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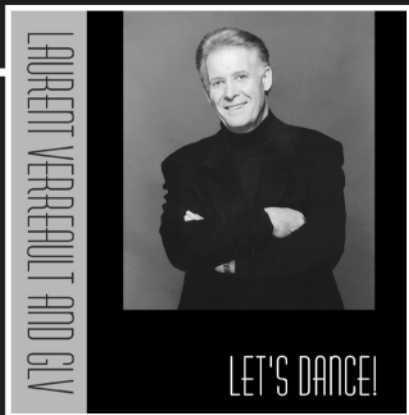


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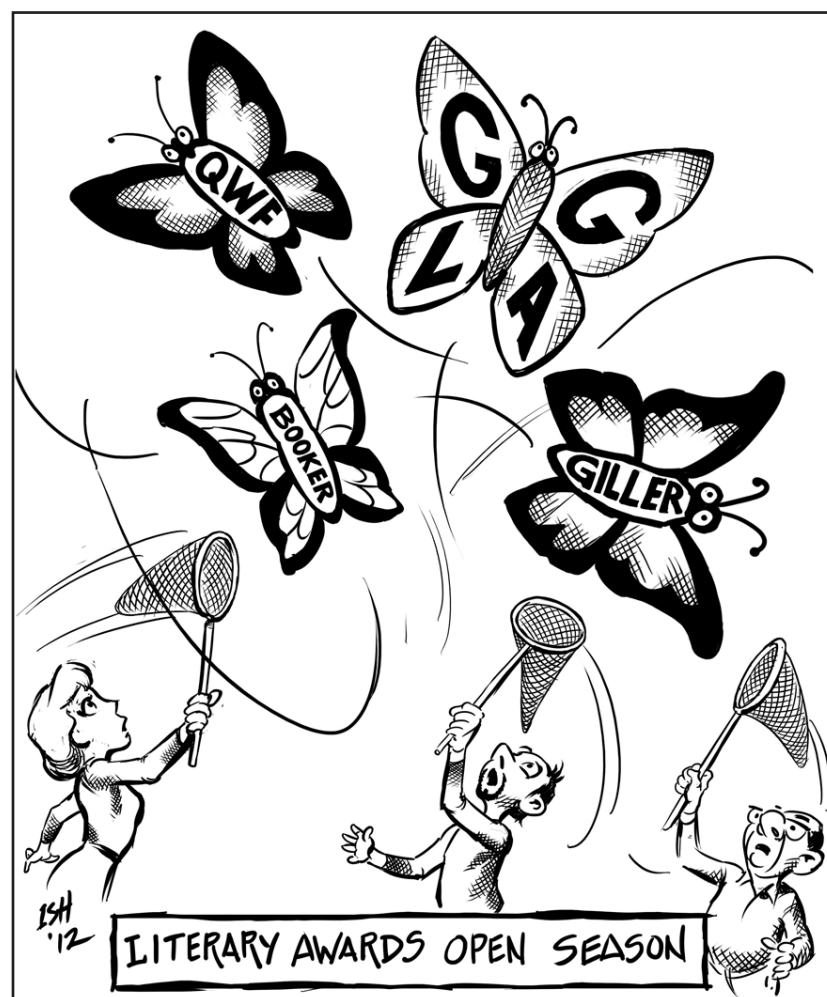


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# The Aesthetics of Transience

By Eric Boodman

**R**awi Hage likes to think of himself as a historical novelist, but you wouldn't know it from reading his new novel *Carnival*. Set in an unspecified time, in an unnamed city, it contains no historical figures or events. When first reading it, you might think it is many things – a paean to the imagination, a dark vision of urban alienation, a collection of wild stories experienced by a nocturnal taxi driver – but a historical novel probably isn't one of them.

And yet, Hage explains, “we have to acknowledge the multiplicity of history.” *Carnival* might not have “that linear presentation of a historical book,” but every last character is dragging around the memory of certain historical events like so many cans behind a wedding car. “In a sense, this is where it becomes a Canadian novel,” Hage says. “More and more, part of Canadian history is the history of elsewhere. You have to talk about these histories. And there is one thing that is in common with all of these histories, and that is the violence.”

We are having coffee in a Mile End café, and the neighbourhood testifies to

the collision of histories: it has hosted countless waves of immigrants over the last hundred years, and you can see that mix in the architecture, the businesses, and the faces. And although the scene outside the window seems pretty benign, with pedestrians enjoying a summer's day and delivery trucks pulling up to the bagel shops and grocery stores, it is hard not to think about troubling undercurrents after reading *Carnival*.

The book's multiple storylines are told by Fly, a taxi driver who works the night shift in a city known for its carnival. He is a wanderer, one of those “operators who drive alone and

around to pick up the wavers and the whistlers on edges of sidewalks and streets,” one of those drivers who “navigate the city, ceaseless and aimless, looking for raising arms to halt their flights, for the surfing lanterns to shine like faraway ships leaving potato famines and bringing newcomers.” Fly is part of a community that relies on the city's carnival while staying on the margins, taking business from party-goers, but preferring to spend time away. They read in their rooms or drink under bridges.

Hage likes his narrators tough. As with Bassam in *De Niro's Game* and the unnamed narrator in *Cockroach*,

Fly is at once a poet and a brawler: even as he is beating someone up over an insult or an unpaid fare, his words are beautiful, his tone both lyrical and wry. By creating this dissonance between content and form, Hage infuses the life of this taxi driver with poignancy – we are caught between the disappointments that surround Fly and the crystalline language in which they are described. In a way, we are made to use Fly's own coping mechanism: just as he temporarily loses himself in the volumes of his library, re-imagining history and creating his own fantasies, we sometimes lose ourselves in Hage's richly imaged prose, only to be yanked back to earth by spare sentences such as these:

He sat at the kitchen table, and when I offered him some food, he asked for a glass of water. He pulled out some pills and swallowed them.

Talk, I said, and he told me the story of his incarceration. [...]

Otto was pushed out of his chair. One police officer watched

while the other beat him with his stick. After a while, the second officer came over and started kicking Otto and stomping on him.

As Hage explains, “the arc is not in the plot this time, it’s in the aesthetics,” which he links with “movement” and “contained chaos.” Fly’s friends, acquaintances, and customers flit through the novel, appearing out of the blue and then disappearing. Sometimes they reappear, sometimes they don’t. No matter how brief their cameo, though, Hage gives us a sliver of their private loneliness and the little things that keep them spiritually afloat. His deep empathy and his eye for the absurd make the novel at once hilarious and sad, tender and full of rage.

Be it a protester arrested and unjustly shut in a mental asylum, a journalist threatened because he comes from a country responsible for colonial atrocities committed before his lifetime, the neglected son of a prostitute or her Angolan pimp, every character feels as if history has robbed them of something. As a drug dealer says when Fly asks him whether the requested errand is legal: “What’s legal, my man? What is? Is history legal, was Vietnam legal. What the fuck is legal in this universe? Stars eat each other, wolves eat the pigs, and Grandma fucks over Little Red Riding Hood.”

Even the spoiled tourists whom Fly chauffeurs around feel that the carnival city has dealt them a bad hand. The same goes for the strippers, the clowns, the born-again Christians, and the drag performers who all get into Fly’s car, along with the motley crew of drivers who hang out in Café Bolero, waiting for a call from the dispatcher.

For a few years in Montreal, Hage was himself a taxi driver yearning for a different life. Like Fly, he roamed the streets at night looking for customers. “You can work as a taxi driver and accentuate the fiction-like existence. I tried to do that. Maybe that’s why I was so distracted,” he tells me.

But mostly he hated it. Besides not being a night person and lacking a sense of direction, he needed glasses for an eye condition that prevented him from seeing clearly at night; a fact he was unaware of at the time. “I thought the city was foggy,” he says, laughing. That detail, along with many others from those years, is not in the book. He would have preferred not to use the premise of a taxi at all – afraid the book might be pigeonholed as Taxi Stories. And yet the transience that

comes with the profession – the aesthetics that Hage was looking for – and the automatic access to a wealth of characters was too good to pass up. “I was tempted. I failed,” he says.

He needn’t be worried about the book being shrugged off as a thinly veiled memoir of his cab-driving years. *Carnival* is too good for that, too imaginative, too original in its ways

of dealing with violence and loss. There is no sensationalism here. It is a page-turner, but a page-turner for all the right reasons: Hage’s prose is addictive for its rhythm and for the emotional truth rooted at the heart of even the most fanciful sentence.

One of the truths that Hage deals with in *Carnival* is our necessity to work out the evil impulses that come from his-

torical forces. “It’s permissible as long as it’s contained, whether it’s through sports or beheadings or the torture of animals ...” Or a carnival. Hage despises “polite literature,” and in *Carnival*, he deals with the colliding histories in the North American city in an amazing, original, and impolite way. **mrb**

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



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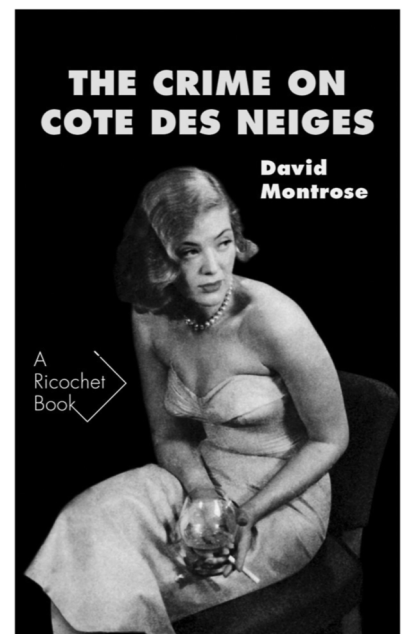
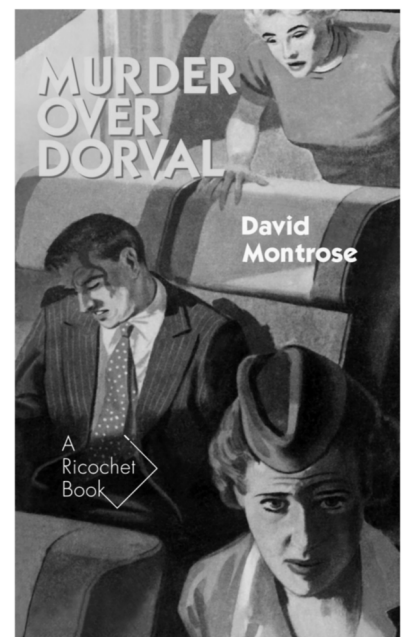
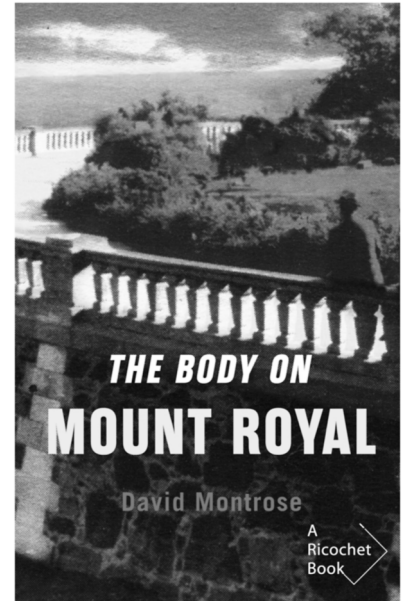
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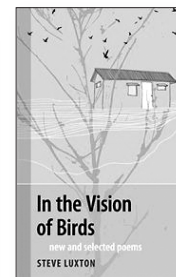
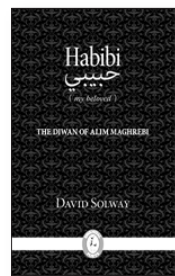


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# poetry

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When David Solway coined the phrase “double exile” to describe the situation of the English-language writers in Quebec, he didn’t do so to lament. Being deprived of a wide readership within the province and without, Solway argued, had in fact led Quebec’s English-language poets to forge their own paths. Translation and the veiled identities it creates have provided one such path for some of these poets, Solway among them. Studying the seams between languages and literatures, he has expanded notions of voice, diction, and self in his work, opening a space for sincerity and sentiment.

Since 2000 Solway has published works by a handful of international heteronyms, the latest being Alim Maghrebi, a quiet giant of Arabic poetry, the author of *Habibi*, who “would, at the same time, find himself at home in any Western capital.” These exercises in disguise bank on the average reader’s ignorance about non-English literature and exploit our tolerance for tropes in a translation that

would invoke eye rolls in an original contemporary poem. Solway acknowledges this in his scholarly introduction to the volume, warning us that “There is for the Western mind a certain sentimentality in these poems, but it is entirely unabashed and, we might say, authorized by the long history of Arabic poetry.” He borrows that “authorization” to pull off love poems that have a stilted sweetness and impassioned formality about them. Solway’s counterfeit is complete; there is not a scimitar or a caliphate out of place here. It takes a loving eye to so fully imagine a solitude other than one’s own. One wonders whether a poet from Calgary or Vancouver – or Casablanca – could pull off such a feat.

While most of us are accustomed to reading short bits of text these days (140 characters, anyone?), many are nonetheless unaccustomed to the pace and attention required by the short bits of text that make up most poetry. Consequently, some poets are finding innovative methods to trip up the reader and demand a more considered interaction with the text. Fortner Anderson’s *solitary pleasures* is as much an art book as a poetry book, and haphazard typeface is the approach it uses to slow down the reader. Designer Fabrizio Gilardino has stamped each page by hand, letter by letter, using different font sizes and letter cases. He then altered the text digitally to create or preserve the appearance of errors and edits. The resulting text is impossible to scan like conventional printing. It must be studied and is, in fact, a bit hard on the eyes. Its unevenness mimics handwriting, making the words more like images, forcing us, almost like new readers, to proceed slowly and meticulously.

The poems themselves, taken from Anderson’s 2004 daybook, chronicle the mundanity of daily life, punctuated by moments of clarity, awe, or lament. “I did seventy five crunche / nude / before breakfast,” begins the entry from July 19th. Later the same day,

the speaker and a friend discuss how one can never know the mind “and must remain / content / with an evershifting vantage / as we look into from the shadows / which we longingly call / ourselves.” There is a certain voyeuristic pleasure in these poems; they fittingly feel like reading someone’s diary, and part of the drive to keep reading is the promise of discovery. That promise doesn’t always pay off, but here that unevenness feels immediate and true.

Mark Lavorato is a seasoned traveller, and his first poetry collection, *Wayworn Wooden Floors*, feels a bit like a suitcase stuffed with souvenirs until the zipper groans. From Oaxaca City to the streets of Montreal to an abandoned farm where “The sound of the wind is defined / only by what it blows through,” these poems are less postcards than personal memories mined for greater, universal truths.

Lavorato has two novels to his credit, and his background in prose is palpable here. Many of the poems feel like finished buildings that still have scaffolding up around them. His command of sound and image are strong enough to give his poems lyrical heart, but he leaves prosaic frames around them that end up weighing down the poems and obscuring their beauty. As a consequence, some feel unfinished despite their polish. In “There Is A Bench,” for example, a bench sits “in front of a lake I know, at just the spot / a bench should be.” Although the view is not described for us, we’re told more than once that it is “one / of my renditions of perfect.” These abstractions are glaring amidst Lavorato’s otherwise precise language. Such generalities are always tempting for a writer: they are so much more dependable in getting The Point across to the reader than poetry’s leaps and silences. But for the reader, generalities register as a writer’s distrust in his audience. In those poems where narration doesn’t intrude upon vivid imagery and greater economy, Lavorato’s

promise as a poet shows through.

Everything has to be post-something these days. The jacket of Steve Luxton’s new and selected poems, *In the Vision of Birds*, informs us that Luxton’s work is “post-pastoral.” If you’re into prefixes, this one should assuage any fears you might have that pastoral is code for provincial or that nature poetry is too bumpkinish to be cool. Luxton, like most poets, owes a debt to Virgil, Wordsworth, and Frost, but he isn’t one to idealize nature or mythologize his place in it. He is as interested in our dislocation from the natural world as our attraction to it. His poems capture how, stuck in our heads and to our cell phones, the moments when we are able to achieve an unmediated encounter are more fleeting now than ever.

On a walk in the woods, the speaker of “To See A Bull Moose,” frets over “the usual concerns: / unanswered e-mails, fatty diet, taxes, death,” with such abandon that he trips and tumbles headlong into a ravine, only to look up and see a bull moose, “not thirty paces off,” “face dolorous, curious,” staring back at him with the superior disinterest of which perhaps only moose and clergy are truly capable. But the animal represents neither nature’s majesty nor the sublime, but a presence both alien and beautiful. Seeing the moose is a second loss of footing, a deeper fall. For Luxton, this is where a poem comes from. Poetry, he says in a poem by that name, arrives in the woods, where he finds himself in “perfect intimacy with strangeness.” The bush is not necessarily a simpler or more idyllic world: there is the sound of an ATV in the distance; there is always the threat of an errant hunter’s bullet; and a great-horned owl “with the sound of / a department photocopier / turned on full tilt / swishes off to further / supervisory offices.” The ways in which these two worlds collide and intrude upon each other is where the real poetry happens, and for-

tunately for us, Luxton – and the birds – are there to watch.

When the Montreal International Poetry Prize was announced, I was among those who wondered whether \$50,000 might be too rich a prize for a single poem. Even if you like the innovative ideas behind the crowd-funded and blind-judged prize, it’s hard not to wonder whether a single poem delivers \$50,000 worth of poetry. And if so, who is qualified to recognize that rare, worthy poem? It was with similar scepticism that I approached the anthology born out of the prize’s inaugural 2011 contest. This book is made up of the fifty poems short-listed for the jackpot, but is this the best poetry money – or the promise of it – could buy?

As it turns out, the anthology contains more than one “Hell yeah!” poetry moment – the kind of poem that avid poetry readers can use to argue poetry’s merits to the unconverted. These include Leslie Timmins’ “After Cancer,” which opens the alphabetized collection; “Children’s Stories” by Philip Nugent; and “On Finding a Copy of ‘Pigeon’ in the Hospital Bookstore,” by Susan Glickman, which dances along humorously before packing a devastating wallop. (If winning poet Mark Tredinnick is disappointed to hear that I was less taken by his poem, “Walking Underwater,” than were the judges, I’m sure his \$50,000 prize will bring him some solace.)

This collection is, in fact, less hit-or-miss than most anthologies assembled with a more premeditated editorial vision. The poems are not only strong, but also surprisingly similar in style and tone. Considering the size of the editorial board, one might have expected greater dissent in the ranks. But over the course of the book, a picture emerges of the kind of poetry that, apparently, can pay. So study up! The next competition will run in 2013. **mb**

Abby Paige is a poet and playwright. She currently lives in Ottawa.

# non-fiction

## Living in America

**GOING TOO FAR**  
Essays About America's  
Nervous Breakdown  
Ishmael Reed  
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**G**oing Too Far: Essays About America's Nervous Breakdown is the latest collection of non-fiction by Ishmael Reed, a poet, playwright, lyricist, novelist, essayist, and retired professor at UC Berkeley.

The first two of the book's three sections consist mainly of polemical essays. Although these essays cover a great deal of ground, their arguments revolve around one central claim: racism continues to be a major and debilitating factor in American life. To counter those who think that America has entered a post-racial era, Reed cites numerous examples of anti-black stereotyping by politicians, government officials, media commentators,

and the entertainment industry. Not surprisingly, Reed devotes considerable space to denouncing America's right wing. He repeatedly criticises the Tea Party, whose rise he attributes to a racist reaction to Barack Obama's presence in the White House. Some of Reed's targets, however, are more unexpected: these include white feminists (whom he accuses of hostility against black men); Henry Louis Gates Jr. (whom he calls the "Commissar of African-American culture"); the television, film, and publishing industries (which he indicts for their collective slander of black Americans); and Obama's left-wing critics ("the black ones seem to want President Obama to be Malcolm X, the white ones, Castro").

Although Reed is a man of vast learning and accomplishment, this is not a strong collection of essays. Reed is correct in arguing that racism exerts a persistent and malign influence on American life;

unfortunately, his arguments in favour of this conclusion are often shoddy. Most of the essays in this book are characterized by an excessively meandering style; Reed jumps from point to point without sustain-



ing his arguments with sufficient care to be convincing, a glaring weakness in a book with such a broad array of ideological targets.

Going Too Far is teeming with ad hominem attacks, loaded language, sweeping

generalizations, and other classic forms of unfair argumentation. The following passage, from an essay denouncing the acclaimed film *Precious*, is a case in point: "[W]hy doesn't the *Times* open its Jim Crow Op-Ed page so that a member of *Precious's* target, black men, as a class, could respond to this smear, this hate crime as entertainment, this neo-Nazi porn and filth?" Even readers who share Reed's critical assessment of *Precious* will wince at this stream of crude

invective. Unfortunately, such invective is a common feature of Reed's book: he describes the television show *The Wire* as "neo-Nazi," the NYPD as "America's Gestapo," Roger Ailes as Rupert Murdoch's "Beelzebub assistant," and Murdoch himself as "Goebbels I" (which prompts one to wonder what Reed would call the actual Joseph Goebbels).

Reed's half-century literary career has been showered with honours and prizes, including

awards for poetry. It is therefore sad to see such clumsy writing from an artist of his stature. With the exception of the previously cited quip about Malcolm X and Castro, the first two sections of this book are almost devoid of literary grace.

Thankfully, the third and final section of the book is more impressive. It consists mainly of interviews with notable black creative figures such as the jazz musician David Murray and the Somali-born writer Nuruddin Farah. There are also two interviews with Reed himself. Even in the earlier and weaker sections of this book, Reed comes across as someone who would make an enthralling conversationalist, an impression that is confirmed when he is asked about his own work and experiences. Reed is not only a good interviewee, but also a good interviewer, a skill especially evident when he asks the actor Lou Gossett Jr. about the racial obstacles he has faced during his illustrious career. This interview with Gossett is the book's high point. **ms**

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



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### FEATURED BOOKS



Some titles are not yet available.

SUNDAY at 10 A.M.  
**NOVEMBER 4**

**CHRISTINE POUNTNEY**  
SWEET JESUS  
McClelland & Stewart

**DR. JOE SCHWARCZ**  
THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY  
Random House

**RAWI HAGE**  
CARNIVAL  
House of Anansi Press

**PATRICIA BURNS**  
LIFE ON THE HOME FRONT:  
MONTREAL 1939-1945  
Véhicule Press

SUNDAY at 10 A.M.  
**NOVEMBER 18**

**AISLIN**  
WAS IT GOOD FOR YOU?  
Linda Leith Publishing

**PETER F. TRENT**  
THE MERGER DELUSION  
McGill-Queen's University Press

**DR. RICHARD BELIVEAU**  
DEATH: THE SCIENTIFIC  
FACTS TO HELP US...  
Firefly Books

**DAVE BIDINI**  
A WILD STAB FOR IT  
ECW Press

**Paragraphe**  
Librairie / Bookstore  
Une société de Québecor Média

**The Gazette**  
montrealgazette.com

Bibliothèque  
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2012

# QWF AWARDS

## Shortlist

### Prix de Traduction Fondation Cole Anglais-Français

Commandité par la Fondation Cole

**Éric Fontaine**  
*Tes con, point*  
Stanké

Doug Harris  
*YOU Comma Idiot*  
Goose Lane Editions

**Marie Frankland**  
*Passage de Franklin*  
Éditions du Noroît

David Solway  
*Franklin's Passage*  
McGill-Queen's University Press

**Lori Saint-Martin et Paul Gagné**  
*Fall*  
Éditions du Boréal

Colin McAdam  
*Fall*  
Hamish Hamilton Canada (The Penguin Group)

### Concordia University First Book Prize

Sponsored by Concordia University

**Tom Abroy**  
*Pollen*  
DC Books

**Michael Lithgow**  
*Waking in the Treehouse*  
Cormorant Books

**Alice Petersen**  
*All the Voices Cry*  
Biblioasis

### QWF Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature

**Catherine Austen**  
*26 Tips for Surviving Grade 6*  
James Lorimer & Company Ltd.

**Monique Polak**  
*Pyro*  
Orca Book Publishers

**Lori Weber**  
*Yellow Mini*  
Fitzhenry & Whiteside

### Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction

Sponsored by Paragraphe Bookstore

**Tom Abroy**  
*Pollen*  
DC Books

**Anita Rau Badami**  
*Tell It to the Trees*  
Alfred A. Knopf Canada

**Rawi Hage**  
*Carnival*  
House of Anansi Press

### Mavis Gallant Prize for Non-fiction

Sponsored by Champlain, Dawson, Heritage,  
John Abbott, and Vanier Colleges

**Taras Grescoe**  
*Straphanger*  
*Saving Our Cities and Ourselves from the  
Automobile*  
HarperCollins Canada

**William Marsden**  
*Fools Rule*  
*Inside the Failed Politics of Climate Change*  
Alfred A. Knopf Canada

**Julija Šukys**  
*Epistolophilia*  
*Writing the Life of Ona Šimaitė*  
University of Nebraska Press

### A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry

Sponsored by Richard Pound in memory  
of his brother Robert

**Oana Avasilichioaei**  
*We, Beasts*  
Wolsak and Wynn Publishers

**Mary di Michele**  
*The Flower of Youth*  
*Pier Paolo Pasolini Poems*  
ECW Press

**Susan Gillis**  
*The Rapids*  
Brick Books



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Book Table provided by Paragraphe Books

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Host: Josh Freed | Music by Vanier College Jazz Combo

Meet the winners of the QWF Awards, the 3Macs *carte blanche* Quebec prize and the Quebec Writing Competition.

non-fiction

## Portrait of a Province

### AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF QUEBEC

Tradition & Modernity

Peter Gossage and J. I. Little

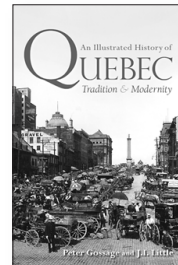
Oxford University Press Canada

\$35, cloth, 369pp

978-0-19-900235-1

From the Proclamation of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774 up to Bill 101 and Bill 22, and the CEQ and the FTQ, the CSN and the FLQ, Lionel Groulx and *Mâitres chez nous* ... Heck, it gets confusing.

Fortunately, here is a book that straightens it all out. This *Illustrated History of Quebec*, by a pair of history professors, Peter Gossage of Concordia University and J. I. Little of Simon Fraser, recounts what's been happening in this patch of North America from ancient times to the present. The emphasis is on French Quebec, from the explorers



to the Péquistes, and in particular, on the eternal conflict (as the subtitle indicates) – always a passionate struggle in Quebec – between the comfort of tradition and the call of modernity.

This is not so much a history of lives or lifestyles. There is less about individual people than the movements that grew up within the society. There is discussion on government policies, on the responses to outside forces (Conquest and Confederation, among many others), and on the powerful influence, for four centuries, of the Roman Catholic Church.

I feared at first I was becoming submerged by facts, this at the expense of the sweep of history. But I was won over by the authors' approach: all the details add up to a well-rounded portrait. Besides, facts can be so compelling:

- The *habitant* diet in the French regime was as much as 85 per cent bread, and the farm crops up to 75 per cent wheat. The *canadien* peasant was better off than his counterpart in France: more literate (the local literacy rate was about 25 per cent), more urban (30 per cent lived in towns), and the women more independent.

- France had four times the population of Britain in 1760, but Britain sent more troops to North America. And that, along with Montcalm's strategic errors and Wolfe's cunning manoeuvres, sealed the fate of New France. Still, post-1763, when France had the option of

regaining Canada or Guadeloupe, it chose Guadeloupe. • British immigration made Montreal a majority-English city from the 1830s through the 1860s. Thereafter, urbanization from the Quebec countryside returned the city to French majority.

• In 1958, only 13 per cent of French-speaking Quebecers finished high school. In 2009, two-thirds of children born in Quebec were born to unmarried parents.

The facts are well organized, with chapters on the fur trade – as many as a quarter of *canadien* men in colonial times went west as voyageurs – on the early military,

More jarring, in a book otherwise so at ease with facts, are a couple of instances where opinions appear to be presented as facts ...

on liberalism and nationalism, on towns and cities, on the “darkness” of the 1940s and '50s and the bright lights of the 1960s, on the rise (and staying power) of sovereignty.

There are occasional loose ends. The authors nonchalantly drop the intriguing idea that a Patriote victory in 1837 “would very likely have resulted in union with the United States” without further elucidation. And while it's noted that Quebecers of the 1920s supported French-Canadian communities outside Quebec, there's no mention of the dismissive or hostile attitudes of more recent Quebec nationalists, René Lévesque labelling those communities “dead ducks,” or Robert Bourassa sending his lawyers to Alberta to argue *against* French-language school boards.

More jarring, in a book otherwise so at ease with facts, are a couple of instances where opinions appear to be presented as facts, “that Confederation was a bad deal for French Canadians,” for one, and a description of Pierre Trudeau as “the leader of the forces of federal oppression.” Let's assume these were instances of careless writing and editing.

But overall, as a reference on the history of Quebec, this book is reliable and thorough; a handy handbook on the forces of tradition and modernity. **mb**

Dane Lanken is the author of *Montreal Movie Palaces: Great theatres of the golden era 1884-1938* (Penumbra Press, 1993).



By Anna Leventhal

# The Poet Is in the Detail

In 1970, midway through a career that lasted seven decades, P. K. Page wrote:

*I am a traveller. I have a destination but no maps.  
Others perhaps have reached that destination  
already, still others are on their way. But none has  
had to go from here before – nor will again.*



Writing a person's life must be, to some extent, like drawing a map: linking major landmarks; finding the smaller tributaries that feed into the river; getting the lie of the land, where the terrain is hard going and where it is smooth. Or maybe it's just a useful metaphor – though one suspects that in Page's case it's not. As one of Canada's early modern poets, a woman who lived almost a century and spent the better part of it making some of the most startling, masterful writing we've seen, P. K. Page cut her own path.

Page is a well-loved and celebrated poet. Northrop Frye famously wrote of her work: "If there is anything such as 'pure poetry,' this must be it: a lively mind seizing on almost any experience and turning it into witty verse." She published extensively, beginning in the 1940s and continuing until her death in 2010. Her paintings have been exhibited widely and her short stories made into films and performances; literary journals have dedicated issues to her work and life; and the CBC Radio 1 programme *Ideas* did a two-part series on her. She inspired so many Canadian writers, personally and through her work: Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje are all in her debt. But there has been no definitive biography of Page. No J. D. Salinger, she had many friends and a vivid public life; nevertheless some instinct for privacy kept her from allowing a biography to be written. It was only in her last decade of life, from 2000 to 2010, that she began to cooperate with English professor and biographer Sandra Djwa on what would become *Journey With No Maps*.

Djwa first met Page in 1970, when she invited her to read for her poetry class at Simon Fraser. "She was absolutely wonderful," Djwa recalls. "Dynamic. Very nervous. But she read beautifully, her voice was full of emotion. All the students were electrified. One poem that she read, 'Arras,' was difficult but we were spellbound anyway. She was also very vibrant and attractive, and wore a purple cape. She looked like a poet."

In 1987, Djwa wrote a biography of F. R. Scott, which puts her in a unique position as Page's biographer. The two poets, who met in Montreal and worked together on *Preview* magazine, had a romantic relationship that lasted many years. Scott was married to painter Marian Dale; the couple had an open marriage, though not without its share of jealousy and misunderstandings. Page's relationship with Scott went through various stages of secrecy and

anguish, and Page finally ended it in the late 1940s, though she and Scott continued to correspond and send work to each other (and, presumably, work through their feelings for each other in verse). "I tried to present both perspectives fairly," Djwa says. "To some extent both were caught in a situation not entirely of their own making. I had worked previously on Scott's biography and may have begun Page's biography with some residual sympathy for him. However, as the work progressed it soon became clear that she was the more vulnerable partner and my sympathies switched. In researching Page's biography I recognized how extraordinarily difficult her situation was for a young woman of her character and upbringing."

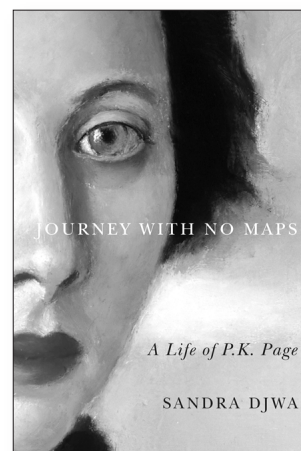
The book's account of Page's early life gives insight into the strength of character and fierce curiosity that shaped her. An early photo shows a confident Page, dressed only in a loose pair of shorts, standing with her brother and father, the latter's military medals on display and the former in his birthday suit. It's an unconventional family portrait of an unconventional family. Lionel Page treated his daughter as an equal, writing her forthright letters when he was away on duty and encouraging her to pursue her creativity. Her mother, Rose Page, illustrated books of verse for her children, saw auras on people, and had accurate premonitions about the future, igniting in P. K. the idea that there were forces at work outside the material world.

*Journey With No Maps* is not just a biography of a poet, but of a painter, and a relentless explorer of the human condition. "From a biographer's point of view she's a fascinating subject," Djwa says, "because her creativity is so broadly based ... To write just the biography of a poet wouldn't do justice to her many-faceted character." Page's readers know her as a highly visual writer whose work hangs on strong images, who observes carefully and is herself acted upon by what she sees. This ocular facility stretched into other areas: Page began painting while living in Brazil, where her diplomat husband Arthur Irwin was posted, during a period in which "poems did not come easily," according to Djwa. But her visual imagination began to develop much

earlier, while working as a scriptwriter for the National Film Board in Ottawa (then the National Film Commission). Or maybe even before then, while exploring the Prairies on horseback with her father or her friends. Djwa portrays Page as an artist across disciplines, and an apparent master of anything to which she put her hand. She treats Page's study of Sufism as a form of this promiscuous, borderless creativity. In periods when Page was not writing or painting, especially beginning in the 1970s, she continued to pursue self-discovery through her Sufi study group, as well as through the writings of Gurdjieff and Idries Shah. This, to Djwa, was not a fallow period for Page but rather her relentless creative spirit expressing itself in a new medium.

In the *Ideas* documentary *The White Glass*, Page says she is interested only in the broad strokes of a life; *Journey With No Maps* gives us much, much more than that. The back cover claims it "reads like a novel," but this is not entirely accurate. A novel might experiment with what could be conveyed in the smallest amount of information possible – this is the seductiveness of good novels, that they lay out a few items, a gesture here, a hat there, and allow us to draw our own conclusions. *Journey With No Maps* is thick with information: comings and goings, lists of names, letters sent and received, reams of quotations from Page herself to fans, critics, friends, and the mailman. But still, somehow, we are left to draw our own conclusions from this encyclopedia of Page; Djwa refrains, with perhaps an overabundance of tact, from setting in place a real narrative arc. Had she been more selective, focusing on a particular storyline or aspect of Page, the book might have been more novelistic, though less exhaustive. But here all things are important, some things are very important, but no one thing is all-important; there is just a life, in broad and thorough detail. Make of it what you will. msb

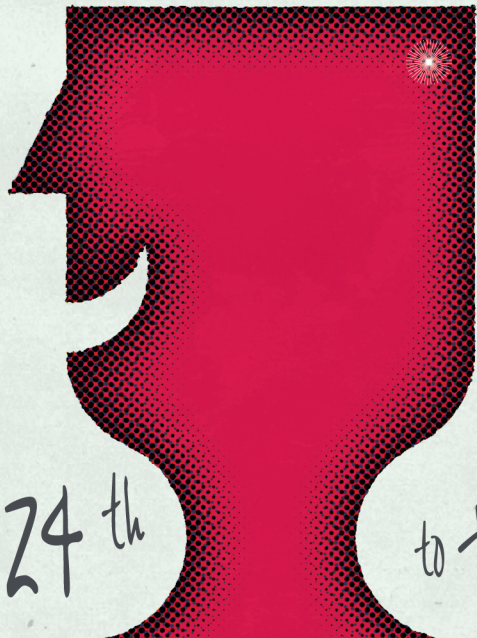
Anna Leventhal is a Montreal-based fiction writer.



**JOURNEY WITH NO MAPS**  
A Life of P.K. Page  
Sandra Djwa  
McGill-Queen's University Press  
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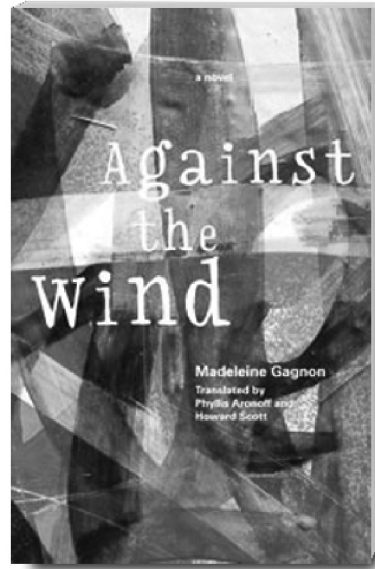
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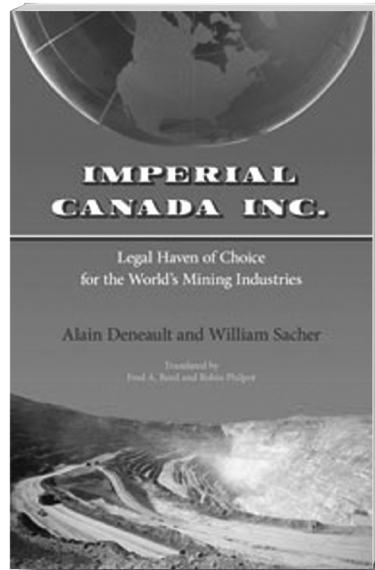


# F A C T F I C T I O N F A N C Y



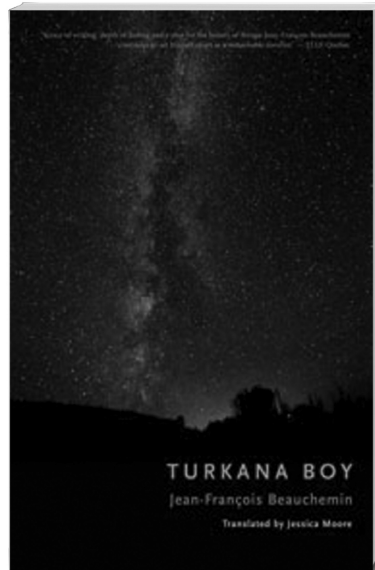
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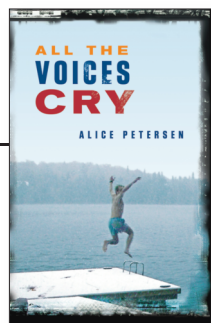
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By Katia Grubisic



ALL THE VOICES CRY  
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## Wherever you go, there you are

“He stepped over the fence, ducked in behind the trees and stood looking up through the branches as if he had never met himself.”

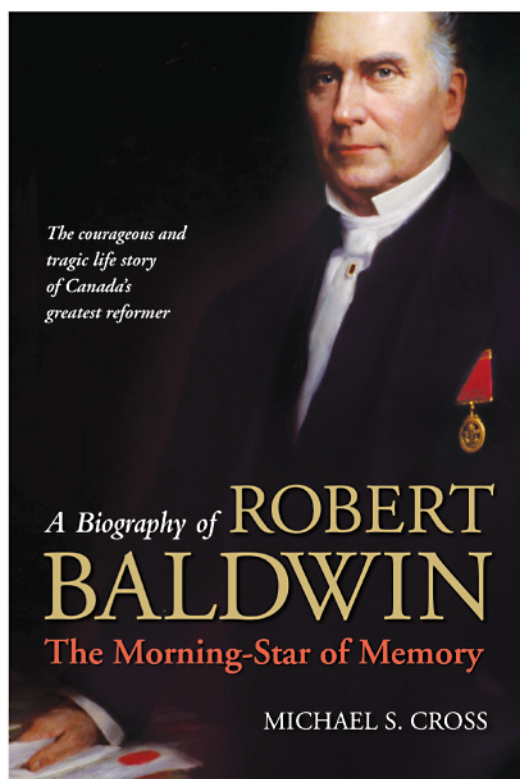
This is Brian, recently divorced, and presently locked out of his car, anti-hero of a story from the standout first collection of Alice Petersen. From the reader’s vantage, the book hinges on characters meeting themselves. What makes *All the Voices Cry* hold our attention is that the characters can’t see it – most seem to feel they’ve either been stood up at a defining moment, or that they are the no-shows.

Petersen herself comes across completely at ease, open and welcoming. Ten seconds into our first conversation, she has asked me up to her place in the country, offered me a place to stay, and invited me along on her favourite hikes. Her cobby accent is soft, and she is disarmingly candid – about both her literary process and her personal map. After deciding not to pursue an academic career, she confesses, “like the

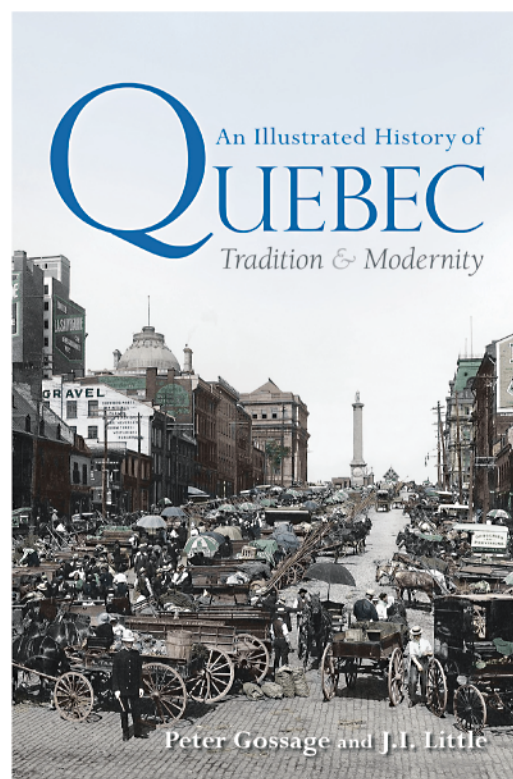
art historian who fancies herself as an artist, I had to learn to write from the beginning.” There is nothing hiccupy in these stories, perhaps because of the genuine pleasure Petersen seems to derive from the creative spark: “I like starting with a small thing – a plant that fascinates me, like corpse weed, or a scrap of graffiti. Then I interrogate the object until I get a human story to attach to it.”

continued on page 17

# New from Oxford



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# A CREATIVE ARGUMENT

By Jim Napier

**A** friend once asked T. S. Eliot whether he agreed with the view that most editors are failed writers. Eliot is said to have replied, “I suppose so, but so are most writers.” Happily that’s not the case with Montreal’s Peter Kirby whose debut novel, *The Dead of Winter*, recently hit the bookstores and shows every sign of being around for a while.



Kirby, a lawyer with one of Canada’s largest firms, skilfully draws on his experience to tell the tale of five homeless people murdered on the streets of Montreal on Christmas Eve. The crimes threaten to dominate the media, and Inspector Luc Vanier’s Chief is anxious to solve the cases quickly. But before the investigation is brought to a conclusion, it takes unexpected turns, reaching into the upper echelons of Montreal’s movers and shakers, and Vanier’s own life is put on the line.

I recently met with the new author over a pint and a pie at one of Montreal’s watering holes.

**Jim Napier:** You’re a successful lawyer for a prominent law firm here in Montreal. What led you to writing crime fiction?

**Peter Kirby:** I love being a lawyer, and I love litigation. It’s a challenging job and I’m not changing it anytime soon. But creativity in the law isn’t the same as creativity in writing. If a judge leans back in his chair, looks you in the eye and says, “that’s a very creative argument,” you’re in trouble; it’s time to pack up and go home. Writing fiction has always been a creative outlet for me. But for the longest time I was just dabbling, stopping at first or second drafts and moving on. Then I decided to get serious and the more I did that, the more I enjoyed it. Changing the level of focus gave me a whole new level of satisfaction; it changed me.

**JN:** *The Dead of Winter* is a convincing, but grim, tale. How did you pick this subject?

**PK:** The easy answer is that I was in a grim mood and wanted a grim subject. The real answer is that there’s a lot out there to be grim about and I wanted to engage readers with more than a straightforward whodunit. Homelessness, poverty, mental illness, and the

abuse of authority are all things we witness too often and do our best to ignore. In *The Dead of Winter*, the homeless and the disenfranchised are not there as props for the story; I want the reader to think about them.

**JN:** *The Dead of Winter* is very believable, especially the bits about the shelters and the street life of the homeless. How involved did you get in the research? Did you visit shelters and talk to the homeless? Given that many street people are suspicious of strangers, was that difficult to accomplish?

... creativity in the law isn’t the same as creativity in writing.

If a judge leans back in his chair, looks you in the eye and says, “that’s a very creative argument,” you’re in trouble ...

**PK:** This isn’t *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Most of the research was traditional: reading, watching, and listening. You can get someone to talk to you by handing them \$5 and asking how it’s going. But the best talkers are usually the ones who have the best handle on street life. The articulate ones rarely sleep outside in minus 20; they find shelter, it’s the mentally ill or the severely addicted that end up out in the cold, and they’re harder to talk to.

**JN:** Your protagonist, Luc Vanier, flirts with alcoholism, is estranged from his wife, and doesn’t really get along with his boss. Would you say he’s an anti-hero in the classic hardboiled crime fiction tradition?

**PK:** I’m not sure that anti-hero is the right description. I prefer to think of

him as an ordinary guy that’s doing his best in some trying circumstances. He’s a complicated guy, but I hope that readers will understand his struggles. And besides, straightforward isn’t that interesting. Imagine a guy walking along the edge of a cliff, looking at the sea, before he goes home to supper with the wife and a couple of hours of television. That’s pretty boring. What if he slips off the cliff and you watch his quick descent to the rocks and cold waves? A little more interesting, but not much. But what if, on the way down, he’s clutching desperately at branches, the shrubs pulling out from the cliff face and releasing him to fall again, his hands clutching at everything as he falls? Now, it’s getting interesting. If Vanier is falling, he will be clutching at every branch on the way down. I admit, Luc Vanier is not perfect, but he’s a good man with a good heart who’s weighed down by some imperfections. He’s flawed, but he’s aware of his flaws and sometimes tries to correct them.


He’s a decent person, loves his mother, is kind to children, and worries about good people getting hurt. He’s human, that’s all, not an anti-hero. So, if his trajectory off the cliff is apparent to every reader, I want the readers to cheer for every branch that slows his descent. Who knows? Maybe one of the shrubs will hold and he’ll save himself. And, as for questioning authority, Vanier doesn’t take much to authority. Anyone who doesn’t question authority on a regular basis is either in a position of authority or a slave. Questioning authority is a muscle that needs to be exercised on a regular basis.

**JN:** The characters are varied, interesting, and believable; the action in *The Dead of Winter* is very well paced. Do you see it as

ripe for a film treatment? Have there been any feelers so far?

**PK:** Do I think it would make a good film? Sure, I do. And I don’t think there are enough Montreal crime films. This city is cinematic heaven for dark crime stories. Will Ferguson said that it would make a great film, and who am I to argue with him? My publisher Linda Leith has received at least one enquiry about optioning the rights. We’ll see what happens.

**JN:** Returning to the book, what lies in store for Luc Vanier? Is there a sequel in the works?

**PK:** Vanier is going to be around for a while because I have a lot more pain to inflict on him, and the second book is well underway. Vanier investigates the “exhibition” murder of a local drug dealer found hanging from a tree in the street. But nobody seems to care. The novel explores what might happen if ex-soldiers formed a community organization in Hochelaga, to fill the gaps left by government cutbacks and disinterest, then moved to clean up, and control, the neighbourhood. Drug dealers, pimps, and prostitutes would be cleared out, sometimes violently, but who would care? And, if nobody cares for long enough, how much power could they accumulate? And when would it be too late to move against them? 

Jim Napier is a crime fiction reviewer and creator of the award-winning website [deadlydiversions.com](http://deadlydiversions.com).



**THE DEAD OF WINTER**  
Peter Kirby  
Linda Leith Publishing  
\$21.95, paper, 324pp  
978-0-9879-9462-2

# fiction

## Message in a Paint Bottle

A MESSAGE FOR THE EMPEROR

Mark Frutkin

Esplanade Books

\$19.95, paper, 187pp

978-1-55065-336-6

Mark Frutkin's new novel, *A Message for the Emperor*, set during the last days of China's Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), is half philosophical meditation, half historical road trip. So while a great deal of wisdom – both Confucian and Buddhist – is threaded through this mainly quiet, thoughtful narrative, readers are also introduced to a refreshingly original villain. What do readers learn about 13th century dynastic China from *A Message for the Emperor*? Don't trust the eunuch.

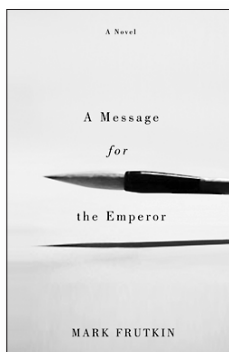
Still, it takes quite a while for the novel's protagonist, Li Wen, a master landscape painter, and his antagonist, the aforementioned eunuch, to cross paths. In the meantime, Frutkin's plot could hardly be simpler. It's all there in the title. Li Wen is engaged by his revered teacher, a Buddhist monk, to deliver a secret message, a secret to him as well, to the Chinese emperor.

All he knows is that the long journey south to the court in the capital of Linhan will require of him "a full year of walking and painting." Li Wen hesitates at first – "Who am I to deliver a message to the Emperor?" – but even-

tually agrees to go. He surmises correctly that the message is of the utmost importance to the emperor and the empire.

So important, in fact, that Li Wen risks his life repeatedly to reach his destination. Along the way, he survives a flood, eludes bandits, escapes entombment, and, most important of all, overcomes self-doubt.

He keeps painting throughout these trials, completing four masterpieces, one for each season. This is likely more than a coincidence since it plays to Frutkin's own strengths as a fiction writer and poet. Frutkin, who lives in Ottawa and whose novel *Fabrizio's Return* won the 2006 Trillium Award, has a keen eye for description. Here, for example, is Li Wen on the process of making art and making order out of art:



The black ink pooled and he began to consider his first stroke. Before that stroke, everything was chaos, ink was simply ink, brush was brush, paper was paper, mountain mountain, snow snow. They were disparate fragments of the world, without harmony.

The first touch of brush on paper would start to resolve the chaos, a pulse driving the stroke right out to its tip. His hand would know where to move...

In life, as any Buddhist monk would likely insist, the journey is invariably more important than the destination. In novels, though, you want the opposite – a payoff in the end. And when Li Wen finally arrives

What do readers learn about 13th century dynastic China from *A Message for the Emperor*? Don't trust the eunuch.

at court, Frutkin provides a good deal of intrigue. There is, for instance, the persistent worry that the Mongol armies, led by Kubla Khan, are on the way to vanquish the capital.

Most of the action, though, comes courtesy of Po Cheng. He's not only the court's chief eunuch; he's a landscape artist himself, though inferior to Li Wen. As a consequence, he's determined, at any cost, to prevent his newly arrived rival from seeing the emperor.

Frutkin also makes the most of his research into this historic period, so in case you didn't know what a eunuch's day is like, there's this detailed job description:

[His] task is to monitor the Emperor's concubines, ensuring their sexual loyalty. This is done by marking their bodies with a paste that comes from geckos fed on cinnabar that turns the lizard red. The lizards are then killed and pounded in mortars. It is believed the marks from the gecko paste will disappear if the concubine has illegitimate sexual intercourse.

In the end, Frutkin's *A Message for the Emperor* deftly balances the yin and yang of storytelling. It mixes light with shadow, meticulous observation with just enough swashbuckling adventure. mrb

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



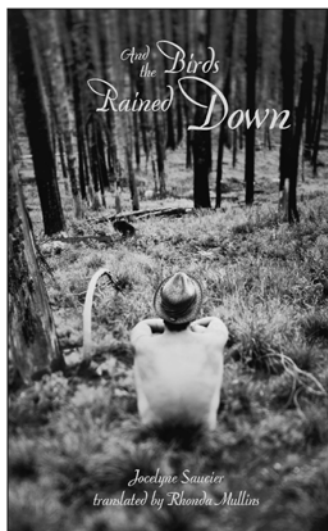
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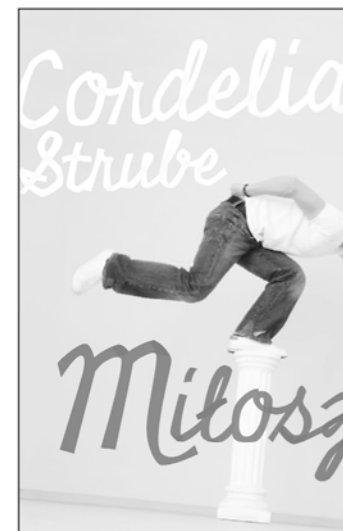
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## Hymne à l'amour

SO LONG

Louise Desjardins

Translated by Sheila Fischman

Cormorant Books

\$21, paper, 144pp

978-1-897151-90-7

*Sans amour on n'est rien de tout.* So sang Edith Piaf, whose love life was notoriously unhappy. The lyrics haunt the heroine of *So Long*, Louise Desjardins' third novel.

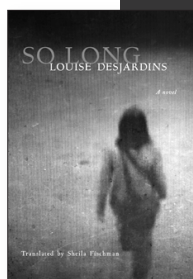
Love is a central theme in Desjardins' writing. The title of her first novel, which won the Grand Prix du *Journal de Montréal* in 1993, is *La Love*, and her subsequent books (two novels, a memoir of singer Pauline Julien, and a story collection entitled *Coeurs braisés*) continue to explore the subject. In *So Long*, first published in French in 2005 and now available in an English translation by Sheila Fischman, the narrator/heroine is obsessed by it.

The book spans a single day in the life of Katie MacLeod, a woman of mixed Scottish and French-Québécois heritage living in Montreal. It is January of 2000, right after Y2K, and it is Katie MacLeod's birthday. She is 55, a "strange number," she remarks, "often placed side by side with the word *freedom*."

Love and freedom are the novel's poles: two powerful, opposed forces. In Katie's life, freedom has definitely won out. Recently retired, twice divorced, with two daughters and additional step-children grown and gone, and with several failed love affairs behind her, Katie now lives alone in a tiny apartment on Fullum Street (an ironic name, given her life's emptiness). "I lose everything," she admits early in the story. "My daughters. My husbands. My plants. All that's left are some books, a few paintings and a whole pile of things brought home from travels."

As the novel opens, Katie is sitting on her bed performing a birthday rite of reviewing her journals and taking stock. The journals provide a portal to the past, allowing Desjardins to flip back and forth in time between the stark winter day and Katie's richly peopled past. The best chapters describe her childhood in Abitibi, where her philandering father owned a music store and played the fiddle in a local bar. When the gold mines are shut down in 1944, just before Katie's birth, her father shuts his eyes to economic reality and refuses to leave, braving bankruptcy and clinging to an "impossible dream" that one day the mines will reopen.

Like her father, Katie clings to the past and dreams of improbable futures. Instead of gold, her focus is love. After Abitibi, beautifully rendered by Desjardins, a native of the area, we move on to Katie's marriages in Montreal and the daughters she bears to different fathers. We meet the stepchildren too,



wounded by the mess their parents have made of love, and we encounter Katie's poetry-writing, pot-smoking lovers. We see the grade school where she used to teach, and the girlfriends, single and middle-aged like herself, who spend their hours trolling the Internet for men. Katie does the same.

Compared to Katie's richly imagined past and future, her present is depressingly thin. This may be Desjardins' point: at a certain age, our lives empty out, leaving mainly memories and dreams. This may or may not be true; but fiction needs drama, and Desjardins does her best to fill the hole at the centre of her story. She inserts a party, organized by the daughters, to which Katie's exes and stepkids are invited. And she brings a cyber lover from Winnipeg to Montreal for the occasion, placing past and future on a collision course with Katie's insubstantial present. There's great potential here, but in the end, Desjardins doesn't deliver. Like Y2K, *So Long* ends not with a bang, but a fizzle. **mrs**

Claire Holden Rothman is a Montreal fiction writer and translator; author, most recently, of *The Heart Specialist*.

## All Dressed Up with Nowhere to Go

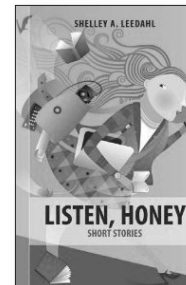
LISTEN, HONEY

Shelley Leedahl

DC Books

\$18.95, paper, 227pp

978-1-897190-79-1



Shelley Leedahl's latest book, *Listen, Honey*, is proof positive that the old adage "never judge a book by its cover" is true. The lime-green cover features a stylized illustration of a woman in pink heels, dashing off somewhere while juggling laptop, handbag, lipstick, and cell phone – a hint that we're in for something light and fun of the chick lit variety. The imperative of the title, suggests a knowledgeable and jaded confidante who is about to set the record straight.

But as it turns out, *Listen, Honey*, is neither hurried nor light-hearted and offers no irrepressibly direct Judge Judy-style advice. All 12 stories in this collection describe some manner of unhealthy relationship and most involve infidelity, sexual assault, marital breakdown, or characters in need of psychiatric help.

The term "collection of short stories" isn't quite right either. What Leedahl offers us is something closer to a collection of elaborately wrought scenarios. We read page after page of intricate details about the character's backstory and current setting – in short, getting a very solid grip on the context. Only towards the end of the story is the emotional heart of the piece revealed.

Leedahl has a gift for descriptions; particularly those that relate to small-town life and those that outline complex relationships. In "Light Housekeeping," a woman dining at a family restaurant in a rural area imagines who the other patrons might be: "Men who had to

leave school to help their fathers seed and harvest. They had been hungry as children. They sported wide fingers, thumbs half-missing or gone." In "The Lay of the Land," an ex-wife is described by the insecure new girlfriend as "an elegant woman, even in cut-off shorts and a wrinkled linen blouse, someone you expect will

become exquisite with age, contract an aggressive form of cancer, deal with it valiantly and *sans* complaint, and be immortalized."

Unfortunately, in many of the tales, the emotional return on one's reading investment falls short. In the first piece, "Heads Down, Keep Low," Denise spends a flight home musing about her career, her fellow passengers, the relative experience levels of the flight attendants, the way she used to play cards with her family – everything except the heart of the story, which is revealed to us only in the last few pages. Denise is going home to visit her ailing mother and will have to see her brother who has spent the last nine years incarcerated for statutory rape, probably because Denise turned him in. We learn this, and then the story abruptly ends, leaving us wondering what happens at this important and potentially explosive reunion.

It is as though we are being dressed up carefully to be taken somewhere, shown the destination at the last moment, then never actually allowed to visit the place.

In a few cases, the tales pack such a heavy emotional punch that I breathed a sigh of relief at the end, thankful that, unlike the characters, I could simply close the book and leave it behind. This was the case in "Scenes From a Family On Fire," a complex and perfectly paced story of a couple struggling to know just how involved they should be in the life of their nephew, also their godson, after the boy's deadbeat father leaves. The reader is shown a domestic scene between the boy's parents that is so painfully dysfunctional, it's like watching a car accident.

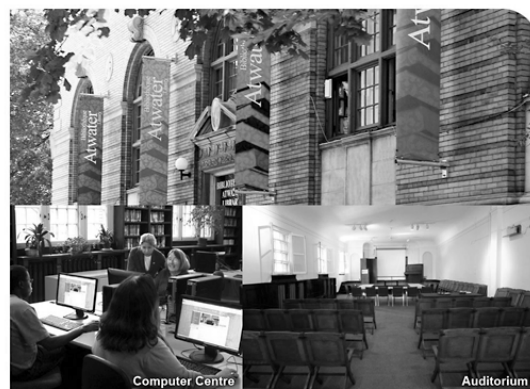
Not only is this one of the strongest pieces in the collection, it makes a far more fitting title for the book. What Leedahl has given us is a collection of scenarios in which relationships smolder, heating slowly but inexorably towards a volatile ignition. **mrs**

Sarah Lolley is a Montreal-based writer of fiction, non-fiction, and travel features.

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## Eight Days a Week

### ENTRY LEVEL

Julie McIsaac  
Insomniac Press  
\$19.95, paper, 162pp  
978-1-55483-068-8



Humdrum and toil. That's the context for Julie McIsaac's first collection of short stories, *Entry Level*. Whether they're working in a Dilbert-like telesales office or a giant toy store, our dejected protagonists try to navigate tedious jobs and the start of uncertain futures.

Three stories in this collection are part of the same narrative. "The Cashier" is an apathetically bitter snapshot of a young woman, Kathleen, who has recently moved back in with her parents and obtained employment at the local Toys-O-Rama. The story demonstrates the banality of big box store life and Kathleen's not-so-enthusiastic return to the nest. There's no arc in this fly-on-the-wall tale and as a stand-alone piece it doesn't deliver much. Kathleen returns in "The Baby Section" to replace a distressed co-

worker in Toys-O-Rama's infant department, which forces her to confront her own predicament as the morning gets the better of her and she vomits all over a customer's pair of shoes. "Red Earrings" follows Kathleen through another day as she starts to settle into her routine.

The office environment in "Team Players" pits employees against management, the sarcastic against the cheery, us against them. It's a familiar hierarchy where disdain trickles up from the sales team to management, and demoralizing regulations pour back down from the higher ups.

*After some consideration, it has been decided that while drawing in between phone calls is unacceptable, doodling will be permitted.*

*Thank you,  
Management*

(And yes, someone is in charge of distinguishing between the two.)

The more interesting notion of "the costs of being female" (as stated on

the back cover) starts to emerge from the humdrum and toil. Pregnancy, menstruation, breasts – all of these have consequences. Pregnant women experience reduced mobility not only physically, but also professionally. In "Team Players," a pregnant Tanya explains to her co-worker how much she needs her current job in the face of the company's cutbacks. "I couldn't keep the job I had when I got pregnant, and no one wants to hire you once you're showing. They know you'll be gone soon, I guess, or they don't want to get saddled with your maternity pay and shit."

Puberty opens up the possibility of bearing children, adds a monthly cycle to one's lifestyle, and alters the physique in ways one might not be ready for. A reluctantly pubescent Jessica in "Hidden in Plain Sight" tries to stave off the attention her new body is attracting, especially from her leering neighbour. "You despise attention, especially from boys. You attempt invisibility by wearing baggy sweat-

shirts and Doc Martens. Your look is boyish, though you are not a tomboy, just desperate not to be a girl, not now."

McIsaac compounds the anxiety that her young female leads experience as a result of biology by isolating them in some fashion, usually by eliminating the father from the picture. Facing motherhood alone and being unable to escape the situation – to escape one's body – leads to a sense of detached helplessness in these stories. It's hard to connect with some of the women, like Kathleen and Tanya, since they seem so resigned to their situations. Jessica, on the other

hand, is the only one who tries to fight, though her story may not have the ending we would all strive for. In *Entry Level's* world there is no real hope in the end, no solution for these women. Biology comes at a price, and just as people suffer the monotony of crappy jobs to pay the rent, women will suffer their bodies and pay the toll for being women. **mrb**

Lori Callaghan is an arts critic whose work has been published in the *Montreal Gazette* and *The Rover*.

The more interesting notion of "the costs of being female" ... starts to emerge from the humdrum and toil.

## It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood

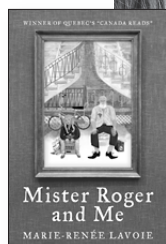
MISTER ROGER AND ME  
Marie-Renée Lavoie  
Translated by Wayne Grady  
House of Anansi Press  
\$22.95, paper, 233pp  
978-1-77089-202-6

For children, cartoon characters not only offer entertainment, but also provide a vision, however skewed, of the outside world. These cartoon heroes often serve as early role models, as in the endearing story of *Mister Roger and Me*, the translation of Marie-Renée Lavoie's award-winning debut novel. Set in the early 1980s, the story follows Hélène through her seemingly endless pre-teen years. The eight-year-old decides she wants to be called Joe because she assumes that life as a boy is better. It isn't because she is the second of four daughters, but because Hélène is enthralled with the cartoon heroine Lady Oscar, a military captain in Marie Antoinette's palace guards who conceals her female identity behind a heavy coat laden with

medals and military insignia. For Hélène, Lady Oscar epitomizes courage, strength, and adventure.

Although our young protagonist tries to emulate Lady Oscar, her surroundings offer little in the way of a romantic, windswept setting. Her working-class neighbourhood is populated with psychiatric outpatients, welfare recipients, and her obese neighbours, the Simards. However, to Hélène, her surroundings are merely humble, not grim, and, inspired by Lady Oscar, she strikes out to find adventure in her tiny world. But instead of fighting for justice during the French Revolution, Hélène lies about her age and says that she's 10 to get a paper route, and then takes on a second. At the same time, a new boarder moves into the Simards' basement, a man by the name of Mr. Roger.

The new neighbour



whiles away his days drinking beer in a worn-out armchair, and, much to the chagrin of Hélène's mother, swears like a sailor. But beneath his rough exterior lurks a kind heart, and the ailing senior dispenses wise advice to Hélène, in addition to serving as the neighbourhood source for home remedies. A father of three grown children, Mr. Roger watches over Hélène and saves her from a fate that would have left lasting scars even on Lady Oscar.

Lavoie has beautifully captured those bright, shiny pre-teen years before the sordid side of human nature makes its unfortunate appearance. The use of Lady Oscar as a narrative device successfully brings the reader back to that ten-

der age when performing an honourable deed was worth every last joule of energy. The first person narrative limits the reader to the world as seen through the eyes of a young girl. Unfortunately, whether due to the author or the translation, there are a number of passages with long-winded, heavy sentences that warranted a second read, thereby interrupting the flow of the story.

Originally published in French under the title *La Petite et le vieux*, *Mister Roger and Me* is a risky translation, as many will shy away from a story about a relationship between an older man and a young girl. But the odd pairing of characters works in this book; Hélène and Mr. Roger complement each other. The outgoing innocent child needs Mr. Roger's guidance, and Hélène's optimism offers Mr. Roger some hope in the final years of his life. Funny and touching, *Mister Roger and Me* will remind readers of a time not so long ago when they were far more trusting of their neighbours. **mrb**

Heather Leighton has written for the *Montreal Gazette* and is a regular contributor at *The Rover*.

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## Black Magic Woman

### MALEFICIUM

Martine Desjardins

Translated by Fred A. Reed  
and David Homel

Talonbooks

\$14.95, paper, 147pp

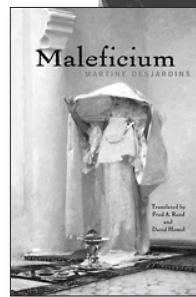
9780889226807

Not since the matchbook-sized publication of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* has such a sumptuous collection of images been packed into so slim a book. *Maleficium* is a sybarite's dream of mid-orient plagues and pleasures, yet it proselytizes moderation.

Written by Martine Desjardins and translated by Fred A. Reed and David Homel, *Maleficium* has a structure that is simple and repetitive: seven sinners visit a Montreal vicar and, under the sacramental protection of confession, each tells a story so compelling that it moves the vicar to the unpardonable sin of writing them down. It's the end of the 19th century. Each man has travelled to a capital of the old world – Damascus, Kashmir, Shiraz, Zanzibar – in search of knowledge that will further his profession. Each meets a woman with a cleft palate. She enthralls them. She helps them. She allows them to stroke the silk of success, and then she damns them with their own desires. The spice merchant searching for a spice more fragrant than saffron loses his nose to leprosy; the architect who learns the secret of Shibam's towers is struck by vertigo so crippling he must come to the confessional on hands and knees.

Complexity arises from the simple structure of the tale as from a clay flute whose four holes can produce a thousand melodies. Variations of tone and definition lead to wordplay. For example, "stigma" is used to mean the filament of a saffron crocus, then the marks of the crucifixion, and then the shame of living without a nose. Another confession uses the word "unctuous" in three distinct ways. It's no wonder that it took two translators to untangle these subtleties and recast them for the English ear and eye.

The seven supplicants each warn the vicar that the woman with the split lip is bringing her curses to him. The confessions are recorded as monologues, so we never hear the clergyman's voice or feel his anxiety. The prologue discloses how the stories drove the vicar to commit the transgression of recording them, but because we learn this before we hear the stories, the vicar's worries are placed in the background. This is not a novel of character or dialogue;



it does not attempt to be. There is never any question of what will happen in each story, only how. There is tension, given

the harelipped woman's impending arrival at the vicar's church, but this reader was not entirely satisfied with how that device resolved. The end, however, is left purposefully ambiguous, and supports readings that may appeal to other readers.

*Maleficium*, then, is a parable about Western ambition as characterized by seven men who, on the eve of the great wars, are hungry for Eastern knowledge. In the guise of the comely woman with the cleft palate, the East protects itself from exploitation as the matador does from a bull – tripping it up and impaling it upon its own horns. The scarred men return to Montreal, seeking absolution with the harelipped daemoness hot on their heels. When she exacts her final vengeance, it feels as though the snake that has caught its tail is about to swallow itself and disappear. It is not an intimate book, readers will not feel close to the characters, but it is an exquisite rendering of theme. If only all justice was as purposeful and poetic. mrb

@RobSherren is enjoying paternity leave and editing the novel he wrote during the QWF's Mentorship program. He reviews books for the *mRb* and the *Winnipeg Review*.

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## Tug-of-Words

### AGAINST THE WIND

Madeleine Gagnon

Translated by Phyllis Aronoff  
and Howard Scott

Talonbooks

\$14.95, paper, 159pp

9780889226968

At age 11, Joseph walks in on his mother being raped and stabs the man to death. In true Oedipal fashion, so begins *Against the Wind* by Quebec writer Madeleine Gagnon who, one might add, studied psychoanalysis at university.

Romances come and go, and Joseph's mother is indeed the woman of his life, but the fictional letters and diary entries that make up the bulk of this book are inspired by another of Joseph's great, if fleeting, loves: a former piano prodigy named Véronique. Joseph meets her when they are both hospitalized in a mental institution where, trying to comfort her, he realizes that "you shouldn't try to avoid pain or sadness or even stupidity, and not even madness. You [have] to go into them, go all the way through them from beginning to end to have any hope of getting over them." The thoughts come forth with Véronique in mind, but they capture Joseph's own journey from committing murder as a child in the 1940s to a more peaceful middle age in the 1970s. This journey has turned him into "an old-fashioned romantic for whom the desire to create and the desire to give oneself to another – and for that giving to be reciprocated – are finally the only true foundations of life." Joseph moves from one set of extremes to another. Scarred from his early encounter with rape and death, Joseph, now a painter, heals himself with love affairs (the original novel's subtitle is: "Journal d'un jeune homme amoureux") and creativity.

Gagnon's book is propelled by the tug-of-war of extremes: love and violence, creation and death, madness and sanity, femininity and masculinity, secularism and religion, blood and heritage. This theme of contrasts is first captured in Joseph's "two family trees and two



destinies." His birth father is of Irish descent and his birth mother of Aboriginal descent, but he's raised as French Canadian by his adoptive parents.

Likewise, Joseph's story parallels a larger struggle in Quebec during the same period, and the novel shows the most promise with this political parallel, but the glimpses of a Quebec in revolution are largely kept at the level of opaque allegory. Rapes, murders, and mental institutions aside, the plot is mostly preoccupied with the mundane. It recounts the upsets, insecurities, and discoveries of everyday life. Emphasis is not placed on events but rather on Joseph's inner life. The outlook is small.

Language, and not narrative, is Gagnon's focus. As a poet, she writes evocative, if at times flowery, lines: "I felt I needed more experience to portray that Beauty that had slipped quietly from the realm of Death into the realm of Life." She experiments with a mixed bag of styles and moves from the first person to the third person to epistolary prose. She employs various sentence structures and effects.

Such wordplay is difficult for translators. In English, the strict facsimile of some of these effects – the overabundance of quotation marks, for example – conveys little and can be plain annoying. At other moments, liberal translation diffuses meaning. Take the title, for instance: Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott translate *Le vent majeur* as *Against the Wind*. The variety of references to wind in the book does not quite render the notion of "against," which they decided to add.

These problems with language and translation, however, mirror Joseph's struggle. As he writes his story through diaries and letters, Joseph believes that he's "speaking these words knowing they're imprecise. No word in any language will ever convey the full measure of death and loss. No combination of words either. No image or music ever created. Words, images and music are only rituals to ward off the ill fortune of death." Writing is inadequate as a means of communication, but it is effective as an act of mourning and, ultimately, healing. mrb

Crystal Chan is a writer and editor based in Montreal.



# 'Tis Pity She's a Whore

**LEPER TANGO**  
David MacKinnon  
Guernica Editions  
\$20, paper, 302pp  
978-155071367-1

I don't know what it is about whores. Or, more to the point, what it is about men who are obsessed with them, like Franck Robinson, the ne'er-do-well hero of David MacKinnon's *Leper Tango*, a title that goes unexplained during the novel's journey through various Paris underbellies. It's safe to say that being a whore is a miserable, violent, and degrading station, despite the great European tradition of romanticizing them – which was especially a nineteenth-century literary fashion. Nowadays, in the early twenty-first century, Franck Robinson's obsession is something of a puzzle.

And author David MacKinnon seems to know this, since he has his



secondary characters question Robinson about his hang-up. A bit past the halfway point in the book, he has Tranh, a Vietnamese member of Paris' demimonde, ask Robinson, "What do you think lies behind your attraction to whores?" Robinson's answer is clear enough: "They

don't require user manuals." These women are reduced to one particular part of their bodies, which is just all right for Robinson.

Of course his pal Tranh doesn't believe him, and neither do we. Tranh insists that Robinson is acting the way he does because he's wrestling with his own eventual death, or he's on the run from himself, or missing some essential part of his human makeup. This is pretty much the realm of popular psychology, and Robinson rejects it. He's a character without need of redemption. He tromps through Paris in search of

Sheba, the whore of his obsession, making stops along the way for many of her sisters. And at the end, 300 pages later, he's off on another adventure, completely identical to all the others.

Current fiction is teeming with likeable ne'er-do-wells. Charles Bukowski set down a model that many writers, mostly male, have followed with a variety of results. While Bukowski had a sense of humour about himself and an occasional tenderness for the world, MacKinnon's character is just plain mean. No surprise there, given Robinson's occupation. Back in Canada he was a shyster lawyer specializing in personal injury suits, and not above ripping off his clients, who all richly deserved the treatment. No doubt there are plenty of people like him in this world, but I'm not sure readers will want to spend a lot of time with him.

MacKinnon's philosophizing tends to weigh down his dialogue, turning conversation into something closer to discourse. A few pages after his "user manual" answer, MacKinnon has Robinson and Tranh deep in conversation as they watch the murky waters of the Seine River (and a bald homosexual

masturbating into the river, for good measure). "You seem driven by some need to penetrate to the inner enclaves of the world of vice, as if it will provide you with some answers," Tranh tells his companion. The first law of dialogue is that it actually has to be

sayable, and many of MacKinnon's lines are on the wrong side of that law. Then again, maybe people talk that way when they gaze at the famous river.

When Robinson actually makes it with a woman named Caroline who's not in it for the money, the relationship doesn't exactly fly

– but it does produce some moments of hilarity, intentional or not. When Caroline starts getting clingy, Robinson tells her, "We've known each other for four days. Don't expect commitment from me, baby." To which Caroline replies in a similar clichéd vein: "I can't live without you, Franck. I'll kill myself." Even more unforgivable than the dialogue, Robinson, on the same page, dreams of washing down a filet mignon with Chablis or Sancerre. White wine with red meat? *Sacrebleu!*

David Homel's last novel was *Midway*; his last novel for children, with Marie-Louise Gay, was *Summer in the City*.

## Petersen (from page 11)

Our friend Brian, in "Champlain's Astrolabe," stumbles upon a piece of metal in the woods – just junk, but it calls to mind the eponymous explorer's lost apparatus, found in a farmer's field in the mid-nineteenth century. "Poor Champlain," Brian muses, "vertiginous with anxiety as the pole star came up and he found himself in a land whose known reach extended no further than the length of his extended arms."

"I wanted to write a story about losing your astrolabe, or living in an era where you have to constantly invent your own astrolabe," Petersen says, herself no stranger to following her pole star: she crossed the globe from her native New Zealand in 1994. First landing at Queen's University, Petersen eventually followed her Montrealer husband to La Belle Province. Before emigrating, she says, other than Anne of Green Gables, "all I knew of Canada as a child was a TV program called *The Beachcombers*."

There is little more Canadian than Relic and Jesse Jim; then Petersen out-Beachcombered herself, building a log cabin in the Mauricie, where much of the book takes place. We are brought again and again to a fictional Lac Perdu, where dead husbands are mourned and their ashes scattered, fathers are relinquished to their adult lives, promising new love founders. Place is a character more than a mere backdrop, and Petersen's quiet, patient enracination is obvious. "The stories set in Quebec were part of my digging into the country, putting down personal roots by turning what I saw around me into stories." After years of spending summers and weekends at the cabin, she has now settled there permanently, to see, she says, "how it is to live in the forest."

**Where the stories in *All the Voices Cry* are going is secondary to the grasping, the almost-reaching, for a change in destiny ...**

In *All the Voices Cry*, the landscape provides freedom from social or identity problems – from the dripping ferns of northern Quebec to the Otago seascape in "Neptune's Necklace," which is peaceful even as it provides an oblique piece of capital-h history.

I make a reference to her fellow literary countrywoman, with utterly complimentary intentions, and Petersen balks (very politely not pointing out that I am being completely reductive): "all New Zealand writers have to deal with the ghost of [Katherine] Mansfield." There is something Mansfieldian about these stories, though Petersen's are more sparsely peopled and the suggestion of possible resolution is whipped away at the last moment. The characters are kept in the dark, while the reader gets the benefit of knowing where the story's going.

Where the stories in *All the Voices Cry* are going is secondary to the grasping, the almost-reaching, for a change in destiny: a woman, well-behaved for decades, comes tantalizingly close to abandoning her husband in Tahiti; a young mother from a more traditional era allows herself a fling with a handsome young medical intern; a professor is drawn to and terrified by a former student.

Petersen writes unabashedly. Poor professor Colin, for instance, gets a "tenured heart, usually preserved in the dim formaldehyde of ethical behaviour." A step-mother-to-be is described as "a wreath-of-dried-flowers-with-seasonal-bear-on-the-front-door kind of person." A gaggle of artsy hipsters have "beards groomed into neat pubic triangles." Her details are so vivid I ask whether she has a visual arts background (no, although her sister is a painter). The shrines in "Salsa Madre" are dead-on evocative of the haphazard countryside clutter of old claw-foots Virgin-Maried up and then abandoned. Elsewhere, the public at a vernissage are ignoring the art and "living only for the subtle readjustment of the room as each new person entered it."

She is an honest portraitist, and a kind puppeteer, whether she is allowing an old lady a nostalgic car ride back through her youth, befriending a young woman who is taking care of her ailing father, or pointing the way to a embittered daughter looking for a miracle cure. In "Through the Gates," a beautiful, simple story, a distraught couple, Rita and Gord, are hiking on the west coast of New Zealand, a trip they decide to take despite having received bad news, and awaiting more. Petersen explains Gord to me with something akin to filial respect: "He seems like an empathetic, sensible chap to me, not drifting off, but finding out how to solve the problem, looking for a pamphlet with information, starting with a sandwich, for strength."

With the exception of Gord, the men in *All the Voices Cry* seem to wander – in and out of landscapes, in and out of lives, in and out of attention – while the women are anchored. A lot of her female characters, Petersen concedes, are tethered by marriage, kids, or relationships, "initially chosen and sometimes resented, and lived with or abandoned." But to be anchored, she says, "is more than just being stuck in one place." Petersen's answer reveals the generosity that extends to her craft: "when you write a short story, you really do have to chose whose story it is – and this is the case no matter whose story it is, male or female."

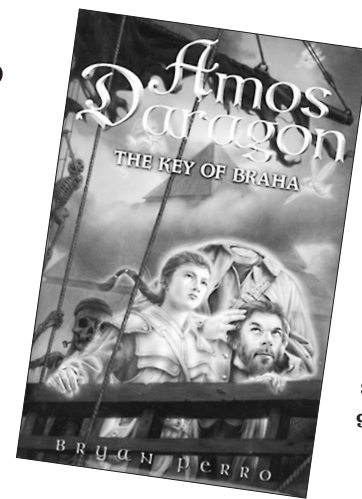
"I can't help wanting good things for my characters, even if they don't get those good things within the scope of the story. I think that's a failing on my part." Hardly. With Petersen as their champion and wrangler, we cheer her characters – yes, way to get laid, Scottish Annie; way to abandon him by the roadside, long-bored Penelope of faculty-wifedom; come on, Colin, don't be a weenie. These characters know a thing or two about escape, the first being its draw, the second, its impossibility.

Katia Grubisic is a writer, editor, and translator.

# young readers

## Literary Pyrotechnics

It's tough to argue with the kind of the success enjoyed by author Bryan Perro. Author of the hugely popular Amos Daragon fantasy series, Perro has outsold Harry Potter in Quebec, seen his books translated into eighteen languages, and this summer launched a multi-media theatrical extravaganza based on the adventures of his twelve-year-old mask-wearing hero.



**AMOS DARAGON  
THE KEY OF BRAHA**  
Bryan Perro  
Random House Canada  
\$18.99, cloth, 192pp  
978-0-385-73904-7

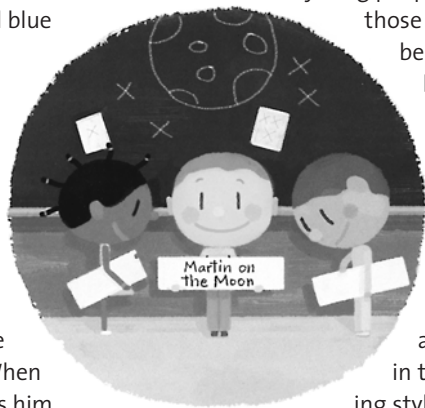
French-speaking kids have made Amos Daragon a phenomenon and Perro has written twelve books chronicling Amos's quest to collect the magical stones he needs to realize the full potential of his destiny. The first book, *The Mask Wearer*, was published in French in 2003. Now, in 2012, the English translation of the second installment, *The Key of Braha*, is available in Canada. While it's too soon to tell if the English version of the Amos books will be as hugely popular as the French original, one doesn't need to read too many pages into *The Key of Braha* to see that Perro has a clear idea of what kind of content will sell to his strongest demographic – nine to twelve-year-old boys. Between the pages of this second Amos Daragon novel you'll find generous helpings of blood and gore, a cast of hideous immortal monsters, despicable villains, and virtuous friends. There's a labyrinthine plot involving a cast of fantastical characters – Jerik the headless servant, Beorf the humanoid who can change from boy to bear whenever it's required, and Arkillion, an Elf who is king of the thieves. A good portion of the novel takes place after Amos has been killed (he successfully resurrects himself later), which allows Perro lots of room to play with settings and situations in the underworld. There's even some prepubescent erotic titillation in *The Key of Braha* in the form of eleven-year-old Lolya who appears with pierced belly button and midriff-baring animal-skin garb.

There's no question that Bryan Perro has put his finger on the pulse of his readers. And it is certain that Amos Daragon has motivated some kids who were previously held captive by their game consoles to check out the written word. But as Spiderman so wisely said, "With great power comes great responsibility." Perro might consider this as he embarks on his next literary adventure. Now that he's gotten the ear of the younger generation, it's time to use his success to inspire kids with literature

that has the capacity to transform them, rather than just giving them what sells. His hero Amos Daragon wouldn't want it any other way.

**MARTIN ON THE MOON**  
Martine Audet  
Illustrated by Luc Melanson  
Owl Kids  
\$16.95, cloth, 32pp  
978-1-92697-316-6

Martin is a dreamy five-year-old confronted with the reality of kindergarten. He must leave behind the beautiful blue river, the lightening streaking across the sky, and the universe's glittering stars. He must sit at a desk like the other children and concentrate. But Martin can't keep from traveling to the moon in his mind. When the teacher discovers him blowing kisses into the air, Martin is horrified, certain he will be punished. Instead he finds that there's room for both daydreaming and poetry in his kindergarten class. Luc Melanson's simple drawings complement the narrative and Martine Audet's text reminds us that the schoolroom should always include a place for a young child's imagination.



**PYRO**  
Monique Polak  
Orca Book Publishing  
\$9.95, paper, 121pp  
978-1-4598-0228-5

Montreal writer and teacher Monique Polak loves stories and she has thirteen novels to prove it. But if you think this prolific writer spends her days hidden away from the world bent over a desk in a garret, think again. Polak divides her time between teaching English at Marianopolis College and writing both fiction and non-fiction. She lists jogging and riding her sleek grey bicycle as some of her favorite fair-weather pastimes. She also recently picked up boxing, and,

though she claims it's something she's started as research for her next novel, her enthusiasm suggests she's added another activity to her list of things to be passionate about.

*Pyro* is Polak's latest novel and is published by Orca Press as part of their Currents Series. Books included in Currents are intended for readers ten-years-old and up. The content is edgy and the books are on the slender side – *Pyro* comes in at 119 pages. The idea is to provide young people, including those who might be reading below their age level, with something to sink their teeth into. The stories are accessible in terms of writing style, but the plots and characters are engaging enough to guarantee that the reader will keep turning the pages.

Polak's books have always been filled with intriguing protagonists: multi-dimensional kids struggling as they reach towards whatever the future holds for them. In *Pyro* we meet Franklin Westcott, the fourteen-year-old son of the mayor of Montreal West. Franklin is watching his mother cheat on his dad, and his dad pretend that there's nothing more important than the results of the upcoming election. It's summer vacation, and aside from his job weeding gardens, there's not a lot for a kid in the suburbs to do. But Franklin's got a secret. At night he sneaks out and sets fires. It relaxes him and so far no one's gotten hurt. But when Franklin's mother moves out to shack up with her hairdresser boyfriend, Franklin discovers that he needs bigger and bigger fires to help him forget his troubles. And when

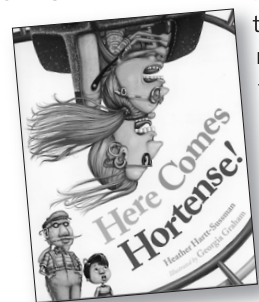
someone else starts setting fires in the neighbourhood things start getting scary; for Franklin, for the innocent homeless man, Bob, who is falsely accused, and for everyone else in the community.

Franklin's not perfect; he's a believable character who has to learn from his mistakes. His new friend Tracy helps him on his quest to find some measure of peace, and like the best books for young adults, Polak's novel allows the kids to find the solutions on their own. The end of the novel finds Franklin and Tracy looking towards the future and Franklin ready to accept his parents, flaws and all. Despite the book's relatively short length, there's a satisfying plot including enough twists and turns to keep the reader guessing until the final chapter.

Polak's other novels have tackled a variety of weighty subjects including a fictionalized account of a young girl's incarceration in a concentration camp during the Holocaust in *What World is Left*. Whether she's taking us back in time to Europe in the 1940s or into the mind of an adolescent boy living in the West Island of Montreal, Polak stays true to her passion for telling tales.

**HERE COMES HORTENSE**  
Heather Hartt-Sussman  
Tundra Books  
\$19.99, cloth, 32pp  
978-1-77049-221-9

There's nothing better than a picture book that uses humour to teach us important life lessons. In *Nana's Getting Married*, Heather Hartt-Sussman introduced us to the boisterous live-life-to-the-fullest Nana, grandmother to the disgruntled six-year-old narrator. Now we have the next installment that finds Nana and her new hubby Bob – who sports a long grey ponytail and



drives a painted VW hippy bus with tie-dyed curtains – taking the narrator on a trip to WonderWorld amusement park. Everything seems perfect until Bob's granddaughter Hortense appears on the scene. Suddenly a special trip with Nana and Bob turns into a full on competition for the attention of fun-loving Nana who seems to have a lot more in common with the daredevil Hortense than she does with her own grandson. By the end of the trip, the narrator learns that there are two sides to any story, and we've all come a little closer to understanding how to navigate the challenges and changes that are an inevitable part of family life.

**REALLY AND TRULY**  
Émilie Rivard  
Illustrated by Anne-Claire Delisle  
Owl Kids  
\$15.95, cloth, 24pp  
978-1-926973-40-1



Most picture books for young children focus on the fun stuff: cozy moments with mom and dad, fuzzy animals, or fantastical journeys to slumberland. It's rare to find a book that dares to explore the painful moments that mark a young child's journey through the first years of life. *Really and Truly* is one of those books. Writer Émilie Rivard and illustrator Anne-Claire Delisle bring us the story of Charlie, a boy old enough to remember when his beloved Grandpa used to tell him wonderful stories and young enough to be confused by the illness that has stolen his grandfather's voice. In the end, Charlie finds a way to connect with his grandfather by tapping into his own creative spirit. Aided by Delisle's impish ink drawings, this story manages to be poignant and touching but never maudlin. **msb**

B. A. Markus is a writer, teacher, performer, and mother who lives in Montreal and tries to follow Spider Man's advice whenever possible.

# I'm a Loser, Baby

When I was a teenager, Kevin Spacey enthralled me, as did Bill Murray and Paul Giamatti; to this day I am drawn to pock-faced actors cast as ineffectual mid-life losers. Literature abounds with similarly uninspired narrators, which makes me wonder why loser narrators are so popular. Why do we buy these books when writing guides tell us no one wants to read about losers?

What is a loser? It's a surprisingly thorny question. Can losers like themselves? Are they self-aware? Are they outcasts? Bridget Jones is a loser. So is Ignatius J. Reilly of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Harvey Pekar, the disgruntled everyman of *American Splendor*. There's even a whole genre of graphic novel devoted to losers. The most recent loser of the bunch is Irving Rosen, the main character of Jon Tucker's *Putz of the Century*. But Tucker isn't the only local writer examining losers. *You Comma Idiot* and *Spat the Dummy* were both shortlisted for the QWF Literary Awards.

According to the ol' Canadian Oxford Dictionary, a loser is "a person or thing that loses or has lost (esp. a contest or game); a person who regularly fails; a socially awkward person; a misfit." (Not to be confused with a *nerd*, the sort of person who looks up the definition of a loser before writing a thought piece on the subject). Voice-overs and isolated scraps of text seeped into my head as I considered the figure of the loser. "I've been on this planet for 40 years and I'm no closer to understanding a single thing" (*Adaptation*). "Both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser" (*American Beauty*). "It's brilliant, being depressed; you can behave as badly as you like." (*High Fidelity*). "But what am I going to do with my life?" Bridget Jones muses. "I know. Will eat some cheese."

Perhaps there is something instructive in losers – my own obsession with pathetic middle-aged men was fuelled by a desperate fear of their lackluster fates – or perhaps we like feeling superior to them. There's more than that

though; there's an unspoken connection. We've all gone through emotional rough patches, publicly embarrassed ourselves, sat sobbing in corners caressing alarmed pets. We've all clawed our way back into respectability (or most of us have), and we're all loathe to find we've again tucked our skirts into our tights, snorted chocolate milk through our noses, betrayed some unforgivable cultural ignorance at dinner, or sneaked into solvency only to find the debt collectors back at our doors. We see in losers the broken fragments of our (ideally) former selves, the third-grade outcast matching an electric blue T-shirt with pumpkin orange shorts, the pitiful self-justifying of a drug addict, the crippling failure to keep up with the Joneses.

Losers are a refreshing "fuck you" to the Joneses. We love Lester Burnham because he tells the Joneses exactly what he thinks of them. We are relieved to read Bridget Jones' compulsive weight monitoring and cigarette counting, which so mirrors our own. Their stories are often painfully mundane: a briefcase flying open on the way to work, a bad blind date, the reorganization of an unwieldy record collection. Losers are more relatable than hermaphrodites in small-town Labrador, teenage girls torn between the affection of werewolves and vampires, or children on boats with live tigers floating across the Atlantic.

Some writing guides advise emerging writers to avoid losers because they *are* hard to write well

and most losers come off as interminably boring. There are only so many brooding protagonists nursing café au laits in poorly lit coffee shops feeling sorry for themselves that a workshop leader can take. It's not that losers are unworthy subjects – on the contrary, they may be among the most worthy – they are just that much harder to pull off.

"Ordinary life is pretty complex," Harvey Pekar said. Every so often a book succeeds in animating an unacknowledged life and transforms an ostensible loser into a figure worthy of consideration. It's a daunting task, but when a writer succeeds in making a humble life noble and beautiful and awe-inspiring and, more often than not, funny – well, that is more addictive than heroin to our insecure little souls.

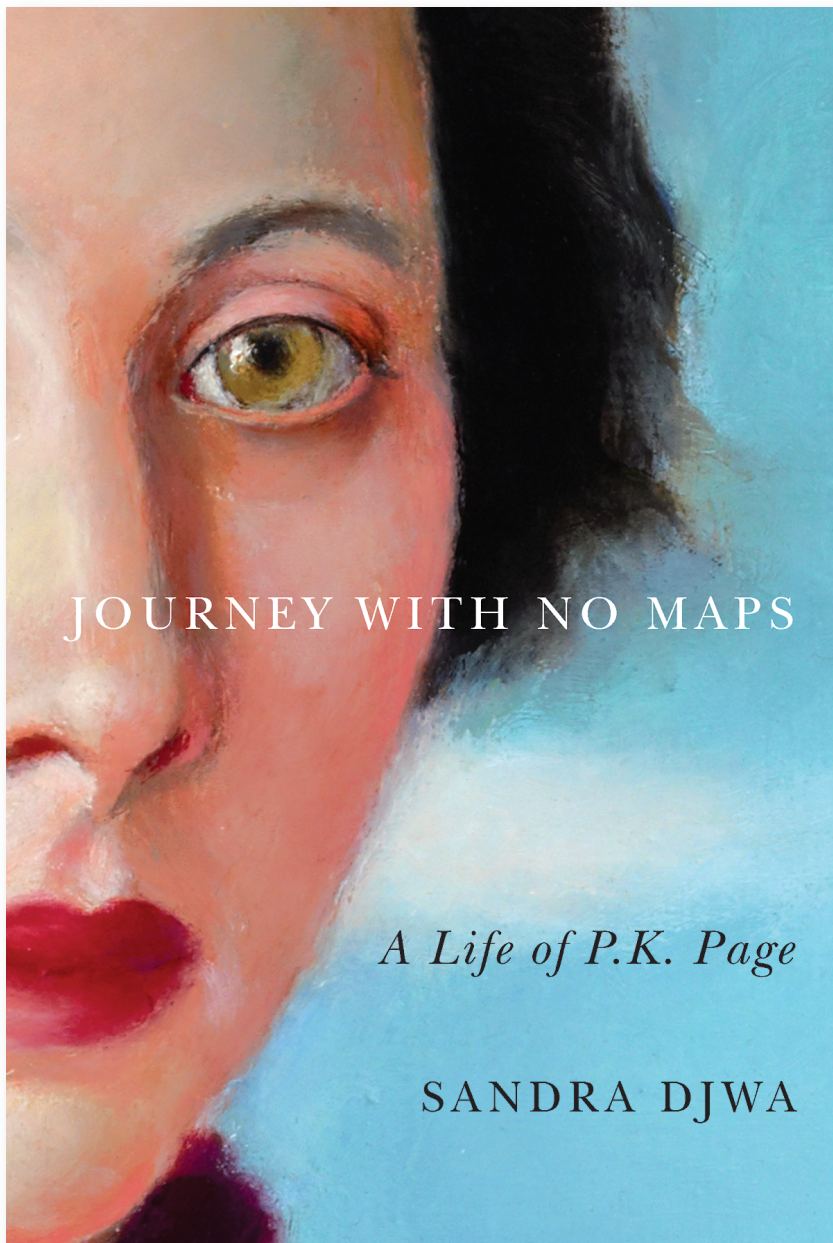
Jon Tucker's brand of loser is the ne'er-do-well rogue who survives by his wits and lives on the brink of bankruptcy; the sort who wouldn't give a shit if he was called a loser. Over-the-top, fresh-out-of-jail Montrealer, he is Irving Rosen.

The novel reads like a manuscript and needs an editor to tighten up the prose, but that's partially forgivable given what most first novels are: hopeful children venturing out on their first two-wheelers. Tucker's not ready to take off the training wheels – and this is a self-published book – but with some honing, his feel for the outrageous could get interesting. Irving Rosen is so far out there as to be barely believable and that's part of the charm of *Putz of the Century*. ms

**Sarah Fletcher** is Web Coordinator at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. She holds a master's degree in English Literature and is a regular contributor to *The Rover*.



**PUTZ OF THE CENTURY**  
Jon Tucker  
Fast Hands Press  
\$11.99, paper, 206pp  
9780987925411



JOURNEY WITH NO MAPS

*A Life of P.K. Page*

SANDRA DJWA

Poet  
Traveller  
Artist  
Mystic

**Journey with No Maps**

*A Life of P.K. Page*

SANDRA DJWA

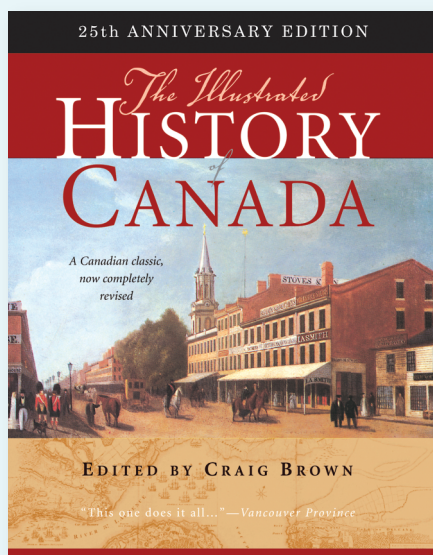


“Sandra Djwa has written a foundational biography of P.K. Page as artist and poet on which all further work on Page must draw. She conveys the extraordinary range of Page’s generous engagement with the world, and finds her way to the core of P.K.’s passion for art and friendship – her absolute faith in love.” Marilyn Bowering

“Sandra Djwa’s brilliant, compellingly detailed biography of P.K. Page is a fitting tribute to one of our greatest poets. Djwa captures Page as a complex, original, and dazzling artist and, in the process, offers an illuminating portrait of Canadian cultural life in the latter half of the twentieth century.” Rosemary Sullivan

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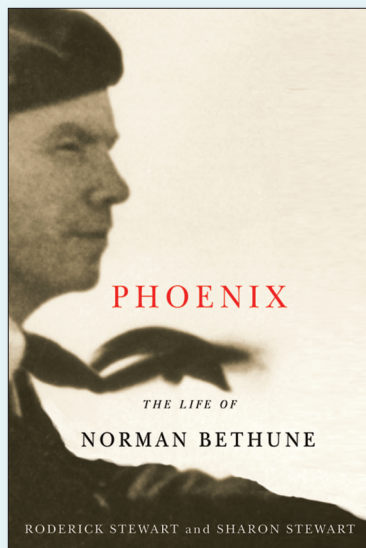
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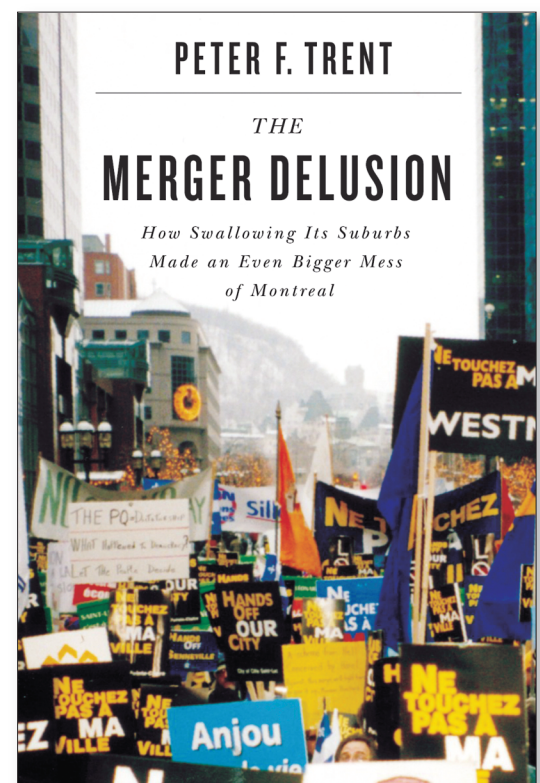
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