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SUMMER 2024



BLAISE NDALA • NOUR ABI-NAKHOUL • WALTER SCOTT





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Photo credit: Paul Litherland

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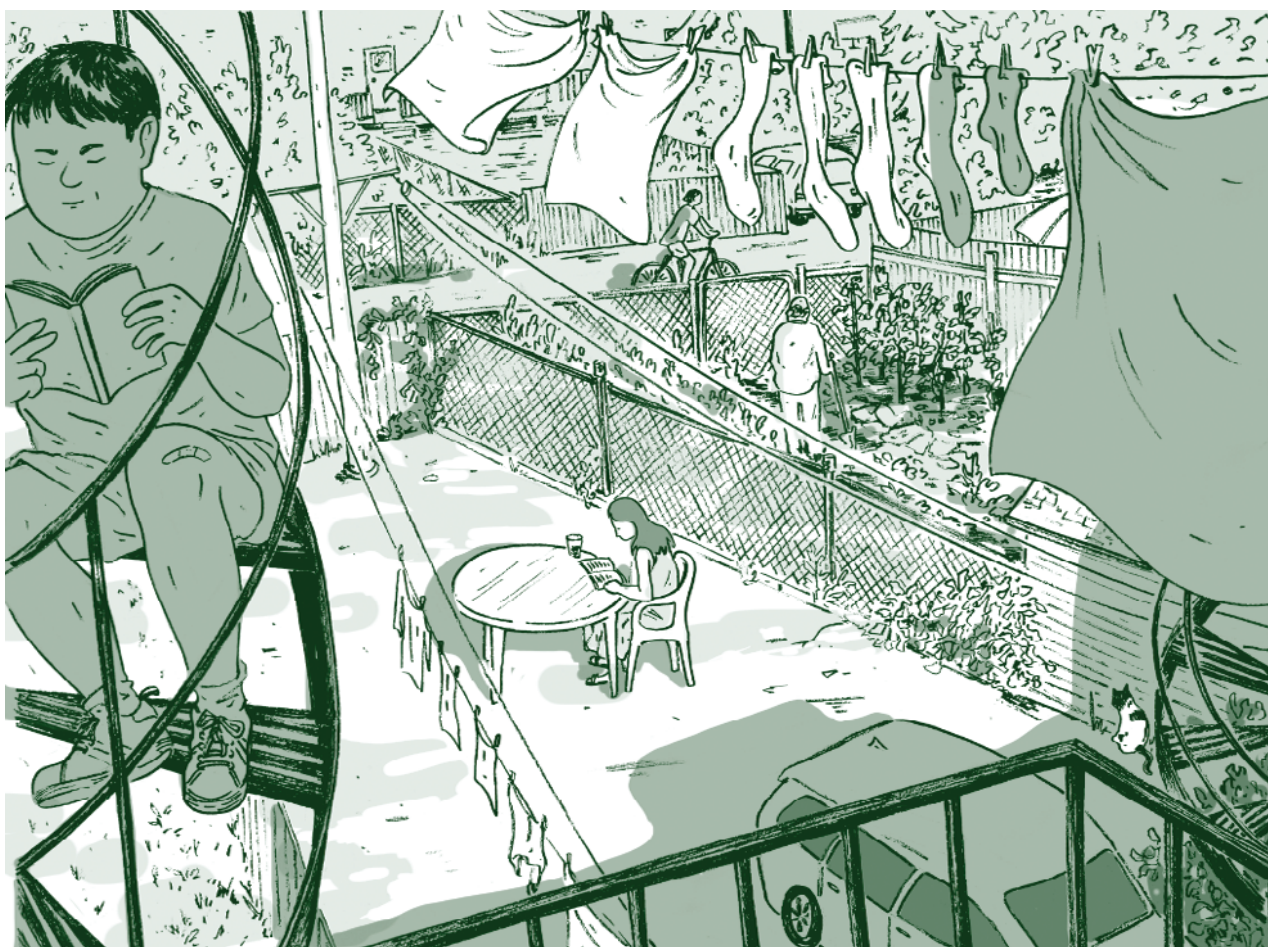
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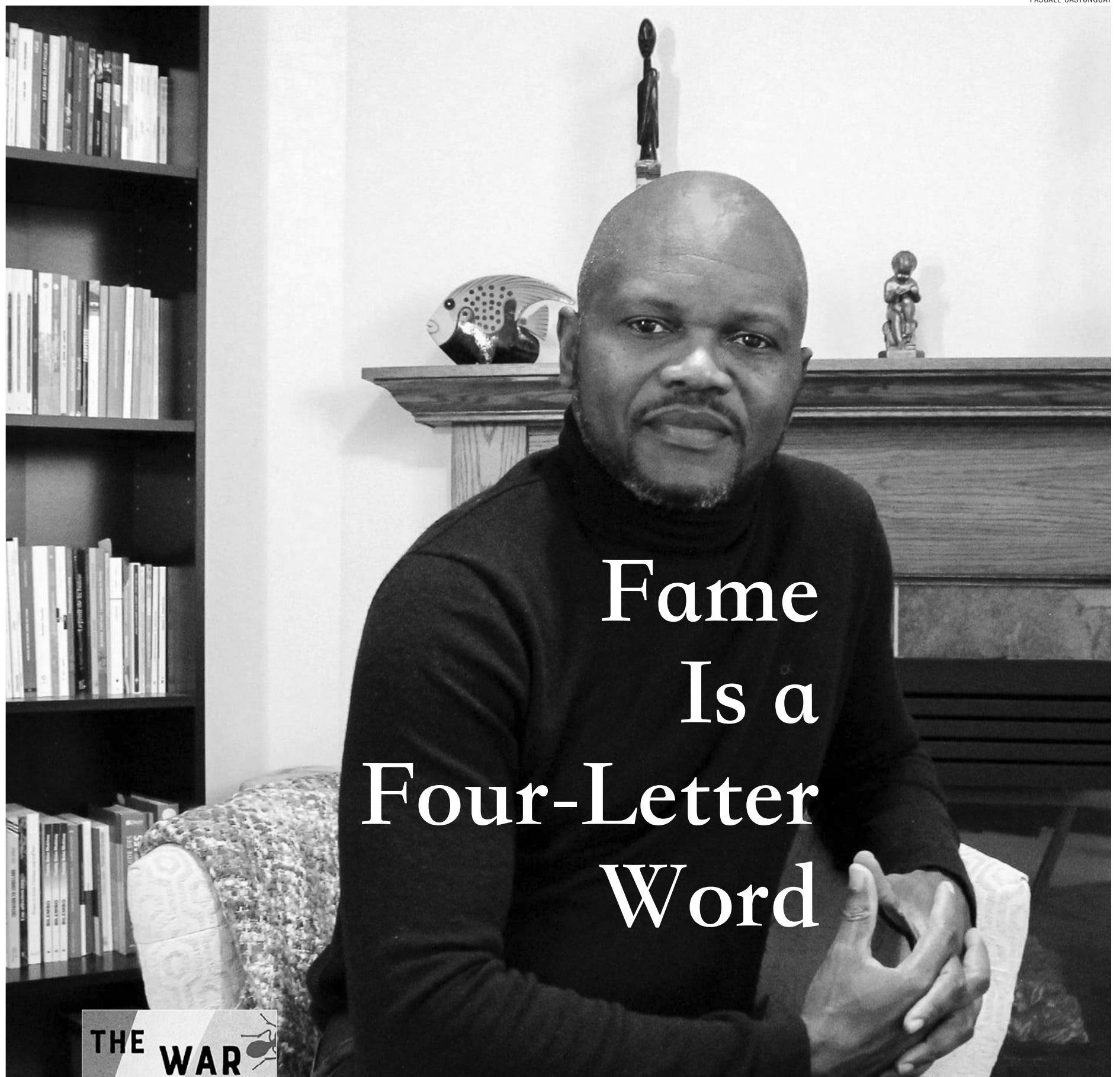


Zoe Maeve is a comics artist and illustrator who lives in Montreal/Tiohtià:ke. They have published two graphic novels and are working on a third. They like to spend their summers people watching in the ruelle with their two cats.

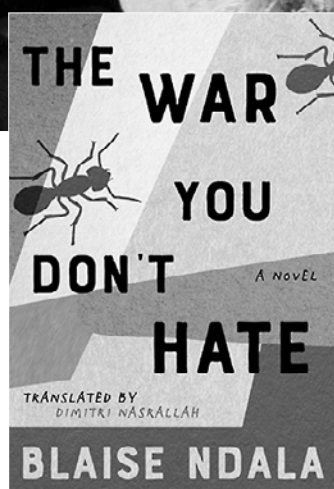


BY AMI SANDS BRODOFF

PASCALE CASTONGUAY



# Fame Is a Four-Letter Word



The War You Don't Hate  
Blaise Ndala  
Véhicule Press  
\$22.95, paper, 400pp  
9781550656558

“**W**hose Story Is It?” People familiar with this icebreaker party game know how it works: Guests write down a story and drop it into a container. A mediator reads the stories aloud and the group tries to guess whose story it is, while the person telling the tale works to convince the group that it’s their own.



When it comes to atrocities of war, this is a dangerous game, as dramatized in Blaise Ndala's blistering second novel, *The War You Don't Hate*. Originally published as *Sans capote ni kalachnikov* in 2017 to considerable acclaim, and now brilliantly translated by Dimitri Nasrallah, the novel is a searing satire of war and celebrity and their improbable connection, centring on the crucial question: Whose story is this, and who has the right to tell it, let alone sell it?

Originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ndala left his homeland in 2003 for Belgium – Congo's former colonial occupier – where he earned a degree in human rights law. In 2007, he emigrated to Canada and now works as a lawyer in Ottawa. When I ask him over Zoom about his path to becoming a writer, he talks fondly about his parents' influence, both of whom were teachers and avid readers. From boyhood, Ndala and his dad read together. "He'd stop a story part-way and ask me to imagine what happened next," Ndala tells me. "It became a game between us. I'd write the rest of the story and present it to my dad." Ndala's mom was active in a theatre group. "I helped her memorize her part, which gave me an appetite to do theatre myself." He performed in plays at school, and later on, tried his hand as a playwright. When Ndala was punished in math class for writing poems, instead of calculating sums, his mom convinced him to keep going.

"My dad left us when I was eleven," Ndala explains. "My mom urged me on: 'Don't stop telling stories. One day, your dad will be in a bookshop or a library and spot a book with your name on it. He'll realize he made a mistake by leaving.'" Ndala's dad eventually returned home, and writing became its own reward.

Ndala's first novel, *J'irai danser sur la tombe de Senghor* (2014), won the Ottawa Book Award for French fiction, was a finalist for the Trillium Book Award, and has been optioned for film. Ndala is writing the screenplay. His third novel, *Dans le ventre du Congo* (2021), received the Prix Ivoire pour la Littérature Africaine d'Expression Francophone and the Prix Ahmadou-Kourouma, and appeared in English last year as *In the Belly of the Congo*. "Are there common themes or subjects that run through your work?" I ask. "My obsession with Congo," he replies. "It's a country with many faces. Being a Congolese Canadian shapes my pen."

*The War You Don't Hate* focuses on the widespread aftershocks of the Second Congo War, also called Africa's World War, the deadliest conflict since World War II. The Transitional Government of the Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC) took power in July 2003; however, the peace process in eastern Congo has remained fragile.

The story opens in 2002 at the Academy Awards in Los Angeles, where Véronique Quesnel of Montreal basks in applause as she accepts the Oscar for best documentary film. Her picture, *Sona: Rape and Terror in the Heart of Darkness*, is the wrenching story of Sona, a Congolese teenager who escaped sex slavery. The pièce de résistance? Sona herself joins Véronique on stage, as Congolese singer-songwriter Lokua Kanza's music envelops them all, and Sona bursts into tears: "Tears, the bottoms of which seem to glitter like shards of crystal, bead the faces on the giant screen which displays, trembling and bleary, the larger-than-life image that will sear the minds of all those watching..."

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## Whose story is this, and who has the right to tell it, let alone sell it?

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Meanwhile, from his room at Southern Cross Hospital in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, rebel fighter Master Corporal Red Ant of the Front for African Dignity, who battled the President-General and his "trash army" for "the good of the movement and the salvation of the country," spews out his righteous rage in blue pen in a yellow notebook, two of the colours of the DRC flag. There, in his diary, "there will be no philosopher, no prophet perched on a pedestal, only Truth strutting around naked from one page to the next." His anger is brined in grievances legion and legitimate: his father and his uncle's murders, the displacement of families, widespread poverty, and an ongoing humanitarian crisis in eastern Congo.

With his signature irony, Ndala dramatizes Red Ant's favourite pastime: watching a TV show called *Heart to Body*, in which has-been celebrities live the life of Burundian refugees and are filmed 24/7, in competition for votes. Red Ant's obsession with this series is a deft echo of Véronique's questionable ethics in making her documentary about Sona, and speaks to Ndala's primary concern: the capitalization of others' misery for material gain and celebrity.

The narrative tension ramps up when Red Ant and his wordsmith cousin, Baby Che,


unite to avenge their fathers' murders. Both are haunted by Véronique, with good reason. Their rebel army was complicit in the capture and rape of Sona and the other "loot women," and thus, they are in the crosshairs of Véronique's "shoulder rifle," or camera.

There are other surprises. Well into the narrative, the reader discovers a shocking yet inevitable twist about Sona's fate and the fact that Véronique had to resort to a shady Plan B in order to bring her documentary to the silver screen, starring her poster girl. To avoid spoilers, I'll just say: the savage ironies pile up. In turn, Red Ant and Baby Che wonder: How did a well-intentioned activist become an ethically suspect filmmaker? And how can they take advantage of her descent?

*The War You Don't Hate* is concerned with the chaotic ravages of war, as well as our contemporary obsession with fame and the ruthless quest for notoriety at any cost. Fame is indeed the worst kind of four-letter word when it's gained at the expense of exploiting others' misfortune. After the war, with one rebel conspirator detained in The Hague awaiting trial for his war crimes, the others seal a devil's pact: a coup de grâce, bathing them both in fetid celebrity.

*The War You Don't Hate* is a voice-driven novel with a rapier's edge. Ndala's tone is sly, barbed, and seasoned with gallows humour. The biting satiric Hollywood scenes contrast markedly with the raw, raunchy rants of Red Ant. Ndala confides that getting the tone and rhythm right was his biggest challenge. "It took me three tries."

"What do you hope readers will get out of the novel?" I ask. "I hope they will catch what they want to catch," he says, adding, "There's a dark side to giving, to being a do-gooder, a violent side. People have their own agendas. It's about power, who has it, who doesn't. It's about visibility, who is seen and who remains invisible."

These days, with his work as a human rights lawyer and the demands and joys of being a relatively new dad, Ndala squeezes his writing in between the cracks. The good news is a fourth novel is on the way. "I sent it to my publisher and will soon work on revisions." Its working title: *The Glory of the Traitors*. The novel takes place in North America, Europe, and Lubumbashi: Congo exerts its magnetic force once again. 

**Ami Sands Brodoff** is completing her sixth book, the novel *Treasures That Prevail*. Her story collection, *The Sleep of Apples*, was a finalist for the International Book Awards and is now available as an audiobook.



# fiction

## Always Here, Never Alone

El Ghourabaa

A Queer and Trans Collection of Oddities

Edited by Samia Marshy and  
Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch

Metonymy Press

\$21.95, paper, 176pp

9781998898022

With contributing writers from both the local and international community, Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch and Samia Marshy share their co-edited anthology, *El Ghourabaa*. The foreword is written by Sherine Elbanhawy, founder of the literary magazine *Rowayat*. Both Elbanhawy's forward and the introduction from the editors give us some cultural and historical context behind Arab anthologies, as well as the general importance of anthologies in the literary world. El Bechelany-Lynch and Marshy walk us through some of their process: deciding which questions are more meaningful to ask, what it takes to birth an anthology, and the joy of discovering your favourite authors within them.

*El Ghourabaa* offers a glimpse of the generational lived experiences of queer and trans Arabs/SWANA (Southwest Asians and North Africans) with a se-

lection of poems, short stories, and non-fiction. From navigating the locker room in a trans body, to lessons on remembering and on making love, to tender and heartbreaking childhood memories, the anthology is all at once wholesome, delicious, dark, and unpredictable.

It starts off with an excerpt from the prominent lesbian Lebanese writer Etel Adnan's poetry book, *Shifting the Silence* (2020). The late writer's seasoned pen confronts death and humanness in a way that is aching, fluid, and authentic. George Abraham's poetry follows, and is raw, melancholic, and jarring – invoking a sense of dis/connection between land and body – while Olivia Tapiero conjures a haunting mythology steeped in ancestral knowledge. There are many more notable poems full of hair-raising imagery, painting complex portraits of the human experience that may leave readers stunned and out of breath.

There are stories that ease us in and quickly become disorienting, absorbing, and uncomfortable, like Karim Kattan's "Night Work," which brings to life the all too familiar upheaval and



SURAH FIELD-GREEN

stress that nearby construction causes. In Naja Sahar's psychedelic "Sun of my heart," Sun, descended from a line of textile merchants skilled in the craft of communicating with fabrics, grieves the loss of a loved one while coming of age as a trans person. It illustrates the radical act of self-acceptance as returning to one's self, and is one of the few short stories shared in the collection

that displays the art of storytelling as an archival practice, passed down through generations.

Poems like Nofel's "To Love Each Other in Arabic" and El Bechelany-Lynch's "Nancy Ajram made me gay" are just two of many pieces that emphasize the limits of expression in

continued on page 18

## Confronting Closure

Little Crosses

Sabrina Reeves

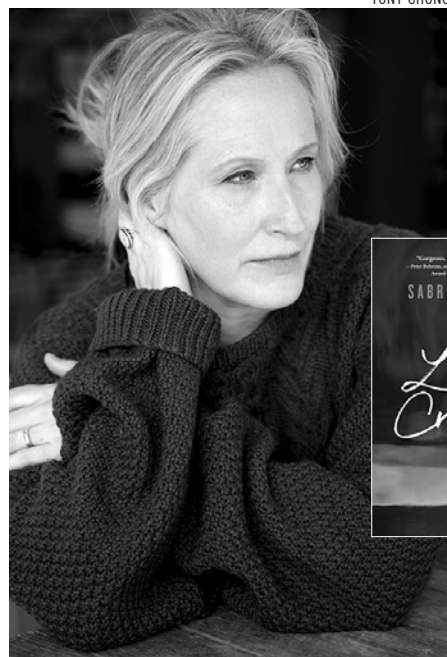
House of Anansi Press

\$23.99, paper, 344pp

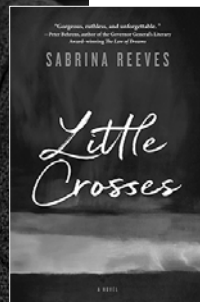
9781487011840

*Little Crosses* reflects on what makes families unique – and where we have followed the same paths as many before us. Cassie's mother Nina is a charismatic and creative woman who is no longer able to care for herself. As her memory loss and confusion, resulting from alcoholic dementia, worsen, her adult children must place her in professional care. We follow Cassie and Nina across several decades and locations, including Albuquerque, Montreal, and New York. The result is a moving story of family, care, and mothers and daughters; readers who have given care to ill parents will find their experiences mirrored in this novel.

We meet Cassie and her brothers at a shared painful moment of forcing their mother into medical care. Nina's doctor



TONY CHONG



tasks Cassie with narrativizing her mother's life and illness: "Put what you think are the relevant names and events into a story. Have fun with it." Cassie begins with her earliest memories and traces Nina's influence on her life: her and her brothers' childhood, their absent father, their subsequent father figures, careers, children, marriages, and moves. Cassie's dreams, lyrical and abstract and interspersed throughout the novel

during her most vulnerable moments, find deeper insight into Nina's behaviour. In the present day, Cassie confronts closure and grief about her mother while raising her own daughters.

Sabrina Reeves has woven a tapestry of characters whose nuances and conflicts are all too real. As Nina's vivacity turns to volatility and her children must revoke her autonomy to protect her, Reeves' skillful writing sticks the landing of the naturally emotional premise. The characters' conflicts could have easily been overdone, but Reeves navigates the act of grieving a loved one who is still alive with a deft touch. Nina's lucid moments are haunting, especially as Cassie puts her own motherhood in perspective. Reeves' narrative flows smoothly through Cassie's memories, and her epiphanies resonate with relatable allegories such as: "Our family is like a teacup that has broken and been glued back together; tiny pieces are missing, the cracks are distracting, and it no longer holds tea. But for some reason, we've put it back on the shelf just the same."

At 344 pages, however, *Little Crosses* is longer than it needs to be. Some of

Reeves' striking prose loses its impact in the length of scenes that could have packed a bigger punch in brevity. At the three-quarters mark, Cassie's reflections on Nina began to feel overly cyclical, and I was ready to return to the present.

*Little Crosses* may have had more impact as a shorter novel, but several scenes still stand out, including the titular line. Cassie reflects on the "little crosses," monuments that pepper the southwest landscape, with the broadly applicable yet incisive words: "Death is everywhere, all the time, irreverently. It's there even when no one has died." Reeves' characters and their words will stick with me for a long time. The vulnerable truths of family ties and hard decisions are difficult to swallow, but they appear effortless on the page. In much the same way that Cassie recognizes her strengths and weaknesses in Nina, most readers will encounter a similar type of reflection and catharsis in Cassie, especially daughters who have been caregivers to their mothers. Reeves accomplishes the painful task of summarizing a loved one's life with magnificent details and delicate insights. **msb**

**Zoe Shaw** is a writer and editor based in Montreal. She is the Managing Editor at *carte blanche* literary magazine.



## Pleasure's Debts

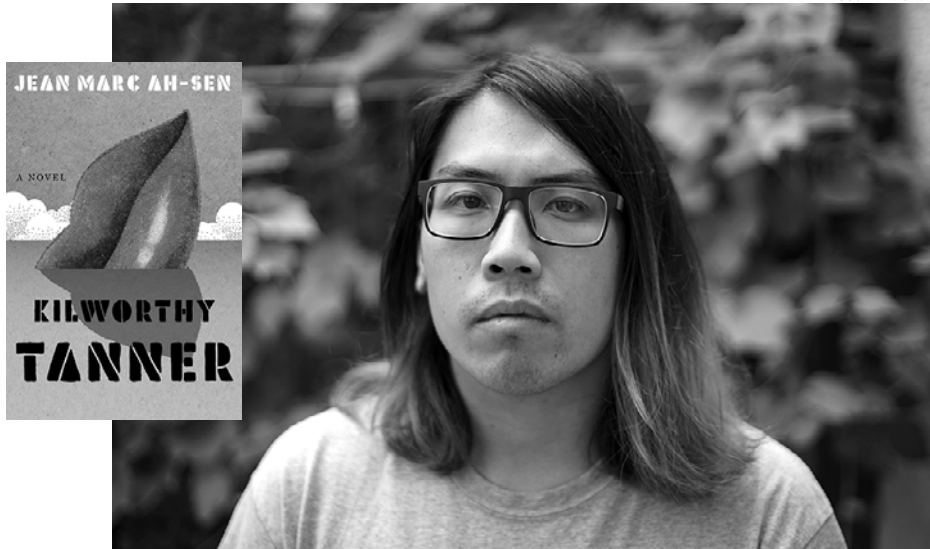
Kilworthy Tanner  
Jean Marc Ah-Sen  
Véhicule Press  
\$22.95, paper, 280pp  
9781550656633

Young, broke, ambitious, and with a penchant for older women, Jonno has all the makings of a great bohemian novelist. What he does not have is a novel. A chance encounter with the famed novelist Kilworthy Tanner brings with it the promise of both literary success and romantic fulfillment. The eponymous antiheroine of Jean Marc Ah-Sen's third novel, Kilworthy is as beautiful as she is brilliant. A reluctant mentor, domineering lover, and master agitator, Kilworthy soon

height of his stylistic powers, Ah-Sen evokes the lurid, laugh-aloud creative genius of the Earl of Rochester, if that debauched nobleman had penned the screenplay to *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. In one memorable episode early in the novel, a bloodied Jonno, fresh from fending off another of Kilworthy's suitors, is tugged by his flaccid member across a lamplit Toronto street: "She dragged me back to my apartment before I had a chance to zip my pants up and so we walked the twenty metres back home with my shrivelled joystick fluttering in the breeze."

For all the loquacious entertainment of petty rivalry and lukewarm smut, the novel's emotive core rests in the evolving relationship between a burgeoning writer and their practice or, in Jonno's case, unpracticed naiveté. Despite his creative promise, Jonno cannot write, or subconsciously refuses to write, the novel that will

JUSTIN LAGACE



becomes infatuated with Jonno's infatuation, enveloping him into the fold of a lightly fictionalized, highly aestheticized Toronto literary scene.

Soon after, evening trysts devolve into a years-long romantic affair and artistic partnership. Together, Kil and Jonno develop a kind of automatic style of tag-team writing they term "translissitude," a method in which one person outlines stories for the other to complete.

Much to his chagrin, Jonno is alone in neither his infatuation nor admiration for Kilworthy. In her wake, Kil leaves a long trail of begrudged friends and lovers who, vulture-like, circle the famed artist to capitalize on her notoriety and advance their own careers. In this respect, Jonno might be the sole person in Kilworthy's life who truly cares for her. His love is eclipsed only by his frustration with her jealous and self-destructive antics. For all the artistic promise their relationship holds, rather than working on his manuscript, Jonno spends his days assuaging Kilworthy's fears and capitulating to her anxieties in a noxious cycle of drug-fueled sexcapades and petty rivalries.

Although self-described as a "pseudobiography," *Kilworthy Tanner* more closely resembles a *Künstlerroman*, a novel about the formation of a young artist. Equally is it a comedy of manners, a work of hyper-aestheticized social realism for underemployed, over-titillated literary types. At the

free him from Kilworthy's long shadow. For Jonno, Kilworthy embodies an anxiety of influence that takes on Freudian pathology: when the object of inspiration is also the greatest impediment to its completion. Is he creatively stunted, sexually perverted, or just a kid who's gotten in over his head? More importantly, does the pain of heart-break and trials of chasing literary success justify the material for a great novel and, if so, is he even the one to write it?

Jonno's story will be familiar to many an aspiring artist in its not-so-very romantic depictions of self-delusion and self-dismissal. It is also a meditation on whether a writer has possession over their craft. In a rag-tag circle of artists who peddle their voices as commodities, and when the next advance might be years away, the only thing Jonno or Kilworthy can ever possess, even momentarily, is power over one another.

*Kilworthy Tanner* succeeds in recasting the pains of artistic creation into an absurd, slapstick, and often self-deprecating odyssey of Jonno's artistic formation that asks what artists of all talents owe to themselves and one another, and to what lengths they might go to claim their due. msb

**Ronny Litvack-Katzman** is a writer and poet who, after a decade in Montreal, still gets lost in the metro. He holds an MA in English from McGill University.

## Apocalypse Cancelled

Mood Swings  
Frankie Barnet  
McClelland & Stewart  
\$24.95, paper, 360pp  
9780771010187

What does it take to imagine the end of the world? If you ask contemporary writers, not much – with climate change and the rise of fascism, present-day dystopia is as much the stuff of journalism as it is science fiction. Frankie Barnet begins *Mood Swings* on this note, but then takes it even further. Writing about dystopia may not require much imagination in this day and age, but writing about a fail-safe solution to the apocalypse? That's much more novel.

*Mood Swings* opens with an animal insurrection, with every reptile, fish, and non-human mammal turning on people. Society shuts down, echoing zombie fiction – or, more eerily, life during the pandemic. Then, just as quickly, the counter-strike: the killing of all animals for the safety of humanity.

In a post-fauna world, roommates Jenlena and Daphne, along with Daphne's boyfriend Jordan (who has been publicly "cancelled" by his underage ex-girlfriend), try not to succumb to one big fat existential crisis. Jenlena steals and sells plants as pets and dresses up as a dog for pay; Daphne and Jordan mourn the loss of their cat and grasp at what little control they have over their lives. With no animals, the climate crisis looms more than ever. Barnet leans into cli-fi clichés – the end of the world beginning with a pregnant protagonist, impending doom leading to confessions of guilt – only to break them, with an abortion five pages later and a culty podcast host calling out confessors: Apologizing is "pretty easy, really, when you've got no intention of changing. You know you don't have to because you haven't got the time."

Enter billionaire Roderick Maeve and his promise of a miraculous time machine that will solve all problems. Roderick offers a glimmer of hope that cuts through the malaise of being a twenty-something-year-old in the twenty-first century. When Jenlena runs into him at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel on boulevard René-Lévesque, she leaves behind her furry Dalmatian suit (both literally and figuratively) to enter a world of celebrity sexting and NDA-worthy secrets.

While it may seem at first that Jenlena is the novel's protagonist, a lot of the book is about and from the



Mood Swings  
Frankie Barnet



perspectives of those close to her – Jordan's journey to and after getting "cancelled," Daphne's new lease on life once the time machine is announced, and Roderick's worries over

what he wants and what he can have. I was initially unsure of the POV shifts, with multiple ones occurring within some chapters, but as the novel progressed, I found the narrative tumult appealing. The chaos is easy to follow and aptly reflects the chaos of the novel's and reader's worlds – a discordant clash of thoughts and opinions that somehow remains enjoyable.

Barnet's biting wit, while probably not for everyone, reflects the rising tide of postmodern millennial fiction, her style reminiscent of its quintessential women writers – Patricia Lockwood, Miranda July, Ottessa Moshfegh. This is most clearly seen in her dual wielding of sincerity and irony: an impassioned post about an abused sister ending with a string of cringey hashtags, or Roderick's attempt at candour being interrupted by his assistant: "Sir, are you practising for a podcast?"

If I had one gripe with the novel, it would be that Barnet hits the nihilistic nail on the head a few too many times. The persistent mantra of "nothing matters," first because the world is ending and then because it's being saved, starts to feel repetitive. The moments of real connection are when she moves away from this: Daphne and Jenlena discussing their ever-changing future, their thoughts slipping "free from their cage. There was no better feeling than actually wanting tomorrow." And, after all, is this not what matters most in a world doomed or redeemed? To want, to hope for, tomorrow to come. msb

**Nived Dharmaraj** is associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books* and aspiring local trivia champion.



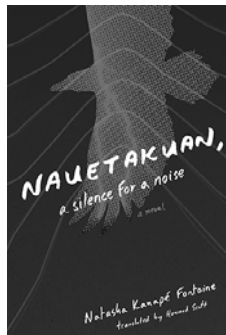
## Identity Crisis

**Nauetakuan, a silence for a noise**  
**Natasha Kanapé Fontaine**  
 Translated by Howard Scott  
 Book\*hug Press  
 \$23.00, paper, 236pp  
 9781771668941

There is a lot that Monica doesn't know, about herself, her family, her past, her Innu identity.

When we meet the protagonist of Natasha Kanapé Fontaine's debut novel, *Nauetakuan, a silence for a noise*, she is basically a blank canvas. She wanders around a Rebecca Belmore exhibition, wondering why the works of the multidisciplinary Anishinaabe artist have such a powerful impact on her. She sits in a dark room and sobs as she watches Belmore's performance of *Vigil*, a response to missing and murdered Indigenous women. That's when Monica meets Katherine, another young Indigenous woman. If Monica is a blank canvas, then Katherine is the paintbrush, ready to colour in with broad, uneven strokes.

*Nauetakuan*, translated from French by Howard Scott, reads a bit like a YA novel, following Monica's gradual



coming-of-age. But Monica is no fumbling teenager figuring her way to adulthood through mishaps, like most YA protagonists. She is in her early twenties and a student of art history at UQAM. Her coming-of-age story has more to do with filling the giant hole that keeps her from being a fully realized individual. Before she meets Katherine, Monica knows little of her Indigenous identity and even less about First Nations traditions and contemporary issues.

After their chance encounter at the museum, Katherine becomes a kind of guide to Monica, introducing her to other Indigenous youth and teaching her everything that Monica's absent parents never did. The friendship is forged so quickly that one wonders if Monica had any friends before she met Katherine. Between the museum, a café, and a bar, the two become best friends, inseparable. They travel to Vancouver together, where Monica's education continues through meetings and discussions with First Nations artists. Her journey of self-discovery eventually leads her to Mexico City and back to Pessamit, where she was born and where she reconnects with her estranged family and roots.

Parallel to these real-life experiences runs a spiritual backstory. The more Monica learns about herself and her people, the more strange things begin to happen – visions of ravens, ghost pinches, supernatural sounds reaching out from another plane of existence. Kanapé Fontaine is an award-winning

poet and this is where her writing shines, in these surreal fragments punctuated with poems and scattered through the novel. This culminates in a touching trip with an Elder named George to ancestral Innu lands, during which her dreams appear to collide with reality.

Unfortunately, the poetry of the novel's most magical moments gets lost between the book's numerous chunky bits of dialogue. Kanapé Fontaine has the tendency of peppering her characters' conversations with "ha ha ha" and "uh" and "argh." There are so many actions in the book, and even moments of silence, that are unnecessarily expressed through dialogue. "Katherine glances up at her. 'Hey, Monica, you're quiet all of a sudden. Sorry, you know, I didn't want to hurt you, if that's what I just did. I'm real sorry if I rubbed you the wrong way!'" The character of Katherine seems to only exist to say out loud what's happening with Monica, or to explain contemporary Indigenous issues in conversations that don't read as natural. She even has to explain to her friend that racism exists, which I find difficult to believe that an Indigenous person in Montreal, especially a left-leaning artsy student, wouldn't be clued in on. It's almost like reading the rough draft of a screenplay.



There are interesting themes and realizations discussed near the end of the story, notably the intergenerational trauma created by residential schools, but they could have been much more poignant if the protagonists were better developed in the first half of the book. Monica's journey ends in a rousing Innu prayer, a chant to her ancestors, but I just wish I had grown more attached to the character along the way to feel stirred by her words. **msb**

**Roxane Hudon** is an occasional writer and frequent layabout who lives on a remote island and reads a lot.

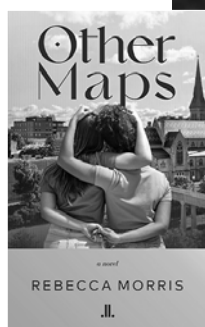
## Revenge and Release

**Other Maps**  
**Rebecca Morris**  
 Linda Leith Publishing  
 \$22.95, paper, 314pp  
 9781773901626

Empathy, especially when it links to compassion, can be a potent healer. To someone as wounded as Anna, healing might seem far-fetched. Yet, as Rebecca Morris' globetrotting protagonist illustrates, kindness and understanding can help pave the way.

Tackling a sensitive topic, Morris may steer readers outside their comfort zone, yet her debut novel has grip, the road rich with unexpected twists. Here, friendship is a life-saving light on a young woman's quest for truth in the aftermath of sexual assault.

*Other Maps* is set in the Montreal author's home city, Guelph, Ontario, a place Anna would rather forget. In 2004, the twenty-six-year-old is still living in exile from herself, behaving with the kind of recklessness of someone who assumes they have little left to lose. Trying



PETRA NIEDERHAUSER

to distance herself from the past, she escapes through travel, alcohol, drugs, and indiscriminate sex. Yet, during a visit home to Guelph for her father's retirement party, she reconnects with her childhood best friend, Helen, who compassionately offers to help her investigate what really happened ten years earlier during Olly Sutton's New Year's party, the night when all the rumours began.

Morris paints vivid visual portraits, her characters colourful with eye-catching qualities. Anna's tough-girl carapace, a shield against the gossip spread by peers, alludes to her resilience. Sporting bleached dreadlocks, piercings, and a "riot of tattoos," she's barely recognizable to Helen when she shows up unan-

nounced at her work. "They're like a map," she says, explaining her tattoos, which are conspicuously devoid of Guelph markers. "Where I've been. What happened along the way?"

Helen's skin bears another kind of map, not one she would have chosen. Her whole life, she's been trying to cover up a facial birthmark her stepfather compares to "a map of Switzerland." She remembers how, even as a baby, she was made to wear makeup, as her mother tried to hide her birthmark with foundation. Having absorbed her mother's shame over this perceived imperfection, she carves out a career in cosmetics, helping other women to conceal their supposed flaws.

Morris writes in clear, straightforward language, keeping things real with unfiltered-sounding dialogue. As Anna begins to piece together the New Year's party that derailed her life, her anger understandably flares. "I'm going to blow up their fucking lives," she swears, revenge fantasies fuelling her search.

*Other Maps* sheds light on the culture that can play into sexual violence in young men, and shows how women may, sometimes unwittingly, add to the fallout. In high school, Anna is ostracized and slut-shamed by female peers who jump to unfair conclusions. Years later, while sticking up for herself, she's challenged by

her own mother, who'd prefer she keep quiet to maintain the status quo.

Scenes from Helen's life expose the toxic rivalry that can crop up when women buy into limiting social norms. Catty competition from a married former classmate, for example, tests Helen's already compromised confidence. "God, I would hate it if my little sister got married before me," the woman gloats condescendingly when she finds out Helen's younger sister is engaged. "But don't worry, Helen, I'm sure your time will come."

Readers are kept on edge as Anna journeys into the most painful and perilous stretches of her memory. As she turns to face her trauma head-on, one wonders if revenge is her only route forward, or if another path will emerge. Come what may, Helen and Anna stick up for one another, validating each other's experiences. Mutual empathy fosters self-compassion, and their outer worlds begin to shift in surprising ways, reflecting rising levels of self-respect. Satisfyingly, *Other Maps* closes on what feels more like an opening, an upward trajectory defined by dignity and release, providing a clear, window-seat view of the restorative powers of friendship. **msb**

**Kimberly Bourgeois** is a Montreal-based writer/singer-songwriter. Visit her at [kimberlybourgeois.com](http://kimberlybourgeois.com) for news about her music and writing projects.



By Emma Dollery

Nour Abi-Nakhoul

## *Pregnant with Pain*

“**T**rauma,” in Greek, translates to the English word “wound,” and Nour Abi-Nakhoul’s debut novel, *Supplication*, begins with an infliction. We meet the novel’s unnamed protagonist in the belly of a damp, bug-infested basement, where she is held captive by a grotesquely sweating and salivating (but otherwise ambiguous) man, her torturer.

“There was nothing before the moment of my eyes opening in the room,” reads the first sentence – and indeed we know nothing of our hero’s past, ambitions, looks, or even name. But from the moment her torturer slides a rusty knife into her side, the novel pours from the wound in a disturbing labyrinth of deep, first-person introspection. Warped by pain, the protagonist’s vision of the world is brimming with contradictions; simultaneously repulsive and beautiful, distressingly violent yet rhythmically calming, and full of both death and wonder, the novel ensues in a series of surreal and inexplicable plot points. In a profound literalization of Freudian theory, trauma is *Supplication*’s galvanizing force, and pain is its tying thread.

Abi-Nakhoul, who moved to Montreal in 2019 and is now the editor-in-chief of *Maisonneuve* magazine, began writing the novel with what she calls an “almost a theological framework of pain and suffering in mind.” She explains: “I was thinking of this idea of pain or suffering, of trauma, as a kind of creature, a thing with agency.” In *Supplication*, the protagonist’s pain takes the form of a child that lives inside of our narrator’s body – she is pregnant with pain, the lasting effect of her wound. The novel’s surreal aesthetic allows for this unborn baby (or inner child) to be both figurative and very real at the same time – the narrator is not literally pregnant, yet her every move is dictated by this entity that she carries. The violent actions that the narrator does to other people and to herself are all at the urging of the twisted pain-child.

In this way, pain becomes almost contagious, spreading itself, proliferating. This is true, says Abi-Nakhoul, for real life, too: “That is the key to violence and pain. It does want to spread itself throughout the world, does want to multiply itself, and the imagery in the book gets to that in a visceral way.” One only has to think about the snowball effects of war (today in Palestine, Ukraine, Eritrea)

to know this rings true. On a more personal level, those who have been in intense pain (emotional or physical) will also know this ebb and flow intimately. Violence begets violence; an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

Fittingly, *Supplication* is not a book that one reads for plot – in fact it’s quite difficult to remember exactly what happened, or in which order. The strength of the book lies in its emulation of pain as a mood or feeling – of being inside a suffering mind. A certain rhythmic nature emerges in the novel’s imagery and pacing – a moment will fill with an abundance of descriptive energy, of thoughts that repeat and loop and are so full of imagery that they might burst or break, and then they do; there is a release (often in the form of death, burning, vomit, or blood) and an emptier moment follows, a brief respite, before the writing starts to fill up once again. The pattern repeats.

The hijacking power of pain is captured in the book’s very title. Supplication,

or the act of supplicating, is defined in Merriam-Webster as “to make a humble entreaty” and is usually used in reference to relationships with a higher power, like God or the law. “The title of the book,” explains Abi-Nakhoul, “is about a pleading to have something greater take control. Which I feel is a very human drive, especially after something traumatic happens. When something really intense destroys your understanding of the world, there is a desire to bow down before something greater and have it take control of you, lead you, and construct the meaning of reality.”

The pain-child represents, for Abi-Nakhoul and for the narrator, a “kind of purpose that you want to completely supplicate yourself before, something to guide you through the world without you

*When something really intense destroys your understanding of the world, there is a desire to bow down before something greater and have it take control of you, lead you, and construct the meaning of reality.*



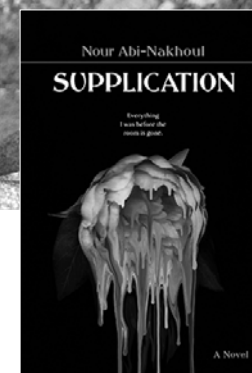
having to think.” This, she continues, “is not something positive. We see that in a lot of people that have gone through trauma. People who throw themselves down before religion or law or whatever, any type of cultish institution.”

This accounts for what feels like the dream-like, or video game-esque, logic in which *Supplication* unfolds. Characters appear out of the blue to hand the narrator a weapon or take her to a place she needs to be.

Doors open for her; lights appear conveniently in the distance. The pain-child within her tells her where to go and what to do. It’s as if a path has already been set out; all she must do is follow it.

It also explains the bug imagery that plagues the novel: “Insects,” says Abi-Nakhoul, “are things that have no real individual identity or autonomy, and are thrown down before this grand drive that they have no power over and that guides their movements. So, it’s almost an ideal for the narrator, but also something that she feels disgusted by. She wants to be an insect laying down before a grand drive, but she simultaneously rejects that. She is very lost.”

The final few pages of *Supplication* bring this fated rhythm to a cryptic end. Our hero’s thoughts are haunted by



**Supplication**  
Nour Abi-Nakhoul  
Strange Light  
\$24.95, paper, 216pp  
9780771006074

memories of the damp basement where we began, muddying reality for both the narrator and the reader. Abi-Nakhoul left this purposefully open-ended: “It’s finally up to her to make that decision,” she explains, and by extension, it becomes the reader’s decision to make too. But Abi-Nakhoul reveals a second reason for the enigmatic nature of her ending: “A part of it was that I didn’t want to end on a really depressing note. I didn’t want the narrative flow to be miserable like that, I wanted to leave space for hope. I started to feel kind of bad for her as a character, because it was pretty horrible, what I was doing to her, writing her into this kind of book.”

Abi-Nakhoul’s growing empathy for her character shows us that pain and violence are not the only emotions that can spread; kindness and hope can be contagious too. mb

Emma Dollery is a chill guy, pool shark, fan of film and literature.



# graphic

## Out of Sight

**The Jellyfish**  
**Boum**  
 Translated by Robin Lang and  
 Helge Dascher  
 Pow Pow Press  
 \$29.95, paper, 228pp  
 9782925114307

In the opening frames of *The Jellyfish*, a graphic novel by Montreal-based illustrator Boum, Odette sits in a big chair at the optometrist's office. The twenty-something-year-old is waiting for test results, and you can feel their anxiety on the page; they make themselves small as they watch the optometrist type something into his computer, hoping for good news. Finally, he looks up and delivers a diagnosis: Odette has a jellyfish in their left eye. Odette says nothing. Beside them, a small black jellyfish floats through the air.

The first few pages of *The Jellyfish* establish a small mystery that follows Odette through the next year. As they go about their day-to-day life – working at a Montreal bookstore, taking care of their pet rabbit, shopping for groceries – the jellyfish becomes a constant nuisance. It's always there, a black ink smudge with long tentacles in almost every frame of the book. It swims in Odette's vision, blocking them from fully seeing their



*The Jellyfish is as ambitious as it is beautiful.*

surroundings. At first, Odette is able to mostly ignore the jellyfish. But then, it starts to multiply; two, then three, then four ink spots in every frame.

What begins as a lighthearted story about a young person with a strange medical issue quickly turns into a nuanced and deeply felt graphic novel about disability and the complexity of relationships. Odette is trying to balance their budding romance with Naina, a

young woman they met at the bookstore, with the fact that their vision is rapidly worsening. As a reader, you experience Odette's vision loss alongside them; as more jellyfish appear, they block out the cleverly drawn panels of the graphic novel, obscuring Odette's world.

Boum has been part of the Montreal comics scene for well over a decade. Some readers might recognize her from her long-running and award-winning series *Boumeries*, which features short comics about the artist's life and family. Though *The Jellyfish* is a work of fiction, it's inspired by Boum's own health issues, with the artist suffering from a number of eye conditions before going blind in one eye in 2021. It was originally published as *La méduse* in 2022 and translated into English this May by Robin Lang and Helge Dascher.

*The Jellyfish* is as ambitious as it is beautiful. Boum crafts Odette's story in stark, black-and-white illustrations and gorgeous page layouts; each panel of the book is expertly plotted, and it all serves to show readers exactly what Odette is going through. Beyond the struggle of coping with a degenerative disability, *The Jellyfish* also delves into how difficult – and necessary – it can be to lean on others for help. Despite Odette and Naina growing closer, with Naina starting to stay at Odette's apartment after a falling-out with her father, Odette never tells her about the jellyfish. They keep their worsening vision a secret, worried about becoming a burden on those they love.

*The Jellyfish* is a treat to read for anyone who lives in Montreal. As the story unfolds, Boum showcases the city



with an enormous amount of care and detail. Over and over, Odette climbs up the winding metal staircase to their apartment. They walk down the street with the Olympic Stadium looming in the background. The story takes place over a year, and you experience the city changing around Odette; you watch the leaves fall from the trees and feel the snow on their skin, even when they can't see it.

It's a long, difficult, and sometimes heart-breaking process, but by the end of the book Odette starts coming to terms with the fact that their life is now shaped by disability. They learn to navigate the metro with a mobility cane; to feel their way through the kitchen while making coffee; to accept the help that's offered to them. In short, *The Jellyfish* is an absolute triumph in terms of both artwork and storytelling. **MB**

**Gabrielle Drolet** is a writer and cartoonist based in Montreal. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Chatelaine*, and more.

## Heated Moments

**When the Lake Burns**  
 Geneviève Bigué  
 Translated by Luke Langille  
 Conundrum Press  
 \$25.00, paper, 192pp  
 9781772620979

In her first solo-authored graphic novel, *When the Lake Burns*, illustrator Geneviève Bigué explores the precarity of both our natural and social ecosystems through the eyes of adolescent wonder and curiosity.

First published in French as *Parfois les lacs brûlent* (2022) and translated into English by Luke Langille, the book follows four high school friends in Corbeau River, a fictional village inspired by many real ones in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the region of northwestern Quebec where Bigué grew up. When news reaches the group that Lake Kijikone is burning, the friends set out to see for themselves and, spurred by teenage fearlessness, to test a local legend: that objects submerged into a burning lake will turn to gold.

The book's central image, of a lake erupting with flames, immediately calls to mind our current



context, in which natural disasters flash across screens in pictures of floods and forest fires, consequences of warming global temperatures. Oil pollution has caused bodies of water to catch fire in North America before, but the cause of the fire at the fictional Lake Kijikone is more mysterious, described in a news article that the friends read as "a very strange phenomenon" that can occur after "an intense storm." Pollution isn't ruled out as a

possibility, but global warming is gestured toward as context rather than being a narrative focal point. Len, the story's protagonist, overhears someone wonder about the risk of a forest fire, and climate change is mentioned once as "clymate chainge" when his friends poke fun at him for his bad English spelling. The precarity of the natural world is evident, and much of this precarity occurs in the book's visual dimension.

Bigué reminds the reader of what is at stake in wordless panels dedicated to illustrations of fallen leaves, a single tree branch, or a small group of mushrooms, as the group makes their way through the forest and toward the lake. Her restrained palette of muted greens, greys, and burnt orange comes most alive when the friends leave the uniform village streets and venture into the woods.

The characters don't dwell on why the fire started; instead, they make bets on whether the legend is true, agreeing that the loser will do the others' homework for a month. That the cause is left ambiguous reflects the book's attention to the adolescent perspective. For a moment, through the eyes of the characters, anything seems possible. The cause of the fire doesn't matter, and consequences are only a vague concept on the horizon.

While the narrative world is imbued with a youthful sense of adventure, Bigué also explores the

continued on page 18



# Selfscapes



**Firebugs**  
**Nino Bulling**  
**Drawn & Quarterly**  
**\$32.95, cloth, 164pp**  
**9781770467057**

Ingken Winter is tired of fire metaphors. “Things burn, and when they’re burnt down, you’re left with piles of ashes and debris and burnt out cars,” they say. “And fire devours everything, you can’t pick and choose. But what if I want to keep certain things?”

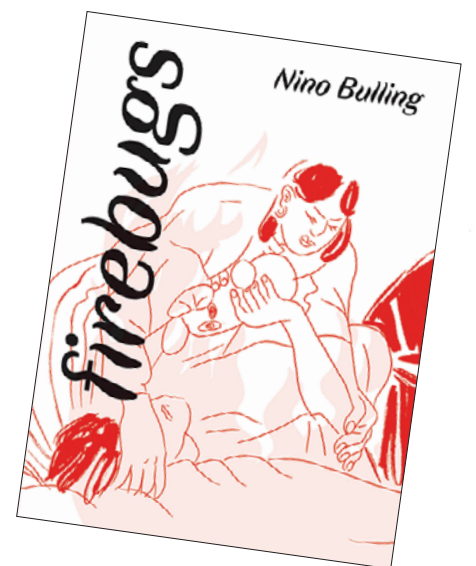
So goes the crux of *Firebugs*, the English-language debut by German comic artist Nino Bulling. The novel opens with Ingken sweating it out in a Parisian club, before returning to the Berlin apartment they share with their American girlfriend, Lily. There, they reveal a secret to Lily, who is trans herself: “I don’t really think I’m a woman.” The confession opens a watershed that Ingken spends the rest of the novel trying to dam, backpedalling, circling, and recircling like a moth to and from a flame.

With a narrative about transitioning set against a backdrop of bushfires and drought-hardened earth, *Firebugs* is a story about personal and geologic change – and the language we use to apprehend both. For some, metaphor offers respite: a friend imagines people risen “from the ashes as brand-new creatures,” while Lily encourages Ingken to “burn [themselves] to the ground” in order to be reborn. For Ingken, however, the metaphor falls flat. It doesn’t help that the advice comes from Lily’s lover Anya, who uses the phoenix as “an allegory for the climate crisis” in her performance art.



Thematically, the phoenix appears at first as the creature lending the book its mythos. Yet more prominent are the bugs that pepper, and at times animate, the narrative, delineated by Bulling’s red pen in the same manner as the dialogue and sound effects. Lily crushes aphids while Ingken, seemingly out of nowhere, tells their friend about the cloning capabilities of female lice. In summer, insects flit around as Ingken tries mouthing a new name, later swooping dangerously close to candles while they and Lily watch the lights of the oil refinery dance on the horizon. When Ingken asks Lily about her own transition, the conversation is overlaid with images of firebugs mating. Down to the motion of Bulling’s illustrations, loose and biomorphic, insects guide the novel as an understated alternative to the glory of the phoenix.

Turning away from myth, *Firebugs* instead shines in moments of subtle attention to the natural world, especially its shapes and forms. Careful sym-



bolism is woven throughout, with the lightness of Bulling’s pen managing not to seem overdrawn where the imagery could otherwise become heavy-handed. Lily, for instance, is coded in an intentional way by virtue of her botanic first name and penchant for floral fabrics, while Ingken (surname: Winter) remains by contrast frozen in place, bogged down under layers of clothing even in the heat of the summer. As temperatures rise, tempers shorten, and the ash-browned icebergs that Ingken doomscrolls past are a reminder that nothing can move at a glacial pace while everything is melting. No phoenix rising from the proverbial ashes, Ingken appears instead a bird too scared to quit the shore, no matter how inhospitable it becomes.

*Firebugs* is a story about standing on the precipice of transformation, even as the ground erodes beneath. What spreads its wings may not be a phoenix, fully formed in the flames – there’s “no magical resurrection,” as Ingken says. Instead, *Firebugs* presents a more bittersweet image of change as necessary and ongoing, conditional even, for survival. **mb**

Alexandra Sweny is associate publisher of the *mRb*. When she’s not reading, you can find her running up the mountain or untangling herself from a ball of yarn (both Sisyphean tasks).

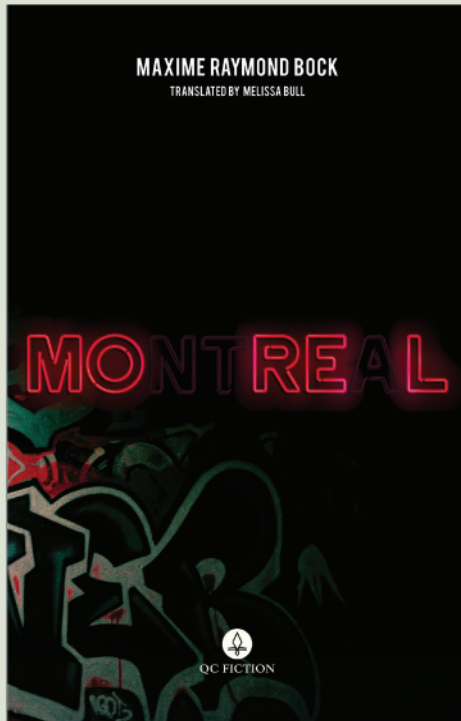


# MOREL

A NOVEL BY

**MAXIME RAYMOND BOCK**

TRANSLATED BY MÉLISSA BULL



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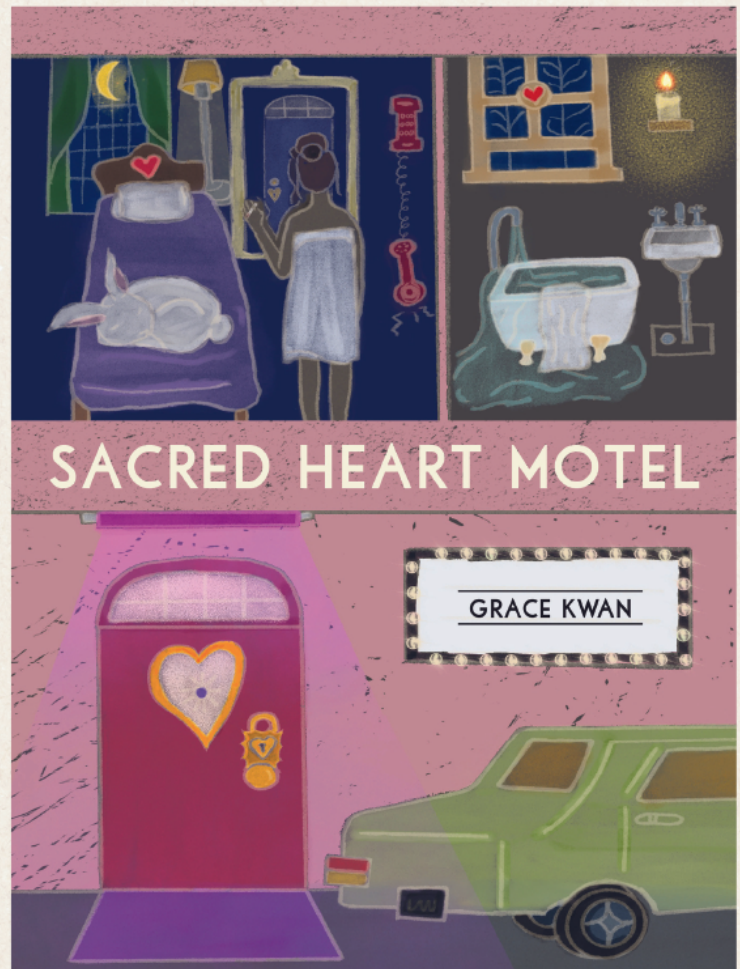


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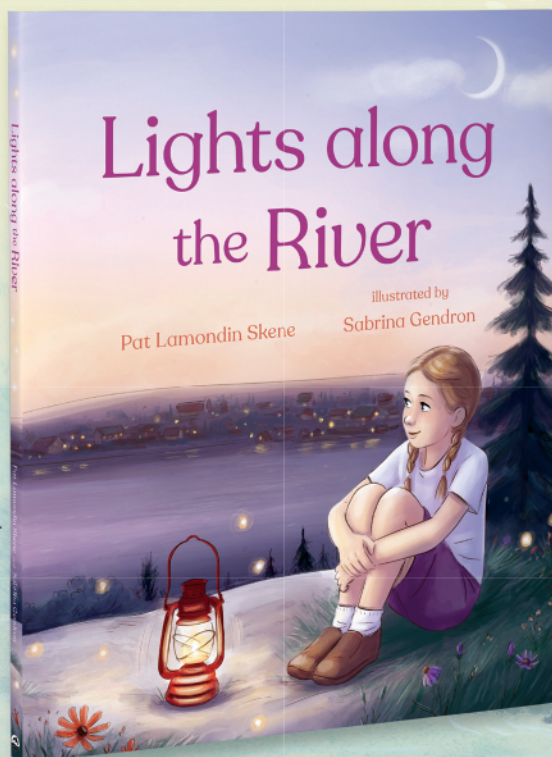
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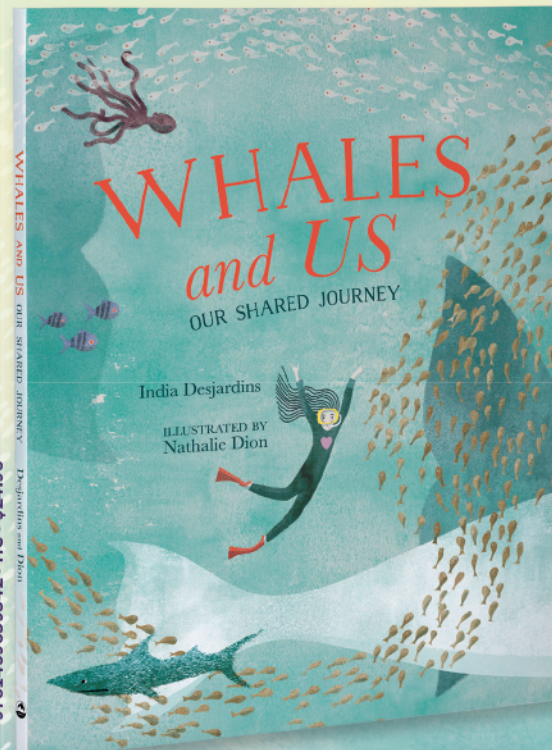
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# Beautiful Books for Long Summer Days



"Inspired by the author's childhood growing up Metis and French, and the changes technology brought to her small town, it has a nostalgic tone. This Canadian historical picture book may find a home in units on unearthing family stories or in writing creative nonfiction." —*School Library Journal*

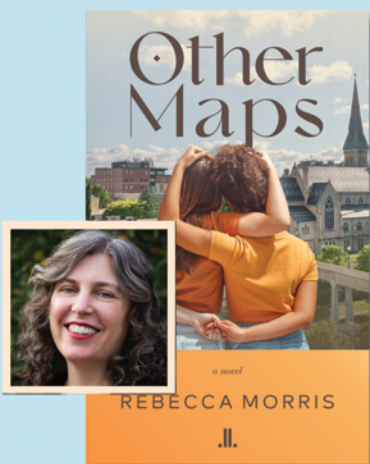


"Visually stimulating and loaded with interesting facts...The educational and inspirational aspects of her book [touch] on themes like climate change and human activity as threats to the welfare of the natural world...a worthwhile choice for shared reading time."

—*Montreal Review of Books*



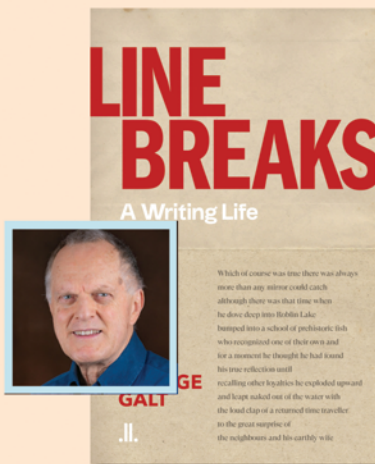
## Linda Leith Publishing presents...



**Other Maps**  
a novel by  
**Rebecca Morris**

ISBN 9781773901626 | \$22.95 | Sept 2024

Annie Leverett is back in her hometown of Guelph, counting the days until she can leave. But when she runs into her ex-best friend Helen, she begins to question the ugly rumours about her past. Together, they embark on a bold campaign to uncover the truth and chart a route forward. A novel about being female in the #MeToo era.

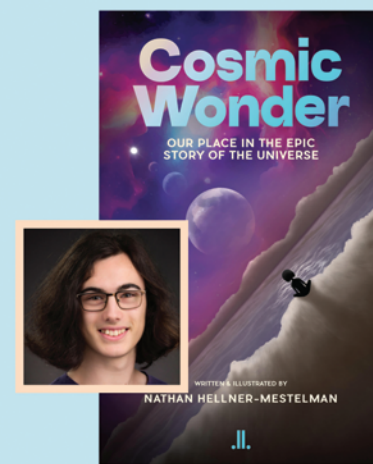


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**George Galt**

ISBN 9781773901565 | \$24.95 | Aug 2024

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"Not only is **THE JELLYFISH** one of the most beautiful graphic novels I've ever read, it goes straight for the heart and doesn't let up. Boum is a master of her craft... *The Jellyfish* is exquisite."

—Kate Leth, author of *Mall Goth*

"Deeply human and ultimately optimistic... a remarkable graphic novel by any standard."

—Quill & Quire, Starred Review

"*The Jellyfish* is a powerhouse of a story... I give this book my highest recommendation."

—The Comics Beat

"A deeply moving meditation on disability, diversity, and joy... a near perfect symbiosis between narrative and art."

—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

"Graceful and empathetic."

—Publishers Weekly

"Amazing and essential."

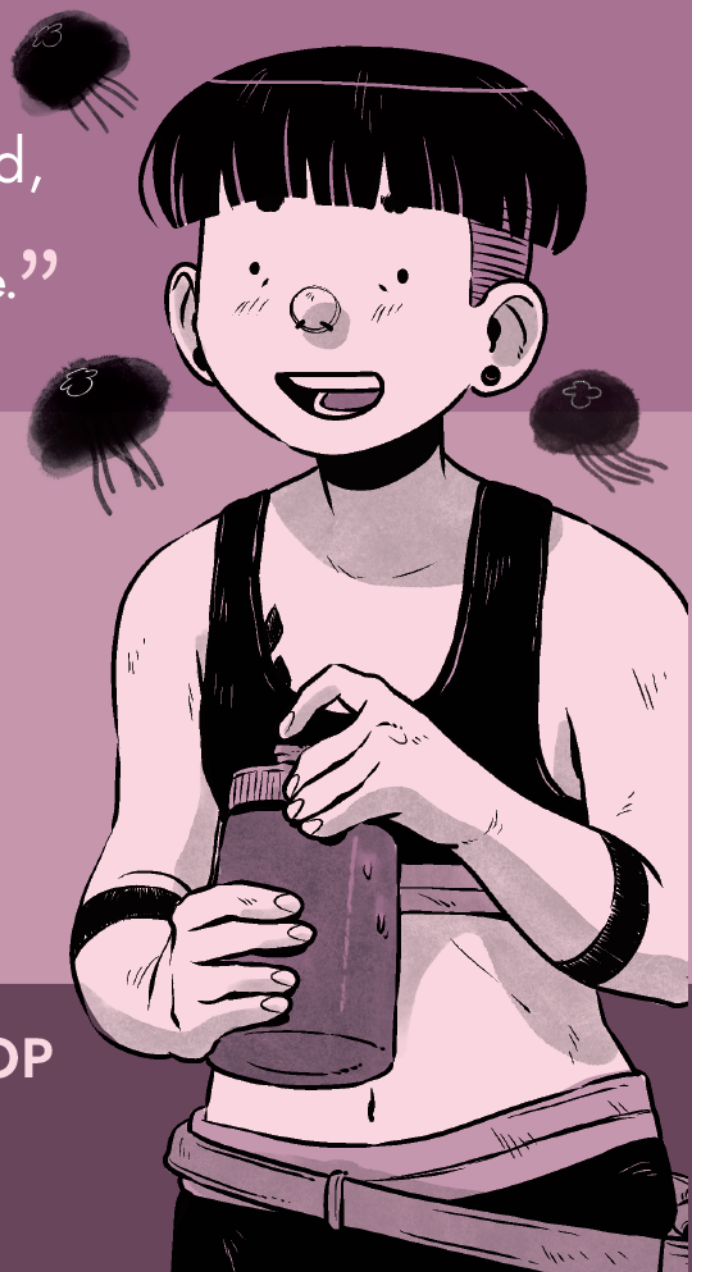
—Booklist, Starred Review



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## Punk Will Eat Itself

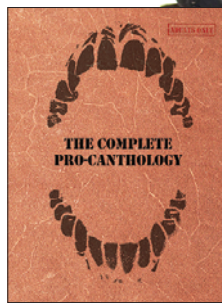
**The Complete Pro-Canthology**  
**Keenan Poloncsak**  
**PRO-CAN**  
**\$20.00, paper, 300pp**  
**9780995279513**

**G**entrification, displacement, immigration, alienation, addiction, police brutality, and Montreal: these are the consistent themes throughout Keenan Poloncsak's work. The newly re-released *Complete Pro-Canthology* is the collected works of his early comic *PRO-CAN* (short for pro-cannibalism), the full series collected into one book.

I first met Poloncsak when he was selling comics inside Frontenac station. Poloncsak is one of the few one-man-show artists: He is not only self-published, but completely self-started. He managed to fund most of his projects, including the 2014 film based on the *PRO-CAN* series, through selling his work in the subway and on the street. After many years of apprenticeship (bookbinding is a particular art), Poloncsak now runs his own restoration and bookbinding shop, Le Relieur des Faubourgs, in East Montreal. (Visit for all your book repair needs, to attend a workshop, or, most importantly, to support and sustain your local artist!)

The *PRO-CAN* series ran for nine issues in total, and began when Poloncsak was in CEGEP, running from the end of 2006 to the beginning of 2009. The comic takes place in a reimagined Montreal, where a new, powerful street drug called "pro-can" is in circulation. When taken, pro-can always ends up consuming the user, and does not allow them to remember their bad trip – though this is of little importance, since it also always leads to death (and becoming a cannibal zombie). While reading, one can only think of the recent rise of potent drugs like fentanyl. This may make the series sound like a warning against drug use, but it is not a preachy comic in any way. Rather, it is a sort of prescient warning of things that were just around the corner in Montreal.

Poloncsak's illustrations and art are always evolving. For the *PRO-CAN* comic, he uses an array of artistic media, including marker, pen, ink, pencil, charcoal, collage, and Letraset. Looking back on his own early work, which includes *PRO-CAN*, Poloncsak feels that it was "very naive and you can tell." However, when coming across the naiveté of his early and eager hand, there is a strong charming effect. Even as a hardened citizen, I find it impossible to resist being swayed by all the recognizable Montreal backgrounds and



cultural references. For instance, the punk subculture (with cameos from some of Poloncsak's good friends)

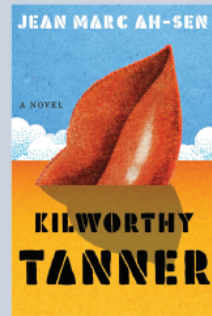
that thrived in and around Griffintown is heavily featured – an important subculture that has long been aware of all the glorious failings and hideous effects of capitalism, another theme explored in this anthology.

Even though Poloncsak feels that parts of the *PRO-CAN* comic are now a bit passé, or contain a kind of naive vigour, *The Complete Pro-Canthology* is highly relevant, particularly to the city of Montreal. The comic is in both French and English, as Poloncsak grew up speaking both languages from a young age. My favourite issue in the anthology is the French issue. On its cover, we can see a Jesus figure on a cross. Right near the hands of our Jesus, instead of nails, we see the words "nazionalisme" and "multiculturéalisme." I especially like the part of the storyline in which we see the words "ralentissement sur la ligne verte" – how it plays into the specific Montreal commute, that dark collective consciousness, a mixed resentment over a possible suicide that could make one ten minutes late for work.

Poloncsak's collage style is interesting both visually and historically, featuring clippings from the no-longer-published free newspapers that used to be given out to commuters. I also like all the Québécois swear words and crass expressions written across the pages, and find there is an almost onomatopoeic effect to this. A unique and important work, especially amid the intense language issues the city currently faces, *PRO-CAN* feels like a Montreal comic for Montrealers. mrb

**Esinam Beckley** is a full-time scribe, student for life, and film enthusiast. She enjoys collecting the written word, tinkering with music wires in her bedroom, but especially mixing the two. She loves her parents, knitted garments, and art.

## Smart summer reads...



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Jean Marc Ah-Sen

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# non-fiction

## Canadian Crime Story

The Rest of the [True Crime] Story

John L. Hill  
AOS Publishing  
\$24.99, paper, 366pp  
9781990496387

When *Law & Order Toronto: Criminal Intent* premiered earlier this year, it was met with some good-natured bemusement on both sides of the border. Did there really need to be a Canadian version of the long-running American series? What would be so different about it, beyond colourful paper money and thinly veiled Rob Ford references?

The truth is, American media shapes Canadian views, and American media loves a good cop show, legal drama, or true crime doc. Between John Grisham books, *Forensic Files*, and five different CSIs, most Canadians can probably recite US Miranda rights more readily than they can speak to the realities – and inadequacies – of our own legal system.

In this way, John L. Hill's non-fiction book *The Rest of the [True Crime] Story* serves as a primer on Canadian criminal law for many readers, with an emphasis

on its many shortcomings, from arrest to prison transfers to parole. Hill has practiced and taught criminal and correctional law for forty years, and the book is divided into some of his standout cases – the bulk of them from the 1990s, which include stories of notorious criminals, wrongful convictions, and oft precedent-setting decisions. That it opens with the case of a serial rapist may put even the most open-minded readers on edge, yet it serves as a stark reminder that concepts Canadians may agree on theoretically – like the right to adequate legal representation – have human faces, and those faces aren't always pretty.

Hill is a measured, straightforward writer who includes a lot of legal details and mentions of paperwork, perhaps an honest reflection of the bulk of a real attorney's job (versus the network TV version). A salacious read this is not, and the average non-lawyer reader may gloss over a lot of the asides concerning statutes, dates, political parties, and the like, though one can easily imagine each of these chapters being delivered to eager, note-taking law school students.

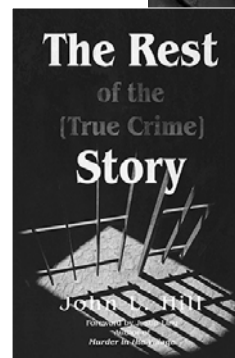
Hill rarely inserts himself into the story with much dramatic flair, and

when he does he often downplays what he must have been thinking or feeling. Which is, admittedly, likely why he's made such an effective criminal lawyer; unflappable, at least in retrospect, even as he finds out his phone's been bugged, or negotiates an escaped prisoner's return (there are a wild number of jail-breaks in this book). Even as his own father tells him, "I hope you lose" after Hill reveals he's defending child-killer Gary Leo Genereaux.

Rather than focusing on what makes a murderer, that chapter uses Genereaux's case to expose a systemic lack of support for mentally ill prisoners. As usual, Hill doesn't dwell on visceral details, but the facts alone are enough to shock: past experimental programs like Defence Disruptive Therapy, which involved nonconsensual hallucinogens; the cult-like Motivation, Attitude, Participation Program; and the Capsule Program, which had overseers chaining naked men together in a tiny, windowless cell, feeding them soup and milk through a straw in the wall.

Despite decades of firsthand experience, Hill is rarely prescriptive, instead ending most chapters with a series of questions about what could have been done differently then, and what we can change now, always with a nuanced push towards early prevention, rehabilitation, and preventing recidivism.

As is noted in the book, about one in eight Canadians have a criminal record, and most prisoners who serve time will



re-enter society at some point. Watching Canadian leaders parrot a shallow "tough on crime" stance for political gain, without facts or experience to back it up, reeks of laziness and detached naiveté, especially as

groups like the Elizabeth Fry Society and the John Howard Society (two of the dedicatees of Hill's book) do the real, unglamorous work of helping inmates navigate the prison system. After all, while the system is certainly broken, until there is real change, it's the only system we've got. **mb**

**Eve Thomas** is a writer, editor, and artist based in Montreal, with an interest in gender, grifters, cults, and crime. She is the co-creator of the award-winning app #SelfCare and the unauthorized hit play *Degrassi: The Musical*. She is currently working on a project about telemarketing. Find her at [evethomas.com](http://evethomas.com) and [@therealevethomas](https://www.instagram.com/therealevethomas) on Instagram.

## Choose Your Player

Not All Fun and Games

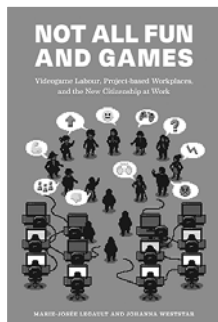
Videogame Labour, Project-based Workplaces, and the New Citizenship at Work

Marie-Josée Legault and Johanna Weststar

Concordia University Press

\$59.95, paper, 408pp

9781988111490



The bulk of research-based literature on video games has traditionally focused on content, but Marie-Josée Legault and Johanna Weststar's book seeks specifically to address the challenges faced by the workers behind these games. Deconstructing the framework of labour characterized by project-based work, *Not All Fun and Games* offers a rigorously researched and thorough analysis of the industry behind the media and the status of citizenship among game developers at work. The title is timely, as the industry on a global scale is facing record numbers of layoffs as well as studio closures in the aftermath of the pandemic media boom, while employees continue to bear the worst of the consequences.

The book is laid out in three parts: theory, context, and applied analysis. Legault and Weststar repeatedly ask, "What does it mean to be a citizen at work in a project-based workplace?" while examining the obstacles unique to game developers who attempt to practice citizenship, through global and national

studies and qualitative interviews with developers themselves.

The straightforward and academic approach to their research reframes the vulnerabilities unique to game developers in the video game industry; individuals' poor treatment is presented alongside clear statistical evidence of corporations' efforts against practiced citizenship in the workplace. A particularly stark example is the industry-wide term "crunch," a stand-in for unlimited, unpaid overtime taken on voluntarily by game developers, albeit in the face of social and professional pressure from upper-level management. The problem is widespread and insidious; the industry's culture and language has been cultivated to obscure the harsh realities of careers with next to no job security, restrictive NDA and NCA agreements (which often don't hold up to legal scrutiny), and work environments systemically hostile to minorities. This, they write, is a consequence of "the unchecked power of corporations" and the risk of commercial failure relegated to workers with no actionable power.

Though the book – understandably – doesn't venture into a one-union-fits-all solution, Legault and Weststar provide the reader with considerable insight on how citizenship for game developers could be approached, laying the groundwork based on previous



successful – and unsuccessful – movements in the industry. We've seen large-scale shifts when public pressure descends on studios, such as the series of solidarity walkouts that eventually culminated in the unionization of quality assurance workers at Raven Software, a studio owned by Activision Blizzard, in 2021. But *Not All Fun and Games* also underlines situations where public pressure wasn't enough, such as the series of half-hearted responses by Riot Games in California to a class-action lawsuit against its sexist work culture in 2018.

Underlined by Legault and Weststar is the fact that issues plaguing the video game industry directly impact the cities and societies in which they are practiced. For example, because of "archaic family

continued on page 18



## The Big Bluff

**The Social Safety Net**  
 Nora Loreto  
 Dundurn Press  
 \$25.99, paper, 264pp  
 9781459753105

If one keeps up closely with local or national news these days, it's easy to become pessimistic. If one widens that scope to include international current events, that pessimism can easily turn into despair. In Canada, the news cycle reminds us that we face multiple ongoing crises: a housing crisis, a climate crisis, an overdose crisis – the list goes on. In *The Social Safety Net*, author Nora Loreto offers her prognosis of these intersecting crises facing the country, identifying the boogeyman of neoliberalism as the culprit of our present troubles. The book offers a Canadian primer on this political phenomenon, from neoliberalism's 1970s roots to present-day ramifications, unpacking how our Canadian variant of Thatcher's and Reagan's economic visions has shaped what Loreto sees as a country in decline.

"This process happened slowly enough," Loreto reflects, "that, rather than feeling a sudden shock, the water was brought slowly to a boil, resulting in fewer hospital beds, fewer doctors, bigger class sizes, and fewer municipal services." *The Social Safety Net* traces this slow boil, the decline in Canada's social safety net, and its replacement with neoliberal public policy – from our racist, colonial foundation through confederation and the twentieth century to the present day.

While giving minor space to Canada's post-war efforts at building a welfare state, she points out how this once-hopeful vision of Canada was deconstructed over the last four-and-a-half decades. The book takes on the sweeping changes brought in by both Liberal and Conservative governments, showing how neoliberalism came to be in its present form while also calling out the failure of united response by the Canadian left. She fairly criticizes the lack of a substantial response to neoliberalism in the form of a united progressive movement. At the same time, Loreto celebrates the social democratic roots of the Parti Québécois' policies while brushing past the federal progressive agenda of the New Democrats during the 1970s and '80s spearheaded by the late Ed Broadbent.

Just as the story of neoliberalism is not a happy one, Loreto's project



*Just as the story of neoliberalism is not a happy one, Loreto's project doesn't sugarcoat our recent past.*

hitting, hard facts, showing how "the neoliberal experiments that started in the 1980s and kicked into overdrive in the 1990s did not achieve what Canadians were told they would achieve." The country has instead been led into decline in recent decades, she argues, with worsening inequality and compiling crises that beg us to wonder if we progressives deserve the tone of optimism that we so often permit ourselves.

*The Social Safety Net* reveals Canada's sharp turn away from social welfare, and serves as essential reading for those curious about our country's deep infatuation with neoliberalism. **msb**

**Jack McClelland** is a writer and translator based in Montreal. He works as the Digital Communications Assistant for the Broadbent Institute.



SAMSON LEARN

## Uncomfortable Truths

**Elvie, Girl Under Glass**  
 Elvira Cordileone  
 Renaissance Press  
 \$22.99, paper, 346pp  
 9781990086519

Joan Didion said we tell ourselves stories in order to live. *Elvie, Girl Under Glass* is the culmination of how, with distance and healing, we can attempt to organize the chaos of our lives into coherent narratives – for art, for memory, for further healing, or maybe for activism.

*Elvie, Girl Under Glass* is an ambitious memoir following Elvira Cordileone's early life in Montreal amid cultural revolution. The prologue reads like a fairytale, describing a recurring childhood dream of a girl trapped in a room, observing others from her window, longing to escape and be with everyone else.

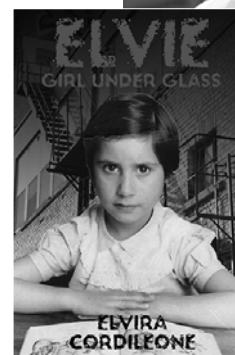
Cordileone was three years old when she and her mother immigrated from Campochiaro, Italy, to Montreal. From the moment she rejoins her father in Canada, Elvie is afraid of him. Her home life is chaotic, demanding, and sometimes dangerous, dominated by her father and his mental illness. As the eldest daughter of immigrant parents, Elvie bears a heavy burden: looking out for her younger siblings, attempting to protect her mother, performing household duties expected of girls, and navigating her father's moods.

Cordileone's father is never labelled a villain, but he is rightfully characterized as one. The memoir's perspective is black-and-white, like a child's. But this is never acknowledged or explored beyond Elvie's mother, who laments her daughter's binary thinking. Does Cordileone agree in retrospect? The years seem to have granted her some new perspective, though she still harbours anger as she details the dark and uncomfortable truths of her past.

The history of Quebec is woven into the personal narrative, albeit awkwardly. Readers from Montreal will appreciate details about the city, but Cordileone's experience as a journalist is evident as she devotes pages to discussing events like the Quiet Revolution, Expo 67, and Bill 101. The pacing and formal, impersonal style of these passages can be jarring, and, as interesting and informative as the history is, the inclusions often feel forced. While events like the Cold War and FLQ bombings seem relevant to the author's anxieties, she



PETER REHAK



struggles to meaningfully link certain historical events to herself, one notable example being the 1969 Computer Centre Protest at Concordia

University. While Cordileone was a student there at the time, she had no involvement in the events, instead witnessing it on television.

Throughout the memoir, Cordileone alludes to the future less than a handful of times. Considering the narrative ends in her twenties, this only makes the ending more unsatisfactory. She tells us she has panic attacks for the next thirty years, but we're privy to none of that. She acknowledges her issues and her patterns, but we don't see how she came to these realizations.

After poring over her traumatic childhood in such detail, readers might be left unsatisfied by the ending, when Cordileone leaves Montreal. Abrupt endings and unresolved plot threads can work in fiction, but this can be ineffective when dealing with real people. By ending the narrative the way she does, Cordileone deprives readers of her growth and healing, leaving them in the lurch. If we follow the dream metaphor from the prologue, then it can be assumed that the narrative ends when Cordileone leaves Montreal because for her, leaving Montreal meant freedom. If this was Cordileone's intention, this connection could have been clarified.

Of course, a person's life is not made up of characters and plot points, and things rarely have neat natural endings. It begs the question: How much of their life, of their soul, does a memoirist owe readers? **msb**

**Nadia Trudel** is a Montreal/Tiohtià:ke-based writer, freelance culture journalist, editor, and podcast host/editor. Find her on Twitter @nadia\_trudel and @nadia.trudel on Instagram.



# A Case for Compassion

**Seeking Asylum: Building a Shareable World**  
 Toula Drimonis  
 Linda Leith Publishing  
 9781773901527  
 158pp, paper, \$21.95

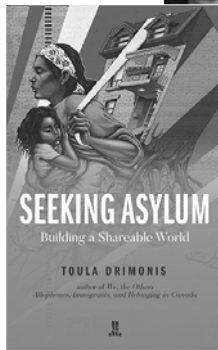
It's been just over a year since Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and US President Joe Biden teamed up to announce the closure of Roxham Road, an unofficial border crossing in the small village of Hemmingford, Quebec. Thousands of asylum seekers had been relying on Roxham Road each month to ensure their refugee claims found consideration in Canada. With this announced amendment, the Safe Third Country Agreement now blankets the entirety of the shared border, making it so that anyone who lands in the US first must stay there, even if they risk deportation. The decision was in response to much complaining, consternation and assumption-making regarding the very individuals and families who simply wanted the ability to claim asylum in Canada.

A discussion of this situation is what opens Toula Drimonis' *Seeking Asylum: Building a Shareable World*, a book that acts as a bit of an extension to her 2022 bestseller *We, the Others: Allophones, Immigrants, and Belonging in Canada*. While the first book by the long-time commentator ends in 2018, *Seeking Asylum* takes that year as a starting point and presents continued observations on immigration in Canada, with a focus on Quebec, alongside a specific consideration of asylum and refugees.

Built on the foundation of Drimonis' work as columnist for *Cult Montreal*, *Ricochet*, and the *National Observer*, the book weaves adapted versions of columns in with new work. Each of the chapters provides elements of an overall argument that emphasizes the need to offer immigrants and asylum seekers opportunity rather than to deny possibilities that are positive for all. Drimonis challenges notions of exceptionalism and asks instead for the recognition of each other's humanity.

Throughout, she vacillates between discussions of Canada and the United States, crossing the border back and forth, comparing and contrasting approaches to migration. The book pushes back against common perceptions – providing strong research to counter fallacies such as refugees and immigrants contributing to higher crime rates or being a burden on the economy. Drimonis provides helpful definitions, developing her arguments with painstaking use of both journalistic and academic sourcing.

She also reaches to the past for examples: in Chapter Four, for instance, she discusses the origins of the term "asylum" and the long history of fleeing persecution as a result of war, enslavement, crime, and



JOHN KENNEY

other reasons. Even though today's asylum claimants may be, as she underlines, escaping gender-based violence or climate change, we should witness the ongoing need to recognize immigration and asylum seeking as a constant, rather than something that can – or must – be curbed.

In a somewhat self-deprecating manner, Drimonis mentions how she is not a "geopolitical expert," but this positioning only highlights the work she does to answer questions and provide examples and evidence throughout the book. There are, unfortunately, a few distracting issues with copyediting, repetition, and consistency; if this book is as popular as her last one, here's hoping that some of these small issues can be ironed out in future printings.

Building throughout the work what she refers to as a "case for compassion," Drimonis' book convincingly demonstrates that there is a need to consider choices and that more could be achieved to support more people. She emphasizes how institutions and governments could actually help more, but are making a choice not to. A juxtaposition of the words of Pope Francis, demanding we all "stop passing off the issue of migration to others," with the reality of the billions of dollars of Vatican assets that could be used to address the problem is quite convincing as an object lesson.

Drimonis will often describe a local event or reality and then expand to encapsulate a wider concept. It's an effective method, especially when it encourages the questioning of assumptions here in Montreal and demonstrates the need to reach across borders and boundaries rather than create new ones. **mrb**

**Erin MacLeod** teaches at Vanier College. Her essay, "Neurotic Affiliations: Montreal, Leonard Cohen and Belonging," will be included in the collection, *The World of Leonard Cohen*, edited by David Shumway, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

## MARSHY & BECHELANY-LYNCH continued from page 6

colonial languages and culture, and their inability to convey and embody the intricacies that exist outside of the Western lens.

Sarah O'Neal's personal essay, "The Oldest Language I Know," is a vulnerable narration of the complexities of growing up navigating faith and community while being a queer Muslim. The collection comes to a satisfying close with "The July War," a short story from Rabih Alameddine of boyhood getting cut short, encountering new personalities in the people you thought you knew, and indecent role models – all while his protagonist copes with a war-torn, crumbling city around him.

A bold and thoughtfully curated anthology, *El Ghourabaa* is prolific and piercing in its beauty and stays true to El Bechelany-Lynch and Marshy's queer, trans, anti-colonial, anti-imperial, anti-Zionist vision. A book born of love and necessity, it is an unforgiving and compassionate offering during times of heightened global violence. Each piece, while separate and unique to each author, is interconnected and speaks to one another, building onto the next – demonstrating the reality that while our experiences are personal and private, they are also shared, collective, and political. **mrb**

**Val Rwigema** (they/he) is a Rwandan-Filipino writer and vocalist who grew up in the Alberta prairies, currently based in Montreal.

## BIGUÉ continued from page 10

hard parts of adolescence. Len is somewhat set apart from his friends. Unlike them, he doesn't have a phone or a bike or a skateboard. He dreams of buying these things with gold if the legend is true, while his friend Theo plans to sacrifice his skateboard to the lake as an experiment. His friends commenting on his trouble spelling English words is a reminder of the importance of language in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, where 95% of the population speaks French as their native tongue. That this dialogue was originally presented in French in *Parfois les lacs brûlent* calls this context to mind more directly, as well as the unique task of translating a book from French to English in a province where language politics are deeply consequential.

The group's journey to the lake is a backdrop through which Bigué explores their social ecosystem, which becomes increasingly strained as they move closer (half of the group abandons the plan before they reach their destination). When Len and Theo arrive at the lake, the fun of their adventure melts into a horrifying new reality in the heat of the flames. Balancing fantasy and wonder with anxiety and hardship, Bigué creates a moving portrait of the time when the fearlessness of adolescence is confronted with the heartbreak and struggle of growing up. **mrb**

**Alex Trnka** is a writer and editor who was born in Newfoundland and is based in Toronto. She has a BA in philosophy from the University of King's College and an MA in cultural studies from McGill. She is the reviews editor for *The Ex-Puritan*, and regularly contributes to publications including the *Montreal Review of Books* and the *Journal of Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*.

## LEGAULT/WESTSTAR continued from page 16

structures," female game developers face a heightened risk of burnout due to shouldering additional familial labour on top of unlimited, unpaid overtime. Social organization outside of work ultimately sets the boundaries of social change within the industry; as long as outdated familial structures are in place, "adding more women to the workforce will not change the overall situation of institutional or systemic sexism."

The intersection, depth, and scope of research makes this book an excellent starting point for those looking to dive deeper into project-based workplaces and the challenges faced by developers. I'll echo Legault and Weststar's assertion that this volume may be of interest to "scholars and practitioners across many fields such as sociology, law, labour studies, industrial and employment relations, HRM, political economy, game studies, and communication and cultural studies," and further recommend *Not All Fun and Games* to future and present game developers intent on working toward a better industry overall. **mrb**

**Miranda Eastwood** is a narrative designer based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. They currently work in video games, but have also produced audio pieces, comics, and interactive fiction.



By Ian McGillis

## Walter Scott

# *Art World Confidential*

Walter Scott has grown quite attached to Wendy.

You can hear it in the way the cartoonist talks about the artist heroine of his critically acclaimed, cultishly popular series of semi-autobiographical graphic novels, of which the new *The Wendy Award* is the fourth.

“She definitely affects my life,” says Scott, talking in his well-lit, cheery Plateau apartment. “Has she taken on a life of her own? Yes, I think that would be fair to say.”

It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that Scott remembers Wendy’s origin moment clearly and with fondness. It was 2011; the Kahnawá:ke-raised Scott, twenty-six at the time, was a habitu  of the Montreal punk scene, a lifestyle that involved a lot of late nights.

“I first drew her on a placemat in a pizza restaurant,” says Scott, “It was in Saint-Henri, across from the IGA on N tre-Dame. It’s been replaced by something else since then, like so many other things in Saint-Henri have.”

When the subject of his historical cartooning lineage comes up, Scott heads straight for a bookshelf in his living room and pulls out a volume of Matt Groening’s *Life in Hell* cartoon series.

“The dry, repetitive, conceptual quality of Groening’s humour is something I was really drawn to as a child,” says Scott, flipping through the book with obvious affection. “He’s not afraid of being dark, and there was no sign of self-awareness that he should be more light. But the subject of influence is interesting, because I don’t actually read a lot of graphic novels. I never have. And I think that’s what has allowed the comic to look the way it does. When I began *Wendy*, I allowed myself to draw in a crude way.”

That same deceptively simple visual language has occasionally triggered people who are given to saying things like, “My four-year-old can draw better than that!”

“They’re probably right,” Scott deadpans. “Four-year-olds aren’t shackled to the insecurities of adulthood. But I do think I’m better than a four-year-old in every other aspect. And anyway, people who say those sorts of things probably aren’t much interested in art in the first place.”

The new book can stand alone but is probably best read as a continuation of a series that has shone an unsparing light on the contemporary art world. Wendy

and a group of fellow artists have been named finalists for a lucrative fictional art prize sponsored by an equally fictional chain called Foodhut. (Their motto: “Because You’ve Got to Eat Sometime.”) The premise is a gateway into a milieu where wildly varying worlds are thrown together, where artists who barely manage to avoid homelessness can end up head-to-head with those who inhabit the international sales stratosphere.

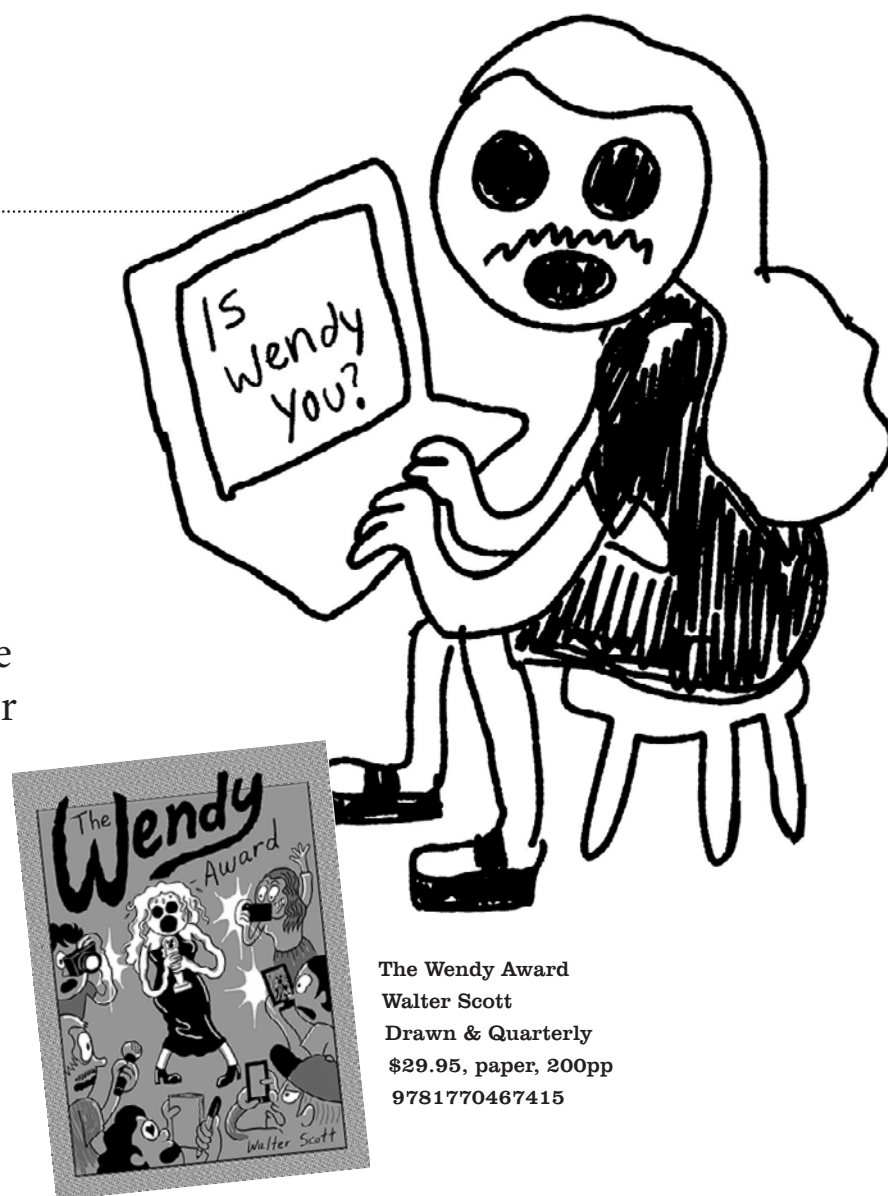
In a trend sure to induce a certain wistfulness in many readers, the new book sees Wendy and longtime best friend Screamo having drifted apart: Wendy is proceeding into adult responsibility and maturity, however fitfully, while Screamo looks to have been left behind. Happily for readers who’ve grown fond of, even protective of him, he finds his way into the new book, albeit in small, self-contained narratives that don’t overlap with the larger plot.

“What’s happened to Wendy and Screamo is something that happens in real life,” says Scott. “But I still want to follow what he’s up to. His life is so different from Wendy’s. She operates in a world of white privilege and pretension, with its own protocol, where he’s navigating this broke, queer, under-represented, druggy world where peoples’ lives are harder and more real. I wanted to maintain that as part of the *Wendyverse*.”

It’s been widely assumed that Screamo is named and depicted in honour of the titular figure in Edvard Munch’s 1893 expressionist painting *The Scream*, but Scott reveals otherwise.

“It’s a comic book series about the art world, so people assume it’s a very direct art reference. I was actually thinking of (Wes Craven’s) *Scream* films. But so many people have said Screamo comes from Munch that I think I’ll just go with the flow and start telling them they’re right. And I do admire Munch a lot. I’m moved by his unabashed desire to create images of jealousy and rage that are also quite funny.”

A counterintuitive strong point of Scott’s work is its emotional complexity



**The Wendy Award**  
Walter Scott  
Drawn & Quarterly  
\$29.95, paper, 200pp  
9781770467415

The line between us gets blurred sometimes. Am I wish-fulfilling through her? Or am I expressing a part of myself that already exists?

and capacity for delicacy. When it’s suggested that, for all the wild behaviour and dissipation on display, his satire is ultimately rather affectionate and gentle, he agrees. But with a proviso.

“I’ve looked back at a few *Wendy* stories and been surprised at how angry she allows herself to be,” he says. “It makes me wonder, ‘Does that come from me?’ The line between us gets blurred sometimes. Am I wish-fulfilling through her? Or am I expressing a part of myself that already exists?”

While Scott is at pains to say that *The Wendy Award* is not a pandemic novel and that he hopes it won’t be received as such, nevertheless there are markers of 2020–22 all through the book: masks, short tempers, contagion paranoia. It’s a reminder of one of the *Wendy* books’ many layers: its close observation, knife-sharp dialogue, trenchant identity politics, and accretion of detail effectively comprise an ongoing social history. Future generations will get as good an idea of the tenor of North American urban life in the COVID epoch from *The Wendy Award* as they would from any number of more earnest studies.

Many *Wendy* fans may be only dimly aware that the books comprise only one part of Scott’s bigger artistic vocation involving many media. While the breadth and variety of that output – encompassing sculpture, installation, and video work, with combinations and permutations thereof – is probably a subject for a different magazine, the question of where it all fits into Scott’s working life leads to a bombshell announcement.

“The pace and the workflow required to make *Wendy*... it’s demanding,” he says. “I never say never, but my plan is to write another *Wendy* book in ten years. She will have aged in real time. It’s the only way to write in a way that’s truthful to my experience. Another good reason [for a break] is that I don’t know how accurately I can continue to write a story about a party girl.”

What Scott is saying makes artistic sense. Without giving any spoilers, suffice to say the new book’s conclusion finds Wendy at a crossroads, and she appears to have the wherewithal to make the choices best suited to her self-preservation and general well-being. Probably. It seems only fair to give her the time and space to work out her destiny.

“I do feel her character arc has reached a point where we can put her aside for a while,” says Scott.

In the meantime, will the creator miss his creation?

“Sure, I’ll miss Wendy. But we’ll always have a thread between us.”

Ian McGillis is a novelist and journalist living in Montreal.



# poetry

LAURENCE PHILOMENE



SCOTT INDERMAUR



**National Animal**  
**Derek Webster**  
**Véhicule Press**  
**\$19.95, paper, 80pp**  
**9781550656572**

The national animal is a shapeshifter and a trickster. It is omnipresent and often abandons us to violent history. More than anything, it defies simple description. Derek Webster's second collection contains a panoramic meditation on the spell of nationhood and its grip on our lives. Throughout *National Animal*, we come to understand not only how this erratic creature defines our narratives, but also how inventive language allows us to move beyond the constraints of its dangerous territory.

In Webster's poetic imagination, the national animal is often, though not always, Canada. Most explicitly, the eleven-piece suite "Dominion" explores how Canada holds in tension the troubled histories of various Indigenous and settler communities across a vast expanse of "Northern fields." Poignantly, the sequence closes with the impassioned call: "Dominion help us / love you / for new reasons." Concluding this survey of the fragmentary whole that forms "Miss Canada," this desire appears both timely and timeless.

Although the book rarely loses sight entirely of the titular animal, national belonging is not its singular concern. *National Animal* intersects biography with questions of place, time, personal memory, art, and history. For instance, the reader is taken through suburban Oakville, finds nature mediated through YouTube, confronts hurtful pasts of war and slavery, and much more.

Nearing the collection's end, the long poem "The Thinker" pulls together the myriad of thematic strands that permeate *National Animal*. The ten-section piece attempts nothing less than to describe the universe's totality through the profoundly human tool of imaginative language. As "the universe equilibrates" long after our sun has darkened, Webster's vision finally reveals that the national animal is only one of the many ever-moving forces that give meaning and context to our lives.

**Mechanophilia Book 1**  
**Sarah Burgoyne and Vi Khi Nao**  
**Anvil Press**  
**\$20.00, paper, 120pp**  
**9781772142198**

*Mechanophilia* is the initial volume of an epic poem collaboratively produced by Montreal-based poet Sarah Burgoyne and American-Vietnamese writer Vi Khi Nao. In a lexical tour de force of monumental proportions, the two poets unleash a verbal maelstrom that rewards readers who are willing to surrender themselves to lyrical chaos.

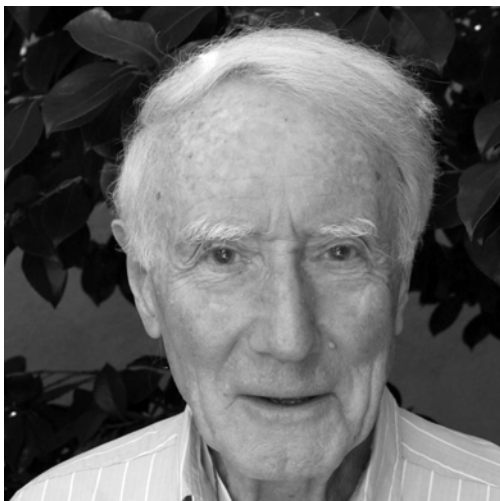
The lines of *Mechanophilia* are numbered after the successive decimals of pi, with each number usually dictating the line's length. This mathematical structure fragments the continuous grammar of the poem. Rife with criticisms and a sense of crisis, the supposed love song that begins the journey washes over the reader with challenging diction ranging from "architaves" and "conchology" all the way to "despaghettify." Occasional serene moments like "You / make the horizon / the purpose for my wanting" offer valuable counterbalance.

Despite the lingual overload, the crossfire of vocabulary assimilated from the arboreal, popculture, architecture, mathematics, various mythologies, and many more generates a sense of palpable thematic multiplicity and continuity.

Halfway through the book, *Mechanophilia* explodes into an absurdist queering of the Bible that grips the audience with a paradoxical but effective combination of hilarity and gravity. On the one hand, during an argument with their homophobic father, transgender Caina (formerly Cain) contemplates eating the moon-like silicone breasts of the Kardashians "like gummy / bears." On the other, this energetic re-imagining of scripture engages serious themes pertinent to the poets' biblical reading, such as homophobia and transphobia, alongside modern issues such as capitalist megalomania and genocidal history.

Persistently bridging the gap between such disparaging affects without trivializing the profound or suffocating its countless gags is this volume's strongest achievement. This first book comprises the initial 3,000 lines of an as of yet open-ended project, with three more books already completed. Especially once its dizzying anti-patriarchal satire picks up, *Mechanophilia Book 1* leaves one hungry for more.





**Dreamcraft**  
**Peter Dale Scott**  
**McGill-Queen's University Press**  
**\$19.95, paper, 120pp**  
**9780228020981**

Peter Dale Scott's most recent collection *Dreamcraft* is a book of truth. The volume's reflections on meaningful connections and the possibility, if not significance, of transcendence begin with the assertion that we require "an other / that we do not know" to even recognize ourselves. We "only become human / from interactions with others" and we are always encompassed by an elusive "moreness" that seems to have emerged as a source of comfort for Scott only after lifelong contemplation.

With an intelligent sincerity nourished by a prolific career as poet and political writer, Scott continues in *Dreamcraft* his commentary on the troubling turns of modern politics and governance that have been a central concern of his throughout. Nuancing the *OED* itself, "Mythogenesis" demonstrates how fact does not easily equal truth. "The Condition of Water" adds with frustration:

Tell me! What is it in our  
 bicameral brain that makes

obfuscation of mere fact  
 so much more beautiful?

In such moments, *Dreamcraft* prompts self-awareness, reminding us that we are part of the difficult world it describes.

Yet the collection moves beyond political concerns, as the poet reaches out on the page to many fellow artists, writers, intellectuals, and loved ones that have enriched his life. In numerous open-hearted, admiring, and often elegiac poems, Scott expresses admiration, love, and forgiveness in works dedicated, for instance, to his wife Ronna Kabatznick, Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Silvers, and Leonard Cohen. *Dreamcraft* thus assembles a literary record of the poet's past and present relations that breathes and will continue to breathe through its readers. Perhaps, the book thereby suggests that the "interactions with others" that make ourselves legible are the truest form of moreness, and that only honest poetry can capture these interactions beyond the fleeting moment of their occurrence.



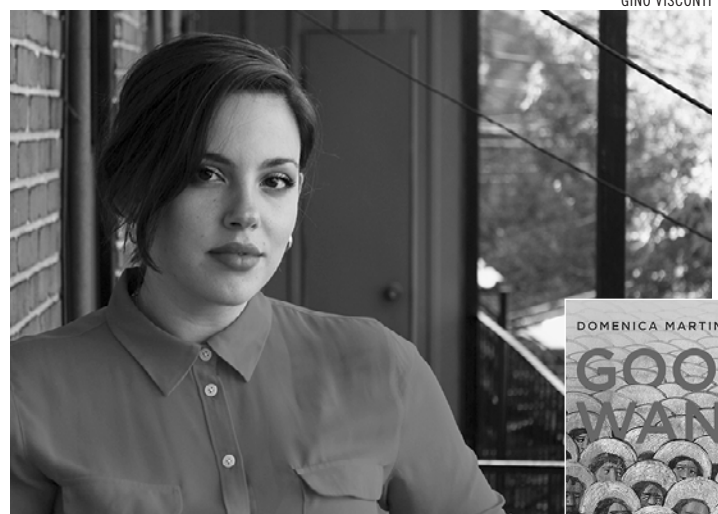
**Ulfhildr**  
**Mary Thaler**  
**Illustrated by Niv Sekar**  
**Untimely Books**  
**\$13.99, paper, 60pp**  
**9781961334038**

Mary Thaler's novel in verse, *Ulfhildr*, is an epic tale of vengeance, greed, violence, and betrayal, but also of courage, friendship, and trust. On a quest to avenge her spouse Thorstein, the fictional queen Ulfhildr is confronted with a series of moral and existential challenges forcing her to negotiate her roles as leader, warrior, woman, and partner with her responsibilities towards her community. Over the course of three chapters, poignantly illustrated by Niv Sekar, the short volume builds up to its moving conclusion by adding layer after layer to the queen's tragic conflicts with her own companions and subjects.

*Ulfhildr* insists that the truths of its story are to be felt in its poetic fabric, rather than comprehended by the mere consumption of its plot. To speak to her readers in this way, Thaler embeds the poem in her own variation of traditional Anglo-Saxon metre to make the book's arc. The perpetual insistence of rolling lines, unrhymed though driven by intricate syllabic reverberation, propels the reader through *Ulfhildr*. The carefully curated diction invokes authentic medieval texts such as *Beowulf*, with which *Ulfhildr* shares motifs of heroism, loyalty, and kinship. Yet at key moments, the poem almost seems to speak back to traditional epics by injecting straightforward lines, such as:

There is more than one way to manage your life.  
 Some build a wall when a storm-tide rises;  
 I made myself a boat, going to meet the greater risk

Thus, Thaler's adaptation of Old English conventions and themes culminates in a compelling work of poetic narration that feels refreshing not despite, but because of, its ambitious return to medieval form.



**Good Want**  
**Domenica Martinello**  
**Coach House Books**  
**\$23.95, paper, 112pp**  
**9781552454824**

We must want the right things and we must want them the right way. The correct kind of happiness threatens us with suburban homes, cars, dogs, children playing in front yards. In a vicious act of rebellion, Domenica Martinello demolishes the delusions of this capitalist pastoral in *Good Want*.

Marked by grit and a bitter sharpness, the lines of this book constantly ask what it means to be good and what we should want. *Good Want* grapples with a dark force that urges us to "keep stockpiling" and "waste not your wanting," an insidious drive that brings the deprived to "imagine juice out of powder, tide out / of detergent, wine out of water."

Martinello makes visible the sparse offerings for the many in this economy, and she embraces some deeper questions unearthed in the process. What are we left to believe in, if we are only allowed to desire specific things in a specific manner? It is no coincidence that biblical references and confessional modes permeate this collection. The speaker's honesty is uncompromising and points out a dangerous nothingness behind all struggle, as even "Money can't buy class. / It's inherited genetically." There is no out for anyone, not even those who champion financial success.

Poem by poem, the book reckons with exhaustion, expectations, the frustrations of city life, of work, of being a partner, of being defined by a myriad of imposed norms. This critique culminates in the title piece – which earned its author the *Malahat Review's* Long Poem Prize – in which we learn that "Good is what happens / when you stretch God too far" and that "Want is what happens. [...] Next comes shame." Perhaps almost ironically, given its insistence that genuine creativity is impossible under the system it convincingly rejects, *Good Want* is a gripping and destructive blow of poetic resistance. mb

**Martin Breul** is a Montreal writer and caffeine addict, currently pursuing a doctorate in Canadian literature at McGill. He writes poetry, flash fiction, reviews, and more. In 2023, Cactus Press published Martin's debut chapbook *love poems suck*. Twitter/X: @BreulMartin



# young readers

## Songs in the Shade of the Cherry Tree

Traditional country life is at the heart of the lullabies and nursery rhymes collected by Nathalie Soussana as

*Songs in the Shade*

*of the Cherry Tree*, printed in English and in the original Ukrainian. Those who can sing the famous Mother Goose rhymes by heart may enjoy adding these Ukrainian lullabies to their repertoire – some of which are meant to amuse, and some to caution against the follies of humans and the perils of nature.

In “Rain, Rain, Come Again,” precipitation is summoned with hot beet soup: “Rain, rain, come again / I’ll make you some borscht / Clap, clap, clap! I’ll put some aside / On a blackthorn branch / Clap, clap, clap!”

A cherry tree asks to come inside from the cold on a winter night in “Night is Falling”: “A happy dream will keep you warm / Dear cherry tree, come join the little one / You’ll be warm in the tiny cradle.”

In other rhymes, sly cranes swoop down to steal the harvest, and a grey wolf keeps an eye on the small white goat; swallows bring glad tidings, and kittens tip-toe around sleeping children.

“I Crush, I Crush the Poppies” is a solemn call-and-answer that seeks hope in the face of war: “And where is the sea?” / ‘Overgrown with flowers.’ / ‘And where are the flowers?’ / ‘Picked by young girls.’ / ‘And where are the girls?’ / ‘Menfolk have taken them in.’ / ‘And where are the menfolk?’ / ‘They’ve gone to war.’ / ‘And where is the war?’ / ‘War is no more.’”

Vibrant illustrations by Qu Lan bring the folkloric characters – like the jaunty magpies in babushkas and the fiddling goats – as well as the pastoral scenes into rich colour. As with all *The Secret Mountain’s* musical books, you can listen to the songs and access the learning guides online.



kinds of larvae, and teaches readers how to make a herbarium. With a little trepidation, she explains the food chain, cautioning that “Nature can be cruel sometimes!”

On the forest floor, she learns more about the crucial role of ants in the ecosystem. Climbing a tree, she “notices with astonishment that, even up high, there’s a lot of life to be found.”

Tereza Vostradovská’s illustrations are highly detailed and the flora and fauna are labelled throughout. When the *gerris* – what I now know is the

proper name for a water strider – dips his long insect leg in the pond, it makes a subtle ring in the water. In scenes as detailed as they are happy, *Little Mouse* tracks the minutiae of her world with a distinctive grin and a confident gait.

First published in Czech in 2016, this English translation brings the hardcover version to a new audience. A video game and interactive version is also available in eighteen languages. From life underwater to life in the garden, kids will learn a lot within these pages.



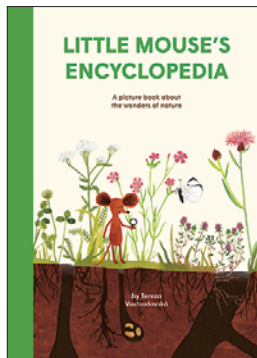
## The Museum of Very Bad Smells

This latest offering from Monica Arnaldo is a whodunnit for olfactory detectives. It is opening day at the Museum of Very Bad Smells, but the prize exhibit, the rotten egg, has been burgled! Everyone is a suspect – the hermit crab, the dung beetle, the disgruntled mouse, and the wet dog – but each seems to have an alibi. Can they find the egg in time for the opening? Thankfully, the hamster is frantically on the case.

Readers can follow the detective’s trail with their eyes and with their noses, thanks to the inclusion of the throwback 1980s gimmick, scratch-and-sniff. I can’t comment on just how bad the smells may be because the print edition was not available at the time of writing, though I admit I wasn’t terribly disappointed about that. Noses beware!

Arnaldo really flexes her illustrator muscles within these vibrant and playful pages. The dog’s tail wags with gusto, while the hamster’s facial expressions belie his oscillating emotions. And let’s just say that when the mystery is solved, no graphic detail is spared!

Repeat readings might not be quite as much fun once the thief is unmasked. But I have the sneaking suspicion that kids will come back time and again for the giddy humour of it all, and more specifically, for the fart jokes.



## Little Mouse’s Encyclopedia

*Little Mouse* loves to spend quiet days sipping tea in her burrow and learning about the world through encyclopedias. But when a plant root pierces her ceiling, she feels compelled to put down the book, go out into the wider world, and document what she discovers.

As most kids are now accustomed to finding the answers to their questions using a search engine, *Little Mouse’s* love for hardbound encyclopedias might require a moment’s explanation. Bygone are the days of my childhood, when volumes of general reference encyclopedias occupied an entire bookcase in the dining room.

Once defined, primary-aged readers will be keen to follow *Little Mouse’s* explorations. Under the burrow, she discovers different

## Barefoot Skateboarders

Set in Janwaar, a village in northern India, *Barefoot Skateboarders* tells the true story of how sport can help bridge caste and gender divides.

The plain text, suited for beginner to intermediate readers, follows Ramkesh, a young boy who is of the Adivasi Indigenous group, living in a mud home in Janwaar. Adivasis like Ramkesh don’t often interact with their neighbours, who belong to the Yadav caste and live in brick homes. Yadavs never play with Adivasis, Ramkesh reports. Girls from both groups are also often excluded from activities.

That is until one day a skatepark is built in Janwaar. At first, Ramkesh is skeptical of the new addition to his village: “What are they building? Another school? A hospital? With pointless hills and ramps, the structure looks like a waste of concrete!” But soon he finds himself enraptured by this new sport, and despite not having any shoes, learns to skateboard together with the other children of the village, Yadavs and girls included. “The children feel free when they are on the skateboards. Like Ramkesh, they all want wings to fly.”

*Barefoot Skateboarders* details Ramkesh’s travels to the UK and Germany, where he learns more about skateboarding, together with two other kids from Janwaar, Arun and Asha. But while the view from the plane is amazing, Ramkesh only has eyes for his new shoes!

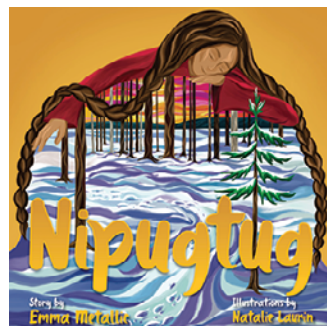
The potential of children to become changemakers even in the most stratified societies is the driving message of *Barefoot Skateboarders*, and Sophie Casson’s playful illustrations bring Ramkesh’s tentative first steps, and high-flying ollies, into full colour.



## Nipugtug

Emma Metallic’s debut book *Nipugtug*, written in English and Mi’gmaq language, is a non-linear story that follows A’le, a Mi’gmaq woman on a journey to learn and speak Mi’gmaq over a day, and throughout the phases of her life.

As the story begins, A’le sips her morning coffee and considers snowshoeing in the forest. She knows it will be hard to cut a fresh trail, but that she will feel better once she is outside. When she arrives at the forest’s edge, she remembers the whispers she heard as a young girl among the miti’g (the trees). Her younger self loved to play in the forest, together with her friends, Qasgusi (cedar tree), Masgwi (white birch tree), and Wapus (rabbit). The trees and the animals are not only playmates but forest guides and the



*Songs in the Shade of the Cherry Tree*  
Songs collected by Nathalie Soussana  
Illustrated by Qu Lan  
*The Secret Mountain*  
\$19.95, cloth, 20pp  
9782898360848  
Ages 5–9

*Little Mouse’s Encyclopedia*  
Tereza Vostradovská  
Milky Way Picture Books  
\$25.99, cloth, 54pp  
9781990252181  
Ages 4–8

*The Museum of Very Bad Smells*  
Monica Arnaldo  
HarperCollins  
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9780063271449  
Ages 4–8

*Barefoot Skateboarders*  
Rina Singh  
Illustrated by Sophie Casson  
Orca Book Publishers  
\$21.95, cloth, 32pp  
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Ages 6–8

*Nipugtug (In the Forest)*  
Emma Metallic  
Illustrated by Natalie Laurin  
KegeDonce Press  
\$18.00, paper, 56pp  
9781928120414  
Ages 7–11

guardians of language and meaning. “I need you to listen to me,” Wapus tells adult A’le. “There are words spoken throughout nipugt [forest], words so old and special they reveal our ways of being on the Earth.”

Though once at home in nipugt among these ancient words, A’le’s older self is uncertain of her place. Taunted by Ga’qaquj (crow), her unease deepens: “I tried to remember what this trail was called, speak its name, but with every step, it seemed as though the language of nipugt slipped between my fingers, leaving me behind.” As a new mother, and later, a grandmother, A’le struggles to come to terms with the forgotten, lost, and unused words of her beloved nipugt. Yet she finds a way to quiet the negative voices, and discover her path.

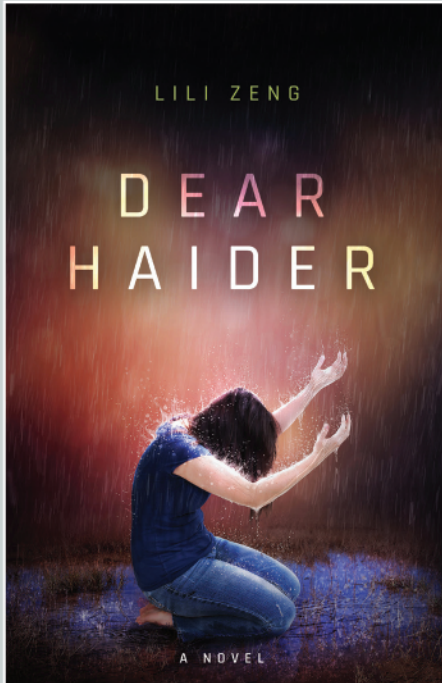
Paired with painterly illustrations by Natalie Laurin, *Nipugtug* is a loving portrait of intergenerational family life and an artful exploration of language revitalization. For non-speakers looking to reconnect with or learn the language, the Mi’gmaq-to-English glossary offers a window into the language for intermediate to advanced readers. [mra](#)

**Meaghan Thurston** is a Montreal-based arts and science writer, co-editor of the anthology *With the World to Choose From: Seven Decades of the Betty Lecture at McGill University*, and mother to two budding readers.





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M.V. Feehan

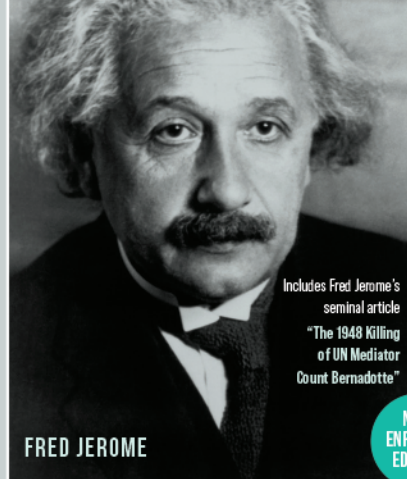
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Julia Erhart

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"Julia Erhart compellingly reactivates a queer classic for the contemporary moment."  
-Lee Wallace, author of *Reattachment Theory: Queer Cinema of Remarriage*



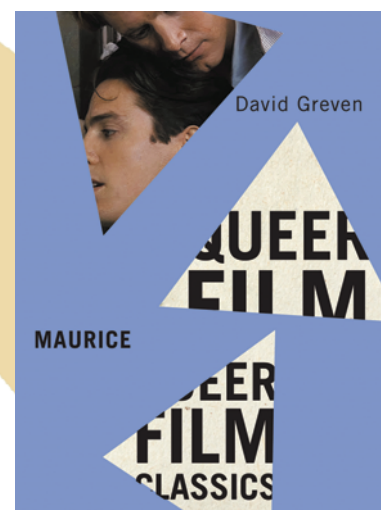
**Winter Kept Us Warm**

Chris Dupuis

Foreword by John Greyson

Paper | \$19.95 | 144pp | 35 photos

"*Winter Kept Us Warm* is the most influential film of my life."  
-David Cronenberg, interview in *The Observer*



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David Greven

Paper | \$19.95 | 208pp | 40 photos

"The writing is the greatest joy of this book. In naming Merchant Ivory's *Maurice* a classic, Greven has created a classic of his own."  
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# Queer Film Classics

Exploring the diversity, quality, and originality of classics in the queer film canon – broadly conceived.



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Paper | \$37.95 | 296pp | 59 photos

«Grâce au travail de l'autrice, l'histoire du cinéma LGBTQ+ québécois se(r)écrit sous nos yeux. Et la démarche de Vaillancourt s'opère alors comme un essentiel et indispensable devoir de mémoire.»  
-Ciné-Bulles



**Midnight Cowboy**

Jon Towlson

Paper | \$19.95 | 128pp | 32 photos

"Towlson highlights the profound influence that *Midnight Cowboy* exerted on subsequent moviemaking. As a step toward the depiction of openly gay people in film, *Midnight Cowboy* was an important milestone."  
-*The Gay & Lesbian Review*



**Appropriate Behavior**

Maria San Filippo

Paper | \$19.95 | 176pp | 42 photos

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