mtlreviewofbooks.ca • FREE/ISSUE 76

Publication • Montreal Review of Books • Contrat/Convention no. 43497096

# mRb

## Montreal Review of Books

**SPRING 2025**

LEILA MARSHY • JAMIE JELINSKI • KARINE GLORIEUX • AMÉLIE PRÉVOST AND RACHEL McCRUM

Ottawa Canada Canada Council for the Arts Conseil des arts du Canada Fairmont Château Laurier Penguin Random House Canada Planet Coffee Ontario

THE OTTAWA INTERNATIONAL
# writers festival
www.writersfestival.org

## 50th Festival

## May 1-4 / 14-16

Streaming Service, Passes, and
Writing Workshops available

www.writersfestival.org

613-859-8911

# mRb

**SPRING 2025**
**Volume 28 No. 2**

**Montreal Review of Books**
is published by the Association of English-language Publishers of Quebec (AELAQ).
Circulation: 37,000

**Malcolm Fraser** • Editor
**Emma Dollery** • Associate Editor
**Rebecca West** • Publisher
**Alexandra Sweny** • Associate Publisher
**David LeBlanc** • Designer

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

For advertising inquiries contact:
ads@mtlreviewofbooks.ca

ISSN # 1480-2538



Dépôt légal, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the National Library of Canada, first quarter, 2025.

We wish to thank the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada, SODEC, and the Conseil des arts de Montréal for their generous support, without which this publication would not exist.

One-year subscriptions available for $15
Please visit mtlreviewofbooks.ca/subscribe

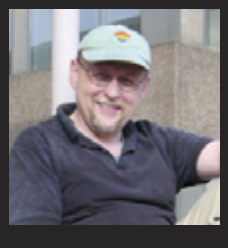


**Visit us online**
**mtlreviewofbooks.ca**
**aelaq.org**

Cover art by
**Allie Gattor**

**PRINTED IN CANADA**


IN MEMORIAM



MICHAEL WILE
APRIL 16, 1956 – JANUARY 6, 2025
*mRb* NATIONAL ADVERTISING MANAGER
2001–2025

# contents


## features

4 **Leila Marshy**
By Léa Murat-Ingles

10 **Jamie Jelinski**
By Yara El-Soueidi

15 **Karine Glorieux**
By Sruti Islam

18 **Amélie Prévost and Rachel McCrum**
By Klara du Plessis

## fiction

6 **Coup de Grâce**
**Sofia Ajram**
Reviewed by Alexandra Sweny

**The Bigamist**
**Felicia Mihali**
**Translated by Linda Leith**
Reviewed by Sharon Morrisey

7 **Secrets of Stone**
**Coltrane Seesequasis**
Reviewed by Karolina Roman

**Saints Rest**
**Luke Francis Beirne**
Reviewed by Ella Buckingham

## graphic

8 **Tsunami**
**Ned Wenlock**
Reviewed by Ian McGillis

**Denniveniquity**
**D. Boyd**
Reviewed by Julie Jacques

9 **Holy Lacrimony**
**Michael DeForge**
Reviewed by Billie Gagné-LeBel

**Gesticulating Gentrification**
**Rick Trembles**
Reviewed by Jack Ruttan

## non-fiction

16 **Soundtrack to the Revolution**
**Eric Fillion**
**Translated by David Homel**
Reviewed by Alexander Hackett

**Yogalands**
**Paul Bramadat**
Reviewed by Rebecca West

17 **Living Design**
**Edited by Zoë Ryan and Valentina Sarmiento Cruz**
**Translated by Natalie Espinosa**
Reviewed by Emily Raine

**No Big Deal**
**Dean Brownrout**
Reviewed by Johnson Cummins

19 **Unravelling MAiD in Canada**
**Edited by Ramona Coelho, K. Sonu Gaind, and Trudo Lemmens**
Reviewed by Yoann Della Croce

## poetry

19 **The Inferno**
**Dante Alighieri**
**Translated by Lorna Goddison**
Reviewed by Brennan McCracken

20 **No One Knows Us There**
**Jessica Bebenek**

**Fugue Body**
**Bridget Huh**

**Cut Side Down**
**Jessi MacEachern**

**The Seated Woman**
**Clémence Dumas-Côté**

**Chambersonic**
**Oana Avasilichioaei**
Reviewed by Frances Grace Fyfe

## young readers

22 **Highlights of the Season's Books for Young People**
Reviewed by Meaghan Thurston



Hailing from the Canadian prairies and based in Montreal, **Cole Degenstein** is an artist whose work takes form in comics, illustration, and poetry. Tenderness is at the core of his work, which centres itself in storytelling about domesticity, gay history, and the scarcity that informs rural life.

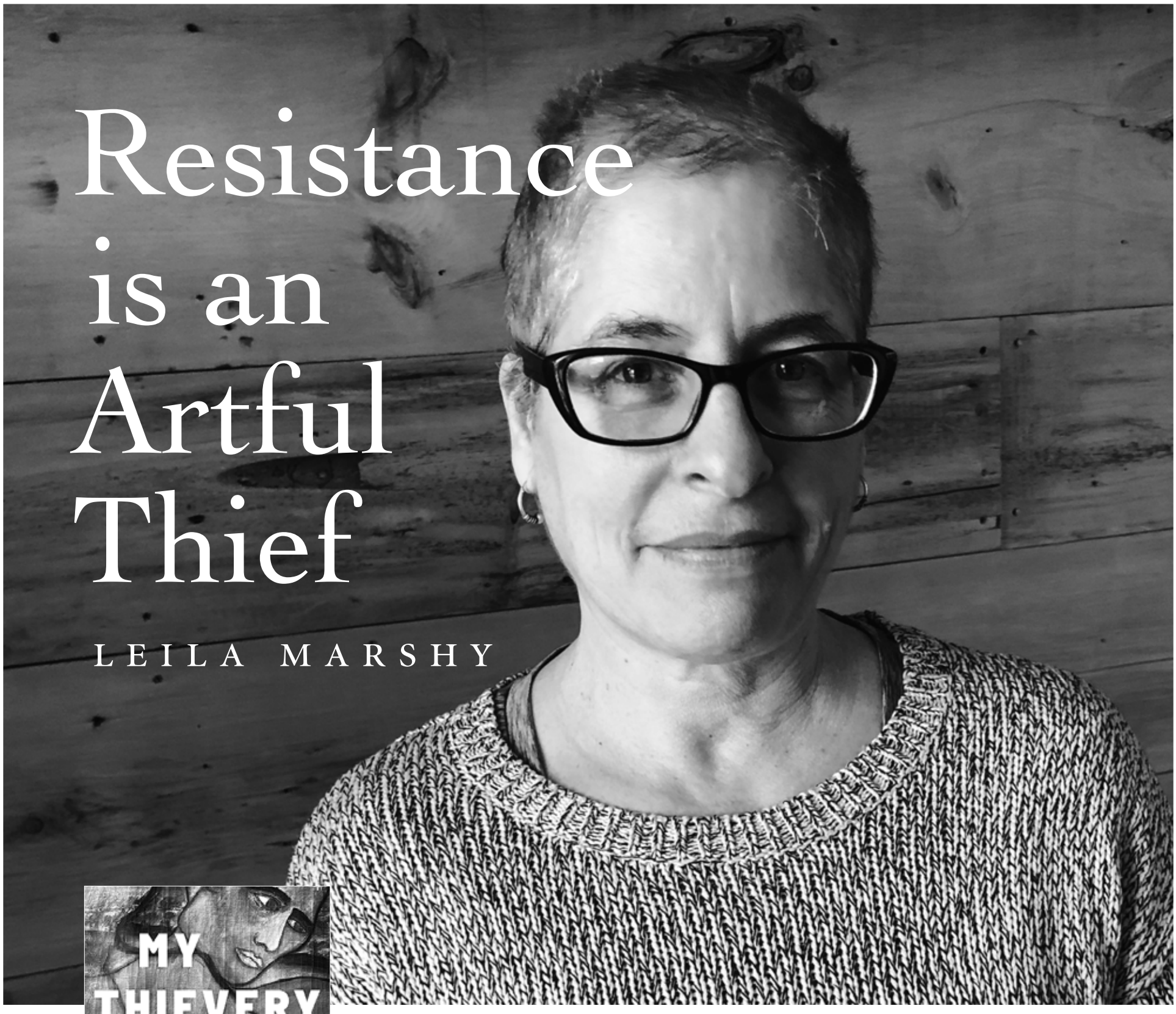

SODEC Québec
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE MONTRÉAL
Montréal
Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada
Canada

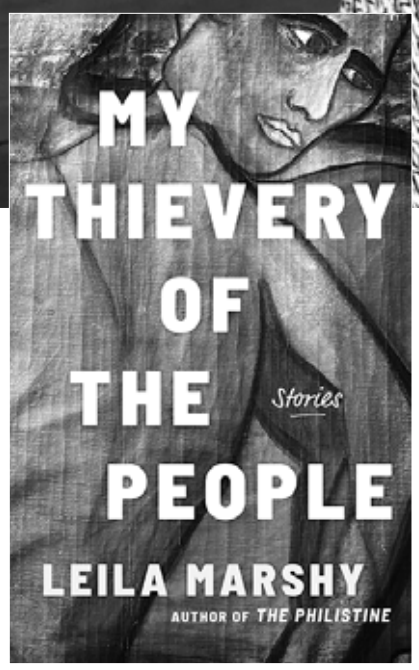
BY LÉA MURAT-INGLES

# Resistance is an Artful Thief

## LEILA MARSHY

CAYOUP






**My Thievery of the People**
**Leila Marshy**
**Baraka Books**
**$24.95, paper, 168pp**
**9781771863773**

Ever since publishing her first critically acclaimed book, *The Philistine*, in 2018, Leila Marshy has felt herself walking a new path. "It signalled the beginning of, I would say, my literary life, and it signalled a different stage in my social literary life," she tells me during our interview on Zoom. A life, it seems, marked by a resounding success as a new author. *The Philistine*, a deeply queer story of reconnecting with oneself and one's culture, was shortlisted for multiple prizes and translated to French only a few years after its debut. The Arabic translation is due out this year.

Marshy's new book, a collection of short stories entitled *My Thievery of the People*, marks a new milestone in her literary career, although she feels a different connection to the book than she did to *The Philistine*. "*The Philistine* was a labour of love," relates Marshy when asked about her new book in our interview. "It was my first book. I worked on it for a long time, on and off, I kept dropping it. But I had faith in it, I loved it… I was really close to it."

Some elements of *My Thievery of the People* echo Marshy's first novel. Although the political and queer dimensions of the book might not be as overt as they are in *The Philistine*, we find characters that are full of angst, enacting subtle forms of daily resistance to maintain their agency. Marshy explains, "I feel very political. I'm not interested in literature that's not political, that's not grounded in struggle of some sort. Otherwise, honestly, what's the point?" Marshy's writing is driven by her deep interest in human nature and societal structures. "Thematically, I am taken aback by hypocrisy and injustice and the little ways people grab on to power, you know, even mundane, banal power. It's obscene."

Marshy might be referring to the strong heteropatriarchal figures that appear as villains in this vastly diverse universe of short stories. A universe that varies delightfully in form – from journalling about the last days at a job after being fired, to a "How to" guide to internal collapse, to the mythical resistance of two women woven through history, to suspense and murder mystery. "I like to have fun with different forms," she says, "and a story takes the form it needs. I like the challenge of having to create momentum and a lot of these stories have that." Marshy's fun is incredibly contagious.

*My Thievery of the People* opens on two strangers at a book event who are having a hard time connecting: "I really wanted that to set the tone. From a distance, it's two people amiably talking, but up close, it's two extremely traumatized people putting on their masks and not really communicating at all."

This conjures, of course, our universal feelings of loneliness and alienation in big tech's capitalist apocalypse, which 2025 seems shaping up to be, to put it mildly. This is especially daunting when you are a part of a community that has been historically oppressed and discarded, relegated into otherness. A sentiment Marshy knows all too well: "That's my default place in the world that I've often papered over and kind of minimized in my life. But being outside and lonely and feeling vulnerable and misunderstood, you know, is also kind of human condition stuff."

These feelings could seem pessimistic, and although Marshy's characters and narrators are often cynical (in the best way), they embody a deep sense of agency that compels them, and hopefully by extension, the readers, to act. "My entire motivation is to question the power structure," says Marshy. "I think colonialism in all its forms has been a horrible blight on the planet. It's our responsibility as individuals, as artists even, to hold up the collective and help people resist erasure."

*My Thievery of the People* helps us believe 2025 might not be that bad after all, and that big tech and other power structures should fear *us.* Marshy's figures of power are fundamentally fragile and could crumble in the face of disaster, or fate, or chance. She highlights her female character's resilience in one of the best stories of the collection, "1001 Nights in Palmyra's Bed." Its protagonist Noha struggles with her brother Ali's royal-like return home after years of working abroad. Her destiny is tied with Queen Zenobia's, a mythical queen who famously resisted Roman siege. "It's, again, a story of resistance. It's about personal occupation, but it's also the story of Palestine. It's like: resistance by any means necessary. In the end, resistance wins. Maybe it's a kind of revenge fantasy." Yet Marshy doesn't really like the word revenge for its narrowness and implied violence. Retribution is closer to what she means, or justice.

*I'm not interested in literature that's not political, that's not grounded in struggle of some sort. Otherwise, honestly, what's the point?*

Just like in *The Philistine*, Egypt makes multiple appearances throughout *My Thievery of the People*, becoming a character Marshy has loved ever since she lived there in her twenties. "Egypt helped me understand a few things about the world. Colonialism, poverty, the privilege of foreigners, the way in which Egyptians are stuck, get stuck, stay stuck. You can be absolutely brilliant and talented but there are too many structural and social things keeping you down." Marshy's connection to Egypt is also intertwined with the larger Middle East and her own Palestinian heritage. The latter doesn't, however, often emerge in her writing, taking instead the shape of activism and community action in her day-to-day life. "I didn't live in Palestine the way I lived in Egypt, and so the stories don't just spontaneously arise. I could create one but then it wouldn't feel authentic. I don't want to shoehorn my Palestinian-ness. I mean, I lived in Egypt *because* I am Palestinian. It's all connected."

Marshy's sophomore book, *My Thievery of the People*, signals that the writer's literary path is only entering its bloom. Since last summer, she has taken up the role of fiction editor at Baraka Books. She feels right at home with the editorial vision of this Montreal-based publisher. "We share a need for political meaningfulness in the books we publish and write. Not all publishers have that mandate."

Her current project? A non-fiction anthology of contributions about how Palestinians and their allies have been punished and scrutinized in Canada over the past year for their engagement, coming out this fall. And she has much more to celebrate: *The Philistine* has been optioned and is being made into a movie! mRb

**Léa Murat-Ingles** (she/they) is a literature doctoral student, assistant researcher and teacher. As part of her studies, she is particularly interested in Haitian literature from Quebec, Afrofuturism, AI, and the role of archives in research creation. Her first novel, *Les rythmes de la poussière*, was published in May 2024 at Remue-Ménage (Les Martiales) and was shortlisted for the first edition of the Radio-Canada Caroline Dawson prize.

# fiction

## Comparing Mythologies

**Coup de Grâce**
**Sofia Ajram**
**Penguin Random House**
**$22.99, cloth, 144pp**
**9781803369624**


Sofia Ajram's debut novel *Coup de Grâce* is a markedly Gen Z take on allegory, bringing visions of Dante, Orpheus, and Medusa to dance alongside figures from twenty-first-century internet lore like the Nutty Putty Cave Man and Elisa Lam. The result is a modern horror story marrying classic mythologies with creepypastas, all unfolding in the bowels of the Montreal STM.

Much like Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves, Coup de Grâce* is a novel in which the setting has as much agency as any of the characters. Hallways circle back on themselves, staircases dead-end into barricaded turnstiles, and the wet concrete drips indefinitely – a labyrinthine structure that becomes manifest for the reader in the final pages of the novel. Part modern oracle, part choose-your-own-adventure, *Coup de Grâce* is a powerful fictional debut that makes an ethical demand of its reader.

The novel begins with a compelling premise: falling asleep along the green line somewhere between Assomption and Honoré-Beaugrand, protagonist Vicken awakens to find himself in an empty terminus. There's no signage, no cell service, and no one around – or so he thinks.

Having boarded the metro to throw himself into the Saint Lawrence – "my river Ouse" – Vicken's purgatory is as much psychological as it is physical. Trapped in the liminal space of the underground maze, Vicken spends countless days surviving off the spoils of an abandoned dépanneur, rationing his medication and using his iPhone to illuminate narrow tunnels. With other human characters kept to a minimum, much of the horror takes place within the confines of Vicken's own mind.

River Ouse, of course, invokes Virginia Woolf, while other phrases in the novel smack of Canadian classicist Anne Carson. The allegorical backdrop is woven throughout, only somewhat heavy-handedly heralded by posters in the metro advertising the latest show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: an exhibit on the "taboo in art," with Orpheus and Eurydice dancing beneath the banner that reads "Don't look back." Hades' command takes on a chilling significance in the context of other classical myths, like that of Medusa, as well as contemporary references like Ajram's invocation of the internet-famous Elevator Game (think Bloody Mary but set in an elevator).

*Coup de Grâce* moves with an imaginative gusto that at times seems difficult for Ajram to harness. He draws from various mythologies but never for more than a few paragraphs, a post-modernist tactic that here feels at turns liberatory and at others frustrating: not adhering to a single story prevents the novel from falling into predictability, but also leaves the constant references feeling sometimes clumsy and overcrowded, never yielding any real insight.

Likewise, Ajram's use of language is visceral but appears at times to outpace his command. For instance, Vicken describes slipping on some unknown liquid "like socks on cold cat vomit," a phrase that made me recoil on its first iteration, but less so when it reappeared verbatim just five pages later. And while Vicken tells us at the outset that he is going to recount his story "with the melancholy of a poet," it never becomes clear why as an EMT – a profession that relies on logic, unsentimentality, and coolness under pressure – he has such a penchant for flowery language and niche literary references.

These flaws are minor considering the ambition and imaginative scope of Ajram's project, which extends beyond the novel's content to engage with form as well. The strongest and strangest parts of the novel are those that seem straight out of an r/Horror megathread, using well-known internet phenomena to revitalize classical references that otherwise might seem obscure or irrelevant. Just as Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be read as an allegory for spiritual self-discovery, Vicken's journey through the terminus can be seen as a navigation of his own mental abyss – one can almost picture Jigsaw in the place of Virgil, telling Vicken that he's not cherishing his life.

LAURENCE PHILOMENE

Intelligent, unsettling, and ripe for re-readability, *Coup de Grâce* is a horror story for anyone who has ever tried to navigate the tunnel system running below Sainte-Catherine, as well as any STM commuters stuck in an indeterminate purgatory waiting for service to be *rétabli.* mrb

**Alexandra Sweny** is associate publisher of the *mRb*.

## Mapping the In Between

**The Bigamist**
**Felicia Mihali**
**Translated by Linda Leith**
**Linda Leith Publishing**
**$23.95, paper, 144pp**
**ISBN 9781773901688**


The introspective calm of the nameless narrator in Felicia Mihali's novel, *The Bigamist*, translated by Linda Leith, sets the tone right from the start. In a forthright voice, she recounts her involvement in a complex pas de deux with two men – a situation that brings to the fore the expectations and contradictions of being a Romanian immigrant in Montreal, as well as the difficult task of grappling with who she once was, who she is becoming, and who she seemingly wants to be. A love story of sorts, the novel illustrates how real life can dull the fairy tale of searching for new beginnings, falling in love, and ultimately finding happiness.

Leaving Romania was her idea, not her husband, Aaron's. He was perfectly satisfied with his life back home but, being easy-going, was willing to indulge her desire. This unforgiving dichotomy forms the foundational flaw in their relationship – the very one that will eventually lead her to move out, but not quite leave him. The novel is about her relationships with both Aaron and her lover, Roman. Both men are engineers and Romanian immigrants, but this is where the similarity ends. Aaron, "whose life was dedicated to undermining the system with his inability to adapt," couldn't care less about getting a job, and relies on our protagonist for his meals, his clean clothes and any tasks related to the home. Roman, on the other hand, is divorced, a successful engineer, and the owner of a large house in suburbia. It is through the Romanian-Canadian Writers' Association, which she describes as being more of a social club, that our protagonist and Roman meet.

The first few chapters present the reader with a story about a couple coming to Canada so that the wife can become a writer. Our protagonist starts a master's degree in comparative literature, and her involvement in local Romanian cultural events and organizations figures prominently. The lot of the newly arrived immigrant is relayed in detail: intermingling languages, precarious living conditions, navigating basic necessities, and gathering with other Romanian immigrants. We quickly come to understand that our protagonist is not a victim of her situation. Her keen analytical eye, often supported by references to a wide variety of authors and books, details her lived "in-betweenness."

DANILA RAZYKOV

Her past, linked to Romanian life and tradition, is extremely well rendered in the trips she is forced to make back home, for her mother's, and later, her father's funerals. These passages were some of my favourites; they read true, and, in a sense, help ground and explain the protagonist's behaviour back in Canada. It is in these escapes back to her homeland that the reader is able to grasp the extent of the internal repercussions and the threat of ostracization that the protagonist faces when leaving her husband.

Readers bear witness to a woman navigating the deep, personal meaning of uprootedness. She describes for us how she slips into a completely different environment with Roman, the man with whom she has fallen in love. Suburbia, mingling with his colleagues' wives, the importance of having money and showing it – all these superficial aspects of her new life are disorienting. Who she was – a spendthrift woman who could fix anything in the house – no longer matters outwardly. Love is the force that brought them together, but will it be enough to keep them together? mrb

**Sharon Morrisey** is hiding out here from her other professional life.

# Wolves, Titans, and Troubled Tongues

**Secrets of Stone**
**Coltrane Seesequasis**
**Kegedonce Press**
**$25.00, paper, 254pp**
**9781928120421**


*Secrets of Stone* is Coltrane Seesequasis' first book, and Book One of the *A Wolf in the Sun* saga from Kegedonce Press. The story takes place in the Four Territories, a continent inhabited by sentient wolves with the power to control the elements, and by their enemies – giant, vengeful spiders. Silversong, a young wolf full of untapped potential, is given the chance to prove his worth when his pack, the Whistle-Wind wolves, are attacked by a group of outcasts. These outcast wolves are led by The Heretic, an exile who seeks to overturn the oppressive Wolven Code and usher in a new, equitable world order. The book follows Silversong on his journey to undermine The Heretic's ambitions. Along the way, he discovers a number of disturbing secrets about himself and the world he thought he knew.

Every sentence in *Secrets of Stone* shows how intimately familiar the author and his editor are with the world they have created. Meticulous attention is paid to various quirks in the wolves' speech and mannerisms, a constant reminder that these characters are not human. Unfortunately, the same attentiveness is not extended to the individual personalities of various characters, especially where dialogue is concerned. Exchanges between characters come off as unnatural and awkward, as wolves of vastly different ages, convictions, and motivations speak in the same stilted, childlike manner. (It was particularly hard to ignore the countless instances of "?!" used to express any shift in tone or emotion.) These elements make it difficult for readers to connect with Silversong and his friends, as opposed to the more mature Heretic, for example, and to understand the moral and ethical beliefs that motivate the heroes and villains of the story.

These flaws in the writing style are, however, absent from the sections of the book concerned with the lore and history of the Four Territories. In these chapters, readers learn about the Titans – gods that take the shape of creatures from the land, sea, and sky, representing both predator and prey – who fought to defeat a human civilization threatening to destroy the world's delicate natural balance during the War of Change. The Titans are portrayed with more detail and care than the wolf protagonists, and are written in a more classic fantasy style than the rest of the book. Though this inconsistency in writing is jarring, these animal gods show much promise for the remaining books in the series. Fans of Rick Riordan are sure to recognize the narrative potential of deeply flawed divine beings on a quest to reclaim their former power.

Seesequasis' series demonstrates a great deal of imaginative promise, and readers who enjoyed *Warrior Cats*, *Teen Wolf*, or

SHARMILA CHOWDHURY

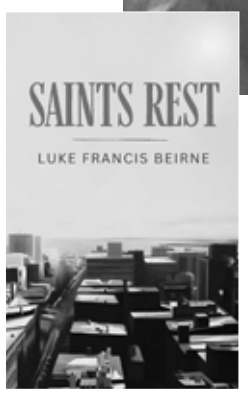
*Guardians of Ga'Hoole* will likely be drawn to his lupine protagonists (and all manner of other creatures encountered along the way). Without revealing too much about the story, it is equally important to applaud the author's skillful integration of a queer character into the novel in a way that complements, rather than overshadows, other important plot elements. In this way, the author avoids the overdone "coming-out" trope, and instead produces a fully fledged, inclusive YA fantasy. One hopes that future books in the series will offer more insight into the history of the Four Territories and help flesh out the wolves who live there. mrb

**Karolina Roman** loves translation, exercise, knitting, and awful television programming.



# No Rest for the Wicked

**Saints Rest**
**Luke Francis Beirne**
**Baraka Books**
**$22.95, paper, 156pp**
**9781771863797**




It must be awfully cold in Saint John, New Brunswick – at least that's what Frank Cain, narrator of *Saints Rest*, the upcoming novel by Luke Francis Beirne, tells readers. But that's not all he tells them. Unspinning an intricate tale that transports audiences from the docks and city centre to deep woodlands and rural farmland, this film noir–esque book is an engaging and speedy read – the ideal companion to an evening spent curled up by a fire.

*Saints Rest* follows the story of Cain, a private investigator tasked with discovering the whereabouts of a young woman who disappeared the previous year. The twist? She is the main suspect in a murder case, the victim being her own boyfriend. The twist to that twist? It's her boyfriend's mother who wants her discovered, but not for the reasons one might expect. Using the dreamy small-town feel of Saint John as a background for unfolding this tale, the plot winds down various roads and country lanes, almost burying readers in suspense, before concluding in a series of grand revelations. As the story progresses, readers discover that behind this sleepy town facade lies a much deeper bundle of mysteries.

Seeing Saint John through the eyes of an expat (Cain is originally from Summerside, Prince Edward Island, while Beirne himself hails from Ireland) adds to the sense of unease that this novel emanates. Always slightly out of the loop, whether that be within the case or his own life, Cain appears to be constantly grasping for an element of truth and familiarity in an unknown environment. His lack of deeper personal connections to the city also makes the reader question his motivations for becoming involved in the case: who is he truly looking for as he plunges deeper and deeper into this intrigue? The young woman or himself? The hauntingly moody and mysterious background of Saint John, as Beirne describes it, seems to be the ideal place for this pursuit of self-discovery. "The ocean sky has presence," Cain ruminates in one scene. However, the question of whether Cain belongs in this setting lingers until the final pages of the novel, making readers wonder if Cain will ever manage to find deeper meaning on the city's streets.

While this novel delivered on all the aspects of a classic mystery tale, I felt myself longing for a stronger sense of place and richer character development. I wished to be better familiarized with the intriguing setting; however, the descriptions of Saint John felt incomplete and lacking in recognizable details. Cain's restlessness aligns with his sense of being an outsider, but also made the storyline feel rushed, preventing further development of place. Additionally, although the book ends with multiple eye-widening revelations, the characters' actions, and their underlying motivations, remain unexplored. Despite his role as a private investigator, Cain seems intriguingly resigned to the idea that they might remain so.

*Saints Rest* invokes images of smoky, curtained rooms where everyone wears a fedora and a three-piece suit, smokes a cigar, and plays pool, shooting the breeze as they ponder last night's shootout. Being transported into such scenes in a uniquely Canadian setting (Dollarama, Tim Hortons, and the Oilers, anyone?) was an engaging and fun reprieve. Although unanswered questions lingered as the book fell shut in my lap, the escape into the wintry countryside was a welcome one indeed. mrb

**Ella Buckingham** is a recent graduate turned job hunter. Her work can be found in *Forget the Box*, *Ahoy*, *The Veg*, and *Folio* magazines.

# graphic

## The Next Wave From Down Under

**Tsunami**
**Ned Wenlock**
**Pow Pow Press**
**$34.95, paper, 270pp**
**9782925114466**

In the 1980s, the town of Dunedin, on New Zealand's South Island, unexpectedly became the nexus of a scene that embodied the Platonic ideal of indie rock. This movement, championed by the maverick Flying Nun Records, garnered a small but devoted worldwide following. It was a rare case of an artistic community whose isolation was its strength: a delicate sensibility developed at its own pace, unencumbered by the boorish outside pressures of conventional commercialism.

Why am I telling you this in the *Montreal Review of Books*? Fair question. Because now, a few decades later, the spirit of Flying Nun appears to be alighting in another branch of the arts, this time in a North Island publishing house devoted to Kiwi graphic literature. Earth's End Publishing is clearly content to proceed at its own pace, allowing it to nurture a work as unique and compelling as Ned Wenlock's *Tsunami*, the company's first book in nine years, brought to Canada by Pow Pow Press. In *Tsunami* – as in a good song by, say, the Chills – youthful innocence is in imminent peril. Melancholic nostalgia battles for tonal prominence with an undertow of something much more unsettling. At the centre of it all is a protagonist destined for the alienated adolescent hall of fame.

Peter, the novel's twelve-year-old loner hero, is in the home stretch of his primary school career. For him and his classmates, as for preteens from time immemorial, it's an awkward life stage – trapped between their impulses and their inability to act upon or even articulate them. Peter, for example, has strong thoughts on the unjust power dynamics that rule all human interchange, but he still needs his mother's permission to get a haircut. He also has to be hyper-aware of Gus, the neighbourhood bully, who terrorizes him for seemingly no better reason than because he can.

KAREN STEVENS

Set in a suburbia expressly laid out for adults and their cars, it's telling that the kids in *Tsunami* are almost always on foot. What's more, they seem to be constantly running – chasing or, in Peter's case, being chased by the bully and his minions. Affection is expressed through physical aggression – "play-fighting" that isn't really play, and isn't really fighting. Until it is.

Though there is a smartphone or two in evidence, the book lends an oddly pre-digital feel to these kids' interactions and their negotiation of the world. Their dramas, masterfully orchestrated by Wenlock, play out not online but in broad daylight, where you can run but can't always hide, and where actions have consequences.


Wenlock's stylistic arsenal – social realism and emotional veracity conveyed via sharp, plainspoken dialogue and simple yet highly stylized visuals, with little to no use of perspective – makes for a potent blend. What's remarkable is how quickly you accept the world on Wenlock's visual terms: within pages you're too caught up in the unfolding drama to worry about how these people get around on feet that resemble rounded stumps.

So deft is the handling of Peter's journey that you barely notice as Wenlock gradually shifts gears, ratcheting up the element of menace and finally pulling off a plot reversal that will have you gasping. A conscientious reviewer cannot possibly reveal more than that. Nor should the nuanced significance of the title be given away. Suffice to say that water plays a part, though not in any way you're likely to guess. *Tsunami* is a book whose modest fame deserves to spread far beyond New Zealand. For an ideal listening accompaniment, I suggest *Daddy's Highway* by the Bats, from Flying Nun Records. mRb

**Ian McGillis** is a novelist and journalist who lives in Montreal.

## The More Things Change

**Denniveniquity**
**D. Boyd**
**Conundrum Press**
**$25.00, paper, 160pp**
**9781772621082**


In this new graphic memoir, D. Boyd transports the reader to junior high in 1970s Atlantic Canada. The cartoon art style, unassuming in black and white, is accessible to all readers as an effective backdrop for both the setting and theme of the memoir. Trooper and Pink Floyd play in the background, a scolding mother uses words like reprobate, high school is free of cellphones and social media, and the haircuts are downright groovy. Boyd, whose first graphic memoir, *Chicken Rising*, was nominated for the Doug Wright Award for emerging talent, presents in *Denniveniquity* a set of connected vignettes that depict a coming-of-age story driven by teenage rebellion, experimentation, and feelings of inadequacy.

Womanhood is an important topic throughout the book. At the start, Dawn's mother tells her she is much too young to be "boy crazy" and attempts to convince her daughter to get a breast reduction. Yet, later, when Dawn tries on some of her mother's old clothing, she is "a young lady now," and "should start acting like it." Dawn's face falls from one panel to the next. What is a young lady? How do you act like one? These questions are not explicitly asked, and consequently

MICHAEL ARONSON

remain unanswered, but Dawn's shame is palpable on the page. Boyd's black and white illustrations are particularly effective in these moments – her drawings, and the emotions on their faces, make everything seem very real.

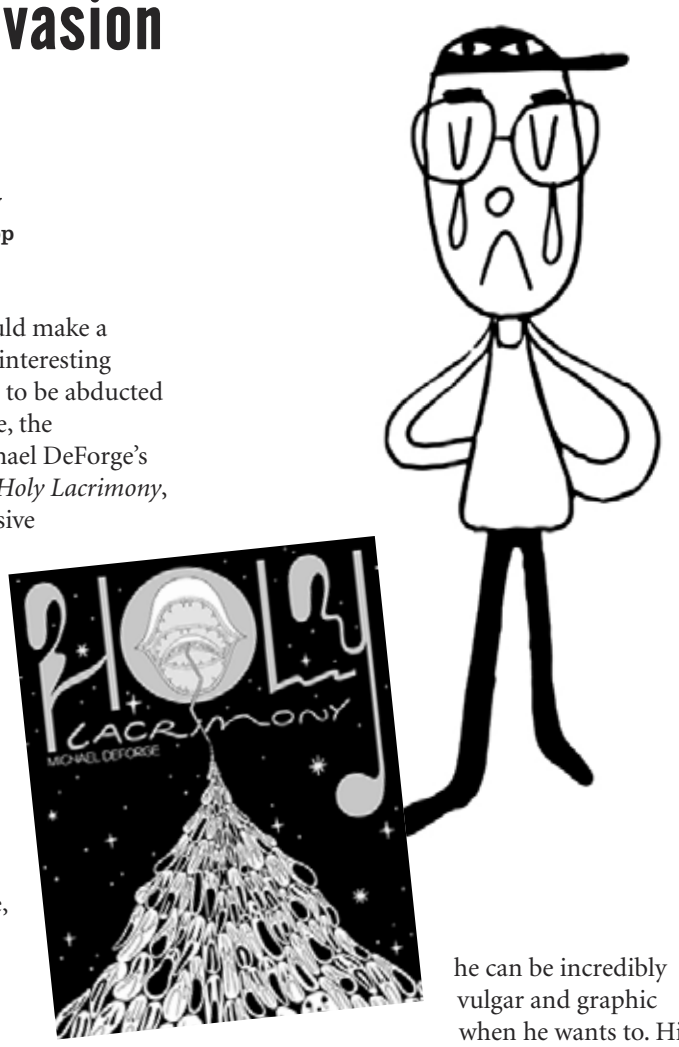
Sexually charged taunting and sexual assault are commonplace – and unpunished – in the school hallways and classrooms of *Denniveniquity*. The teen girls are used to it, and try to convince each other that the attention they receive is positive. "See," Dawn's friend says to her after she is groped in the hallway, "guys like you." Assaults are brushed off as unserious, while a vague schoolyard flirtation is paired with a mother's warning: "That's how you get yourself raped!" This kind of behaviour and brusque language may not be so commonplace today, but modern young women can nevertheless relate to the feelings they evoke. Many readers will identify with Dawn in those unsettling moments and how difficult it can be to process this kind of experience as a young girl. Boyd's sharing of her embarrassment and shame reads as its own act of rebellion – she puts it all out there to show that it was real, but doesn't linger on it, because this sort of behaviour was considered "normal."

*Denniveniquity* also chronicles Dawn's first experimentations with alcohol and relationships. When she starts seeing Nick Dorsey, Dawn's parents don't approve. There are rumours that he throws pot parties and worships the devil. He even lives "on the wrong side of the tracks." Nevertheless, his bad-boy charm endears him to Dawn and to the reader. Their relationship is almost nostalgic: in comparison to today's social media-driven scene, dating seems uncomplicated. Rather than stalking your crush on Instagram, you might just follow him around your small town. Your parents may disapprove, but Life360 or FindMyFriends wouldn't betray your secret relationship, for better or for worse. There are many differences between teenage romance in the 1970s and now, but also many similarities. Awkwardness and indecisiveness radiate from the page, reminding the reader of their own mistake-filled first love experiences.

In *Denniveniquity,* D. Boyd generously shares an intimate portrait of her junior high experience in a small Canadian town. Boyd does not offer any direct reflections about her past, but rather allows the reader to come to their own conclusions. The world was different, the world was the same. The memoir tells Dawn's story without dwelling on scenes a reader might, in hindsight, find shocking. The story moves forward because, like the young women who lived through it, it must. mRb

**Julie Jacques** currently studies publishing in Vancouver, but dreams of returning to Montréal very soon.

# Alien Invasion




**Holy Lacrimony**
**Michael DeForge**
**Drawn & Quarterly**
**$29.95, cloth, 120pp**
**9781770467552**

What would make a person interesting enough to be abducted by aliens? For Jackie, the protagonist of Michael DeForge's new graphic novel *Holy Lacrimony*, it's that, after extensive study, he has been deemed the world's saddest person.

The alien spaceship is shaped like a giant mouth, full of multiple rows of teeth and reminiscent of the classic manga trope, the vagina dentata. Inside, Jackie is greeted by his new apprentice, Kara, who seeks to learn grief and sorrow from him. She also offers her shapeshifting body for him to suck and fuck, since, as she puts it, this is "standard practice in mentor/apprentice dynamics on your planet's educational and artistic institutions."

Historically, DeForge has alternated between depicting humans and other creatures such as ants and birds – yet the subject matter he explores is always decidedly human. For *Holy Lacrimony*, he delves into bodies, the psyche, and their commodification – frequent themes for the artist. Obviously, Kara's straightforward offering of her body to Jackie is one such commodification. With dubious consent on his part, Jackie's sadness is displayed and commodified by the aliens, who admit to having studied him all his life. Since he has no other choice, he plays along, eventually becoming close, and even intimate, with Kara.

When he is beamed back into his bed with no goodbye, Jackie is upset, and desperately searches for meaning in the aftermath. It is an urge he didn't have before his abduction and leads him to take better care of himself. This aligns with DeForge's approach to writing characters. He describes his method in an interview with *The Comics Journal*: "A lot of the characters I write, I try to write them in moments where they're feeling or pushing up against the edges of some sort of system. I tend to find I write characters who perceive themselves as not having very much agency." Jackie eventually takes back agency by forming a support group for fellow abductees after his return.

One shouldn't be fooled by DeForge's sometimes simplistic lines and shapes, as he can be incredibly vulgar and graphic when he wants to. His particular style is very evocative and far from plain. His depictions of the shapeshifting aliens are mesmerizing: he offers the kind of illustrations that one could stare at for hours, yet still find something new to look at. His use of colour is deliberate in *Holy Lacrimony*: only the time spent on the spaceship, or Jackie and other characters' recollections of the aliens, are in colour, while normal life is in black and white. The colourful sections stay true to DeForge's style, featuring bright, high-contrast, and saturated colours. He clearly has fun with alien imagery during the various support group recollections, showcasing an array of pop culture and folklore depictions of extraterrestrials, flexing his illustrative talents.

*Holy Lacrimony* is DeForge's tenth graphic novel, an impressive number for the thirty-eight-year-old cartoonist. He identifies as a socialist, and his work often includes his socio-political views and beliefs. In *Holy Lacrimony*, his socialist optimism is translated into the support group Jackie forms. Even if their stories don't line up, and some members seem to be lying or making things up as they go – causing some tension in the group – they ultimately all show up for one another. DeForge shows us that community and camaraderie can be found in the strangest of places. mkb

**Billie Gagné-LeBel** is a queer freelance writer who loves to explore questions of mental health, alternative lifestyles, beauty, and all things pop/geek culture. She writes for publications such as *Grenier aux nouvelles* and *Frame Rated*, and does social media for clients such as *enRoute*.

# Lodging Complaints


**Gesticulating Gentrification**
**Rick Trembles**
**Conundrum Press**
**$20.00, paper, 64pp**
**9781772621099**

Anyone who's lived in Montreal for any period of time is probably familiar with, or has at least glanced at, the work of Rick Trembles. He's a longtime stalwart of the punk/alternative music scene, not to mention a mainstay of English-language underground comics in Quebec.

When I first arrived in Montreal in the late 1980s – fresh from the wilds of Alberta and looking to make my own mark on the cultural scene – Trembles' angular, robotic-looking characters were plastered on gig posters, lampposts, and construction hoardings all over Mile End. I myself "borrowed" a couple of these posters for my own tiny apartment on Park Avenue, just above a swanky Greek restaurant. His comic strip, *Motion Picture Purgatory*, also appeared in the *Montreal Mirror*, where I was the weekly art columnist before that late, lamented rag vanished years ago.

I've seen his band, The American Devices, play at a few different venues. Trembles was always a slightly grouchy guy who kept to himself, dressed in skin-tight leather and sunglasses. I thought he looked like a member of The Ramones. One of those times his band played in drag. But even in a torn-up dress with *Bride of Frankenstein* skunk stripes on either side of his pitch-black mop of hair, it was still easy to guess what subculture he was favouring…

Montreal was once known as an easy city to be poor in and a haven for artists. But times have changed, as they have across much of the continent. Anyone who's been following headlines, or trying to survive on their own terms, has read the stories about increasing levels of homelessness, and "skyrocketing" (I *hate* that word now!) rents.

*Gesticulating Gentrification* is Trembles' tale of his personal housing woes, told in graphic memoir fashion. His father was a noted comic book artist and illustrator in the 1950s and '60s. Trembles grew up in a family bungalow in a nearby suburb, and hung out in lofts with girlfriends, cockroach-infested "digs," and other various locales, almost like a punk rock version of Harry Potter.

The book follows our hero through many different precarious living situations. He deals with mouldy furniture, voracious bugs of different sizes, and even rodents. Soft-heartedly, he rescues a mouse from a "sticky trap" in which it had broken a leg, and keeps it, along with its grey, furry companions, in a terrarium.

The reader gets a detailed look at his adventures in a graphic style reminiscent of a construction blueprint. Panels take up a single page and are crowded with figures and events. Villainous landlords show up; with their round heads and moustaches, they resemble the Monopoly mascot. Trembles must face these bad guys, and is often forced to retreat to Daddy's place in Saint-Lambert or other locales.

The book bogs down a little in these sections. One confrontation is quite like every other, and while the story seems completely believable, perhaps something more fictional might have been more entertaining. Even I, an English-speaker who has made many trips to the *Régie du Logement* for various reasons, occasionally found myself confused as to what was going on in certain places.

Trembles also hints at other stories that I would have liked to read about, such as his encounters with one of the former editors of *Vice* magazine (and co-founder of the Proud Boys), Gavin McInnis. Still, *Gesticulating Gentrification* is a harrowing read, and an important cultural record of a difficult time in our history. mkb

**Jack Ruttan** is a writer and cartoonist, still surviving (for the most part) in east downtown Montreal.

By Yara El-Soueidi

## Jamie Jelinski

# *Skin Deep*




Jamie Jelinski's *Needle Work* begins with a peculiar introduction: the story of Edgar Fournier, a Progressive Conservative senator from New Brunswick. The Senator's story has nothing to do with legislation or laws. No. This is about a Last Supper scene tattooed across a man's back, a tattoo inked by Fournier himself. This story also features a Senate messenger named Roger Lalonde, who described tattooing as a hobby for most of his life and tattooed for profit before his role in the Senate. Published initially in the *Toronto Daily Star* in July 1969, the tale illustrates tattoos taking over Parliament. As such, we are introduced to Canada's rich and complicated history of commercial tattooing.

When I asked about tattooing in our Zoom call, Jelinski delves right in. He has loved tattoos since he started getting them in college. And he doesn't stop at liking the drawings on his skin. He is interested in their history and the ecosystem that surrounds them, which, until Jelinski came along, wasn't well documented in Canada."I wanted to learn more about it in this distinctly Canadian context," said Jelinski. "You could find a decent amount online, especially now about the United States, England, and a little bit of Europe. But the Canadian stuff… there was almost nothing to find on the internet. And so I was like, okay, I guess this is my job now."

While the book originated as a PhD dissertation, Jelinski goes beyond academic rigour to weave a detailed yet accessible narrative. His meticulous research leaves no stone unturned. For Jelinski, tattoos are a form of visual culture – an art form that has drawn people in for centuries. The historical lack of interest in such art forms, particularly in Canada, reflects a certain elitism among academics. However, times are changing, and Jelinski addresses this oversight, championing tattooists as integral to Canadian visual culture. He expands: "I personally think that tattooing is probably one of the most consumed forms of visual culture or cultural production amongst the general populace, but one that we know relatively little about. Given that it's so popular and has been pretty much on an incline for 100 years with some ebbs and flows, it's about time we start to recognize those responsible for getting us to this point."

From his engagement in the Canadian scene emerges *Needle Work*, a captivating and comprehensive book. Jelinski, a Saskatchewan native living in Montreal since 2013, has been diligently working on this book for the past ten years, traversing the country to research and unearth the lost history of tattoos. Jelinski's book isn't about people who get tattoos, a subject that has been studied extensively. The art historian and future lecturer at the University of Liverpool unveils the unknown history of the tattooists that left an indelible mark on art in Canada.

"I focused on tattooing as my object of study," Jelinski tells me in our interview. "Everything else is kind of secondary. Those histories of the cities, the histories of law enforcement and regulation, the history of art – all of these things I tried to bring together through the lens of tattooing."

*Needle Work* is an easy read, as it is divided into chapters that focus on each Canadian city's contribution to commercial tattooing rather than following a linear, chronological retelling of history. Events intertwine one within another to create a patchwork that illustrates how every province and city brings a different part of tattoo history to the table.

The arrival of Japanese tattooers on the West Coast around 1891 marked the beginning of tattoos being practiced more openly. Murakami, a Japanese tattooist living in Vancouver, was the first commercial artist ever reported in Canada. Murakami's designs fused cultural references, incorporating not only traditional Japanese imagery, but also blending in Western influences.

As Jelinski put it in our interview, "When you look at Murakami's designs, he had the ostrich, which he pulled from a Japanese woodblock print, but he was also offering prototypical Western style imagery to appeal to as wide an array of customers as he possibly could because that was the name of the game. There was no reason not to try to draw people in."

While most tattooists featured are men, most mention the importance of their female clients. If people thought that historically women got into tattoos way later than men did, the stories featured debunk this idea. In this way, Jelinski's narrative is inclusive, ensuring that all voices in the tattooing community are heard and valued.

*Needle Work*'s bibliography is as dense as the book itself. When asked how he found the previously untold stories that make up the book, Jelinski described the extensive travels and meticulous research that brought him to the United States, Europe, and the coasts of Canada. He found discrepancies in stories, and filled holes left by reporters. He even went as far as getting access to FBI files for a chapter on Sailor Joe, a tattooer who lived multiple lives under different aliases.

**Needle Work**
**A History of Commercial Tattooing in Canada**
**Jamie Jelinski**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$75.00, cloth, 424pp**
**9780228021988**

Yet, Jelinski reminds me, tattooing practice was not a totally back-alley activity: Canadian tattooists "were working on the main streets of the big cities, trying to appeal to as many people as possible, like being profiled in the newspaper, advertising in the classifieds, and purchasing larger advertisements in newspapers. This pretty public activity has grown over time, with some ebbs and flows, specifically in the 1930s. And then things started to take off post–World War II. By 1970, there were a lot of tattooers."

While tattoos might not have been considered part of mainstream visual culture before, Jelinski attempts to remedy this with his book. As meticulous as it is accessible, *Needle Work* is a valuable resource for anyone interested in art, history, or the evolution of tattoo culture. By documenting this overlooked history, Jelinski ensures that the stories of Canada's tattooists will not fade away. mrb

**Yara El-Soueidi** is a millennial writer and culture columnist based in Montreal.

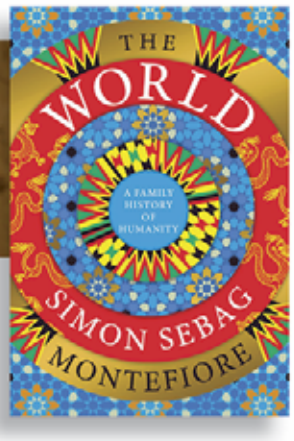

# THE 2025 WINNERS

## GRAND PRIX

SALMAN RUSHDIE

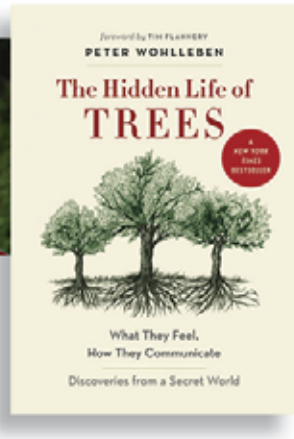

## WORDS TO CHANGE PRIZE

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE




## PLANET LITERATURE PRIZE

PETER WOHLLEBEN

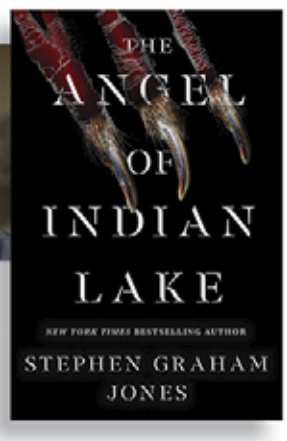



## VIOLET LITERARY PRIZE

FRANCE DAIGLE


## FIRST PEOPLES PRIZE – INTERNATIONAL EDITION

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES




## PREMIO METROPOLIS AZUL

CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA


BLUEMETROPOLIS.ORG/2025FESTIVAL

Canada · Canada Council for the Arts · Conseil des arts du Canada · Québec · Montréal · Conseil des arts de Montréal · CDPQ · GardaWorld · Davies · Stella-Jones · Power Corporation du Canada · Logient · Fondation Cole · Zeller Foundation · Fondation Azrieli · Ginny Stikeman · Mark Gallop · Cameron Charlebois & Katherine Dalziel · Université Concordia · McGill University · Quebec Writers' Federation · Salon du livre de Montréal · Paragraphe Librairie / Bookstore · La Librairie Gallimard de Montréal · Les libraires · Tourisme Montréal · Le Devoir · mRb · webtmize · fugues · CBC · Liberté · CISM · maisonneuve


## CELEBRATE THE TALENT OF QUEBEC'S ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH US!


ELI TAREQ EL BECHELANY-LYNCH


KAIE KELLOUGH


LINDA LEITH


TARA MCGOWAN-ROSS


ANDREAS KESSARIS


RACHEL MCCRUM


MONIQUE POLAK


MIRIAM COHEN


INGRID BEJERMAN


SIMON CHANG


ISABEL COUT


NANCY ETOK


GUSTAVO ESTRADA


HOLLY GAUTHIER-FRANKEL

JONATHAN EGAN


ANWAR ALHJOOJ


SHIMMON HUTCHINSON


JANELLE LUCYK


LIZ MILLER

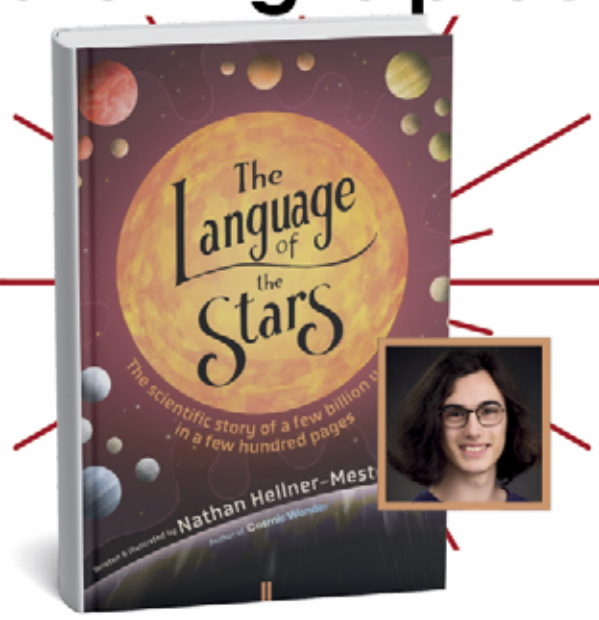

ZEV MOSES

Canada

*Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise*
Québec

# Linda Leith Publishing is proud to present...

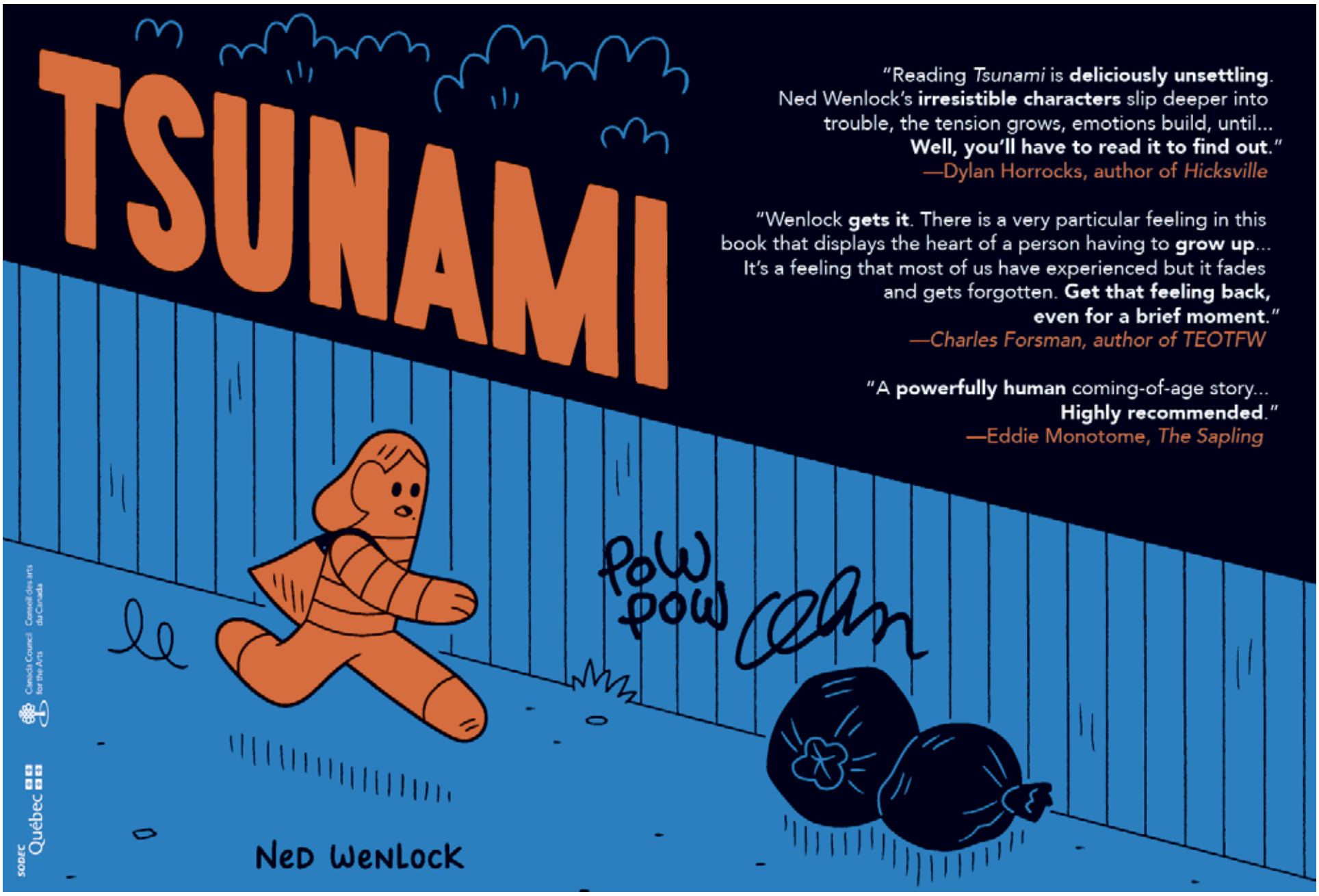

**Miss Matty**
a YA **ruelle** novel by
**Edeet Ravel**
Fran longs to be a star of stage and screen, but she's too poor to afford elocution and dance lessons. When she lands the leading role of Miss Matty in a school production, she's determined to make a splash
ISBN 9781773901657 | $24.95 | February 2025




**The Language of the Stars:**
**The Scientific Story of a Few Billion Years in a Few Hundred Pages**
YA **ruelle** non-fiction, by
**Nathan Hellner-Mestelman**
Nathan Hellner-Mestelman takes us right back to the Big Bang, then hurls us through cosmic history as we discover how to swirl up galaxies, solar systems, and eventually life. Come along for another maddening adventure of science.
ISBN 9781773901718 | $24.95 | March 2025


**The Bigamist**
a novel by
**Felicia Mihali**
Translated by
**Linda Leith**
Tension mounts as a woman torn between her husband and her lover risks offending everyone in her conservative immigrant community if she chooses to leave her husband.
ISBN 9781773901688 | $23.95 | March 2025

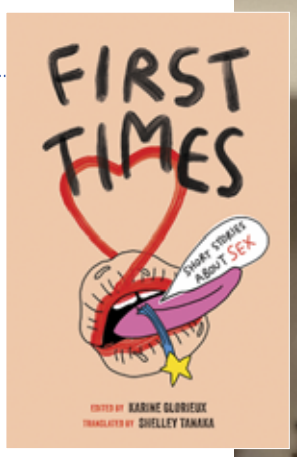
**www.lindaleith.com**



By Sruti Islam

# Karine Glorieux

# *Close Encounters*




DAMIEN STRYCKMAN

In response to the growing need for more open and inclusive discussions about sexual health in schools, Karine Glorieux, a teacher at Collège de Maisonneuve in Montreal, compiled *First Times*, an anthology of stories about first sexual experiences from a diverse group of Montreal writers. Translated from French to English by Shelley Tanaka, this is an inclusive book that remains relevant across cultures.

**First Times**
**Short Stories About Sex**
**Edited by Karine Glorieux**
**Translated by Shelley Tanaka**
**Groundwood Books**
**$16.99, paper, 178pp**
**9781779460356**
**Ages 14-18**

"I was shocked by how little sexual education my students were getting," says Glorieux over a video conference. She is joined by contributors Edith Chouinard (author of the story "Hugh Nguyen"), and Schelby Jean-Baptiste (author of the story "My Chouchounette, My Faith and Me"). "It became clear that the formal education system wasn't addressing the full spectrum of sexual experience," continues Glorieux, "so I decided to step in." *First Times* offers a broader perspective on what constitutes a "first time" in sexual experiences, challenging traditional, heteronormative definitions by including diverse narratives, ranging from queer experiences to self-exploration through masturbation.

The stories in *First Times* reflect the anxiety, humour, and vulnerability often felt during these formative moments. Each story is told in the first person, a choice that Glorieux believes creates a more intimate connection between the writer and the reader. "I wanted writers who could effectively communicate with young people, giving them honest, relatable stories that felt personal," she explains. The anthology opens with Edith Chouinard's contribution, which she describes in our call as "semi-autobiographical with fictional elements." Chouinard shares, "I wanted to make the story more engaging. Real life can be ordinary, so I added a touch of fiction to make it more compelling." Reflecting on her experience writing the piece, she notes, "It helped me grow as a writer. I'm no longer afraid to go there."

The stories go beyond navigating the awkwardness of first sexual experiences; they are also designed to offer reassurance and comfort. By sharing their personal experiences, the writers encourage readers to reflect on their own journeys with self-acceptance and resilience. "I wanted the stories to provide comfort without sounding like a lecture," Glorieux says. "The goal was to create a space where readers could find themselves reflected in the stories, while also learning about the diverse experiences of others." Some stories explore themes like the absence of consent in a first kiss, while others use visual formats – such as spaced-out indentations – to convey physical experiences. One narrative explores multiple "first times" across a woman's life, touching on everything from her initial attraction to women to her deeper understanding of sexuality and emotional intimacy.

Schelby Jean-Baptiste writes a story that humorously reflects on her teenage infatuation with Trey Songz. The R&B musician served for her as a kind of initial sexual awakening. "I was completely obsessed," Jean-Baptiste laughs over the call. "But now, not so much. His confidence was a huge part of why I found him attractive back then." When asked if she felt any hesitation about sharing such personal experiences, Jean-Baptiste explains her initial discomfort. "I was raised in a very Christian household, where even thinking about sexuality was considered taboo," she says. "Writing about it felt like a huge step, and sharing it with the world was even harder. I was like, *girl, are you serious?* But I thought about the next generation – those who may not have access to authentic stories. In the age of social media, many young people get different views of sexuality, and I wanted to offer something real and human."

> Writing about it felt like a huge step, and sharing it with the world was even harder. I was like, *girl, are you serious?*

Olivier Simard's contribution is particularly notable for its creative approach to writing about intimacy. His opening line, "My erect penis was as squishy and malleable as string cheese, unbreakable as a carbon-fiber hockey stick," uses humour and vivid imagery to capture the complexity and awkwardness of adolescence. Simard's story meditates on a secret experience in his parents' basement – an all too common experience at a young age. Simard's protagonist stumbles across an adult movie, where he sees a pair of breasts that intoxicate him. Suddenly his penis takes on a feeling he, until that moment, had never experienced before. As he describes it, he suddenly became "in a *very* big hurry for the commercials to come to an end."

While his co-contributors praise Simard for his unique voice, they agree that Nicolas Michon's story is among the most affecting. His reflection on his first blowjob uses a series of spaced indentations to represent the physical and emotional progression of the experience. In doing so, Michon highlights a certain kind of unspoken nature in sexuality. "The way Nicolas describes the physicality of the moment is incredibly raw and honest," Chouinard notes in our conversation.

My conversation with select contributors highlighted that the writing process led many of the writers to reflect on broader societal issues, particularly those surrounding gender expectations. Chouinard shares, "I've always been aware of the roles we put on women, but I began to realize that there isn't a clear model for what it means to be a boy. That's something I wanted to explore." She highlights the pros and cons of such an observation. While women do have clear role models growing up, it's almost to their detriment. They are raised with a rigid set of expectations on how to be, (and that version is almost always demure and shamed in their sexuality). However, Chouinard notes, that is still a model. Men, however, are simply "understood" to have "needs," and any correlation between what those needs are and their personhood are rarely explored.

JULIETTE-CLÉMENTINE AUBIN

Schelby Jean-Baptiste

MELANY BERNIER

Edith Chouinard

*First Times* is an invaluable resource for educators, counsellors, and anyone working with young people who may be navigating issues of sexual identity, consent, and emotional growth. It serves as an accessible entry point for discussions about sexuality, offering insights into the diverse ways people experience intimacy. By encouraging openness, fostering understanding, and providing critical perspectives, *First Times* serves as a support for young people as they explore their own sexual development. Glorieux, who views the stories in the collection with deep affection, emphasizes, "These stories made me laugh and cry. I think that's excellent." mRb

**Sruti Islam** is a reader, and sometimes writer. She founded Weird Era, a literary space, in 2019. She continues to freelance in literary and cultural coverage. She is a Libra.

# non-fiction

## Radical Racket

**Soundtrack to the Revolution**
**Free Jazz and Leftist Nationalism in Quebec, 1967-1975**
**Eric Fillion**
**Translated by David Homel**
**Véhicule Press**
**$24.95, paper, 200pp**
**9781550656855**


How political is jazz? As Eric Fillion shows in this compelling portrait of leftist musicians who were active at the height of Quebec's nationalist movement, politics is often at its very core.

Fillion tells the story of Jazz Libre, a four-piece ensemble that skronked a challenging, cacophonous brand of free jazz throughout the province in the heady days of the late '60s and '70s. Montreal at the time was rife with all kinds of socialist revolutionary groups and separatist utopian movements, and for descriptions of this period alone – supported with a wealth of research from contemporary journals and magazines – the book is worth the read.

"I am a revolutionary first, and a musician second," claimed Jazz Libre co-founder and trumpet player Yves Charbonneau. Avant-garde saxophonist Walter Boudreau, who caught the band early on in their career at The Barrel, a now-shuttered club on De la Montagne, went a step further, describing them as "terrorists with instruments." Charbonneau, sax player Jean Préfontaine, bassist Maurice C. Richard, and drummer Guy Thouin cut their teeth in jazz clubs downtown, and rose to prominence as the backing band for Robert Charlebois and Louise Forestier during their controversial shows at L'Olympia in Paris in 1969. These were chaotic, improvised affairs that were panned by French critics.

Free jazz, in its desire to do away with the conventions of tempo, tone, and melody, and its emphasis on improvisation and dissonance, was seen by French writer Jean-Louis Comolli as "the sound of the world revolution against capitalism and imperialism." Jazz's underground and African-American roots

VALÉRIE DUMAINE

were always anti-bourgeois and threatening to the white, middle-class mainstream. But free jazz took the menace a step further with its explorations of the "sonic symbolism of dissonance," its studied dismantling of all boundaries (both musical and social), and its push for a "liberating disorder," which found parallels in the group's political ideas and actions.

Seeking to marry practice with ideology, Jazz Libre founded a socialist commune in the Eastern Townships (complete with a printing press for pamphlets and political materials), a summer camp in Val-David, and an experimental cultural centre in Old Montreal called L'Amorce. They rubbed shoulders with FLQ militants and hosted meetings aimed at "revolutionary militants around the world," which attracted members of the Black Panther party and the Weather Underground. Their activities got them noticed by the RCMP, who eventually burned down Jazz Libre's commune in a botched operation. Following the political violence of 1970, they were seen as a threat to be neutralized.

By combining two niche but eminently juicy subjects, Fillion's book makes for a memorable read. While it's not a tome with much widespread appeal, it is one that local history buffs and music nerds will greatly appreciate. Beyond the main narrative, *Soundtrack* shows how much Quebec society has changed in such a short period of time – though it's interesting to note how much of that era's ethos has carried over to Montreal's current identity as a bastion of fringe weirdness, musical experimentation, and leftist politics.

*Soundtrack to the Revolution* is a book that makes you wonder why we aren't more aware of the depth and intensity of our history. Why are these captivating episodes, full of rogue dreamers, eccentric idealists, and political intrigue, not better known? I have no answer, other than generalities about Quebec's cultural divisions having relegated some people and events to obscurity in certain circles. That's a shame, but it's a disconnect that Fillion goes some way to repairing with this well-researched book. How easily we've forgotten – or how little we know, in some cases – just how turbulent, hopeful, conflictual, and riveting Quebec's recent history is. mRb

**Alexander Hackett** is a writer and translator from Knowlton, Quebec. He lives in Montreal.

## Beyond the Mat

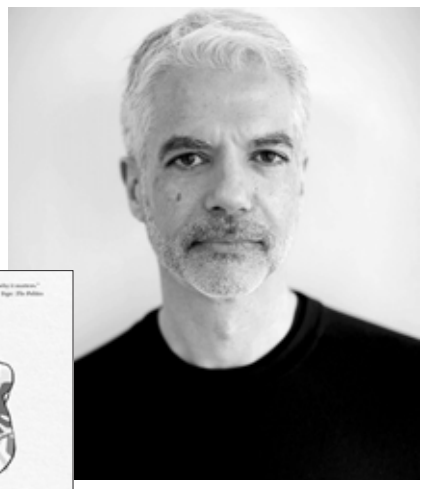
**Yogalands**
**In Search of Practice on the Mat and in the World**
**Paul Bramadat**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$29.95, paper, 294pp**
**9780228023746**

It's quite possible that you've taken a yoga class. It's also very likely that you've had a moment during such a class, where you glance around at the spare, ascetic design, listening to a vaguely Eastern downtempo soundtrack, pull up your $140 leggings, do "vinyasas" and say "namaste" without really knowing what they mean, and wonder to yourself, "What exactly is going on here?" In *Yogalands*, Paul Bramadat sets an ambitious goal: to address questions that many Western yogis may have pondered but not examined profoundly. Such as, how today's yoga relates to contemporary India, why 80% of North American practitioners are white women, the nature of the teacher-student relationship, and whether their pastime is spiritual, or simply exercise.

Bramadat is director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, and in *Yogalands*, he draws heavily on both his academic background and his personal entry into yoga as a means of alleviating osteoarthritis pain. As a professor with some South Asian heritage, he felt deeply ambivalent about entering "an environment where [I] was likely to be aggravated by a banal spirituality, the creeping tendrils of capitalism, impossible beauty standards, and the appropriation of South Asian religions." Yet enter it he did, not just as a casual weekend yogi, but as a devoted practitioner of the Ashtanga tradition, practising six days a week for 90 to 120 minutes at a time. *Yogalands* tries, and mostly succeeds, at communicating his experience and research into a format and tone that is accessible enough for non-academic yoga devotees to enjoy.


My own yoga practice began in the late '90s at my local Y. I quickly became hooked and joined Montreal's Ashtanga studio, which taught in the Pattabhi Jois tradition, complete with chants, photos of gurus on the walls, and incense burning. I have since tried hot yoga, outdoor yoga, a lot of online pandemic yoga, and classes in large fitness clubs with no pretense of maintaining any connection to yoga's religious roots.

This experience seems to mirror the transition that yoga has gone through in recent decades, adapting to fit Western fitness and wellness culture. While the book's focus is on yoga's place within



today's socio-political context, it also delves into its origins. Much of what we consider yoga today was developed in the 1920s when a Mysore raja hired a teacher named Krishnamacharya – often called the "father of modern yoga" – to teach the boys of his palace. Bramadat speculates that this training was intended not only as a means of increasing the boys' physical strength, but also "to challenge the British stereotype of the effete, listless, servile, Indian man." *Yogalands* goes on to explore postural yoga within a colonial context, describing how early teachers participated in Indian nationalist efforts to popularize the practice among Westerners, who in turn tended "to see India as a bastion of spiritual wisdom and mystery" – a narrative that persists today in books like Elizabeth Gilbert's popular memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* and countless others.

Much of the research for the book comes from interviews that Bramadat conducted with over one hundred North American yoga studio owners, teachers, and students. Bramadat doesn't shy away from difficult questions, asking studio owners whether they think they are appropriating Indian culture for commercial benefit, how they have reckoned with yoga's many #MeToo scandals in recent years, and how their practices are connected (or, more often, not) to broader socio-political movements. Through the responses that he quotes, you get the sense that Bramadat is perennially disappointed, wishing for something deeper. Further, he has made the curious editorial choice to leave in conversational hesitations (um, like, you know), which I found undermined the content of what the (many female) interviewees were trying to get across.

Bramadat concludes by wondering "whether one day practitioners might be more comfortable talking about the political world in which we are all entangled, a world that produces the need for the balm of yoga in the first place." Unlikely, but for the curious, *Yogalands* is a good place to start. mRb

**Rebecca West** shares a name with a famous dead writer and a '90s alt rock band from Halifax, and likes swimming to the other side and back.

# Interior Thoughts

**Living Design**
**The Writings of Clara Porset**
**Edited by Zoë Ryan and**
**Valentina Sarmiento Cruz**
**Translated by Natalie Espinosa**
**Concordia University Press**
**$39.95, paper, 362pp**
**9781988111551**

LOLA ÁLVAREZ BRAVO. CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA FOUNDATION, TUCSON, AZ


*Living Design: The Writings of Clara Porset* gathers short articles by a largely unsung Cuban-born interior and furniture designer, many translated into English for the first time. Initially published in Cuba and Mexico between 1930 and 1965, the pieces are framed here by short editorial introductory essays from contemporary academics.

Like many affluent Cubans of her time, Clara Porset studied abroad in early twentieth-century New York and Paris, where she encountered modernism in its myriad forms and became an early and impassioned advocate of interior design. She was loath to call this new field "interior decoration," arguing that the term diminished this work's artful shaping of light and space.

Porset's writing indexes a particular moment, a shift in aesthetic sensibilities as "art" came to be recognized in visual formats beyond painting and sculpture. As mass production grew, objects needed to be deliberately "designed" for manufacturing, changing the perception of this work from traditional craftsmanship to industrial creation. The arrangement of commodities in space also began to take on an artistic heft. Thus Porset, very much a product of this moment, was being intellectually bold when she proclaimed that "there is design is in everything" – because, by this new sensibility that recognized intention in any act of creation, it suddenly was.

Her writing style is informal, even chatty, unpacking architecture, furniture design, and domestic space with spare, mostly unadorned prose. In the essays introducing each section, the volume's editors do a good job of framing Porset's work and significance for today's reader.

That said, the stridency of her once-novel takes makes it hard for some of her early essays to resonate with a contemporary audience that now takes the values she argued for as a given. It's not necessary, for example, to convince anyone today that furniture can be beautiful as well as comfortable, or that industrial production can accommodate folk art aesthetics. Even when she's attempting to be playful, her pedagogical arguments occasionally grate, as in the short essay outlining the "rules" of salon furniture placement, where she delves in some detail into which configurations of chair-couch-coffee table do and do not work. Her work is stronger when she writes about her contemporaries, from high-profile architects like Walter Gropius to lesser-known specialists like metalsmith Edgar Brandt or Brazilian rug weaver Da Silva Bruhns, with a care and attention that betrays a sprawling curiosity.

Some of Porset's writing about the social role of design still feels relevant, especially her thinking on the connections between folk craftsmanship, regionalism, and the role of mass design in domestic life. She was an early and vocal advocate for the value of local Indigenous design practices. Much of her later furniture creation practice, for example, consisted of iterating on traditional Mexican forms like the *butaque*, the low-slung ergonomic chair that's most strongly associated with Porset's legacy several decades after her death.

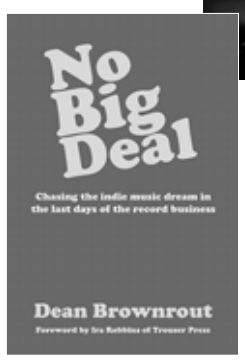
This collection gathers Porset's oeuvre into a single volume, but most readers won't need a collection this complete. Some of her essays offer insights that might intrigue anyone who's interested in design history, but the bulk of the book would appeal more to readers with a deeper intellectual investment in the history of interior design or Mexican and Caribbean modernism.

That said, the framing essays by the book's editors and guest contributors do an excellent job of situating Porset's enduring significance. While she may not be a household name, even among those who follow interior architecture and furniture design, this collection will surely help to enshrine the legacy of this early twentieth-century female public intellectual and leader in an emerging field, many of whose perspectives have proven quite timeless. mRb

**Emily Raine** is a writer, editor, creative strategist, and lapsed academic.

# The Price of Doing Business

**No Big Deal**
**Dean Brownrout**
**Guernica Editions**
**$22.95, paper, 170pp**
**9781771839099**




Dean Brownrout's *No Big Deal* details his trials and tribulations in the '80s and '90s indie record business before the entire industry was cut off at the knees in the late '90s with the advent of a new music service called Napster. Brownout's initial invitation for us to dive between the covers is a hard one to accept indeed, as these indie record label memoirs often follow the same lockstep story arc: music fanatics who live for the dream of getting coffee for execs and rubbing shoulders with rock stars soon break away from the corporate confines because "it's about the music, maaaan" – only to develop a nagging cocaine problem before the dastardly MP3 drags the carcass of independent music label behind the barn and puts it out of its misery. Heard this one before? Of course you have, but *No Big Deal* is different. No, really!

*Against all the odds that stack up in the late '90s, our author keeps swinging to the bitter end, staring at the sputtering fuse attached to the music industry.*

Thankfully, Brownrout knows that the story of the death of the music biz is a trek well travelled, and manages to write a memoir that is aimed directly at music fanatics. The real triumph here, and the reason you will thumb past the initial pages, is that the reader is invited to invest in Brownout's true passion for music, which does not waver within the sleek 170 pages.

Of course, his ongoing campaign to set up an independent record label alongside the bigger fish in the small indie pond, as well as his battle against the cigar-chomping corporate ogres, is a death-defying feat and remains the hook. Talk of climbing the corporate ladder as well as taking stock in "moving units" is kept to a bare minimum, but is nonetheless essential to help illustrate the behemoth task of one man's attempt to capture one pair of ears at a time. There are, of course, tales of the author clasping hands and slapping backs over six-figure deals, coast-to-coast red eye flights, bedding down with the major labels, etc., but Brownrout manages to humanize these somewhat callous episodes, and never stoops to completely alienate the music from the business.

The book is loaded with backroom deals, corporate creeps, contact disputes, hungry bands looking for greener pastures, underlining that the music business was hardly for the faint of heart. The memoir is not afraid to name names, but it's hardly trashy tabloid fodder. These music biz angels and devils are merely mentioned to paint the cut-throat world of the independent music underground that Brownrout commandeered from his living room couch. Since the publication of the book, Brownout has been completely erased as the founding member of his label Big Deal, which, sadly, currently exists as a husk of its former self, just a blip of bandwidth robbing the author of his providence. Against all the odds that stack up in the late '90s, our author keeps swinging to the bitter end, staring at the sputtering fuse attached to the music industry.

For the Forbes subscriber, or people who love to hear about deals gone bad/good, there is definitely something here for you. But the real takeaway is Brownout's undeterred passion and resilience. If you are a real music fanatic who pines for the days of physical media, Brownout's dalliance through the music industry of the '80s and '90s will have you creasing the cover with relish. Because, at least in this case, it really is about the music, maaaan! mRb

**Johnson Cummins** is a musician and freelance music journalist in Montreal. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Montreal Mirror*, and *Bass Fishing Today*. He can be found taking up residence on local Montreal stages with bands such as The Meatballs, The Lazers, and The Puppeteer's Castle. He enjoys movie nights with his two dogs and masturbation.

By Klara du Plessis

# Amélie Prévost and Rachel McCrum
# *Strange Family*

JULIA MAROIS

JONATHAN LAMY

The stage in Maison de la culture Maisonneuve glows violet. It is late September 2024 and a packed audience is seated bistro-style, enjoying a drink in anticipation of the performance version of Amélie Prévost and Rachel McCrum's *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother.* This hybrid show, straddling a combination of spoken word and theatre conventions, is presented bilingually in French and English. It is ambitious: written, translated, workshopped, produced, recited, and acted out by Prévost and McCrum themselves, with directorial guidance from Elkahna Talbi. As the room dims, the first words reach the listeners:

> We could be 36 or 47 years old,
> we could be francophone or anglophone […]
> We'd be a woman like any other, or like none.
> One thing's for sure, we wouldn't have any children,
> not in the usual sense


**La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother**
**Amélie Prévost and Rachel McCrum**
**Éditions l'Hexagone**
**$21.95, paper, 120pp**
**9782896481729**

The title *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother* is reasonably self-explanatory. Prévost and McCrum tell me in a recent interview how they bonded over their mutual stepparenting experience, over the difficulties of living in proximity to budding adolescence without the intimacy or authority of a biological parent, of loving a man who will always put his child first, and of trying their best and those attempts not necessarily being well-received. "Where was the rule book? How were we supposed to manage all this?" McCrum asks me rhetorically. "Why were there no good examples of stepparenting for us to follow?"

Resisting negative stereotypes so prevalent in popular culture – think of the evil stepmother in Grimm fairy tales or Disney cartoons – Prévost and McCrum construct a more authentic and nuanced prototype of the contemporary stepmother. Their stepmother is not specific to a single identity or experience; she ranges in age, look, profession, and more. Yet she also coheres as cisgendered and heterosexual, a woman struggling with the cultural idealization of motherhood within the confining expectations of the nuclear family.

*La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother* materializes as two interlocking outputs: a public-facing live performance, which will continue to tour in Montreal and Quebec this year, and a full-length poetry collection, including both the French and English texts, beautifully released by Éditions de l'Hexagone. While this review cites exclusively from the English side of the collection, I read both languages side by side and can vouch for the sensitivity of the translations and the seamless quality of the collaboration – there is very little stylistic discrepancy between parts and, as Prévost describes to me in conversation, the authors co-edited their respective sections to merge into a unified, poetic flow. I was fortunate enough to attend the performance such that my reading experience is now imbued with the vocal resonance of hearing the poems out loud.

A series of twenty-one dramatic monologues, the print version of *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother* follows in a long tradition of poetic ventriloquism that ventures into narrative, lyrical, and speculative terrains. The book is structured as an alternating weave between the voices of the Stepmother and the so-called Blue Voice – a more theoretical intervention into the subject matter, contrasting against the narrative strand of the Stepmother's anecdotes. In this way, Prévost and McCrum are able to share scenes that ring true – the fond memory of a single Halloween enjoyed with the stepchild, or the worry about a budding eating disorder – and to allude to fictional or historical archetypes – such as Jesus, who was raised by his stepfather Joseph. As interpreted by the Blue Voice, Joseph was a selfless, accepting stepparent, whose story is still neglected in the Bible:

> After so many years
> of an imperfect but constant love,
> Joseph didn't even merit
> his own chapter in the Book.
> No funeral, no flowers,
> not a word to say
> Thanks for the Sunday brunches
> and the tool box.
> the times when the other father was working in such
> mysterious ways

Here the stepparent, Joseph, is clearly more present than the biological parent who, in this case, is the New Testament God. With this example, Prévost and McCrum initiate a pattern demonstrated throughout the book: On the one hand, the stepparent is shown to be capable and nurturing, even superior to the biological parent who might be absent, overworked, or incompetent. On the other hand, despite their best efforts and successes, the stepparent does not receive the same level of acceptance as the biological parent. They can never be *as loved* or *as good.*

The unfairness of this imbalance means that *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother* can be challenging, at times, in its sense of baseline hopelessness. As the poem "Doubts" admits, "We know that we've only shown the worst of it, / that we've given you no good stories, / no happy endings." Even as the book delves into the complexities of the role, the difficulty of stepparenting is never denied. McCrum explains in our interview that the book is "confronting, but it has to be. Otherwise, everything is still repressed and hidden."

The move towards honesty and openness about the tough realities of stepparenting is exactly what makes *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother* a celebration of this often demonized familial role. As Prévost tells me, the project hopes that "shared [stepmothering] experience could be useful to others." McCrum adds that this "shared experience" includes a mélange of "confusion and negotiation and reward and tenderness." The Stepmother character's ability to commit to the father and his child, despite the challenges, setbacks, continuous affective labour, and the latent desire for autonomy as a childless woman, allows her to eventually grow close to and express her love for the stepchild.

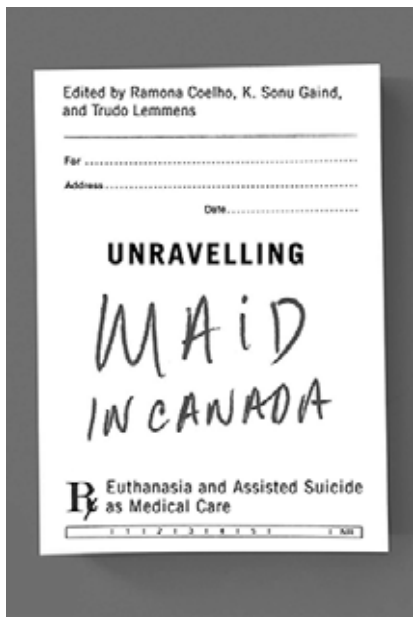
Prévost and McCrum do the work of delving into the difficult topics, experiences, and emotions, and it is this commitment to understanding what it means to be present and responsible for another life that serves as testament to their dedication to the family unit of which they now form a part. As Prévost suggests during our interview, the formation of certain families might adopt structures alternative to the traditional nuclear unit, but they will always exist as a gathering place where "we learn how to interact with others, how to love one another, how to share space with one another." This "strange family […with] big, supple arms" is the one that Prévost and McCrum acknowledge and embrace.

Prévost, a poet, playwright, and actor (who also happens to be the 2016 Slam World Champion), and McCrum, an event organizer, editor, and co-host of the Mythic Porcupine writing residency in Cacouna, are both active community-makers in Montreal's local literary and theatre scenes. The sociality and relationality with which they approach their individual and collaborative practices shine through in *La Belle-Mère / The Stepmother.* Not only does the work engage thematically with interpersonal dynamics, it also expands formally beyond print culture into embodied recitation and live artistic expression. Both on the page and the stage, this is a feminist project, one which imagines new modalities for intimate cohabitation and kinship, and posits care not only as an act of giving, but also of receiving, of being true to oneself – whether that self qualifies as *stepmother* or exists independently as *woman.* mrb

**Klara du Plessis** is the author of five books of poetry and literary criticism, of which *Ekke* won the 2019 Pat Lowther Memorial Award.

# Ethics of Endings

**Unravelling MAiD in Canada**
**Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide**
**as Medical Care**
**Edited by Ramona Coelho,**
**K. Sonu Gaind, and Trudo Lemmens**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$39.95, paper, 520pp**
**9780228023692**




Featuring fifteen chapters by fourteen different contributors from a variety of backgrounds, and spread over five hundred pages, *Unravelling MAiD in Canada* provides an extensive inquiry into the ethics and controversies that pertain to assisted suicide in Canada. The editors, Ramona Coelho, K. Sonu Gaind, and Trudo Lemmens, have done impressive work gathering a variety of scholars from diverse backgrounds to tackle issues that are both specific to Canada – namely the introduction of Bill C-14, which legalized Medical Assistance in Dying and its subsequent eligibility extension through Bill C-17 – as well as pieces that are relevant for other jurisdictions.

This diversity in authors and approaches is reflected by that of the editors themselves: While Coelho and Gaind both have backgrounds in clinical practice, the former practicing family medicine and the latter trained in psychiatry and psycho-oncology, Lemmens is trained in health law and policy. As all familiar with the ethics of assisted suicide are well aware, diversity in approach is paramount to providing relevant and inclusive insight into the subject.

As the editors themselves acknowledge in the preface, their position is resolutely critical of MAiD, and that is reflected in the chapters. As such some of the topics addressed, while crucial to understanding the ins and outs of the ethical debate for the uninitiated, will be familiar to the reader who has previously engaged with the ethics of assisted dying. Subjects such as the relationship between MAiD and conscientious objection, disability and the slippery slope, or the difficult relationship between MAiD and palliative care, are staples of the debate. Other chapters address issues as varied as MAiD and mental illness, advance requests, and the current Canadian legal landscape concerning MAiD as well as its potential pitfalls.

All chapters come together to provide a unified picture, but I believe it important to take some additional time on two topics that are highly relevant in Canada, and have been given little attention in the philosophical and political literature: Indigenous peoples and mature minors. Throughout Chapter 9, Hon. Graydon Nicholas addresses the systemic health inequalities endured by Indigenous peoples due to colonialism and subsequent coercive uses of power against them, particularly through the medical system. This led to a climate of distrust towards the health system in Indigenous communities, which is only aggravated when said system starts providing suicide assistance. Furthermore, Nicholas argues that MAiD may be conceptually incompatible with non-Western holistic views on health, often overlooked in Western medical frameworks.

Chapter 15 focuses on another emerging issue in the ethics of assisted dying: should adolescents deemed capable of consenting to medical procedures without parental approval or knowledge (usually referred to as "mature minors") be granted access to MAiD? Coelho discusses how self-determination should be understood in the case of such minors requesting MAiD, and how theirs may be compromised by pressures such as bullying, exposure to domestic violence, or poverty – all elements that may thwart one's ability to make a free and informed choice. She also hints at how extending MAiD for mature minors may deeply reshape parental dynamics by blurring the limit between parental authority and state power, and diminishing the weight of the former in favour of the latter. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Nicholas or Coelho, both their chapters raise challenges that neither side of the debate can ignore.

All in all, *Unravelling MAiD* is a timely and important book. The editors have done a fantastic job in curating this volume, and the works they have gathered should be of interest not only to those critical of MAiD. Given the highly emotional and tense nature of the debate, it is more crucial than ever to look at the controversies of assisted suicide through the eyes of the other. To that end, *Unravelling MAiD* provides a step in the right direction. mRb

**Yoann Della Croce** is a trained political theorist doing work at the interface of political theory and bioethics. He specialized in the ethics of medical assistance in dying, on which he wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Geneva. He is now furthering his research on MAiD at McGill University's Faculty of Law.

# poetry

# Exiles of History

**The Inferno**
**Dante Alighieri**
**Translated by Lorna Goodison**
**Véhicule Press**
**$24.95, paper, 250pp**
**9781550656787**


"Halfway tree. The journey of our life found me
there at midnight in a ramshackle state,
for to tell you the truth my feet had strayed."

HUGH WRIGHT

So begins a new translation of *The Inferno*, the first of the three works comprising Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, by the Jamaican-Canadian poet Lorna Goodison. This opening stanza resets the epic poem in a new register – namely, Jamaican vernacular English – and establishes a striking tone. The speaker finds herself at the "halfway tree," a "Bitter! Barren!" place, and surveys the landscape behind her with the humbled gaze of a survivor: "I turned back to study with awe / the dark pass none before me did ever leave alive."

Goodison moves the *Inferno* to Jamaica and thus remaps the poem's intertextual field of literature, religion, mythology, and politics. Translating Dante into Jamaican vernacular may seem a surprising choice, but it rhymes with Dante's own project. He wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the fourteenth century in the *dolce stil novo* (a term coined in *Purgatorio*, translating literally to "sweet new style"), a register that radically incorporated the Tuscan vernacular and laid the foundation for a national literature in Italy. In a talk given at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in 2021, Goodison thanked Dante for giving "poets worldwide his imprimatur to write in the tongues of their people." Like Dante, she suggests that it is through one's everyday language that a true sense of the self may be found within the determinative exile of history.

As in Dante's *Inferno*, the speaker's midlife malaise catalyzes a tour of the underworld, where those who've sinned pay penance for their earthly wrongdoings. Whereas Dante was led by the Roman poet Virgil, Goodison's speaker follows Miss Lou, the nickname for Jamaican-Canadian poet and folklorist Louise Bennett-Coverley. In Canto II, the speaker cites Miss Lou's tales of twentieth-century Black nationalist Marcus Garvey and eighteenth-century resistance leader Nanny of the Maroons. In Canto IV, where Dante encounters the poets Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan in Limbo (as they are non-Christians), Goodison places Philip Sherlock, Dennis Scott, Anthony McNeill, and Kamau Brathwaite. Goodison's nods to these Caribbean greats affirm that *The Divine Comedy* is not just a canonical work – it explores canonicity itself, and how figures and stories from the past shape the ground of meaning for our relations in the present. As the speaker wonders near the beginning, "But why is me must go?/ Who says so? I am not Garvey, Nanny nor Marley." Miss Lou counters: "is like yu soul downpress by cowardice… / You must get release from fear."

Goodison maintains the tercets that structure the original *Inferno* across its thirty-four cantos and reproduces Dante's nine-circle structure of Hell. Whereas *The Divine Comedy* was written using an interlocking *terza rima* rhyme scheme, Goodison writes in free verse, finding rhyme only when it comes naturally in her poetics. Still, Goodison's lines bristle with colloquialisms and music. I was particularly struck by her work with Canto V, where she transforms Dante's Francesca and Paolo – blown by the winds of desire as punishment for submitting their reason to lust – into "scholars of popular culture / like Dancehall and Rap." This canto demonstrates both the faithful study and surprising dislocations of Goodison's interpretation. To read it solely for homology with Dante's allusions would miss something of this text's unique character. From her own dark wood, she calls – as Walter Benjamin described the translator's task – into the "middle of the high forest of the language itself."

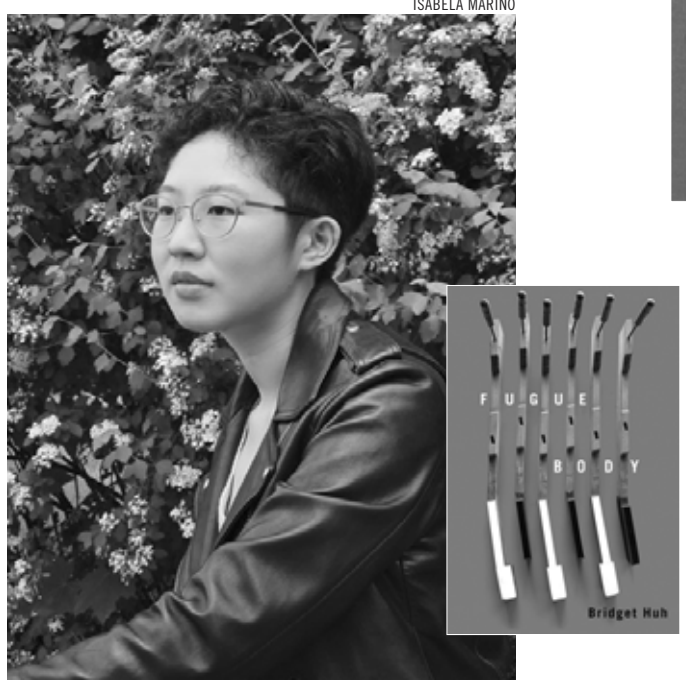
As a reader of Dante, I hope to follow Goodison's speaker through *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, too. For now, however, this is a fascinating work: one that would appeal to those interested in Dante, the Caribbean, world literature, or translation, or simply those seeking to face the dread rising from the ground of the everyday. mRb

**Brennan McCracken** is a PhD candidate in English at Concordia University.

VIV AMARA



ISABELA MARINO




**No One Knows Us There**
**Jessica Bebenek**
**Book*hug Press**
**$22.95, paper, 96pp**
**9781771669399**

Jessica Bebenek's debut is divided into two sections that explore, in turn, grief and early adulthood, but these themes aren't entirely separate. Instead, they extend across the collection, with the poems in the first half feeding into the next. The book opens with the aftermath of a grandfather's death and eschews melodrama in favour of the mundane, listing all the things the living must do in the wake of tragedy: make funeral arrangements, walk around, buy overpriced coffee.

By breaking actions into their component parts, Bebenek paints an accurate picture of grief – how it can make you both glassy-eyed and allow you to see the world more clearly. By the end of the first poem, the speaker has dispensed with euphemism entirely: "Here is the attempt to close your mouth. We were lied to. / This was not a slow slip. There was pain."

For all its restraint, *No One Knows Us There* looks upon the world with a barely concealed wonder. What makes this an assured debut is its ability to make nature sing and to string the contemporary world to its elemental past. Bebenek has a great ear for near or internal rhyme: descriptions of present-day Montreal and Toronto are interlaced with "the morning / of a meaningless sparrow at the window," the "magenta abalones" of a sunken eyelid, and deer's hooves smacking "a path of broken asphalt slabs."

Bebenek is ultimately able to metabolize nature writing, astrophysics, and ancient Rome in a way that the work sustains life, even as it swirls around death. Her curiosity where these concepts are concerned is perhaps a rejection of stoic philosophy. In the words of Marcus Aurelius, time "is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by." Bebenek's time, on the other hand, is fecund, and open to absorbing more: "Time exists not as a river, but a pond / in which we float / with all the other stories."

**Fugue Body**
**Bridget Huh**
**Vehicule Press**
**$19.95, paper, 80pp**
**9781550656763**

The title poem of Bridget Huh's *Fugue Body* recounts the claustrophobic experience of being racialized. The narrator, a child of Korean-speaking immigrants, describes feeling "enclosed" by the English language. They attempt to find their way through conversations with well-intentioned but annoying white people, "muddling" notes at the seat of a piano, with "arms / as tender and yielding as overcooked / spinach." Over the course of the collection, different speakers try to use music to break free from their own confinements, for instance in the poems which take on the voice of a boozing nineteenth-century composer, who writes "until there were / no more voices inside."

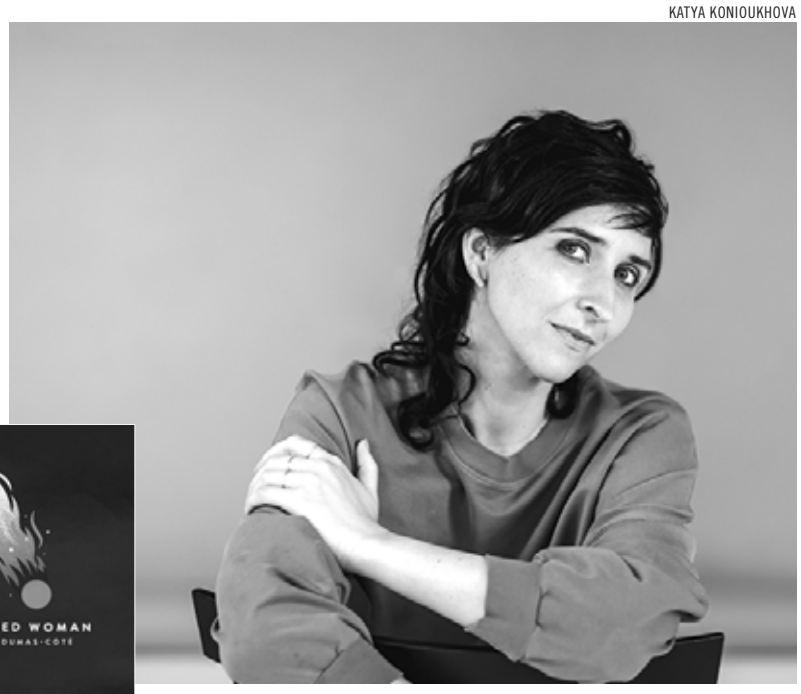
The composer's attempts to free himself from this fugue state are quashed, if not explicitly then at least formally, in elliptical passages that are sometimes cordoned off from the rest of the work entirely by square brackets. If speakers manage to break through at all, it might be when they forego elaborate composition in the first place. The collection descends, near the middle, to a lovely one-two sequence: there is the quirky, slightly neurotic poem "Sometimes I'm," followed by the sweet and straightforward "Aria." The former includes the most memorable four lines in the whole book: "When was the last time we ever / had a good laugh together? / The feeling of our bare asses / on the new blue couch."

The latter, meanwhile, defies language categories entirely by inventing its own ("white sandflesh [blushing] brown"), and goes on to catalogue details about a particular love that recalls the poetry of Frank O'Hara. Like O'Hara, Huh's speaker finds love in the beloved's idiosyncrasies, the asymmetries of the face: "The sunlit / orchard and your insistence on biting into every kind / of apple, leaving a trail of them as you go. The sun / gazing right at you. You winking back, with both / eyes."

**Cut Side Down**
**Jessi MacEachern**
**Invisible Publishing**
**$9.99, paper, 128pp**
**9781778430596**

Like *Fugue Body*, Jessi MacEachern's *Cut Side Down* spans different time periods and voices. The work takes inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a story of a time-travelling poet who entertains multiple romantic partners through multiple centuries. As in *Orlando*, the speaker toggles between their desires for formality and frippery, and the decision to reveal or conceal these desires. The collection opens: "there are women wearing / ruffled underpants just behind my eyes."

KATYA KONIOUKHOVA





Though exploratory and wide-ranging, the work is best when it's rooted, as in the poems from the final section, which deal with a rural childhood on Prince Edward Island. Here, rhyming couplets and references to "child-mad women" conjure a downhome Macbeth:

> You show me
>
> The dirt drove. The woman-child mad
> The damp poof. Radish halves
>
> Greens soaked in vinegar. Profound sound
> Strong between

Could the Bard himself have come up with the amazing sonic description "snapping dirt-streaked asparagus"? Underpinning the collection is the sense that there is something both thrilling and deviant about putting these sounds and feelings into words: "Words / —*sex, garments, death*—turn to ash in the mouth. / But we thrill in the deceit!"

**The Seated Woman**
**Clémence Dumas-Côté**
**Translated by E.S. Taillon**
**House of Anansi**
**$22.99, paper, 72pp**
**9781487013295**

If *The Seated Woman*, Clémence Dumas-Côté's third work of poetry – which takes the form of a stage play – is described on the dust jacket as a "competitive dialogue," it's only because its actors can't seem to agree on their roles. While "the seated woman" wants to get her stage partner, "the poems," to speak to her, they don't easily comply. The muse, it seems, has finally refused the conditions of its labour.

The resulting work is a dance between the two characters who take turns contesting for authority. The tension underlying their coupling is signalled at the beginning by the voice of "the poems," who intend to set the record straight: "We bring the metronome, / we will play opposite you— / you handle the score."

What makes this a fresh and frankly inspired collection is its unusual, and sometimes surreal use of imagery. Over the span of a few pages, the reader encounters "trampoline rhythms," "Christmas runoff," "my irises / and a pile of chewed wrists." At one point, "the poems" tell the seated woman that "we make love to you, slow like the plague." The more the poems treat the worn or disgusting areas of bodily and industrial life, the more the concept of poetry comes to resemble them. "On the ground," observes "the poems" at one point, apparently listing the detritus that surrounds them, "residue of a couplet, origami."

In *The Seated Woman*, just as the poems infect the woman's body, different art forms end up leaching into one another. From theatre to the art of folded paper, the poems show the reader a more porous boundary between poetry and other forms of expression. Perhaps the work's title is a riposte to anyone foolish enough to call themselves a poet. After all, as the poems remind the seated woman, "You use me to make beehive calligraphy / but what I do is just ventriloquism. / Here, an earthenware vestibule."

**Chambersonic**
**Oana Avasilichioaei**
**Talonbooks**
**$21.95, paper, 164pp**
**9781772016260**

The most dynamic pieces in Oana Avasilichioaei's *Chambersonic*, a book made up of multiple, overlapping voices, take place on an imagined stage. In the section "Improbable Theatres," the poet envisions a performance where people can choose between the role of performer or viewer. Each audience member decides beforehand how long they want to watch or perform the piece. A performer might plan to perform for twenty seconds, while a viewer expects to watch for twenty minutes. The only way for the show to end is for both parties to agree on an ending point. If not, they might spend the remaining nineteen minutes and forty seconds in studied silence.

Like John Cage, the avant-garde composer whom she cites, Avasilichioaei is attuned to what we might hear in an otherwise quiet room, a presence "which isn't exactly 'air' but closer to a viscous atmosphere of longing." Much of the book is eaten into with these long pauses, with entire pages left blank, their script scrubbed away entirely.

Elsewhere, though, the book is loud. Voices overlap – literally, in QR codes through which the reader can access the associated musical compositions, or in a typeset that blurs entire lines together. The work relies on the metaphor of voice as an agent of political change, as in the section "Street Speak" which reproduces pictures of graffiti, and it takes its epigraph from the experimental composer Pauline Oliveiros: "Be subversive, very subversive." Still, if subversion is everywhere, then it also risks being nowhere. One poem recalls the sound of "a supersonic blast / a market stall collapsing / [limbs] trapped under rubble / [the] constant din of rocket fire," perhaps a reference to the experience of watching the genocide in Gaza unfold onscreen – a genocide made possible, in part, by the silence of Western media institutions. But maybe denouncing genocide and the institution's complicity therein is less the work of poetry and more the work of its readers, or of anyone with a voice and the good fortune to broadcast it from a platform. mrb

**Frances Grace Fyfe** has a Master's degree in English from Concordia University.

# young readers

## The King and Nothing


**Olivier Tallec**
**Milky Way Picture Books**
**$25.00, cloth, 40pp**
**9781990252389**
**Ages 4–8**

What if the emperor who had no clothes wished to be naked from the start? This is the question that drives the plot of *The King and Nothing,* a humorous take on the ridiculous greed of the oligarchy, first published in French in 2022.

The King, when we meet him, has a serious case of Nietzschean buyer's remorse. He has it all: "And when I say everything, I mean 'everything': caterpillars on bicycles, bicycles with caterpillar wheels, elephants without trunks, storm clouds that refused to make lightning, caramel flavoured ice skates…"

Yet the King is unsatisfied because what he lacks is "nothing" itself. He's troubled not only by the lack of it, but by the fact that what constitutes "nothing" evades him. No amount of vacuuming or desert walking brings him closer to finding "nothing." Alas, the material world asserts its dominance.

The King's mission raises some eyebrows. "But why does he want nothing?" my young test reader asked, exasperated. "Spend an afternoon picking up all your Legos and toys and perhaps you'll get the idea," I thought to myself.

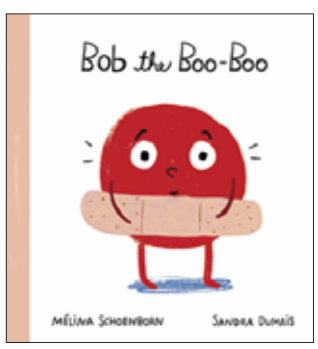
A primer on existentialism and a caution against overconsumption (but not necessarily a tome on the moral imperative to redistribute wealth), *The King and Nothing* is a delightfully complex story, rich with cheeky wordplay and illustrated in a bright, cartoonish style.

And while the King may finally be satiated by scarcity, rest assured, dear reader, that, as in Andersen's folktale, the last laugh is reserved for you.

✦ ✦ ✦

## Bob the Boo-Boo

**Mélina Schoenborn**
**Illustrated by Sandy Dumais**
**Kids Can Press**
**$18.99, cloth, 24pp**
**9781525313837**
**Ages 3–7**




When I first became a parent, I stocked up on the stuff I needed: diapers, baby bottles, and tiny onesies. Once the kids started walking and exploring fearlessly, I added Band-Aids to the shopping list.

I also purchased a magnifying glass so I could inspect the microscopic scrapes and scratches (the "boo-boos") that required, in my kids' opinion, immediate medical attention.

For all the fuss they cause, has anyone taken a moment to ask if boo-boos have feelings, too?

In *Bob the Boo-Boo*, the titular character is a personified injury who wanders the earth in search of a home. It's a hard life for him. No one wants a boo-boo: not the kid with an elbow full of them, not the elderly man who stubbed his toe, and certainly not the parent shooing away a wasp.

Finally, Bob meets a little boy who has fallen off his bike. After some discussion, the boy agrees to let Bob take up residence on his knee. By bonding together and feeling less alone, they learn to ask for the help each of them need.

If *Bob the Boo-Boo* has lessons to impart, it's that while scrapes and cuts hurt, they are an inevitable part of a play-filled childhood and can help kids learn about their bodies. As for parents, it's a gentle reminder that applying a bandage is one small way to acknowledge kids' needs and show them that they are cared for.

Sandy Dumais' playful illustrations make this charmingly offbeat story even more entertaining. The original French version of this book (*Bob le Bo-Bo*) has been in circulation in my home for some time. I can therefore attest that no tears or giggles are lost in translation.

✦ ✦ ✦

## Our Plastic Problem

**A Call for Global Solutions**
**Megan Dunford**
**Orca Book Publishers**
**$21.95, cloth, 48pp**
**9781459836709**
**Ages 9–12**


In *Our Plastic Problem: A Call for Global Solutions*, author Megan Dunford tracks plastic from its optimistic beginnings as an alternative for ivory, to the serious environmental problems the petroleum-based substance now poses.

Four chapters condense a large body of knowledge into digestible bites that young readers can understand, including clear explanations of the proliferation of microplastics in the Earth's water systems (and in our own bodies) and the uncoordinated global efforts to reduce and recycle different types of plastics.

Unflinching descriptions of the trouble we are in due to our plastic dependency and our mismanagement of the waste it creates are balanced with tips for reducing pollution in ways both big and small. For example, Dunford recounts that while her son didn't want to stop wearing his favourite fleece sweater, he was willing to wash it less often, and in cold water, to help reduce its microfibre shedding. Efforts to clean up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch are explored.

Though the book is well-researched, stock photography dampens the visual interest it could have achieved with the inclusion of diagrams or illustrations. Refreshingly, however, the text highlights some Canadian-led research efforts; for example, the innovative green chemistry led by McGill University's Audrey Moores, who is developing a new crustacean-waste based plastic.

*Our Plastic Problem* joins a fleet of pedagogical resources on the topic, which will hopefully help a new generation prepare to combat the environmental catastrophe of unchecked plastic production and pollution.

✦ ✦ ✦

## Keep Your Ears Wide Open

**Céline Claire**
**Illustrated by Marie Lafrance**
**The Secret Mountain**
**$19.95, cloth, 36pp**
**9782898360985**
**Ages 5–9**


Waiting for a special event to begin or a special someone to arrive can be hard, especially for kids. Though let's be honest, adults can be pretty impatient too.

In *Keep Your Ears Wide Open*, Russell is faced with the challenge of waiting. He has received the happy news that his older brother, Angus, is coming to visit. Russell swiftly prepares the guest bed and bakes his brother's favourite cake.

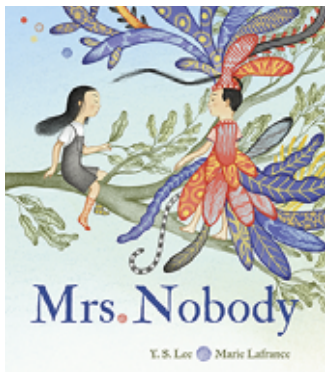
He is so anxious for Angus to arrive that every sound seems to signal his brother's return – the train's whistle, and the rumble of an approaching car – yet Angus does not appear.

Instead, Russell encounters many strangers in need: a traveller who has missed the last train to her destination, a family whose car has broken down, and even a cold, wet dog. By going out of his way to lend a hand, Russell's wait becomes a little less lonely.

The pastoral scenes of Russell's world are rendered by Marie Lafrance in a subdued palette, with the exception of his vibrant red hair. The characters have a paper doll quality, striking static poses as though suspended in time.

*Keep Your Ears Wide Open* is about anticipation, patience, and empathy. Russell does not let his impatience cloud his empathic instincts towards other people, and when the time comes for his new friends to return his kindness, they give back willingly.

Empathy also heightens Russell's powers of observation (or rather, his keen listening), so that when the anticipatory note of Angus' return finally rings, the brothers reunite in dramatic fashion.




✦ ✦ ✦

## Mrs. Nobody

**Y.S. Lee**
**Illustrated by Marie Lafrance**
**House of Anansi**
**$21.99, cloth, 32pp**
**9781773068367**
**Ages 3–6**

Reflecting on the sensitive and eager minds of children, Rachel Carson wrote in 1956 in the introduction to *The Sense of Wonder* that, "If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life…"

In *Mrs. Nobody,* a fairy figure by the titular name looms large. She is a delightfully unbridled shapeshifter living in the imagination of her real-world friend, Alice. When Mrs. Nobody is satisfied, she appears as a beautiful flower. When displeased, a fire-breathing dragon.

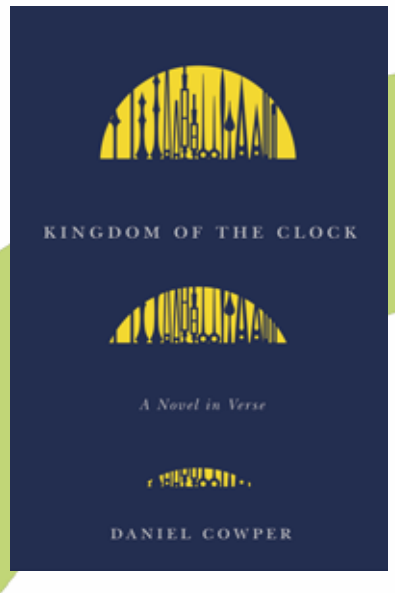
Imaginary friends have long populated the pages of children's books, most famously, Christopher Robin's Pooh or Calvin's Hobbes. In their imagination, children can find a companion tuned into their emotional needs, who may help them develop coping strategies for difficult situations or make long, lonely summer vacations more bearable. Yet these fantasy folks can also embody a critical inner voice.

Most of the time, Mrs. Nobody and Alice have great fun together. They draw with markers on the walls and climb trees. They play a game called "puppy." They are no strangers to the gifts of natural beauty and wonder. But Mrs. Nobody can also be a bully, as Alice discovers when she refuses to play puppy according to Mrs. Nobody's unbending rules. When Alice says "No," Mrs. Nobody screams and shouts. Alienated from her friend, Alice must learn to trust her feelings.

Author Y.S. Lee has crafted a unique tale of budding independence and conflict resolution. Paired with fanciful illustrations in the signature style of Marie Lafrance, *Mrs. Nobody* grants Carson's wish for an enduring and indestructible sense of wonder among children. mrb

**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 Beatty Lecture at McGill University*, and mother to two budding readers.

# New Poetry from MQUP

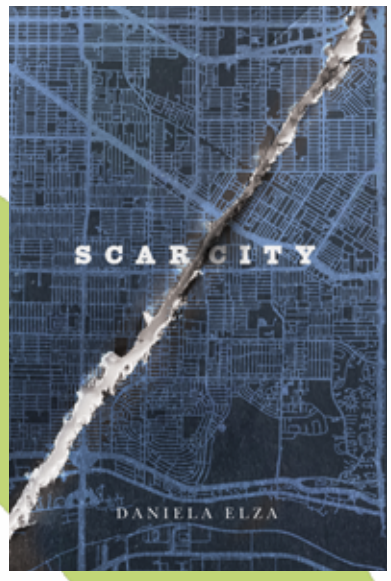



**Kingdom of the Clock**
*A Novel in Verse*
**Daniel Cowper**
Paper | $24.95 | 208pp

"Daniel Cowper's novel in couplets is a technical high-wire act. Here we have narrative poetry at its best."
–Boris Dralyuk, author of *My Hollywood and Other Poems*


**White Lily**
**John Emil Vincent**
Paper | $19.95 | 104pp

"*White Lily* is like nothing else I know in contemporary poetry. This is Vincent's best book yet."
–Chris Nealon, author of *The Shore*




**SCAR/CITY**
**Daniela Elza**
Paper | $19.95 | 52pp

"This is a work for our times. Elza's poetry will move you to reflect deeply, to mourn loss, and, through poetic persuasion, to defend what's left."
–Leilani Farha, The Shift


**Water Quality**
**Cynthia Woodman Kerkham**
Paper | $19.95 | 128pp

"The poems in Cynthia Woodman Kerkham's *Water Quality* wash over the reader's psyche like a blessedly cool drink poured down a parched throat."
–Anita Lahey, author of *While Supplies Last*


**Without Beginning or End**
**Jacqueline Bourque**
Paper | $19.95 | 80pp

*Without Beginning or End* is Jacqueline Bourque's final testament to a life well lived, written in the wake of a terminal cancer diagnosis. It is an emotionally charged parting gift to loved ones and readers alike.


**The Rough Poets**
*Reading Oil-Worker Poetry*
**Melanie Dennis Unrau**
Paper | $34.95 | 240pp

"A long-overdue examination of the art and interior life of a workforce typically passed over for serious consideration."
–Kate Beaton, author of *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*

---

McGill-Queen's University Press

mqup.ca | @McGillQueensUP