

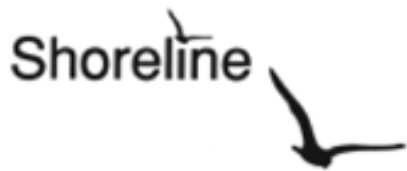
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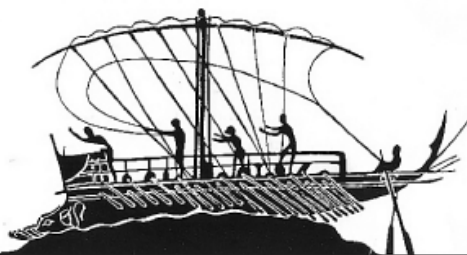
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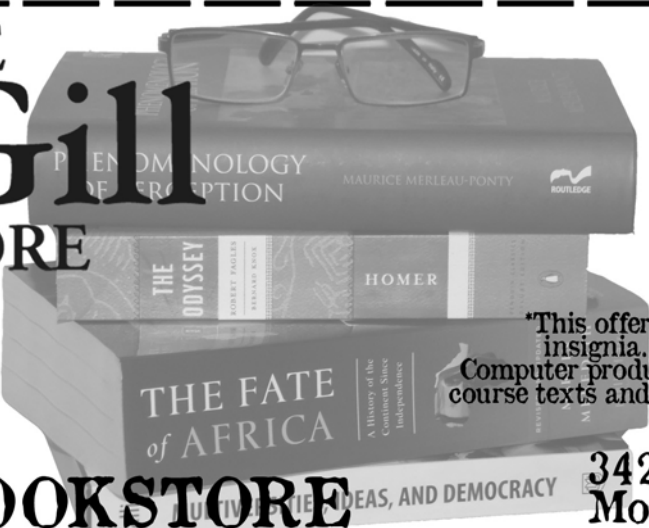
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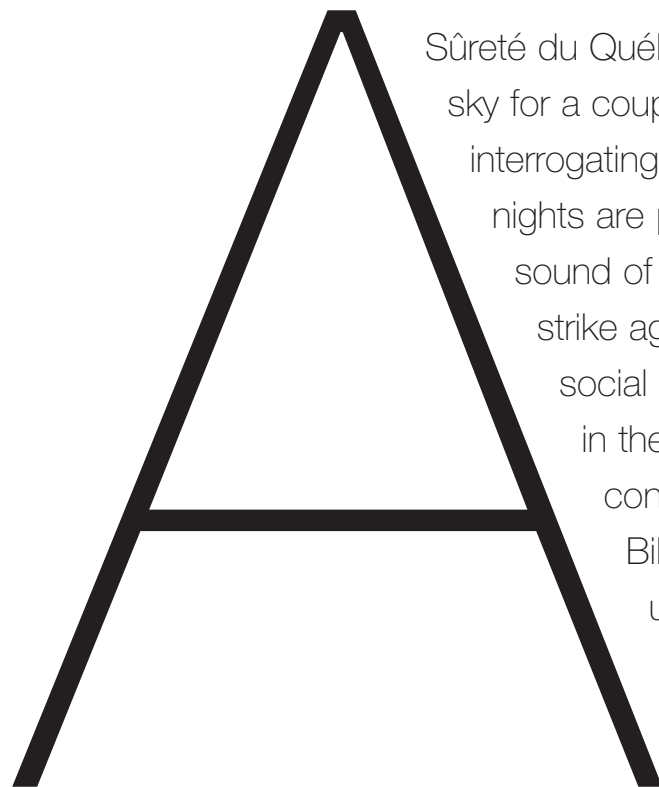
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by Kimberly Bourgeois

Maple Spring is in the Air



Sûreté du Québec helicopter has been dominating the downtown sky for a couple of months already. Grumbling insistently, it casts an interrogating eye on a city that no longer seems to sleep. Montreal nights are punctuated by shouting, sirens, and the occasional sound of explosives, for what started out as a Quebec student strike against tuition fee hikes has bloomed into a full-blown social movement, echoing the Occupy protests that erupted in the fall. The Quebec government's attempts to regain control backfired when it passed the highly contentious Bill 78, attempting to curb protest rights. Deemed unconstitutional by many, the emergency law only added fuel to the protesters' bonfire, drawing more support to the student cause.

As the helicopter looms over my apartment, I am awestruck by synchronicity. *The City's Gates* opens with Montreal preparing to host an International Economic Conference, an event that deepens the ideological divide between those who embrace corporate culture – and those who question it. While some are eagerly preparing to welcome the policy-makers and moneylenders, activists groups such as CARP (the Coalition Against Rapacious Profiteering) are ardently organizing protests. Kyle, a CARP member whose discourse sounds oddly familiar, laments:

They [the corporations] want a world in which nothing is more important than profit [...] a world in which—above all—nothing is free, nothing a fundamental human right—belonging to us inalienably just because we're human beings. Not our health and well-being, the sanctity of our families, not green spaces to rest in, not streets to walk down without the clutter and noise of mercantile hawking. Not clean water to drink, not even our imaginations.

“The fact that *The City's Gates*' publication ended up coinciding with the events of Maple Spring fascinates me,” writes Dubé in an email. Hesitant to call his novel prophetic, he says it's “more a case of the imagination tapping

into something that was out there in the air.” Writing me from Vancouver, where he was on tour with his book, the former Quebec Writers' Federation president explains: “I've been working on this novel for some time and its inspiration lies in other moments of passionate protest against globalization, like Seattle and Genoa or the G20 meeting in Toronto, for example ... So, as I worked on my book I was reflecting on what had happened at past demonstrations, but also looking forward to what shape they might take in the future ... because I was sure the movement would reappear. After all, it wasn't like the problems had vanished.”

Asked about the current student strike and Bill 78, Dubé responds passionately: “Since any serious artist is interested in the possibilities of human life, and what such a life might mean in a deeper sense, I think we're all partisans of freedom. And, if freedom means anything at all, it means the right to speak publicly and without censorship, to organize in pursuit of our shared interests, and to call the governments that claim to represent us to account. And I think that's what is happening right now.”

Dubé's protagonist, Lee, does not share his enthusiasm. A loner graduate of psychology, philosophy, and statistics, Lee is, in fact, remarkably apathetic, noting:

In fiction as in fact, there is something about tear gas that tends to get emotions flowing.



Everyone, regardless of which side of the proverbial fence they stand on, was rapt before this crisis in organizing the world and the world's money. For the life of me I couldn't muster a fraction of the passion that pulsed through everyone else. It was the end of the fucking world, but it was a world I couldn't bring myself to care about.

Yet it is Lee's very indifference that makes him the perfect candidate for the research assignment that drives *Gates*' narrative. He is hired by the director of an

unnamed university department to investigate the source of strange happenings that occurred during meetings leading up to the economic conference. Attendees have been behaving uncharacteristically, exhibiting a “disinclination to weigh their words before speaking.” Suspicious of the “possibility of a new drug's emergence, one with possible links to political or counter-cultural tendencies in the occupy movement,” the authorities are anxious to restore order.

Lee befriends Roomie, an elusive outsider with the inside scoop, and, following his tips, sets out to study a broad range of countercul-

ture groups, focusing mainly on two: the Mals, a gorgeous group of drop-outs who fetishize style, favouring imagination and creativity over truth or reality; and CARP, a left-wing collective determined to expose the ugly truths behind corporate capitalism and fight economic disparity.

Faithful to the adage that you should write what you know, Dubé, like Lee, is a thorough investigator. “In some ways much of my life has been research for this novel. I spent years involved in various subcultures and undergrounds,” he writes, explaining how his involvement in activist groups – from queer movements to a number of cultural advocacy organizations – helped inform the book.

The end result is a philosophical, metafictional work whose form is as quirky as its characters. Perception and language are key themes in this somewhat noir novel that contains elements of detective and speculative fiction and, as the author points out, slight touches of the picaresque. “As I wrote this book and explored the ways in which it simultaneously dealt with passion and struggle, the strain between language and silence, desire and rage, I saw that above and beyond merely handling such content, the shape of the book needed to reflect these tensions,” says Dubé.

At the centre of these tensions is Lee. Emotionally remote, his character serves as a window between worlds, providing the best view in town of Montreal’s fictional mysteries while reflecting society’s cynicism or hopelessness. “Although it is a fictional device in the novel, the kind of observational distance that characterizes Lee,” says Dubé, also “increasingly characterize[s] our culture (political passivity, declining voter turnout, a focus on comfort, a hunger for mindless distraction, etc.).”

Yet, in fiction as in fact, there is something about tear gas that

tends to get emotions flowing. When Lee runs into a distraught CARP acquaintance at a heated protest, the lens through which he views his friend switches to soft focus, and a new eye – his heart – opens like a velvet portal. “I don’t know why, but for that moment I wanted to keep holding him, even to kiss him,” he says in a touching moment of intimacy.

The plot thickens as Lee’s impassivity erodes, challenging his loyalty to his employer.

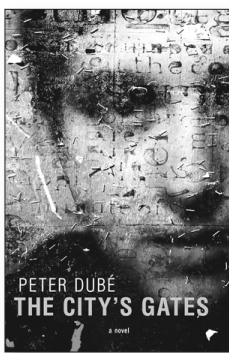
And, gradually, one gets the sense that something has been conceived – that although it may very well be the end of one world, another world – a new vision – is asking to be born.

Heightening this impression are the closing lines of Dubé’s email. Linking his novel to real life, the author speculates that “the crisis [Lee] undergoes, his journey, and possible transformation, may have something interesting to say about where our culture is, and where it might – just might – be heading. Who knows?”

As I review Dubé’s email, the helicopter growls a little louder, and I flash back to the day I finished reading *The City’s Gates*: On May 22, 2012, tens (some say hundreds) of thousands of citizens, young and old, took to Montreal’s streets to oppose Bill 78. Some are calling it the greatest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history.

Indeed, who knows? mb

Kimberly Bourgeois, a Montreal writer/singer-songwriter whose CD of spoken-word and songs is now available on iTunes.



THE CITY’S GATES
Peter Dubé
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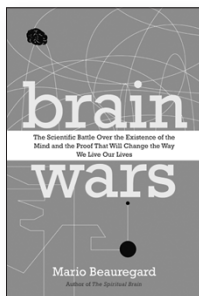


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Weird Science

BRAIN WARS
Mario Beauregard
 HarperCollins
 \$29.99, cloth, 250pp
 978-1-44340-706-9



For a study on the nature of consciousness, neuroscientist Mario Beauregard's *Brain Wars* makes for suspiciously easy metro reading. His second title following *The Spiritual Brain* argues against a materialist paradigm of the mind – the view that consciousness arises entirely from physical processes in the brain – with examples that include near-death experiences and telepathy. This is officially the first pop science book I've encountered to cite sources like the *Journal of Paranormal Psychology* and *Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine Journal*.

In lieu of an unsexy reductionist model of consciousness, Beauregard posits that the brain functions like a radio transmitting signals from another dimension or a prism reflecting

light. He explains that “the brain usually acts as a filter that prevents the perception of what could be dubbed *other realms of reality*.” He cites the placebo effect, meditation, and neuro-feedback as evidence for his point, though how any of these

discredit materialism is unclear; meditation and neuro-feedback prove our ability to change the physical structure of the brain through conscious processes, and, if anything, support a materialist view of the mind.

Highlights from *Brain Wars* include: a 1970s study of successful breast enlargement through hypnosis (“participants who had better visual imagery skills had the greatest success”), a Harvard medical student who “simply decided not to die of his brain tumor,” and a 1991 study that determined that thinking of another person affects their level of psychological arousal. Never mind untangling the mystery of consciousness – if this guy is right, we may well see the end of cancer and push-up bras.

Call me a narrow-minded science protégé, but I won't be ripping up my La Senza Bra Club Card anytime soon.

It's not that the premise of *Brain Wars* is so wrong. It's the fact that Beauregard presents his argument as established fact and neglects the first basic condition of any credible scientific theory: that it be testable and falsifiable. In order to prove that another realm of reality sends signals to our brains and is responsible for consciousness, one would need to develop an experiment to tap into this other realm and confirm its existence. If there is a way of doing so, Beauregard fails to propose it. Instead he makes a completely unsupported link between the laws of quantum mechanics and neuroscience, and in the words of quantum physicist Richard Feynman: if you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don't understand it.

Beauregard so intensely overstates his position that even his credibility is questionable. It is difficult to trust his reasons for writing *Brain Wars* when he claims his vision restores “dignity and power” to humanity and that we need no longer think of ourselves as

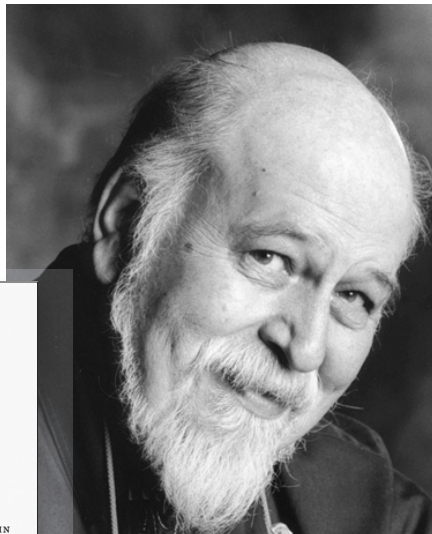
“computer[s] made of meat.” His are not scientific motivations. The cheap marketing language couched in the book – “paradigm-shifting,” “cutting-edge,” “eye-opening” – makes this reader doubt his integrity as a scientist.

Scientists have yet to explain consciousness, and perhaps we're afraid of the potential damage to our fragile egos when they do. But is it so terrible to be a computer made of meat? Does displacing the answer to an alternate reality necessarily salvage our agency? Must admitting how little we understand mean that science as we know it is a sham? We can't yet answer the riddle of ourselves; but whether we are meat puppets stuck in a boring ol' mechanistic universe or quantum fairies from another dimension, Beauregard would do well to be more humble in his claims and careful in his logic. **mrb**

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*.

Mr. Germain's Neighbourhood

RUE FABRE
Centre of the Universe
Jean-Claude Germain
 Translated by
Donald Winkler
 \$18.00, Véhicule Press, 135pp
 978-1-55065-328-1



There should be more books like this: amiable, interesting, fun to read; a blend of memoir and history and social study; much of it told through the curious but not always comprehending eyes of a boy, much of it sweet and very charming.

The title calls rue Fabre the centre of the universe (Fabre, a residential street in Montreal, runs between Parc Lafontaine and the Metropolitan, two streets west of Papineau). And maybe it is the centre, but not much in the book happens there. The stories are more of excursions to the edges of the universe: the West Island, the Laurentians, the South Shore.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Jean-Claude Germain's father is a travelling salesman, a supplier of candies and cigarettes to outlying retailers. The boy happily rides in his dad's truck amidst piles of Cherry Blossom chocolates and Lumière peanuts, “maple sugar cones, sugared strawberries, sugar sticks, coconut balls, blackballs, red cinnamon fish, pink mints, chocolate tuques, licorice negresses [and] caramel dice ...”

Brief encounters with people and fleeting experiences in unfamiliar

places leave impressions that lasted a lifetime. In Sainte-Geneviève, for instance:

There are snow banks as high as the truck's roof, you can see everybody's breath, everyone has red cheeks and raises his voice, dogs bark, horses snort, stablemen curse, and when I go into what seems to me to be a general store, a lady in charge takes me under her wing, removes my coat and mitts, unwinds my scarf, sits me in front of a purring white-hot stove, serves me a bowl of bread and milk laced with maple sugar ...

The young Jean-Claude follows his father around, but he is his father's adjunct rather than his own being (which brings to mind Peter O'Toole's admission that he was “nothing but Patrick O'Toole's son” till he was 30 years old). The boy catches glimpses

of things, hints of his father's past, but it's a child's eye view, incomplete, puzzling. He hears in disbelief that his father once played drums in a band. He watches in astonishment as his father dances a tango with the wife of an old acquaintance encountered on a Montreal street corner. But enlightenment is hard to come by. “Oh, that was in another life,” is his dad's standard explanation of people he knew, things he once did.

The family relocates sometime in the 1950s to the South Shore of Montreal, a patchwork of communities, some established, some new, Mackayville, a Gypsy camp of tarpapered houses, Greenfield Park, a touch of Olde England where “children were born almost as old as their parents.” The family operates a small store there, where a pay phone and one-sided conversations offer enticements and mysteries.

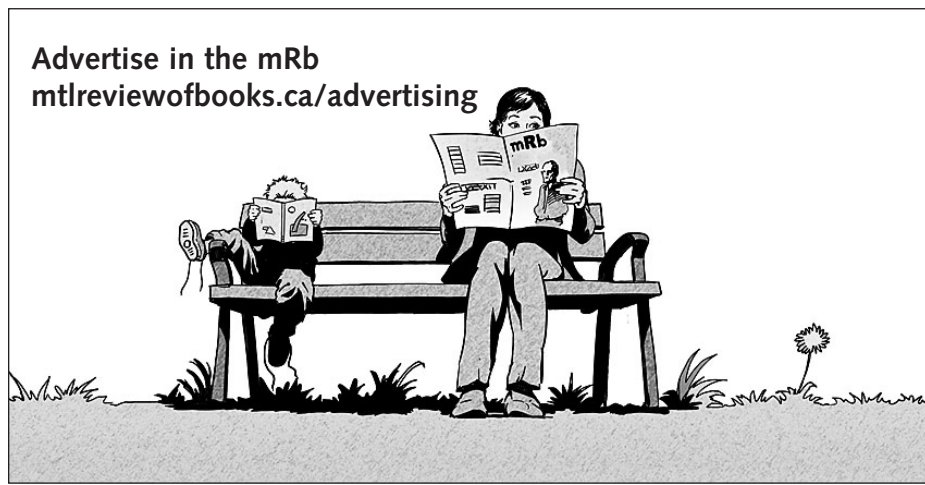
There's more, too; visits to the Orange Julep and Mendelsohn's pawnshop; the romance of the horse in Québec; the building of roads; the exploits, glorious and otherwise, of

early explorers. And *la grande noirceur*, the mechanics of paying off traffic cops, the advantages of a brothel next door: “Every time the Madam sent one of them on an errand, most often she would knock on the back door to ask Mama if she needed something at the store. They were the best neighbours we ever had.”

Armed, no doubt, by having carefully stored away all that he had seen and heard, Jean-Claude Germain grew up and became a distinguished journalist, historian, and author. He wrote many plays and encouraged many other playwrights in his years as artistic director of Montreal's Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui. He taught at the National Theatre School of Canada. He also told stories – some historical, including the year-by-year saga of the history of Montreal from 1642 to 1992 on CBF Montréal, and others personal, like this delightful memoir. **mrb**

Dane Lanken is the editor of the just-published *Glengarry Gardens: The old arenas of Alexandria, Ontario 1947-1975*.

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If I Could Turn Back Time

THE LIST

By Jennifer Tremblay
Translated by Shelley Tepperman
Playwrights Canada Press
\$16.95, paper, 67pp
9781770910805

I didn't lay a finger on her.
I didn't hire anyone.
To sneak in and murder her.
And yet it's as if.
I killed her.

With these opening lines we are drawn into Jennifer Tremblay's Governor General's Award-winning play *The List*, the compelling story of one woman's struggle to come to terms with her overwhelming guilt in the face of the tragic death of her friend.

Originally written in French, the play is beautifully translated by Shelley Tepperman. For those who have seen the play performed in French, reading the English text provides additional insight into the character without sacrificing the clear voice of the playwright. Furthermore, the book includes added segments written by the author for the English version especially.

The List is a one-person play. It is set in present day in a small village in the remote Quebec countryside. The only character, a woman in her mid-thirties, delivers the text from her immaculate kitchen. She interweaves the telling of how her friend Caroline died with the details of her ongoing to-do list, hence the title.

Caroline dies of complications related to childbirth soon after delivering her fifth child. The narrator feels responsible for her death because she hadn't placed the right amount of importance on giving Caroline her own doctor's phone number.

In one-person shows, the following question presents itself: whom is the narrator talking to? The answer can vary. Sometimes it is themselves, sometimes it is God, and sometimes it is an invisible second character, like a friend or a dead relative. And sometimes, as in this case, the nameless narrator of the piece seems to be talking directly to the audience.

Another question that is commonly asked of playwrights is "what does



this character want?" As Jennifer Tremblay explains in her Afterword: "*The List* is to my mind a long, unending question, although one that is never explicitly formulated: 'In your opinion, ladies and gentlemen, am I culpable in my neighbour's death?'"

If this is what she is asking, then one could venture that what she wants is to be granted forgiveness. But even then will she be able to forgive herself?

"Find doctor's phone number." I didn't treat that task properly. I should have dealt with it right away. No question. It was urgent.

Certainly, there are others who appear to be more immediately responsible for the tragic death of Caroline; primarily, the doctor who delivers the baby and cuts her artery. The fact that Caroline dies of complications due to childbirth is shocking. In these modern times, we do not expect women to die in childbirth. Thus, we can forgive the narrator her failure to "Find doctor's phone number." We understand how the task could have easily been relegated to

her less urgent list, especially when up against the myriad of other things listed. As the narrator says: "I didn't understand her panic./There are doctors on every corner./It's the twenty-first century." The narrator's neglect of this task becomes less understandable when she describes Caroline as being really afraid, as starting to panic. To find the doctor's phone number is clearly a priority for Caroline, one that the narrator recognizes and fails to act upon – not, albeit, out of any malicious intent. Only does that matter? In the end, Caroline is dead and her death could have been prevented, perhaps by finding the doctor's number. This is the crux of the play.

In many ways, the unnamed narrator is easy to empathize with: it is sometimes difficult to be able to distinguish between the urgent and not-so-urgent tasks on our lists. It all seems so important: daily and monthly chores, groceries, errands, and appointments. It all seems urgent until something happens that forces us to stop making lists and start paying attention to our lives.

By the end of the play the narrator has only one heartbreaking unattainable item left on her list: Bring Caroline back. **mb**

Alexandria Haber is a Montreal-based actress and playwright.

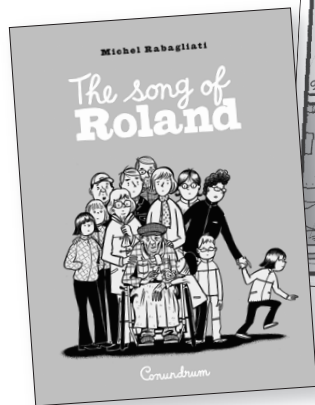
graphic novel

Family Matters à Québec

THE SONG OF ROLAND

Michel Rabagliati
Translation by
Helge Dascher
Conundrum Press
\$20, paper, 192pp
978-1-894994-61-3

After three long years, the English translation of Michel Rabagliati's internationally acclaimed *Paul à Québec* is finally out, and, as in Rabagliati's previous stories, the sixth album in this semi-autobiographical series addresses yet another milestone in Paul's life. Our protagonist, someone readers can really identify with, is an average middle-class nice guy, a husband to Lucie, and a father to Rose. Now 40, Paul moves with his family from their urban apartment to a modest home, just as he is hitting his stride in his career as a graphic artist. In other words, life is good. But on a long holiday weekend with Lucie's parents and extended family, Paul inadvertently discovers that his father-in-law Roland is sick. While *The*



Song of Roland is about Roland's life and legacy, this intergenerational portrait is also about family, love, and coping. Of course, the story will bring many readers to tears, but Rabagliati expertly negotiates the theme of death by adding touching family memories and generous doses of humour to keep things light and the narrative moving.

An old-school federalist and quintessential self-made man, Roland is also a likeable character. Born into poverty, he came of age in the prosperous postwar era and achieved relative wealth through hard work and determination, back in the day when success



did not require a higher degree. His political views differ from those of his offspring, who came of age at the height of Quebec nationalism. But for all his hard work, the former executive finds that his new rank among the dying is unbearable, and, true to the Kübler-Ross model, Paul's father-in-law proves to be a stubborn, difficult patient for hospice staff at the beginning of his three-month stay.

Rabagliati's treatment of time in the *Song of Roland* is nothing short of masterful. As anyone who has lost someone can attest, the final months and days are excruciatingly long, and time indeed moves very slowly. To illustrate this, the author decelerated time

segments by increasing his number of frames. In his beautiful broad ink brushstrokes, Rabagliati shows us Paul's final drive to bid farewell to his father-in-law in no less than 22 frames, adding highly realistic yet extremely banal detail, such as Paul fastening his seat-

belt, turning right onto Sauvé East, taking the Louis-H.-Lafontaine tunnel, and even passing by IKEA. The author successfully draws out the sequence while maintaining the reader's interest.

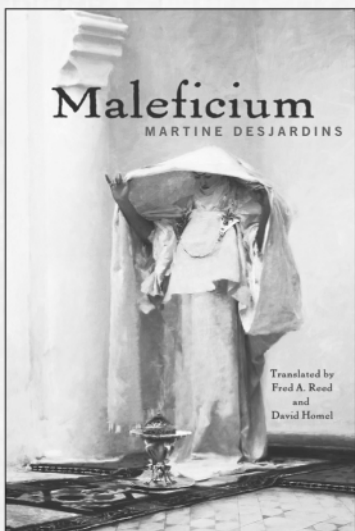
In terms of graphic elements, the most stunning is Lucie's nightmare, foreshadowing her father's death. Rabagliati contrasts a sequence of luminous open spaces in which an adolescent Lucie and her father are clowning around on a summer's day with that of Lucie walking alone in a dark dense forest with short teeth-like branches. Amid the darkness, Lucie comes across a small structure awash with light, containing a tiny Virgin Mary statue on the forest floor and

then comes face to face with the shadowy grim reaper wielding a shotgun. Another poignant visual is the floral pattern created by Roland's final injection of morphine.

The Song of Roland has been hailed as Rabagliati's midcareer masterpiece, and with good reason. This is his best yet. But the dramatic change in title for the English version will certainly raise some eyebrows. Why the sudden shift in emphasis from Paul to Roland? Could it be the new publisher? At any rate, diehard Paul fans who have patiently waited for the translation will not be disappointed. Once again Rabagliati, the storyteller, gives us another highly realistic and riveting chapter in Paul's life, while Rabagliati, the artist and craftsman, skillfully brings his readers close enough to the action to make them feel personally involved in the story. **mb**

Heather Leighton has written for the *Montreal Gazette* and is a regular contributor at *The Rover*. You can find more of her writing online at *The Unexpected Twists and Turns*.

Talonbooks Summer 2012



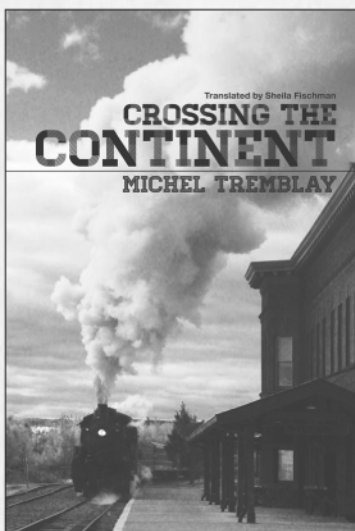
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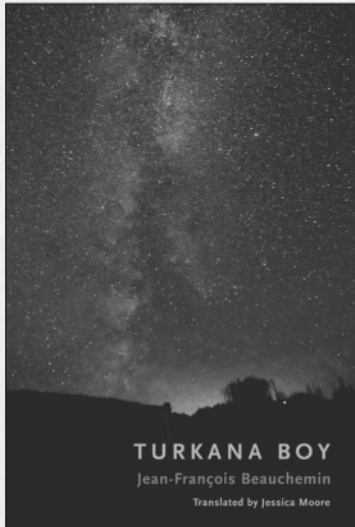
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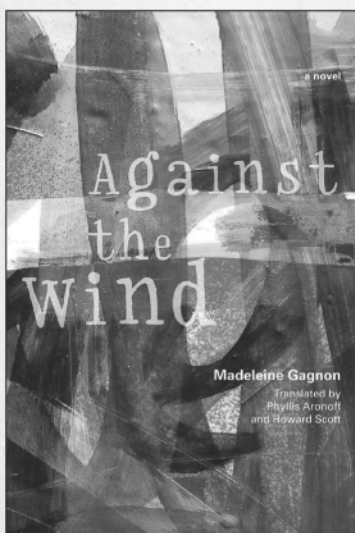
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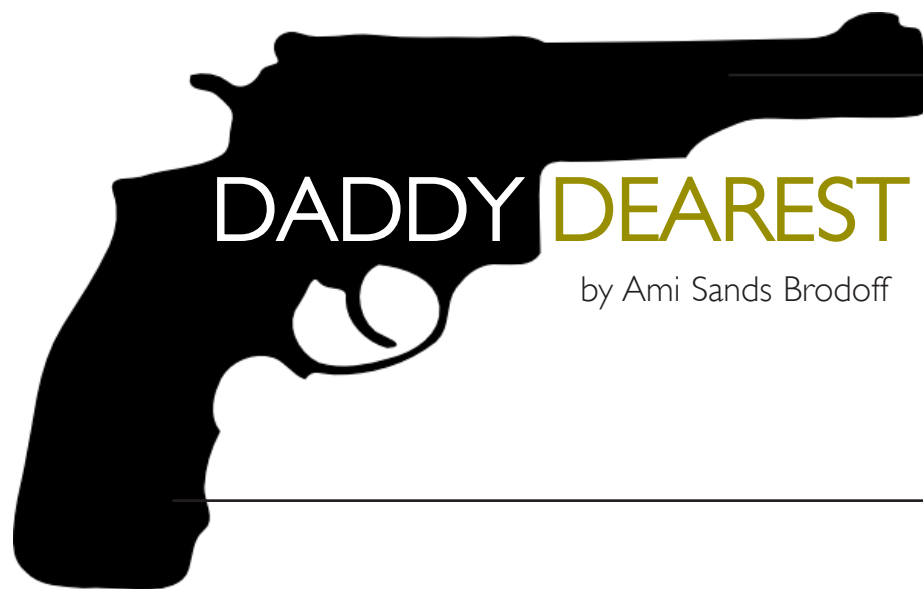
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Available September 2012

www.talonbooks.com



Deni Y. Bécharde begins with an ending in *Cures For Hunger*, his beautiful memoir about longing to connect with – and escape from – his mad, bad, and charismatic father. The story starts with André Bécharde's suicide at age fifty-six inside an empty house on the outskirts of Vancouver. It is winter; the power has been cut off, André's car repossessed. A country and a coast away in Vermont, his son is too broke and broken-hearted to attend the cremation. As Bécharde says, "I'd fought so long to be away from him that not even his death could bring me back." Nonetheless, he senses that "a father's life is a boy's first story," and that by unravelling the secrets of his Dad's life, he will unearth the key to his own.

"Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end," said the Roman philosopher Seneca. The death of Bécharde's father catalyzes his commitment to be a writer and to tell André's story. In fact, Bécharde hammered out the first draft of what would eventually become *Cures For Hunger* in two weeks, just three months after his father's suicide. "It was a story I had to write for myself," he says. Seventeen years of rewriting followed. "I realized how the repeated telling of any story separates it from the original events and gives it a life of its own."

Given Bécharde's nomadic nature, it is fitting that he is on the road in New York City when I catch up with him to chat by phone. Currently, the thirty-six-year-old author is on tour, promoting both *Cures For Hunger* and his Commonwealth Prize-winning debut novel, *Vandal Love*, which are being released simultaneously in the United States by Milkweed Editions, a first-rate independent, mid-sized press.

When asked what was the toughest part of writing his memoir, Bécharde says, "Seeing the joy. The material was pretty dark, pretty grim." The book started out as a novel, and only after a decade of revision did he decide to rewrite it as a memoir.

Growing up in rural British Columbia, Deni idolizes his Dad, his stories, his old "Indian" tricks, and his perilous adventures. A favourite: racing trains, where his father piles the kids into his green truck and outstrips a train, only to pull onto the crossing, as warning lights flash and bells ring. Then he turns off the ignition: Deni and his brother spot the oncoming train and scream. Just in time, Dad

twists the key and lurches onto the road.

When he is with his father, Deni feels "more alive, charged ... with sudden, mysterious joy." He loves his father's smell, pine sap and coffee, gasoline and sweat; he even loves his foul mouth and short, passionate temper. Deni is sure they are alike, though he knows little of his father's family, life, and past.

While his Dad encourages him to fight and cuss, his mother urges him to find his true purpose. Interestingly, she makes Deni study in French, though his father, originally from Gaspésie, rarely uses his mother tongue.

Deni's mother has her own quirks: she hates Christians and processed food with equal fervour; attends a psychic church; and believes in meditation, levitation, teleporting, and spirit guides. While all the other kids come to school with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cookies, Deni and his siblings get lettuce and tomato on dark crumbly bread and flat, hard cookies that look like "wet mud thrown at a wall." His mother is also a talented artist, though sadly, she relinquishes this dream.

When Deni is in fifth grade, his parents' acrimonious marriage falls apart. His Mom flees with all three kids to a trailer park in Virginia. Not only does Deni miss his Dad, but he also pines for the woods and streams, the mountains and valleys of his B.C. home. For the first time, he experiences hunger, subsisting on ramen noodles. Before the move, their Dad managed to keep spaghetti and meaty soups on the table through his fish stores and Christmas tree sales. Now, hunger stalks Deni "like a school bully. Hunger slept on



He loves his father's smell, pine sap and coffee, gasoline and sweat; he even loves his foul mouth and short, passionate temper.

father. Surfacing after bankruptcy, André now has three seafood stores and breeds German shepherds. Flea powder edges the rugs in his ramshackle house; he stashes dirty plates in the fridge, so he can reuse them with-

my belly, like a hot cat. Hunger barked me into a panic like a vicious neighbor's dog."

As Deni probes his mother and talks to his Dad long-distance, he unearths his father's history in jigsaw pieces. André left home as a teen, working jobs in mining and construction, so he could send money back to his poverty-stricken family. Though he never got an education, his siblings did. He loves his mother, but is bitter about his early life. Eventually, he turns to bank robbery and safe cracking, and spends time in prison. Hearing these gritty, dangerous tales only inflames his son's imagination.

As a teen, Deni is a badass and a bookworm, aspiring to be a bank robber *and* a book writer. At fifteen, he flees Virginia and moves in with his

out a washing. Deni is repulsed by the slimy, smelly fishmongering business and the unromantic realities of survival – within the law. He wants to go to school, but his father hopes to hook him into fishy business. André continually tells his son that they are the same; he never needed school, why should Deni? The risk is being caught in Dad's net: If Deni sticks around, he will end up like his father.

After André's death, Deni contacts his father's family who had not seen him for thirty years. He knows French: *quelle action de grâce!* Deni writes a letter in French to his grandmother, Yvonne, saying that he is Edwin's son, the name his father was known by at home. A week later, he receives a call from his uncle, and sets out for Quebec,

uncertain of what awaits him. His fears are quickly dispelled. His uncle resembles his Dad physically, but is gentler, kinder, a successful businessman. Deni's grandmother is 90 and lives in her own apartment. (He tells me Yvonne is now 104 years old; he will see her and the rest of the family this summer in Rimouski). The next few days are filled with visits, all-night talks, and tears. From his father's family, Deni learns the word *agrémenter* – a composite of the words meaning "to embellish," and *menteur*, liar – which epitomizes his Dad, and frankly, quite a few writers. The reconnection with extended family offers joy, a bit of hope, completion.

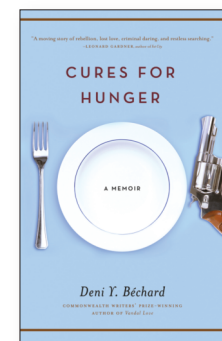
Béchar's memoir is alternately funny and poignant, with a meditative, leisurely pace. The narrative is at times repetitive, diffuse, and rambling, like memory. Though more colloquial and less rich in image and myth than *Vandal Love*, *Cures For Hunger* is embedded with insights. The complexities of hunger are the core of this story. Hunger is not

simply a clawing emptiness in the belly: It is the yearning "for truth, for love, for a single thing that we can trust"; it is "the perfect pleasure of wanting."

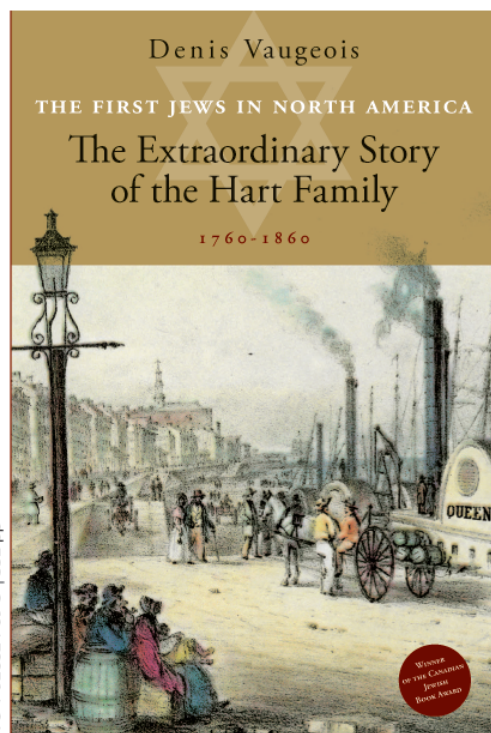
Béchar writes daily, wherever he is. When he returns to Montreal this summer, he will be "on lockdown," in order to complete his third book, which centres on his travels in the Congo and work on grassroots conservation.

Though Béchar was the child of adversity, he managed to absorb the gifts each of his parents had to give. Thanks to his mother, he found his purpose as a writer. His Dad's legacy was a talent for telling stories and taking chances, an almost ruthless adventurous spirit. His family's struggles fed his commitment to human rights and activism. Ultimately for Béchar, writing is freedom and *Cures For Hunger* is both a journey and a coming home. ■

Ami Sands Brodoff's latest novel is *The White Space Between*, Winner of the Canadian Jewish Book Award for Fiction, now available as an e-book. She is at work on a new novel, *Faraway Nearby*, and blogs at chez-ami.blogspot.com



CURES FOR HUNGER
Deni Y. Béchar
Goose Lane Editions
\$29.95, cloth, 322pp
978-086492-671-5



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978-1-926824-09-3 | 352 pp

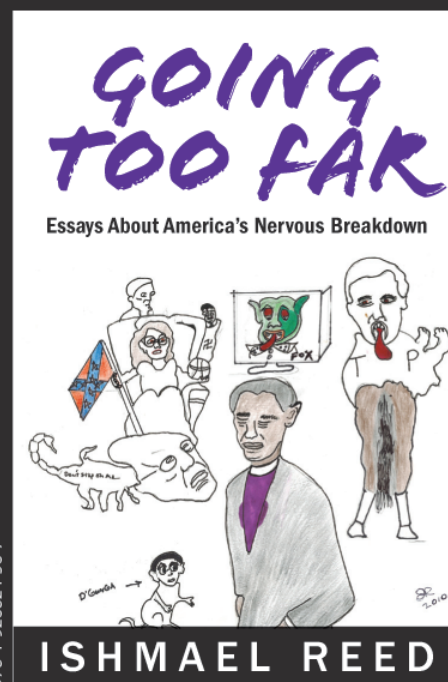
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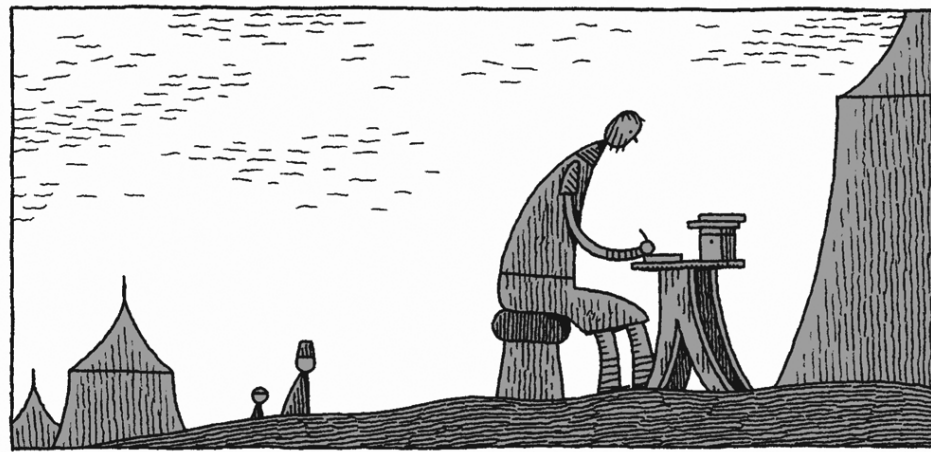
David Homel, Montreal, *Rover Arts*

Losing My Religion

by Ian McGillis

If it's true that history is written by the winners – and history would certainly seem to bear that out – then let's spare a thought for one of the all-time losers. The Philistine Goliath of Gath has been viewed through the ages as a sacrificial stooge for plucky little David to smite; the necessary fall guy in the ultimate underdog story. If you're at all interested in both sides of that legendary (and legendarily brief) duel, it's clear that Goliath never got a fair shake in the telling, whether in the Old Testament or in the many subsequent versions. But now, after a mere couple of millennia, he has, thanks to Scottish cartoonist Tom Gauld. Better late than never.

Gauld, who has experience with tweaking the perspective of a Biblical tale – having done a four-page comic of the story of Noah as seen through the eyes of his sons – here posits the concept of Goliath as a mild-mannered administrator whose only distinguishing trait, and of course his ultimate undoing, is the simple fact that he's big. Perfectly content to be left alone pushing a pencil, he finds himself in the hour of the Philistines' need drafted into a dubious and deceptive “patrolling” mission, but is too nice a guy to stand up for himself. Most of the book finds him keeping a melancholy watch along with his child retainer, waiting for what we know is his inevitable demise. It's all really rather sad, with a vein of black humour inherent in the contrast between the gravity of the situation and the utter mundanity of the characters and their dialogue. In its under-



stated way, it makes as powerful a statement about war and its waste as any more epic treatment could.

The story is told in stylized but simple black, brown, and white images, starkly presented, with spare dialogue and no third-person narration. A sense of stillness and tension is created, investing the slightest change of scene with significance, and intensifying the reader's sympathy for the doomed (anti)hero. Formally, Gauld has taken the opposite route from the one represented by another recent much-celebrated graphic adaptation of the Old Testament: R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, which takes its text verbatim from the original and employs dense, detail-packed imagery. But *Goliath* is, in its own way, an equally distinguished book, the major work so far in the career of one of the best cartoonists working today.

In an interview conducted by email from Gauld's home in London, I ask what drew him to this well-known story. “I had an idea to do a story about a giant,” he wrote. “Mainly because I thought it would be visually striking, and realized that maybe David and Goliath was a good story to look at, so I found a bible and looked it up. I knew pretty much straight away that it would be interesting to adapt. It's a very one-sided story. We know almost nothing about Goliath. He's mainly a list of measurements: how tall he is, how much his spear weighs. I wanted my story to happen in the gaps in the Bible story. The same things happen but they seem different from the other side.”

Anyone retelling a classic narrative is of course faced with the question of how to deal with the fact that the reader knows how the story ends. Did Gauld have a special strategy for that? “Not really. I just trusted that the reader, upon seeing my Goliath, would be sufficiently intrigued about what would happen to get him into the situation he's in by the end. I hope that the reader is involved enough in my version of the narrative that the actual ending is, if not completely forgotten, at least not in the front of their mind, so when the ending does come it's hopefully still a bit of a shock.”

As for the book's visual aesthetic – figures shown either in profile or straight-on, long shots but few close-ups, little depth of field – the cartoonist says it's in keeping with his general approach. “I try and keep the artwork in my comics simple, to make it as readable as possible. I felt that taking out the perspective and keeping it to a flatter, more graphic feel would make the book feel calmer. I didn't want the reader's viewpoint to be whooshing all over the place, it's all just straight on: often more like a theatre set than a movie.”

Such simplicity, the kind that serves to spotlight often-complex ideas, is something Gauld has been working toward since he was a child. Raised in Glasgow in a home that nurtured art – his architect father regularly supplied him with paper, his teacher mother encouraged his early obsession with drawing – Gauld's earliest influences included Richard Scarry, Maurice Sendak, the *Asterix* and *Tintin* books, as well as the televised work of Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin. “They were odd, gentle little animations which took place in surreal imagined worlds,” he says of those BBC

series. “My favourite was a Viking saga called *Noggin the Nog*.”

Gauld's vocation was further cultivated thanks to the enlightened approach of British higher education. “I know a few cartoonists who found their art school very anti-comics, but I never experienced that,” he says of his time at Edinburgh College of Art and the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. “My tutors were very encouraging of my comics. The art schools in Britain are quite relaxed. It was great to spend those years just playing around, figuring out what I wanted to do.”

Post-RCA Gauld teamed with fellow graduate Simone Lia to found a small publishing house, Cabanon Press (“I really like designing the book as well as creating the content, so I really enjoyed self-publishing”). Since then his work has appeared in a wide variety of forms and settings, the most prominent of which has probably been his ongoing weekly cartoon in the *Guardian Review*, a gig Gauld clearly relishes. “I like constraints on my work and this has lots: I'm given a theme by the newspaper, I've only got a day to do it, and it's quite small. It's like a mental exercise every Tuesday, trying to come up with something new and interesting.”

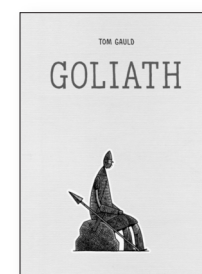
Such spontaneity stands in sharp contrast to the process that led to *Goliath*. It hardly seems fair for a work that can comfortably be read in a single lunch break, but two years of intensive labour went into the new book. Put bluntly, what took so long?

“Before *Goliath* I'd only created short narratives,” Gauld says. “So a lot of work on this book was figuring out how to tell a longer story. I began by working on vague ideas for words and pictures in my sketchbook, then I wrote out a script for the whole thing and fiddled with that quite a lot. Next I drew a rough version of the whole book, made up of quick, small, sketchy drawings, to figure out how the panels would be laid out on each page and what would be in them. Then I drew the whole book out in pencil, showed it to a few people and edited it based on their feedback. Lastly, I made the final ink drawings which you see in the book now.”

Given how touchy some Bible fans can be about adaptations, how thorough a grounding in the original did Gauld feel he needed to have? “I did a bit of reading,” he says, “as I didn't want to make any howling errors in my story. But not that much.”

Not much, maybe. But clearly enough. **mm**

Ian McGillis is the author of the novel *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry*, and a frequent contributor to the *mRb* and the *Montreal Gazette*.



GOLIATH
Tom Gauld
Drawn & Quarterly
\$19.95, cloth, 96pp
9781770460652

NOW AVAILABLE:

Conundrum Press' English edition of the award-winning *Paul à Québec* has made its way to bookstores! Its French edition won the FNAC Audience Award at France's Angoulême festival, a Shuster Award for Outstanding Cartoonist, and was nominated for the City of Montreal's Grand Prize, and the Audience Award at Montreal's Salon du Livre. Retitled *The Song of Roland*, this book centres around the life and death of the father-in-law of Rabagliati's alter-ego Paul. People have cried reading it.

“A formidable ode to life that reminds us of the importance of knowing how to say goodbye” — La Presse

“A novel that goes straight to the heart” — Le Soleil



THE SONG OF ROLAND
MICHEL RABAGLIATI
ISBN 978-1-894994-61-3
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BLACK AND WHITE / \$20
BD&G IMPRINT
TRANSLATION BY HELGE DASCHER

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Greek Tragedy

THE GOODTIME GIRL

Tess Fragoulis
Cormorant Books
\$21.00, paper, 322pp
9781897151730

It is 1922, and your native city has been on fire for nine days. You have lost everything, and are living as a refugee in a new city where you know nobody. What do you do?

In *The Goodtime Girl*, Tess Fragoulis' second novel, this question is an important one. Kivelli Fotiathi is a pampered young woman living with her family in Smyrna. She dreams of marrying an "American naval officer" and of moving to Paris, London, or New York, but in the meantime, her day-to-day life doesn't sound too bad. She goes to balls, strolls along the streets with her friends, reads Colette, sneaks out at night to go on clandestine dates. Yet this luxurious world is shattered when Smyrna is attacked and burned in the Greco-Turkish war. Kivelli is lucky enough to escape on a boat to Piraeus, but then has to deal with the trauma of surviving this horrific event.

Tess Fragoulis, on the other hand, was born in Crete, now lives in Montreal, and teaches at Concordia. In writing *The Goodtime Girl*, she had to deal with the difficulty of capturing Kivelli's traumatic experience in fiction, and she came up with an interesting trick to do it. We do not read about the Great Fire of Smyrna

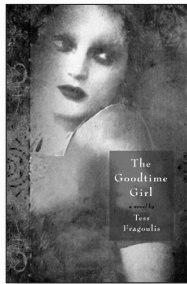
until more than two thirds into the book. Before that, we only get hints of what happened between Kivelli's carefree days in Smyrna and her life in a brothel in Piraeus. We hear about "the Catastrophe" and "the thunder of collapsing buildings," and while the Great Fire of Smyrna will be familiar to many of us from Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, we are still propelled forward in the story by our desire to know what Kivelli saw that has left her scarred.

You might think that keeping this scene from readers for so long would alienate them from the character, given that Kivelli's life was changed so profoundly by the fire. But Fragoulis' trick actually allows us even more access to Kivelli's thoughts; it is as if the book itself were enacting her attempts to forget.

It is Fragoulis' almost frightening ability to get us to feel for her characters that makes this book work. As Kivelli is hired from the brothel to sing *rebetika* (outlaw music) in a dive, and then as she moves to a fashionable hall in Athens, we slip into the heads of the musicians and prostitutes who populate Kivelli's world. Even the most heartless *mangha* (tough guy) is depicted with humanity. For example, here is a description of a ruthless madam, who is easy to hate for the way she treats her girls, after she has told Kivelli her own story of loss: "Tears pooled in the deep wrinkles beneath her eyes ... Kyria Effie looked spent, deflated, as if only the story circling through her body all this time had kept her alive."

Fragoulis' Greece is like a nineteenth-century painter's image of the Orient: lush, colourful, not quite real. Her similes and metaphors can be over-the-top – Kivelli is "a Smyranean rose with a scent as fresh and intoxicating as an orchard at sunset," Kyria Effie's words march out "like prisoners of war in the hinterlands heading to their doom" – and while these ornaments detract from the scenes Fragoulis has created, they do not make the story any less captivating. Kivelli is a young woman who survives against all odds, leaving her charmed past behind to make it big in a man's world of brothels and brawls, ouzo and hashish and *rebetika*. You aren't likely to forget her journey. **mb**

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



Love in the Time of Email

MARTINE DOYON

THE DARLING OF KANDAHAR

Felicia Mihali
Linda Leith Publishing
\$16.95, paper, 126pp
978-0-9879317-5

The premise of Felicia Mihali's new novel *The Darling of Kandahar* is taken from a real-life event.

After a young woman appeared on the cover of the 2007 University Student issue of *Maclean's* magazine, a Canadian soldier stationed in Afghanistan, apparently taken with the photo, wrote a letter that was printed in the magazine. The media began calling the cover girl "the darling of Kandahar."

Mihali fictionalizes this girl as Irina, a Montreal student who is asked to pose for the cover of *Maclean's* and later receives an email with the subject line "Hello from Kandahar."

This is Mihali's first book written in English after publishing seven novels in French. It's an ambitious book, considering its scope of topics: life as an immigrant in Quebec, religious beliefs, the historical founding of Montreal, and the human impact of the war in Afghanistan. But, perhaps meandering from idea to idea is an accurate portrayal of the mind of a 24 year-old girl, painting the world in broad, far-reaching strokes.

Seeing Montreal through the eyes of her parents, immigrants from Romania and Hungary, Irina describes the city with an outsider's perspective, yet an insider's insight, making interesting observations about the experience of immigrants living in Quebec: "Two solitudes is it? What happens, then, to the third one, the lonely immigrant side, left on its own or, even worse, caught up in a political game and sacrificed in multicultural speeches?"

As a high school student, Irina and her best friend took pleasure in acting out religious plays about the missionaries who founded Montreal. The story of Jeanne Mance and de Maisonneuve, for instance, takes up several pages. Though a bit long-winded, the story is told in a charming way and demonstrates Irina's ability to throw herself wholeheartedly into the stories of others. She is a character who lives in her head; she doesn't enjoy going out with friends, and finds herself increasingly showing agoraphobic tendencies, like her mother.

Irina asserts on the first page that "Young women have stories to tell, too ..." The stream-of-con-

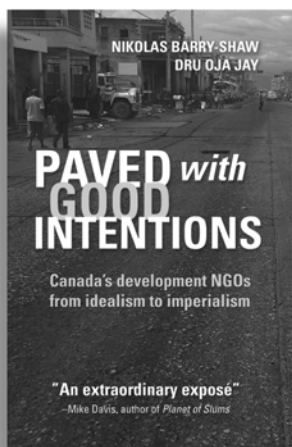


sciousness narrative can draw the reader in with its intimacy, but can also ring false at times: "I guess it's time I told you about my family," Irina self-consciously narrates. She walks us through her family history, failed romances, and current life as a university student, telling the stories of the people around her as a way to explain more of herself. Although perhaps lacking in stylistic elegance, the narrative captures Irina's inner thoughts well. "You wouldn't be wrong if you called me ordinary," she says, and indeed some of her observations are mundane. Others grasp at something larger: "I still wonder about the briefness of things that can later on rouse huge emotions, when they do not destroy you. Ten minutes is long enough to kill a person."

The temporary celebrity that comes with having her photo on the cover of a national magazine brings Irina a new self-awareness: "I felt like this kind of wave, just part of the mass of water in the sea for so long, and now suddenly here I was with my very own existence." And it is in the resulting relationship between Irina and Yannis, the Canadian soldier in Afghanistan, that the book really hits its stride. Unfortunately, this doesn't begin until more than halfway through the book, and the relationship isn't given enough space to fully unfold. Theirs is not a straightforward romance; in fact, it's not a romance at all, but a tense correspondence that is conducted entirely by email and fraught with misunderstandings. As a result, the reader may ultimately feel unsatisfied by all that is left unsaid between Irina and Yannis. **mb**

Lesley Trites is a Montreal-based writer and editor. Her book of poetry *echoic mimic* was published by Snare Books in 2011.

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The Perfect Storm

BLOODMAN

Robert Pobi

Simon & Schuster

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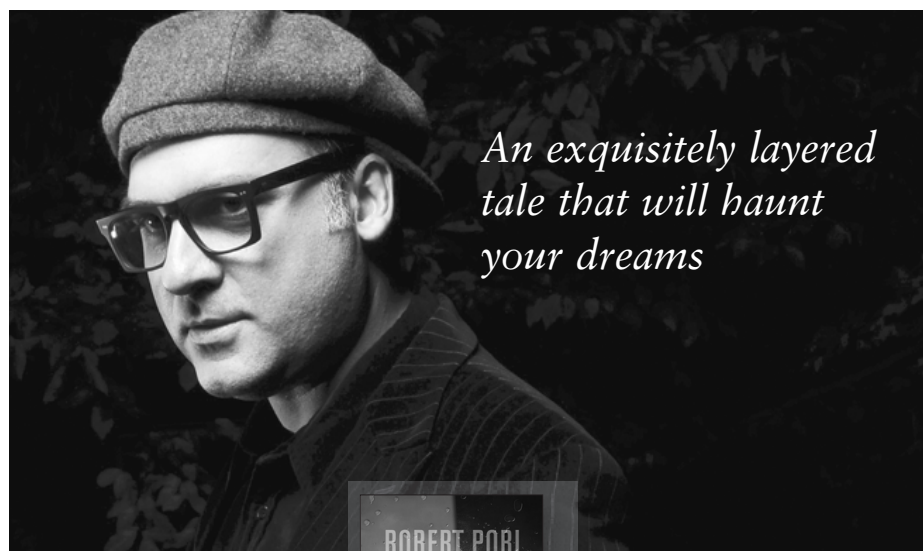
978-1-4516-5492-9

If there's a more endangered species than debut authors, I don't know what it is. Handicapped by having unknown names, the new author's book is almost always given a limited print run with often minimal publicity. Success depends on attracting the attention of book buyers who, according to some studies, linger over a title on bookstore shelves an average of seven *seconds* before moving on. It's a wonder that any new authors manage to survive in such an inhospitable environment, and of course most simply do not. With their first works confined to remainder bins or returned to publishers for pulping after a few scant weeks on the shelves, typical debut novelist have a very harsh fate indeed.

Yet against all odds, promising new authors surface each year and, incredibly, some even thrive. One such author could be Montrealer Robert Pobi, whose debut novel, *Bloodman*, is a compelling, original tale that will be an exciting find for thriller fans in search of a quality read.

In *Bloodman*, Special Agent Jake Cole – born Jacob Coleridge Jr. – has returned to Montauk, on Long Island, after an absence of nearly three decades, to deal with his father who's been fighting a losing battle against the crippling effects of Alzheimer's disease. A painter with an international reputation, the elderly recluse has been hospitalized following an accident stemming from his dementia. The timing is unfortunate: a massive hurricane is rapidly converging on the small community. Quickly gathering force as it approaches the East Coast, the storm threatens to decimate the exposed village and its vulnerable residents. As the locals prepare for the worst, news crews move into the area to begin their grim reportage.

But even the most terrified residents cannot imagine the horrors that are about to engulf their isolated peninsula, for there is another kind of storm descending on the region. Jake has not even settled into his childhood home when he gets a call from the local sheriff: a multiple homicide has occurred only minutes away. Aware that he is out of his depth, the sheriff has contacted the FBI for assistance. They gave the sheriff Cole's name, knowing that he's nearby; as a consultant to the Feds, Cole has dealt with some of the most dangerous killers in the country. Torn between his family crisis and the murder case, Cole reluc-



tantly agrees to help.

But not even Jake Cole is prepared for the grim tableau that awaits him at the crime scene. A woman and child have been savagely murdered, literally skinned alive. The sheriff of the normally placid community, a decent man, simply cannot comprehend the sheer brutality of the crime. Cole, however, recognizes the signature of the killer from an earlier case: it involved his own mother, murdered when he was only a child. As he moves to track down a deranged serial killer, he must come to terms with his own horribly scarred past, and before the case comes to a conclusion

it will take a terrifyingly personal turn that not even Cole can anticipate.

An exquisitely layered tale that will haunt your dreams, *Bloodman* is intensely graphic – as it must be; but it is also

a probing account of one man's troubled journey through life, told with heart-rending pathos. A literate, compelling debut that can more than hold its own with the best thrillers of today, *Bloodman* should generate legions of fans for this talented author. **mb**

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

Natural Born Killer

AGAINST GOD

Patrick Senécal

Translated by Susan Ouriou and Christelle Morelli

Quattro Books

\$14.95, paper, 107pp

978-1926802787

Patrick Senécal's novella, *Against God*, translated by Governor General's Award winner Susan Ouriou (*Pieces of Me*) and Christelle Morelli, describes the spiralling trajectory its protagonist, Sylvain, a man in his midthirties, takes after his wife and two small children are killed in a car accident.

Prior to the death of his family, Sylvain ran a successful sporting goods store, lived in the suburbs, and led a seemingly ordinary, peaceful life. Indeed, the book opens with a telephone conversation wherein all of the family members speak tenderly of how they look forward to seeing one another later that same day. Sylvain's family does not come home, however. Instead, a couple of cops

show up at his door looking at Sylvain "as though they're carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders."

The shock of losing his wife and kids drives Sylvain over the brink. In no time flat, the man is throwing family members into traffic, robbing *depanneurs*, shooting a priest, and crucifying a young woman to her apartment wall.

The narrator states that the character is committing these violent acts in order to avenge himself on God (who may or may not be the narrator). In the character's mind, God did not create order; rather, he invented chaos. With his new

ontological understanding, wrought by grief, Sylvain claims he was lied to and announces repeatedly that he, like God, will commit senseless acts of violence in order to further the world's lawless pandemonium.

The novella, written in the second person, uses a single stream-of-consciousness sentence for the span of the novella, and uses periods for dialogue only. Punctuation is



otherwise signalled with the use of italics, commas, apostrophes, and question marks. The form no doubt parallels the content. Senécal's use of the single sentence device may signal that his character's disorder exists as much outwardly as it does within, and that his derangement knows no end:

... you look at the woman crucified to the wall whose eyes never cease their pleading, you bring your face close to hers, and now you're no longer crying because your eyes are two

craters erupting, desiccating forevermore any future tears, and the harsh caw of your voice rises from the bitterest of chasms, and your words – *Live . . . and suffer.*

Unyielding violence can be done beautifully. At the very least it can be a useful plot device. Books like Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Red the Fiend*, do it well on an aesthetic level, on a language level. Certainly *Against God* packs

in so much slaughter and mayhem that the story moves at a good, page-turning, and then – and then – and then – clip. But unlike these books, which depict constant, crushing violence with visceral, macabre imagery, the violence in *Against God* lacks purpose, beauty, or weight. While Sorrentino's *Red the Fiend* and McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* demonstrate environmental and sociological triggers for violent behaviour, it is uncertain why Sylvain snaps in *Against God*. Is tragedy enough to trigger a sociopathic break?

Was the love of a good woman all that tied Sylvain to acceptable conduct? And if it was, does that make the character a man, a monster, or a child?

Without touching on these questions, the book's revenge tactics appear two-dimensional and melodramatic, and they frame Sylvain's acts within the constraints of a narrow, barely post-catechism worldview. Though perhaps it is such small-minded views of the world that can justify intentional harm against others. **mb**

Melissa Bull is a writer, editor, and translator. She lives in Montreal.

Love Bites

THE LOVE MONSTER
 Missy Marston
 Véhicule Press
 \$19.95, paper, 224pp
 978-1-55065-326-7

The *Love Monster* concerns the life and times of one unfortunately named Margaret H. Atwood. Unfortunate because this Margaret is not illustrious, celebrated, or even especially appreciated for anything besides her proofreading abilities at the insurance company where she works; the name is just another daily reminder of how important she isn't. This Margaret has split with her cheater-pants husband, deeply offended a co-worker, and alienated her family and friends; she seems to be on the brink of a mid-thirties existential crisis. She's not completely incapacitated by depression, but like *Bartleby, the Scrivener's* title character, she would "prefer not to": not attend a mandatory office workshop on tolerance, not talk to her mother or friends, not leave the apartment for any reason other than to check documents at what she spitefully calls "the button factory." Fortunately for Margaret, author Missy Marston has arranged a diverse and provocative cast of characters and situations to yank her out of her doldrums.

One of Marston's best tricks is turning the sympathy lens back and forth, showing the pocked, reflective surface of a character as seen by Margaret, and then tilting the view so we're peering into that character's murky depths. Margaret's bitchy, hilarious sum ups of everyone she meets (she refers to one particularly hated woman as "Chiclet" because of her squeaky white teeth and saccharine bearing) are countered when, in later chapters, their psyches are delicately unpeeled, revealing their particular human damage. Such generosity is surprisingly rare – too often writers rely on straw men and caricatures to set off their main character's authenticity. But every potential "type" in this book, from the kooky mom to the loser boss to the uptight Christian girl, is shown, finally, to be a person worthy of sympathy and respect; all except for Brian, the cheating husband. A pedophile who preys on girls at a church youth group gets more sympathy than poor old Brian. But even he gets a happy ending, of sorts.

Marston's prose is unfailingly charming. She's mastered the voice



of pissed off, sulky, self-effacing, vitriolic Margaret, a character who would be unbearable if she weren't so delightful to read. Her observations are wry,

funny, and often moving and insightful. With the exception of a few Miranda Julyesque flights of fancy (even Miranda July can't pull off Miranda July all the time), the chapters move forward compellingly.

There is, however, a grain of feel-good at the heart of this novel that keeps it from being truly gratifying. How to explain this? It's not that literature necessarily requires cynicism or pessimism or tragedy to be fulfilling. But there is something a little too pat, too ready-made, in Margaret's eventual redemption. She overcomes some obstacles, learns to see and love people for who they are, opens her heart, and by the end everyone is bathed in a warm Vaseline-coated glow. It's a little too *Movie of the Week*, and a little disappointing for a novel that otherwise seems to revel in life's complexity and the lack of assurance that everything does indeed get better.

And there are aliens. Why aliens? They seem like a device to zany up an otherwise plain-Jane story. (Reviewer's note: there's nothing wrong with a plain-Jane story if it's told well. Please spare us the zany devices.) Or, they take the place that God (or the author) occupies in other books: an unknowable, mostly unseen presence that has a happy ending in mind, but that puts us through the wringer to get there.

And, as we all know, it's the wringer that we want to read about, not the spotless garment that comes out the other side. But Marston gives us enough of both to make it worthwhile. **mb**

Anna Leventhal is a writer living in Montreal.



Reflections from the Seventh Inning

HALBMAN STEALS HOME
 B. Glen Rotchin
 Dundurn
 \$19.99, paper, 184pp.
 978-1459701274

Stories of midlife crises invite deep reflection on the past, wishful thinking of the present, and trepidations about the future. In his second novel, *Halbman Steals Home*, B. Glen Rotchin attempts to convey the complexities of a middle-aged man at a crossroads, but the book feels a little too much like the other stories of midlife crisis out there.

Mort Halbman is the tragicomic protagonist; happiness has eluded him his entire life. His ex-wife got away from him once she started a collection of self-help books, and now seems to be flourishing with a new pompous partner. His son, whose homosexuality has always bothered Mort, announces that he is getting married and wants to find a progressive rabbi for the ceremony. His midlife crisis is exacerbated by a mysterious fire that burns down his old family home in Hampstead. To cope with all the rapid changes in his life, Mort keeps on revisiting the site of his old home, though he is not sure what he is looking for exactly.

As events unfold in Mort's life, they also trigger a series of flashbacks, through which the reader learns of Mort's past. Despite his career success (and his economic comfort), Mort's life has been a series of disappointments and regrets. We learn about his passionless marriage to the daughter of a powerful garment industry mogul, his short stint in Los Angeles where he fails to "make it," and his children's rejection of the hetero-normative, bourgeois lifestyle Mort worked so hard to provide. Even Mort's fanatic love of baseball is marred by the Montreal Expos' 1981 loss.

Rotchin is great at evoking the deep sense of ambivalence we all feel for some of our family members; those towards whom we feel a *duty*, rather than a genuine bond. The funniest (and

the most awkward) moment in the book occurs when, in a fit of nostalgia, Mort visits his daughter Rusty's home unannounced, and ends up trying to bribe his young grandchildren to like him. The problem is that one of the grandchildren is only a toddler who does not yet understand the value of money, and sees it as something fit to put into her mouth. This of course only makes the mother panic, which results in some physical comedy

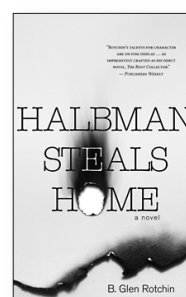
where bodies are piled on top of each other, everyone is trying to save the coin and the baby.

Rotchin addresses the ethnic segregation and tension between various Montreal communities, mostly through exchanges between Mort and a police officer of Italian descent. There's a brief glimpse of Asian groceries and restaurants, passed by on one of Mort's drives. Disappointingly, this exploration does not go beyond stereotypes and sensationalized media stories, such as crimes committed by the Italian mafia and tax fraud committed by Jewish merchants.

What stops the novel from being a truly immersive experience is its overactive plot; life seems to be showering Mort with one hardship after another. But the novel's biggest problem is the lack of depth in all of the characters, who are caricatures. Perhaps the exaggerated nature of the characters has to do with the fact that the novel stays with Mort's warped and bitter perspective. Seeing the events solely through his perspective, the reader never experiences the relief of a different family member's version. This omission feels like a missed opportunity.

Halbman Steals Home does not provide deep insights about human nature or family relations, but it is entertaining and a quick read. The nostalgic overview of Montreal's sad baseball history adds a bit of originality to a familiar tale. **mb**

Rosel Kim is currently studying law at McGill University. She also blogs at: jroselkim.wordpress.com.



BECAUSE IT FEELS RIGHT

BY ROB SHERREN

W

hen you sit down to talk books with Daniel Allen Cox, you're never quite sure what's going to happen, all you can be sure of is that it's going to be interesting.

This is the time for full disclosure: in 2010 I worked closely with Daniel when he was my mentor for the Quebec Writers' Federation's fantastic Mentorship Program. Over four months Daniel helped me coax a novel out of my head and we had a blast. When I listen now to the recordings I made of our meetings I can see how we slid from topic to topic in what seemed like a serendipitous way – and yet he was constantly underscoring the importance of craft, goals, and structure.

In *Basement of Wolves* Daniel's commitment to craft reveals itself the same way as a thief's; you don't notice a thing until suddenly the book is over and your underwear's on backwards. He's a tough nut to crack because he shows you only *just* enough, but, during our conversation, I almost think that the question Daniel answered by making reference to "desire paths" said as much as anything else about his approach to writing and storytelling and perhaps even to living life.



Rob Sherren: What made you want to write about Hollywood and an actor turning 40?

Daniel Allen Cox: Los Angeles fascinates me. Downtown Hollywood is a strange place. Once I was shopping for vinyl at Amoeba Music when the floor started to shake. I assumed the vibrations were from the Steely Dan [gig] the store was hosting next door, but my friend confirmed it was a tremor. And the movies have always fascinated me. It was time to work my love of film into my artistic practice.

RS: Michael-David is perhaps your most neurotic character to date. How did it feel to be inside his head?

DAC: It's not difficult for me to enter a state of neurosis when writing. I imagine it's some kind of precondition, given the number of assumptions, transpositions, projections, and predictions that writers carry from page to page.

RS: As the inertia of the novel's movie takes hold, Michael-David feels helpless, like he's a victim of the film's destination rather than its agent. Some novelists speak of the same thing happening to their projects, while others famously declare their characters to be galley slaves who do their exact bidding. How is it for you?

DAC: It depends on the book. *Basement of Wolves* was the least planned of my books. It began as a very ominous feeling that I just ran ahead with, and then somehow gave faces to the feelings, and turned it all into something resembling a book.

RS: Your characters often have atypical relationships with public buildings and spaces: I'm thinking of *Shuck's* narrator sleeping in a shoe store; *Krakow Melt's* parkour pyro; Tim in this book haunts an LA tourist hotel. They feel to me like urban hackers who re-task architecture for their own purposes. Is there a line of subversion or social commentary that runs through these characters or something else completely?

DAC: I suppose most of my characters want to configure the cityscape to suit their personalities and, in some cases, their political and ideological ends. That could be it. I should be doing more of that. Subversion can take many forms. I was recently talking to an urban planner friend about "desire paths": routes formed when people ignore planned walkways and instead cut their own through lawns, etc., because it feels right.

RS: The incredibly poetic passage about rimming suggests that the act has the power to prevent wars and geopolitical unrest, "... all it takes is a little lick." If we are to save this planet, what contemporary ass is in most desperate need of a good rim job?

DAC: This scene appears to be making the rounds. The idea of achieving world peace through the asshole is not a new idea – see "The Purple Resistance Army Manifesto" by Bruce LaBruce. I could list a bunch of Conservative politicians who could use a rim job, but at this point that might already be cliché. What I'm really thinking about is international diplomacy. Could tongues have melted the Cold War?

RS: At a certain point, the future of the novel's film seems to hang on the balance of a studio maintenance man's opinion. How often do you think life turns on precariously serendipitous moments?

DAC: Rob, all the time! I think every life turn is serendipitous. When we consider an event banal, it's probably our lack of imagination about how every moment is the result of a mind-blowing series of twists and turns. We have let the mundane take too much control of our lives. Enough!

RS: Chapter five is the beginning of a daring point-of-view experiment. Chris Culpepper's chapters could easily have been told from a conventional perspective, but you specifically remind readers that what you're doing is intentional. Can you talk a bit about the thought processes that went into choosing to do it this way, and the opportunities and challenges it presented?

DAC: The POV in this book wasn't planned, it was a resolution to a problem – an attempt to make two different stories work together; a total improvisation and risk. I'm grateful to have writing mentors and my editor to confer with about this tricky sort of stuff.

RS: I know you're a vinyl aficionado (I've heard your copy of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's *Building on the Rock* album); do you write or edit to music, and if so, were there any albums that influenced this book?

DAC: Yeah, I try to pick up weird used vinyl when I can. I always listen to

music when writing a first draft, to keep the energy flowing and my mind open. I put *The Art of Noise* into heavy rotation last year. But I never listen to music while editing. I need to read the sentences out loud to hear if they work.

RS: Your books have taken on some of the world's great cities: New York City, Krakow, and now Los Angeles. Your hometown, Montreal, has been looking at you all night – when are you going to drop the gloves, tear off your shirt, and throw down with it in the alley?

DAC: This is the question I get asked the most, and you know what? I answer it differently every time! I've been in the city streets a lot these days, and I find more energy here than ever before. Historically, that's been a potent writing catalyst for me. We'll see what happens. mrb

@RobSherren reviews books for the *mRb* and the *Winnipeg Review* and is currently seeking a publisher for the novel he completed while working with Daniel Allen Cox.



BASEMENT OF WOLVES
Daniel Allen Cox
Arsenal Pulp Press
\$15.95, paper, 151pp
9781551524467

THE
MILE END
CAFÉ

by Leila Marshy

Ode to Public Transport

I own a bicycle, but I rent a Bixi every now and then for the sheer thrill of it. Participating in the great Bixi experiment feels much like voting, and I get a mad attack of grinning. There we all are, me and you and you and you and you and you, pedalling furiously in what Taras Grescoe in *Straphanger* calls a “crucial meeting ground for society.” In other words, the street.

In his exploration of how we can go about “saving our cities and ourselves from the automobile,” Grescoe reaches beyond familiar economic, demographic, and ecological arguments to wonder about our sense of community and our responsibilities to each other. After all, “When a society eliminates public space – when your only contact with your fellow citizen happens at 55 miles per hour, separated by layers of glass – it stops knowing itself, and can start believing the most outrageous lies: that crime is rampant, that people have no shared interests, that races and classes have no common ground.”

The twentieth-century city did its best to eradicate this common ground. Rail lines demarcated the “wrong side of the tracks,” freeways flattened entire neighbourhoods, financial institutions “redlined” areas where they would not support businesses or lend money. No wonder success is measured by how much we can “get away from it all.” But just what are getting away from anyways? Short answer: each other.

Life is stacked differently when we squeeze together on the bus or the metro or in bike lanes. There’s a white noise of awareness, a bodily din that feeds a broader perception of the universe. Suddenly our personal to-do lists don’t quite make it to the top of the cosmic priority heap – not necessarily a bad thing. Not for nothing that Jack Layton rode a bike to work while Rob Ford, barely motile suburbanite Toronto mayor, said, “cyclists are a pain in the ass.”

Ford is only the latest in a long line of what Bianca Mugenyi and Yves Engler call *homo automobilis*: man descended from his need for the car. Written while drinking copious doses of piss and vinegar, *Stop Signs: Cars and Capitalism* is, like *Straphanger*, a road trip, this time through the rusting American heartland. Eschewing cars, they criss-cross the country wherever a lowly Greyhound will take

them; disembarking, they are often the only pedestrians for miles. Seen from this perspective, America is a ghost town of indifference. At a late-night stop in the South, for example, they are refused service at Wendy’s because it’s after 10 p.m. and they did not arrive by car.

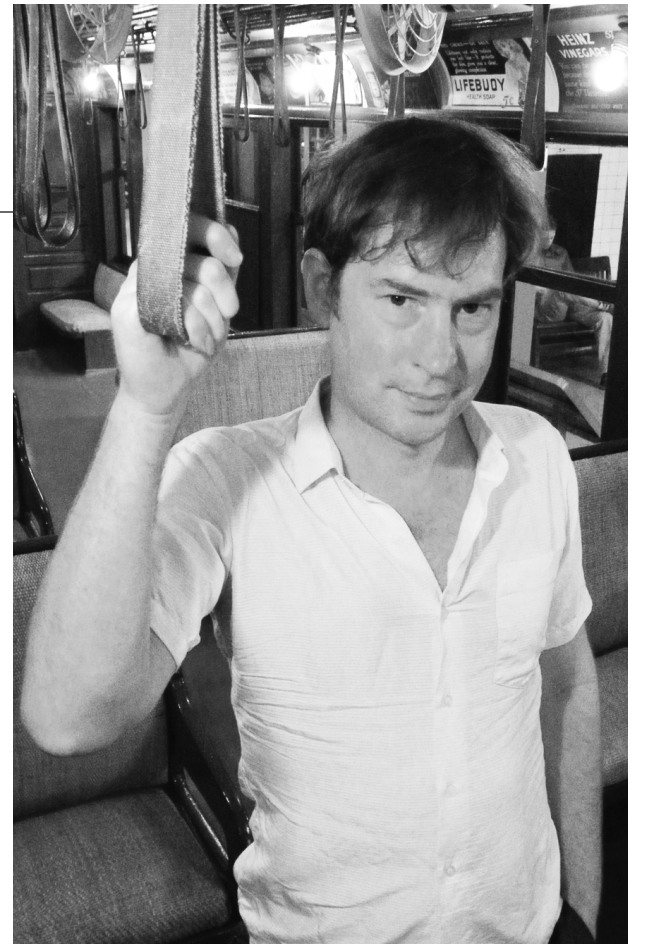
“Every time you choose to drive,” Grescoe says, “you are, in a tiny way, opting out of, and thus diminishing, the public realm.” While car companies tout such things as freedom, speed, and cones of silence, cities need very little of any of these things. What they need is shared responsibility, slowing down, and joyful noise. Who makes that joyful noise? Each other.

Public transportation is about so much more than moving a maximum number of people at a lowest possible cost. And you can’t only measure it as a wedge in a budget pie chart. Mass transit, if

allowed to be so, is a city’s nervous system. It’s how we move and feel and see. We’re lucky in Montreal, benefiting from what the STM dubs a “transportation cocktail”: a multiplicity of options that include bus, taxi, bike, metro, and Communauto. All of this together helps cast a net of security and cohesiveness around the city in a way that endless streams of cars do not.

Jean Drapeau, mayor of Montreal for an unbelievable 29 years, once said, “what the people want are monuments.” Actually, what the pharaohs want are monuments. What the people want is what Jane Jacobs called “spontaneous order.” Human-scale neighbourhoods full of dense, diverse, and mixed uses. Neighbourhoods where you can “leave your key at the delicatessen across the street.” Substitute deli for *depanneur*, and you know what she’s talking about.

Sometimes when I’m on a Bixi I think of other projects the city has recently embraced: the Pine-

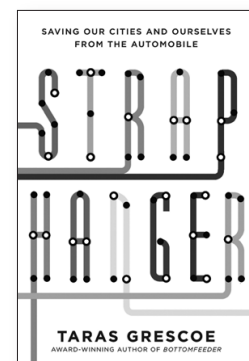


Park interchange, the urban beach in the Old Port, the Cité du Multimédia, Saint-Viateur East, and the promise to replace the Bonaventure expressway with a waterfront park. As someone who remembers the decrepit 1980s in Montreal, when rent was \$200 a month for a reason, it’s sometimes still hard to believe that the city has actually gotten sexier. Not a Drapeau-phallic-Big-O sexy, but a sultry *je ne sais quoi* hot.

It’s hot in a way that the latest \$30,000 car will never be. The businessman in a suit, his briefcase strapped to the front of the bicycle – he’s hot. The woman in espadrilles and Jackie O sunglasses ringing her bell down the de Maisonneuve bike path is hot. Everyone on the 80 bus is smiling for some reason. Commuters streaming out of the Place des Arts metro and taking a minute to try the musical swings at the Quartier des spectacles are all gorgeous. And I can’t take my eyes off those elegant fixed-gear bikes that still seem out of time and place. I watch the world go by while hanging out at an empty Bixi stand waiting for a bike to arrive. And so I wait and wait but I don’t mind cause it’s a beautiful day and everyone is just so bloody hot.

When Jane Jacobs was asked by CBC in 1969 just who did she think she was, an unknown upstart challenging the monolithic orthodoxy of top-down urban planning, she answered simply: “My name is Jane Jacobs and I live in the city.” That was enough for her; it explained everything. mrs

Leila Marshy is editor of *The Rover*.



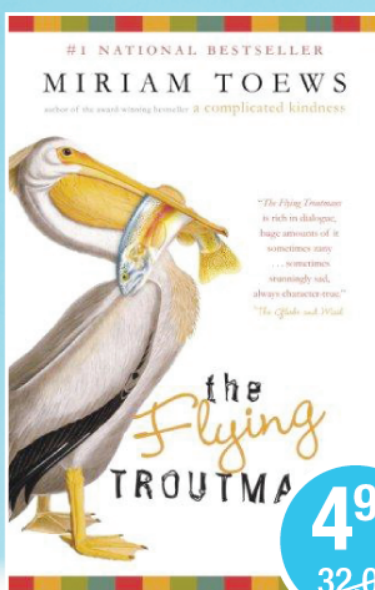
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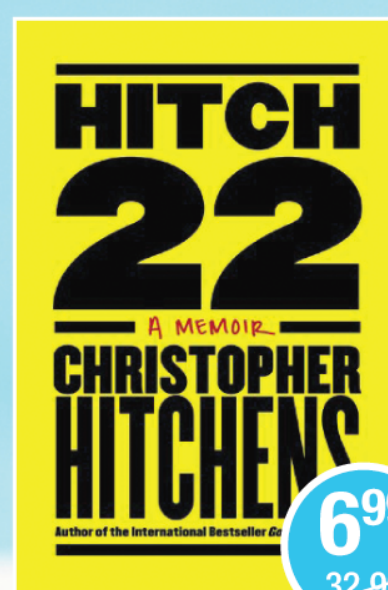
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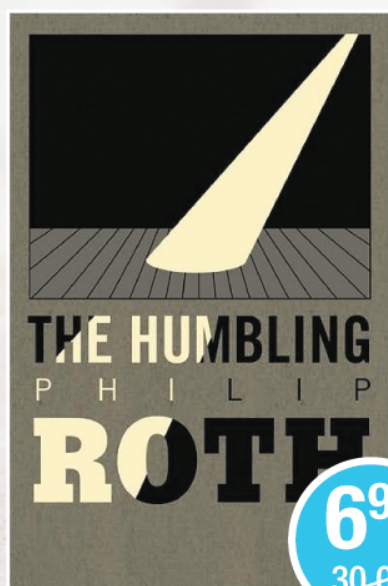
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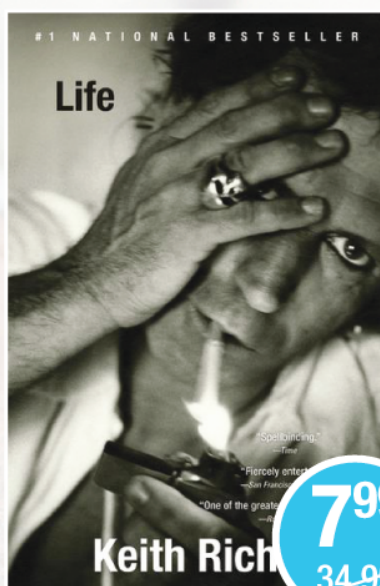
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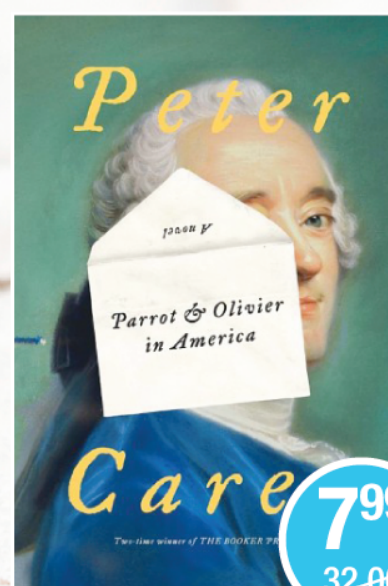
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