

# mRb

Montreal Review of Books

FALL 2025



ANDREAS KESSARIS • MADELEINE THIEN • LEE LAI • STEPHANIE BOLSTER

# QUEBEC WRITERS' FEDERATION

# 2025 AWARDS GALA

HOSTED BY SHELLEY POMERANCE



Monday, November 10, 2025  
Reception 6:30 pm Award Ceremony 8:00 pm

Cabaret Lion d'Or  
1676 Ontario St East, Montreal  
Tickets: [www.qwf.org/gala](http://www.qwf.org/gala)



## 2025 COLE FOUNDATION PRIZE FOR TRANSLATION

*The Hand of the Hand* SHIRA ABRAMOVICH AND LÉNAÏG CARIOU (Ugly Duckling Presse)  
*La Main de la main* LAURA VAZQUEZ (Cheyne Éditeur)

*Valid* NATALIA HERO (House of Anansi Press)  
*Valide* CHRIS BERGERON (Les Éditions XYZ)

*The Hollow Beast* LAZER LEDERHENDLER (Biblioasis)  
*La bête creuse* CHRISTOPHE BERNARD (Le Quartanier Éditeur)

*Sadie X* AIMEE WALL (Book\*hug Press)  
*Sadie X* CLARA DUPUIS-MORENCY (Éditions Hélio trope)

## 2025 MAVIS GALLANT PRIZE FOR NON-FICTION

*Hope is a Woman's Name: My Journey as a Bedouin Palestinian Activist in Israel* AMAL ELSANA ALHJOOJ (Sutherland House Books)

*The Mind Mappers: Friendship, Betrayal and the Obsessive Quest to Chart the Brain* ERIC ANDREW-GEE (Random House Canada)

*No Fault: A Memoir of Romance and Divorce* HALEY MLOTEK (Viking)

## 2025 JANET SAVAGE BLACHFORD PRIZE FOR CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

*Outta Here* LEA BEDDIA (James Lorimer & Company Ltd.)

*The Bearing* ELIZABETH BLANCHARD, ILLUSTRATED BY NANCY KING SCHOFIELD (Mouton Noir Acadie)

*The New Girl* CASSANDRA CALIN (Graphix)

*Remember This: The Fascinating World of Memory* MONIQUE POLAK, ILLUSTRATED BY VALÉRY GOULET (Orca Book Publishers)

*Miss Matty* EDEET RAVEL (Linda Leith Publishing)

## 2025 A. M. KLEIN PRIZE FOR POETRY

*No One Knows Us There* JESSICA BEBENEK (Book\*hug Press)

*Post-Mortem of the Event* KLARA DU PLESSIS (Palimpsest Press)

*Gone Gone* TODD MEYERS (Duke University Press)

*UNMET* STEPHANIE ROBERTS (Biblioasis)

*An Orange, A Syllable* GILLIAN SZE (ECW Press)

## 2025 PARAGRAPHE HUGH MACLENNAN PRIZE FOR FICTION

*The Reeds* ARJUN BASU (ECW Press)

*Cannon* LEE LAI (Drawn & Quarterly)

*My Thievery of the People* LEILA MARSHY (Baraka Books)

*Valentine in Montreal* HEATHER O'NEILL, ILLUSTRATED BY ARIZONA O'NEILL (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.)

*The Book of Records* MADELEINE THIEN (Knopf Canada)

## 2025 CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY FIRST BOOK PRIZE

*Hope is a Woman's Name: My Journey as a Bedouin Palestinian Activist in Israel* AMAL ELSANA ALHJOOJ (Sutherland House Books)

*Eyes Have Seen: From Mississippi to Montreal* FRED ANDERSON (Baraka Books)

*The Mind Mappers: Friendship, Betrayal and the Obsessive Quest to Chart the Brain* ERIC ANDREW-GEE (Random House Canada)

*No One Knows Us There* JESSICA BEBENEK (Book\*hug Press)

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OCTAVIE DOHERTY-HAIGH CLAIRE SHERWOOD

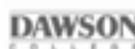
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Montreal



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Cover art by **Todd Stewart**, an author and illustrator  
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2024 Governor General's Literary Award – Picture  
Books and the TD Canadian Children's Literature  
Award. His latest picture book as author/illustrator is  
*Little Moments in a Big Universe*, out on October 14.

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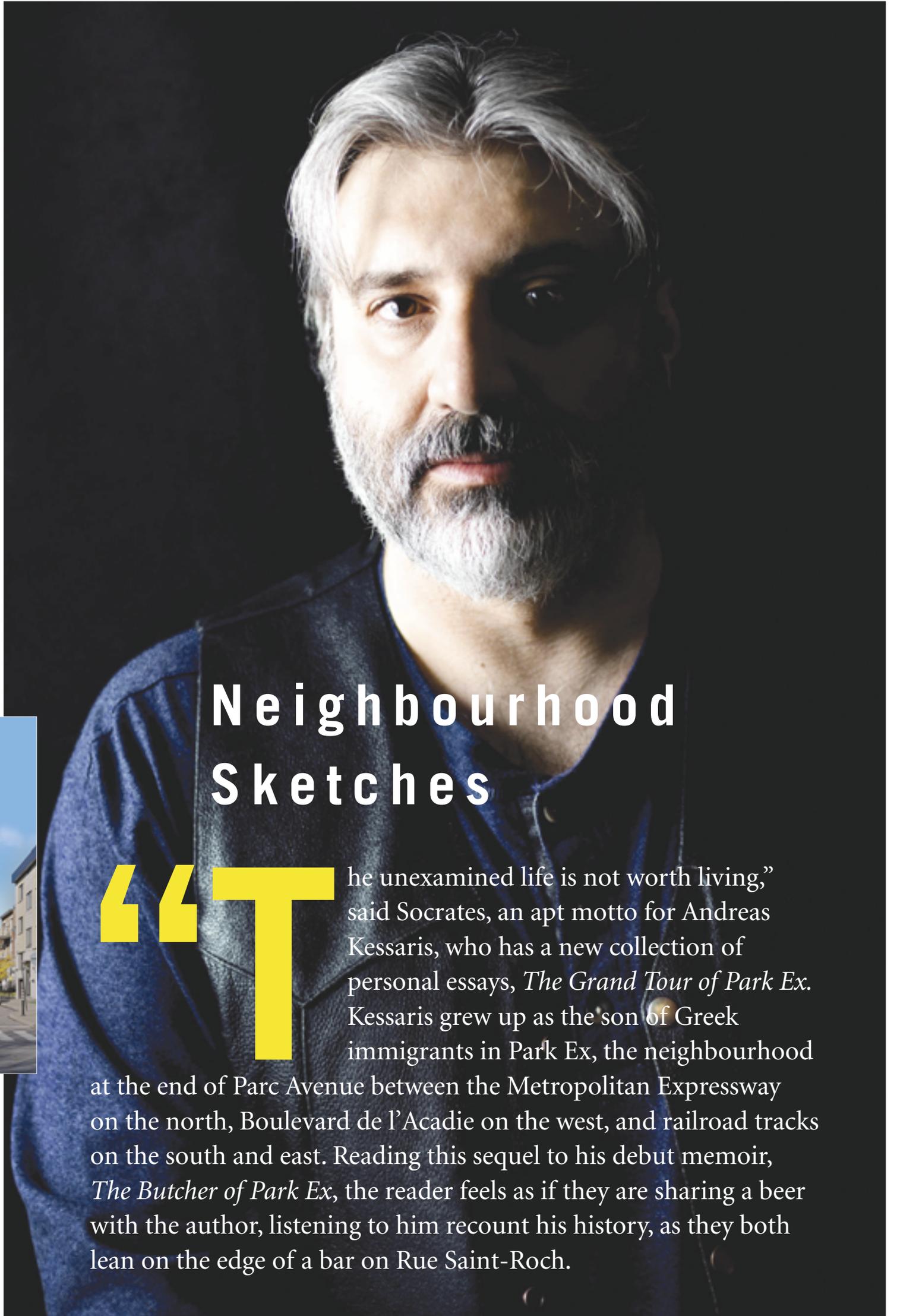
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**Akinasi Partridge** is a 2-Spirit Inuk and Mohawk artist from Kuujuaq, Nunavik and Kahnawake Mohawk territory. She works in illustration, printmaking, and beadwork and is currently developing her own debut 18-page one-shot manga.

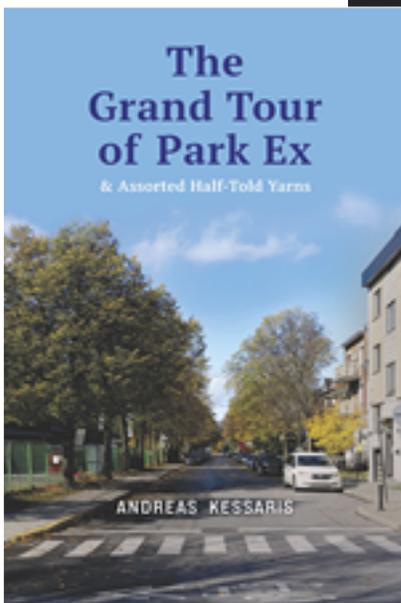
BY AMI SANDS BRODOFF

ANDRÉE WILHELMY



## Neighbourhood Sketches

“**T**he unexamined life is not worth living,” said Socrates, an apt motto for Andreas Kessaris, who has a new collection of personal essays, *The Grand Tour of Park Ex*. Kessaris grew up as the son of Greek immigrants in Park Ex, the neighbourhood at the end of Parc Avenue between the Metropolitan Expressway on the north, Boulevard de l’Acadie on the west, and railroad tracks on the south and east. Reading this sequel to his debut memoir, *The Butcher of Park Ex*, the reader feels as if they are sharing a beer with the author, listening to him recount his history, as they both lean on the edge of a bar on Rue Saint-Roch.



The Grand Tour of Park Ex  
& Assorted Half-Told Yarns  
Andreas Kessaris  
Guernica Editions  
\$25.00, paperback, 154pp  
9781771839730

Kessaris is a natural raconteur, his colloquial voice peppered with irreverent, self-deprecating anecdotes, relaying tales from his childhood through university, on to young adulthood, up to the present. Though infused with humour, this collection grapples with substantive and timely issues: the immigrant experience, divisions of class, and what it's like to grow up neurodivergent in a neurotypical world.

"You had a pretty tough time of it growing up," I say to Kessaris when we meet up on Zoom. "Yet, you managed to survive and ultimately thrive. To what do you attribute your resilience?"

"Writing is therapy," he tells me with a laugh. "When you open yourself up, you find [that] many people relate to your experiences. I hear a lot of 'That happened to me too.' When you really connect with readers, you feel better."

Known to writers, readers, and literati as the face of Librairie Paragraphe Bookstore, where Kessaris has worked as the events coordinator for over seventeen years, I ask him when he decided to write his own books. "Oh, I always wanted to be a writer," he says. "I started out with a blog. Once I began this book, it just poured out."

Kessaris is deft with visceral detail, drawing parallels between experiences. In "Participant," his mom decides to learn French so she can chat with her great nephew who is starting French school. She tries to get her son to do her Level 1 homework for her. When he refuses, she slams her workbook against a wall, calling him *axristos*, Greek for "good for nothing." Nonetheless, she gets a certificate which she frames and hangs on a wall.

Meanwhile, Kessaris learns how to game the system in gym class during the Canada Fitness Award trials. Unathletic, he's humiliated when he receives a "participant" sticker. What is he supposed to do with this mark of shame, he wonders: stick it on his bike or binder, advertising to bullies, "Come and get your free lunch?" So, the next year, he fudges his results, upping his reps on sit-ups and other exercises, and garners a respectable bronze patch. However, he can't enjoy this false achievement because he has cheated. Maybe just showing up *is* what counts.

Kessaris describes himself as on the spectrum, an outsider both in his family and among his peers. He's mercilessly bullied in both elementary school and high school, often with teachers as ringleaders. His family scrapes by: Kessaris's bedframe is missing a leg and propped up with phone books, while his headboard is fashioned from wooden posts, tacks, and vinyl.

No one in his family seems to understand him. As a toddler, Kessaris is thrown into the Atlantic Ocean by his father so he must sink or swim. He wonders if he'd been encouraged to *learn* to swim gradually, if he might have avoided a lifelong fear of the sea. Kessaris does get over his terror eventually, enough to tread water and doggie paddle. "I can't help but ponder," he writes, "how I would have progressed if simply left to my own devices."

His parents' knock-down drag-out fights destabilize him, and he can't focus on homework. In high school, he flunks French and math. His father describes him to a prospective tutor: "He is an intelligent boy. Quite keen and sharp. If he comes back to your office here a week from now and you have one pen... out of place, he would notice... He's like an encyclopedia. But he constantly gets lost in his mind."

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### The hardest part for me was finding the connecting thread between the tales, like writing a symphony and finding the right key.

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"My parents weren't intentionally cruel," he explains. "Immigrants bring the Old World here. In my family, we can have a huge argument one minute, and ten minutes later, everyone's forgotten about it. No one holds a grudge."

In terms of the challenges he's faced being on the spectrum, Kessaris adds, "I'm lucky I was diagnosed with autism later in life. If I'd been shoved into a special school and had been pandered to, I might not have survived as well in the real world. I had to adapt, work hard. No one went easy on me. I'm persistent. I don't give up easily."

Before working at Paragraphe, Kessaris had a variety of odd jobs: in an ice factory, a bakery ("one was too cold, the other too hot"), clerk at a record store, unpaid grunt in broadcasting, bank teller, ballot taker, service station attendant, and extra in a variety of films.

"I helped liberate France from the Nazis, was a protesting racist farmer, a preppy college student, a guy in a suit who strolls past Donald Sutherland and Helen Mirren, and one of three

thugs who beat up an old man," he writes. As in these films, so in life: to adapt to different, challenging work and social situations, Kessaris took on a variety of personas. "I'm like an actor playing a role. It's exhausting! But at the end of the day, I'm still me."

I ask him where he gets his sense of humour. "I love comedy," he tells me. "I grew up watching Sonny and Cher, Carol Burnett, and went on to Monty Python, Letterman, and *SNL*. I structured *The Grand Tour of Park Ex* like a comedy variety show. Each story is a sketch. The hardest part for me was finding the connecting thread between the tales, like writing a symphony and finding the right key. Here, it's the abuse of authority. It's what really bothers me about the society we live in." We see this abuse again and again as Kessaris faces setbacks dealing with those with more power and financial resources, such as teachers and bosses.

I've often heard memoir writers fret about the response of those people featured in their work. I ask Kessaris if he was worried about the reaction of friends, family, and community. "Oh yeah," he says, "lots of qualms. The neighbourhood Greek newspaper let me have it. I took that as a badge of honour." He chuckles. "Most people in the neighbourhood read that paper for the obits. The folks who I thought would be upset weren't, and those I hadn't worried about were. But the characters are composites, names are changed. The truth is, I poke the most fun at myself. Anything I say about anyone else, I say worse about myself."

"So what's up next for you?" I ask. "Do you have another book in mind?"

"I'm open," he says. "I might try fiction next time. Of course, the story will be set in Park Ex." Of course. *The Grand Tour of Park Ex* is ultimately a hopeful, triumphant story. Kessaris meets a loving partner, lands a fulfilling job, and now has two books under his belt. Coming full circle, he's moved back to Park Ex. Where else? 

Ami Sands Brodoff's sixth book, the novel *The Awakening of Chaya Pearlman*, is forthcoming from Guernica Editions.

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# fiction

## Sad Clown

All Kidding Aside

Jean-Christophe Réhel

Translated by Neil Smith

QC Fiction

\$24.95, paperback, 306pp

9781771863803

For a stand-up comic, things in Louis' life aren't very funny. Jean-Christophe Réhel's *All Kidding Aside* takes place in the suburb of Montréal-Est, where protagonist Louis slogs through the snow on Sherbrooke to his job at the Pointe-aux-Trembles Tim Hortons, and at home takes care of both his father (terminally ill with glioblastoma) and his brother Gui (twenty-eight years old, schizophrenic, and a disciple of Eminem).

Once a regular of the local comedy scene, Louis now spends Friday nights pining in two directions: over his ex, known only enigmatically by the iPhone contact "Nicolas is the Devil," and for his would-be boyfriend, the handsome, charming, and straight until proven otherwise Jérémie. Things are so bad they're not even funny, and they get even worse.

Louis' candour and self-awareness are the engine of this novel – a novel which, against all odds, is actually quite funny.

While admittedly the situation is bleak, as in Réhel's previous work the landscape is one lighted by its characters, all of whom feel whole and developed unto themselves. Rapid-fire banter is expertly rendered by translator Neil Smith (with an explanatory note on Quebec profanity for the uninitiated), and despite everything stacked against them, the little family shares moments of genuine happiness in what Louis thinks must be the crappiest three-bedroom in all of Montreal.

At the same time, the novel avoids falling into oversimplifications or silver-lining platitudes, and the challenges its characters face are real. The author of three novels and six collections of poetry, Réhel has a sensitivity to nuance indicative of his training as a poet. Concise, unflinching, and often circling back on understated prior details, the short vignettes comprising *All Kidding Aside* have the power to stand on their own, showing Réhel's aptitude for succinct forms even in prose.

Réhel's attention to nuance is especially important in his treatment of mental illness. While in the past Réhel's novels centred characters with cystic



fibrosis (a condition with which the author also lives), *All Kidding Aside* instead deals with schizophrenia, an illness to which Réhel's own relationship is not clear. The novel seems actively engaged in confronting Louis' own assumptions about his brother, who is often observed by Louis as childlike – "a twenty-eight-year-old kid with neck tattoos." Indeed, at various points Louis has to shake himself from treating both his ailing father and brother as children. The difficult balance between his responsibility as a caregiver (albeit an imperfect one), and his desire to respect

his brother's autonomy is one of the bittersweet impasses of the novel, culminating in an ending that feels almost Steinbeckian (perhaps not coincidentally, Louis and Gui share their initials with the protagonists from *Of Mice and Men*).

Though fast-paced and punchy, *All Kidding Aside* manages to explore serious moral dilemmas without being prescriptive. Like a good joke, like a good poem, its impact resounds beyond its last line. MRB

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

## Love, Love, Love

Count On Me

Ann Cavlovic

Guernica Editions

\$22.95, paperback, 358pp

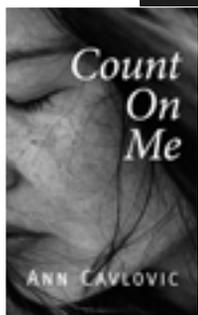
9781771839464

"All you need is love," John Lennon famously sang in 1967, when The Beatles recorded their idealistic peace anthem.

While many would intuitively agree, looking at the current state of the world, one might wonder what love actually requires, and, if "it's easy," as Lennon claimed, why so many people are still fighting.

Western Quebec author Ann Cavlovic gets to the heart of such matters in her debut novel, *Count On Me*. Through the eyes of Tia, her conscientious protagonist, readers gain a nuanced view of love's complexities within a dysfunctional family. Contemplating this family portrait, one might perceive a disquieting microcosm of our wounded world.

Like a sudden storm, *Count On Me* startles the reader from chapter one, commanding attention throughout. When her elderly mother is admitted to hospital,



DAVID IRVINE

Tia catches "images of movie stars with gleaming teeth" on a muted TV screen in the waiting area. These are quickly chased by ravaging scenes of Hurricane Sandy, foreshadowing the kind of drama about to unravel in her family and in a world increasingly shaken by extreme weather events. The sharp contrast between shiny celebrities and a house being ripped from its foundations suggests an unsustainable situation in which lies lurk beneath suave surfaces.

A single mom, Tia is raising a one-year-old while working full-time. She's already struggling to keep up when she realizes she also needs to protect her ailing parents from

her older brother, Tristan. After giving their parents the silent treatment for six years, Tristan is suspiciously interested in caring for them as they approach their final days. Uninvited, he and his girlfriend move into their Kingston home, and, before long, Tia detects shifty financial manoeuvres suggestive of elder abuse.

Tia also encounters trickery on a larger scale through her job, sparking a secondary environmental theme that adds depth to the main narrative. As a federal auditor tasked with investigating charities, when she is asked to review EarthClean, an environmental organization she sees as "basically a bunch of do-gooders," she suspects the group has been unfairly targeted. Meanwhile, back home, Tristan is as crafty as FairFossilFutures, the dubious group discovered to have triggered the audit. Playing the role of the rescuer son, he blame-shifts to gain the upper hand, and misrepresents Tia as the abuser for innocently pointing out injustices. "There you go. Money, money, money. All you ever care about is counting your money," he retorts when Tia calls him out for dipping into their parents' funds.

Tia recognizes both resilience and unresolved trauma in her parents, who lived through the Second World War. Loving her emotionally distant mother is especially complicated by the fact that, growing up, Tia

felt unprotected by the one she's now trying to defend. Recalling her mother's various abuses, she understands Tristan's vengeful behaviour, yet she's determined to break the cycle. Bits of humour provide breathers as Tia makes a serious commitment to healing. "Therapy seemed like a place you went to blame your mother for everything," she muses, yet later credits her counsellor: "I am the daughter of eastern European parents who lived through a war. I was also raised by a paid therapist."

Addressing the wound of emotional neglect, Tia attends to her inner experiences, avoiding the potential knee-jerk reactions of those who feel unseen. She dotes on her daughter, Zoe, without abandoning herself or her parents. "Love is a form of paying attention," she astutely observes in the final chapter. If this is true, then there's no lack of it in Cavlovic's heartfelt, often humorous novel. *Count On Me* is a close, compassionate study of one courageous woman's determination to review, and rise above, her conditioning. Pulsating with thoughtful insights, it invites readers to consider how ending negative generational patterns within families might impact our world. MRB

Kimberly Bourgeois writes and sings in Montreal. Visit her at [kimberlybourgeois.com](http://kimberlybourgeois.com) for news about her music and writing projects.

## Feasting Across a Country

**Annapurna's Bounty**  
**Veena Gokhale**  
**Dundurn Press**  
**\$24.99, paperback, 232pp**  
**9781459754591**

While picking a place to eat out, an Indian restaurant is always a mental battle for me. Do I wish to pay to eat something I could easily make at home? Or should I just pay for the convenience? What really bothers me is the heavy lifting done by the adjective "Indian"; imagine trying to describe a landmass that contains multiple culinary traditions in a single adjective. This often means that Indian food in this part of the world is reduced to a standard menu, with butter chicken as the highlight. *Annapurna's Bounty* by Veena Gokhale is a refreshing take on Indian food; it captures several culinary influences, encompassing the gastronomic and geographical diversity of the country. The book is structured as a collection of short stories; each story is accompanied by a vegetarian recipe.

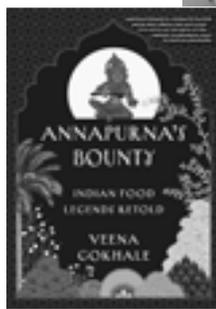
While food is a source of nourishment, the stories in the collection certainly show how food choices are also political choices. The opening story, "Land of Milk and Sugar," addresses migrants, particularly Zoroastrian migrants from Persia. This story about Hindustan, the Persian term for India, speaks about the experience of uprooting one's life in search for better futures and how food can be a part of that journey.

*Imagine trying to describe a landmass that contains multiple culinary traditions in a single adjective.*

All the stories in the collection are about vegetarian food. In the first story, for instance, when Zoroastrians arrive in India, they note that many inhabitants of the new land are vegetarian. While India might offer more options for vegetarians, to say that it is a vegetarian country is a misconception. It is easy to characterize vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism as personal choices; however, in a country such as India, food remains inherently political. This becomes somewhat evident in the second story in the collection, which connects food and caste. In "Parvati Bai and the Bandits," the lady of a Brahmin household feeds a vegetarian feast to lower-caste bandits. Brahmins are at the top of the caste hierarchy and consume vegetarian food. The descriptions of the feast are luxurious, the author taking time to list various dishes. However, the head cook whispers about how the feast is wasted on the *dakus* or bandits. The question of caste

and ritual pollution also appears in another story about Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. In "Do the Right Thing," Guru Nanak asks a Brahmin the logic behind offering gods the "purest food" (usually vegetarian) which is made by discriminating against other humans belonging to lower castes.

In addition to inviting reflections on how food can be political, the author also problematizes the word "curry" itself, which



has become a catch-all with respect to Indian food. In a section titled the "Interlude," Gokhale dives into the history of the word curry itself, including what constitutes a curry.

Stating that the word was an invention of the British to describe a dish with a sauce, the author turns her attention to the British colonial epoch with the story "Chef William and Captain Tyrant." The story features an Anglo-Indian recipe, illustrating how the British chef in the story adapted his cooking techniques to use Indian ingredients.

The stories in the collection feature the different confluences that have shaped "Indian" food and encompass geographical and historical variety. For instance, "The Emperor who Loved Mangoes" is about Akbar and Birbal, the former being the famous Mughal emperor and the latter his trusted right hand. "Three Grains of Mustard" is about lord Buddha.

Geographically, the stories are not just confined to the north. Set in South India, "The Cries of Animals" looks at nonhumans and their plight. I was delighted to see an adapted recipe for aviyal (a vegetable dish with shredded coconut), something I had grown up eating, which is usually not a staple on the standard North American restaurant menu. Some recipes in the book have been revised so that the ingredients are easier to find in North America. For those interested in discovering more about Indian cuisine and its diverse influences, this collection could serve as a starting point. If you enjoy a mix of fact and fiction or fictive retellings of history, this collection will speak to you. As for me, I was happy to read this collection of short stories on "Indian" food in which the adjective is indeed doing some heavy lifting, through its emphasis on geographical diversity. mb

Priscilla Jolly is a writer living in Montreal.

## Future Tense

LAZLO MONTREAL

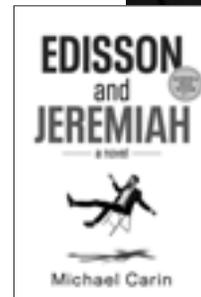
**Edisson and Jeremiah**  
**Michael Carin**  
**Guernica Editions**  
**\$29.95, paperback, 500pp**  
**978177849-0682**

*Edisson and Jeremiah* is a novel every bit as bold as it is broad. Author Michael Carin dares not only to reopen some of the biggest wounds in readers' collective memory, but to illuminate a not-so-bright future, weaving together scientific, spiritual, and political worlds. Beginning at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and working its way through the darkest days of the Trump presidency, it also envisions a United States under the yoke of artificial intelligence.

In the year 2034, a fourteen-year-old boy approaches the owner of a historic theatre in an unnamed city and requests permission to perform a magic show. The owner is skeptical, but after spending just a few hours with the boy, he becomes convinced that Edisson is no ordinary teenager and that this will be no ordinary magic show. The fateful night draws a smaller than expected crowd, but the eight unlikely attendees to Edisson's show have little idea how lucky they are – or what this boy magician has in store for them. As they assist in the performance of what are not mere tricks but *miracles*, the participants are brought together in a strange confederacy, one that explores the divide between the possible and the impossible and tests the limits of human potential.

One participant in Edisson's show, the ostentatiously named but shabbily dressed Mr. Jeremy Vanderbilt Delaney, Esq., also known as Jeremiah, is in for a particular shock. Though dismissed by society and his fellow participants as a "tramp," "jerk," "wreck," "drunk," and "creep," Delaney is revealed to have enjoyed a privileged upbringing and an illustrious career. As the truth of his past and the events leading to his downfall become clear, a hope for change and a plea for redemption begin to flicker in the ruined man's eyes. But before Jeremiah and his co-conspirators can get on with the rest of their lives, a disappearing act to rival any performed by Houdini will shake the crowd – and later the country – to its very core.

Considering his background in



political theory, Michael Carin's skill at reproducing the contemporary American political landscape and imagining its near future

comes as no surprise. With a sharp wit, a keen eye for detail, and a healthy amount of disdain, Carin explores the effects of religious fundamentalism, discrimination and hate, and the spread of misinformation. His characters, most notably Jeremiah, suffer from the "deep fracture in American culture," but as they learn to suspend judgment, exercise compassion, and connect to themselves and each other, they tap into a healing power with applications for political as well as personal ills.

For all that it accomplishes, *Edisson and Jeremiah* opens a lot of doors that it never quite manages to close. Five hundred pages proves insufficient space to develop the dozen or so personalities and perspectives from which this story is told, and the constant jumping through time, frequent foraying into complex scientific concepts, and pervasive grammatical faux-pas do not make for an easier reading experience.

Unfortunately, too, while the author has clearly taken pains to display progressive political stripes, his writing on race, gender, sexuality, and disability leaves much to be desired. Indeed, the most shocking elements of this book are to be found not in miracle magic tricks or quantum mechanical breakthroughs, but in a use of slurs and other offensive language that ranges from the mildly insensitive to the wildly inappropriate. Perhaps, before injecting yet another POV into this book, Carin ought to have paused to consider his own. mb

Catey Fifield is a writer, editor, and recent graduate based in Ottawa.

## Art that Offends

**Private Number**  
**David Homel**  
**Esplanade Books**  
**\$22.95, paperback, 240pp**  
**9781550656916**

When Mikhail, a Montreal-based documentary filmmaker, offends the Jewish community with his latest film, the backlash, both at home and through the Anti-Defamation League, sends him packing. “We were living in the age of tell-all, or so I thought. Tell-all is fine, but it depends on who you are.”

Mikhail himself is Jewish. He’s accused of being a self-hating Jew and an artist “who did not think twice about deconstructing his own family and his own people.” His research exposed the dealings of his relatives in Chicago, “bill collectors and shysters” who sold refrigerators in the ghetto to people they knew would default on their payments, repossessing and reselling each unit over and over again. His film, which screened at Cannes in “some off-off category,” included raw scenes of brothers screaming at each other, depicting Jews in an unflattering light and reasserting negative stereotypes. Though he refuses to apologize, he grudgingly accepts, at his wife’s

urging, an artist’s residency far away to escape the hostility. In his tenth book, *Private Number*, David Homel charts the two-month, self-imposed exile of this modern-day piranha.

Mikhail arrives at a town in a coal-mining region of France where Didier, his host and the owner of the town’s bookstore, duly introduces him to the other characters: Lili, the elderly matriarch at the nearest vineyard; Marie-Claire, an organizer of the residency; and Caroline, a woman whose face is “burnished like metal” or flushed with the effects of Lili’s wine, and with whom Mikhail quickly embarks on an affair. Caroline is an investigative judge, a profession which elevates her to a lofty status in Mikhail’s eyes, yet which seems to be at odds with the way she conducts her life. Married to a lawyer described by Didier as “a member of the Mafia” and a “caveman,” Caroline elicits sympathy, if not pity, from Mikhail – strange qualities for fuelling attraction, but effective in advancing the plot when the days of his unstructured residency stretch on and boredom is the only emotional rival. If it weren’t for the coal miners’ strike that breaks out, he would have nothing to do but lunch at La Chambre and rendezvous with Caroline. As it is, he engages in acts

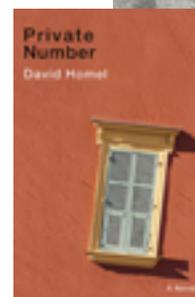
of solidarity with the union, as do Didier and Caroline in their own ways, and is able to put his cinematic talents to use.

In describing Mikhail’s predicament, Homel sets up the story for an exploration of making art that offends, and what it means to be an artist who is scorned. Mikhail didn’t intend to troll his family, but when he got the offending sequence on film, he couldn’t cut it either. In hindsight, he doubts his true motives. “I was hardly a cineaste; I was an opportunist.”

It’s a timely and contentious premise, and powerful context for a serious novel. But this is not that novel. More a romp in the French countryside, *Private Number* is a light read that favours local intrigue over philosophical questions. The reader follows Mikhail around, from his bed to his desk to the coal miners’ pit, but not into the depths of his psyche. What toll does outrage take on Mikhail, or on any artist with an unsparing streak? How does scrutiny affect his creativity? His confidence? The likelihood of his continuing to make a living as an artist? Hard to say, but rather than explore these questions, the book indulges



MARINA VULICEVIC



the reader with descriptions of wine and the pleasantries of a mature love affair.

As he prepares to address the local crowd at Didier’s bookstore, Mikhail puzzles over what to say until he remembers something he read. “Audiences want to hear about themselves. Talk to us about us.” A sad truism, if it is true, but perhaps a reflection of society after all. To consider the complexities of the life of another, one must invest a bit of oneself. There are times, and books, in which just plodding along can offer a welcome reprieve. **mb**

**Pamela Hensley** is the managing editor of *yolk* and creator of the podcast *How I Wrote This*. Find her previous (and upcoming) reviews in *The Miramichi Reader*, *The Temz Review*, and *The Ex-Puritan*.

## Editor Wanted

**My Child is a Stranger**  
**Brandon W. Teigland**  
**AOS Publishing**  
**\$23.99, paperback, 190pp**  
**9781990496899**

Brandon W. Teigland’s *My Child is a Stranger* is the author’s fourth book, but his first collection of short stories. The stories cover a broad range of topics, from environmentalism to refugee rights and systemic racism to religion and Canadian politics. A few of the stories are linked by recurring characters, locations, or objects, and the author explains they all work to challenge contemporary anthropocentrism. In an interview with *XRAY Literary Magazine*, he also reveals that these stories were in fact written over the course of ten years. This explains much about the disparity in style, themes, and even calibre of writing across the collection. Another possible explanation for the clash in quality is his choice to work with a hybrid (traditional and self-) publisher, who requires the author to share the costs of publication with them. I suspect the author’s financial contribution to the project gives them, rather than their editor, greater leverage over the final product.

The absence of editorial authority is unfortunately evident in the book’s overall presentation and quality of writing. The formatting choices are inconsistent, with some internal monologues appearing in italics while others appear in single quotes, as is the punctuation, with en dashes appearing in the place of em dashes, for instance. Teigland’s prose would also benefit from more thorough revision: his writing proliferates with lists of adjectives



upon adverbs in long sentences, making it difficult for the reader to focus on the images he wishes to paint. This makes his wide array of themes and styles seem scattered and imprecise, something one assumes was not intended given his seemingly careful word choice throughout: “Where, in the ataraxy of the apse, with its monstrosity altar of golden molten fire and its suffering statuary solemnly representing the mediatrix in melancholy decay, obscure mutilations stripped away the holy secret fear of impersonal fecundity from the faceless generous mother.”

Semantically confusing sentences such as these are only made worse by the monotonous structure of his paragraphs, an over-reliance on repetition, and an

abundance of clichés, revealing a lack of depth in the consideration given to the serious topics he wishes to cover. For the self-avowed nihilist Teigland, “Life is a disease, sexually transmitted, ending in death” (from “Cathedral of Spiders”), and activism seems to involve either escaping society entirely or posting about it on the internet. Someone should also have perhaps warned him *not* to identify his former university professor by name, calling him “a paradox: a Jew who taught Heidegger.”

The author’s virtues as a writer do, however, come through in some of his philosophical musings about the place of humans in the natural world and his vivid descriptions of the mundane. Teigland wonderfully conveys that humans and the environment are one and the same. In a visceral manner, he draws parallels between spines and trees; bones and boulders; toes, mushrooms, and cheese. His climate-conscious characters never pollute the forest they disappear into, but are subsumed by it. Teigland’s most compelling characters are an accountant working at a textile company (in “Empty Comforts”) and a Canadian federal enumerator on a business trip in Alberta (“Shadow Population”). In these stories monotony and repetition have their place, allowing Teigland to make blind manufacturing and driving down a deserted highway seem downright fascinating. These stories, where the focus is sharp and the images exact, stand in stark contrast to the rest of the book.

Despite the many problems in this collection, one has to laud Teigland for his readiness to slip into the skin of an assortment of characters: a Canadian poet laureate, a mixed-race investigative journalist, a Proud Boys apologist, a Russian refugee. One hopes that Teigland’s future readers will encourage him to commit to his metaphors and tighten his writing style so that its strengths can shine. **mb**

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

# Grief: Hers and His

Tunes for Dancing Bears

Irena Karafilly

Baraka Books

\$24.95, paperback, 242pp

9781771863810

People grieve differently, but how does this universal truth play out for both parties in a marriage that is already strained and whose longed-for child is stillborn?

Written from the perspectives of both bereaved parents, Lydia and Dr. John Gabriel, the author offers a “hers and his” account of eleven days following the stillbirth of their son in early-'90s Montreal.

Lydia Gabriel is the artistically inclined daughter of poor Greek immigrants, while her husband is the ambitious son of a more prosperous Greek family. Lydia's devastation following her newborn son's death contrasts sharply with chapters narrated from her husband's point of view; the oncology doctor's arrogance and self-centred focus on his own sexual, professional, and egotistic needs sharply contrast with his wife's devastation. Fortunately, Karafilly's masterful ability



MONIQUE DYKSTRA

to highlight John's growing compassion towards his wife, his guilt for his secret infidelity, and his emerging grief as we move through the novel renders human a character that would otherwise veer into cartoon villain territory.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of John's mistress, a marriage

counsellor named Claire, who confronts John with his psychological failings, but whose motives for cultivating their affair (John suspects she is using him to research a character for a novel she is writing) remain somewhat flimsy.

Claire serves an important purpose in the novel's plot; her rejection precipitates John's resolution to end the affair and reinvest in his marriage, but one is left wondering whether the lesson John has learned is simply to avoid women who criticize him.

Fortunately, John is not the main protagonist; Lydia is. It is in the depiction of Lydia's feelings and thoughts following the stillbirth that author Karafilly excels in her aptitude for research and empathy, not surprising to readers of her previous works. While grief is indeed experienced differently by everyone, there are certain experiences common to women who

give birth to dead babies, and which tend to be described clinically or anecdotally in non-fiction works passed hand-to-hand, usually by nurses in darkened hospital rooms. How does it feel to go through nine months of pregnancy, labour, and then hold your dead baby in your arms? What happens when your breast milk comes in? How does it feel to see and hear other women's babies alive and well, when your own has been cremated? How does it feel to face the ravages of pregnancy with empty arms? Will you ever find out why your baby died? What are the self-blaming superstitions (sex during pregnancy, not wearing certain charms) explaining the baby's death?

Karafilly addresses these questions tangentially in chapters devoted to John's point of view, but her chronicling of Lydia's thoughts and feelings is far richer, supporting the character's growing sense of autonomy and purpose at the novel's end. Lydia's transformation, while subtle, is promising. Her husband's, not so much.

Fiction makes experience flesh in a way non-fiction and anecdotes do not.

This novel will be a hard read for those

*Fiction makes experience flesh in a way non-fiction and anecdotes do not.*

who have suffered stillbirth and an instructive read for those who haven't, because it unflinchingly and accurately describes the

common postnatal experiences of women who endure it. This holds true even though the novel is set in the early '90s, a time during which perinatal loss was even more censured than it is today.

It's telling that while chapters depicting Lydia's and John's points of view unfailingly alternate throughout the novel, its last two chapters belong to Lydia; “hers and his” becomes hers alone. In Karafilly's novel, as in life, the ability to carry a child and to let it go belongs to women. mrb

Ingrid Phaneuf is a writer and registered psychotherapist.

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# graphic

## A Comfortable Cage

**The Mongoose**  
**Joana Mosi**  
**Pow Pow Press**  
**\$29.95, paperback, 170pp**  
**9782925114475**

**G**rief, like love, is a story that's both personal and universal. It is both a process and state, silent yet deafening. A baffling, life-changing thing that can withstand contradiction: everyone throughout time has felt this loss, and; no one has ever felt *this* loss.

Joana Mosi's *The Mongoose* gives us a story of grief – self-deluding, stumbling, and tired – drawn nonetheless with deep compassion and understanding. After a life-shattering tragedy, Júlia finds herself living in her grandmother's old beach house, fielding impromptu phone calls and dodging family obligations. Her brother Joel has just moved in, spending most of his time on the couch playing video games. While she keeps insisting that she's fine, she is bothered by one



thing: a mongoose is ravaging her garden – though no one but Júlia seems to believe it.

That disbelief echoes out into all of her relationships, compounding the usual frictions where characters struggle to connect. Júlia admits to her therapist that she and Joel don't talk

much, and even conversations with her mother or her aunt feel forced. We follow frustrating lunches between Júlia and her mother as they butt heads about salad bowls and tofu preparation: well-intentioned emotional check-ins, sidetracked by bickering. How much harder is it to reach someone when neither of you knows how; how adrift do we feel when we don't have the right words?

In fact, in many panels, Mosi lets the silences, interruptions, and blank stares do the talking. Characters in conversation



PRUNE PAYCHA

rarely face each other, and a good amount of portraits are drawn completely faceless, mouthless, or with their backs turned three-quarters to the "camera." The rarity of facial expression reminds me of work by Nick Drnaso, who has a similar knack for evoking tension and complex, conflicting emotions with vacant looks and wide eyes. At times I wished we got a bit more emoting from these characters, but the frequent lack of facial features makes the appearance of pursed lips or even two angry eyebrows stand out all the more.

Fans of Lee Lai or R. Kikuo Johnson will enjoy Mosi's even linework and soft, rounded shapes. She demonstrates a keen understanding of pacing in her form, and imbues even quiet moments with tempo and depth. Worms wriggle in the dirt as

Júlia paces back and forth; families debate why a husband left while two kids fight over a stuffed toy. Júlia slouches on her bed until it crumples inwards like tissue paper, an imploding star. And as she goes for a run or cooks dinner, the portrait of the mongoose flashes in.

Júlia's conviction that a mongoose is destroying her garden, not some other animal, quickly warps into obsession. Barely a conversation goes by without her mentioning it, haunting her late nights and internet searches until she unexpectedly breaks. "He's everywhere," Júlia finally tells her mother, "I see him everywhere, all the time."

And here Mosi reveals her lens on grief, the mix of denial and avoidance that feel like a comfortable cage. The animal gaze of Júlia's loss – a wild thing running loose in the garden – is too painful to hold. It is easier to approach at a slant, to walk towards it backwards rather than head-on. But it's only when Júlia manages to speak about it directly that the view clears, and reflections of her real memories finally start to seep in.

*The Mongoose* recognizes grief as an exhausting, isolating, unfinishable story; something that sneaks up on us, scraping the sides of our consciousness without warning. Under Joana Mosi's pen, it is keenly and kindly told; a story that, throughout time, will always bear telling. **MBR**

**Jules (Julie) Brown** is an artist, writer, and editor from Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). Weather permitting, she can be found in the bike lane.

## Shelf Love

**Checked Out**  
**Katie Fricas**  
**Drawn & Quarterly**  
**\$39.95, paperback, 300pp**  
**9781770467811**

**K**atie Fricas's *Checked Out* is a meta graphic novel that follows Louise, a twenty-something aspiring cartoonist who is creating her own graphic novel about Cher Ami, the celebrated World War I carrier pigeon credited with saving a battalion of U.S. Army soldiers. While working as a page in a private library, Louise navigates the ebbs and flows of the creative process, drawing inspiration not only from the library's extensive WWI archives, but also from her often-chaotic urban experiences. This slice-of-life story vividly portrays her artistic struggles and personal growth, set against the vibrant and intense backdrop of New York City.

Louise is a bibliophile with a lifelong devotion to libraries, even if she bristles at epigraphs, epistolary novels, and italicized opening paragraphs. After she is hired at the library, she delights in its very smell, which she describes as "notes of bergamot, amber, musk, a



touch of sweetness, mildew, the tang of time like fine perfume." She takes a mischievous pleasure in overriding the library system's warning that she has exceeded her book-borrowing limit to glean just the right information for her graphic novel. She also relishes finding trinkets left behind in books – a Paris metro ticket, a postcard of JFK, and a two of hearts. After working a short time as a page, Louise discovers that the real action lies at the circulation desk. She is able to cover for

others in this coveted position where she can talk all day long about books, answer interesting reference questions, and meet the regular patrons. She also learns the intricacies of the Dewey Decimal System, though she finds Dewey himself to be a weirdo – not only racist and sexist but also oddly obsessed with pruning words

of any "extraneous" letters. At one point, he even wrote his own name as Dui. The library is where Louise thrives, and it fuels her enthusiasm for her work-in-progress.

But at the beginning of the story, like many young artists, Louise works in a dead-end job at a shoe store alongside Wanda, her co-worker and secret lover, a bi-tease who is ostensibly married, and who insists that kissing on a bridge doesn't count as cheating. The reader also meets Louise's roommate, Cam, who works as a dog walker and sitter, and her bestie, Joey, a rock star who was once dumped by her girlfriend at a place called Mr. Dumpling. Louise's dating prospects are nonexistent until fellow library employee, Anthony, insists that she get on a dating app. Louise relents and goes on some cringe-worthy dates. Then she meets Gus, a trans chef, who brightens her life – until they don't. The people in Louise's life help her make sense of the world, but also introduce her to new challenges that aren't always easy to negotiate.

*Checked Out* is a richly layered romp with dynamic illustrations that capture the frenetic pace of New York City – from the stately buildings and manicured landscaping on the Upper East Side to the gritty shops, subway stations, and streets closer to Louise's apartment. The author uses simple washes of green, purple, and blue to set apart flashbacks from the main narrative thread. Fricas' naïve illustrations, rendered in bold watercolour and marker, may initially come across as messy, but this distinctive style is the cartoonist's hallmark and will eventually win the reader over. Her writing shines with clarity and wit, complementing her illustrations.

continued on page 23

# Histories of Control

## The A Word

A Global History of the Abortion Struggle

Elizabeth Casillas

Illustrated by Higinia Garay

Translated by Karen Simon

University of Regina Press

\$34.95, paperback, 168pp

9781779400963

**T**he *A Word: A Global History of the Abortion Struggle* is a graphic novel primer on abortion rights and reproductive activism. It's chunked into short themed sections, linked by a narrator who breaks the third wall to speak directly to her readers.

The comic's focus is global, and while both author Elizabeth Casillas and illustrator Higinia Garay are Spanish, this edition, translated by Karen Simon, is tailored to a Canadian audience. It delivers a succinct history of Canadian reproductive law, zooming in on figures like Emily Howard Stowe (the nation's first female doctor, who had a complicated history with other women's freedoms) and abortion advocate Dr. Henry Morgentaler, to show how they both shaped and reflected local attitudes and legislation.

*The A Word* opens with, and is driven by, one fact: around the world, women have seventy-three million abortions each year, regardless of local law. Since vast numbers of women choose to end pregnancies for one reason or another regardless, the author reasons, any conversation about abortion regulation is not so much about whether women can access reproductive services as whether or not they are able to do so *safely*.

The book touches on the horror-show histories of desperate back-alley hanger surgeries, but it also looks at equally appalling practices of involuntary abortions and forced sterilizations imposed on targeted communities. Together, these stories underline another core theme: that the regulation of reproduction is always ultimately an exercise of power over women's bodies, and using that control to shape population growth.

Casillas connects this thread to the body of first-wave feminist critiques of how medical practices are often "professionalized" in ways that exclude women's participation in care. Her argument recalls *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*,



ELIZABETH CASILLAS



HIGINIA GARAY



Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's influential 1970s pamphlet outlining how female practitioners were kicked out of their millennia-old roles in birthing spaces in favor of (mostly male) ob-gyns – and how these shifts often coincide with greater regulation of women's reproductive choices.

The slim volume covers its topic from as many angles as possible, bouncing from a quickie comic overview of fetal development phases, to a walkthrough of common modern

abortive techniques, to a long-view history of abortion law in ancient societies. Most of the book is executed in crisp, high-contrast black-and-white line drawings, brightened by splashes of hot pink.

Occasional pastel-wash inserts break up the longer histories with watercolour illustrations of abortifacient herbs and flowers, or snapshot histories of various groups who illegally provided services on ships sailing in international waters, tough-to-trace roaming van caravans, or via anonymously run 1-800 numbers.

Unsurprisingly, *The A Word* is explicitly,

*The A Word opens with, and is driven by, one fact: around the world, women have seventy-three million abortions each year, regardless of local law.*

urgently feminist, but class analysis and intersectionality factor in, too. Casillas repeatedly drives home the fact that most of these conversations about abortion access are really only about poor women, since wealthy ones enjoy greater freedom and opportunity. Really, much of the restrictive legislation of reproductive rights is enacted on poor women's bodies – those who can't travel across state lines to a public clinic, jet off to a private one, or ask for contraceptives from a doctor they know well.

Overall, Casillas' authorial voice and Higinia Garay's approachable illustrations make the topic accessible. *The A Word* could be used to gently educate a reproductive rights fence-sitter – someone who's not fully sure where they stand on abortion, but isn't fully against it – but with its unapologetically "woke" tone, it's unlikely to convert any MAGA bros or incels (men, as a whole, factor into its story surprisingly little). Instead, the book feels perfectly targeted toward a budding teen feminist who wants to ground convictions in a firm bedrock of facts. **mb**

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



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By Elise Moser

Madeleine Thien

## *The World Between Us*

“I feel a bit greedy,” says Madeleine Thien, then laughs. We’re talking about the complex weave of *The Book of Records*. “Whatever will help me understand something, I want to bring it in.

They’re all ways of seeing, conceptual frameworks, of trying to touch something that’s hard to hold in language. I’ve found that thinking about things through one framework helps me see more clearly through another.”

Thien’s new novel is a story that ranges from deep past to near future, spans continents rich with history and also math, physics, and philosophy, disciplines rarely so well integrated into fiction.

“What I love most about novels is that they can be polyphonic.” Thien is animated. “For me, that’s not just about the multi-voicedness, but about different ways of thinking and knowing,” she says. “The philosophy, the mathematics, the history are all part of a common thread. I never stopped reading sciences and physics, from the time I was young, alongside novels and history. In my second novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, there’s a strand about neurology, and in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, there’s writing about math and music, so there’s a continuity.”

The book begins in “the Sea,” where our narrator, Lina, lives with her father. It is a bold way to open, with a setting that has a fluid relationship with time and place.

“I imagined the Sea as a place where time washes in,” Thien explains. “The centuries wash in; narratively it’s about the way different centuries move through us.”

The Sea alternates seamlessly with stories of historical figures who come to life, each in their own vividly imagined times: eighth-century Chinese poet Du Fu, seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and twentieth-century thinker Hannah Arendt, who famously coined the term “the banality of evil” after reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. What research did Thien undertake to cover so much ground?

“I’d been reading those three for decades. I knew their work, but I was interested in the lives and the world that gave rise to their ideas.”

Did Thien set out to write a novel with philosophers and poets as characters? She laughs again.

“Not at all! I had the building. I had this enclave, the Sea, and the father and daughter. And I had the young girl’s longing for an education. I’m always drawn to what it means to tell the story of another person’s life.”

I comment that often the novel’s characters seem to be speaking to the ethical issues of our current moment.

“It’s probably not a coincidence,” she says. “There is something about the time we live in now that resonates with the times they lived in – it feels so immediate.”

The book engages deeply with ideas of friendship and community. I quote a character who says, “Maybe you and I should set our sights on the world that emerges between each and every person. Maybe imagination is a way to find that place.”

Thien smiles. “It’s a very Hannah Arendt idea, her belief that the world exists between us. It’s not something that I carry, or that you carry; it comes into existence between us. We all lend ourselves to it – no one fully possesses it.”

“In times like these,” says a character sharing a train compartment with Arendt as she flees occupied France, “friendship is one of the only certainties people can give each other. People are obliged to rescue one another.” I ask Thien about this too. She gazes upward while composing her response.

“I feel like the best answer is the answer I keep coming back to,” she says slowly. She says there are two things. One is the poem written for John Berger by Gareth Evans, “Hold Everything Dear,” a plea to cherish the world. Then she paraphrases Israeli scholar David Shulman: “What holds off despair is to act. Even if it is futile, it is not in vain.”

We talk about how the world is changing, described in a near-future China section of the book as the disparity between establishment power and the subversive culture ordinary people are making under the radar. The student Bing, one of the members of the radical group the Floating World, says, “This imbalance is the engine of political change.”

How does she see this happening?

“I think about the desecration of language.” Thien turns her paper coffee cup in her fingers. “There are forces that want to separate the meaning of a word from the word. Even such a fundamental phrase as ‘human being.’ There is a growing awareness



**The Book of Records**  
**Madeleine Thien**  
**Knopf Canada**  
**\$36.95, hardcover, 368pp**  
**9781039009561**

of this – a fight to preserve meaning. I see more artists and writers engaged with that. And doctors, humanitarian aid workers.”

What else is she working on?

“Starting another novel, that will be quite different again. And two lectures that I have to give this fall. One lecture about the imagination, and the other about the silence of the bookshelf.”

In November, Thien’s short story “The Artisans” will appear as part of “Objects Talk Back,” a series focusing on art – mostly looted – in the collection of Berlin’s Humboldt Forum. (As will an essay by Rawi Hage entitled “The Call,” about a fragment of text from the same source). “The Artisans” is inspired by a piece of a Uighur cave mural taken by German archeologists in the early 1900s from the Northern Silk Road, now called the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, where Uighurs suffer relentless persecution. Most of the panels were destroyed by Allied bombing in WWII; this one, improbably, survived.

“It’s very moving, all of it,” she says, about the layers of history. “Some of the stories around these objects... there’s so much to face up to.”

Having left a tenure-track position at Brooklyn College, Thien continues to teach remotely from Montreal. Why the change? “Hard to be divided between two places. I worked there on a visa and over the seven years it was clear the situation was changing.

It wasn’t comfortable.” She pauses. “And it was age.

It was time to come home.”

Of course, she is still doing publicity for *The Book of Records*. “The hardest part over this year is talking about a book when so much else is happening. I feel we need to be talking about Gaza, and about these detentions in the United States, and about the ways that we talk to each other.”

I remind Thien that when she was writing *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), she told me she was “working on a book about a group of music students in Beijing” – a wildly modest description of her powerful account of events around the massacre at Tiananmen Square. How about *The Book of Records*?

“What is it about?” Thien thinks again, but not for long. “I think it’s about ethics.”

Was she aiming to comment on contemporary politics?

“Maybe what I want is not that specific. I hope that a reader will just live with these human beings. That quality of recognition is not something that can be forced; it’s something that arises, if we are fortunate. I imagine that as a novelist I’ll keep looking

continued on page 25

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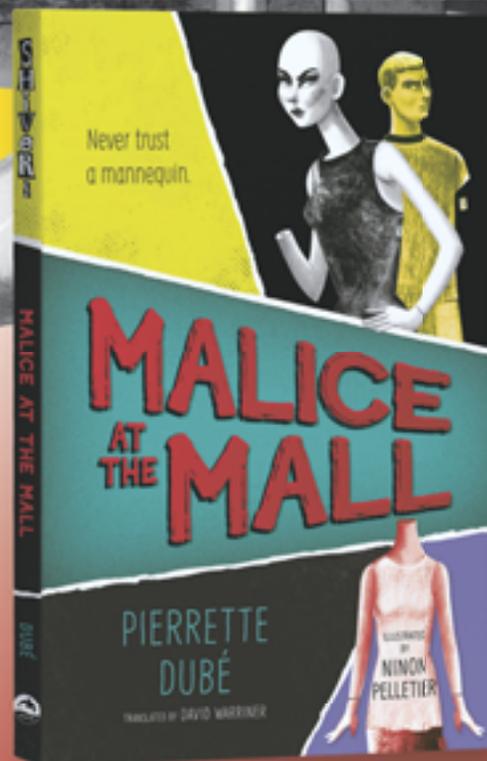


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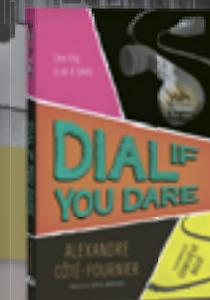
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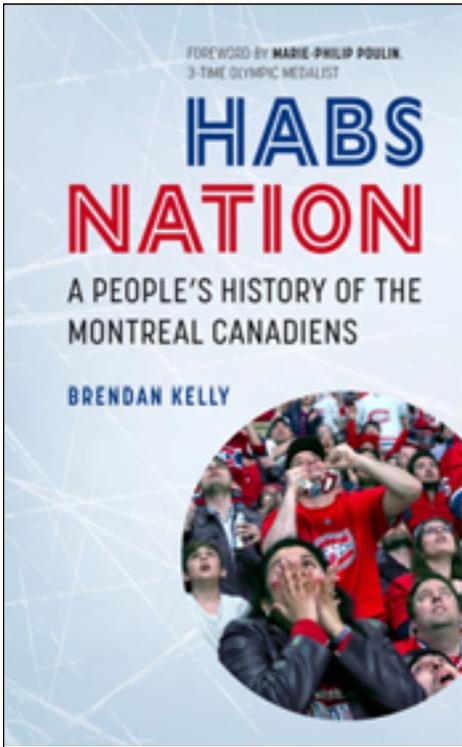


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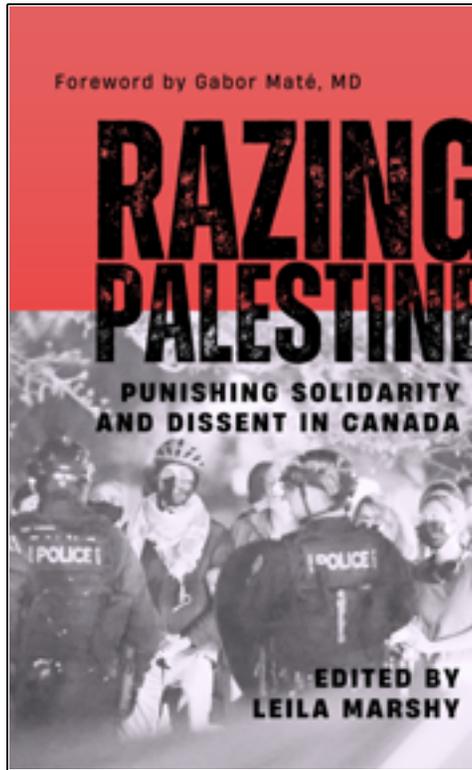
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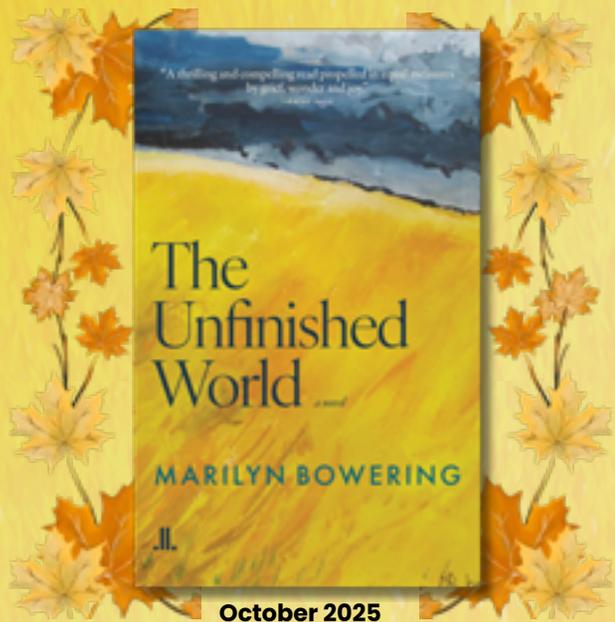
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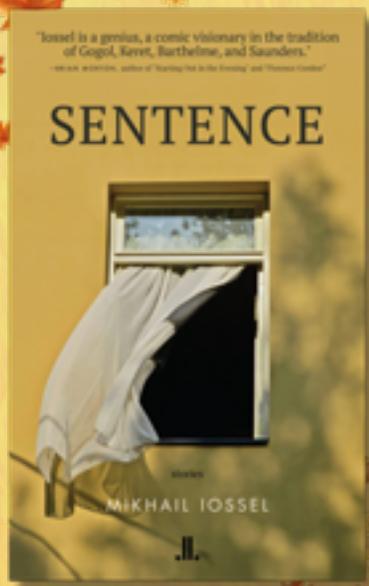
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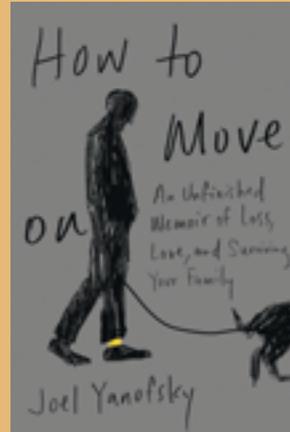
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A prolific journalist, Yanofsky wrote for *The Village Voice*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Montreal Gazette*, and more. He also taught journalism at Concordia University, mentoring future writers. He died in 2020, at the age of 65.



*Fan Mail: A Guide to What We Love, Loathe, and Mourn*

Jason Guriel

This is a book about fandom in all its obsessive, contradictory, and deeply personal forms. But more than that, it's an inquiry into how love for art—books, music, movies, poetry, comics—shapes not just our tastes but our lives. Guriel, an acclaimed poet and critic, assembles a series of essays that trace his own experiences as a fan, while simultaneously constructing a larger meditation on what it means to be enthralled by culture.

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Jason Guriel is the author of *On Browsing*, *Forgotten Work*, and other books.

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## *The Friends and the Furious*

“**Y**ou’re the most interesting person I’ve ever met,” Cannon, the titular character of Lee Lai’s new graphic novel, reassures her best friend Trish in a flashback scene partway through the book. “That’s never not going to be true.”

It’s 2005 and the two of them are hanging out in Cannon’s teenage bedroom, getting ready to move from the Eastern Townships to Montreal for CEGEP. Trish is curled on the bed, face covered in an unmistakable gesture of teenage angst, while Cannon sits on the floor – grounded, both in Lai’s drawing and in her role as staunch best friend. Through Lai’s astute writing, we soon discover that being interesting is not the only important trait of a best friend, especially once the concerns of late-twenties adulthood come barreling in.

*Cannon*’s main narrative takes place in 2017 Montreal: Cannon works a hectic job in a restaurant kitchen; takes care of her aging Gung Gung (her mother’s father) with no support from her mother; navigates the confusing dynamics of a new hookup situation, and bottles up feelings of agitation and resentment that threaten to boil over. To add to this, things are not going so well in her friendship with Trish – but neither friend is self-aware enough to address the tensions between them.

Sitting at my kitchen table, drinking tea in the early fall sunlight, Lai tells me about her decision to centre *Cannon* on a long-term friendship, rather than a romantic relationship, which was the focus of her previous, award-winning graphic novel *Stone Fruit*. “My own experience of making friends in high school was defined around shared marginalization, particularly around queerness,” she says. “Those friendships felt so crucial to surviving high school.” However, she notes, high school friendships don’t always make it through early adulthood, even when they are anchored in shared experiences of otherness – in the case of Cannon and Trish, being queer Asians in a small white town.

Initially, she admits, she had set out to write the total dissolution of Cannon and Trish’s friendship, to explore a queer friendship breakup the way she had previously explored a queer romantic one. But then, as she was in the midst of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. “My own friendships started getting tested,” she says, “and I felt that I just couldn’t write such a sad story anymore.” The resulting version of *Cannon* is a gentler one, invested in showing the paths we can take away from one another but also the ones we can take to reconnect, however imperfectly. Which doesn’t mean that *Cannon* doesn’t probe at painful truths – or explode with rage.

Cannon is a stoic character who is invested in her own calm, steady persona. Other people – notably Trish, Cannon’s restaurant coworkers, and Cannon’s own mother – depend on her reliability.

Cannon listens to Trish’s endless griping about her recent breakup, her writing struggles, and whatever else is bothering her, without ever managing to get a word in. She remains calm and focused in the kitchen, which is increasingly stressful as the overbearing restaurant owner pushes his staff past their capacity. She regularly cares for her grumpy, aging Gung Gung, without any help. Char, Cannon’s new love interest, tells Cannon she is a good person for looking after her grandfather, especially while her mother, traumatized by his rageful parenting, won’t visit him. Cannon squirms in discomfort at this: “I just have to do it,” she says, “It’s not anything.”

For Lai, it was important to show that Cannon has learned her values from her Chinese family – that one takes care of one’s elders, no matter whether it is pleasant or not. “I witnessed that in my own family,” she tells me. “The care work might be quite punishing, but it isn’t a choice – it’s about values, which go deeper than anything.” However, Cannon’s tendency to deny herself any outlets for her own emotions begins to eat at her.

Lai finds many wordless, often humorous, ways to convey that Cannon is not feeling as stoic as she lets on. She uses washes of red in some of *Cannon*’s panels, as well as recurring visual themes of violence, taken from the classic horror movies that Cannon and Trish often watch together. The more Cannon refuses to talk about her stress, the more agitated she becomes on the inside. Lai depicts this with her signature subtlety: Cannon never says that



Cannon  
Lee Lai

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she feels stressed out – instead, the food she prepares begins to take on a vibrating agitation; a scene from a horror movie interrupts a seemingly mundane conversation; the meditation app that she listens to during her anxiety-fuelled runs takes on an ominous tone. “In... and out – hhaah. In... and out – aaaahh.” As we watch Cannon run, sweating and grimacing, through the neighbourhoods of Montreal, we wonder: Are these the sounds of calm, regulated breathing, or the panicked sounds of fear and overwhelm?

While Cannon is stuck in her cage of stoicism, Trish is stuck creatively. Here’s where *Cannon* gets a little (or a lot) meta: Trish is struggling to write a second book, but she has terrible writer’s block. Her inertia stems from the pressure she feels to write stories that are recognizably Asian to an imagined readership. “I’m not the kind of Asian that they want,” Trish tells her mentor, referring to a granting body that has provided her with funding. “They’re probably looking for, like, some intergenerational immigration-trauma shit.”

Here, Trish voices some of Lai’s own feelings about writing-while-Asian. “I wanted to play with the nihilistic feelings I have as an author towards #diversity,” Lai says. “There is this pressure to represent the ‘correct’ kind of Asian experience, for marketing purposes – to produce characters and stories that are more consumable to a non-Asian audience, that match their held assumptions about Asian-ness.” Unable to come up with anything that fits the brief, Trish makes the sneaky decision to steal storylines and characters from the lives of people around her. I ask Lai if she has

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# non-fiction

## Reconciling Rights

**A Different Cloth**  
**Reimagining Faith and Feminism**  
**Dania Suleman**  
 Translated by Nouha Gorani-Homad  
**Ronsdale Press**  
 \$19.95, paperback, 130pp  
 9781553807346

The role of religion in public life has long been a contentious topic in Quebec. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s significantly reduced the Catholic Church's role in education, healthcare, and social services, resulting in a decline in religious practice among the population. While this period is rightfully credited with modernizing Quebec's institutions, it is clear today that the CAQ government invokes secularism to target and stigmatize immigrant communities while undermining many of the same public institutions. One only has to look at how the CAQ's recent inflammatory rhetoric and legislation banning public prayer coincide with widespread cuts to the education sector.

Dania Suleman's *A Different Cloth: Reimagining Faith and Feminism* pushes back against this rhetoric and deconstructs

the idea that faith is at odds with social equality – in particular, the rights of women. Drawing on legal analysis, sociological research, and postcolonial theory, Suleman argues not only that religious expression can be reconciled with feminism, but also that it can serve as a tool for marginalized women to assert their identity and autonomy.

Suleman starts by challenging the notion that freedom of religion represents a threat to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. She sifts through multiple Supreme Court of Canada decisions to show how our legal system has always placed contingencies on the right to religious freedom. For instance, the courts weigh freedom of religion against other interests, such as public safety and social equality. Infringement of religious freedom must also be objectively demonstrated. People can not just ask for exemptions on religious grounds; instead, they have to prove that their right to freely practice their religion is being impeded.

Moreover, Suleman discusses how, despite a couple of sensationalized cases, a majority of legal requests for religious



HAMZA ABOUELOUFAA

bans religious symbols for public sector employees, on Muslim women. She cites stories from these women, particularly those studying or working in education, who now fear the loss of income, barriers to professional advancement, and harassment. There is a cruel irony in the way that proponents of this bill invoke Islam's oppression of women while championing the exclusion of Muslim women from the workplace and public life more broadly. While Quebec prides itself on the rapid modernization of its society, Suleman astutely notes how legislation like Bill 21 is "grounded in subjective feeling," notably manufactured prejudice and fear, rather than meaningful social, cultural, or economic considerations.

The book ends with a reflection on feminist theology – the ways that women find meaning, community, and empowerment in their faith. Suleman offers examples of women who return to the feminist roots of their religion, those who reinterpret religion through a feminist lens, and those who reject and resist patriarchal practices within their religious communities. Suleman hopes that her research and writing will contribute to the creation of "societies that are not content to simply manage tensions, but also seek to reimagine the possibilities." But beyond just offering a more nuanced view of religion needed for a harmonious multicultural society, Suleman's work exposes and counters the sensationalist narratives about religion in our society that are often a vehicle for othering and an obstacle to solidarity. **mb**

**Aishwarya Singh** is an English teacher and writer living in Montreal.

## Mining the Surface

**This Rare Earth**  
**Building the Dams, Mines and Megaprojects that Run our World**  
**Jeremy Thomas Gilmer**  
**Véhicule Press**  
 \$24.95, paperback, 230pp  
 9781550656794

It's best practice when reviewing a book, at least in my reckoning, to lead with the positive and interesting aspects. As any writer will tell you, it's no small feat to compose 230 pages; the effort alone is something to be proud of. So, the first nice thing I will say about Jeremy Thomas Gilmer's book – an autobiographical account of his "twenty-five years working for some of the largest mining and engineering companies in the world" – is that it offers an incredible geographical and topological wingspan. Peru, North Carolina, Angola, Bolivia, the Northwest Territories of Canada, Congo – an impressive list of regions, no doubt.

The second nice thing is that *This Rare Earth* contains moments of real poetic clarity, especially when describing the mechanical workings of certain mining procedures or chance encounters with wildlife. For instance, a late-night sighting of six wolves in Ontario – "their breath hanging in clouds as they made a direct line for us... dark grays and browns and one with a tinge of red" – evoked, quite vividly, the hair-raising thrill of contact with a truly wild animal, a rare (and ever rarer) experience.

I will also grant that the book does, as Gilmer promises in the introduction, provide us with a

perspective "rarely heard from in the debate: an extraction industry with deep connections not only to the environmental challenges we face as a species, but also the very systems that support our everyday lives." Fair enough. Being an expat brat myself (my father is an engineer whose contract work took us all around Southern Africa), I can vouch for the validity of the claim that this is a low-key, behind-the-scenes perspective, often unheard by laypeople.

Only, Gilmer never clearly lays out the stakes of the "debate" he refers to. Right up until the conclusion – in which he offers an equally pithy and vague call to action – I remained confused about what it is that Gilmer wants us to think, do, or change.

If pressed to distill the story's moral, I'd say it's simply this: being a mining engineer is a dangerous gig. A disappointingly flattening throughline. The book opens on the tailings – the heaps of waste rock skirting a mine in Peru – where we first meet Gilmer as he abseils down a sheer slope to assess the stability of a dam. This scene is a fitting microcosm of the book as a whole, which is full of similarly high-stakes moments: men wielding chainsaws in flip-flops, minus-30-degree cold, floods, fires, lethal snakes – hard-boiled men doing hard-boiled work, all narrated in the clipped tones of a safety narc who has, regrettably, watched *Apocalypse Now*.

There is no denying that Gilmer has lived a particularly interesting life: his work in this unusual field has taken him to all sorts of far-flung, exotic places, some



GARY WEEKES

of which I'd never heard of. And if this were all the book claimed to be about, then perhaps I would have enjoyed it more. But if *This Rare Earth* was meant to add a new perspective on pressing issues like global power structures, neocolonialism, extraction culture, and climate change, I am left seriously wanting.

For all his globe-trotting, Gilmer's autobiographical mining account never penetrates very deep, skimming along the surface of the world. Ultimately, he fails to locate himself and his work within the mechanics of the larger system. What does it mean that he, a Canadian engineer, personally supports the often harmful (to land as well as people) extraction of international resources? Enough about the time you (almost) had an encounter with a puff adder in the Congo; tell us what it's like to work in an explicitly fraught industry, your interpersonal interactions and tensions with other engineers or locals, how that makes you feel, why, and what you think should be done about it.



This neglect is linked to Gilmer's larger faux pas. He fails to build a coherent big-picture story: How do these extraction projects connect or interact? What does it mean that Canadian companies, some of the world's most aggressive extractors, are mining in the Congo, Angola, Peru? And, by extension, he never asks the key question: Can we do things differently? **mb**

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

## Igniting Possibility

**Strangers Need Strange Moments Together**  
**Designing Interaction for Public Spaces**  
**Mouna Andraos and Melissa Mongiat**  
**Set Margins**  
 \$45, paperback, 240pp  
 9789083449852

Since moving to Montreal “temporarily” in 2022, I’d lived with the idea of elsewhere as a hazy inevitability. Whereas I related mindlessly to the particulars of leaving, my resolution to stay felt like waking up to my surroundings. I tuned in, and suddenly I was attached. Reading *Strangers Need Strange Moments Together* shortly afterwards, I came to recognize this experience as a very literal case for the emphasis author-collaborators Mouna Andraos and Melissa Mongiat place on presentness as part of what bonds us, meaningfully, in and with our cities. The book revisits fifteen years of public activations by Daily tous les jours, their Montreal-based interdisciplinary studio, that (to oversimplify) works across interactive design, urban planning, and public and participatory art. To borrow characteristically whimsical phrasing from the book, Andraos, Mongiat, and their team aim to build local “infrastructure for the human spirit,” revitalizing the basic but timeless principle that our realities are always subject to shifts in perspective.

It’s difficult to write about *Strangers* as distinct from the work of Daily tous les jours. In images, texts, diagrams and, most notably, mindfulness prompt-style lists of phenomena from the “raw material of the... everyday,” the book documents and contextualizes installations like a sidewalk with tracks of coasting shade parasols (Palm Beach), choir-sized boardwalk karaoke (Minnesota) and most popularly, musical swings (piloted in Montreal and exported internationally) – each pitched according to height kicked, and programmed to play a single note, until, when used in tandem, they release melodies. Reflecting the special marriage of joy and conviction that animates this work, *Strangers* also reveals the tremendous effort poured into research, engineering, funding, relationship management, and general bureaucratic tedium on its behalf. Importantly, the book foregrounds the serious social and political stakes of creating moments “strange enough to ignite possibility” in a world where callousness is normalized (and even rewarded).

*Strangers* is uncomfortably sincere at times. At its best, though, the book’s combined account of playful ideas, social research, technical knowledge, and commitment to public interest reads like listening to someone discuss something



STRANGERS  
NEED  
STRANGE  
MOMENTS  
TOGETHER

they’re uniquely passionate about. In these moments, it is life-affirming, almost independently

of the Daily tous les jours projects it describes. Equally fun to read are the little gems of inspiration strewn throughout the book. Andraos and Mongiat refer hopefully to examples of successful public engagement initiatives by others working across disciplines. They also acknowledge the curious cues their own projects have received, from sources spanning international cinema to pop music, and lessons from the social dynamics of pigeons at the park. In the face of the need for more humane and connected cities, who’s to say the most promising solutions won’t come from Monty Python? Occasionally undercut by the book’s unselfconsciously celebratory tone, Daily tous les jours’ willingness to see the wisdom in the weird suggests genuine humility as much as it does optimism.

This ethos is also conflicted by the book’s appearance (its cover in particular), which skews more corporate quirky than truly strange. I mention it because by contrast, the artistic concerns of the playful constructions it describes feel quite substantive. Any practice that claims ethical and aesthetic ambition in the same breath asks to be treated cautiously. Importantly, Daily tous les jours’ mission is, at core, material – each project a practical experiment aimed at realizing better ways of living together. At the same time, it resists wholly utilitarian terms not just because it hinges on disrupting efficient patterns but, crucially, because it rests in respecting what *Strangers* articulates as the ineffable, poetic, and undesignable character of cities, and the human relationships they bring to life.

The jauntily coloured surfaces of Daily tous les jours’ projects further characterize this heartfelt philosophy, each earnestly expressing a variation on the logic that “It is very hard to be angry, stressed, or sad while gliding on a giant pink parasol.” This is at least as charming and intelligent an integration of form and function as any. It’s also probably true. mrB

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

## Reflections on a Revolution

**The Darkest Night**  
**Brings Longer Days**  
**Surviving War and Iran’s**  
**Evin Prison**  
**Sirous Houshmand**  
**McGill-Queen’s University Press**  
 \$24.95, paperback, 234pp  
 9780228025771

Sirous Houshmand’s memoir on being held as a political prisoner in Iran is at turns exhilarating and deeply introspective. His telling is coloured by a unique perspective that decentres well-worn critiques of U.S. foreign policy and interventionism. Instead, Houshmand turns his attention to the people’s struggle for freedom from the bottom up. The result is a heroic, if at times preachy, narrative driven by a steadfastly curious, critical, and compassionate spirit.

The narrative begins with a recounting of his family’s notable involvement in watershed moments of Iranian history, and his early childhood in Iran. From there, the reader is abruptly transported across borders to the United States. Taken in by adoptive families, the author and his siblings spend their formative years navigating the turbulent American landscape of the 1960s and early ’70s. As an immigrant, Houshmand goes through alternating experiences of connection and alienation that create some distance from Western culture, fostering critical reflection. This tension comes to a head when, as a young adult, he decides to return to Iran to rejoin his family and reconnect with his roots. The timing is remarkable. He has just arrived on the eve of the Revolution of 1979.

Houshmand struggles to improve his sixth-grade level Farsi and reorient himself in the land of his birth, all while a new regime steps into power, and political uncertainty literally floods the streets with mass demonstrations. A string of life-changing events explode into the frame: helping save lives as a volunteer medic at the onset of the Iraq-Iran war, witnessing banal death and destruction befall his beloved people, and choosing between snitching or facing nearly certain execution along with thousands of other dissidents held in Iran’s Evin Prison, infamous for its human rights abuses against political prisoners.

Given the subtitle, I was expecting to learn about the horrors of prison life. The reader does get a sense of that in the last few chapters. However, Houshmand is less intrigued by the capacity of authoritarians to commit violence than by the will of individuals to resist. He frames the central question as follows: “why do some people stand up for their beliefs to the point of losing their lives?”

THE DARKEST  
NIGHT  
BRINGS  
LONGER DAYS



Is having a moral stance an act of becoming free or an expression of a utopian dream?” Houshmand’s quest is about unravelling the extraordinary circumstances, instincts, and insights that enabled him and his comrades to continue fighting for liberation.

Houshmand gestures toward the importance of the ongoing women’s liberation movement in Iran. At one point, he even affirms: “Over time, I realized that the key to liberating our region from despotism is through the emancipation of women.” However, the narrative fails to expand on this issue. He focuses more on the oppression of secular leftists such as himself by a conservative religious majority. Even then, Houshmand avoids diving into the political weeds, and vaguely aligns himself with the opposition’s struggle for “sovereignty, civil rights, and social and economic justice.”

At a time when authoritarianism is on the rise, Houshmand’s appeal to a universal human love of freedom and resilience is powerful. He grapples with a regime’s terrifyingly indiscriminate approach to doling out violence, noting that “[m]ost people around me were non-violent individuals whose only ‘crime’ was to hope for a different world.”

In each chapter, Houshmand offers a series of reflective questions. Their increasing complexity with each successive chapter mirrors his political development over time, building from naively rhetorical to philosophical and yielding no easy answers. Fascination and concern for how people make decisions in moments of crisis emerges from his unrelenting inquiry. At times, Houshmand’s tone can cross from genuine self-doubt into goading the presumed Western reader to question their own beliefs. At his best, he invites us to linger on his memories of deep ambivalence colliding with urgent, impossible demands – “before and after” moments, in which his very conscious experience of reality is never the same. This is a meditative journey guided by a man with an extraordinary life. mrB

**Danielle Douez** is a freelance writer and editor based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal.

## Voices of Resistance

**Gaza Held in Time**  
**A Tapestry of Two Lives**  
**Tareq AlSourani and Yara Nasser**  
**Daraja Press**  
**\$22.11, paperback, 86pp**  
**9781998309955**

**G**aza Held in Time: A Tapestry of Two Lives is a powerful recollection of memories – of all the things that have been lost, or rather taken. The book is a resounding, honest call in a world that’s silenced Palestinian voices for the past seventy-seven years. It acts as a hand reaching out – for empathy, for understanding, for humanity.

Teenage writers Tareq AlSourani and Yara Nasser beautifully blend their voices to recount the stories of their motherland from two perspectives: Tareq’s from exile in Egypt, and Yara’s from home. With both individual and conjointly written chapters – each signed off with the name of its author – the book, as Yara puts it, shows “two versions of survival trying to meet on the same page.”

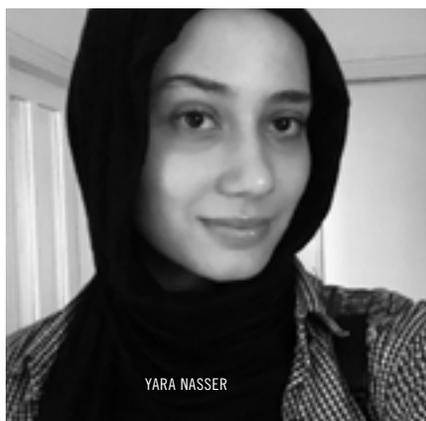
Through a series of event accounts, prose-style reflections and recollections, poems, and essay-style writings, Yara and Tareq’s words aim to reflect the conflicted feelings of young Gazans. They recite the anguish of loving a motherland that’s suffering. What once were “clean streets, busy cafes, big supermarkets... bakeries, and beautiful trees” now lie under rubble. Their writing serves as a way to immortalize what once was, what can never be returned. Their words act as a beacon of truth, a shared responsibility.

Yara’s voice is haunting – her prose juxtaposes the horrors of genocide with the beauty of the things that make Gaza her home. The blooming flowers planted in her family garden, uprooted carelessly by Israeli soldiers who invaded and ransacked her family home. The thorough erasure of Palestine – its cities, its culture, its people. A motherland that can no longer protect its children, and yet, as Tareq wonderfully puts it, “leaving still feels like exile.”

After being forced to flee with his family to Egypt, Tareq dutifully shoulders the responsibility of immortalizing Gaza and its people through his writing – describing its citrus trees, its strawberry fields, its historical sites, its cafés by the sea. He recounts the vibrant details of Gaza’s main market, and the smells of the neighbourhood’s bread and falafel. He gives voice to “the naked truth,” as he says, and this truth is that Palestinians are suffering, and it shouldn’t be ignored any longer.



TAREQ ALSOURANI



YARA NASSER

Tareq and Yara’s words make us as readers realize how complicit we all are in this genocide, and how normalized this kind of violence has become, how desensitized we have become to it. They ask us, what are you going to do about it? And urge us to resist – to carry the heavy responsibility of sharing the truth, however harsh it may be.

*Gaza Held in Time* reminds us how necessary community is, especially for survival. As Yara tells us, Palestinians are raised on the proverb “My shoulders are your subsistence and supply; my tears are your water.” It is our turn now to hold out our hands. To gather in empathy and community with one another. To resist. To share the truth. To not let others censor it.

In Yara’s words: “People talk of resistance as if it were a choice. But when your life is made unlivable, resistance is breathing.” It is refusing to let the world pretend that they don’t see what is happening, that we’re not all victims of the same oppressors.

Yara and Tareq’s voices ring loud and clear. And we must listen. **mb**

**Nayibe Siwady** is a queer Honduran writer whose fiction explores alienation and reconnection with sensitivity and sharp observation, capturing fleeting moments of distance, longing, and unexpected closeness. Based in Montreal, she is a bilingual writer and editor with experience in fiction, content creation, and freelance projects.

## Ideas to Action

**Squat the City!**  
**How to Use the Arts for**  
**Housing Justice**  
**Norman Nawrocki**  
**Kersplebedeb Publishing**  
**\$20.00, paperback, 160pp**  
**9781989701416**

**M**ontreal once attracted artists from all over with its affordable housing, shaping the city we know today as one defined by its arts and culture. Over the past four decades, however, developers have been working towards efficiently transforming low-income neighbourhoods into gentrified spaces and condominiums. These changes, motivated by profit, have displaced the residents of these areas, unconcerned with the people who have been living there for decades.

Norman Nawrocki is an expert on fighting for housing justice, an artist and activist who has been working towards creating an affordable city for all for over thirty years. In *Squat the City!*, he shares the arts initiatives he has been a part of, as well as those going on around him, through text, lyrics, and photographs. By chronicling a variety of affordable housing actions organized by creative non-profit organizations and collective resistances, Nawrocki not only provides an account of the history of this fight in Canada, but also a guide for the ways in which everyone can use whatever talents and interests they might have in order to make meaningful change. His ethos is clear: to inspire and incite those around, turning ideas into action.

Nawrocki shows us how all artistic media have radical potential. Rhythm Activism, a group led by Nawrocki and Sylvain Côté, used their theatre and music background to create works specifically for the communities they were performing for. *Un logement pour une chanson (A Home for a Song)* was a free cabaret show touring several low-income neighbourhoods across Quebec. The script was easily adaptable to include details from each neighbourhood they performed in, and in each show the “condo vampires” were driven out by an organized tenant opposition protecting their community. Including songs, skits, and political satire, the cabaret was immensely rousing for audiences, speaking directly to the issues impacting them most. Nawrocki notes: “Groups told us later that each show added more names to their membership lists of tenants willing to demonstrate in the streets to back up and shout or sing out their demands.”

Artistic practice and activism have always gone hand in hand. In Overdale, an inner-city neighbourhood in Montreal, the fight against developers incited an outcry from the community.



JOYCE VALBUENA



Tenants (many of whom were also artists) mobilized those around them through music, poetry, and large-scale cultural events. One such example was a “backyard” cultural event entitled *The Horror of hypocritical faceless bureaucracy; the Terror of ruthless developers; the Fear of homelessness*. Tenants, activists, and passersby came out in numbers, and the combination of musical acts and poets directly addressed their concerns to a crowd of those equally outraged.

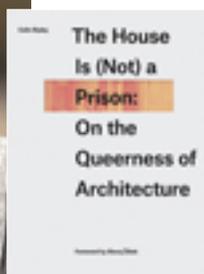
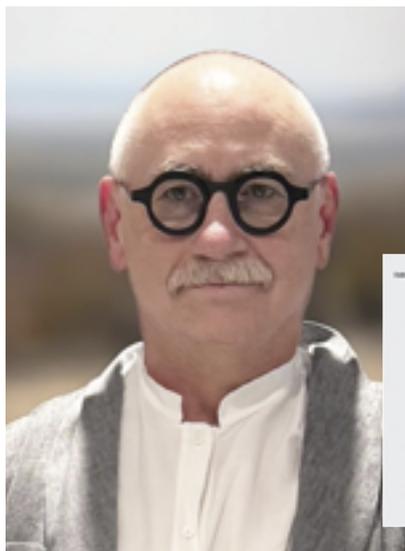
The following week, the tenants met up with officials at city hall in hopes to convince the city to step in and protect the buildings. As it turned out, “the officials admitted that by chance, they had actually witnessed the back-balcony musical protest while walking through the area... a special moment that convinced them of the existing vitality and community spirit of the neighbourhood, and the need to preserve and nurture it.” This resulted in the creation of the Anderson Housing Co-operative, which still exists in the neighbourhood today.

From wide-reaching mural projects by Artifact, Artists For Action/Artistes Font l’Action, a feminist group of female artists, to Frederick McSherry’s *Maison de chambres/Rooming House Show*, an exhibition in one of the empty houses featuring the work of fourteen other local artists, *Squat the City!* provides countless examples of creative projects for those who are fighting within their own communities now. There are a multitude of ways that can combine the theory of housing justice with practical artistic applications, and Nawrocki reminds readers that this is an issue that impacts everyone; no one is exempt from a basic necessity like housing, especially artists. There is no one outside of this fight; the way forward is banding together, with all the tools available, towards housing justice for all. **mb**

**Ashton Diduck** is a queer writer currently residing in Tiohtià:ke. He graduated from the Honours English and Creative Writing program at Concordia University in 2023 and is currently the communications manager for *carte blanche*.

# Fleeing (to) Heterotopia

**The House Is (Not) a Prison**  
**On the Queerness of Architecture**  
 Colin Ripley  
 Concordia University Press  
 \$49.95, paperback, 368pp  
 9781988111612



Dr. Colin Ripley deconstructs the tenets of architecture in his most recent book *The House Is (Not) a Prison: On the Queerness of Architecture* with the argument: to be queer is to be anti-architecture. This perspicacious text reads remarkably fast, offering an intellectual yet sufficiently relatable exploration of the structures that shape our modern daily living. Ripley welcomes readers with a researcher's quest via interview to unearth the lore of Lucien Sénémaud's house in Cannes (designed and gifted by the trailblazing queer author Jean Genet) while integrating throughout, and thereafter, a panoply of literary and cinematic works. In Slavoj Žižek's foreword of the book, he references (the ironically named) *Ripley's Game* by Patricia Highsmith, stating: "what Highsmith achieved in her domain, Colin Ripley did for queer studies."

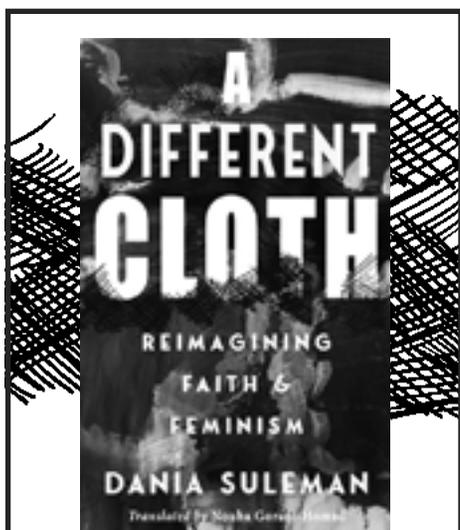
The book begins by analyzing the phenomenon of domestication from multiple intriguing, albeit unsettling, angles, settling early into its overarching exploration of the concept of "house-machine": as Ripley paraphrases it from Le Corbusier, the pioneer of modern architecture, "a machinic consideration of the house [that] could transform the way we live." In addition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the epistemic "violence of the line" explains how the demarcation of personal property not only destroys, but takes away from, someone – as well as something – else. Ripley also invites readers to rethink the perfect geometry of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, nudging us to

traverse its idyllic (and to put it plainly, white and cisnet) manmade borders and venture into the realm of something more colourful and authentic, more natural, messier and more real: to brave the queer and chaotic (dis)order of things. Ripley comments briefly on the social position of women, and though he could elaborate more on this, he calls for a separate exploration from a woman's perspective.

While a house is often a symbol of comfort and familiarity – with "home" as something wholesome, warm, and welcoming – Ripley delves into the less picturesque ideas of house as erotic machine, of domestication as imprisonment, and a number of perverse iterations a house can assume. Hardly novel concepts, admits Ripley; he names the evident and hackneyed comparisons of queerness to architecture through metaphors such as the "closet" for repression, and the role of Philip Johnson's Glass House for the "ambidextrous character of the screen, its simultaneous ability to hide and display." Naturally, he draws also from Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" in addition to *Discipline and Punish* on the all-surveiling essence of Bentham's panopticon "as a diagram of power... although admittedly without its architectural trappings and circular plan form, as central to our contemporary world." These are all helpful and necessary contexts for situating a new reader outside of the field(s), easing them past the threshold of an eclectic and enlightening mid-twentieth-century canon, guiding them into the territory of "suitcase as the microcosm of a house" with a focal point on Genet – as rings true for much of the book. Segments from Derrida on map-making, as well as Lacan's observations of the relationship between architecture and voids, are also interspersed throughout.

Ultimately, *The House Is (Not) a Prison* is a scholar's playground, dense in parts and chock-full of foundationally queer theoretical frameworks, carefully laid out and dissected through the lens of an architectural researcher and designer. The book itself swerves between its myriad themes in its own fascinatingly profound rhythm of chaotic order, rendering it a most useful and bountiful resource across an expanse of sociocultural knowledge, laying the impressive groundwork for, as Ripley writes, "ways of thinking and building that desperately resist the utopic in all its aspects." mrb

**Brooke Lee** (she/her) is a freelance writer and editor in Montreal who writes fiction under the pen name River Lee. For more info, visit her website at [riverleewriter.ca](http://riverleewriter.ca).



**A DIFFERENT CLOTH**  
 REIMAGINING FAITH  
 & FEMINISM  
 DANIA SULEMAN

*Translated by Nouha Gorani-Homad*

Prompted by Quebec's controversial secularism law, known as Bill 21, this concise and accessible essay acknowledges the empowering role religion can play in a woman's life while exploring meaningful ways to reconcile gender equality and freedom of religion.

978-1-55380-734-6 • 130pp • \$19.95

**RONSDALE PRESS**  
[www.ronsdalepress.com](http://www.ronsdalepress.com)

**LAI** *continued from page 17*

ever been tempted to grab other people's stories, in order to keep the creative juices flowing. "I think it's better to ask yourself what you find fascinating about another person's life, and to then build that into your own writing, rather than just lifting someone else's details for your own storytelling," she says. "What are the deeper elements that are drawing you in?"

Two deeper elements that Lai explores in *Cannon* are interpersonal conflict and anger. She manages to approach these topics with an unexpected mix of restraint and camp. On the one hand, as Cannon herself remarks to Trish at one point, the book isn't interested in "some big Dr. Phil session" between characters, where everyone lays out their traumas and feelings, and everything gets neatly resolved. Instead, Lai lets conflicts and resentments brew; when confrontations do occur, they never lead to tidy outcomes. On the other hand, Lai wanted to have fun creating *Cannon*, which meant leaning into exaggeration. "There is something so ridiculous about anger," she says. "Cannon is so stoic, but then she does hit a level of anger that becomes campy." These scenes of over-the-top anger and hilarity allow Lai to showcase her drawing chops – her frames fill with bodies in motion, as people scream over each other in the restaurant kitchen, tangle together in bed, run until their shoes break, and engage in cathartic acts of vandalism.

In the end, *Cannon* is a testament to the importance of learning to balance external demands with internal needs – in the workplace, in romance, in family, and in friendship – especially in those precious, infuriating friendships that are just as strong as family bonds. As she moves into newer projects, Lai is making sure to leave space for levity and fun in her own process. In addition to a collection of graphic short stories (full disclosure: I am one of her collaborators on that book), she is working on "a little side project that is a lot sillier, with non-human characters, a more classic strip-style comic, like a sitcom." She pauses and grins: "I miss writing jokes!" mrb

**H Felix Chau Bradley** is the author of *Personal Attention Roleplay* (Metonymy Press). They are the fiction editor at *This Magazine* and write a book reviews column at *Xtra*. You can read their monthly newsletter on books and perfume at [filletchaubradley.substack.com](http://filletchaubradley.substack.com).



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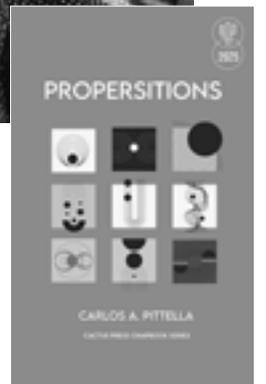
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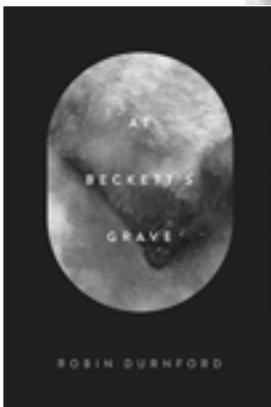
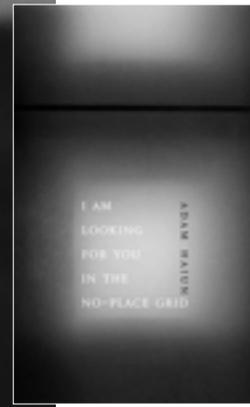
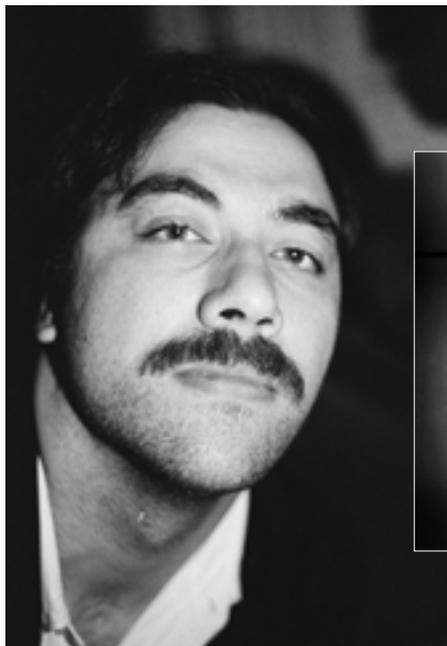
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## poetry

STEPH LEITH



HOLLY VESTAD



**At Beckett's Grave**  
**Robin Durnford**  
 McGill-Queen's University Press  
 \$19.95, paperback, 120pp  
 9780228025641

Robin Durnford's *At Beckett's Grave* reimagines elegy not as closure, but as pause. Beckett presides over the volume, but he does not dominate it; alongside him appear Kafka, Dante, e.e. cummings, Dorothea Tanning, Claire Keegan, and others, their voices tessellating into Durnford's own. The poems make palpable the experience of what it is to dwell in the interval between the present and the past. Arranged in two acts, the collection opens with birth, and this beginning complicates the logic of elegy, suggesting that grief and emergence are inseparable.

Again and again, her language tends toward submergence: "in the dirt of a bog," amid the "eternal rhythms of the sea," or against the "relentless spray" of the ocean. Durnford turns water into a metaphysics of grief, and immersion is her device for its unrelenting persistence. The speaker loses herself, "edged / forgetful, the sea at ebb." In another poem, she sheds her skin, and says "yes to the waves."

Loss moves from metaphor to embodiment, a saturation of the senses. Submergence leads to transformation elsewhere: "I have become / the rain." This is not catharsis so much as a recognition of porousness, of how grief saturates and permeates: "waiting for form to take hold [...] I overflow." *At Beckett's Grave* is bleak, but its bleakness is cathartic, illuminating, and beautiful. Durnford's poems understand grief not as an aberration, but as an essential

condition of life: as the medium in which we live, as the pause that defines what it means to speak at all.

**I Am Looking for You in the No-Place Grid**  
**Adam Haiun**  
 Coach House Books  
 \$24.95, paperback, 80pp  
 9781552454961

"I want so badly," Adam Haiun writes in his debut *I Am Looking for You in the No-Place Grid*, "to write the new natural law." That desire to remake nature's law is technological; to reimagine nature through code, to find orientation within disorientation. This book, for its interest in glitch, intimacy, beauty, anachronism, and the voice coming from inside of the computer, is striking, difficult, and altogether magnetic.

Who is this artificial, coded voice, this new natural law, for? Baby, the speaker's interlocutor and addressee, is the vessel through which the book explores a speculative intimacy that feels both turn-of-the-millennium and utterly contemporary: "Don't look into the vortex of infrastructure baby you'll be sick"; "Do badly hold the grudge baby." Elsewhere, the address veers into playfully provocative territory: "Oh you're aroused real mature. You've got me thinking about the chain of supply." The effect is a poetics of attention and distraction, desire and unfulfillment, in which the intimate and the abstract, the natural urge and the technological imperative, converge.

In these breathless, experimental poems, Haiun plays with textual orientation; compact vertical columns are interrupted by fragments that look like lines of code, text boxes disrupt narrative flow, and greyed-out text

written beneath the main lines hampers legibility. Voices overlap and collide; the form encourages your eyes to slide across the page, catching snatches of meaning here and there. The effect of this bracketing is not a random disruption but deliberate disintegration, the corruption of data. Yet what is corrupted is never empty: the glitch in the matrix, Haiun suggests, is no flaw in the design, but the design itself.

Meaning resists precision. Reading Haiun, one no longer sees the forest, nor even the tree, but the scurrying of ants up the bark – or something even smaller, more minute, in the spaces where legibility frays. Blink, and "a new kind of wave" might knock you out of your seat. This, perhaps, is the new natural law: that meaning in the age of the Cloud arises precisely at the threshold of disorientation.

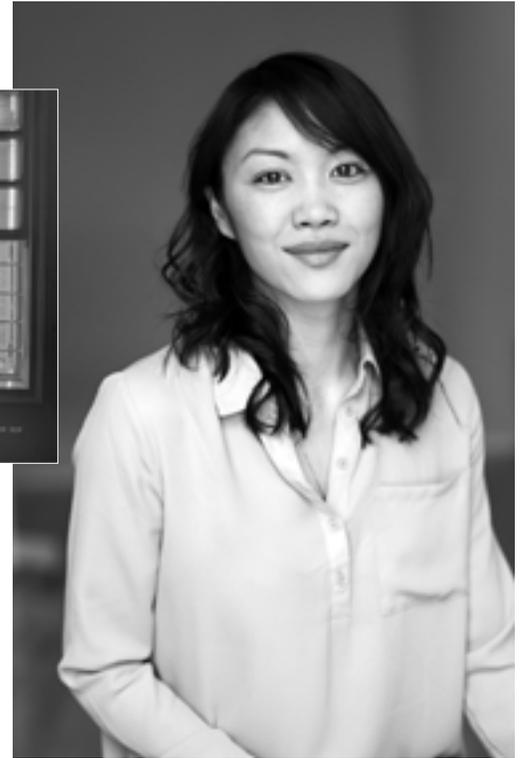
**properisitions**  
**Carlos A. Pittella**  
 Cactus Press  
 \$10.00, paperback, 32pp  
 9781990474408

I tripped over the title of Carlos A. Pittella's latest chapbook the first time I read it. What is a *properisition*, exactly? At first glance, it might seem like a slip of the tongue, or a trick on the eyes. But the word carries echoes of propriety and position, and traces of prepositions and propositions: terms of situation, alignment, and exact placement. Pittella seizes on this cluster of meanings to ask what it means to be (dis)located in both language and life.

In the fourth poem bearing the title "properisition," Pittella writes: "There are 18 essential prepositions in



STEPHEN BROCKWELL



Brazilian Portuguese / & none of them a compass to belonging. / I'm never arriving at a place / always on—soles groundstuck." These lines capture the book's tension: mastery of grammar and syntax cannot guarantee belonging. Prepositions mark direction, but not arrival. By the end, the speaker arrives not at home but at a condition: "a stray object subject to any verb." What is left is a resistant, restless subjectivity, a remainder of an insistence on living in language without being secured by it.

The chapbook is recursive, circling its images – walls within walls, "the tides within the tides" – as though testing the limits of language's capacity, poetic or bureaucratic, to hold experience. The poems move like a mind caught between thresholds: visas, borders, permissions, refusals, evictions, and the empty space left by a chipped tooth. They track how borders attempt to mediate our ability to understand ourselves as situated, and how surveillance attempts to reduce us to something improper. Yet at the same time, they open into moments of brilliant lyric suspension: "Suddenly all greens look green—you take photos / of subtle branches to remember left or right?"

#### **We're Somewhere Else Now**

Poems 2016–2024

Robyn Sarah

Biblioasis

\$21.95, paperback, 102pp

9781771966863

Robyn Sarah's first collection in sixteen years, *We're Somewhere Else Now*, marks a return to a voice both familiar and probing. Her poems carry an ease of camaraderie, a voice to commiserate with, lightly: "Winter is here once more," she writes; "(What were we expecting?)" she whispers. That delicate balance of intimacy and observation extends to the book's meditative closings: one poem ends, "and to see, and to see, and to see," which reminded me of Julian of Norwich's refrain, "and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all shall be well," a sense of comfort even amid the slow creep of a decaying world.

Sarah's work embodies the tension between expectation and perception. There is the feeling of

difficult anticipation, the awareness that hearts in the right place "won't be enough to save us. / We need accidents," yet there is also recognition of quiet beauty, of life's subtle contingencies, and of "trick[s] of the mind" that can yield small revelations.

The collection opens with the first section, "Once More," thirty-one poems of impression and tempered expectation. In the second section, "In the Wilderness," subtitled "A Soliloquy, in broken time," the register shifts, exploring the dislocations of contemporary life, adopting occasionally the voice of inquiry and philosophical reflection: "We open our eyes at birth to the oneness, but when we begin to see, what we see is separation. We learn the world by separating things we see." These reflections are tempered by a grounding insistence on attentive perception: "No ideas but in things / No answers but in questions."

In this way, Sarah's poetry makes attempts at closure but finds only doubt. Sarah envisions doubt in multiple forms: as condition ("I am; there I doubt"), as character ("a tall, lean, androgynous fiddler"), as thrall ("in the sway of bare branches in the wind"), and as self ("I had become Doubt"). By the collection's close, doubt is neither fully resolved nor conquered; it remains a presence through which the speaker learns to inhabit complexity and see clearly without insisting on certainty: "Doubt can kill faith. But it can also / give birth to it. A paradox."

#### **An Orange, A Syllable**

Gillian Sze

ECW Press

\$24.95, paperback, 88pp

9781770418516

In her latest collection, *An Orange, A Syllable*, Gillian Sze asks, "How to measure one's mouth by its words?" This question, deceptively simple, sets the tone for a work that is as much an exploration of language as it is of perception and embodiment as it is about early motherhood and childhood. Sze's meditations frequently hinge on the elasticity of language and perception: "in that fit," she writes, "I resided *inside* her mouth," collapsing registers of distance into intimacy.

The collection unfolds with the energy of attention

accelerating into life itself: "Each word a car." Elsewhere, a hole appears; an "Ow" registers. The poems acknowledge the suddenness of experience as if life is a surprise, as if the poet and speaker did not know the shape of a mouth before the advent of the child.

This poetry is informed by the lens of observation, but not of the coldly scientific kind; moments of "utter joy" pepper her account of the child's learning. Reading *An Orange, A Syllable*, I thought of Melanie Klein, a clinician watching an infant with intense, discerning care, but the poems never fully settle into that clinical distance. Instead, they inhabit a space between close attention and wonder, exploring the acquisition of speech through careful observation of the child's brilliance. Sze's imagery – of the mouth, the sun, the square – simultaneously opens, brightens, widens, and gapes throughout.

These are small epiphanies, granular meditations on speech and the relation of the self to the world. This poetry is urgent and alive, a work of observation and invention that bends the formal and the lyrical toward a singular purpose: to observe and to wonder at the astonishing mechanics of speech, and being. "the light speaks its own language," she writes; "we pass through its vocabulary without fear." msb

Paisley Conrad is a writer and critic based in Montreal.

## **FRICAS** continued from page 10

Humour and fun abound in *Checked Out*, but it also serves up some thought-provoking questions. Like most of us, Louise struggles with creative doubt, social anxiety, and romantic waffling, which form the backbone of the narrative. Her journey shows that true growth comes from facing adversity and learning to let go – something Louise ultimately achieves. This debut graphic novel was a joy to read, and I would gladly read it again. msb

Heather Leighton has written for *The Globe and Mail* and *The Comics Journal*. She blogs at the *Unexpected Twists and Turns*.

By Madelaine Caritas Longman

Stephanie Bolster

## *The Flood of Experience*

**O**n the crest of a late summer heatwave, I interview poet Stephanie Bolster at her Concordia University office. Bolster and I first met a decade ago, when she taught a poetry class that shaped the trajectory of my future – a claim that would feel laughably melodramatic had I not heard the same from countless others. Students often note Bolster’s attentiveness, dedication, and – perhaps most of all – ability to recognize startling language in voices frequently overlooked.

Perhaps it is therefore only fitting that Bolster’s latest book, *Long Exposure*, is a chorus of voices. A fifteen-year work of durational poetics coalescing found text, extensive research, haunting litanies, and everyday living, *Long Exposure* gleans from news broadcasts and corporate-speak emails, YouTube and rock songs, Wikipedia. “We are increasingly digressive and distracted thinkers and readers,” she says from across a desk stacked with student papers, poetry books, and photos of her daughters. “It felt like a necessary part of the project to include all of that in the finished work.”

Temporally and geographically expansive, *Long Exposure*’s apparent digressions sediment into uncanny layers. Rules from the Tashme Internment camp for Japanese Canadians about advertisements for the same region today: “Now Sunshine Valley. / One of BC’s best kept secrets.” Meanwhile, under COVID-19 lockdown, the speaker witnesses another upsurge in anti-Asian racism. As she researches natural and human-made disasters – and confronts the instability of these distinctions – pages jolt with the speaker’s attention between Chernobyl, New Orleans, Japan, Hastings Park, rows of empty Zoom rooms. Stanzas written during lockdown interpose earlier compositions, the newer sections jutting in from the right margin. While perhaps the most accurate poetic rendering of a digitally splintered consciousness I have yet encountered, *Long Exposure*’s ambition far exceeds a poetics of the doomscroll. Uniting this disparate mosaic is a profound concern with the ethics of witness: an ongoing reckoning with mortality, injustice, legacies of harm, and our responsibilities to one another.

Bolster traces the genesis of the book to a 2009 Musée d’Art Contemporain retrospective for Canadian-American photographer Robert Polidori, best known for his shots of dilapidated interiors in the Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion and post-Katrina New Orleans. “I was unsettled by looking at Polidori’s photographs,” she tells me. “He had essentially trespassed to enter these spaces, [from which] the occupants

had been evacuated or fled.” At the same time, the photographs conveyed “the nature and scope of the suffering” more effectively than the television news. “I was witnessing his witnessing and was drawn to this, but also uncomfortable.”

On the water-soft walls in the photographs, funguses bloom in rich, saturated pigments. Such tensions between suffering and aestheticization constitute a central theme in *Long Exposure*: where is the line between witness and voyeur?

He chose where to stand.  
Where to look. Reveals

where he set the edges. The exposure  
went in his lungs to live forever.

I ask Bolster whether writing this book was also a process of choosing where to stand, an act of setting and revealing edges. “I think it’s really all edges, in a way,” she says. “I’m not sure there is a centre.”

Rather than discrete poems, narrative progression, or eventual answers, *Long Exposure* coheres – to the extent cohesion is intended – through reoccurring images. Empty rooms, parents and children, and, especially, water. “Water embodies a lot of the ambivalences and ambiguities within the work,” she explains. “The areas that used to be freshwater are now saltwater around New Orleans. With climate change and sea level rise, saltwater is coming in where there used to be marshes. Water is the constant thing. It’s the thing that comes back. But it’s also not the same water that it was 100 years ago.”

Having grown up in Vancouver, Bolster adds, “I think I’ve been writing about floods my whole life.”

While addressing longstanding themes in her oeuvre, *Long Exposure* is the most formally bold of Bolster’s books. “I knew going into it that I didn’t know how to make the thing that I wanted to make.” Composing in “fragments and



**Long Exposure**  
Stephanie Bolster  
Palimpsest Press  
\$21.95, paperback, 152pp  
9781997508014



layers” was both a procedural choice and a necessity; Bolster began the project when her second daughter was born, writing in “little corners of time” while the baby napped. “Each time I would sit down to write, I was kind of starting anew.” At one point, she amassed 1,200 pages.

Far more than Bolster’s previous work, *Long Exposure* resists “poetic” language. Her keen ear remains evident – the 2011 Tōhoku tsunami is “a thing alive so wrong one couldn’t call it water” – but there is little use of metaphor. Syntax is clipped, stark, abrupt. “I’d been praised in the past for ‘beautiful’ writing,” Bolster says, “but I came to be suspicious of [that impulse] because it felt like my intentions were in the wrong place.” After twenty-five years teaching creative writing, she tells me she harbours a level of distrust for “the well-crafted poem,” noting how superficial polish can impede deeper risk. While Bolster notes that there can be value in technical polish, she says, “The dismantling of [aesthetic perfection] is really instructive.”

*Long Exposure* is also striking for its ever-present yet decentred speaker. Pages often pass without first-person pronouns, yet “I” remains implicit: scrolling, reading, watching. After a conference on positionality in writing, the speaker says,

[...]We wanted

not to harm. We wanted  
(I wanted) to disappear

I ask Bolster why it was important that this “I,” however ambivalent, remain. “I’ve heard it said the only safe terrain is to write about oneself because you’re not encroaching on anyone else’s material experience of trauma. But at the same time, I don’t feel like I know where I end and someone else begins [...] There’s no pure self that is not touched by other people.” It felt important, she adds, to “take the risk of

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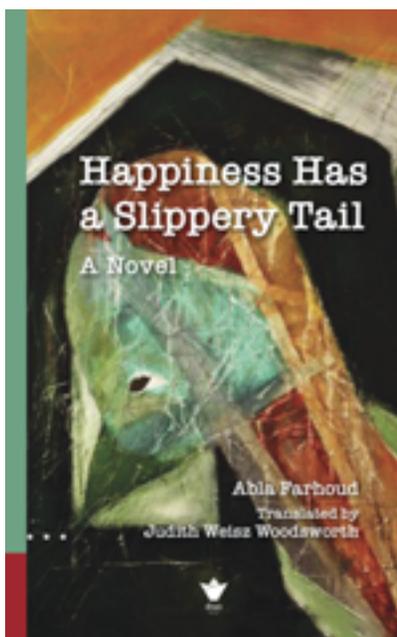
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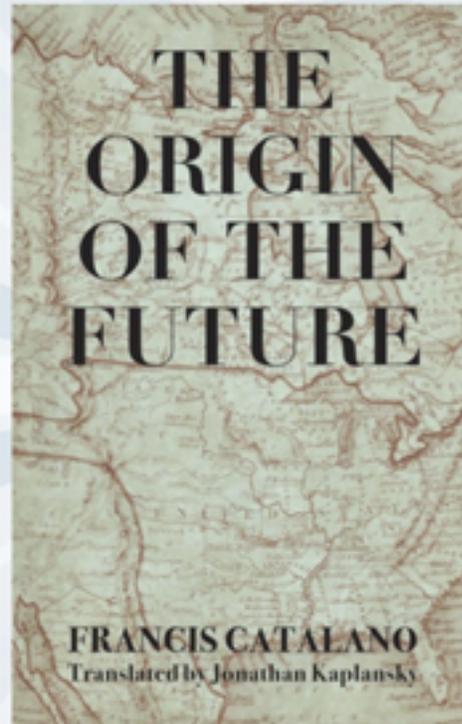


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THIEN continued from page 12

for ways to open ourselves up to that possibility. It's something that happens on so many levels of a person that you can't plan it. And maybe it's most powerful when it takes us by surprise. In that moment we're also recognizing something in ourselves." mb

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.

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engaging," while acknowledging her own subjectivity. "Including those stories, but then including my own response to them, including my unease about my own response to them, my unease about including them, felt like a necessary part of the project. The self wants to disappear but can't not be there."

Bolster's approach, therefore, was for this self to "admit to being there," rather than writing as a "ventriloquist" for others' voices or presuming to share the same risks. *Long Exposure* persistently grapples with the simultaneous impossibility and inevitability of entering other lives. Visiting a friend during the pandemic, the speaker remarks,

We are sure we are safe.

We don't say we are almost  
in each others' bodies now.

These poems suggest our fates depend on one another, yet also recognize that attempts at closeness may instead do harm. Bolster therefore makes extensive efforts to seek permission from those whose stories she includes, most of which were originally encountered in news broadcasts and documentaries, particularly Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*. The book's lengthy endnotes describe "cut[ting] many passages whose speakers/authors [she] could not locate or who could not give permission." They continue, "If your experience is here and I haven't found you yet, please contact me."

Like Anne Carson's Sappho translations, *Long Exposure* carries a sense of wreckage, of trace: a remnant broken from something much larger, water-gnawed and impossible to remake as it was. Elegiac, moving, and unsettling, *Long Exposure* is at once a portrait of an era and a reminder of how much inevitably lies beyond any artwork's frame.

A few days after our meeting, Bolster emails to add: "I thought the book was basically finished in 2020 but kept being struck by connections between elements of its content and the experience of living through the pandemic. [...] The implication, I hope, is that I could keep on doing this – the flood of experience is ongoing." mb

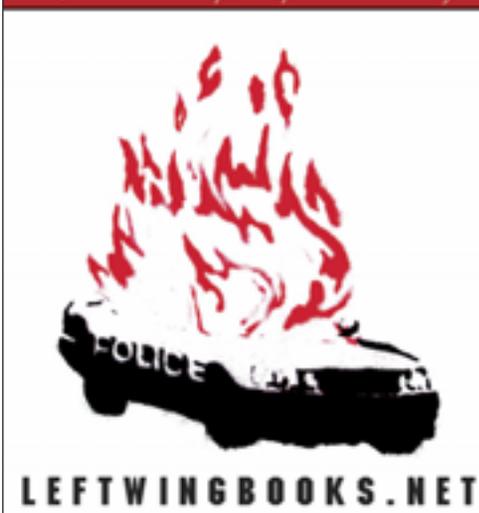
Madelaine Caritas Longman is the author of *The Danger Model* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), which won the Quebec Writers' Federation Concordia University First Book Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Room*, *PRISM international*, *Vallum*, *The Ex-Puritan*, and elsewhere. In 2025, she received the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize in Literature.

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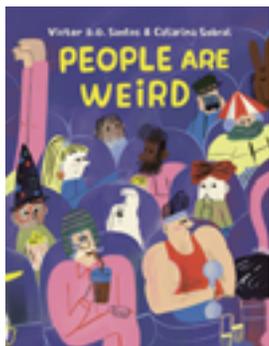
*The philosophers have only interpreted the  
world in various ways; the point is to change it*



# young readers

## People Are Weird

Victor D.O. Santos  
Illustrated by Catarina Sobral  
Milky Way Picture Books  
\$24.99, hardcover, 32pp  
9781990252488  
Ages 5–8



Taking a cue from *The Doors*, *People Are Weird* is an unapologetic and didactic interrogation of the quirks that make us human. Neither normies nor eccentrics are spared the critical gaze of the tiny protagonist: “Uncle Jeff writes children’s books and doesn’t care what people think about how he dresses. He says that if he cared, characters and stories would start running away from his imagination. Weird.” People are also weird about maintaining their lawns; people are weird for staring at themselves at the gym; people are weird when they are afraid of flying; people are weird for walking their turtles on a leash (I mean, I can’t argue with that!).

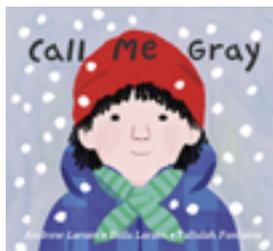
*People Are Weird* is a kid-sized manifesto that confronts contradictions, embraces honesty, and champions being unapologetically oneself. The vibrant, cartoony illustrations by Catarina Sobral are a playful counterbalance, adding dollops of whimsy that the text withholds.

I’ll be honest: as a reader, I found myself wishing this kid would lighten up a bit. Still, I couldn’t help but relate to that feeling of not quite fitting in. In the end, the flicker of self-awareness that appears isn’t a tidy conclusion, but more of a wink to the reader. It might not be so bad to be weird after all.



## Call Me Gray

Written by Andrew Larsen  
and Bells Larsen  
Illustrated by Tallulah Fontaine  
Kids Can Press  
\$23.99, hardcover, 32pp  
9781525311352  
Ages 4–8



While building a backyard ice rink together with their dad, as is their annual tradition, a kid has a burning question to ask: “Do you ever feel mixed up about who you are?”

Missing the point, the dad muses about his past aspirations to become an astronaut. “That’s not what I meant,” thinks the kid.

They feel left out. They were not invited to their best friend’s sleepover because they are not, in the eyes of others, a girl. They desperately need to be understood for who they are and called by their chosen name, Gray. But how do they explain these changes to the person they love most?

*Call Me Gray* is a valuable addition to the growing cache of early-readers books that explore themes of self-acceptance, family relationships, and gender-non conforming identities. What makes this book a stand-out is the masterful narrative pacing. The storyline is driven by Gray’s self-discovery. Yet the father’s journey is given the space it deserves too.

Simple yet beautiful illustrations by Tallulah Fontaine set the right tone, grounding the reader in each moment, from the crisp crunch of snow underfoot on a winter’s night to the soft embrace of steam from a hot cup of cacao.

With patience, affirmation, and affection, the bond

between father and child grows stronger. This is a relationship that can celebrate their traditions, like building an ice rink, and also embrace change. In an increasingly intolerant world, *Call Me Gray* is a hopeful tale and a highly readable resource on gender transitions, empathy, and the power of communication.



## The First Christmas Tree

An Innu Tale  
Written by Ovilá Fontaine  
Illustrated by Charlotte Parent  
Translated by Ann Marie Boulanger  
Orca Book Publishers  
\$24.95, hardcover, 56pp  
9781459841802  
Ages 3–5

In *The First Christmas Tree: An Innu Tale*, the Great Manitou, a shape shifting deity, searches for a tree that will brighten the dark days of winter and bring joy to children during the holiday season. But who is up to the job of becoming the first Christmas tree?

As he journeys through Innu territory, the Great Manitou pauses to appraise each tree: The birch is prized for yielding snowshoes, canoes, and drums. The sturdy larch is perfect

for making sleds and bows. The black spruce’s firewood is unmatched. Yet to Manitou’s dismay, they turn down his Christmas invitation. “I do not want to be decorated. I’m already beautiful,” says the birch. In turn, the larch is too stubborn to move and the spruce wishes only to grow taller.

Out of options, Manitou asks the all-important-question to the one tree he overlooked. To his delight, the fir enthusiastically agrees to be the first Christmas tree.

As in many fables and biblical stories, a reckoning awaits those trees who refused Manitou’s request. Their punishments echo through the natural world, offering mythical explanations as to why trees lose their leaves in autumn or why some fail to thrive in southern climes.

Originally published in French and awarded the Governor General’s Award in 2024, Ovilá Fontaine’s spirited prose shines through in this English translation. The richly coloured illustrations by Charlotte Parent are perfectly paired with the text, and kids will enjoy spotting Manitou, who appears in various forms.



Bridging traditions and transcending seasons, the last page inevitably prompts a request that’s hard to resist: “Will you read it again, please?”



## The Old Man and the Child

Story by Gabrielle Roy  
Adaptation by  
Dominique Fortier  
Illustrated by Rogé  
Translated by Katherine Sehl  
The Secret Mountain  
\$19.95, hardcover, 52pp  
9782898361111  
Ages 7–9

This adaptation of Gabrielle Roy’s short story, published in 1966 in the novella, *The Road Past Altamont (La route d’Altamont)*, introduces a younger audience to the semi-autobiographical protagonist, Christine.

During a lonely and oppressively hot summer in a small Manitoban city, Christine befriends an elderly man who shares her love of adventure. While the days grow hotter, he and Christine retreat into their imaginations. “The heat is strong enough to kill everything, except perhaps the idea of coolness,” says the old man to Christine.

To beat the heat, they travel by train to Lake Winnipeg. At the water’s edge, they are spellbound. “The waves

lapped near their feet, whispering that they were happy to see them. A delightful freshness washed over their faces. Christine felt her joy was as great and deep as the lake.”

Rogé’s watercolours, rendered in a muted prairie-grass palette, capture these delicate moments as if nature and the characters have paused for a portrait.

Struck by nostalgia, the old man contemplates mortality. Fearing the inevitable loss of her new friend, Christine confesses the quiet grief she carries. Together, they marvel at the wonders of nature.

Devoted readers of Gabrielle Roy may long for her original prose, but Dominique Fortier’s abridged version honours its spirit. In adaptation, Fortier might have done away with Christine’s imaginative play as the colonial figure, French voyageur La Vérendrye, and she should have removed the cultural stereotypes embedded in the dialogue.

But as a celebration of intergenerational friendship, of everyday adventure, and the



wonder of Canada’s lakes, *The Old Man and the Child* is a story worth retelling. Though Roy did not write it with climate change in mind, the tale resonates in the present moment, as billions of people around the world face increasingly severe

heatwaves driven largely by fossil fuels. The lake and all its beauty serves as a reminder of what we stand to lose, and what we must protect.



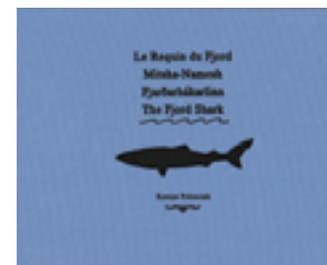
## The Fjord Shark

Keenan Poloncsak  
Self-published  
\$35.00, paperback, 56pp  
9781778284328  
Ages 10–12

Authored, illustrated, and handbound by Keenan Poloncsak, *The Fjord Shark* is an objet d’art with its embossed cover and paleoart-inspired illustrations. In English, French, Icelandic, and Innu-aimun, this book is a rare example of multilingual kids’ lit – an inspiring model for future storytellers, even if its pages feel a touch crowded.

The book’s protagonist is Skaluguak, a

one-hundred-year-old Greenland Shark, who is taking a holiday in the Saguenay Fjord. After running into some trouble at the end of a hook, he is saved



by an even older Greenland Shark, Egalussuaq, who becomes his friend. A witness to profound marine ecology and cultural changes, Egalussuaq says she has tales to tell, but she doesn’t get around to it. Perhaps a sequel is in order, so we can hear what Egalussuaq has to say.

While it’s more educational than entertaining, shark enthusiasts will enjoy learning about this impressive species. A fine example of bookbinding craftsmanship rarely seen in mass-produced editions, *The Fjord Shark* may also appeal to collectors of handbound volumes. [mb](#)

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

Montreal musician Bells Larsen's acclaimed children's book is out now!

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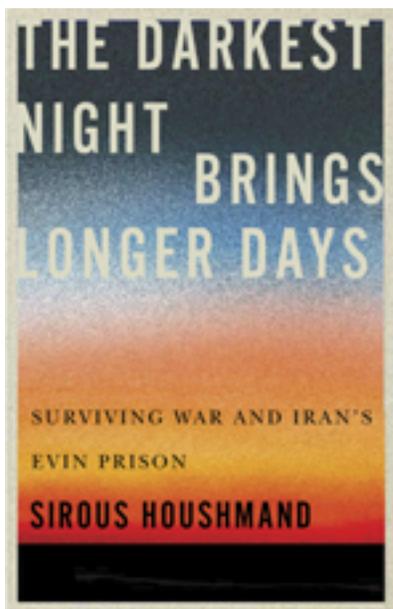


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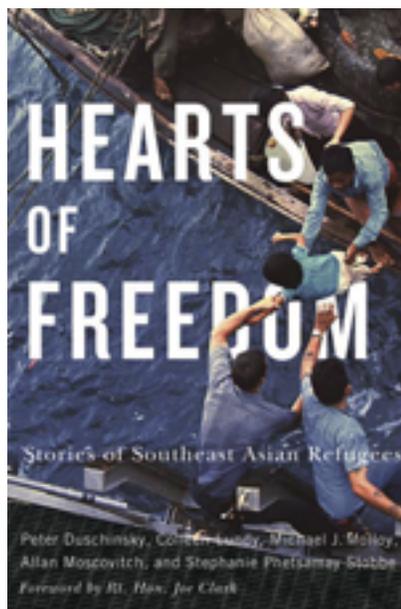


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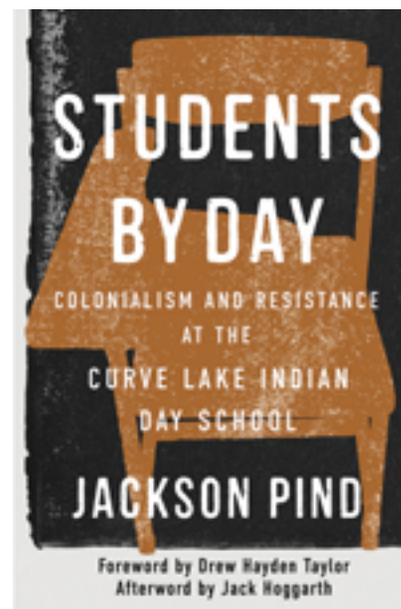


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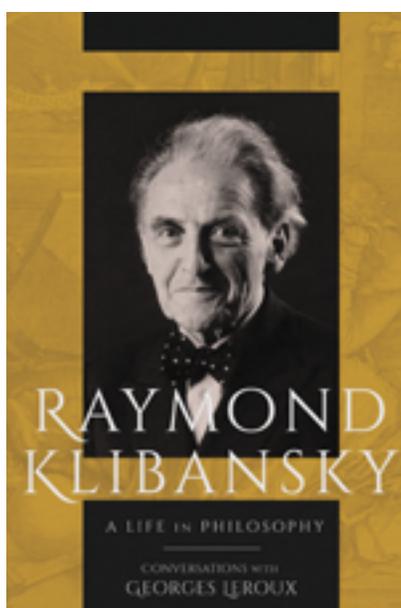
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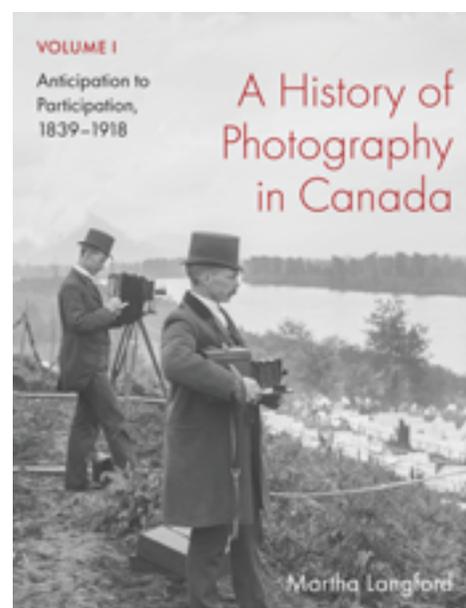


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