

mRb

SPRING 2016 MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

# The Storyteller

Monique Polak Publishes  
Three New Books this Spring

## INSIDE

SINA QUEYRAS'S *BARKING & BITING*

ROBERT EDISON SANDIFORD'S *FAIRFIELD*

MARGUERITE ANDERSEN'S *THE BAD MOTHER*

ALICE PETERSEN'S *WORLDLY GOODS*

CHRIS OLIVEROS'S *THE ENVELOPE MANUFACTURER*

THE MILE END CAFÉ





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Sara Spike Associate Editor  
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Michael Wile Advertising Manager, National

For editorial inquiries contact:  
AELAQ 1200 Atwater Avenue, Suite #3  
Westmount, QC H3Z 1X4  
Telephone: 514-932-5633  
Email: [editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca](mailto:editor@mtlreviewofbooks.ca)

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## features

- 4 **Monique Polak**  
By Vanessa Bonneau
- 8 **Sina Queyras**  
By Melissa Bull
- 11 **Robert Edison Sandiford**  
By Danielle Barkley
- 19 **The Mile End Café**  
By David Austin

## poetry

- 6 **Mission Creep**  
By Joshua Trotter
- The Unlit Path Behind the House**  
By Margo Wheaton
- Leviathan**  
By Carmine Starnino
- Model Disciple**  
By Michael Prior
- The Snow Kimono**  
By Ilona Martonfi  
Reviewed by Abby Paige

## non-fiction

- 7 **The Bad Mother**  
By Marguerite Andersen  
Translated by Donald Winkler  
Reviewed by Elise Moser
- Police Wife**  
**The Secret Epidemic of Police  
Domestic Violence**  
By Susanna Hope and Alex Roslin  
Reviewed by Kimberly Bourgeois
- 9 **Learning Activism**  
**The Intellectual Life of  
Contemporary Social Movements**  
By Aziz Choudry  
Reviewed by Patricia Boushel

## fiction

- 12 **Worldly Goods**  
By Alice Petersen  
Reviewed by Katia Grubisic
- Guano**  
By Louis Carmain  
Translated by Rhonda Mullins  
Reviewed by Pablo Strauss
- 13 **The Goddess of Fireflies**  
By Geneviève Pettersen  
Translated by Neil Smith  
Reviewed by Jeff Miller

- 13 **The Orange Grove**  
By Larry Tremblay  
Translated by Sheila Fischman  
Reviewed by Mike Spry
- 14 **The Poet is a Radio**  
By Jack Hannan  
Reviewed by Eric Boodman
- Pony Castle**  
By Sofia Banzhaf
- Looking Good and Having  
a Good Time**  
By Fawn Parker  
Reviewed by Crystal Chan

- 15 **The Homes We Build On Ashes**  
By Christina Park  
Reviewed by Patricia Maunder

## graphic

- 16 **The Envelope Manufacturer**  
By Chris Oliveros  
Reviewed by Frederik Byrn Köhlert
- Big Kids**  
By Michael DeForge  
Reviewed by Mark Streeter

## young readers

- 18 **Highlights of the season's books  
for young people**  
Reviewed by B. A. Markus



In this issue, we introduce  
a new feature spotlighting  
original work by some of  
Montreal's finest illustrators,  
a different artist in each  
issue. Our first featured  
artist is **Meags Fitzgerald**,  
the author and illustrator  
of *Photobooth: A Biography*  
and *Long Red Hair*.



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BY VANESSA BONNEAU

## *Monique Polak Always Stops for a Story*

**T**he year is off to a good start for Monique Polak. Not only will she see her eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth books for young readers published, but she's also the first CBC/QWF Writer-in-Residence. For Polak, these are all opportunities to tell her stories.

"Stories in the end are what I think matter most," she tells me on a blustery January morning in her cheerful Notre-Dame-de-Grâce dining room. Polak, who has taught at Marianopolis College in Montreal for more than thirty years, comes from a very social family. "I grew up around that. It was almost a currency in the household. It was like, 'Who's got a story?' 'What's your story?'"

Polak's books usually revolve around real places or experiences, though not necessarily ones she's already familiar with. She often learns more about them first for shorter journalistic pieces. That was the case for her new book *Forensics Squad Unleashed* (for readers aged 8–11), which follows a group of young sleuths at forensics summer camp who work to solve a dognapping case. A former student of hers worked at the University of Toronto Forensics Science Summer Camp, and Polak visited to write an article for *Maclean's*.

The book has lively, accessible details about using fingerprints, handwriting, and shoeprints to solve crimes. The spunky voice of Tabitha, the thirteen-year-old main character, opens the book: "Look, let's be honest with each other. I don't



PHOTO BY TERENCE BYRNES

like you. You don't like me. And I really wish you'd quit touching my *Junior Encyclopedia of Forensic Science*." Polak calls Tabitha "nasty," but she means it in the best possible way. "That's fun for me because my persona in the world is like I don't let the nasty out that much. And one of the great things about writing is that you explore different parts of yourself, the unexpressed."

Her second new book, *Leggings Revolt* (ages 10–14), concerns how young people express

themselves. Specifically, it addresses high school dress codes. On a visit to Heritage Regional High School on the South Shore of Montreal in 2013, Polak learned about a real dress code revolt: when the school tried to prohibit leggings, students, male and female, chose one day to show up in the banned attire. The story stuck with her.

In the book, Eric, a new student at Marie Gérin-Lajoie High School (an invented institution, named after the real Montreal feminist), gets involved with fighting a strict dress code that



mostly targets female students. Daisy, a beautiful girl he has a massive crush on, is a prime offender.

The book tackles tough issues, like freedom of expression and sexism, without oversimplifying or neatly wrapping them up. How should women dress? "I don't have a clear answer for it," says Polak. "I wanted to explore the complicatedness of the question." At one point in the book, Miss Aubin, assistant to the very strict principal and an ally of the students in their revolt, has a tough conversation with Daisy: "I'm all for freedom of expression, but I wonder if you've thought about the sort of image you present when you dress in a way that draws attention to your body." Daisy responds, "Why should I have to care about my image? Why don't you talk to the boys instead? Get them to stop looking at girls as if we're objects! ... I only dress to be comfortable!"

"That's how I wanted to handle it," says Polak. "I didn't want it to be preachy at all. Because that's the worst thing you can do, as a children's writer." Polak says she's inspired by young people. "I appreciate that they're trying to figure things out. Because so many adults will not admit to that. I love the openness to the confusion," she says with a laugh.

This respect and admiration for youth comes through in her books, which is surely part of the reason for her popularity with readers, young and old. But Polak doesn't use special techniques to make her books easy to read for her young audience; she just tells her story. "I don't mean for someone to read [my work] and faint at the beauty of a paragraph," Polak says. Her style, she explains, is much like the literature from Holland – where her parents grew up – which she enjoys. "When I read Dutch stuff, I notice that the style is very straightforward. The story is the story. That made me feel good, it

made me think, maybe that's somehow a storytelling that is in my blood."

Polak's third new book, *Passover: Festival of Freedom* (ages 9–12), is her first foray into non-fiction. She remembers the day editor Sarah Harvey called to ask if she would write it. It would be the first in a new series, Orca Origins, which examines ancient traditions in the modern world.

"I said, 'I want you to let me do it no matter what I'm about to tell you next.'" Polak then admitted she had never celebrated Passover in her own

"Stories in the end are what I think matter most."

home. "I grew up with a very complicated relationship with religion, because my real connection to Judaism has been the Holocaust," says Polak. Her acclaimed book *What World Is Left*, which won the 2009 QWF Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature, is based on her mother's experiences in Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia.

While Orca requested she include the history and present-day incarnations of Passover around the world, it was Polak's idea to bring in the Holocaust. "That's why I'm most proud of that book." Two Holocaust survivors provide vivid, moving details about how they celebrated the holiday before and after the war. Both were the sole survivors in their immediate families.

For the book, Polak spoke to many other Jews about Passover, and the anecdotes, recipes, and, importantly, good deeds bring the holiday to life. "This obligation to share, to

continued on page 17



**FORENSICS SQUAD UNLEASHED**  
Monique Polak  
Orca Book Publishers  
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Ages 8–11



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**PASSOVER**  
Festival of Freedom  
Monique Polak  
Orca Book Publishers  
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Ages 9–12

## Novel pleasures.



### *The Goddess of Fireflies* Geneviève Petterson

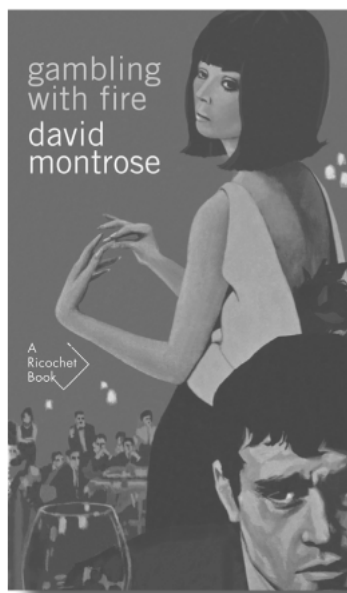
TRANSLATED BY NEIL SMITH

The year is 1996, and small-town life for 14-year-old Catherine is made up of punk rock, skaters, shoplifting, sex, and the ghost of Kurt Cobain.

"Catherine and her story will resonate deeply with those of us who grew up in the 90s ... it's a universal tale."

—ANNA LEVENTHAL

166pp \$19.95



### *Gambling with Fire* David Montrose

INTRODUCTION BY  
JOHN MCFETRIDGE

Montreal's glittering, ruthless, post-war underworld. Originally published in 1969, the author died while it was in production. *Gambling with Fire* was preceded by *The Crime on Côte des Neiges*, *Murder Over Dorval* and *The Body on Mount Royal*.

240pp \$14.95



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# poetry

## Suddenly Intimate

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9781552453193

### THE UNLIT PATH BEHIND

THE HOUSE  
Margo Wheaton  
McGill-Queen's University Press  
\$16.95, paper, 96pp  
9780773546776

### LEVIATHAN

Carmine Starnino  
Gaspereau Press  
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### MODEL DISCIPLE

Michael Prior  
Véhicule Press  
\$17.95, paper, 96pp  
9781550654394

### THE SNOW KIMONO

Ilona Martonfi  
Inanna Publications  
\$18.95, paper, 128pp  
9781771332576

“I believe the word used wrongly distorts the world,” the late poet C. D. Wright once wrote. In *Mission Creep*, Joshua Trotter plays with that distortion. Trotter’s 2010 debut collection, *All This Could Be Yours*, demonstrated his command for metre and rhyme, but here he leaves traditional forms in the distant dust. There is nary a line break – nay, not even a carriage return – to be seen in these sonically dense prose poems.

Using the CIA’s “Human Resource Exploitation” Training Manual as source material, Trotter tortures the text until it gives up half-truths and near-revelations, rendered in thick blocks of sentences that fade in and out of coherence like a radio dial being spun. The flurry of juxtapositions that emerges is by turns silly and disquieting, like this from “The Ghost Is Clear”:

... Once strengths and weaknesses have been identified it is possible to make long-term plantations. Yesterday a state of maximum inefficiency, tomorrow a co-operative attitude, plus favourable conditions for performance art. Orgasm. Self-pity. Purell. Is that you crying? Lick me in the eyes and ask me again. Do you feel the same as me twice removed?

The text’s CIA origins float to the surface only now and then, like veiled threats, but for the most part references to terrorism and wiretaps are delivered with the same emphasis as those to Evel Knievel and Scrabble; they are all part of the same unmodulated onslaught of language. The repetition of sounds and the near-familiarity of phrases offer one kind of satisfaction,

while denying another. For all its chaos, *Mission Creep* confirms that Trotter’s strength is his willingness to work within convention, whether that convention is defined by tradition or his own devious imagination.

With the titular image of *The Unlit Path Behind the House*, Margo Wheaton evokes the mysterious darkness that surrounds our everyday living. Searching and mournful, Wheaton’s poems walk a path that lies just beyond the familiar, convinced darkness contains some wisdom. She is preoccupied with “how the inner world turns / into landscape,” continually studying the world outside the window as if it were a mirror in which one could find the very essence of self.

Wheaton uses pathetic fallacy to create startling images of the moon (“compulsively telling its story”), the rain (“drenching the earth ... as if to heal / the dryness here”), and the woods in “Pause”:

You’re certain that within  
this dark population of resolute pines  
and maniacal roots,

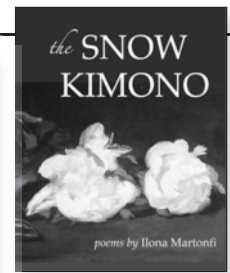
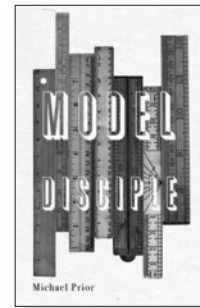
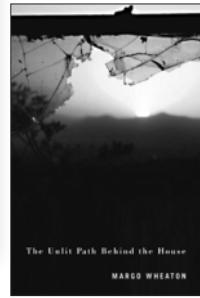
in the damp austerity  
that’s been made by days  
of exhalations,

is a name for the loneliness  
wrapped inside the torn cloth  
of the train whistle’s cry,

Subtler than straight personification, pathetic fallacy can be an inventive way to create atmosphere within a poem, but cumulatively it flattens this collection’s visual field. A neighbour rescuing peonies from the garden before rain or a homeless person sleeping in a parking lot seem as symbolic as a sunset. Blurring the line between people and things creates distance where intimacy was intended. The poems are strongest when they look into the darkness unflinchingly: a long elegy for a friend killed in a car accident, anchored by the specificities of friendship and grief, is among the book’s strongest moments. Where metaphors are deployed to create drama, the same grief doesn’t ring as true.

When Carmine Starnino uses personification in his poems, he doesn’t project emotional states onto objects so much as imagine the exterior world’s sardonic back-talk. “It’s style (or whatever unique intuition a poet brings to his diction, rhythm, and syntax) that vivifies raw data into poetry,” the poet argued in a 2004 interview in *The Danforth Review*, and Starnino’s poetry embodies that argument. His meaty diction and formal rigour assert that the way of saying is as urgent as the “raw data” being said.

Starnino has written about masculinity in the past, but with his latest collection, *Leviathan*, he seems determined to slay the



beast. Starting with a series of poems on parenting and lawn care, he swaggers through the domestic landscape, alternately singing and skewering traditional images of masculinity, feeling the pull of enlightened manhood on the one hand and manly myths of previous generations on the other. While we’re told in the title poem that, “From eye-gougers, pistol-whippers, / below-the-belt punchers, I come,” it’s clear that these speakers aren’t convinced they belong among that gritty bunch; they delight toddlers with shadow puppets at bedtime and blush carrying flowers down the street.

The tension between fathers and sons comes to symbolize a man’s struggle to shape his identity by embracing and rejecting given models. In the long elegy “San Pellegrino,” a glass of water (half full) is the window through which a father is remembered during his final days as an “epic-snorer, inveterate jaywalker,” “a ditherer, a born quitter.” The incessant repetition of the *er* sound, which ends almost every line, gives the poem a meditative and prayerful rhythm, but also a low growl – perhaps a moan of frustration at the fact that our parents so often embody an outdated ethos that fills us with both nostalgia and shame.

There is a pleasure in watching Starnino, who enjoys throwing his masculine weight around as a critic, wrestle with these complexities. More than tackling, he touches, with a wit and nuance often lacking from the ferocious defenses of poetic orthodoxy he deploys in his criticism. He confirms here that, if nothing else, a real man knows what his leaf-blower compensates for.

In addition to his work as a poet and critic, Starnino serves as editor of Signal Editions, and one can see his fingerprints on Michael Prior’s debut collection, *Model Disciple*, which they publish this spring. Prior’s formal strength and self-conscious wit recall his editor’s. His inventive approaches to self-revelation help break his work out of a purely confessional mode and give it refreshing emotional range.

Although few of the poems make explicit reference to the fact that Prior is Japanese Canadian, many nod toward double identities. Prior often depicts animals and other beings who transform, camouflage themselves, or are otherwise able to be two things at once. The hermit crab that beachcombers unknowingly hold to their ears and the gentle inventor of a weather balloon, whose plans were retooled to transport Japanese bombs across the Pacific, suggest that our identities are primarily the unintended consequences of others’ actions.

The collection is anchored by a long narrative poem written in iambic pentameter that tells the story of a road trip to Tashme and other sites of Japanese internment by a Japanese Canadian grandfather and his grandson, who feels the unbridgeable dis-

tance between their experiences of the trip as they tour the former camp:

We continue past a couple of shacks,  
their siding split and cobwebbed. I  
wonder  
aloud if they could be originals.  
He stands on his toes, shades his eyes,  
and tries  
to glimpse inside through the dirty  
window.  
*I don’t know.* Can’t he recall anything?

“Tashme” demonstrates how form and metre can contain a poem. Here, the form is a levy against a flood of love and horror the speaker feels in the face of his grandparents’ traumatic history. It braces him against the possibility that memory is one destination to which we must travel alone.

Also rooted in the reverberations of World War II, *The Snow Kimono* begins in Nagasaki and travels the world, making stops in Europe, North America, and Japan, less as tourist than refugee, which poet Ilona Martonfi once was. Wandering geographically and temporally, Martonfi links the public and global violence of war and genocide with intimate forms of violence, such as child and spousal abuse, demonstrating how difficult it has been throughout history, particularly for women, to find safe refuge.

Atmospheric and spare, most poems in the collection consist of images strung together like beads, as though their speakers are trying to piece together memories one object at a time. “The cellar room,” which remembers a World War II air raid over Budapest, is representative:

Candles and kerosene lamps dispel  
darkness.  
On the oak table: krumpileves — potato  
soup. Corn bread.  
Here in my childhood house. Christmas  
Eve, 1944:  
a besieged Budapest. Snow-covered  
boulevards.  
Steep clay stone roof. Chimney. The  
woodbox stacked  
with logs and coal.

A bridge in Guernica; a city street in eighteenth-century Venice; the unhappy home of a husband and his wife, whose body has been exhumed from a Dutch bog nearly two thousand years later: the settings Martonfi draws are vivid even when they are imagined. The poet’s ability to take us from place to place gives the collection a telescopic sensibility, within which notions of here and there, now and then, shift, suggesting that what is distant can become, through a slight change in light, suddenly intimate. mb

Abby Paige is a poet and playwright. She currently lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick.



# non-fiction

## Motherly Confessions

### THE BAD MOTHER

Marguerite Andersen

Translated by Donald Winkler

Second Story Press

\$19.95, paper, 208pp

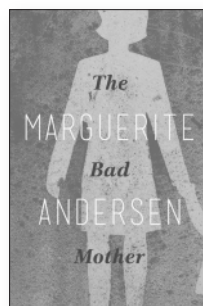
9781927583975

In the 1970s, Marguerite Andersen compiled one of the first feminist anthologies in Quebec, *Mother Was Not a Person*. Many books later, on the cusp of her ninth decade, she

picked up her pen again to reconsider one mother in particular: herself.

A short, sometimes poetic autobiographical account, *The Bad Mother* takes Rousseau's *Confessions* as its model, "but," as Andersen says in her dedication, "in the feminine." She might more precisely have said, "in the maternal," for although the story of her life as she writes it here is her struggle to live fully as a person, it is told entirely in relation to her identity as a mother.

Like most confessions, it presents itself as an admission of wrongdoing, al-



though it might also be read as an effort to forestall accusation; at times she protests too much. The risk in confessional literature is that the reader, called upon to judge the writer, will do just that; it takes great skill to craft a story that compels the reader beyond the gossip value of "bad" behaviour.

Andersen's life has certainly been interesting. Born in Germany, displaced to Austria by the Second World War, she moves to Tunis with her French lover. Falling pregnant, she considers leaving; she marries him and feels trapped with this man she does not love. She eventually leaves him, but making love one last time, falls pregnant again, and returns. When she finally leaves for good, he prevents her from taking her younger child. The story continues thus, hopscotching from mistake to lost opportunity, a litany of regret, even as we see Andersen earning several graduate degrees and settling into a stable marriage and a career.

Beyond the specific questions of whether she was a bad mother to move

her children "to six different countries, on three continents," to allow her brutal husband to beat her young son when he was having trouble adjusting to kindergarten, or to more or less abandon each of her sons in turn while struggling to leave the abusive husband, start a career, and begin a new relationship, are larger ones. How does one make a life? What are the pressures brought to bear by gender, poverty, violence? And: what choices are possible?

*The Bad Mother* is more prose poem than traditional essay. Written in short sentences arranged in broken lines on the page, the language is clear and sometimes evocative, especially when Andersen is talking about the Tunisian landscape and details of daily life. A description of bathing her two toddlers is supremely sensual, a lovely and engaging moment of simple happiness.

Yet, for a book that purports to be a confession of bad mothering, a painful and contentious issue for feminists and others alike, *The Bad Mother* lacks emotional resonance. Andersen maintains a cool calm; although she ex-



presses remorse, it feels distant. Moreover, the book begins with a conversation in which the author's son reassures her that she is "getting all worked up over nothing." So even before beginning the story, the reader knows Andersen was not such a bad mother after all. Rather than a confession, *The Bad Mother* is an apology.

Written in French, Andersen's second language and that of most of her written work, *The Bad Mother* has been rendered in graceful and lucid English by Donald Winkler. **ms**

Elise Moser's nonfiction book for kids, *What Milly Did: The Remarkable Pioneer of Plastics Recycling*, will appear in summer 2016.

## Demolishing the Blue Wall of Silence

### POLICE WIFE

The Secret Epidemic of Police Domestic Violence

Susanna Hope and Alex Roslin

Golden Inkwell Books

\$22.95, paper, 312pp

9780994861702

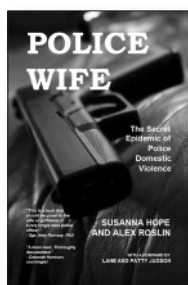
"Many enter policing with the best of intentions—to help others and serve their community—and act with honour and courage," recognizes award-winning investigative journalist Alex Roslin, from Knowlton, Quebec. *Police Wife's* coauthor Susanna Hope (a pseudonym) gives several examples of upright officers from her past, some of whom helped save her life. Sadly, Hope's husband, "Mac," a heavy drinking cop who often treated her more cruelly than the criminals he was hired to catch, lacked such integrity.

From the very first page, *Police Wife* sensitizes readers to the horrors of domestic violence, highlighting the extra challenges faced by victims of officer-batterers, such as when 911 calls are answered by the aggressor's colleagues. For anyone who's ever wondered why women stay with violent men, Hope explains that "leaving is the most dangerous time for an abused person," and, in his foreword, Roslin hits Quebec readers where they live with a chilling case in point: the 2001 murder of Montrealer Lucie Gélinas, who was car-chased and

gunned down shortly after leaving her boyfriend, seventeen-year RCMP veteran Jocelyn Hotte, "a crack shot on the VIP-protection squad trained in advance driving tactics." (While this book focuses on female victims and male perpetrators, the authors acknowledge that men and people in same-sex relationships also experience domestic violence.)

*Police Wife* takes a comprehensive look at a complex topic, pairing up Hope's first-hand survivor experience with Roslin's investigative work and analysis of statistics and studies. Though occasionally repetitive, it's a substantial reference that includes endorsements from experts as well as practical resources for victims in the appendices.

In part one, Hope delivers her memoir in diary format, courageously recounting over twenty years of unthinkable degradation at the hands of her husband. While informative, these entries stick to the bare basics, summarizing events and leaving out details that could deepen readers' understanding of the "traumatic bonding" mentioned in her afterword. Yet, the author's synopses make sense within the context of her PTSD – she is the first to admit these pages were written in a "fugue state" – and to her credit, she still gets the main point across, raising awareness. "One day I will break your spirit," Mac warns after beating her for trying to leave, two years into the marriage. Her spirit miraculously intact, Hope now delivers a loving, hopeful message (her pseudonym is apt) that emanates with compassion, even for her abuser, reminding victims they are not alone.



Focusing mainly on Canada and the United States, with comparisons worldwide, Roslin aims, in part two, to break the "blue wall of silence" that conceals police domestic violence, citing statistics that suggest much higher abuse rates among law enforcement families than the general public. Theorizing on potential causes, he underlines derogatory attitudes towards women, officer impunity, and issues of dominance: "The ability to establish power and control, while an underlying motive of domestic abuse, is an essential job skill for police." Roslin then discusses how this violence affects us all, stressing the conflict when those hired to protect the public are themselves batterers, and touches upon related issues like the killings of African Americans and the botched investigations of missing or murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

Roslin's final chapter may be the most hopeful as it confronts the underlying systemic issues, which, if eventually addressed, could benefit everyone, including officers, whose high-risk lifestyles, marked by burnout and exposure to traumatic events, yield high divorce rates and substantially shorter lifespans. "Police families pay a steep price for being on the frontline of upholding our uneven social order," remarks Roslin, who urges readers to face the truth about police domestic violence: "It is a mirror reflected back on ourselves. May we see and finally act." **ms**

Kimberly Bourgeois is a Montreal-based writer and musician.

**"Police families pay a steep price for being on the frontline of upholding our uneven social order."**



By Melissa Bull

Q&A with Erin Wunker and Sina Queyras

# Poetic Trajectories

**S**ina Queyras is the author of six books of poetry, the most recent of which, *MxT*, was a Lambda finalist and won the Pat Lowther Award, a ReLit Award, and the QWF A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry. She has also written a novel, *Autobiography of Childhood*, and edited a collection of Canadian poetry, *Open Field: 30 Contemporary Canadian Poets*. Queyras has hosted reading series in New York, Calgary, and Montreal, and until 2015 she was the author and curator of the renowned poetry and poetics website, *Lemon Hound: More Bark than Bite Since 2005*. Queyras is currently based in Montreal.

*Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras*, edited by Erin Wunker, is the twenty-fifth volume of Canadian poetry in Wilfrid Laurier Press's Laurier Poetry Series. Books in the Laurier series are slim and accessible. Thirty-five poems are selected from across a poet's career and supplemented by an engaging critical introduction by the editor and an afterword by the poet.

I corresponded with editor Erin Wunker, chair of the Board of Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA), about the process of curating this volume of poetry. I also briefly corresponded with Sina Queyras about her thoughts on the book.

**Melissa Bull:** What were you looking to highlight from Sina Queyras's work?

**Erin Wunker:** In making my selections I was trying to do two things. First, to select representative work from each of Queyras's poetry collections. For example, when Sean Michaels won the Giller Prize he quoted from *Expressway* in his acceptance speech. That quotation, "Go forth and undo harm. Go forth and do," made the rounds in newspapers and on social media. I made sure to select the poem it came from for this collection.

My second aim was to track Queyras's poetic attentions – which I see as focusing on literary and artistic genealogies, and on the intersection between lyric and conceptual poetic practices, which Queyras writes about as "Lyric Conceptualism." I see a real focus on developing feminist literary genealogies (meaning that in attending to and naming her influences – often, but not always women – Queyras's poetics are feminist), and a real focus on thinking through innovations in lyric and conceptual poetics that don't rest comfortably or uncritically in either poetic.

**MB:** Did you select the poetry for this book alongside Queyras? How did you make those decisions, whether together or apart?

**EW:** I selected the poems. To my mind, each of Queyras's collections is a real project – the poems start at one place and, through a huge variety of tactics, end up at a different place by the end of the collection. They are, I feel, books that teach you to think as the poems themselves are thinking and exploring. Choosing a select few poems from each text is a task that is, in some ways, bound to fail. No selected works will ever take the place of reading an entire collection.

I tried to choose poems that 1) demonstrated an evolution of poetic form over time, 2) demonstrated the things I mention above (genealogies of literary and

artistic influence, experiments at the interstices of lyric and conceptualism), and 3) gave readers a sample of the different kinds of poetic work that make up each collection. I knew making the selections that it was an impossible task; my hope is that I have selected poems that will pique readers' interest and encourage them to go out and read her poetry in its entirety.

**MB:** This will be the twenty-fifth book in the Laurier poetry series, but only the sixth anthologizing a woman. Given your work as chair of CWILA, how important was it for you to bring Queyras's work to this canonical Canadian series? Do you feel an investment in the creation of a new Canadian canon?

**EW:** So important. With *Lemon Hound*, Queyras forged and fostered one of the most generative spaces for discussion and presentation of new and existing literary criticism, poetry, and creative writing in Canada. She is not only a brilliant and influential writer, she is also a community builder. Bringing a small sample of Queyras's work to a wider readership and helping to institutionally recognize her is deliberate and serves the double purpose of celebrating her writing and making space for writing by women in the Canadian canon.

Canons will always be fraught. But literary canons exist, and I am invested in helping to diversify what books and writers people think about when they hear "Canadian literature." I would like to see indispensable reading lists comprised of writing by Indigenous women, people of colour, queer people, trans people, refugees to Canada, and people who are differently abled. There are, of course, writers in Canada who fit into all these categories. I would like to see their names come up when people ask, "what is canonical Canadian literature?"

**MB:** How does it feel to have these selections – from different projects and different times – come together in this collection? What do you think the selection of poems highlights about your work?

**Sina Queyras:** It's exciting to begin to see evidence of trajectory. I love trajectories. That it's my own is equally thrilling. I see that I like repetition and variation, prose poems, language, intertextuality, the lives of women. I'm more consistent than I imagined. But I think these are questions for others to answer. I'm thankful to Erin Wunker.



**BARKING & BITING**  
The Poetry of Sina Queyras  
Sina Queyras  
Edited by Erin Wunker  
Wilfrid Laurier University Press  
\$18.99, paper, 100pp  
9781771122160

**MB:** Tell me about the book's cover image – a Barbie arm sporting a bracelet of fur – it almost looks as if her arm is being smothered by a giant, decorative caterpillar.

**SQ:** It's one of my images. While I was writing *Lemon Hound* I was also taking a series of photos called "Barbie Reaches Out." This is one of them. I thought it was a fitting image for the poems included as it reflects many of the ideas that were percolating: plastic, petroleum product, and a caterpillar. Actually I was using headless Barbies.

**MB:** *Barking & Biting* will be the twenty-fifth book in the Laurier poetry series, but only the sixth book anthologizing a woman. How do you think this count speaks to the canonization of women writers in Canadian literature?

**SQ:** Really? That low number surprises me. But why does that surprise me? I think who is anthologized is important for what

it signals, and what it can do for a poet's trajectory, as well as for the editor. These anthologies offer ways to teach, and that means further embeddedness – or canonization if you like more manly terms. They are also good for editors' careers. It's hard to begin to figure out the relationship between the appearance of these anthologies, and the access points for women writers. One thing: I believe the series is driven by the interest of the editors, which is to say if you want to pitch one to WLU Press you should.

**MB:** What do you think of the title of this collection, *Barking & Biting*?

**SQ:** Well, it did ruffle my fur a little ... but I guess the hound metaphors are my own doing. I have used the phrase "more bite than bark" and "more bark than bite" variously on social media. But I also try to separate the public bitch from the private poet. **mb**

**Melissa Bull** is a writer and translator based in Montreal.



# Knowledge and Struggle

**LEARNING ACTIVISM**

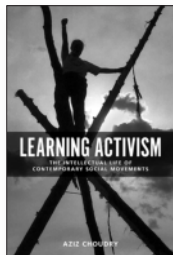
The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements

Aziz Choudry

University of Toronto Press

\$29.95, paper, 216pp

9781442607903



The fascinating story of how contemporary activists learn from each other and disseminate their knowledge is still being unravelled by academia, as well as by social movements themselves. In *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*, Aziz Choudry, an activist-turned-academic and professor in McGill's Department of Integrated Studies in Education, pays homage to the intellectual work that is inherently produced and circulated when people get together to challenge oppressive systems.

The question of how activists come to know what they know is central to Choudry's work. In this book he draws upon his varied activist experience, from anti-APEC organizing in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the context of neoliberal globalization to the emancipatory anti-exploitation work at Montreal's Immigrant Workers Centre. These experiences are interwoven with insights gleaned from

fellow activists in broader networks, including labour education in South Africa and anti-WTO mobilization in Seattle. Choudry makes an undeniable case that key ideas from the histories of solidarity, struggle, and Indigenous resistance are often overlooked, despite the importance of the knowledge emanating from such sites.

The book's main title could be misconstrued for a how-to manual, but this is far from *Activism 101*.

This rigorously theoretical work draws helpful connections between figures like Antonio Gramsci, Harsha Walia, and Himani Bannerji, and is primarily aimed at students, teachers, and anyone involved in struggles for social change. Those only newly acquainted with contemporary social movements will access streams of thinking that strive to be accountable to the complex past, present, and potential of collective action.

*Learning Activism's* four main sections map sites of activist learning, both geographically and institutionally: the current context of social movement knowledge production; the theoretical frameworks and historiographies relating to past and present social movement theory; popular education through art and formal versus informal learning; and, finally, the

continued on page 10

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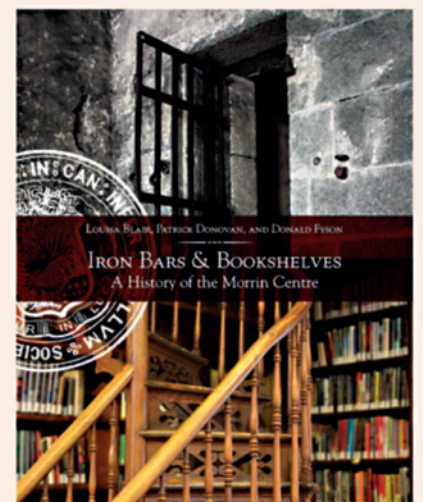
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Writers, readers, friends of the press – all are welcome to celebrate our spring launch during the 18<sup>th</sup> Blue Met Festival, April 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Hosted by Keith Henderson, the line-up begins with Robert Sandiford's latest collection of short stories *Fairfield: the Last Sad Stories* of G. Brandon Sisnett, an intimate, insightful look at how we all strive to live with the memory of love and loss. The stories con-

tain a mystery surrounding the sad death of a Barbadian-born author's four-year-old daughter, his retreat from society, and the recurring name of "Fairfield."



Also featured: Tom Abroy reading from his forthcoming collection *Where I Wanted to Be*. Jason Camlot, editor of the Punchy Poetry Series will be reading from his work, together with latest Punchy stars, Larissa Andrusyshyn and Greg Santos.



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Choudry (from page 9)

contentious question of expertise in the field. Understanding the "dynamic reciprocal engagement by theorists and movement activists in formulating, producing, refining, and applying research" is the overarching task of this work. Researching and organizing are consistently presented as being deeply interdependent.

One of Choudry's most compelling points is that informal/non-formal learning contexts complement more formal ones, and that the unrecognized movement participant remains as important as the scholar in contributing to theoretical paradigms. There are no tidy, all-encompassing explanations of how movements and struggles evolve and succeed. Instead, we are asked to consider just how much the internal life of social movements is interwoven with their political experience and potential.

The questions Choudry poses about geography, scale, valuation, and relationality in movement building, knowledge production, and education expand our map of truly democratic practices. The West, NGOs, and academia do not provide the primary thrust of action, and likewise, Choudry argues, they do not adequately record and archive the objects, tools, and artifacts of activism's intellectual life. The Anarchives project at Montreal's Médiathèque littéraire Gaëtan Dostie is presented as an example, albeit a manifestly white one, of autonomous movement archiving at the local scale. According to Choudry, this type of archiving is essential to the struggle's renewal, while also serving as remediation to more dominant mobilization narratives.

"We are in dire need of thinking, acting, theorizing, and imagining 'outside of the box' to make fundamental changes and dramatic differences in the communities, societies, and world we live in," Choudry insists. As long as the intellectual work of social movements makes space for the theorizing of ordinary people and for resounding the voices of the unheard, it will continue to illuminate the global struggle for change. ■■■

Patricia Boushel is a cultural producer and independent translator from Montreal, currently working on a documentary about democracy with director Astra Taylor.

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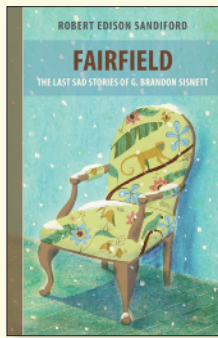
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## Robert Edison Sandiford

# The Secret Lives of Writers



**FAIRFIELD**  
The Last Sad Stories of  
G. Brandon Sisnett  
Robert Edison Sandiford  
DC Books  
\$18.95, paper, 160pp  
9781927599358

**T**he title of Robert Edison Sandiford's short story collection, *Fairfield: The Last Sad Stories of G. Brandon Sisnett*, plays a number of tricks. It introduces the central conceit of the collection: the stories are presented as a manuscript written by a reclusive figure named G. Brandon Sisnett, who devoted his life to writing speculative fiction and political science. As readers are informed in a fictional foreword, it is only after Sisnett dies in isolation that the stories are discovered, and eventually published. The title also raises the spectral and ambiguous name Fairfield, a noun used in the stories to describe "city, state of mind, person, or idea," and which reappears in these varying guises throughout the collection. But perhaps most importantly, the title wields either the promise or threat of stories imbued with sadness.

Yet, while this collection of thirteen brief stories is many things, *sad* never quite seems to be the right adjective. This assertion might seem surprising considering that, as the foreword states, one of the "true links between all the stories ... is their preoccupation with death."

I spoke with Robert Edison Sandiford and asked about his inspiration for the collection – the latest contribution to a career that has spanned fiction, graphic novels, journalism, and teaching. He cited issues of mortality and loss, explaining how he began writing the stories prompted by reflections on "death, how different people and different cultures handle death." His young daughter and his own experience of aging deepened these questions, prompting him to think about "what it means to grow old, or at least older ... [noticing that] things change, your body changes ... [there is] this relentless kind of process."

As the stories emerged from these themes, the idiosyncratic structure came later, at the moment when, Sandiford recalls, "the stories started to ask, 'How do we hang together?'" This question is a good illustration of how Sandiford speaks about his writing: meditatively, often punctuating his thoughts with rhetorical questions, more interested in musing and exploring than offering definitive statements. This question is also an important one; the stories in this collection are diverse and even disparate. Some plotlines include vignettes that draw their power from the subtlety with which they render seemingly unremarkable encounters: in "They Build Houses Here Now," a former soldier, now selling vacation properties in Las Vegas, finds himself drawn to the opaque intimacy he witnesses between a husband and wife, while "Northern Lights" lyrically recreates a drunken night in Montreal as two long-time friends probe the raw edges of recent romantic trauma.

*While the collection grapples continuously with the presence and possibility of death, it also reminds us that dying is inseparable from living.*

Other stories such as "Mobbed, By the BBC" and "Massiah" engage more directly with questions of politics and violence, both bodily and emotional. There is also a willingness to grapple with the fantastical and even the absurd: "Massiah" is set in a future reality where a cure has been discovered for aging, and the collection's penultimate story, "Screen Saver," narrates a sequence of events in which a man abruptly becomes trapped within a television set after stumbling against it.

What allows these stories to cohere and coexist, in addition to the thematic arches developed in the foreword, is Sandiford's direct and unflinching approach to surprising or even outrageous details. "Screen Saver" offers a particularly compelling example of this unapologetically matter-of-fact narration when it presents its moment of crisis: "instead of breaking his face on the screen [he] fell into it and couldn't get out."

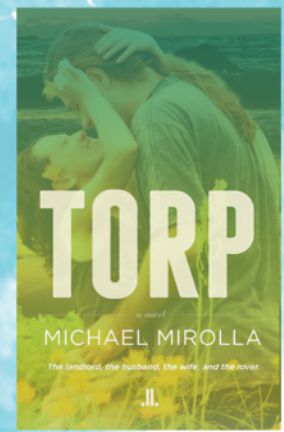
This tightly paced narration and deft use of language is key to the success of a demanding form defined by its brevity. Sandiford celebrates the genre for "the tremendous amount that can be said in a short story ... how brilliant the language can be, more so because it's told in such a concentrated form." And he displays the ability to take full advantage of these features.

Sandiford also cites the ability to imbue his stories with a strong sense of place as one of his major goals as a writer. The stories in *Fairfield* move deftly from Montreal to Las Vegas and Barbados, punctuated throughout by memories of the places where characters have been, or imagine themselves, as well as the places where they are. His own history is divided between Barbados and Canada, and we spoke while he was in Montreal for a brief visit. The issue of how place shapes experience and a sense of self is clearly a central question

continued on page 15

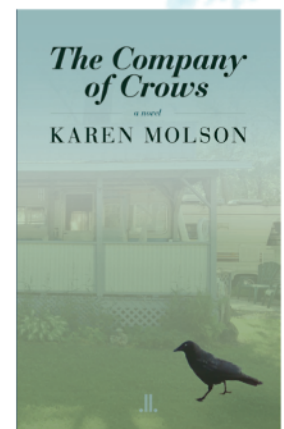
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# fiction

## After the Crowds, Before the Storms

**WORLDLY GOODS**  
Alice Petersen  
Biblioasis  
\$19.95, paper, 176pp  
9781771960809

What a thrill to follow a writer from promise to fulfillment. Alice Petersen's debut collection of short stories won the 2012 QWF Concordia University First Book Prize and marked her as a young writer to watch. Her second collection, *Worldly Goods*, more than delivers.

Whereas *All the Voices Cry* was concerned with intimate loss, here Petersen has cast her thematic net more widely, and more confidently. The fifteen stories in *Worldly Goods* are redolent of a universal, inexorable human loneliness: the thoughtful aftermath of loss.

Neither reeling nor quite whole, the characters wax epistolary about the one that got away, they seek unlikely escapes on solo holidays, they help lost boys and hang onto lost poems. Yet the stories are never dour. The reader feels she has known these people, their deep solitude, all along. It is the writer, not the character, whom we meet in the charmer's arms, on the dislocating vacation, in the tired kitchen, and she generously shares her sense of omniscience and irony with those who people her stories.

It is a book, too, about women; loneliness and ironing.



The stories take place up and down the Commonwealth, on the approximate cusp of spinsterhood. The title, borrowed from Irène Némirovsky, prefaces a kind of everyday-use leitmotif. Much meaning is derived from small things: earrings, fine porcelain, a stuffed cat from another ship passing in the night. A woman on vacation in Tahiti, who wants to buy herself pearls, is reminded to dab on disinfectant. After all, "Felicity did not wish to be a foreign pathogen." Properly effacing, she eventually settles for bottle caps. More overtly, in "The Fruits of Our Endeavours," a wayward country doctor, "interested by the female's natural state of madness," casually ascribes that madness "to the dual influence of too much pudding and too many visitors." Subtle or scathing, the stories are an indictment of country life, of middle-class holidays and china aspirations, of a century full of second-hand women, and women dismissed out of hand.

Always an intuitive stylist, Petersen has honed her prose. I love the creepy, bathetic "Lovely to Touch, Lovely to Hold"; I love "A Nice, Clean Copy" – how we give of our flawed selves, instead of the

gift of knowing the other. Petersen is master of the telling detail. We are told of a runaway that "someone had cared enough about him to take him to the dentist." A raucous do is evocatively qualified as "a street party where the sofas were set on fire." Yes, exactly.

You'll read on for the satisfying dissatisfaction of others, but it's the language that'll hook you. A poor choice for a wife is referred to as a "dandelion clock," department-store box-room thugs are "sexist baskets," rummage-sale women are "manatees in tweed skirts." A minster here, a jerkin there, but Petersen's is no passing ten-dollar vocabulary; it is aptly used, and well earned.

Where a less able writer might belabour the figurative, or load Venice, Aeneas, and co. down with research, Petersen weaves a solid but unobtrusive lattice. The time to vacation in Italy, she counsels, is "after the crowds but before the storms" – good advice all round. In "Dear Ian Fairfield," "Dido sings for ages while she is dying," Prudence muses. "There is



always so much ground to cover before the end." If the ground ahead for Petersen might include fixing a tendency to tinny titles and occasional non-endings, the author's pen is nonetheless firmly in her service.

These criticisms of *Worldly Goods* are of an editor's eye. The reader's reading organs – mind's eye, escapist heart, palate for language – are delighted. As when she compares an unfortunately pregnant girl to "a golden pear," Petersen wields the beautiful and the richly out of place. The book is a well-set table. mrb

Katia Grubisic is a fan of both crowds and storms.

## Love, War, and Bird Shit

**GUANO**  
Louis Carmain  
Translated by Rhonda Mullins  
Coach House Books  
\$19.95, paper, 144pp  
9781552453155

An elaborately coiffed woman, an intricate tapestry, and a woodblock sinking ship on the cover promise a story of love, history, and war. And Louis Carmain's *Guano* delivers assuredly on all counts. But there's also an off-white splotch that closer inspection reveals to be bird shit, a commodity once valuable enough to spark the minor war that provides the backdrop for this unsanitized yet sparkling historical novel with a sly contemporary feel.

Reviews of the French-language original, published in Quebec in 2013, register astonishment at the level of craft achieved in a first novel. There is a rare and impressive economy here. Carmain is trained as a historian, but he is clear on how much fact a ship can lug before it lists; he may love making every image new, but the experimental load is never too much for

the prose to bear. And Rhonda Mullins's adroit translation captures Carmain's ready wit and wordplay beautifully, finding a faithfulness that doesn't surrender the moxie of the English language.

We begin in Cadix in 1862, where a scientific expedition with a political side-project (or vice-versa) is preparing to set sail. Lieutenant Simón Cristiano Claro, never one to grasp the bull by the horns, is "astonished to find himself" aboard. After crossing the Atlantic and a contretemps in Chile, the Spaniards alight in Callao, Peru, where the small-time statecraft is ineffective and monotonous, but wryly funny in the accounts Simón embellishes for royal eyes.

In Callao, Simón meets the daughter of a local landowner. Montse Sánchez Ortuño is attractive, in late marriageable age, conversant in psychology and the Romantic poets, but so far unschooled in love. Can Simón change this? If only he will act. Before he ships out, Montse implores him to write her letters. We wait. Though Simón's happy turn of phrase has made him the ship's official scribe, he cannot seem to write

the letter that could change his life. Only years later and in captivity does Simón finally find the words; as the novel runs to its climax he makes his way through a battle to deliver them, hoping it's not too late.

Carmain's style is paratactic: short declarative sentences follow one upon another in rapid succession, and he trusts his readers to make their own connections. The story hums along, leavened with just enough historical insight and memorable imagery. "As everyone knows," (I did not) "sailors do not march well." Cannon are lined up on a ship "like decaying teeth." In a home destroyed by war, "the loss of several joists gave the floor more spring." The words for the long-awaited letter finally arrive, "as if in slow motion, clear and right and soft as slow tears that the eye lets fall after they have rested a time on the eyelashes."

What makes *Guano* not just a fun but also a believable portrait of love

and war is wealth of detail married to dearth of meaning. Life is lost painfully and most often pointlessly. Montse's father's horrifically casual transgression against a powerless employee, and the bloody retaliation it inspires, show the profound inhumanity of colonial society all the more powerfully because they are simply *there*, a brief sentence or two, uncommented on.

Unlike many historical toe-breakers, *Guano* keeps things short and sweet. Louis Carmain is content to say less than he knows. History, for him, "is built on trivial things that come and go, and no one notices." It's a convincing view, a compelling entertainment, an unexpected treasure of a novel. mrb

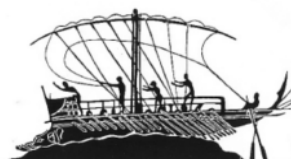
Pablo Strauss's translation of Maxime Raymond Bock's *Atavisms* was published in 2015. He lives in Quebec City.



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## Teenage Wasteland

### THE GODDESS OF FIREFLIES

Geneviève Pettersen  
Translated by Neil Smith  
Véhicule Press  
\$19.95, paper, 200pp  
9781550654370

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN BLAIS



Set in Chicoutimi-Nord in the mid-nineties, Geneviève Pettersen's first book is a harrowing coming-of-age novel about a teenage girl whose life quickly spins out of control. Winner of the 2015 *Grand Prix littéraire Archambault* and a bestseller in its original French, *The Goddess of Fireflies* is narrated by Catherine as she navigates the eventful year between her fourteenth and fifteenth birthdays, a year full of change, violence, substance abuse, and star-crossed romance.

The novel opens at Catherine's fourteenth birthday party, where her inebriated father spontaneously gives her a cheque for a thousand dollars before totalling her mother's jeep. Catherine is unaffected by the scene, using it instead as an opportunity to introduce the reader to her father, a crooked lawyer, and her mother, a former model. The pair had been bitterly arguing for as long as she could remember.

While her parents' marriage implodes, Catherine begins hanging out at the mall, "the hole," and other hideaways for underage drinking and debauchery. Her portrayals of the kids she encounters are one-dimensional, but authentically teenaged. There's Melanie the bully, Pascal the heartthrob, and Eve the bad apple. These characters are sweet and selfish by turn, and Catherine's loyalties change quickly. But while her friendships are disposable, Catherine remains devoted to the PCP-variant mesc, which she first tries at a party in the woods. Soon, her life is ruled by her appetite for the narcotic, and she lovingly describes the different varieties she ingests. Along with drugs, the novel is full of sex and rock 'n' roll, with many references to nineties' pop-punk bands like Lagwagon, NOFX, and The Offspring, and alternative rock such as Sonic Youth and Les Wampas. These are bands that reflect Catherine's alienation, offering a discordant soundtrack to her drug-fuelled bacchanalias and teen romances. The music references increase as she falls for Kevin, a music and horror film obsessive with a pompadour and tight jeans.

Rather than being narrated from a distance, Catherine's voice comes to the reader almost in real time, relaying each event immediately after it takes place.

**...the novel has a breathless pace, moving at the frantic speed of an addicted fourteen-year-old's mind.**

As a result the novel has a breathless pace, moving at the frantic speed of an addicted fourteen-year-old's mind. Divided into short chapters, *The Goddess of Fireflies* offers few moments of pause or reflection. Instead of depth, the reader gets perpetual digressions, and there are several stories-within-stories of Chicoutimi teen lore in each chapter.

In the original French, Pettersen prioritized using words and expressions particular to the Saguenay. In an interview with her last year, *La Presse* included a glossary of terms used in the book. While we necessarily lose access to this unique argot in the English version, Neil Smith ably translates the novel into a more universal English teenage talk. The original, like the translation, is liberally peppered with swearing, as well as offensive epithets against Indigenous people, women, and homosexuals. Perhaps intended to shock, and likely true to the diction of a Saguenay teenager in the 1990s, this aspect of the novel nevertheless becomes incredibly tiresome.

After the death of a friend and the discovery of her habit by her parents, Catherine faces the consequences of her wild year. But even so she shows little remorse. Finally, during a fishing trip with her father on her fifteenth birthday we begin to see the first signs that Catherine might be changing for the better. As the pair return to Chicoutimi they witness the Saguenay flood at its height. The book ends with a powerful image of destruction, a symbol of the tenuous position that Catherine still occupies as a teenage girl stepping back from the brink. mb

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

## Artistic Permission

### THE ORANGE GROVE

Larry Tremblay  
Translated by Sheila Fischman  
Biblioasis  
\$17.95, paper, 176pp  
9781771960366



As playwright in Larry Tremblay's *The Orange Grove*, a tertiary character representing the author himself, asks, "Why should he not have the right, as an artist, to talk about war?" – even if he hasn't been exposed to it. The novel argues that a writer has permission not only to discuss war he has no intimate relationship with, but also to enter into racial and religious conversations beyond his scope as a white, North American writer. While the use of imagination is paramount to the success of art, the reader is left pondering Tremblay's own question throughout the text.

*The Orange Grove* is a poetic novel that reveals stunningly in its use of language and metaphor – wonderfully apparent in Sheila Fischman's deft translation – to tell the story of twin brothers from a war-ravaged unnamed Middle Eastern country. Following the bombing death of their grandparents, the boys' family is charged with a life altering decision about an act of vengeance. As they confront their decision, Tremblay explores issues of religion, race, war, family, and morality in a lyrical text that immerses the reader in a difficult conversation, while unravelling a larger discussion about the limits and rights of imagination.

*The Orange Grove* presents itself as "a tragic fable about the absurd logic of terrorism." And if its story was set in a universe other than ours, the question Tremblay asks about the permission to appropriate the voices of another culture might have been dismissed as simply part of its fabulism. But in introducing "America" to the narrative, Tremblay situates his novel in our world, and in doing so he demands that the reader consider whether or not such cultural appropriation is suitable.

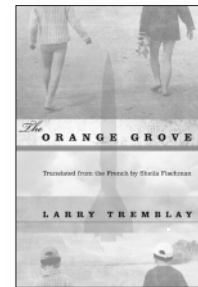
In their seminal essay on writers and the permissions of imagination, "On Whiteness and The Racial Imaginary," Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda encourage writers "to not simply assume that the most private, interior, emotional spaces of existence ... are most available for lyric and fictive rendering because they are somehow

beyond race." In *The Orange Grove*, the reader is made uncomfortable by assumption. Tremblay's lyric beauty is unfortunately offset by the reader's questioning of the authenticity of characters that exist fully within the imagination of a writer who lacks intimacy with the culture of his text. The characters and the dialogue, at times, feel like caricatures. The reader is asked to forget about the legitimacy of the narrative and rather to focus on the fictive, the imaginary, and on contentious issues such as war and faith.

Tremblay was asked by the *National Post* Reading Society about what experiences permitted such authenticity. He replied, "I have fortunately never lived through any events in my life that resemble those written about in *The Orange Grove*. I have never experienced war. I am a writer who puts forward the power of imagination. A writer, for me, is, before all, someone who imagines." But that's not enough. As Rankine and Loffreda argue, "to say, as a white writer, that I have a right to write about whoever I want, including writing from the point of view of characters of color – that I have a right of access and that my creativity and artistry is harmed if I am told I cannot do so – is to make a mistake."

*The Orange Grove* is a poetic exploration that is troubled by a question it asks of itself: Is imagination an open license? It is the task of artists to find interesting ways to disseminate their creativity without assuming knowledge or intimacy, while respecting both the limits of imagination and the realities of permission. mb

Mike Spry is the author of *JACK*, *Distillery Songs*, and *Bourbon & Eventide*, and was nominated for the A.M. Klein Prize, the ReLit Award, and the Journey Prize.

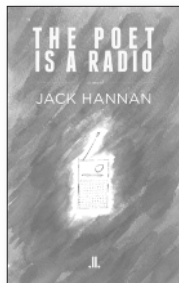




## Wandering Poet

### THE POET IS A RADIO

Jack Hannan  
Linda Leith Publishing  
\$14.95, paper, 162pp  
9781927535981



Li Bai, the eighth-century Chinese poet, didn't like to feel tied down. He spent much of his life on the road. He got married four times. Drank himself to sleep in bars. And he admired those who, as he put it, "made nothing of sea-crossing or of mountain-crossing."

But in *The Poet is a Radio*, Jack Hannan's first novel, this ancient wanderer outdoes himself. Not only has he found his way over some eleven thousand kilometres, from Sichuan to Montreal. He has also managed to make a jump more dramatic than any continent-crossing: he has safely travelled across twelve centuries, into the present.

Hannan offers no explanation as to how Li Bai came to be in twenty-first-century Montreal. All we know is that

he has borrowed some details from Li Bai's real life in China as a backstory, and that, in more recent years, the poet has been city-hopping across Europe and North America. What happened between his historical death in 762 and the present is anybody's guess.

Those kinds of unanswered questions are everywhere in *The Poet is a Radio*. The novel clearly states it is set in Montreal – and succeeds in capturing some of its moods – but the relationship the city in the book bears to its real-life counterpart is fuzzy. It isn't just that the names of streets and bridges and metro stations have been changed. It's also that Hannan's Montreal is a kind of post-economic wasteland, where the remaining pockets of vitality are an exception to the rule.

The novel is a snapshot of one of those pockets of vitality: the staff members and customers of a bookstore on the brink of bankruptcy, who are all trying to wake Montrealers up out of their computer-daze. The owner, named (but not modelled) after another real-life poet, Kenneth Patchen, refuses to sell e-books and t-shirts and tote bags in the place of paper-and-ink books. His employee J.-S. spray paints poems onto the asphalt of the street, hoping to fill a whole block with beau-

tiful words. Habana de Curra, who often comes to the bookstore to browse and chat, learns languages "the way other people put on weight." Dwayne, the Stetson-wearing Poet of the Blue Line, drops pages of his poems into commuters' laps, shouting "Look at yourselves, you're dog tired, bone dry, deep in debt, and you're all going to die."

One might say that the book is about Li Bai becoming embroiled in someone else's crime when he stumbles upon a duffel bag stuffed with money. Or that it's about the unlikely romance between Habana and Dwayne. Or that it's about a bookstore owner whose business and twelve-year relationship are falling apart at the same time.

But Hannan does not really delve into any of these stories. Rather, he flits from one to the other, giving us little more than a glimpse of each. The novel's trajectory is as mysterious as Li Bai's. Reading it feels as though you, too, have become a wanderer, making unexpected appearances in people's lives, only to disappear again soon after.

We shouldn't be surprised that Hannan's first foray into fiction is so enigmatic. When discussing his poetry in an interview for the *Montreal*



*Gazette*, he told the journalist Jeff Heinrich, "I'm not a person who has a point to make, and I very rarely write with the idea that there's something I want to say."

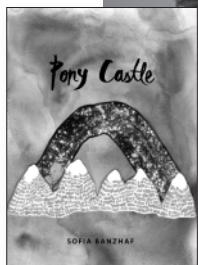
It may be hard to pinpoint exactly what *The Poet is a Radio* is about. But it leaves you with an image that hits home: someone passing through a foreign city, wanting both to forget and remember all of the different lives he led in what feels like some distant century, thousands of kilometres away. **mb**

Eric Boodman won a 2015 Norman Mailer award for student creative nonfiction. He now works as a science journalist for *STAT*.

## Young & Restless

PONY CASTLE  
Sofia Banzhaf  
Metatron  
\$10.00, paper, 44pp  
9780993946448

LOOKING GOOD AND HAVING  
A GOOD TIME  
Fawn Parker  
Metatron  
\$10.00, paper, 61pp  
9780993946455



are speed reads – *Pony Castle* is forty-four pages, *Looking Good*, sixty-one – and their conversational

prose, as if written for wandering attentions, brims with aggression, humour, surprise, and sarcasm.

The manuscript of *Pony Castle* won Metatron's Prize for Rising Authors of Contemporary Literature. In these snapshots (chapter 22 is one short sentence) of a naive woman's unmaking through depression and drugs, there's plenty of millennial discontent and disconnection: "My desire to be understood by others is the primary way in which I introduce resistance and suffering to my experience." But the emotional core of the book comes from the painful contrast between childhood and adulthood, fantasy and reality. The title refers to a plastic symbol of childhood, the protagonist's "plastic Barbie pony." When she finds her baby teeth, she acknowledges, "I always feel



sad when I think about the smallness of my child body." Banzhaf grants us access to the internal narrative of mundane actions: eating fried chicken, holding a garage sale. Then her language turns them into poetry. She describes the protagonist observing her period blood on bedsheets: "I put my finger on the spine of the butterfly staining the sheet." And having sex: "I am performing girl performing slut performing real person performing fantasy."

*Looking Good and Having a Good Time* is breezier in tone, its dark edges submerged in self-effacing humour. Parker makes fun of her generation, and of contemporary literature. The title of one of the four stories, "Doreen, Doreen," is taken from a scene where the protagonist sifts through submissions to the *Alien Baby Anthology*:

Another submission is titled 'Photo of My Ass' and the document is empty.

The last submission is called

'Untitled,' containing only:  
DOREEN,  
DOREEN.

In the next scene,

Heather O'Neill is reading at Monument-National. I show up with no clothes on and sit at the bar. A man is on stage holding a wooden moose, saying, It's a give and take.

John Travolta comes over and sits behind me at the bar. He writes on a napkin: I want to fuck you.

Magical realism has arrived in millennial Montreal. Parker plays with form, incorporating a fictional interview in *Vice* magazine. Here, the young person's desire for a life instruction manual is made literal. In the last story, a teenaged girl discovers a self-help book titled *Looking Good and Having a Good Time*. And it costs seventy-five dollars.

The mind of a self-doubting young person is a tiresome place to be (for both the protagonists and the reader), so it's hard to imagine these books sustaining their prose for much longer than their short page counts. These books are the right size, although such short books are unusual. Also rare, regrettably, are stories by and about young women testing their independence, conveyed through the form of independent literature. That's reason enough to read these books. **mb**

Crystal Chan is a writer and journalist. She is the manager of *alt.theatre* magazine and the editor of *QWF Writes*.



## Reconciling with the Past

THE HOMES WE BUILD ON ASHES

Christina Park  
Inanna Publications  
\$22.95, paper, 264pp  
9781771332330

The first novel by second-generation Korean Canadian Christina Park, *The Homes We Build on Ashes*, explores key aspects of the Korean experience, from the mid-twentieth century to the present. A work of fiction inspired by Park's grandmother, the story is primarily that of Nara, a woman who repeatedly rebuilds her life in the face of significant hardships in Korea, then Canada.

As a girl and young woman, Nara saw her life all but destroyed under Japanese occupation, including during World War II, when she becomes a forced labourer in a factory. She endures the Korean War's violent era of suspicion in a refugee camp, then a catastrophic, city-wide fire, before migrating to Vancouver in the early 1970s. Nara encounters racism in Canada, but her most profound struggles here are centred around troubled family relationships and an inability to reconcile with her past.

In this final act, Park's third-person narrator places greater emphasis on the perspectives of secondary characters, especially Nara's eldest daughter. This helps tease out some of the novel's most important threads: the nature of what might be called the Korean character; the powerful but imperfect bonds between parents and children, husbands and wives; life being more about regret and reconciliation than harmonious ideals, at least for these characters.

This is a tragic tale constantly searching for peace, and as such, neat, satisfying connections and conclusions would be out of place. Even so, *The Homes We Build on Ashes* often loses its way because of a lack of cohesion.

By occasionally including other characters' perspectives, Park certainly adds nuance. However, this always feels awkwardly welded onto Nara's story, even haphazard at times. There are meditative passages variously driven by Buddhism, Shamanism, and particularly Christianity, as well as psychological insights and observations about oppression, resistance, conformity, and social order, but little sense of the novel's overriding philosophy. Symbols – a cooking pot, a tree – and points of connection, such as the deaths of two characters in similar circumstances, years apart, are piled on with so much other poorly developed material that their impact is diminished.

Perhaps even more fatal are the frequent language problems, which are not limited to a sometimes breathless excess of adjectives, hyperbolic similes, (occa-



sionally mixed) metaphors, and cumbersome word repetition that could easily be solved with a pronoun. The frequent typographical errors are distracting, but worse are the failures to grasp a word's

nuanced meaning, such as when street peddlers are said to “heckle” Nara, though in fact they try to gain her attention with desperate politeness. Numerous misused words and bewildering phrases and sentences compound the sense that this book lacked adequate editorial oversight.

Undoubtedly, *The Homes We Build on Ashes* is an interesting novel, which sheds light on the Canadian immigrant experience and significant moments in Korean history. Park succeeds in building a strong, sympathetic protagonist in Nara, keeps the narrative moving along with several scenes of genuine drama, and expresses some ideas with poetry and insight. However, it is no credit to either author or publisher that it was released in this form, so clearly in need of at least one more draft to iron out the kinks. **msb**

Patricia Maunder is a Montreal journalist whose book reviews and author interviews are published in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand media.

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## The Word

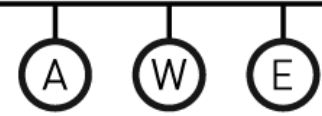
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## Sandiford (from page 11)

for him; I notice again and again a real desire to do justice to, and honour, the places he discusses.

There is a similar diversity to the style: when a story is narrated in the first person, or closely mirrors a particular point of view, Sandiford readily cultivates vivid voice and persona. This includes the careful use of dialect in “Thick ’n’ Thin” to capture the nuances and rhythms of spoken language. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when asked about his earliest memories of writing creatively, Sandiford recalls oral composition: “I remember walking home from school, coming up with stories, or the plots of stories.” He further roots his understanding of the creative process in notions of intimacy created through orality: “I remember my sister leaning in and asking, ‘Do you want to hear a secret? Do you want to hear a story?’”

The warmth of this intimacy is conveyed even at times of stylistic risk, such as in the challenging “Mobbed, By the BBC,” which is constructed from two overlapping sets of fragments, with the broken and ragged sentences mirroring the violence depicted in the plot. Despite the range of tones, places, and styles, the collection, unlike some other volumes of short fiction, stands up well to continuous reading, not demanding that each story be encountered as a discrete unit.

While the collection grapples continuously with the presence and possibility of death, it also reminds us that dying is inseparable from living. Moreover, it suggests the hidden

selves that can emerge at the time of death, when the public surface of one's life falls away. Sandiford explains that by presenting the collection through the framework of an author who was best known during his lifetime for producing non-fictional work, he wanted to explore the question of “which is more true? Which is more powerful? ... The [work] people know about [or] the secret work we do, and the secret lives we lead?” “Work,” he continues, “might be very good and yet be unknown ... there is the driving question of what people consider important. What is it that really matters to us?”

If, as the stories in the collection suggest again and again, we can never know the people around us in their entirety, then perhaps the question of what matters most can only be answered in full at the end of one's life. Even here there is mediation and the possibility of loss. The foreword states that the thirteen stories presented in the collection are only a fragment of a total of thirty-two recovered at the time of Sisnett's death. What is present is haunted also by what is not there. But what can be recovered, as those thirteen stories attest, is by turns tender, unflinching, and illuminating. Amid the detritus of lives, finished or still in progress, there are always stories, and if they are at times sad, they are also all we have. **msb**

Danielle Barkley holds a Ph.D. from the Department of English at McGill University and teaches topics including writing, rhetoric, and critical analysis.



# graphic

## A Comic of His Own

### THE ENVELOPE MANUFACTURER

Chris Oliveros

Self-published

\$19.95, paper, 104pp

9781770462298

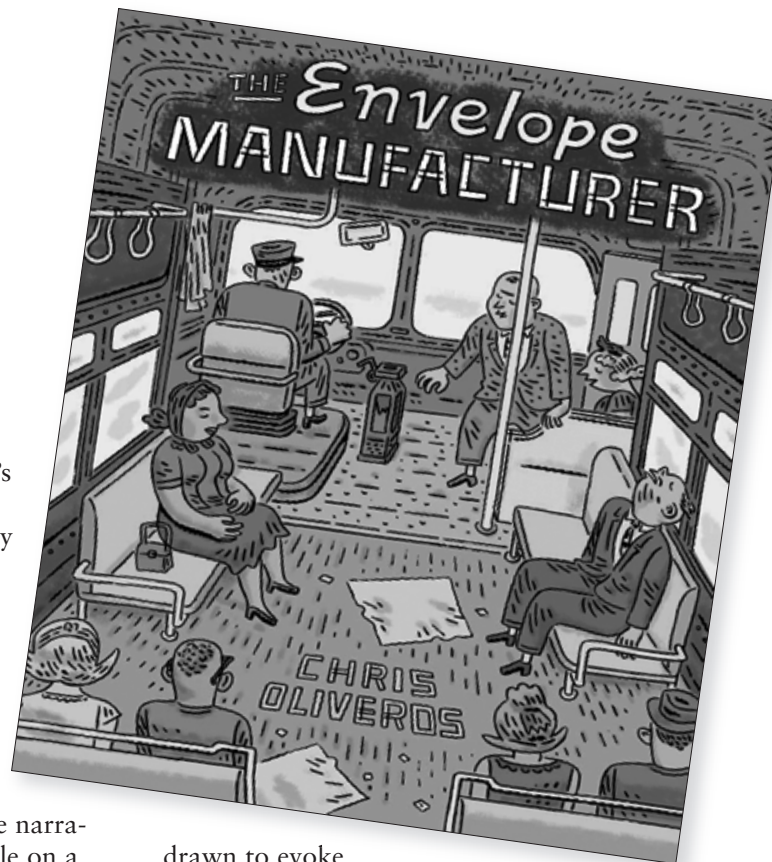
The importance of Chris Oliveros to the world of alternative comics publishing is probably impossible to overstate. As the founder and publisher of Montreal's Drawn & Quarterly, Oliveros oversaw work by such seminal cartoonists as Chester Brown, Julie Doucet, Seth, and Adrian Tomine, among many others, and his successes have been instrumental in carving out a cultural space for offbeat, alternative, and so-called "serious" comics. In fact, so closely has Oliveros been identified with both Drawn & Quarterly and comics publishing in general, that it was something of a surprise when he stepped down as publisher in 2015 to focus on his own work.

The first book resulting from this change of attention, the self-published and relatively short *The Envelope Manufacturer*, makes it clear just how much the early Drawn & Quarterly editorial line was guided by Oliveros's own taste and artistic sensibilities. But while *The Envelope Manufacturer* shares several visual and thematic characteristics – and a distinctive way of drawing shoes – with many of Seth's slickly drawn comics, its tone is relatively free of the nostalgia and obsessive everyplace Canadiana that is a hallmark of Seth's richly imagined past worlds. Instead, *The Envelope Manufacturer* is a haunting chronicle of mid-century despair in the face of increasing professional and personal obsolescence, set in an unnamed Canadian city that is clearly

meant to be Montreal. Drawn in a wavy and unsteady line that is entirely Oliveros's own, the richly detailed black and white images also serve to underscore the anxiety and gradual mental disintegration of the book's main character as his orders dry up, his equipment is repossessed, and his marriage dissolves.

Richly evocative yet narratively and visually unstraightforward, what exactly happens in *The Envelope Manufacturer* is something of a mystery. This is not least due to the disorienting and dreamlike narrative perspective, which never seems to settle on a stable or even realistic point of view. Instead we get scenes of businessmen jumping off buildings and floating through the air while plotting to turn everything around, or hostile encounters on the bus between people who may or may not be co-workers. Oliveros's page design, similarly, adds to the narrative uncertainty, as speech bubbles weave through the page, creating the sense of lost snippets of dialogue coming to us from the past like ghostly radio waves.

This clever strategy is accentuated by Oliveros's decision to focus a large number of panels not on his ephemeral and in some sense everyman – and everywoman – characters, but instead on their material world of analogue and largely obsolete machinery. As such, the book's panels are filled with real-world objects like metal lunchboxes and stovetop coffee makers, in addition to various absurd-looking gadgets and doodads, all of them drawn in inventive detail. Oliveros's cityscapes, similarly, which make up the majority of the illustrations, are affectionately



drawn to evoke a lost time of inner-city daily life and manufacturing – a time, that is, when men wore suits and had haircuts, and when a city's downtown was more than simply an outdoor shopping mall.

The book's visual texture is complemented by its physical form; it is compact, floppy, and printed on coarse paper that emphasizes the narrative's focus on the loss of materiality in an increasingly modern and technologically advanced world. In a current market dominated by beautifully produced high-quality hardback comics, it is therefore only fitting that Oliveros's *The Envelope Manufacturer* itself, which has been nearly twenty years in the making, seems to belong in style, theme, and publication values to a slightly earlier era of comics. With *The Envelope Manufacturer*, Oliveros has finally begun to catch up to the world he helped create. **mrb**

Frederik Byrn Køhlert is a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Calgary, where he thinks and writes about comics.

## Freaks and Geeks

### BIG KIDS

Michael DeForge

Drawn & Quarterly

\$19.95, cloth, 96pp

9781770462243

There are two kinds of people in this world, as the saying goes. Michael DeForge uses this premise, normally the setup for a joke, to engage in some nimble psychedelic riffing with results more bleak than funny. Ostensibly a coming-of-age parable, *Big Kids* quickly unfurls into strangeness and unfamiliarity, gesturing toward an allegory that never quite materializes, and finally leaving readers in a narrative hinterland with no epiphany or punchline in sight. Which is to say: it is a triumph of honesty and bravery.

Over the past half-decade, DeForge's work has become more complex and his audience broader, largely due to a



rigorous work ethic. In addition to dozens of online and print comics and illustration commissions, he's a designer on the much-loved cartoon *Adventure Time* and a fixture at the Toronto Comic Arts Festival. Just shy of thirty, DeForge is part of a generation for whom the lines between mainstream and underground in the art world are not so rigid and stratifying, likely to be as fluent in the line work of Jack Kirby as that of R. Crumb, at home within the iconography of Japanese manga and French *bandes dessinées* as much as the Sunday funnies. In a short amount of time, DeForge has cultivated a style that seems at once a synthesis of many traditions and a wholly original voice, comics that pulse with the impeccable timing and expressive minimalism of *Peanuts* while also conjuring the opaque otherworldliness and drifting dream logic of Jim Woodring's "Frank" stories.

His third book for Drawn & Quarterly in less than two years, *Big Kids* admirably showcases both DeForge's poise and his sense of risk.

We're introduced to Adam, a bored and anxious teenager trying to navigate life at home and at school. But just as soon as we feel lulled into standard indie comics loneliness-and-alienation fare, things go sideways. Adam undergoes a fantastic transformation, one that drastically alters his perception of the world around him. And he learns he's not alone: like members of a secret society, those who have been transformed carry a bond between them that is invisible to others. It's hard to know what exactly to make of Adam's transformation, but it feels similar to DeForge's *Ant Colony*, in which the author takes tightly focused observations about "human nature" and projects them onto a strange metaphorical conceit. He then plays with the metaphor as much for its dissociative potential as its affinitive power.

While there's a sense of openness and playfulness that comes from the loose, unmoored metaphor, *Big Kids* also flourishes under its self-imposed

continued on next page



Québec 2016

# imagination

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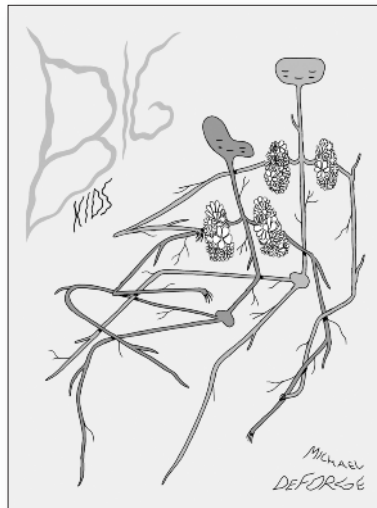
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## DeForge (from page 16)



approach to figuration and page layout move the narrative along almost breezily, in spite of its emotional and psychological entanglements. DeForge's incredible control over rhythm and timing provides for a limpid, spirited traversal through deeply surrealistic territory.

It's this compelling rhythm that perhaps provides the strongest sense of resolution by the story's end, which arrives swiftly and without much conclusion in terms of plot. This doesn't feel so much like the rug being pulled out, however; if anything, *Big Kids* seems courageous in its attempt to stare its subject matter in the face and not know what to make of it. Sometimes, we simply feel different and don't know why, and like big kids, can do nothing but try to bear the weight of the change. mrb

Mark Streeter lives in Toronto, where he writes about music and comics.

## Polak (from page 5)

do good, and to give what is called in Hebrew *tzedakah* is an essential part of Passover, and an essential part of the Jewish tradition in general." Polak hosted her first Passover last April, and intends to make it a yearly event.

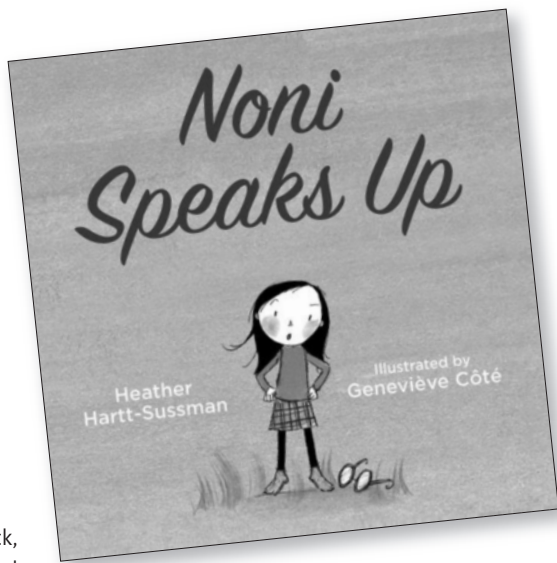
Montreal plays a central role in all three of Polak's new books. "I wouldn't be able to write about a place I hadn't gone to. I have to walk there, I have to feel it, I have to smell it," she says. Montreal is also central to her position as inaugural CBC/QWF Writer-in-Residence, for which she is writing several articles for the CBC Montreal website. She's also helping define what the annual residency will be in the future. With many print writing opportunities drying up, Polak applied for the residency because she's seeking new homes for her stories.

In the residency she is exploring the stories we share and those we don't, including lies and secrets. Polak feels it's a responsibility and a privilege to tell the stories she comes across. "It makes you wonder, what other stories, all of us, are we the keepers of?" She gestures with both hands turned palm up, almost in supplication. "This is how I feel about stories," she says. "I go through life, I'm busy, I'm running around, I do too many things, but I *always* stop for a story. ... If you care about them, they land." mrb

Vanessa Bonneau is a writer and editor living in Montreal.



# young readers



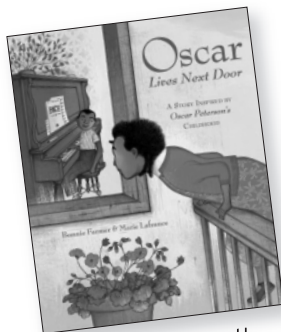
**H**eather Hartt-Sussman's *Noni* is back, in *Noni Speaks Up*, teaching us another life lesson about feeling afraid and doing it anyway. Perhaps you've met *Noni* before, in *Noni is Nervous* or *Noni says No*. In this installment, *Noni's* conscience goes head to head with her desire to be part of the group. Every day *Noni* watches her classmate Hector, he of the giant glasses and gangly legs, get bullied by the other kids. She remembers how easy it was when she only cared about what her parents thought. She thinks of how bad it would feel to be kicked out of the group, to eat lunch alone, and to be made fun of. Twice she wants to defend Hector but she is too afraid. When she finally does speak her mind she discovers that her old friends' taunts don't hurt a bit because she's too busy talking to her new pal Hector. Geneviève Côté's drawings are as charming as always, expressing tons of emotion in a few brush strokes and ink lines.

**Y**oungsters are masterful at creating fabulous new worlds from couch cushions, blocks, blankets, and chairs. Unfortunately, most of us get the creation-of-new-worlds-mastery nagged out of us by well-intentioned parents who are just trying to clear a path through the clutter so everyone can get to the bathroom.

*Down Here* tells the story of little Jamie, who loves to build things, from dazzling fantastical rollercoasters to personal solar systems and secret mazes. The problem is that his mom doesn't appreciate the chaos that her little rug rat concocts. Instead of commending him for his creations she gets madder and madder. Finally Jamie decides to see what all the fuss is about and climbs up on a chair to see things from his mom's point of view.

*Down Here*, by Valerie Sherrard, is a sweet story that might manage to defuse a few of those heated time-to-clean-up encounters. A book with an important reminder that sometimes the most difficult problems can be solved by looking at things from a different perspective.

**O**scar *Lives Next Door* is a story inspired by Oscar Peterson's Montreal childhood and told by elementary school teacher, author, and playwright Bonnie Farmer. This picture book was years in the making, inspired by Farmer's desire to write a book about growing up in her beloved Little Burgundy. That rich setting found its ideal protagonist when Farmer came up with the idea of telling a story from jazz master Oscar Peterson's childhood. In her narrative, Farmer succeeds in telling a good tale filled with information about the social and cultural life in the Black community of Little Burgundy, including compelling details about Oscar Peterson's past. The author has astutely chosen to chronicle a particularly dramatic episode in



Peterson's life – the period when he contracted TB and was ultimately forced to give up his beloved first instrument, the trumpet.

Bonnie Farmer is also blessed with a wonderful illustrator. *Oscar Lives*

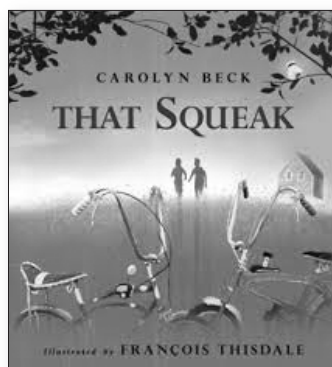
*Next Door* is a visual as well as a literary success thanks to the drawings by Marie Lafrance. Little Burgundy's skies explode on the pages – yellow, light blue, indigo – and then the eye notices inner-city landscapes crisscrossed by electrical wires and defined by the outlines of church spires and smoke-stacks. Lafrance recreates the bustling, cramped, and leafy avenues and balconies of the vibrant neighbourhood that was bulldozed under in the 1970s to make way for the Ville-Marie Expressway. Unfortunately we can't bring the real-life wonders of Little Burgundy back, but we do have writers like Bonnie Farmer and illustrators like Marie Lafrance to give us a feeling for the history of the Black community that continues to inform and enrich the city of Montreal today.

**R**emember that cliché about the book and its cover? Well *That Squeak*, by Carolyn Beck, proves that you can't judge a book by its format

either. This large picture book with glossy and gorgeous images by François Thisdale looks like it's for kids. With only about a paragraph of text on each page, much of it dialogue, on first glance the book looks a lot like something you might read to a six- or seven-year-old, that it might be suitable for a child who can't quite read but who can concentrate long enough to appreciate a well-told tale. But book judges beware! This book is meant for a YA audience and not elementary school kids.

*That Squeak* introduces us to Joe and Jay, who are best bicycle buddies until Jay suddenly dies and Joe is left to mourn his lost friend and their shared adventures. When Joe decides to take Jay's abandoned and now rusty bike and polish it up, Carlos, the new kid in class, starts acting all friendly. Joe's unexpressed pain at Jay's death leads to misunderstandings and accusations. In the end, the story of Carlos, Joe, and Jay is told to remind us that we must let go of the pain if we want to move on to joy. A good choice for a young adult who is struggling with one of life's hard lessons.

**A**rsenal Pulp Press is rapidly building a comprehensive YA catalogue, including this new release, *Faerie*, a novel by Eisha Marjara. The novel is divided into nineteen chapters, each of which includes either one long piece of writing or a series of shorter pieces of varying lengths. Some sections read like diary entries while others are more finely crafted. The writing itself, the figurative language, the consistent narrative voice, and the descriptive passages



are well done. The author is an award-winning film writer and director and there is ample evidence here of her ability and skill.

The faerie in question is Lila. An almost eighteen-year-old daughter of Punjabi immigrant parents, Lila is on a quest to escape from her life through starvation. She is disappointed by her father, repulsed by her mother, and grieving for the loss of her beloved cousin Monika. There are lengthy descriptions of Lila's pain, before and during the months she spends hospitalized in Four East wing, part of a psychiatric hospital. We learn about rotting food, how it

feels to have a feeding tube inserted up your nose, or the logistics of having dried up excrement removed from your emaciated and sore-covered body. The writing expresses pain that is visceral and raw.

But despite the many accomplishments of the writer and her work, *Faerie* is not a book I would recommend for a YA audience. The book presents a ghastly picture – a very personal story – but it pushes us away instead of drawing us in. We know that girls and women are starving themselves to death, but *Faerie* doesn't help us understand why, and at the end of the novel, where we search for resolution, there is only a tidy epilogue – two short paragraphs that inform the reader that Lila is now slender and happy, working as a photographer and using her art to keep her inner faerie alive. **mhb**

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B. A. Markus teaches Secondary 3 and 4 English at The High School of Montreal and tries to convince her writing group that book reviews are a form of creative nonfiction.



By David Austin

# Quebec's Gain

**H**aiti occupies an important place in the consciousness of the Americas. Formerly known as St. Domingue, it became independent in 1804 when its former slaves defeated Napoleon Bonaparte's army, the French general's first major military defeat. The people of this small country bear the distinction of being the first in the history of humankind to successfully carry out a slave revolution.

But as a Haitian labour organizer remarked to me during my recent visit to that country, knowledge of the Haitian Revolution cannot put food in hungry bellies. The poverty in Haiti is overwhelming; proportionately there is little else like it in the Americas. Haiti is also known for the infamous Duvalier dictatorships, coup d'états, corruption, and stereotypical conceptions of its religion, Vodou. But to say this while ignoring the long history of outside intervention by countries like the United States, France, and Canada is to say nothing. For much of Haiti's history, outside political, economic, and military interference has served foreign interests and propped up repressive governments, undermining the population's capacity to exercise its humanity.

Haiti is also a place of tremendous creativity. Out of necessity, the country's poor have had to find ways to survive economically. There are districts such as Croix-des-Bouquets or the slum district of Grand Rue where art is literally a way of life and where artists are literally surrounded by their art. The larger-than-life sculptures produced in Grand Rue are made out of discarded objects of all kinds, including scrap metal and rubber from nearby auto-shops. These works of art are visually stunning and evocative, examples of creativity out of necessity, the ties that bind art and freedom.

Haiti is home to a long tradition of world-class writers and poets. Yanick Lahens, who was awarded the 2014 Prix Femina for her book *Bain de Lune*, is part of this tradition. So, too, are the late poet Jacques Roumain and the poet, novelist, and essayist René Depestre, uncle of former Governor General Michaëlle Jean.

Of course, Dany Laferrière is the first person who comes to mind for Quebecers when we think of Haitian writers, but there are others such as poet and publisher Rodney Saint-Éloi, who was recently inducted into the Académie des lettres du Québec. Laferrière, Saint-Éloi, and novelist and poet Marie-Célie Agnant, and poet and essayist Joel Desrosiers, among others, all call Montreal home. Together they are part of another Haitian tradition – exile.

Haitian exile is the subject of Sean Mills's latest book, *A Place in the Sun: Haiti, Haitians, and the Remaking of Quebec*. This thoroughly researched and well-written history picks up where his first book, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal*, ended its discussion of various groups – women, Black Anglophones, global anti-colonial thinkers, etc. – that influenced Montreal politics in the sixties. During this same period, thousands of Haitian women and men fled the dictatorship of François Duvalier and later his son, Jean-Claude.

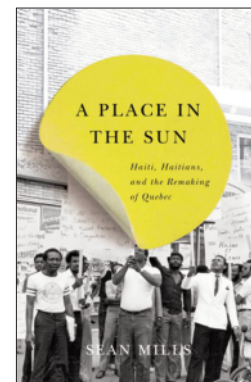
The first wave of Haitian exiles, largely intellectuals and professionals – writers, poets, teachers, academics – arrived in Quebec in the midst of political and cultural revolution. They taught in high schools, colleges, and universities at a time when Quebec was in dire need of skilled workers, and their literary circles exposed Québécois writers to the world of Caribbean thought and literature. Haiti's loss became Quebec's gain.

The second wave of Haitians was not part of their country's elite. They became taxi drivers and labourers who, competing with French Quebecers for jobs, were often greeted with racial hostility and disdain. In response, taxi drivers, for example, organized themselves to fight discrimination within their industry. As Mills shows,

they and their supporters were intellectuals in their own right. In the pages of the magazine *Le Collectif* they discussed worldly events and made links, for example, between the writing and politics of Frantz Fanon and Angela Davis and their particular experiences in Montreal.

Mills also highlights the role that Haitian women played in building and sustaining Montreal's Haitian community. The women were organizers and intellectuals, many of whom had been part of anti-Duvalier political groups and movements in Haiti. In Montreal they became the backbone of several important Haitian community organizations and many of them are still active today in organizations such as Maison d'Haïti. Mills sensitively narrates their rightful place within the historical narrative of Haitian exiles in Montreal.

Collective organizing by Haitians in Quebec and its impact on Québécois and Canadian nationalisms is central to *A Place in the Sun*. And yet one of the most intriguing parts of the book hinges on Dany Laferrière's rise to fame as a Quebec writer. Mills traces Laferrière's trajectory from a journalist who fled the Duvalier dictatorship to an aspiring novelist trying to make ends meet before ultimately achieving



**A PLACE IN THE SUN**  
Haiti, Haitians, and the Remaking  
of Quebec  
Sean Mills  
McGill-Queen's University Press  
\$29.95, paper, 330pp  
9780773546455



success with his controversial 1985 novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (*How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired*).

Laferrière was not part of Haiti's more established exile literati. He worked odd jobs for a while before devoting himself to writing his way out of obscurity. Laferrière's novel both mocks and, as Mills suggests, reinforces sexual and gender stereotypes as he pierces through taboos associated with Black male–White female sexual encounters and the seemingly primal fears that govern this society's preoccupation with sex and race. The book was written at a time when the left wing of Quebec nationalism had waned, and Quebec society was apparently ready for a less politically charged but nonetheless socially subversive rendering of Montreal society with a Black male as the chief protagonist. As is often the case with writers, Laferrière's book came to embody the dreams, aspirations, and contradictions of a Quebec society struggling to redefine itself in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution.

*A Place in the Sun* is an important contribution to Quebec, Canadian, and Haitian history. It brings the "other" Quebec into conversation with the dominant nationalist narrative, and in the process changes that narrative. It forces us to reconcile the past with our present, and to imagine possible futures that reflect the reality that there are many peoples who have made Quebec, and in the process made Quebec their home. msb

**David Austin** is the author of *Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal*, winner of the 2014 Casa de las Américas Prize.

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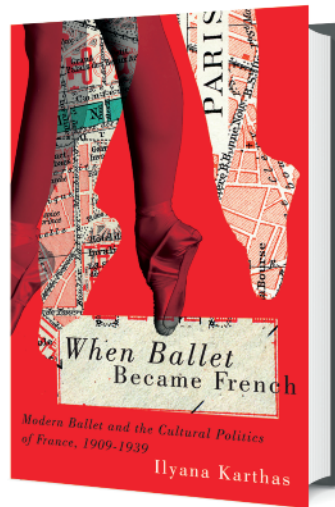
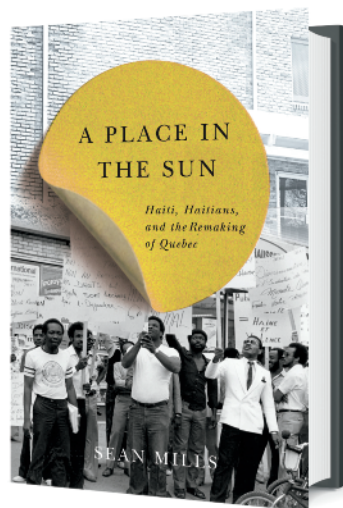


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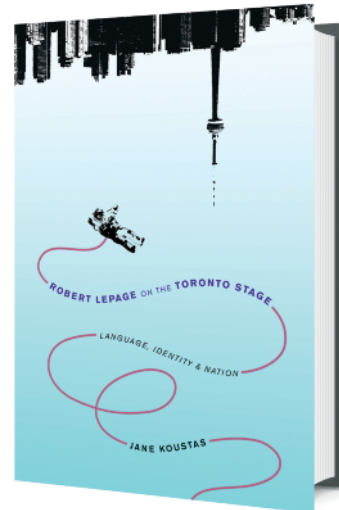
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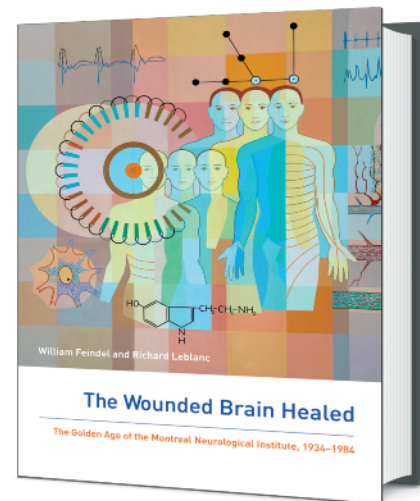
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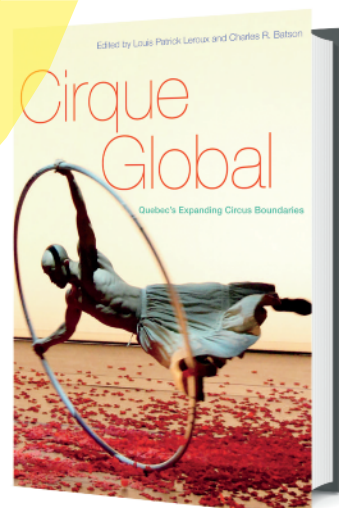


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