus Ride*, is about leaving the house behind and taking a trip on four wheels. Clara is embarking on her first solo voyage on the bus that goes to Grandma's house. Because she is cheerful and well equipped with snacks and sweater, she can enjoy the ride as well as her furry, feathery, and friendly co-passengers. Owls in wide-brimmed hats and calico dresses, mama moles in kerchiefs, and

sloths that snooze for the whole trip; these are just a few of the animals Clara comes across on her adventure. The drawings are lovely and colourful, both delicately executed and full of bold intensity. Dubuc has managed to create a whole world inside the bus, a universe that we imagine existed in good old days, when children were allowed to take a bus ride without cellphone monitoring.

Where *The Bus Ride* disappoints is in the text. The book was originally written in French and the English version is flat and not pleasing to read aloud. The strength of this picture book and the reason one keeps turning the pages, is the visual narrative Marianne Dubuc develops and sustains throughout. Fascinating creatures come and go, the bus navigates through leafy forests and dark tunnels, and Clara mysteriously changes places without meaning to. Dubuc draws the kind of pictures that could very well keep a squirming pre-schooler happy on the bus ride home from another long day at daycare.



**I**n *The Traveling Circus*, long-suffering Charlie is being dragged on yet another family holiday. This time Charlie, his little brother Max, and his adventure-loving parents are off to Croatia. Since the co-creators of the Charlie and Max travel books are married and parents to two boys in real life, it's fun to speculate about how autobiographical these stories are, especially when we learn that the mother in these chapter books is prone to sketching everything she sees and the father can't stop regaling his family with historical details that he alone seems to find interesting.

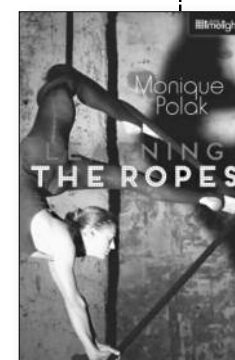


Marie-Louise Gay and David Homel are to be commended for taking their fictional family to a part of the world that most travellers know very little about. Here we learn about the beauty and richness of this fascinating Mediterranean region. Amidst encounters with fierce old Dalmatian ladies wielding wheelbarrows, death-defying fishing trips, and hairpin turns on goat-strewn mountain passes, Gay and Homel manage to fit in a discussion about what war does to families, communities, and countries. Too bad that Charlie's first person point-of-view sometimes falls flat, his revelations about the

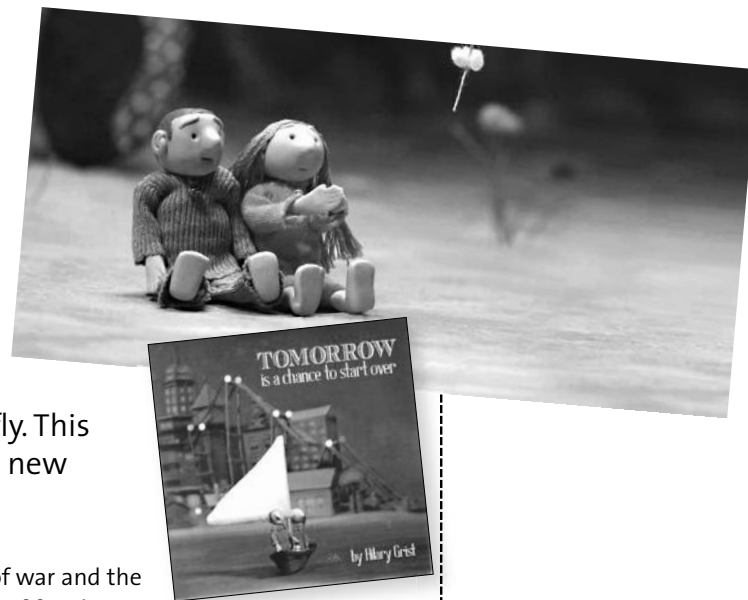
casualties of war and the importance of family sounding less like the thoughts of a pre-teen and more like the opinions of a world-weary adult who has been around the block a few times. Gay's distinctive illustrations, as seen in the award-winning Stella series of picture books and countless other places, are charming when they appear in colour, but the black and white images included in *The Traveling Circus* do little to enhance or illuminate the text. While Gay and Homel's personal relationship is an inspiring example of how married artists can creatively collaborate, *The Traveling Circus* does

little to reveal the true talents of these well-respected members of the Quebec literary community.

**I**n *Learning the Ropes*, we meet fifteen-year-old Vancouverite Mandy, who has always loved the circus. Despite her father's misgivings, she plans to be a professional aerialist and rope climber one day. Mandy is finally on the way to realizing her dreams when she is accepted to Montreal Circus Camp. In Montreal, she immediately meets Genevieve, another aerialist, who does *tissu*, a performance art that involves climbing long strands of brightly coloured Lycra. Although Mandy needs a friend, only one aerialist will ultimately be chosen from the circus campers to attend the prestigious Montreal Circus College. Mandy encounters a wide variety of aspiring circus performers from around the world at circus camp: Hana, an acrobat from Korea; Anastasia, a Russian trapeze artist; and Cécile, a tightrope walker from France, to name a few. The plot is well structured, although some events, such as the visit to a *Cirque de la Lune* performance, add nothing to the story. With her strong dialogue and consistent narrative voice, Monique Polak succeeds in convincing the reader that a fifteen-year-old really is telling the story. It is an original idea to write about the circus. Most books about the performing arts describe more conventional disciplines such as singing, dancing, and acting. But even if the YA reader is not interested in circus arts or gymnastics, this book is still a guaranteed fun read. **mrb**



**B. A. Markus** is a writer, performer, and high school English teacher who spent a summer travelling across Canada as Bee Bee the clown.



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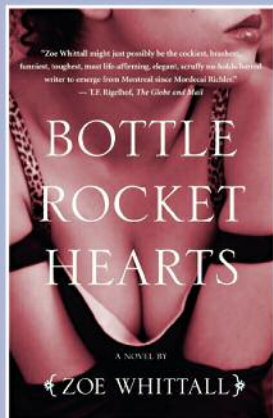
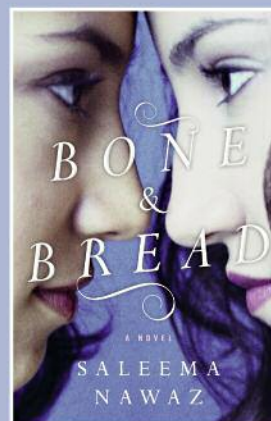
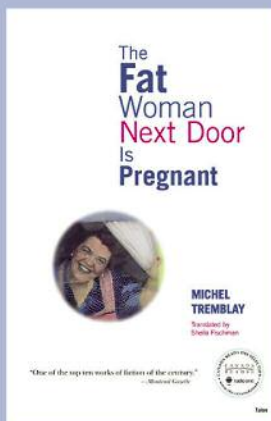
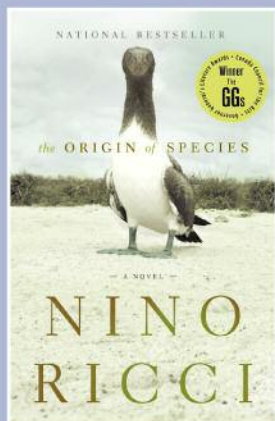
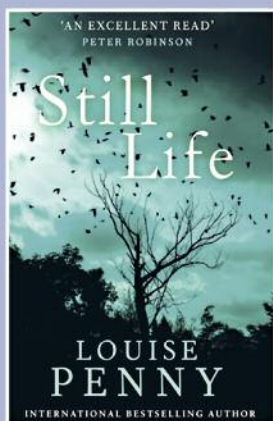
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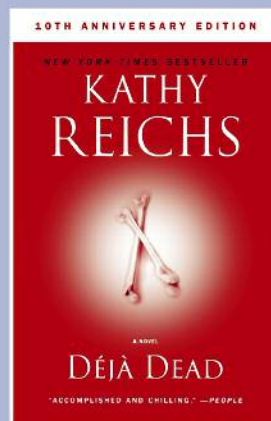
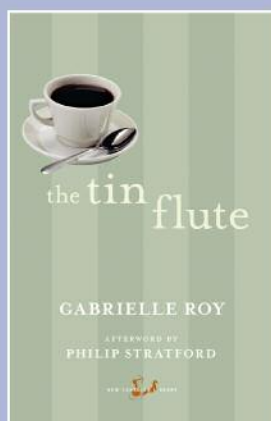
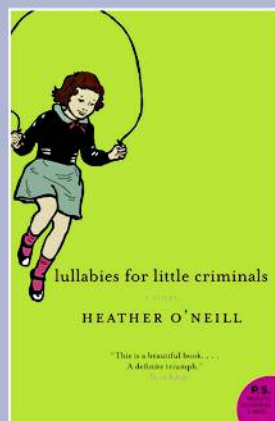
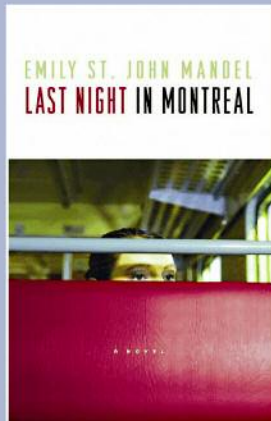
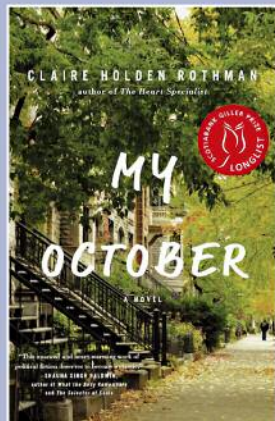
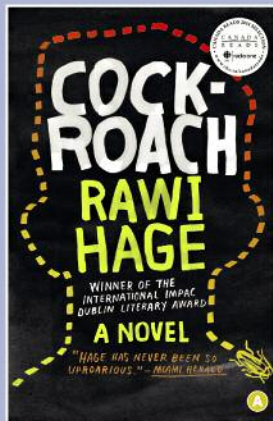
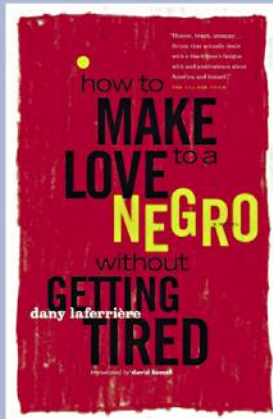
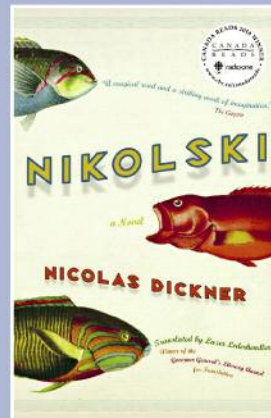
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