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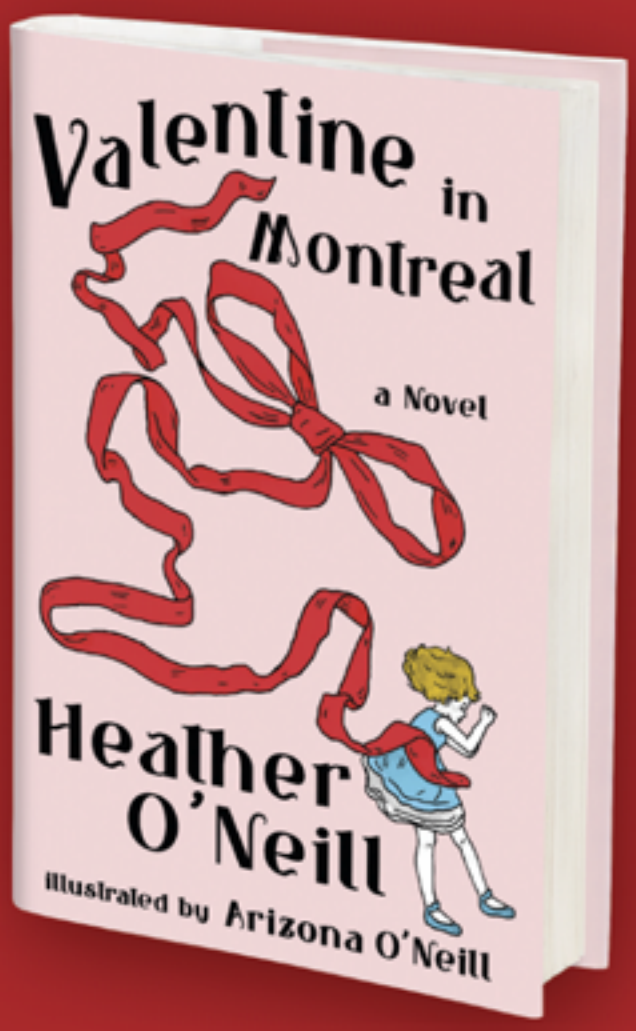
# mRb

## Montreal Review of Books

SUMMER 2025

CURTIS JOHN MCCRAE • H. NIGEL THOMAS • MÉLIKAH ABDELMOUMEN • BENJAMIN LIBMAN

# A love letter to Montreal




## From #1 bestselling author HEATHER O'NEILL

A young woman who works at a **Montreal metro station** looks up, sees her **doppelganger**, and is thrown into an **unexpected adventure.**

## With beautiful illustrations throughout by ARIZONA O'NEILL

**AVAILABLE WHERE BOOKS ARE SOLD**

# mRb

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**Malcolm Fraser** • Editor
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**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

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Cover art by
**Carl-Philippe Simonise, detail from *Untitled*, 2023.**
**Acrylic on canvas, 96" x 60"**
Carl-Philippe Simonise is a Haitian-born Montreal-based multidisciplinary artist. Their work focuses on healing processes by studying ancient and contemporary mythologies.

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**Jeraume**, a Montreal-based artist, has honed his craft through years of training and meaningful collaborations, blending traditional pencil drawing with digital tools. He is a permanent artist at Livart and Paperole, represented by Pinzle in Seoul, and regularly collaborates with magazines and fashion brands.

BY EMMA DOLLERY

# Love, From a Distance

MATTHEW KHALILI


**Quietly, Loving Everyone**
**Curtis John McCrae**
**Esplanade Books**
**$22.95, paperback, 200pp**
**9781550656756**

The title of Curtis John McCrae's debut short story collection, *Quietly, Loving Everyone*, already captures what I take to be the book's central ethos: the bitter-sweet tension between individuality and community, solitude and connection – a tension at the heart of what it means to be human. "The collection as a whole," says McCrae, "is interested in loving from a distance. It's punctuated by that comma in the title, too – a sort of separation. The collection explores failed love, love from a distance, our complicity in each other's lives, and our accountability in the lives of our loved ones."

Composed of eleven pieces, *Quietly, Loving Everyone* is itself a love letter to the city. The stories – some linked within the same narrative arc, others standing alone – weave a web of intimacies in a shared world: Montreal and its surroundings. Fittingly, I met McCrae on a warm spring day for coffee under the budding trees of Parc La Fontaine, where we talked about living, loving, and writing in Montreal.

McRae, who grew up "a Montrealer, but not quite" in the West Island, learned to love the city from a distance. "I wasn't accustomed to it," he says; "I was always sort of on the outskirts." The city – all cities, we agreed – insist on a kind of intimacy with strangers that is lacking in the suburbs. "Your lives become intertwined, you have no choice in the matter," says McRae. "If you have thin walls, you smell what your neighbours are having for dinner, and you hear their arguments, you know what music they listen to."

There is a lonely quality to this kind of closeness with strangers, a proximity that lacks intention, one that McRae occasionally visually evokes. In "Hundred-Year Floodline," McRae's protagonist watches from a kayak on the water while his father and his father's new girlfriend dance in their well-lit living room on the shore. And in the collection's titular story, the protagonist relates an anecdote to his long-term, on-again off-again lover – with whom he is now embroiled in an illicit affair – about his parents listening to the couple next door's private conversations through a glitching baby monitor. To observe, from a distance, intimacies between strangers, can distill in one the sense of being alone. But, argues McRae, "There is also something incredibly soothing about feeling lonely in your own apartment, then leaving and seeing hundreds of people out in the park." In the city there is space for both: you can be lonely in a crowd, or you can embrace, like a protective hug, the comfort of anonymity.

A more painful interpretation of loving from a distance is the metaphorical separation from people who might be deeply enmeshed in one's life. "I'm kind of obsessed with the idea that we can try to show up for somebody, with love, when they need us, but we ultimately fail them because the ways in which we've learned to love are failed and fractured," explains McRae. "What we bring in an act of trying to help is actually damaging." Some of the characters in *Quietly, Loving Everyone* suffer the worst-case-scenario consequences of this distance, which, judging by the number of rather heavy-handed (overt or implied) suicides in the stories, McRae seems to figure is death by one's own hand.

Sometimes the equation is simple, à la "hurt people hurt people" (or, in McRae's case, hurt people hurt themselves). Seymour, a recurring character, has a difficult relationship with his aloof and tough-loving father – and a penchant for self-destructive frenzies. Rose, who also reappears (though returning more often as ghost than person, because we learn of her suicide in "Hotel Viviane," the collection's first story), is shamed and ostracized by her mother and stepfather in what they believe is an act of protection. Both instances illustrate moments in which ill-fitting, old-school varieties of love can cause alienation and pain; a classic case of perpetuation.

*I'm interested in the idea of inheritance and the ways we try to get rid of old notions or ideas, but also the ones that last, and how they last, and why? How aware are we of the ways in which they show up in our lives?*

Interestingly, this return-to appears in McRae's writing practice, too. Not initially written to be a part of a collection, the short stories were finished piecemeal, some for his MA thesis, and others for publication in various places. When I ask how he managed to weave a cohesive-feeling compilation, he replies: "I had enough similar preoccupations in my stories that they just intrinsically tied together. I was curious about similar themes and topics, and perhaps approaching them from different angles to try and access them better." This is a familiar feeling for many artists, I believe. A practice is often circling around a central problem – a trauma perhaps – a working out of something that needs to be solved.

What is complicated, interesting, and wonderfully articulated in *Quietly, Loving Everyone,* is the fact that there is no clear delineation between past and present, no extricating one from the other. Set sometimes in the 1990s and sometimes in the 2020s, the collection is littered with anachronisms. This is woven into the fabric of the city: "There is a nostalgic element to Montreal," says McRae, an element that he most clearly explores in "Love Cinema," in which the city's iconic Cinema L'Amour serves as the backdrop to the beginnings of a love story. "There's something sort of… liberal, about the idea of a porn theatre blatantly shining its marquee onto the street," he continues. "Yet, in the strictest sense, there is something conservative about it, it's something that's been preserved from the past."

Other times, these anachronisms are emotional. McRae deftly tackles the intertwined and stalling emotions of grief, mourning, nostalgia, and guilt, and how they figure within the relentless march of time. In "We Should Change the Curtains," Rose's mom and stepfather sit smoking in their dusty living room, the shower curtains growing mould, stuck in the mud of grief as they replay the tragic death of their daughter. In this instance, it seems, guilt and grief keep the characters locked in the past, shaping them into anachronisms themselves.

"I'm interested in the idea of inheritance," says McRae, "and the ways we try to get rid of old notions or ideas, but also the ones that last, and how they last, and why? How aware are we of the ways in which they show up in our lives?"

The past can haunt us, the present hurt us, and the future scare us. But the past can also nourish or teach us, the present ground us, and the future inspire us. Just like how we can feel alone or together in a city (and sometimes both at the same time), like how both moments of loneliness and connection are fleeting, we live in a soup of things past, things happening, and things still to come. The world, and time, is cyclical. Or are we a pendulum, swinging back and forth? "It's precisely that grey zone that I'm interested in," says McRae. mRb

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

# fiction

## Super Bug

**Horsefly**
**Mireille Gagné**
**Translated by Pablo Strauss**
**Coach House Books**
**$24.95, paperback, 160pp**
**9781552454992**

"A lemon scent hangs in the air," notices Theodore, a factory worker in Montmagny, Quebec, as he unfurls sticky fly traps around his workstation, "the scent of Marguerite's hands." Much lingers in the atmosphere of Mirelle Gagné's *Horsefly*. The smell of a colleague's hand lotion, music, unsettling news, pollution, clouds of dust, "fecal" and "pestilential" odours, "moments of air conditioning," relentless waves of heat, and, as the title suggests, bugs – "butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, mosquitos, flies, bees, wasps, midges, and stink bugs."

Translated into English by Pablo Strauss, the thrilling novel alternates between the present day – which finds Theodore suffering through a hot spell and an inexplicable uptick in local crime – and the Second World War, told through two years in the life of an entomologist, Thomas, working at a government-run laboratory. As the two narrative threads move closer together, the characters become increasingly enshrouded in fatal systems of power – both natural and political.

We meet Thomas in July of 1941, shortly after his enlistment in an international team of scientists and military put together by the Canadian government and based on Grosse-Île, a large island to the east of Quebec City, where the Saint Lawrence River begins to open onto the Atlantic. Alternately muggy, muddy, and freezing, the dynamic landscape – teeming with flora and fauna that thrive in freshwater, saltwater, and brackish environs – provides a remote and relatively self-contained place for the classified mission to "develop methods for propagating epidemics using insects."

Reluctantly following these orders, Thomas begins cataloguing the bugs and wildlife in the marshlands on the northern shore. He quickly befriends a teenaged local, Émeril, who has been tasked with helping the researchers move resources between the mainland and island by canoe. Émeril warns Thomas to stay away from certain areas, including the cemetery, and to never let the ubiquitous horseflies bite him. But the Montrealer, who learned everything he knows about entomology "from reading" and has spent little time in the field, is cavalier about this advice. Instead, "day after day, night after night," he catches, digs, and attracts the island's many pests until he is "covered in bites."

EMILIE DUMAIS


*Horsefly* is a book about consequences. In imagining some of the worst outcomes from real experiments of biological warfare conducted on Grosse-Île during the 1940s – the unearthing of long-buried anthrax spores and the emergence of flies designed to transmit them to humans, for instance – Gagné considers the tiniest players in large-scale global violence and examines how naïve humans are to the long-term impact of our actions. Grounded in her evocative descriptions of the riverbanks and tidal flats across the seasons, the events on the island over almost two years prove far more compelling than the sections that follow Theodore through his mind-numbing workdays and into a precarious public health crisis.

Even so, the two timelines are indispensable to one another and, together, render a nuanced story about the long arc of causality. We watch Thomas react to young Émeril's sudden illness after transporting flies injected with "a selection of viruses and bacteria, influenza and plague" – moments before learning that, in the present day, Émeril is Theodore's dementia-ridden grandfather, his only living relative, and possibly the only person who can help forestall the rage spreading throughout the region.

Woven throughout the book are a series of brief chapters narrated by a voracious and unforgiving horsefly that hovers around Theodore for days before wounding him. "Desire rose up from my depths," it says, recalling the ecstasy of biting Theodore while he was having sex. "I cracked, succumbed, gave in, let drop my final shred of self-control."

Like the inexorable heat and the unforgiving landscape, these disturbing and intimate vignettes allow a non-human voice to comment on just how merciless and inhospitable we've made the world. "We have seen you animated by a rabid fury," the fly says, "turning on each other, against your own kind." Poised somewhere between speculative and historical fiction, *Horsefly* elegantly reveals how limited our view of the future is if we can't investigate – and excavate – the worst chapters of the past. mrb

**Emily Mernin** is a writer based in Montreal.

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## Spies Like Us

**Oxford Soju Club**
**Jinwoo Park**
**Dundurn Press**
**$25.99, paperback, 224pp**
**9781459755109**

*Oxford Soju Club* follows the intertwining lives of three members of the Korean diaspora living in Oxford, England. Namely, Yohan Kim, a precocious North Korean spy; Yunah Choi, a young, driven Korean-American CIA agent; and Jihoon Lim, the kindly South Korean owner of the Soju Club, the only Korean restaurant in the city.

Yunah is one of the American agents assigned to tracking Yohan, who is posing as a student at Oxford while gathering intelligence for the North Korean government. When Yohan's mentor and spymaster is mysteriously murdered, he uses his last breath to deliver a message to Yohan: "Soju Club, Dr. Ryu." Meanwhile, on the same night, Yunah is ambushed by a man who, after a violent scuffle, leaves her a note that reads, "Soju Club, 7PM." It is at the Soju Club – run by Jihoon, who is unaware that his restaurant has become the site of high-stakes international espionage – that Yunah and Yohan's paths fatefully cross.

Beneath the surface, *Oxford Soju Club* is – according to Park's foreword – a metaphor for the ruthless competition that can exist between Korean immigrants. It is also a story about various coping mechanisms that immigrants employ in order to survive: there are those who try to assimilate (Yunah), those who try to fit the stereotype of the "model minority" (Jihoon), those who reject the above and embrace their identity (Yohan). As they get to know one another, the protagonists find they have much in common, despite beginning their lives in different places.


The writing in *Oxford Soju Club* is rhythmic and economical, especially during action scenes. The novel has shootouts, assassinations, and tense getaways. Moments of action build and climax satisfyingly quickly. There is plenty of drama, with North Korean, South Korean, and American agents all pitted against one another. That Park chooses to set South Korean and American spies, normally allies, at odds is part of the book's probing into themes of identity and loyalty – issues that come up often, especially around Yunah's character. Born in the United States to Korean parents, Yunah finds herself having to justify both her Korean-ness and her American-ness to colleagues and friends, who are rarely satisfied to let her be both at the same time.

Yunah, Yohan, Jihoon, and the other characters in the novel (such as Doha Kim, the shrewd North Korean spymaster) are strongly characterized and feel authentic. There are evocative moments in the fast-paced narrative, like when Jihoon reminisces about the restaurant his mom ran in Seoul before she died, the memory of which led him to open the Soju Club. Each of the protagonists spends time – occasionally too much time, detracting from the immediacy and intensity of the story – reflecting on their past. A common thread is that each protagonist has parents or mentors at home who made sacrifices to give their children a better life, enabling them to leave home for England. The characters long for a sense of home, for "feelings that cannot be replicated," without a clear sense of where home is – is it Korea, America, Oxford, or a combination of them all?

*Oxford Soju Club* is full of twists and turns, including a surprising and touching ending, which I won't spoil here. As a unique confluence of genres, Park's novel will appeal to those interested in both spy stories and narratives about immigration and identity. mrb

**James Ivison** is a writer based in Montreal.

# Clause and Effect

**Sentence**
**Mikhail Iossel**
**Linda Leith Publishing**
**$24.95, paperback, 198pp**
**9781773901749**

The one-sentence stories in Mikhail Iossel's new collection present us with the kind of risky stylistic experimentation – rare among established writers today – that could easily fall flat. In the hands of a less skilled author, this kind of writing might well be indigestible. But with *Sentence,* Iossel succeeds beautifully.

This is in large part due to the fact that, beneath the *samizdat*-influenced structures that hark back to his past as an underground Soviet writer, the stories are bursting with real heart, real melancholy, and real questioning from an acutely sensitive and perceptive soul.

While the prolixity of its style is an indicator of *Sentence*'s conceptual, anti-commercial nature, there is no shortage of meat in the stories. The pieces come at you like distilled fragments of the author's psyche. In Iossel's case, it's a psyche that has experienced exile, otherness, and reinvention. From his youth in Leningrad, to his time as a Stegner fellow in the US and organizer of literary workshops in Kenya, the man has *lived*.

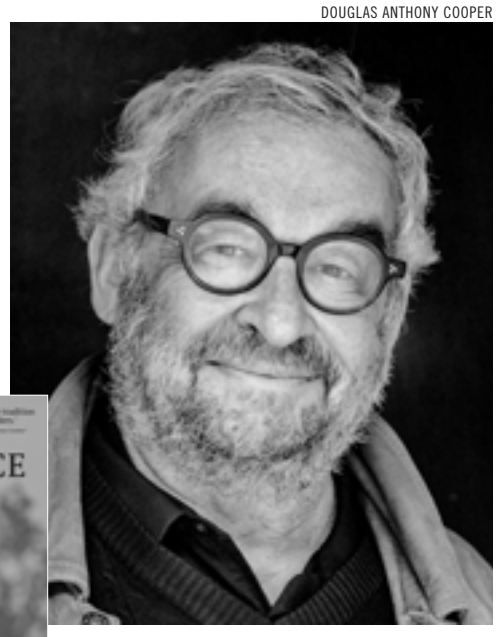

"Memory, I'll submit to you, has no chronological dimension to it," he writes in "Life Happened." And *Sentence* is a reflection of this: a great swirling maelstrom of memory, in which bits of the past, ego, and identity float to the surface to be savoured and reconsidered. The effect, particularly in the longer pieces, is dizzying, intensely poetic, and oddly soothing. That they are written in a logorrheic torrent of run-ons, subordinate clauses, and parenthetical asides gives the stories a sense of urgency – and, paradoxically, an unrushed expansiveness.

This is dense writing that buoys you up and floats you through its ambience, unbothered by a certain degree of disorientation. Which is to say, it allows you to absorb a big-picture atmosphere – pleasantly foreign and internationalist – as opposed to requiring absolute dedication to every word. Considering that it is simultaneously granular in nature, this is an impressive trick; should you wish to zoom in, the components of these sentences are often as impactful as their overall effect.

The premise at the heart of many of the stories is simple: some event or image in the present triggers a memory from the past, which then snowballs into something unruly and overwhelming. Mirroring the émigrés's life, we end up far from where we started. The Proustian *madeleine*, in this case, could be hearing Shostakovich's Waltz #2 in the Montreal metro, leading to bittersweet recollections of a youth spent in Leningrad. Iossel delicately renders the minutiae of his childhood spaces and episodes, filling them with mentions of Armenian cognac, Estonian pralines, faraway Soviet cities, and faience teacups.

In "May 12: The Wolf," Iossel the child overhears chilling snatches of conversation between pro-Stalin elders, who talk of "those heady no-nonsense old days of unbreakable national unity achieved through the stringent application of optimistic terror and general optimization of the warm brutality of fear …" There follows the sighting of an emaciated wolf prowling behind bars in the Leningrad zoo – a symbol, perhaps, of Russia's eternally ravenous designs. It paints a gloomy but potent picture of the Soviet Union in its twilight phases, a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enema."

DOUGLAS ANTHONY COOPER



Iossel stuffs an impressive amount of poetry into his sentences, tossing off lines describing Russia's "hopeless European aspirations and its shambolic Scythian existence," or how Saint Petersburg's "gossamer night, glowingly transparent, white-pinkish of hue, wore on lightly into the unworded endlessness of the day."

Thematically, the stories often wrestle with language's limitations in expressing the inexpressible. "Google Gulag" sees him considering "such a strange concatenation of sacrilegious alliterations," and acknowledging the futility of attempting to convey the nature of Soviet terror to young students living in the comfort of a bourgeois society in 2025.

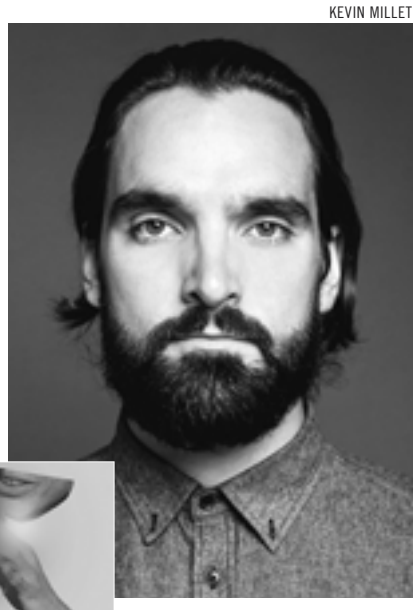
Whether he's musing about growing up Jewish in the USSR or recalling a homeless man during COVID telling him, "There's no cure for happiness, brother!" the everyday life-grist of Iossel's writing mill is by turns moving, funny, transporting, and self-excoriating. Iossel gives us a masterclass in the purity of literary expression. One of the highest compliments I can give *Sentence* is that it should inspire young writers to take more risks, to write in a freer, more individualistic way. Be honest, be passionate, don't be afraid to break the rules … and your sentence will be well served. mRb

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

# Comedy and Compulsion

**You Crushed It**
**Jean-Philippe Baril Guérard**
**Translated by Neil Smith**
**Book*hug Press**
**$24.95, paperback, 278pp**
**9781771669313**

KEVIN MILLET



What would your ex say about you if they told the story of your breakup? This question is at the core of Jean-Philippe Baril Guérard's latest novel in translation, which details the euphoric rise (and dramatic fall) of an ill-fated romance that plays out in the small, often cramped world of francophone comedy in Montreal. *You Crushed It* begins with a direct address: "You told yourself nothing bad could happen." Guérard has made the unconventional choice to write in second person, placing the reader in the perspective of his protagonist, Raph, a recent comedy school graduate and comedian whose main purpose seems to be one-upping his best friend, Sam. "Whenever you're better than Sam, you feel great," Guérard notes.


The novel takes a swing at the adage "There's two sides to every story" by positioning Raph's ex-girlfriend, Laurie, as the narrator of his experience and giving her seemingly limitless access to his internal thoughts and memories. Like most unreliable narrators, Laurie reveals many of her own hangups and neuroses as she documents Raph's internal world, forcing the reader to reckon with the bias baked into her perspective.

Much of the narrative is told in future tense, with Laurie describing their relationship in a prophetic tone, as if it has yet to unfold. "We'll do what normal couples do," she begins – a fortune teller peering into their shared future. She paints a picture of what's to come: they go clubbing and do MDMA at Berghain in Berlin, hard-launch their relationship on Instagram, get drunk and high on weed and Ritalin to write comedy in a cottage in Ange-Gardien – "brainstorm, take notes, eat, fuck, joke around, rewrite, drink, chill, get a brilliant idea, write it down, develop it, smoke, fuck" – and the bottomless downward spiral that unfolds when it all starts to fall apart.

This formally complex perspective is a joy to read in the hands of Guérard, who has crafted a psychological page-turner sustained by an addictive rhythm that surges and stalls with the momentum of Raph's increasingly high-stakes triumphs and embarrassments. This is a testament to the original prose as much as to Neil Smith's translation. Smith has risen to the challenge of translating a dialogue-driven book in which characters speak to each other almost entirely in sarcastic jabs, slang, and inside jokes, while preserving Guérard's precise, dry humour. "Everything is fucking amazeballs," is Raph's response when asked how he is doing post-breakup (spoiler alert: he's not doing well). The novel's francophone origins remain evident in its strong sense of place. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Raph chases success while fielding interviews on Radio-Canada Gatineau and Énergie FM or competing on local TVA game show *Le Tricheur*.

Raph's trajectory unwinds the association between success and happiness as his career balloons steadily alongside his depression, culminating in a scene characteristic of Guérard's irony: Raph lies catatonic on the floor of a hotel hallway while an employee tells him, "I really like what you do." Through this unravelling, Guérard explores the ubiquity of alcohol within comedy scenes, the many faces of toxic masculinity, and, when Raph's cohort becomes the subject of a scandal, the complexity of call-out culture in the era of #MeToo. Beneath the quippy dialogue and clout-chasing is an emotionally charged exploration of insecurity, infatuation, and the consequences of basing success on the failures of others. mRb

**Alex Trnka** is a writer and editor who was born in Newfoundland and lives in Toronto.

# graphic

## Out of Europe

**Episodes from a Colonial Present**
**Daniel Bendix et al.**
**Daraja Press**
**$34.55, paperback, 104pp**
**9781990263460**


What does a cup of tea have to do with contemporary migration patterns? Or a library in Dresden with the destruction of Mayan manuscripts in 1562? Quite a lot, suggests *Episodes from a Colonial Present*. The academic anthology-cum-graphic novel reveals the seemingly unlikely legacies of colonialism in our everyday lives. While much of the book surfaces these fascinating interrelations through the digestible medium of the graphic novel, its storytelling occasionally flounders under the weight of its theoretical commitments.

Half a dozen "episodes" draw on the personal experiences of the book's diverse cast of authors and illustrators, exploring the contradictions – and potential solidarities – that arise within our colonial present. Each episode is interspersed with an "intermezzo," mixing short stories and dense theoretical investigations. While the common theme of colonialism runs throughout, the fact that each story is created by different writers and illustrators makes for a great deal of aesthetic and thematic variation.

One of the anthology's more compelling revelations is the link between Germany and the formerly colonized world. Franziska Müller's "It All Runs in the Family," illustrated by Qi Zhou, draws an adroit connection between German emigration to the United States and the violent displacement of Native Americans. This is a particularly underexamined topic in contemporary German discourse, where "Cowboys vs. Indians" remains a popular cultural motif and is rarely regarded as anything beyond a metaphor. By exploring both settler and Indigenous versions of the same history, the episode's auto-fictive approach draws attention to this gap in Europe's self-knowledge, encouraging the reader to learn more. At the same time, however, the story also suggests the limits of intra-national solidarity with its strikingly ambiguous closing lines: "Still, at the end of the day… we can never be 'one.' May the bridges we burn light our way."

Some episodes are more adept than others in forging theory, autofiction and imagery into a coherent whole. The book's distinctive – if somewhat limiting – focus on Germany resurfaces in Daniel Bendix and Hangula Werner's "Tracking Trauma: German Genocides at Home and Abroad," which offers a much-needed intervention in Germany's memoryscape by drawing parallels between the Holocaust and the colonial genocide of the Ovaherero, Nama, San, and Damara peoples in what is now Namibia. Although clearly well-researched, the story struggles to find its narrative footing, with the plot and dialogue feeling somewhat like an afterthought.

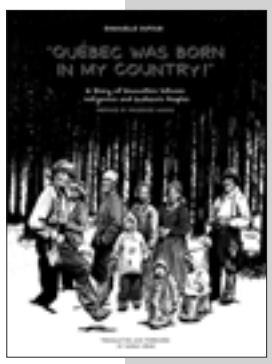
These authors have clearly reflected on their own positionalities in relation to colonialism and its enduring legacies. One might therefore have expected a story exploring the book's own migration, both conceptual and physical, from writers to publishers all the way to its readers. In the introduction, the authors emphasize the significant colonial power structures at play in the distribution of cultural resources – for instance, who receives funding and who earns royalties. Paid for by the European Union and several German cultural institutions, created by a largely European-based group of writers, and published by Quebec-based Daraja Press, the book's own journey serves as a fascinating case study in how knowledge, and other forms of capital and power, continue to travel global routes shaped by colonial histories.

*Episodes from a Colonial Present* largely succeeds in its goal of bringing postcolonial critique into the everyday. An engaging read, the graphic novel is strongest when its illustrations are seamlessly integrated with its theoretical and autofictional foundations, rather than simply layered over them. While *Episodes from a Colonial Present*'s focus on Germany's implication in colonial crimes offers a novel perspective for readers from elsewhere, the book sometimes struggles to balance this with its broader global claims – at points assuming a decidedly European audience. mlb

**Jasper Sattentau** is an editor and translator based in Montreal. He is also a PhD student researching the reception of Global South literature in the Global North.

## Learning to Listen

**"Québec was Born in My Country!"**
**A Diary of Encounters between Indigenous and Québécois People**
**Emanuelle Dufour**
**Translated by Sarah Henzi**
**Wilfrid Laurier University Press**
**$32.99, paperback, 200pp**
**9781771126779**




"*Québec was Born in My Country!*" is an eye-grabbing title, the kind that practically demands further investigation. Follow that demand and you will have read a book essential to Quebec's understanding of itself – and Canada's, too.

The quotation marks are present because the title is taken from a longer statement by Acinape and Cree educator Anna Mapachee, one of fifty-plus interlocutors whose testimonials comprise the heart of Emanuelle Dufour's revelatory, multi-layered, multi-genre correction of colonial history. The full impact of Mapachee's title statement hits home on seeing the sentence that immediately precedes it: "I was not born in Québec."

Dufour – settler scholar, storyteller, visual artist, and now oral historian – was galvanized into awareness of Indigenous peoples' history as a child living in suburban Montreal by reports of the 1990 Oka crisis on television. Her choice of the graphic novel as delivery device for her project proves inspired. Images rendered by the author in a variety of styles and media, ranging from straightforward portraiture to Rorschach-like near-abstractions, are dense with organically integrated cultural, political and historical references. While some depict iconic tableaux that will be broadly familiar to many readers – at least those of a certain age – their depth becomes fully apparent when reading the book's annotated endnotes. For this and other reasons, the book is likely to gain more traction as a pedagogical tool than a more conventional, text-centred treatment might.

One risk with a strategy like Dufour's is that words and images can end up blunting each others' best attributes. In this case, the effect is the opposite: they amplify each other, achieving a synergy that somehow combines narrative pull with a start-on-any-page usefulness. The key here is the richness and range of Dufour's subjects. A back cover blurb deploys the word "polyphonic" to describe the effect of the voices on these pages. In aggregate, though, the effect is full-on symphonic, especially as the book progresses and the individual testimonials build into an unstoppable collective moral force. (Praise is due Sarah Henzi for a translation that draws from multiple sources yet achieves a unified tone.)

The only way to give a fair sense of the voices Dufour has gathered is to quote a cross-section of them. Here, then, are five, chosen at random:

"The media only talk about First Nations as problem communities."
– Lise Bastien, Wendat, Director, First Nations Education Council.

"I am not Québécois because I am not accepted as a Québécois."
– Jean-Yves Sylvestre, Québécois and Haitian, Intercultural facilitator, Ahuntsic College.

"At the start of the (Oka) crisis I did not want the Mohawk to draw any attention because I thought the white people would just hate us more. Eventually, I understood the impact of being heard."
– Melissa Mollen Dupuis, Innu, columnist, co-founder of Idle No More.

**continued on page 23**

# Dog Daze

**Cornelius**
**The Merry Life of a Wretched Dog**
**Marc Torices**
**Drawn & Quarterly**
**$49.95, hardcover, 392pp**
**9781770467767**


My first impression of *Cornelius: The Merry Life of a Wretched Dog* was uncanny in a bodily more than literary sense. Like the sensation of missing a stair or connecting a spoonful of food with your cheek, I stretched out my hand to accept the book and my whole arm sank under its weight. The emotional texture of Marc Torices' graphic novel is similarly familiar and surreal, an unsettling combination that is also very funny. Cornelius, the protagonist – as well as the main character of his own universe – is a dog languishing under the full weight of a human psyche; an aimless, ambitious, creative type; janitor by day, writer (it is ultimately decided) at heart. It more or less follows that an over-active inner life is core to Cornelius' being.

With its gold embossed hardcover and close to 400 colour pages, Cornelius has the gravity and visual appeal of an expensive coffee table book: a worldly body worthy of the conceptually ambitious, self-realizing mythology inside. Demonstrating his range as an illustrator, Torices uses a shifting array of comic styles so that Cornelius, which is pieced together from distinct strips, imitates a variously authored compendium – one that the book's meta-commentary dedicates to Cornelius Comics on their 300th anniversary. According to the prologue and dense notes pages, Cornelius the dog is the flagship character of a fictional publishing group, the author "Marc Torices" is a marketing ploy, and for centuries, their polarizing comic has swayed the citizens of a nation called Miamie. Although it might explain the book's complex system of symbols, and meticulously chosen details, there's a comical gap between such epic context and the all-too ordinary tale Cornelius tells. And yet, this lore proves an illuminating backdrop for the familiar social and psychological dramas that Cornelius and his fellow anthropomorphized animals navigate.

Across Torices' various drawing styles, characters change in appearance and remain believably themselves. It's a playful approach to capturing a social order driven by soul-searching and insecurity, the distinctly cowardly Cornelius. Splicing between inner thought and outer reality, present tense and memory, Torices applies the seriality of comic strips and the form's sequential panelling to cinematic effect; the narrative is engrossing. After witnessing the kidnapping of his friend Alspacka, and meddling with her ransom, Cornelius' luck suddenly turns. Desperate to rewrite, repress, and succeed at any cost, he spirals. Channelling this delirium, the story transforms erratically. Shorter strips pop up like intrusive thoughts. Where once they seemed to spell it out in shining lights, title panels now chant his name like evidence of its worthlessness.

Before and after the kidnapping, Cornelius goes to work at the Turbo Diesel Club gym, tries to keep up with the cultural scene, and talks about unrealized projects. Though it is governed by the logic of dreams, and sometimes benders, and contains instances of straight absurdity, his story is at its core slice-of-life. Sometimes uncomfortably so, if you belong to a similar demographic of lost youth. At face value, it's odd to try and reconcile the fantastical world of the prologue, in which "Cornelius has prevented … war – and triggered others" with a character who, exposed by an underhanded comment, spends his days "hubristically fantasizing about the … future [while] loafing around." Then again, as the book makes plain, self-mythology is a very powerful thing.

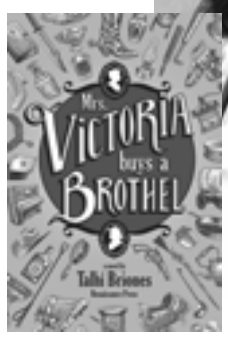
With Cornelius, Torices offers a perfectly ambivalent tribute to the sheer force of the creative ego, never losing sight of its signature inertia. The book is also a strong argument for the medium's ability to spin human contradiction and the everyday with the insight and intrigue of a novel. Cornelius is a lot of things, infectious among them. Having really enjoyed the book, I'm conscious of slipping into Cornelius-like hyperbole. Taking my cues from Cornelius, I'll forgive myself, because as the prologue explains, one "either detests him or finds him delightful." mRb

**Maya Burns** lives in Montreal. She has an MA in Contemporary Art Histories from OCAD University and a job at *C Magazine*.



# Hot and Steamy in the Desert

**Mrs. Victoria Buys a Brothel**
**Talhí Briones**
**Renaissance Press**
**$24.95, paperback, 312pp**
**9781990086854**




Who would've guessed that Swainsburg, Wyoming, is the place to be? Well, after Mrs. Victoria is done fixing it up, that is. Starting in Salt Lake City, Utah, and travelling quickly through the Wyoming landscape – from brothels to neighbours' front stoops to the edge of a cliff – *Mrs. Victoria Buys a Brothel* spins a fascinating, eye-opening tale, ideal for a long, juicy gossip session.

Set in the nineteenth century, the novel centres on the adventures of Victoria Montgomery, a former upper-crust member of Salt Lake City society who, in a twist of fate, finds herself the owner of a brothel in the small town of Swainsburg. Tasked with building a new life, she rolls up her sleeves and sets to it with intelligence, vigour, and a heaping scoop of refined manners. She becomes a major topic of gossip because of her friendship with the brothel's sex workers and with the tall, mysterious, and private widow, Mrs. Natane Diaz, a social recluse and farmer who lives on the edge of town.

The plot thickens when she faces a series of dilemmas, including a persistent gang of hijackers and the sudden reappearance of her abusive husband. Experiencing enormous growth throughout the story, Victoria takes these challenges in stride and remains true to herself, allowing her to push the boundaries of what she believed was possible. In her third novel, Talhí Briones crafts a fun-loving and fast-paced tale filled with lovable, heartwarming characters, a multitude of pulse-pounding moments, and, most importantly, a love story that challenges the expectations and stereotypes of the times.

Don't let the wholesome Victorian façade of this novel fool you, though! It gets steamy up in that desert, in a way that is more than just a flash of the heels and a romp in the hay. Mrs. Victoria may own a brothel, but it takes some time for her to shed her petticoat layers and become comfortable in her own skin. When she does, however, it might leave one reaching for a fan to cool their blushing cheeks.

Briones also stitches together what may be the most diverse small town of the nineteenth century, giving voice and space on the page – and in history – to the wide range of immigrants present in North America at the time. The acknowledgement of the Irish, Mexican, French, Chinese, and Black populations living in the West during this period is refreshing and informative, although at times it risks reinforcing the stereotypes of the era. I appreciated the space the author gave at the end of the novel to talk about the subject of residential schools, which Natane is described as having attended. Briones' descriptions of the Shoshone people and Natane's experience in residential schools, however, could have been explored in more detail. A further developed backstory for characters like Natane, Consuelo, and Mrs. Zhao, one more accurately representing their struggles and rich cultural backgrounds, would have been appreciated throughout the novel.

*Mrs. Victoria Buys a Brothel* reads like a captivating bedtime story (minus the R-rated elements) and was overall a fun and relaxing read that will have readers softly smiling as they turn the last page. 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.



mRb

By J.T. Wickham

## H. Nigel Thomas

# *Weathering the Storm*

H. Nigel Thomas' *A Different Hurricane* is a beautiful, brutal book about love in all its complexity. Looming over it is a question: How do you live in a society that condemns your existence, that hates you for your sexuality?

A poet, novelist, and retired professor of American literature, Thomas is no stranger to themes of homophobia and queer oppression. "I carried this story for a very, very long time," Thomas tells me on a video call. "Even before the AIDS epidemic, I carried this story with me."

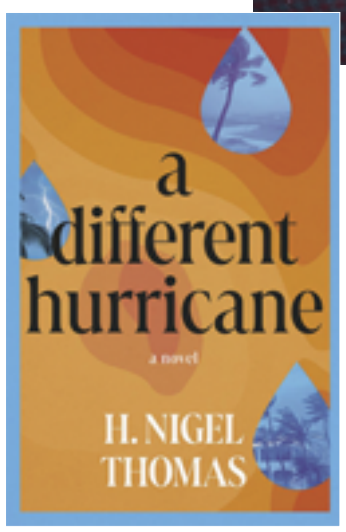
Thomas' debut book, *Spirits in the Dark*, published in 1993, was the first Caribbean novel to feature an identifiably queer main character. It brought him into the public eye in his native St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where he became known as a queer-rights activist – and where homosexuality remains a criminal offence today.

"I'm from an island where most gay men married as a way of preventing themselves from being persecuted," he explains. "If you looked gay, you would be teased and abused. And so to avoid that, people simply pretended they were not."

Pretend is precisely what Gordon, the sixty-eight-year-old protagonist of *A Different Hurricane*, chooses to do. We meet him in 2017 as a semi-retired economist living in Kingstown, working for the St. Vincentian government. He has spent a lifetime masking his homosexuality behind a heteronormative veneer: a well-to-do family man with a wife and daughter. Now, though, cracks in his edifice are starting to emerge. His body shows the signs of living with AIDS – a disease he contracted from one of his many affairs with men, and which he passed onto his wife, Maureen, who then died.

Living with AIDS is just one of Gordon's worries. More pressing is the fact that Maureen kept a journal documenting his infidelity. Now, their daughter Frida – en route from Toronto to visit Gordon – expresses a particular interest in her mother's journal and what secrets it contains. A storm is brewing.

*A Different Hurricane* is more than a story of one man's lies and their consequences. It is a generational saga, excavating the layers of trauma that build up in a family, and how that trauma so often contributes to, and culminates in, tragedy. "This is a novel that holds a mirror up to nature," Thomas says. Throughout the book, Thomas delves into the history of St. Vincent, interweaving real and fictionalized events. Excerpts from Maureen's journal recount what she hears on the radio and reads in the newspapers, providing snapshots of history that deepen the narrative's scope.




**A Different Hurricane**
**H. Nigel Thomas**
**Dundurn Press**
**$25.99, paperback, 256pp**
**9781459754065**

One of the most surprising revelations from my conversation with Thomas is that he didn't write these excerpts independently. Instead, he constructed an entire eighty-seven-page journal written from Maureen's perspective over four years, which he then inserted piece by piece into the book. "I spent two weeks in the archives," he says, "reading newspapers, seeing what's going on," to build Maureen's perspective. There's a documentary style to it all. "Some of the names mentioned in the book are historical figures. In some cases, I barely altered their names, but I keep the facts so everyone [in St. Vincent] knows to whom I'm referring … I read one particular incident where there was a man who dunked a boy, a thief, in boiling water. I chose to include that particular incident in my story because I wanted to point out the kind of cruelty that can exist in society."

In *A Different Hurricane*'s St. Vincent, violence runs deep. It is everywhere, permeating relationships for the maintenance of a rigid social hierarchy. Children, wives, lovers, queer people: all experience brutality at the hands of their peers or, more often, authority figures. For Thomas, violence is intrinsic to the island's past. "Colonial societies originated in violence," he says. "The very first thing colonizers had to do was use violence to subjugate people, to take away their land and reduce them, if not to legal slavery, at least to *de facto* slavery. And so violence became enshrined in society. And it continues to resonate throughout history." Gordon senses the threat of violence hanging over him. He has nightmares of being beaten and attacked with a cutlass. Were he to be found out as a gay man, he would risk losing his livelihood or even his life – fears that are rooted in the cruelty he experienced as a child and still witnesses as an adult.

The violent history in *A Different Hurricane* is real, palpable, and at times insurmountable. Yet, a ray of hope shines through. Despite the violence Gordon and Maureen experience growing up (or perhaps because of it), they are never cruel to each other or their daughter. They eschew violence. Maureen in particular stands out as one of the novel's most interesting characters for her compassion and capacity to forgive. Notably, her view is the only one presented in the first person, through journal excerpts; all others, even Gordon's, are told in the third.

When I ask Thomas if he has hope for the future of queer Vincentians, his answer is emphatic. "Yes, yes, yes," he says. "My queer contacts in St. Vincent are no longer around, unfortunately. One of them was a victim of AIDS. But I am in contact with queer Vincentians who live abroad, including one of two guys who challenged the criminalization of homosexuality law in St. Vincent. I go back to St. Vincent often, at least once a year, and I tell gay people there to claim their space: Talk about your sexual orientation. Make it clear you belong and are not going anywhere."

Thomas tells me about a recent interview he had with a Vincentian literary group, Page Turners Plus, which criticized *A Different Hurricane*'s depiction of gay men. "They accused me of reifying the stereotype that gay men are vectors of HIV," he says. According to the group, such depictions set back Vincentian gay rights and efforts to decriminalize homosexuality. He expresses shock at the accusation. "What is the argument?" he asks. "You can sense a certain discomfort on the part of the reviewers." Thomas' concern is well-founded. More than forty years have passed since the AIDS epidemic began. Today, we are witnessing renewed efforts to stymie and erode 2SLGBTQI+ rights, in North America and beyond. Lawmakers, among others, call into question the representation of queer and trans people in books, film, educational settings, and elsewhere. If these stories can't be told now, when can they be?

**continued on page 23**

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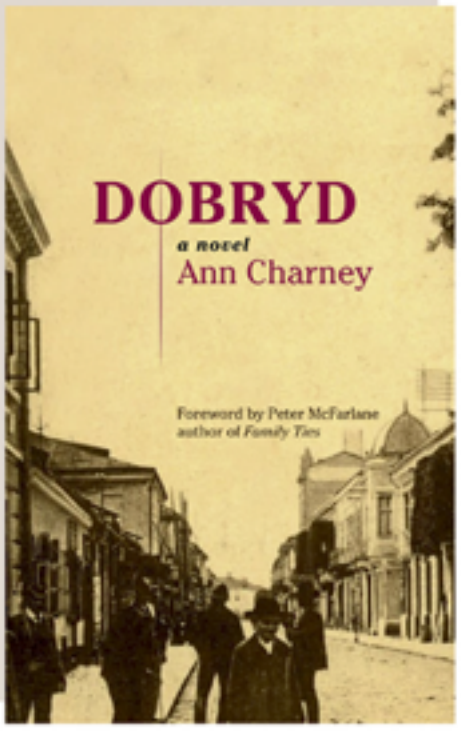


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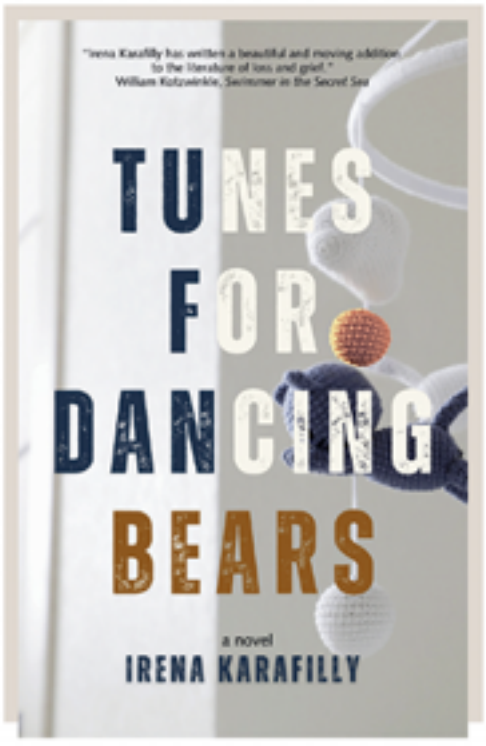
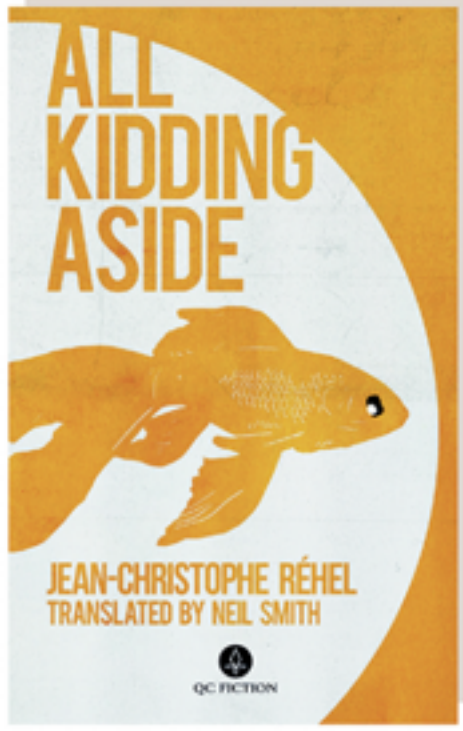
—*Books in Canada*




It is September 1991 and Lydia has just given birth to a stillborn child in Montreal. Award-winning author **Irena Karafilly** plunges deeply into the complexities of grief and marriage.

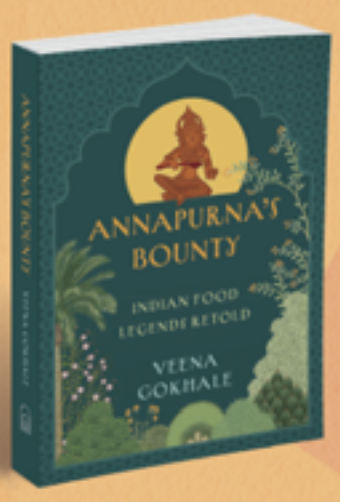
"This eloquent, impressionistic novel evokes the devastating void left by a stillborn child." —*Foreword Reviews*




A young queer man supports his schizophrenic brother and sick father by working at Tim Hortons, but dreams of doing comedy. **Jean-Christophe Réhel** juggles themes of love, class, and grief with poetic mockery and electric banter.

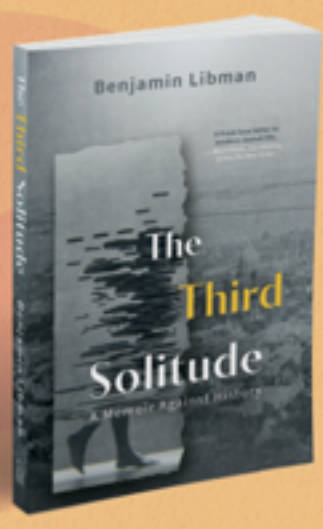
"[Réhel] celebrates the beauty of the everyday... and laughs about it."
—*Radio-Canada*

# New from Montreal Authors!



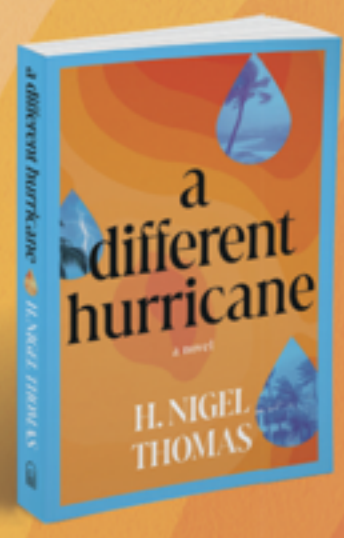

**"An irresistible blend of delightful Indian legends, freshly told, with Gokhale's personally honed recipes."**

— MARIANNE ACKERMAN, Montreal novelist and playwright




**"A frank love letter to modern Jewish life."**

— MERVE EMRE, contributing writer to *The New Yorker*




**"Thomas writes with honesty, intelligence and compassion. *A Different Hurricane* is his most poignant and compelling novel yet."**

— ALICE ZORN, author of *Colours in Her Hands*

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—Dylan Horrocks, author of *Hicksville*

"Wenlock **gets it**. There is a very particular feeling in this book that displays the heart of a person having to **grow up**... It's a feeling that most of us have experienced but it fades and gets forgotten. **Get that feeling back, even for a brief moment.**"
—*Charles Forsman, author of TEOTFW*

"A **powerfully human** coming-of-age story... **Highly recommended.**"
—Eddie Monotome, *The Sapling*



NED WENLOCK

# Good books

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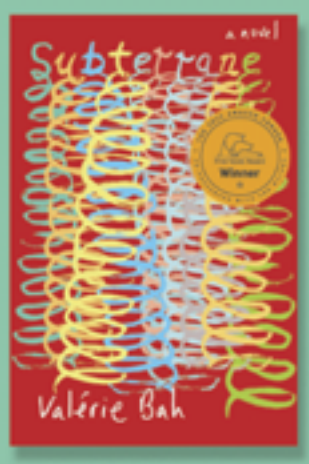


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*On the Last Authentic Bohemia*

Andy Brown

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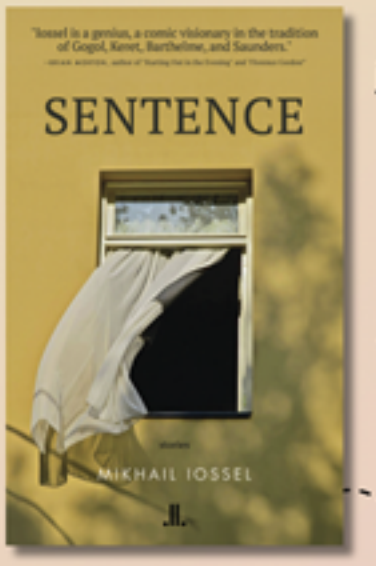


*Sentence* is a remarkable juggling act between genres and countries, memory and imagination, past and present—a celebration of linguistic freedom and virtuosity.

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It's Christmas weekend and bad weather traps Geoffrey in the Laurentians, where the Internet's lousy and he's stuck with Rebekah, his dad's latest girlfriend.

"This heartwarming book shows that with charm, patience, and a whole lot of courage, new bridges can be built." —Lori Weber, prizewinning author of *The Ribbon Leaf*

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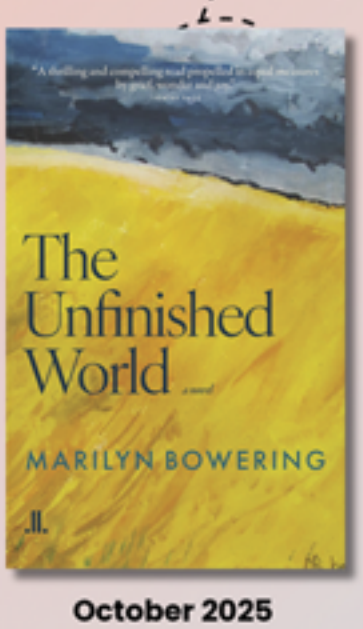


This magnificent novel asks if stories can play a role in offering opportunities for acts of courage, love and kindness. Will Pearl take what she needs from her inheritance; and does her story hold out possibilities not only for her own future but for our own?

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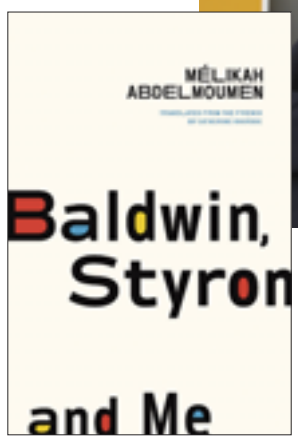
By Faith Paré

# Mélikah Abdelmoumen

# *Recreating Relationships*

MARJORIE GUINDON

When Mélikah Abdelmoumen walked into a police station in her Lyon suburb in 2017, she writes in *Baldwin, Styron, and Me*, she was hoping for some semblance of compassion.




**Baldwin, Styron, and Me**
**Mélikah Abdelmoumen**
**Translated by Catherine Khorduc**
**Biblioasis**
**$22.95, paperback, 160pp**
**9781771966269**

The author filed a report with a police officer after enduring a purse-snatching and assault only steps from her front door. The swift attack was tinged with a lasting pain: the perpetrator spat a racist slur before fleeing the scene. The officer was sorry that a "foreigner" would experience this kind of violence while in France, especially one from Quebec. She thought of the Québécois as "frank and open, sweet and innocent; to her, Quebec was a land of unicorns."

Abdelmoumen was used to the condescension, constantly defined as foreign in her adopted home, even after twelve years. She writes that she wasn't prepared, though, for what the officer said next: "France was being invaded by Islamists who killed people … She was really talking about North Africans. Arabs. Muslim-looking people." An incredulous moment of being victimized twice over: "I had come to her as a Québécoise immigrant who had been the victim of a mugging and subjected to anti-Arab insults and physical injuries. Her response was that the Arabs were to blame, as was my own naïveté as a Québécoise."

Abdelmoumen somehow finds empathy for the officer – empathy that was never reciprocated. Her attention to language as a writer, combined with her insights as an immigrant, have made her into a precise observer of how othering works. "She couldn't take it, and she didn't know how to keep going … She was probably just as fed up as I was. But her comments were also racist." Abdelmoumen's understanding never compromises her steadfast demand for something more just; rather, her compassion reinforces it.

To make social transformation possible, to manifest a world free from racial and colonial terror, how do we learn the monumental task of hearing each other? *Baldwin, Styron, and Me*, translated by Catherine Khorduc from the original French (Mémoire d'encrier, 2022), emerged from fierce debates in Quebec and in France on cultural appropriation, ownership, and subjectivity. Her answer to those tensions looks backward and southward, to a friendship that grew over sixty years ago between the two literary giants invoked by the book's title: James Baldwin, a descendent of slaves born in Harlem, and William Styron, the grandson of a white Virginian slaveholder.

When Abdelmoumen discovered Baldwin, she was invigorated by his writing on everyday people contending with legacies of race and subjugation in the United States and in France. She tells me in our interview over Zoom that in 2015, during the far-right political torrent sweeping the country, "I remember reading Baldwin and feeling that somebody understands, even though it was a few decades ago." For instance, in the 1960 story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," the Black narrator living in Paris, protected from racism's shadow by his Americanness, is the only one to defend a Tunisian man accused of stealing by the white attendees at a party. "The effect these words had on me, an Abdelmoumen in France in the 2010s," she writes. "I had suddenly found a brother, and his name was James Baldwin."

But Baldwin and Styron as a pair walked into Abdelmoumen's imagination when she read a fragment from the former's biography about his Southerner friend; how Baldwin "would have trusted this man with his life." Styron, by then a well-established writer, learned from a mutual friend in 1961 that the quickly rising star, James Baldwin, was stuck with his third novel. Styron invited his acquaintance to finish the manuscript that would become *Another Country* (1962) at his Connecticut home. The men were understandably tentative: Baldwin – the impassioned civil rights activist, whose stepfather had tried, and failed, to teach him to hate white people; Styron – raised by white liberal parents burdened with a deep family shame, who brought him to racially integrated venues, yet "the only way he got to know his fellow citizens was from a distance."

The proximity could have been explosive. But during Baldwin's stay, they became just Jimmy and Bill; writing together, and sharing drinks during late-night conversations on the racism of their day and what they dreamed America might be. From their discussions, Baldwin began making notes for *The Fire Next Time* (1963), a book that cemented him in the American canon. Jimmy encouraged Bill to write his career-defining novel; to pursue the ghosts of a crushed slave rebellion that had risen in 1831, only two hours from his hometown. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* won Styron the 1968 Pulitzer Prize and national controversy, with some readers contesting a white writer inhabiting the voice of the executed insurrectionist.

"The connections made, the heated exchanges, confessions, commitments, promises … I've pictured all this so many times," Abdelmoumen writes. *Baldwin, Styron, and Me* has lived many lives. First, it was a 2019 article in acclaimed Quebec magazine *Spirale*. Then it was performed in the 2021 Festival international de la littérature (FIL) as a *lecture spectacle*: "Theatre that pays homage to literature," Abdelmoumen explains in our interview. "There was music, there was movement and dialogue … It was already hybrid from the start." She had long imagined dramatizing the men's friendship, but the book it became owes its existence to a friend of her own. Film director Marie-Hélène Panisset was a reader of early versions of the text. Panisset insisted, "'Everyone should know this story, now more than ever,'" Abdelmoumen writes. "This story of an improbable unwavering friendship – a bit like our own?"

Abdelmoumen's entanglement with Baldwin and Styron throughout the years distinguishes her retelling. The book unfurls as an intertextual love story, combining memoir, correspondence, dramatic monologues, and quotations from the authors' work. Its climax, for example, is shaped entirely from the transcript of a broadcasted debate between Styron and actor/activist Ossie Davis, discussing the ethics of a potential film adaptation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Baldwin, who moderates, opens the occasion with, "I'm sitting between two friends of mine," setting the precedent that hard conversations can be acts of love. Likewise, the formal innovation of *Baldwin, Styron, and Me* captures the risk inherent to both making art and forming relationships. By opening ourselves to friction, we trust in the potential of being transformed. "We never talk enough about how these texts, which are supposedly solitary endeavours, can emerge from a collective surge of energy and effort. Through a chain of shared ideas," writes Abdelmoumen.

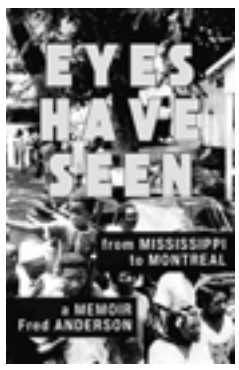
In the 1980 essay "Dark Days," Baldwin writes about one of his seminars: "They began talking to one another, and they were not talking about race. They were talking of the desire to know one another, their need to know one another." *Baldwin, Styron, and Me*, Abdelmoumen's first book to be translated into English, is just the author's latest experiment in this regard. She relates in our interview how she went as far as to expand certain sections

**continued on page 23**

# non-fiction

## More Than History

**Eyes Have Seen**
**From Mississippi to Montreal**
**Fred Anderson**
**Baraka Books**
**$24.95, paperback, 240pp**
**9781771863780**




"My grandmother once told me that you had to walk more responsibly after you had witnessed something. It was her way of saying that the past and the present collide." This is just one of the multiple memories that encapsulate the wonderful and gripping life odyssey chronicled by Fred Anderson in his new memoir *Eyes Have Seen: From Mississippi to Montreal*. Recounting his life story – from the young Mississippi boy cocooned in his hometown community of Hattiesburg, to the burgeoning activism of adolescence, to the exile of adulthood – Anderson's recollections, stitched together like his grandmother's patchwork quilts, contribute to an all-too-often erased Afro-American and Afro-Canadian heritage.

In this place we call Canada, such an offering is extremely generous and precious. By writing into history his own remembrance, Fred Anderson adds his voice to important pivotal events, such as the civil rights movement, Expo 67, the Computer Centre Occupation at Sir George Williams University Lab, and the October Crisis. These historical moments have often been dominated and archived by mainstream media or institutions that rarely leave room for the voices of Black writers and artists. Anderson, on the other hand, spent most of his Montreal-based life not only witnessing important Black spaces in Montreal, but also participating in the founding of important Black institutions, such as The National Black Coalition of Canada Research Institute.

*Eyes Have Seen* can be viewed as a contribution to alternative or counter-history, a crucial perspective that challenges dominant narratives and illuminates forgotten truths. Anderson's point of view on these events is not only

RANDY COLE

vital; it is dynamic and passionate, remaining true to the curious young self he evokes in earlier memories. This ever-present curiosity also emanates from his detailed portrayals of the real-life characters and places across North America that shaped him.

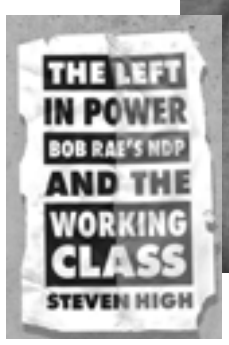
That said, *Eyes Have Seen* represents much more than a historical offering – it is also a lesson on the importance of education for enacting real change in the world. It is a testament to alternative education within Black communities and to the resistance and grassroot activism Black individuals have historically needed to advocate for their basic human rights. This sharing of knowledge, strategies and plans was an essential part of Anderson's upbringing and belongs to a broader tradition of the Southern African American communities. References to music and songwriters, as well as to books and authors, are sprinkled throughout Anderson's journey up north, mirroring the crucial role that both art forms played in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the civil rights activist group that the author was deeply involved in for most of his young adult years. Thus, *Eyes Have Seen* emphasizes the importance of community – particularly friendship – for survival and resistance.

*Eyes Have Seen*'s predominant intertextuality signals another mode of survival, one that avid readers will certainly relate to: making sense of difficult feelings and experiences we aren't quite sure how to process with beautifully crafted words, whether they be on a printed page or sung alongside melodies on a record. For Anderson, finding solace in books from authors like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and H. Nigel Thomas, to name only a few, this experience was exile; his longing for home was barely tolerable, only slightly appeased by the southern recipes he and his friends would cook up in their Little Burgundy kitchen. These intimate moments described by Anderson in *Eyes Have Seen* show us we can always find hope, even when the political landscape is most hostile to us. mrb

**Léa Murat-Ingles** (she/they) is a French literature doctoral student, research auxiliary, teacher and author. Their writing has been published in the literary journals *Montreal Review of Books*, *Moebius* and *Possibles*. Their first novel, *Les rythmes de la poussière*, was published in 2024 as part of the collection *les Martiales* at the publisher *remue-ménage* and was nominated for two awards.

## Past Progressive

**The Left in Power**
**Bob Rae's NDP and the Working Class**
**Steven High**
**Between the Lines**
**$39.95, paperback, 486pp**
**9781771136679**




In some respects, Steven High's *The Left in Power* may not seem like a conventional historical account of a government or its era – but this works to its advantage. Though doubtless useful to a range of academics, the book is particularly informative for those seeking to rebuild progressive political parties or the labour movement in Canada today. While the economic challenges Canada currently faces – trade war and tariffs, disrupted supply chains, and an end to the "special relationship" with the United States – are not identical to those that preceded the unexpected 1990 rise to power of the Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP) under the leadership of Bob Rae, the party's successes and failures are worth reconsidering. An avowedly progressive, social-democratic party with a solid foundation rooted in organized labour, the ONDP ascended to power just as Ontario descended into one of the worst economic and industrial crises in the province's history.

As the title suggests, High approaches the subject from a decidedly working-class perspective, one that reflects his familial background as much as his academic focus. There's a good reason for this: the ONDP was distinctly working class with around 40 percent of the 74 MPPs who went to Queen's Park in September of 1990 coming from trade union backgrounds. They were blue collar workers, nursing assistants, teachers, clerks, social workers, librarians – quite unlike any government in Ontario history. The issue of class and class politics takes centre stage throughout the book (opposition politicians and media figures derisively referred to the ONDP Caucus as "the Clampetts," a reference to the comical yokels of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, indicating long-held prejudice against the working class by Canada's elites).

High details the Rae government's initial "firefighting" efforts during a period of accelerated economic transition, job losses, and plant closures. Worker ownership initiatives succeeded in saving some mill towns, and the ONDP was particularly interventionist in Northern Ontario, continuing the previous government's policies designed to diversify the economies of hard hit industrial cities. High argues that, on the whole, the Rae government took an "energetic and fairly coherent approach to the industrial crisis." However, he also notes that Rae failed to follow through on other policies favoured by organized labour – policies that would have strengthened workers' rights and increased corporate responsibilities towards them. This included a refusal to intervene in corporate decision-making, or insist that companies justify plant closures, among others.

Like other "Third Way" leaders of the neoliberal era (such as Bill Clinton's New Democrats, or Tony Blair's New Labour), Rae neither held corporate power to account nor advanced the necessary protections for the working class. "Empowering communities" makes for a good sound byte, but lacks the teeth of direct intervention. Ontario under Rae, like many other jurisdictions facing similar challenges at the time, was overly focused on attracting investment. As elsewhere, the end result was ever more job losses and a schism between party leadership and organized labour that still hasn't healed after three decades.

Despite his disillusionment, High strikes a conciliatory tone, noting that "there was no time during the economic storm to see the bigger picture or reflect on the wider ramifications of the decisions being made." The ONDP was new to governing, and the economic catastrophe that befell the province in the early 1990s was equally unprecedented.

Because Ontario is, in so many ways, a microcosm of the entire nation, *The Left in Power* offers a fascinating case study in the real-world application of progressive labour theory and ideals during a major economic crisis. That Bob Rae agreed to sit down for an interview with a historian (and a somewhat disillusioned former partisan) adds to the uniqueness of

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# Taming the Underbelly

**Montreal After Dark**
**Nighttime Regulation and the Pursuit of a Global City**
**Matthieu Caron**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$34.95, paperback, 342pp**
**9780228024774**


My grandfather, ninety-three and an Ottawa native, has fond memories of his earliest trips to Montreal. Visiting the city as a teenager shortly after the end of World War II, he remembers its refusal to go to sleep, and being "elbow to elbow," packed like sardines on a crowded Sainte-Catherine at some unseemly hour. He has developed dementia over the past several years, but every time we talk, he returns to this vivid image of the city that I now call home – long before I ever knew it.

Matthieu Caron's new book, *Montreal After Dark: Nighttime Regulation and the Pursuit of a Global City* illustrates how one politician transformed the city's nightlife in the forty or so years following my grandfather's initial visit. The divisive figure of Jean Drapeau stands at the centre of this book, which details the former mayor's over thirty-year political career and his effort to tame the city's underbelly.

Caron shows the enormity of Drapeau's ambitions for Montreal, beginning with the politician's curious ascent in municipal politics in the 1954 election, in which he rose to power as a more-or-less political nobody, heavily influenced by nationalist priest Lionel Groulx. The book highlights Drapeau's involvement in an early 1950s police corruption cleanup as a harbinger of future policies targeting the city's most marginalized, a dramatic first effort to rid the city of sex work – or at least shade it from public eyes.

Following a three-year reprieve from public office in the late 1950s, Drapeau returned as mayor in 1960 with high hopes of making Montreal a "global city." The two crown achievements of his effort – Expo 67 and the 1976 Summer Olympic Games – reveal the groups that he was willing and ready to sacrifice to put Montreal on the world's stage. Caron's investigative dive into the Expo 67 leadup shows Drapeau's continued effort to eradicate sex work from the visible cityscape, while his draconian tendencies reached full force during the 1976 Olympiad – a spectacle that left the city with a thirty-year debt after costs ballooned to over 1,000 per cent of original estimates.

Caron's informative but occasionally didactic storytelling reveals other tensions at play in Drapeau's Montreal. The urban historian's colourful anecdotes accompany black-and-white archival shots of the city through the twentieth century. The most exciting of these involve the wildcat strikes of the late sixties and early seventies, perhaps most consequentially the sixteen-hour "Night of Terror" police strike on October 7, 1969, and the "Red Weekend" firefighters' strike, five years later in October 1974. While both examples show the necessity of these two public services to Drapeau's globalizing Montreal, they also show the power of organized labour in this period. Unfortunately, later anecdotes of Montreal police clamping down on similar labour actions reveal a lack of solidarity with workers among those tasked to protect and serve.

*The divisive figure of Jean Drapeau stands at the centre of this book.*

Caron reveals Drapeau's insistent chipping away at Montreal's countercultural life through nighttime regulation. Raids on gay and queer community hubs served as a useful tool for Drapeau to push some of the city's most marginalized citizens further into the periphery, while his crackdown on sex workers marked a national turning point, culminating in the passage of Bill C-49 by Brian Mulroney in 1984.

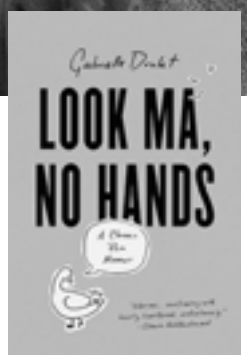
More than anything, *Montreal After Dark* offers a portrait of a shifting Montreal, reminding readers of the power our municipal leaders have in shaping the city around us – by day and by night. It comes as a timely history lesson, a call for civic action as Montrealers look ahead to a consequential election this November. mRb

**Jack McClelland** is a writer and translator based in Montreal.

# A Body in Flux

RUBY MCKINNON

**Look Ma, No Hands**
**A Chronic Pain Memoir**
**Gabrielle Drolet**
**McClelland & Stewart**
**$24.95, paperback, 272pp**
**9780771019142**




Montreal-based writer and cartoonist Gabrielle Drolet's debut book *Look Ma, No Hands: A Chronic Pain Memoir* is an earnest and intensely honest exploration of art and chronic pain. In 2021, at the height of the global pandemic, Drolet began experiencing pain that made it difficult to use her hands. This pain would continue to worsen as she navigated freelance writing gigs, graduate school, multiple cross-provincial moves, and the horrors of the Quebec medical system. Amidst all the uncertainty of diagnosis and pain management, Drolet paints a picture of her life with wit, humour, and deep self-compassion. Reading *Look Ma, No Hands* felt like catching up with an old friend – you pick up right where you left off, no detail too small or uncomfortable to divulge.

Drolet's memoir is structured in a seamless cadence of personal essays that detail her experiences with chronic pain in young adulthood. She discusses having to relearn tasks that once came naturally to her, how the onset of chronic illness affected her romantic relationships (e.g., feeling burdened with the weight of making her pain digestible for others), and how navigating her own illness gave her more insight into the experiences of others.

Her essay "Dave" brought me to tears. There's something in the way she writes about Southern Ontario – the sense of community, the effects of global warming, and the desire to stay in a place you love – that found its way into my gut. Her writing and voice, particularly in this essay, have the overwhelming ability to situate her reader within a tangible sense of place. I could see the farmland stretching to the horizon, the Amish buggies on the road, and the quarry in my mind's eye. What is perhaps most moving about this essay is Drolet's newly contextualized understanding of Dave, her ex-partner's dad – a beef farmer and private investigator. Looking back post-diagnosis, she reflects on why he couldn't let his arthritis keep him from a life and a place that he loved. Drolet writes about the people in her life with a tenderness that almost allows the characters to speak for themselves.

*Look Ma, No Hands* is more than a memoir; it's a meditation on accessibility, bodily autonomy, and the complexities of living – dating, putting IKEA furniture together, moving cities – with chronic pain. Drolet's writing is tonally consistent, vulnerable, and, at times, hilarious. I simply couldn't get over the part in "Barbecue Leftovers" where she asks a well-meaning medical student whether she would be allowed to keep her own rib if she opted for the surgery. Rather than fixate on the looming reality of chronic pain or the procedure itself, Drolet instead focuses on the surreal, almost comical possibility of shaving her rib bone into "a small bespoke spoon." She has the uncanny ability to find humour and levity in unexpected, quotidian places.

*Drolet paints a picture of her life with wit, humour, and deep self-compassion.*

If you're looking for a book that will have you laughing out loud while quietly reminding you that you're not alone, this is it. Though Drolet discusses the difficulty of moving from typing to voice-to-text, it is evident that she has found her voice anew. Coupled with her illustrations – previously published in *The New Yorker*, *The Narwhal*, and *The Globe and Mail* – Drolet offers us a vivid memoir, opening her life to us with candour and mirth. mRb

**Hana Woodbridge** is a literary artist based in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). Her work has been featured in *Vallum*, *Soliloquies*, and the *Encore Poetry Project*. She has an MA in Media Studies and great taste in music.

# Swimming in Nostalgia

CHRISTY ANN CONLIN

**Why Fish Piss Matters**
**On the Last Authentic Bohemia**
**Andy Brown**
**Véhicule Press**
**$22.95, paperback, 180pp**
**9781550656862**


I remember the things that made me want to move from Toronto to Montreal. The cheap rent, the casual lifestyle, the focus on community and creativity rather than competition and careerism, the cheap rent, the slapdash fashion, the francophone joie de vivre, the romantic atmosphere, the cheap rent. But there was also an artwork that inspired me: namely, the cover of Louis Rastelli's screen-printed zine *Fish Piss* number four (1998), by Jean-Pierre Chansigaud, which depicted a Plateau neighbourhood seen from a balcony in winter. Something about it just captured me and made me think, "I want to be there." The zine was named after Rastelli's McLuhan-esque concept of how ideas circulate freely throughout a community – like fish urine in water – and its contents, a mishmash of music interviews, comics, and political ramblings, only added to its enticing vibe.

Andy Brown, publisher of Conundrum Press and former Montrealer (as well as *Fish Piss* contributor) now based in Nova Scotia, has written a celebration of the zine and all it represents. The title – *Why Fish Piss Matters: On the Last Authentic Bohemia* – essentially lays out his argument. The book tells the story of the zine and the artistic community it both sprang from and nurtured in its ten-year lifespan (1996-2006). As an added bonus, the covers are reproduced in all their colourful and detailed glory.

In the first part of the book, Brown takes a bird's-eye view, with chapters titled "What is a Zine?" and "What is Bohemia?" – suggesting, perhaps, that his intended reader is someone younger or less familiar with these concepts. These chapters are heavy on quotations and occasionally academic framing, evoking a master's thesis. I would have liked to see less reliance on secondary sources and more contemporary interviews – although Brown says in an afterword that the book was banged out in a two-week creative frenzy, a process hardly conducive to shoe-leather journalism to be sure.

Brown takes care to situate *Fish Piss* in its very particular time and place, addressing only briefly the political situation that left Montreal economically depressed for decades – conditions that ensured the cheap rent that has long been a boon for underemployed artists across eras and locales. Over time, the zine grew bigger and gained national distribution (hence my spotting it in Toronto). In this sense, it was a microcosm of the Montreal artistic community that exploded in the early 2000s with the global popularity of certain local bands. And like all utopian moments, it was fated to pass, as Brown details in the chapter dramatically titled "The Death of Bohemia."

Brown takes great pains to define bohemia, but I would quibble with his use of the words "last" and "authentic." You could get seriously bogged down in the meaning of the latter term, and as for "last," maybe I'm naïve, but I hope there's some ragtag art scene that exists, or will exist someday, in some corner of the world.

The specific circumstances that produced *Fish Piss* are unquestionably in the past – along with other classic Montreal amenities like, ahem, cheap rent. (But hey, with a resurgent PQ promising another referendum, who knows? The conditions for bohemia, for better or worse, could be closer than we think.) Nonetheless, the community around the zine has continued to thrive. Contributing writers like Heather O'Neill and artists like Billy Mavreas and Rick Trembles are still producing like crazy. Constellation Records (whose concurrent rise is touched on, and which could just as easily have served as a linchpin of the emergent Montreal scene) are still going strong. And Rastelli himself is still putting on the Expozine fair and its various offshoots, attracting and spotlighting new generations of writers and artists.

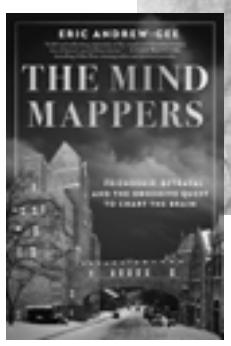
For these reasons, I resist the pull of nostalgia for a bygone age, as strong as it may be. But there's no denying that the heyday of *Fish Piss* was a special time, one that Brown captures beautifully in this granular and passionate tribute. mRb

**Malcolm Fraser** is a writer, musical entertainer, occasional filmmaker, and editor of the *mRb.*

# Cognitive Dissonance

MACKENZIE LAD

**The Mind Mappers**
**Friendship, Betrayal and the Obsessive Quest to Chart the Brain**
**Eric Andrew-Gee**
**Penguin Random House**
**$38.00, hardcover, 368pp**
**9781039008069**




We love a lone genius, but how many discoveries are truly the work of one person? *The Mind Mappers,* by Eric Andrew-Gee, is the story of one such dazzling genius, Wilder Penfield, and the man in his shadow, William Cone.

Cone and Penfield's careers saw neurosurgery progress from a dark period that had hardly moved on from blind trepanning to a stunning illustrated cartography of the brain, but it's the pair's friendship that forms the core of the story. The two are complementary opposites; Penfield is the showman, charming the public and the medical community alike. He laps up recognition for his pioneering epilepsy treatment and the development of the world-famous Neuro Institute in Montreal. Cone, on the other hand, shies away from the spotlight, quietly working with Penfield to develop the Neuro Institute and innovate in the less sexy, but vital, fight against infections in surgery. Andrew-Gee wrestles Cone out of hiding to reveal how Penfield's greatness was only possible with the gruelling work of his "useful" friend.

It's astonishing anyone would choose to enter the "terrible profession" of twentieth-century neurosurgery. The slim chances of patient survival took a heavy toll on surgeons, anaesthetics were rudimentary, and penicillin was not yet fully developed. Andrew-Gee handles the gory nature of the subject with delicacy, making the visceral descriptions of surgery surprisingly readable. Without modern methods of sharing new research, developments in the field of neurosurgery trickle slowly into Cone and Penfield's operating room. The pair have an underdog quality that makes their meteoric rise all the sweeter. Andrew-Gee weaves together this complex and fragmented medical history, centring the enormous difficulties neurosurgeons were up against.

*The Mind Mappers* is, in a sense, an autopsy of a friendship, a hunt for the root cause of Cone and Penfield's differences. The author dissects how differing personalities, miscommunications, and ambition can unravel the strongest of friendships. Even in the happiest moments of Cone and Penfield's friendship, we are reminded that the story of these two star-crossed heroes will end in tragedy. Andrew-Gee admires both men greatly; even their flaws are described generously. They both had excellent bedside manner and frequently took patients who couldn't pay for their world-class care. The two men seemed blind to the prejudices of their time, hiring women, people of colour, and even French speakers. Only briefly do we glimpse Cone's moodiness and habit of overworking his residents, or Penfield's self-absorption and willingness to leave the hard work to other people. The author reserves his harshest critique for Penfield's betrayal of his loyal friend Cone.

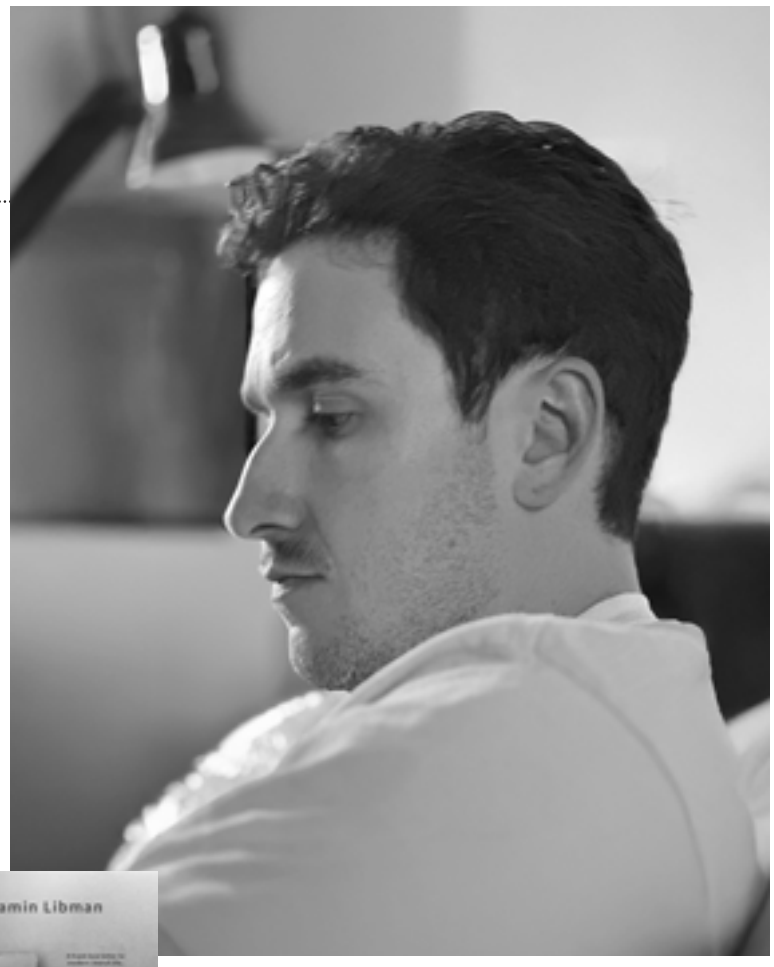
It's easy to understand Penfield's motivations, as he left behind reams of diaries, speeches, and books that unpack every thought that went through his head. By contrast, Cone barely wrote anything down. Andrew-Gee seems bewildered by Cone's unreciprocated loyalty to Penfield, most apparently in his ponderings about Cone's sexuality. There is some circumstantial evidence suggesting that Cone was a closeted gay man: his close friendship with a hospital orderly, his difficult home life, and hints of a secret that horrified his former mentor, Samuel Orton. However, Andrew-Gee takes his speculation further, suggesting that Cone's undying loyalty to Penfield and eventual distress at his betrayal stemmed from unfulfilled romantic yearning. This conclusion feels like a stretch of already thin evidence.

The motivations behind Cone and Penfield's complex friendship is impossible to fully untangle, like most relationships. However, their battle to map the uncharted territory of the brain is a truly incredible story. *The Mind Mappers* draws a fascinating image of the early days of neurosurgery, illustrating that it takes many minds to understand the brain. mRb

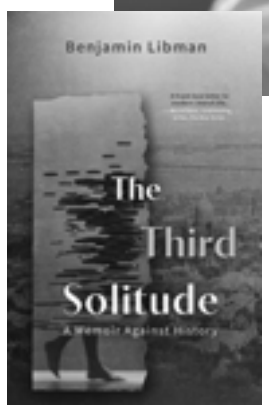
**Iona McEwan** is a VR filmmaker, producer, doodler, frequent sock knitter, and step-parent to a vibrant array of plants. Her name is pronounced exactly how you think it is.

By Elise Moser

# Benjamin Libman
# *Realms of Memory*



"I want to trouble the way we write history," says Benjamin Libman. He is Zooming in from Paris, surrounded by books. "Not just the grand histories, but also the small histories of individual lives. What does it mean to write our own history, or, more troubling, to write the life of another into being?"




**The Third Solitude**
**A Memoir Against History**
**Benjamin Libman**
**Dundurn Press**
**$25.99, paperback, 208pp**
**9781459753662**

We're discussing his book, *The Third Solitude: A Memoir Against History*. He's on the young side to be writing a memoir, but this is not the story of a single life. It ranges across past and present, spanning continents, and is deeply rooted in generations of his family: Jews who fled Austria to escape the Holocaust. They came to Montreal and now their great-grandson is back in Europe – but he is still Montrealer enough to take the title of his book from Irving Layton, who added a third, Jewish solitude to those of Quebec's English and French speakers.

The Layton quotation is, he says, "a provocation. The Jews were the third solitude in the sense that they were not welcome. These solitudes were structural categories, built into Canadian society writ large. Any peoples could inhabit them; they are about economic superiority and subordination, rather than cultural categories."

"Jews typically performed working class or middle-class trades. Over time we accrued capital and we would own a shop; this is the history of the Main. As Jewish people in Canada rose, we forgot political solidarities that were part of our culture in Europe. We shook them off in order to rise economically. In our place, other people entered those positions. I wanted to highlight this transition that I think we've forgotten as a community. This history sits at the base of a lot of our institutions in Montreal."

*Nostalgia is the object to look at most critically. It is a familiar and overwhelming emotion. Because it's so powerful and foundational, we must be extremely skeptical of it.*

Are Montreal's Jews still the third solitude? I ask Libman. "I don't see us as that anymore, although in a sense we are that in the realm of memory." That realm is the rich soil that feeds Libman's thinking about the current moment. "This book originated with my great-grandmother Anna's family documents I got on a trip to Vienna at the age of eighteen," he says. Among those papers was a family photograph, a key reference point included early in the book, which shows a passenger train. Anna, her husband, and daughters look out of the train window; ten family members, sending them off, pose below on the platform. None of those ten will survive the war. Anna and her family fled Austria for Canada early, and were relatively established by the time postwar refugees began to land. Anna was a staunch Zionist, firmly believing in Israel as a safe haven for Jews. But she also devoted herself to helping Jewish refugees of all stripes, regardless of belief, including "assimilationists, socialists, and Communists whose ideas she claimed to abhor," Libman writes. She and her husband helped these refugees immigrate, and found them shelter and employment. Anna inhabits the book as an animating spirit, a role model of Jewish comradeship beyond political divisions.

Are Montreal's Jews still comrades? Libman doesn't mince words. "In a sense we are, but I think the ideology we've been given, or the lines of comradeship made available to us, have been winnowed down to one: Zionism. If you mark yourself out publicly as a Jew who is against Zionism, you are marked out for a kind of excommunication. You have to subscribe to certain notions about the legitimacy of Israel. I would desperately love to see this change.

"Anna represents a different way of being a Jew. She came from a world – the Old World – in which being Jewish in a cultural sense meant a plurality of things, a lot of them contradictory. People my age, or even my parents' generation, don't realize that before the end of World War II, the vast majority of Jews on Earth were either anti-Zionist or not in favour of Zionism. This was certainly true of Jews in Europe. It was also true of Jews in the Arab world, who had a multitude of deep, local identities tied to the places where they lived. They were not included in the original Zionist vision, which was designed for bourgeois Europeans."

The five essays in *The Third Solitude* make for a dynamic whole. Opening with a familiar kind of Holocaust family history, the book moves on to explore the history of Zionism, the establishment of Israel, and how Montreal Jewish day schools inculcated students with Zionist values. One way is the March of the Living, a Zionist rite of passage for many North American teens. Sponsored by the Israeli government, it takes the teens to visit Auschwitz, followed by a pleasant vacation in Israel, all presented within the Zionist narrative of Jewish history.

"I am a bit antiauthoritarian regarding genre, so I used various forms in the different chapters – the travel essay, for example – to allow me to say what I wanted to say," Libman explains. "I'm not saying I have my view, you have yours, let's hold hands. I have strong views. I think Zionism is immoral. I don't want us to agree to disagree, *and* I don't want us to exclude people who disagree with us."

*The Third Solitude* also discusses separatist ideology in Quebec, with these several threads drawn together in a beautiful, more obviously philosophical chapter on nostalgia and its uses for nationalism.

"Nostalgia is the object to look at most critically. It is a familiar and overwhelming emotion. Because it's so powerful and foundational, we must be extremely skeptical of it. Nostalgia is not just something one feels, but something we utilize. You can see a movie and end up nostalgic for this fictive realm that it created. So much of our lives is governed by nostalgic views that other people have created and placed over our own like a veil. Israel and Quebec have done this – a vision of the past that governs our perceptions of the present. They make us feel the place we are in now has to be 'made great again.'"

Libman seeks to recover Anna's ethic of possibilities for "new ways of being individuals, Jews, and citizens," as he writes.

"I'm trying to recentre Anna in my conception of what Judaism can be. We need to find alternate futures," he explains to me.

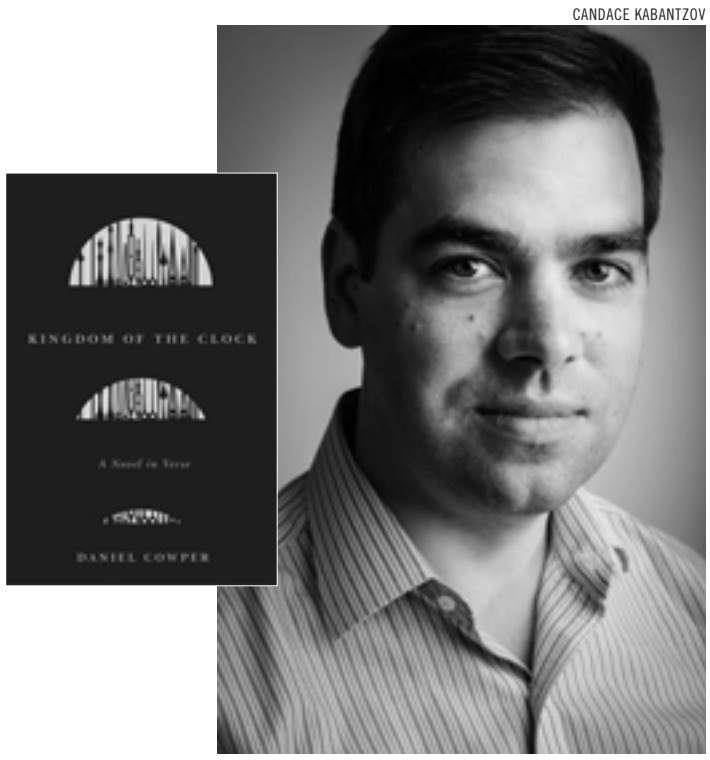
"The Zionist vision is that there was the past followed by the Holocaust and then the perpetually insecure present, which requires us to eliminate our enemies. It occludes many other kinds of Jewish futurity. A way to contest that, for example, is reacquainting us with other Jewish histories. A lot of Jews, especially non-Ashkenazi Jews, have these kinds of stories in their families, and these pasts need to be rediscovered. Then you uncover past ways of envisioning the future.

"I also believe in direct action, that wherever people find themselves situated in the social fabric, they do what they can to abandon Zionism as an ideology and open other spaces of consideration of what Jewishness could be. But there is no single program for getting us out of here. It requires a change in ethos. If we are going to have a healthy sense of futurity again, we need to give the breath of life to these alternative futures." mrb

**Elise Moser** is a writer and editor who also manages the Atwater Writers Exhibition and co-coordinates the Read Quebec Book Fair. She is a co-founder and co-coordinator of the National Juries and Awards Working Group. She also had a kick-ass great-grandmother.

# poetry

CANDACE KABANTZOV




DIANA C. RESTREPO


LUIS LOYA GARCÍA


**Kingdom of the Clock**
**Daniel Cowper**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$24.95, paperback, 208pp**
**9780228023715**

A novel in couplets, *Kingdom of the Clock* follows twenty-four hours in the intersecting lives of an extensive cast of characters. The titular Kingdom, implied to be modern-day British Columbia, arguably serves as protagonist, and Cowper perceptively captures BC's precarious mosaic of tech bros, salmon fishers, underpaid baristas, unhoused people, and aspiring artists, as well as the devastating effects of the opioid crisis.

A yearling bear wanders into the city; an artist steals phones to pay her rent; a crow becomes trapped in a train car; two swimmers drag a seal's body out for a sea burial. In a landscape where animals and humans struggle to survive, this atmospheric novel in verse asks us to interrogate what we regard as natural.

Cowper's writing is gorgeously attuned to sonic flow and sensory detail: "Gulls tick / on dark winds" while "[c]hill air breathes on the water's single eye." The propulsion of the plot is likewise a strength. On nearly every page, characters reckon with life, death, friendship, morality, addiction, and paying the rent. At times, however, I questioned whether every storyline was fully necessary to the project. Meghan, a woman with psychosis, seemed to be granted less complexity than other characters. In contrast, Mehrdad's storyline – and his family's – was especially layered, moving, and productively ambiguous. An elderly man who once domestically assaulted his wife, Mehrdad now seeks to support his family while his daughter-in-law gives birth to a baby who may not survive. Cowper crafts this sensitive subject matter with nuance and compassion, leading to a climax that is gasp-inducingly beautiful.

Neither condemning nor absolving its characters, this musical, dense text captures the clink and fizz of modern life. Exploring the paradoxes of human behaviour, Cowper's book flows with the insistence of rain, sometimes rushing up against the reader with the startling closeness of a passing owl's wing.

**White Lily**
**John Emil Vincent**
**McGill-Queen's University Press**
**$19.95, paperback, 104pp**
**9780228023777**

*White Lily*'s cover features a striking white flower – a flower that, on closer inspection, reveals itself a carnation. The opening poems clarify this mix-up as a reference to musician Laurie Anderson and director Michael Fassbender, but the process of misapprehension, disorientation, and discovery is also a fitting metaphor for the experience of reading the collection. Though dedicated to lyric poet Louise Glück, and sharing her propensity for minimalism, restraint, and mythological allusion, Vincent's poems are a distinct species of their own.

*White Lily*'s ironic, minimalistic stanzas sear like incisions across the page. Vincent does not dilute his poetic voice to please everyone, and readers seeking more emotional warmth or imagistic ornamentation may not find this collection to their taste. For those open to an exploration of darker emotions, however, *White Lily* is an intriguing interrogation of persona, unease, and the paradoxes of confession. Vincent complicates preconceived ideals of writerly honesty by presenting a speaker who repeatedly gestures to both the spoils and pitfalls of his deliberate self-performance: a speaker who bemoans the ease with which he can "fool" others by shrouding himself in an air of intellectualism, yet proclaims that he "won't stop either after confessing this so there."

The collection is divided into three sections – "White Lily," "Wrecked Utopia Tour of the Endless Mountain Region," and "What Flowers Mean" – the first of which I found especially compelling for the specificity of its self-critique and its tempering of painful emotions with interpersonal affection. Other standout moments in the book include poems where the speaker turns his acid tongue on homophobic strangers, as well as the collection's final poem, "Tall Poppy Syndrome," which concludes with a moving callback to the collection's beginning.

*White Lily* explores difficult mental states with a frankness that makes Vincent's voice distinct. The poet's strongest collection yet, these poems ask how to make peace with a self one can neither entirely disclose nor entirely escape.

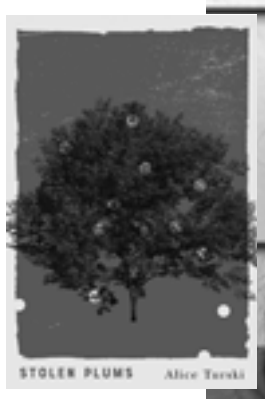
**Palestine Wail**
**Yahia Lababidi**
**Daraja Press**
**$24.88, paperback, 116pp**
**9781998309115**

In his twelfth collection, Yahia Lababidi advocates for the rights, dignity, and safety of Palestinians, crying out against the brutality inflicted upon Gazans by the Israeli government. These poems address staggering violence while remaining accessible and optimistic, prioritizing values of peace, hope, and solidarity. Lababidi

RIVER ROBERTS



LEITHEN M'GONIGLE




dedicates the book to his grandmother, a Palestinian woman who, eighty years ago, was "[f]orced to flee her ancestral home… at gunpoint," after which she became a social worker, activist, and educator. *Palestinian Wail* likewise embodies this desire to transfigure pain into compassionate action.

Rather than advocating vengeance, Labadibi insists that we must all "tend to the wounds of others – and our planet – as an extension of our larger body." Expressing empathy for violence endured by the Jewish people, *Palestinian Wail* asserts that we must resist turning painful histories against one another. This earnest cri de coeur calls for a unity transcending borders, recognizing the sacredness of every life: "there is no looking away / no foreign soil / no Others."

*Palestine Wail* forgoes linguistic flourishes: "during a genocide / most words lose their meaning – / some sound empty & others strange." Readers who prefer formally complex or highly research-driven poetry may find this style does not resonate with them, but others will value the book's accessibility and urgency. I was personally most compelled by the poems which described specific scenes: an air show, a zoo in Gaza, watermelons strewn rotting in the streets, the speaker walking in the woods with his nephew. Labadibi's introduction and afterword essays are also highlights. The afterword provides especially valuable context regarding the ongoing violence against Gazans, and pays a touching tribute to Palestinian poets Refaat Alareer, Ghassan Kanafani, and Mourid Barghouti.

This collection will appeal to those seeking an introduction to the realities of life in Gaza, and to those seeking a hopeful voice in a devastating time.

**UNMET**
**stephanie roberts**
**Biblioasis**
**$21.95, paperback, 118pp**
**9781771966573**

Following her acclaimed 2020 collection, *rushes from the river disappointment, UNMET* continues to establish stephanie roberts as one of Montreal's most exciting contemporary poets. By turns harrowing, defiant, tender, and humorous, this collection is unlike anything I have read before. Alchemizing a keen eye and restless mind, these are poems in which the speaker weeps "in the chamber of a blue whale's heart;" where "t-shirts breathe like geese" and the Nova Scotia ocean "mak[es] butter / full of stars."

Her linguistic boldness and exploration of the interplay between inner and outer landscapes will appeal to fans of Liz Howard and Dionne Brand, yet roberts' voice is one of a kind. *UNMET* reads as thrillingly unconcerned with what poetry "should" be. Poems veer fearlessly across lyricism and experimentalism, pain and humour, vulnerability and standing one's ground. Their contents range from a fantasy of making a man into soup, to a jazz-inspired love poem, to reckonings with domestic violence and police brutality, to a gentle ekphrasis of Vasily Kandinsky's "Seven Circles."

Critical of how "[w]hite crimes of obedience click as silent syntax to / the flat and sharp sentences of death," these poems reject the "overseer's lexicon" to resist poetry as a space of exclusion. She defies respectability politics to depict a speaker "ris[ing] / to the wild of her life," whether that be paying tribute to the victims of state violence or appreciating an "absolutely tremendous jar of garlic pickles." She references Socrates with the same ease she does Marilyn Monroe, *Star Trek,* and Cardi B "levitating up a stripper pole / like a fuckin' phoenix." Rather than feeling scattered, these varied tones, themes, and dictions coalesce to suggest a larger whole: a record of living and thinking in the world.

Revealing the artificiality of divisions between lyric, academic, eco-, confessional, and political poetics, this beautiful and unsettling collection is an accomplished work by a skillful poet of well-earned confidence.

**Stolen Plums**
**Alice Turski**
**Véhicule Press**
**$19.95, paperback, 94pp**
**9781550656770**

Alice Turski's surefooted debut hardly feels like a first book. Imbued with rich imagery, animated with subtle musicality, and saturated with quiet confidence, these poems will invite and excite readers to follow their startling leaps. Set in contemporary North America, this collection explores translation, nature, culture, matrilineage, marriage, and parenthood, often addressing Asian American and immigrant experiences. The poems range from unsettling pseudo-pastorals exploring the entanglement of life and decay, to ironic retorts against orientalist tropes of serving blond boyfriends bone-broth congee with "our slipperiest chopsticks."

Turski's lyrical voice is remarkably restrained. This is not to say the poems are cold, but rather that their tenderness is conveyed through depth of attention rather than overflow of language. Fans of Louise Glück and Victoria Chang will appreciate this skillful modulation. Rather than linguistic pyrotechnics, this collection's innovation lies in Turski's capacity to gaze clear-eyed at the strangeness of everyday life: the speaker receives a call from a woman accusing them of being "the god of parasites"; a rat falls from the sky; the speaker's grandmother teaches them how to steal plums in exchange for help studying for an immigration test.

Turski's exploration of the emotional and political weight of language is especially powerful:

> There were words my mother
> never taught me
>
> juniper
> hamlet
> stucco
> junco
> …
>
> Here is some of the bitterness
> without which we had lived

I was also particularly compelled by the collection's most daring poem, "Looking for Jade Rabbit," in which the speaker imagines "reach[ing] inside your skull / and strok[ing] a special spot" to numinous effect. This surreal concept allows Turski's visceral imagery and steady voice to shine. As "bone open[s] up to its sapwood," the speaker calmly intones, "what should I do with your God / tell me / God / is the breeze bothering you."

Turski's poems lick the lead off paintings, gaze upon the "plains of horns" of lychees, and pulse like a "eusocial tide" of ants. Coruscating with pearls and worms, this deft, uncanny book announces a poet keenly attuned to a "world / holding tight to the roots / of its blades." mrb

**Madelaine Caritas Longman** is the author of *The Danger Model* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), which won the Quebec Writers' Federation Concordia University First Book Prize and was longlisted for the Fred Cogswell Award for Excellence in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Room*, *PRISM international*, *Vallum, Grain*, *The Ex-Puritan,* and elsewhere.

# young readers


## True Colors

**Growing Up Weird in the 90s**
**Elise Gravel**
**Drawn & Quarterly**
**$21.95, paperback, 188pp**
**9781770467996**
**Ages 11–14**

This latest release from author and illustrator Elise Gravel has something wild, weird, and wonderful for everyone – whether the 90s is when you grew up or feels like ancient history. At 188 colourful pages, *True Colors* is a novella-sized exploration of tweendom via the diary entries of a re-imagined Gravel, and ultimately a look at how the brain of a young girl with anxiety and ADHD processes the world around her.

With her signature writing style and instantly recognizable artwork, Gravel takes us on a journey through her formative years, discussing everything from mixtapes and study planners to Milli Vanilli, friendships, changing bodies, hobbies, and struggling with how to fit in. Along the way, we are given an inside look at her "unhinged" brain, which is constantly full of questions and weird facts, auto-deletes important information, and is often just too busy to fall asleep.

In an afterword, Gravel reminds us that there wasn't much info available on ADHD in the 90s, and girls were rarely, if ever, thought to be affected. Looking back through the lens of her recent diagnosis, she writes her main character with compassion, understanding, and just the right touch of humour – giving herself and her readers permission to be "quirky" and find their own path through life.

Ultimately, *True Colors* is an ode to the ups and downs of early adolescence, and the value of finding friends who help each other shine.

✦✦✦


## Little Pea's Drawing School

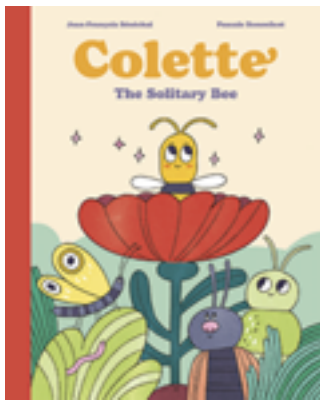
**Davide Cali**
**Illustrated by Sébastien Mourrain**
**Milky Way Picture Books**
**$19.99, hardcover, 36pp**
**9781990252075**
**Ages 4–6**

Somewhere in the forest, Little Pea is a great artist working on his specialty: drawing stamp collections. His insect friends are so impressed that they convince him to open a drawing school. He puts up a homemade sign over an opening in a tree trunk and welcomes budding artists of every size, colour, and number of legs.

Most of Little Pea's students show much promise, but Tarantula brings chaos to the canvas with an ever-growing collection of pieces made only of dots, blots, and spots. Even a trip to the local museum to see great works by famous painters doesn't seem to deter the budding pointillist, and as the drawing school's year-end exhibition approaches, no one's quite sure what to expect from the eight-legged artist.

Davide Cali has crafted a truly delightful story about the importance of stepping back to see the big picture. Using humour, friendship, and acceptance, he draws a gentle lesson that kids can easily relate to. Richly illustrated by Sébastien Mourrain, *Little Pea's Drawing School* teaches us that everyone – no matter our differences – has a special talent to share with the world. It's just a matter of seeing it through the right eyes.

✦✦✦




## Colette the Solitary Bee

**Jean-François Sénéchal**
**Illustrated by Pascale Bonenfant**
**Milky Way Picture Books**
**$22.99, hardcover, 44pp**
**9781990252396**
**Ages 3–7**

There's strength in being solitary – and also in knowing when to reach out if we need help or just want to share our happy moments with others. That's the message at the heart of Jean-François Sénéchal's *Colette the Solitary Bee*, which follows the busy life of Colette, a bee who buzzes through life without ever really needing anyone else… until she does.

In a refreshing take on being OK with your own company, Colette lists all the things she can do by herself – from flying, eating, and foraging to keeping monsters away at night and sleeping alone under the stars. It's from this firm sense of self that Colette also learns to reach out to others, who offer to light her path in the dark, accompany her on an adventure, or simply listen to her stories.

Pascale Bonenfant's colourful illustrations depict Colette as a complete and content person – whether she's by herself or in the company of her friends in the forest. It's less a lesson-heavy story than an adventure that celebrates the benefits of independence and the joy of coming together to make life a little easier – and a lot more fun.

✦✦✦


## Jackie's Drawing

**Andrew Katz**
**Illustrated by Tony Luzano**
**CrackBoom! Books**
**$21.95, hardcover, 32pp**
**9782898025679**
**Ages 3–6**

A rusty haze falls over the city, and young Jackie feels compelled to pull out her sketchbook. While people are forced to stay inside, she takes to drawing all her favourite sights, from sunlight against a tree to a squirrel's furry tail to the mountain keeping watch over her city.

But soon days turn to weeks, then to months, and Jackie begins to lose her will to draw at all. Only when she looks out the window one day and spies dolphins in the canal below, moose on the grass, and an eagle in the sky is she drawn back to her sketchbook, creating a dragon inspired by her newfound friends and climbing on its back to embark on an adventure over the changed landscape.

This poetic and exquisitely drawn story is a reimagining of the pandemic lockdown, depicting all the possibilities of a world free from human intervention. Andrew Katz handles this heavy material with a light touch, weaving a tale full of imagination and possibility. The story is accompanied by Tony Luzano's compelling illustrations of a city undergoing profound change and brought to new life by a child's imagination.

*Jackie's Drawing* includes discussion points about the resilience of nature and the chimera-like creature that emerges from Jackie's sketchbook. Young readers are invited to come up with a chimera of their own – an opportunity to invent new ways of seeing, and perhaps even changing, the world outside their own windows.

✦✦✦


## The King's Conniption

**Rita Pomade**
**Illustrated by Jonathan Burrello**
**self-published**
**$13.99, paperback, 32pp**
**9798300810368**
**Ages 8–12**

Calliope is handmaiden to the Queen, and when her employer suddenly announces that the King is having a conniption, it sends the girl into a tizzy. What is she to do? Who should she tell? And, most importantly, just what is a conniption, anyway?

In this fun adventure about a little girl struggling with a big announcement, writer Rita Pomade explores what it means when royal trappings and fancy titles speak louder than a child's voice of reason. As Calliope informs the Royal Guard, Advisor, and Court Physician of the King's conniption, she sees how quickly the information gets out of hand. Only through her own curiosity and thoughtful research does she finally uncover the truth. But will anyone listen?

The zany, wonderfully cacophonic black and white illustrations by Jonathan Burrello add a layer of energy and excitement to the storytelling, showing the strength that one small child can possess even when overshadowed by grownups. There's an important message in *The King's Conniption* about what lies behind closed doors, and who we are when all the layers of pomp and ceremony are peeled away.

"There's a little of the King in all of us!" the King's Advisor tells Calliope, and *The King's Conniption* reminds us that there's a little of Calliope in all of us, too. mrb

**Tina Wayland** recently completed her Creative Writing MA at Concordia University, where she won the department's David McKeen Award in 2021 and 2023. She's been published in such places as *carte blanche*, *yolk*, and *Headlight Anthology*, as well as longlisted for the 2021 CBC Nonfiction Prize and shortlisted for *Room Magazine*'s 2022 Short Forms Contest. Tina is currently writing a story collection about her Lithuanian grandmother, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.

## DUFOUR continued from page 8

"In 2011, I studied for a year at York University in Toronto. That is where I found out that there were Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Before that, I only knew that there were some in the United States."
– Léa-Lefevre-Radelli, French, Ph.D. in Religious Studies and Education.

"…in Québec, people are afraid of altercations, of those who get angry, and who exert pressure tactics."
– Guillaume Dufour, Elementary school teacher, brother of the author.

The encounters represented in these pages do not take the form of dialogues or conversations, though at times they read uncannily as if we are privy to a series of face-to-face exchanges. The catch is that one side of the exchange stays silent – or more accurately, speaks volumes by the simple act of listening. And as is made clear time after time, the desire and willingness to listen has been the single most important element missing from the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Québec. *"Québec was Born in My Country!"* provides hope that the tide might be starting to turn. mRb

**Ian McGillis** is a novelist and freelance journalist living in Montreal.

## THOMAS continued from page 10

One of the rare moments of physical and emotional tenderness between Gordon and Maureen comes roughly four-fifths of the way through *A Different Hurricane*. Maureen has recently learned of her AIDS diagnosis. Gordon wonders why she hasn't left him. Instead of answering him, she – in school teacher fashion – hands him homework: Carson McCullers' short story "A Domestic Dilemma," which he promises to read later. She's doubtful; he's never been fond of literature. But at breakfast the next morning, she can tell he's read it simply by the "triumphant look" on his face. "I love it when the little child in you pushes aside the adult," she says. He thanks her for sharing the work and compares himself to Emily, the mother in the story, whose alcoholism tears apart her family. He cries. She reaches for his hand. Tears fill her eyes. Here it is: love, in all its facets – all its complexity. mRb

**J.T. Wickham** is a writer, Communications Officer of the Quebec Writers' Federation, and the web designer for *Quist*, a literary journal publishing Quebec youth. He lives in Montreal.

## ABDELMOUMEN continued from page 15

in the translation. "[Biblioasis publisher] Dan Wells told me, 'Here, we don't just translate, we adapt. Do you mind?' Well, this is the whole process of this book, right? Adaptation after adaptation, and adaptation is recreation, which I think makes the relationship to the work really vibrant and alive."

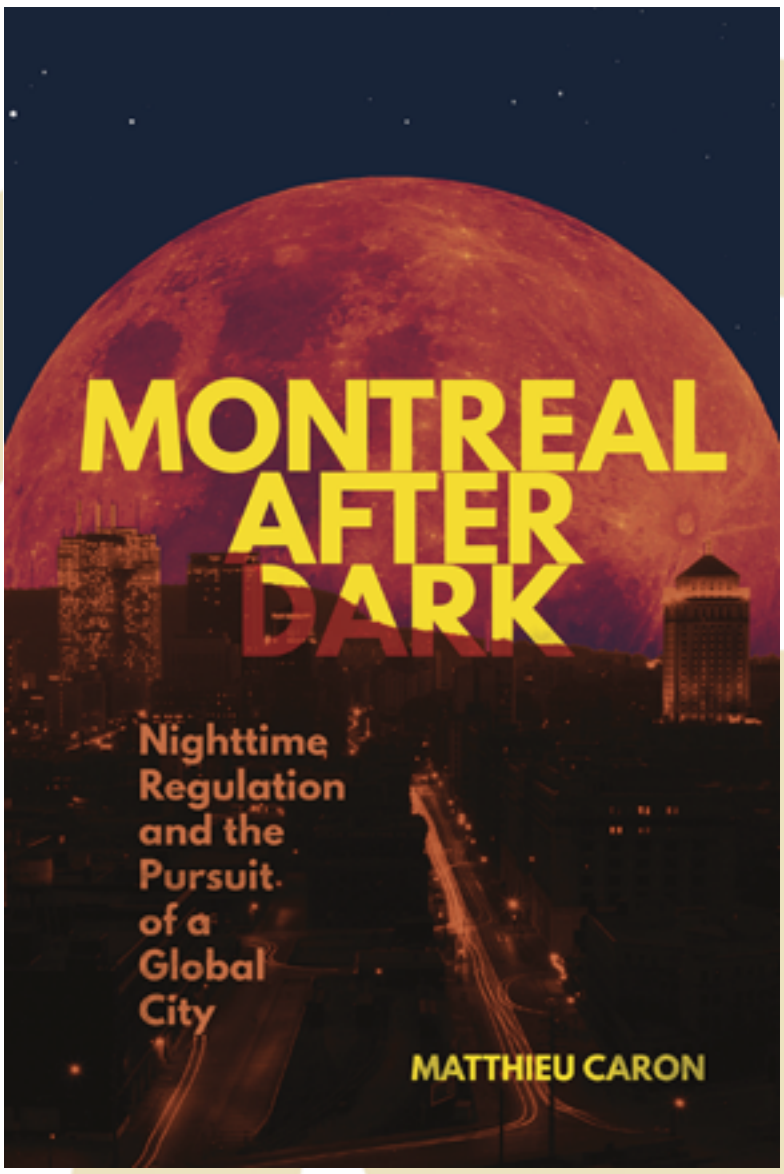
She's particularly excited about the book appearing on shelves in Baldwin and Styron's native country. In a Quebec literary landscape that often yields to a narrative of linguistic fragmentation promoted by the political class, Abdelmoumen's curiosity is refreshing. "Now I'm talking for the first time in my life to an anglophone audience. What is it I think they need to know to get my work?" She is a good reader of Baldwin; on the journey, as he wrote of his seminar students, of "trying to become whole." mRb

**Faith Paré** is a poet of Afro-Guyanese ancestry. Her writing has appeared in *The Capilano Review*, *The Ex-Puritan*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and elsewhere. Faith writes in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montreal, the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka people, where she is at work on her debut collection of poetry. faithpare.com

## HIGH continued from page 16

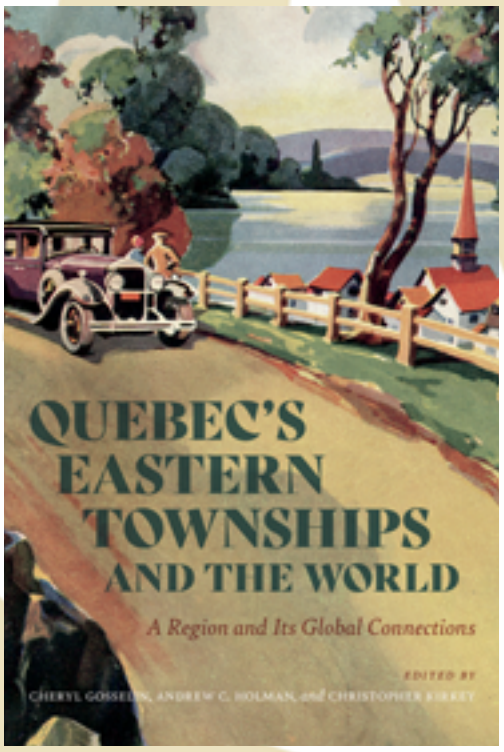
the book, and is a credit to him. Rarely is political power assessed from a working-class perspective in Canada, and rarer still is that power assessed critically. It also demands we ask ourselves why such critical analysis doesn't happen more often within the broad scope of Canadian political history, or why labour or working-class scrutiny of economic conditions and policies isn't more common in Canadian media. If it was difficult for experts and journalists to assess policy choices in the midst of an economic storm thirty-odd years ago, what hope do they have of doing so today? mRb

**Taylor C. Noakes** is an independent journalist and public historian from Montreal. Follow him on Bluesky and visit taylornoakes.com for his recent published work.




**Montreal After Dark**
*Nighttime Regulation and the Pursuit of a Global City*
**Matthieu Caron**
Paperback | $34.95 | 342pp | 30 images

"Caron's compelling prose, mastery of pertinent historiography, and fresh perspective make this a history that is local, national, and international in equal measure."
–Harold Bérubé, Université de Sherbrooke




**Quebec's Eastern Townships and the World**
*A Region and Its Global Connections*
**Edited by Cheryl Gosselin, Andrew C. Holman, and Christopher Kirkey**
Paperback | $32.95 | 440pp | 48 figures

"A timely collection that challenges readers to think in new ways about global trends as they interact with local and regional realities, with specific reference to one of Quebec's most interesting and distinctive regions."
–Peter Gossage, Concordia University


**Réinventer Montréal**
*Ambitions et revers de trois urbanistes des Trente Glorieuses*
**Frédéric Mercure-Jolette**
Paperback | $42.95 | 288pp | 28 images

« *Réinventer Montréal* démontre de manière claire et stimulante que les urbanistes des Trente Glorieuses avaient identifié les problèmes à venir, qui sont les nôtres, et qu'ils ont tenté d'y remédier avec des solutions de leur temps, beaucoup plus nuancées que ce qu'on en a dit ultérieurement. »
–Loïc Vadelorge, Université Gustave Eiffel

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